

art

Bian Hong: Chinese Calligraphy Revisited

Jonathan Goodman

Bian Hong comes from Mainland China. Born in Heilongjian, she studied calligraphy and ink art a bit more than two decades ago, in 1995, at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. In 2013, she came to visit America and decided to stay. She now lives in Lower Manhattan, and practices meditation while working on her abstract calligraphy and ink paintings. Attracted by the personal, social, and cultural freedoms of the United States, Bian Hong likes her life in America, but she currently is not represented by a gallery here, although she has won two awards since establishing herself, both in 2013: the Asian Art Funds Outstanding-Artist Award and the Chinese-American Arts Council Outstanding Artist Award. Her artwork demonstrates a passion for traditional Chinese calligraphy, even as she moves beyond the remarkable legacy of ink art she has inherited. Her work will inevitably be compared to abstract-expressionist painting, given its nonobjective nature (and also her current life as a painter in New York), but this is likely a mistake. The convention here, of identifying foreign art practices, especially the inspired one of Chinese calligraphic art, as indebted to modern American innovations in painting feels absurd in light of increased knowledge and experience of Chinese work--especially now that Chinese artists are coming to live in America, often in New York City, and manifest their heritage.

But it takes more than increased understanding of Chinese calligraphy for Western culture to completely comprehend its meaning. It requires the willingness to approach a differing tradition without bias, something that likely cannot be done completely but that must be attempted. Our penchant for reading other cultures in light of our own should be seen, at least partially, as an act of willful misreading, based on the Western impulse to capture the achievements of other cultures by claiming that they are based on our practices. Certainly, the history of Chinese art is as great as the art of the West, but that does not mean in any way that its accomplishments are the *same*. Today we find that, given present art efforts, in which styles in a cultural, epochal, and formal sense are up for grabs, no matter where anyone comes from, romantic creative longing has been replaced by a rather cold assessment of what one can borrow. This trend does have its positive points; because we are now mostly saddled by the historical particulars of our own situation, there is a great need, not only formally but indeed thematically, to transcend, to see beyond the fog of what has been given us. This is what happened with Picasso's appropriation of African tribal sculpture in his iconic work of 1907, *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*. We remember, though, that this work was painted more than a century ago, before the globalization of culture, and therefore the borrowing had extraordinary esthetic meaning and no sense of theft.

Now, however, the cultural terms of influence have been so profoundly politicized, dominant cultures have had to rethink their stance in regard to cribbing from others, outside their own past. At the same time, the ease of travel and the availability of images on the Internet have created a world culture, in which any tradition can be taken up by anyone. But this has been true for a long time; when Gauguin began traveling to Tahiti in the early 1890s, ostensibly to rejuvenate his painting and experience a greater innocence (not to mention erotic contact with the women), cultural tourism had already begun. So we now have more than a hundred years of such travel, first begun by Western tourists, artistic or not, but which is now practiced by everyone everywhere. In art, then, this means that the habit of intellectual and esthetic journeying carries with it a precedent history that has begun to blunt the insights of what such travel originally achieved, giving them the weakness of a cliché. This is no one's fault; instead, it is the inevitable, slightly tragic consequence of insights being reiterated to the point of becoming trivial. As always, the question for artists is, What to do next? Historically, Chinese painters imitated earlier works in order to internalize the painter's insights--and then, move to something new. Now, though, it seems that we have come quite close to exhausting our resources--the Chinese as well as the West. Our legacies have faded to the point of vanishing.

More than a generation ago, the New York critic Arthur C. Danto pronounced that art, or at least its innovatory continuance, was dead. While he retreated from that position a bit later on, it is also true that since the period of Conceptualism and Minimalism, no new movement has asserted itself. Instead, since the 1970s, we have acknowledged that pluralism, or the activity of individual artists alone, has been the best way to describe contemporary fine art. Most recently, because of intellectual desperation and, likely, erotic pursuit, we have a situation where foreignness is being celebrated. But of course, the intensity of such celebration is now worn out with the repetitions of time. This is not only true of Western culture; it is true of the Chinese, who have gone in and out of periods of interest in other cultures. When they were interested, as happened in the Tang Dynasty--this can be seen in lively portraits of foreigners in their paintings--they produced a poetic and artistic culture that is unsurpassed. In recent times, however, obsessed as the Chinese have been with the abstract, ideological transformation of their communal spirit, as constructed by Mao, they lost contact with their extraordinary art tradition. In the 1980s, once a generation of relatively affluent and intellectually open artists occurred, remarkable art was produced, in large part because of their willing to experience, and then reinterpret, the advances of the Western avant-garde. But the inspiration didn't last very long, only about ten years, and saw its end, more or less, with the crushing of the democracy movement. Many of these artists were forced to leave the country, and many came to New York, where for a period of roughly fifteen years, from the early 1990s to the middle 2000s, they were idolized. The originality of their art, created in the Mainland in the midst of poverty and considerable hostility from authorities, was understood here and experienced as if it were entirely new (some of it was not--Xu Bing's great *Book from the Sky* had its first public viewing in Beijing in 1989).

