

art

Huang Rui: Painting with Words

Jonathan Goodman

Huang Rui's word paintings, shown at Zuercher Galleries in New York this past spring and summer, recognize Western traditions but do not succumb to them. Rui, one of the founders of the influential, and oppositional, Beijing literary magazine *Today* in 1978, has always maintained some distance from Chinese mainstream art. This has happened partly because his current work develops from a strong knowledge of American painterly and conceptual advances in the last forty years. Indeed, the technique he employs for his oils on canvas—the materials he uses indicate of course a debt to Western culture—looks a lot like the style of Robert Rauschenberg; moreover, his word paintings demonstrate a knowledge and internalization of conceptual art.

At the same time, for the cover of his show's small catalogue, Rui has posed in traditional Chinese dress; with his long hair, moustache and goatee, and wire-rim glasses, the artist looks every inch the proponent of long-established Chinese culture, even though the painting shown behind him looks like it is influenced by the work of Mondrian. This contrast between the old and the new suggests an unusual complexity in Rui's mentality, which acknowledges recent developments in world art even as he seeks a steady contact with his own past. Ever since the 1970s, when Chinese art began to internalize the lessons learned from the West's avant-garde, artists from Beijing and other intellectual art centers in China have kept their eyes posted on inventions from America and Europe.

This has happened in other arts: the poet Bei Dao, with Rui a co-founder of *Today*, writes a rhetoric-free verse that owes a lot to Western modernism (he spent many years teaching in America before before authorities allowed him to move to Hong Kong). But it is easier to incorporate Western visual influence into Asian art than to do something similar in language—this is because the structures of Chinese and English are, from the start, so unlike. In Rui's case, it is important to note that, for his generation of artists in China, the acceptance of Western avant-garde principles has meant a turning away from his own history, at least to some extent. At the same time, within the very recent past, five to ten years ago, there has been a return to ink painting, surely the idiom considered most traditional in China—by the Chinese as well as outsiders.

In addition to helping found *Today*, Rui is perhaps even more famous for starting the Stars group, active from 1979 to 1983. This underground collective, including Ai Weiwei, Wang Keping, and Ma Desheng, all of whom now enjoy fame and notoriety, is best known for its counter-exhibition in 1979, situated across from the China Arts Gallery (now the National Art Museum). After three days, the show was shut down, supposedly for security reasons, by the government. But the moment was decisive—it is clear that Rui has been consistently involved with culture dissenting from convention in China. It would seem that the artist's current pose of literati painter represents a further development in a career remarkable for its idiosyncrasies and political resistance. It is

also interesting to note that Rui's progressive art actions align themselves with historical awareness of Chinese history; perhaps the past enables him to work out a view that is free of dogma, in both a political and esthetic sense.

Earlier efforts by Rui spanned a broad spectrum of influences from the West, including Cubism, Fauvism, Expressionism, and Abstract Expressionism. In his powerful show of recent art, he looks to appropriate, in slightly ironic fashion, the painting of real language within the composition. Recognizable words, mostly in English, are used as physical attributes while infusing the paintings with acuity. The irony comes from the position Rui finds himself in: as a conceptual painter, he must feel compelled to invest his creativity with ideas, but at the same time he paints with a fluidity that withstands the notion of a purely intellectualized art. The contradiction does not weaken but actually intensifies his ideas—in large part because he paints so well!

It is interesting to consider whether the notion of social dissidence, so important to the artist, is embodied in work that uses Western materials (oil on canvas) and English words as its constructs; Rui's choices, both physically and conceptually, have consequences. Certainly Chinese painters have long maintained an interest in Western art, and have been very successful at internalizing the generally subversive values of the Western avant-garde. Perhaps, though, Rui's position is more complex, as he makes clear in his image of himself in traditional clothing. Or is the pose another way of undermining authority, in this case the legacy of his own culture? It is hard to say. Clearly, his view supports more than one stance; Rui's most recent art, done this year, consists of painterly treatments of the I Ching hexagrams, collected in a series called "Dance of the I Ching." So the work shifts from Western involvements to iterations of Chinese culture, forming a vision that moves between the two.

Likely this is easier to do from a Chinese background than from an American one. One of the things I have noticed is just how often and long Chinese avant-garde artists have been looking at art in New York created in the last forty years. It is true enough that American artists have been influenced by Chinese culture; one thinks of the Cold Mountain paintings of Brice Marden and the poetry of Gary Snyder. But advanced Chinese art has been in dialogue for a couple generations with Western models of innovation; they seem to take more from us than we from them. We remember that modernism as the West knows it did not truly take place in China; abstract art has only been taken up relatively recently, decades after its development in Europe. Consequently, Rui's paintings take place within a very recent framework, one in which the values of abstraction and conceptualism are made real and immediate by their true newness to his culture.

