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FAN SHAOHUA



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A Return To Tradition

Numerous mainland-born Chinese artists eschewed traditional teachings and cultural references and emigrated in the 1980s and 1990s. They sought to make new art that was free of political and social clichés. But the attractions of Chinese traditional art and culture are strong. It is to these that Fan Shaohua returned to make new and engaging art.

By Ian Findlay

Over the past four decades, innumerable mainland Chinese artists have been strongly influenced by Western art styles and traditions. This was a great part of their individual and collective success at the beginning of the 1980s as their art was readily accessible to Western audiences and, to some extent, reinforced the perceived notion of the superiority of Western art forms in the international art world. While many of the most singular artists of the post-Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) era remained at home to make art for changing times, numerous others emigrated across the world to develop artistic identities free of political and social constraints. After the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, many others followed.

Southeast Asia was among the most significant early destinations over the past century for Chinese artists, especially the countries now known as Singapore and Malaysia, which were viewed, prior to the Second World War, as secure and welcoming. The Guangzhou-born artist Fan Shaohua is one of the many Chinese artists for whom emigration to Singapore in the late 1980s and early 1990s constituted both a break from rigid political, social, and artistic constraints and the challenge of a new cultural and artistic life, as both artist and teacher.

Fan Shaohua arrived in Singapore as an already accomplished painter in 1992, at a time when Singapore was itself seeking fresh directions in its artistic development. Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts¹ had been around since 1938 but LASALLE College of the Arts had only opened in 1984, and it was in

Fan Shaohua, Reflections, 2014, oil on canvas, 340 x 90 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist.



throes of forging its own identity as an art school under the guidance of the sculptor, Brother Joseph McNally (1923–2002).²

The Singapore Fan Shaohua emigrated to was certainly not a world devoid of art and a history of artistic achievement. On the contrary, it had already established the reputations of a wide range of artists: among these were such pioneer modern artists as Georgette Chen (1906–1993), Liu Kang (1911–2004), Chen Wen Hsi (1906–1991), and Cheong Soo Pieng (1917–1983). Individually and collectively these artists played important roles in developing the art style that came to be known as Nanyang art and also as mentors to early post-War generations of Singaporean and Malaysian artists. Their influence was not only as teachers and mentors but also as artists who had wide experience in Western art, in Europe and the United States, and in the traditional Chinese art canon. Their influences reverberate subtly throughout the Southeast Asian art world to this day.

Through his awareness of Singapore's pioneer artists and their traditions Fan Shaohua gradually carved out an impressive niche for himself as an artist and teacher, which his recent retrospective entitled *Journey in Art* at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts served as witness.³

Born in Guangzhou in 1963, Fan Shaohua graduated with a BA in fine arts from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 1985; he immediately began teaching at Guangdong Huanan Art University. In 1992, Fan emigrated to Singapore where "I liked its multicultural society and am able to appreciate art forms from different parts of the world, learning from their different painting schools and styles as well. It has been an eye-opener for me."⁴

Between 1992 and 2002, Fan made many outstanding works as a figurative artist. He recorded Singapore's recent history through portraiture of his varied subjects. From the innocence of children to the hardiness of the ordinary worker and women of all ages to the determined spirit of the late leader Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015) Fan developed a singular style for his realism. He notes in making



Fan Shaohua, *Seeker*, 2014, oil on canvas, 100 x 120 cm.

portraits one has not only "to be able to understand the construction of the human body, the posture and appearance of the

characters, the interplay of light and shadows, and the use of cool warm colors, one also has to observe deeply the character's personality and charisma, his life and person."⁵

Moving around Fan Shaohua's retrospective it is clear that he is a keen observer of the world. His portraits stand out as one example of this but his street scenes and his busy river scenes also highlight his astute reflections of the city-state and the odd juxtaposition between the bustling past and the clean-cut present. His architectural works of glass and steel towers looming over the river suggest the cool modernity of technological Singapore, but they also suggest something of the remoteness of modern life and work. In such works it is clear that Fan is steeped in the Western art practice and theories in which he was educated. I admire many such works, but I am more engaged with his vision of traditional landscape and the lotus that move boldly between oil on canvas and ink-and-color on paper, which speak to his Chinese cultural traditions.

In his Western-style



Fan Shaohua, *Frosty Peaks*, 2015, oil on canvas, 120 x 90 cm.

works Fan says, in his artist's statement *My Journey to Art*, that he sees the clear connection between Chinese and Western art: "After years of studying Chinese and Western art, I can see their common starting point which is to emphasize art's basic characteristics and spirit. Art's basic characteristics include creativity, [and] energy, and they must be full of life and imagination too." It is not only Fan's skills as a painter and his continuous search for his own visual language that lend his landscapes and lotuses their power but also his crucial understanding of visual art's fundamental human and painterly connections within historical art traditions. Without these relationships art is but decorative craft when it should be something that enlightens the human spirit and lights humankind's way into the future.

