

HUMA3660 Individual Essay

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Wai Bong Koon

Pat Sin Leng 2017

Ink on silk

Octapych

25 x 25 cm each



Landscape painting is considered as the highest form of Chinese painting since the Five Dynasties period. Artworks from Fan Kuan, Guo Xi, Dong Yuan and many more landscape masters from that period are regarded as templates for later painters to imitate and learn from. Inspired by the brilliant use of brush and ink (bǐ mò) in the Southern Tang master Dong Yuan's works, Koon's Pat Sin Leng aspires to inherit the core of traditional landscape painting with new interpretations, seeking innovation through modern perspective in visual experience of the landscape that is so familiar to Hong Kongers.

Pat Sin Leng (ridge of eight immortals) located in the northeast New Territories, is named after a local legend. A celestial lion was once sent by the heaven to Hong Kong to quell nine dragons that caused an upheaval to the region. Eight out of the nine dragons were eventually turned into the hills of Pat Sin Leng. Koon selected Pat Sin Leng, a place that have such interesting origin and where holds fond memories of him as once a student of CUHK and now a resident nearby as the subject. Emphasis on life drawing, he could paint according to his actual observation. Koon captured the serenity of the undulating mountain range as a distanced haven in only monochrome. Presented in eight panels arranged in a sinuous manner, a dynamic movement is implied in the scenery of Pat Sin Leng. Koon aptly merged traditional brushworks, with Japanese aesthetics of "Wabi-sabi" and visual experiment on fragmentation to convey his artistic vision of modern Chinese ink painting.

Variation of tonality in dots and wet ink washes with the use of negative space, Koon demonstrated excellent control of brush and ink in rendering landscape acquired from traditional techniques. After the style of Dong Yuan, the painting shares similarities in depiction with Dong's masterpiece - Xiao and Xiang Rivers.^[1] Dong Yuan's style is commented as "(His) rough brushwork caused paintings not making any sense if examined closely, but when viewed from a distance it is vivid and appealing" by famous scholar Shen Kuo.^[2] In Dong's painting, the rendering of mountain is through

his signature texture strokes with meticulously arranged dots. It might seem messy when looking closely but it gives a sense of foliage to the trees on the mountains by looking from a distance. The composition of the painting is divided into three layers. The river as the foreground, taking up most of the space; the mountain range as the middle ground; and small space is left for the sky (negative space) as the background. Absorbed from Dong's oeuvre, Koon simplified Dong's approach by using a much softer brushwork to depict the landscape. Under same setting of composition, Koon adopted a rather boneless manner without applying clear outline on the contour of the ridges. By using only light and dark ink washes, light and shade is contrasted and layers of river, mountains and sky is divided subtly. Such ambiguity in outlines creates a mist-like atmosphere to the scenery. When observed closely, viewers would notice the dots of different sizes and ink intensity applied on the hills surface, suggesting the texture of rocks and trees.

Koon's inspiration is not limited to traditional concept, his appreciation of Japanese aesthetic "Wabi-sabi" is shown in the depiction of quiet landscape. "if an object can bring a sense of serene melancholy and a spiritual longing, then it could be regarded as wabi-sabi."^[3] Koon reduced the objects that can be seen on Pat Sin Leng to minimum, including Guanyin statue and the Beverly Hills, and gives viewers a glimpse of the peaceful Pat Sin Leng in its original, purest state.

The dynamic created by multiple-panel framing, a signature to Koon's painting, is defined as the modern perception to understanding nature. Koon explained that nowadays people approach nature through photos, through looking out the windows (frames). Our idea of nature is through a combination of fragmented images. Koon displayed the shifting perspective through the sinuous arrangement of the panels. With the spatial arrangement of each painting panel, it encourages viewers into a unique visual experience to enter the painting on different levels and layers of perspective. Apart from the panel arrangement, each panel has its own distinctive compositional trait and yet harmoniously unite the whole set.^[4] Viewers are expected to observed the beauty of Pat Sin Leng from different angles when focusing on both a sole panel or the entire arrangement. With modern composition and fragmented displays to reinterpret the aesthetic of traditional landscape painting, our imagination's exploration is allowed freely and our own perspective regarding Pat Sin Leng is formed.

[1] Dong Yuan, “Xiao and Xiang Rivers,” *China Online Museum*.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/36382872@N03/3593018982>

[2] Li Mao Ning, 2008. “Art in artlessness——On the prosaic beauty of Dong Yuan’s landscape paintings.” *Journal of Guangzhou University (Social Science Edition)*, no. 8 (2008)

[3] Andrew Juniper. 2003. *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*. Tuttle Publishing.

[4] Wai Bong, *Talk and Demonstration in Picturing Hong Kong: Ink Paintings by Contemporary Hong Kong Artists*, October 12, 2017