In its entirety, Rui's exhibition, which is called "Language Color"—the words are presented as separate, equal entities, nearly physical objects as well as legible signifiers—spans more than three decades, from the "Space Structure" works done in 1984 to the "Dance of I Ching" paintings done this year. The early pieces can be considered geometric abstractions very much in tune with the hard-edge paintings that form part of up-to-date American art history. And "Space Structures," the title of the series, consciously situates the art within a constructed framework. The paintings, made by a

Chinese contemporary artist, must be re-seen and re-defined by the light of *his* history as opposed to our own. This gives both Rui and his audience the chance to establish a point of view that stays free of historical over-determination. Why can't we accept Rui's work simply as it is, without devaluing it by seeing it as part of a differing culture?

If it is true that post-modern painting accepts the notion that anyone from any background is free to make use of any particular style in art, then why must we pin down someone like Rui? He should be free to do what he wants; it is inevitable that an open regard for genres now spans time and geography. Given that Chinese artist has been painting oil paintings for more than one hundred years, it becomes clear that it now has a short history of its own with regard to the medium. For those of us in the West, it is hard sometimes not to see the Chinese work as academic. One of the strengths of Rui's art is that he infuses his paintings with an intelligence that advances his efforts toward current thinking.

Some of this contemporaneity has to do with the borrowing of genres, and even ideas; but Rui's creativity is seamless with the understanding that, at least for someone in his position, as a Chinese artist who has disagreed with the art and politics of his own culture, abstraction represents an oppositional outlook—even if *we* see it as a repetition of history. As a result, what looks like borrowing to us holds a different tenor and weight in China, even at this point in time, when abstraction has been practiced for more than a couple generations. Rui may be better appreciated in America than in China, although the art world he belongs to is at this point highly knowledgeable and just as sophisticated as America's situation. Both cultures are likely in a place where the conscious continuance of a mostly historical style is given weight because modernism goes on influencing artists' imagination even when the modernist moment is over.

At least this is so in America. The paintings from Rui's "Space Structure" series, *Space Structure 84-2* and *Space Structure 84-21* and *Space Structure 84-25*, all from 1984, can be understood as examples both of independence of mind (in China) and the borrowing of a tradition (in America). The origins of the series are in fact highly specific. In late 1983, Hui began the series, creating painterly schemes based on divinations of the city's environment. At the same time, the artist had traveled to Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou, where he encountered gardens and waterways, which he rendered in hexagrams (bagua) first used in Daoist philosophy, as a means of presenting physical reality in terms of spatial experience. The colors he uses—dark browns, greens, and blues, and also reds and grays—describe and connect with the experience of cities and urban life in post-revolutionary China. At the same time, Rui's use of abstraction, even if it is based on ancient divinatory tools in China, also looks to Western stylistic advances in painting.

Space Structure 84-2 feels like a grid that has been partially disassembled; on the left are several four rows of squares of green outlined in black, with the top right and bottom left squares missing. On the right there are four rows of single horizontal forms, outlined again in black with a dark brown interior. The entire composition, horizontal in nature, has a brown background. The piece is a pristine example of painterly intelligence, and

seems to reference the I Ching hexagram as well as the legacy of Western geometric abstraction. But whatever its influences, it is a self-reliant and attractive work of art. Thus it is important to note that Rui's focus has incorporated Western art practice for at least three decades.

Space Structure 84-21 is even more rigorous in its presentation. A tall painting, 136 by 83 centimeters, the picture incorporates two black columns floating in the middle two-thirds of the composition, whose background is dark gray. The posts balance each other, being positioned on the left and right edges of the painting and thus allowing the gray to take over the center space. There is true sophistication in the shapes' formal arrangement, its schematic delivery coming very much from Western abstraction. *Space Structure 84-25* repeats the idea of simple shapes arranged geometrically, this time on a burgundy background. Four long narrow forms frame a circle within the painting; the forms are filled with a dark gray and framed in black, with the circle's center painted a slightly lighter gray. As their titles demonstrate, these pictures are purely visual exercises, and it seems clear that their interest is essentially formal in nature. Rui's creativity has mostly been intellectual and abstract in its terms, and so the above paintings must be seen in light of modernism and its consequences—even if the works should slightly suggest a Chinese connection.

The dualities inherent in a much later painting, entitled *White Tiger Black Dragon* (2014), substitute Chinese characters for English words. The work consists of two exactly similar forms in white and black: an L shape placed upright in white, which structures the same L shape placed upside down in black. As a minimalist work of art, it is highly satisfying, but the simple scheme is rendered more complex by the inclusion of characters in the two parts, reading as “white tiger” in the white half and “black dragon” in the black. Why would Rui do this? The painting would likely work quite well without the characters. It seems to me that he is incorporating a literary meaning into what at first looks like a purely painterly approach. We know from his biography—as a co-founder of *Today*—that he has an interest in words. And we know as well that Chinese characters—often poetry—are inscribed traditionally on Chinese paintings. So there is a precedent for what he has done.