However much one struggles to reject one's cultural origins, there always comes a time when one has to make the decision to either accept that the past is lost to one or to re-engage with it, to embrace it wholeheartedly with one's new life experiences.

As the artist grows and changes, so does his art: it is inevitable. Looking back for Fan was not to repeat the past in artistic terms but to find a light that would shine on his new creative path forward. The desire to regain the past and to deal freshly with the expressive abstract power of Chinese traditional art was strong, he told me in Singapore earlier this year, but it had to be through his fresh perspective of time and distance as well as the struggles to be his singular self as an artist. As one looks across the arc of a decade in his *Journey in Art*, one sees an artistic voice that has become at ease with itself. It was a change with which Fan was extremely comfortable, even as it sometimes unsettled him: his diverse range of subjects and themes could not easily be cast aside.

"I really started to go back to tradition about ten years ago," says Fan. "I feel that art should represent one's spirit and that through this one get back to one's roots. I do feel better about myself as an artist because I feel that I am now painting my own vision of the world. I can't say that the East or the West is better, but for me what is important is that art from different traditions is related to one's individual spirit."⁶

For the unprepared artist returning to traditional Chinese landscape and lotus painting there is always a danger of being trapped by sentimentality in the painting of their subjects.



Fan Shaohua, *Longevity Crane*, 2015, oil on canvas, 200 x 100 cm.

Regardless of the natural intensity of landscape and the colorful brilliance of a blooming lotus, artists often feel compelled to try to “improve” on nature. This is not the case in Fan Shaohua’s art, for he knows that nature always wins. Like Wong Keen (b.1942), another Singaporean expressionist artist of landscape and lotus, Fan allows the physical reality of his subjects to speak for itself, playing with the viewer’s desire to see beyond the surface of the painting and into nature.

Fan’s vision of tradition is not something copied from past masters but one that possesses something of its formality yet with his own individual line and colors.

The surfaces of his recent paintings are not flat as in traditional art but rough-textured, sometimes raw, as in Expressionist art. One sees this to a good effect in his lively paintings such as *Reflections* (2014), *Seeker* (2014), *Nature’s View* (2015), and *Shade of Red* (2015). The latter two are *tondo*, a form that Fan Shaohua has used to a great visual effect during the past decade. The images he makes in this round form focus the eye completely on the immediate narrative as well as suggesting to viewers that they are voyeurs to one of nature’s private moments. It is a seductive form that speaks across time and cultures but it also presents the artist with various difficulties, not the least of which is painting in the round. And among some artists there is the feeling that they are copying something of the masters. Fan is aware of this.

“I studied the masters and I appreciate them but the biggest challenge for me has been to find my own voice as a landscape and ink painter,” he says. “I don’t want my work to look like copies of the traditional masters. For



Fan Shaohua, *Shade of Red*, 2015, oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.

me the Song dynasty is the most inspirational period and the most important as it has best represented the Chinese spirit. But I don’t copy it. The Chinese spirit is that nature and humanity are together. In the West, I believe, nature and people are separate. I want my work to represent the Chinese spirit.”⁷

Fan’s landscapes are narratives of

all there, for example, in the drama of the oil painting entitled *Longevity Crane* (2015), which is a layered work of subtle intensity, with cranes swooping down the picture plane; the dramatic waterfalls and the brown-rocked cliff faces emphasize their grace, and the distant gushing sounds of waterfalls whisper at the edge of a viewer’s hearing.



Fan Shaohua, *Nature’s View*, 2015, oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.

the imagination and not of any particular place, although they are certainly informed and inspired by tradition and place.

But one of his most significant influences in landscape painting is the “Lingnan School descendant and master Li Xiangcai’s Chinese ink. I was impressed by his old but strong hand with the brush, and attracted to his clever and clear compositions, which look far and high. Looking at his painting at close range, they can sometimes bring one to a state of mind thousands of miles away.”⁸

Clarity, cleverness, and a dream-like quality are at the heart of many of Fan’s finest works, but these never overwhelm his art, never inhibit his spontaneous vision. It is

Glorious Beauty

(2015), painted in fan form, also has a sense of the spare power of dark mountains. And the mountains soaring into a light blue sky as in *Frosty Peaks* (2015) speak to the endlessness of time and nature in which cranes seem to be hovering in expectation of a long flight. The tondo entitled *Peak Observations* (2015) [see Cover] also suggests the timelessness of the mountain ranges as they seek to touch the sky. The naked tree branches in the foreground of *Glorious Beauty*, *Frosty Peaks*, and *Peak Observations* speak to the calligraphic brushstrokes as they move lyrically across canvas and paper. As Fan has said, these “semi-abstract works in oil look as if

they are Chinese ink paintings. Their compositions are in a free-flowing style uninhibited by any rules such as perspective."⁹

In all of Fan Shaohua's art one is never far from a poetic sense of calligraphy and his subjects have an immediate presence that can be quite startling in a surreal way. At other times, his subjects seem so distant as to be beyond the viewer's perception. The visual effects of Fan's landscape, which burst with modernist energy and experiment, open our eyes to a fresh way of looking at traditional Chinese landscape.

