

Picturing Hong Kong: Ink Paintings by Contemporary Hong Kong Artists
The Contemporary Ink Painter's Relationship to the Past

Entry by Jasmine Hsia



Joey Leung

The Listless Lion

2017, Chinese ink, gouache, ball pen, acrylic, coloured pencil on paper, 36(H) x 104 cm each (Set of 2 pieces).

On *The Listless Lion*

Seamlessly blending modernity and tradition, Chinese and western styles, Joey Leung pays homage to the past in a provocative way. These comparisons are created through her use of subject matter, materials, and drawing style. She challenges the status quo while maintaining elements that force the audience to see her work's connections to the works of great ink masters.

The Listless Lion features a melancholically limp lion draped over a leg wearing floral tights. This is surrounded by protruding similarly-clad legs, all swimming in a sea of loosely flowing hair. The lion-leg combination symbolizes lion rock mountain, the other subjects of the painting forming a detached island of whimsy and relaxation—Leung's unique take on Hong Kong. The unorthodox use of legs and hair as subjects of a landscape is an iconoclastic challenge to typical Chinese paintings. Done in *gongbi* (fine-line) style, the painting—despite its seemingly unusual subject matter—is

reminiscent of traditional landscape paintings from the 17th century. Leung partners this with the usage of more modern/Western ideas, from the sensuality of semi-exposed legs to the femininity attributed to the passive lion. The lion, in Chinese culture, is typically seen as a powerful creature, as a “divine and mysterious animal, a protective power”¹. Using this symbol in a different way challenges classic ideas and brings in an additional sense of freshness. Leung uses ideas from ancient Chinese paintings and combines them with more contemporary elements to create a fusion of tradition and modernity, to express the feeling of being caught in between the two forces.

The Listless Lion, with its delicate, consistent lines, lightly-applied color, and generous use of negative space draws more from older, more traditional style of ink painting. The fine-line style pre-dates the more expressive brushwork typical of literati artists. The gongbi style with thin, concise lines and light color is a stark contrast to both literati ink paintings and typical Western paintings. Leung's style also contrasts the realism and bright colors that dominate in Western



Figure 1

¹ Feltham, Heleanor B. "Everybody was Kung-Fu Fighting (...)", 2009, 111.



Figure 2

paintings. The floral patterns on the tight-bearing legs mimic the style of ancient ink artists. For example, the white peonies on the leg to the right of the lion mountain are drawn in a style typical throughout the early Qing dynasty, as can be seen in Figure 1². This reference to ancient styles continues throughout the painting, evident with the lotus flowers on the legs to the far right. These flowers are close copies to that of Figure 2³, an excerpt from the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, a tool often used by artists to practice *fanggu* (imitation of ancient masters). This frequent reference to ancient masters throughout the drawing style brings the audience back to Chinese painting's roots. The combination of the fine-line drawing styles with the more interpretive and unique take on the subject matter demonstrates the unity amongst different methods that Leung is able to achieve. This dialogue between the contrasting cultures is essential to contemporary pieces, of which are defined by their ability to “negotiate the discrepancies between cultural frames”.⁴ The added challenges for Leung and other contemporary artists then are not to solely use these different methods, but to harmoniously intertwine them.

Lastly, Leung also achieves this culmination of styles through the medium—or rather multi-media—that she uses. Traditional Chinese ink painting typically uses Chinese ink and some mineral/plant pigments on silk

or paper while Western paintings tend to focus on oil paints on canvas. This is due to fundamental ideas on the expressiveness of the paintings. While Western artists preferred oil and its erasive properties, Chinese ink painters enjoyed letting their brush strokes become a part of the painting, preferring expression to perfection.⁵ Leung uses a blend of different media within *The Listless Lion* and throughout all of her works. In this piece, gouache, acrylic paint, and colored pencils are used. All of these mediums are flexible with their opacity, changeable depending on how the artist decides to add water or apply pressure. The ability of these to mediums to act so fluidly reflects the idea of Leung's own breadth and variability. Leung also uses ballpoint pen as well as Chinese ink here, contrasting the use of traditional materials with the use of modern everyday ones. This use of a variety of media brings back this dialogue about different cultural lenses, becoming not only appealing but also captivatingly relevant; a truly contemporary work.

The Listless Lion seeks to challenge perceived divisions between culture and time. It aims to escape limitations and categorization. Leung cultivates centuries of different methods and styles into a unique commentary on tradition. With Leung's work and that of other contemporary ink painters, the seemingly outdated art style can continue to reinvent itself in new ways.

² Yun Shouping, *Peonies*, 1686, Shanghai Museum, China.

³ Zhang Lu, *Lotus Flowers*, 1701, Color woodblock print, Leaf from the *Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual*.

⁴ Kee, Joan. "The Curious Case of Contemporary Ink Painting.", 2010, 89.

⁵ Fu, Flora. "Introduction to Chinese Ink Painting in the Twentieth Century." Lecture, HKUST, Hong Kong, September 8, 2017.

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