As a result of his choice to incorporate characters into the field of the painting, Rui consciously turns to the past. The structure and forms of *White Tiger Black Dragon* demonstrate his recognition of contemporary painting; however, the combination of words and image goes back a long way in Rui's culture. So the composition is grounded in history. Even the title of the picture alludes to ancient, mythic beasts present in Chinese literature and art. Simply by adding legible meaning to his image, Rui grounds the work in a context that, to some extent, frees it of its lateness as art. Therefore, it turns out that the referencing in *White Tiger Black Dragon* is both very old and very new. For someone in Rui's position, whose culture jumped from an academic realism in the twentieth century to postmodern practice without directly experiencing modernity, this is a very good way of advancing art. Rui's place is different from ours; he has older images and practices informing his esthetic.

Part of the problem with contemporary art today is its superficiality; the obsession with creating something new in art has resulted in work that indicates only what has just happened. One of the challenges facing Chinese art has to do with how it will—or will not—introduce its far-reaching past into today’s efforts. Contemporary art in fact needs an infusion of legacies it may not agree with formally but which will lend current applications of creativity a dignity popular culture cannot provide. Ever since Warhol popular culture has won out in American painting; yet one can appreciate the impulse without yielding to it as an esthetic. In China, the situation is different. Art there has a potential depth, given its history, that may not be possible in the United States, whose traditions are so young. Rui may well be bridging a gap between his experience as a contemporary artist and his awareness that the ideas and forms of his painterly inheritance are very old indeed.

In *Black Joke White Joke* (2014), Rui has painted a diptych, a black canvas on the left and a white canvas on the right. The words “black joke” occur on the black canvas; “white joke” occurs on the right. The literalism of the phrases contrasts with the highly imaginative manner in which the panels are painted, in accordance with the lyric expressiveness of the New York School. What do the two phrases mean? Reduced to their basic element, the terms seem to mean no more than the exact copy of their visual display—at least in the light of this particular painting. At the same time, as words they do in fact signify more than their physical forms. But the feeling associated with their use here is that of skepticism. Perhaps Rui is indicating his mistrust of language by devaluing it; the sheer banality of the two phrases shows that the artist is interested in reducing the words to forms. Meaning is thus trumped by form.

Rui’s position in *Black Joke White Joke* is postmodern; language is introduced into the picture plane only to have the words made intellectually meaningless by their inclusion within the painting as purely formal elements. But, interestingly enough, the delivery of the *painting* style is highly poetic—in the brushy manner of the New York School. So the composition is based on a highly imaginative reversal, in which the words, usually the vehicle of meaning, become formal constituents and the painting style takes on the condition of poetry. This is an exercise in reversed dualisms, as seen in the title of the painting. Rui’s intellectual intelligence plays against our expectations of mediums and meaningfulness. He does this to undermine our complacency just as he has stood up against the self-satisfaction of his government.

The most recent works, done this year, are examples of *Dance of I Ching—Bagua*, a group of paintings done in accordance with the eight trigrams of the *I Ching*, which is a divinatory text accompanying the different numbers, originally produced by the use of yarrow stalks, whose linear signs are found in the book. The *I Ching* is a text of great importance in a philosophical and even religious sense in Chinese culture. In the first example of the series, the trigrams, consisting of long and short horizontal bands, are collected in a group of eight. Alternately painted light and dark black, and then white and gray, the trigrams fit perfectly within a New York School scheme—even as they quote deliberately from the *I Ching* structure. The individual trigrams are placed against a background of silver and gray, much like those trigrams painted white and gray. The

contemporary sophistication of the painting remains notable, at least in part because its context goes back to the ancient Chinese manual.

Number 11 in the series is in fact highly similar to the first composition discussed above. There is one difference: the individual trigrams are composed of both the black, and white and gray, strips, rather than one particular tone. The elegance of the sequence is undeniable; it is a composite of a highly achieved, contemporary style and the recognition of visual elements in China's oldest philosophical document. Together the two work out a statement that is in keeping with Rui's current metaphysical bent, perhaps the result of a maturing career. But no matter the reason for Rui's present choices—the paintings are amazingly beautiful. They lead in the direction of fused dualities: between old and new ideas, paintings and texts, and Western and Chinese influences.

It should be said that Rui's political independence is mirrored by his esthetic autonomy. Beginning in resistance to Chinese governmental authority, Rui has always known the value of dissent. His career has moved in the direction of philosophical statement, reflecting the importance of inner realities. And it is also true that he has eclectically borrowed from Western culture and its modernist tradition, albeit without giving way to its somewhat outdated blandishments. Instead, Rui has successfully quoted differing influences and brought them into play in a holistic manner. It seems fitting that he now addresses the *I Ching*, whose knowledge is intuitive and spiritual in the extreme. By addressing both literature and visual style in a way that incorporates influences outside his own culture, Rui shows us a methodology that is neither presumptuous or jaded. It is open, as all good art must be.

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