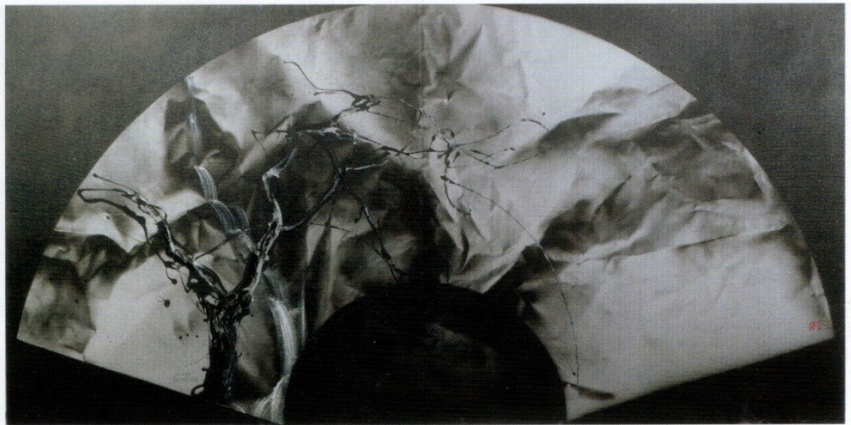
It is in Fan's landscapes that one has a concrete sense of his Western art influences, which is something that he is quick to acknowledge. "Among the important things that I learned from Western art was about Greek sculpture and the body, the three-dimensional aspects of these, and the people and the idealized view of these. All of these have had a deep influence on my ink work and landscapes,"¹⁰ says Fan.

Emphasizing the lotus and its flowers may mark Fan as something of a traditional Chinese flower painter, but this is something that he readily dismisses. "I am not a traditional painter of flowers," says Fan. "My flowers are abstract, my forms are free flowing, so it is difficult to say what one is and what is not, a flower or a lotus or a rose."¹¹

Some of his lotus works are realistic, touched with the textures of expressionism, but they are much less common than his abstract lotuses. The line and colors—rich reds, greens, blues, and yellows—of many of the lotus works suggest the beauty of traditional flower painting, the hum of music, and nature's turning seasons, all of which are important to Fan's creative energy. Works such as *Nature's View*, *Reflections*, and *Shade of Red* (2015) speak powerfully to these qualities.

In his lotus works Fan often uses titles with the name of the seasons or alludes to the natural qualities of each season, as in *Autumn Beauty* (2014). In these works Fan easily blends numerous artistic concerns of the East and the West. "I often use the seasons as a starting point in my paintings," says Fan. "I also use music and calligraphy as starting points in my abstract ink works. I never use a place as a starting point. It is limiting."¹²

Fan Shaohua's search for a singular artistic identity continues. It is not one that will limit



Fan Shaohua, *Glorious Beauty*, 2015, oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm.

his art: this is certain. He knows that his journey into art is one that has no end in sight and this is as it ought to be for the creative spirit. Just as tradition and modernity travel side by side along art's never-ending journey, only occasionally meeting to experiment, so, too, does the

traveler's spirit as it seeks to be renewed. Returning to tradition is just a stop on the way, a brief respite before engaging in something new. Fan Shaohua know this well. Δ



Fan Shaohua, *Autumn Beauty*, 2014, oil on canvas, 200 x 100 cm.

Notes:

1. Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts was established in 1938 with only 14 students. Artists as different as Georgette Chen, Liu Kang, Chen Wen Hsi, and Cheong Soo Pieng, and many others, played a vital role in mentoring new generations of Singapore and Malaysian artists.
2. Brother Joseph McNally founded LASALLE College of the Arts in 1984. The College is now one of the premier art colleges in Asia.
3. *Journey in Art: Retrospective Exhibition by Fan Shaohua* was held between March 21 and April 8, 2015, at the galleries of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore. This exhibition covered some 40 years of Fan's life as an artiste.
4. The catalogue *Journey in Art: Retrospective Exhibition by Fan Shaohua*, published by Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore, 2015; page 14.
5. From the Introduction to the catalogue for the exhibition entitled *Portraiture: Singapore 1992–2002 by Fan Shaohua*; page 58.
6. Quotations from Fan Shaohua are from an interview with the author in Singapore on March 20, 2015.
7. March 20, 2015, Singapore.
8. The catalogue *Journey in Art: Retrospective Exhibition by Fan Shaohua* published by Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore, 2015; page 15.
9. *Journey in Art*, page 16.
10. March 20, 2015, Singapore.
11. March 20, 2015, Singapore.
12. March 20, 2015, Singapore.