Then, though, the time of mutual admiration fell, and New York became too expensive. Many of these artists returned to China, around the time of America's financial depression in 2007. Certain major exceptions, such as Cai Guo-Qiang and Wenda Gu, stayed here. This group, no matter where they now live, learned greatly and then internalized their experience of artistic advance; a couple of years ago, Xu Bing hosted a talk at the Central Academy of Fine Art with Yoko Ono, another exploratory Asian artist who has remained in New York. So, like everyone else, Asian artists have become active in a truly broad participation of avant-gardism, although this stance is starting to feel antiquated, as strange as that may seem. This is perhaps the inevitable result of its reiteration and, indeed, its institutionalization in the art world--all over the world. Now that Chinese artists have been regularly visiting and living in New York, they are also regularly being interpreted as internalizing the values of the Western practitioners here. But cultural travel and education in modern China is also historically established; Lin Yan, the paper sculptor who has lived in New York for many years, comes from a family of artists who came to the West to study--both her mother and her grandmother went to Paris to learn from the art academy (it is also true they went home to practice their craft!). These educational sojourns in the West by Chinese artists continue to take place; Bian Hong is one of the latest examples.

Bian Hong thus represents not something utterly new, but a decision that comes with some history. Despite the repetition over time, this choice carries considerable weight on an individual level. And incorporating cultural difference and geographical distance into artistic effort still results in clear thinking and a changed view, even if limited. Bian Hong remains outside the art world in New York, not only because her work still communicates close ties to Chinese ink tradition--even if the work seems deliberately abstract--but because her English is limited. As a result her direct involvement with New York's cultural life is constrained, although she does regularly visit gallery and museum shows. This unrecognized involvement with our contemporary art culture has resulted not so much in stylistic change in Bian Hong's paintings as it has in a deepening of her own prospect, which like every cultural impulse today, Western or Asian, needs to be made new by divergence, usually achieved by a move somewhere else. Because the artist has decided to stay in America, which means that she must reinterpret her own idiom in the face of art experiences and life choices that she couldn't make before, or were not available, she is becoming, inevitably, a part of the art world here. But it also remains true, even in 2017 in America, where everyone is parading their cultural openness, that her efforts may go unnoticed in New York. The situation is not the artist's fault, though. Her decision to stay in America examples her wish, and even need, to mature in an environment which she may well misunderstand, or in which she may be unrecognized. Even so, her inescapable misinterpretations start to seem consciously made; they have been the source of change in painting, generally speaking, since modernism took place. The notion of a nearly willfully ignorant reading of influence may have had its origins in relatively recent Western art, but times

have changed, and now the option--and it has become a deliberate choice, rather than something new and original--is open to artists from all over the world.

The availability of settling down elsewhere, at present widely available, has brought about a world art culture. It is often hard, very hard, to tell the backgrounds of artists now. But that is not necessarily a good thing; specificity and strength arising from *internal* change have been the engines of artistic development, at least before now. In painting, somehow, national characteristics may persist, although they may not be prominent in any way. Bian Hong, even when we acknowledge the abstraction of her art, *feels* Chinese--whatever that means! It is something very difficult put a finger on. There must be ways of particularizing the decisions gone into the making of a style, especially in a broad cultural sense, although succeeding at doing so must also be very hard. Certainly, the Chinese understood abstraction in painting dynasties ago, even though they were painting nature with high realism. Insights in art are discovered and lost and discovered again, although in contemporary art, when most everything seems to have been previously found, it feels almost as if it is impossible to go forward. Indeed, the impossibility to originate something genuinely new as a group or movement seems final, although individual artists can work within historical paradigms in ways that show considerable integrity, grit, and tenacity of purpose. Bian Hong clearly demonstrates these qualities in her work. But she cannot escape the essentially historical dimension of her creativity--not even when she has courageously decided to exile herself from her own country and, to some extent, her culture. Despite the high intentions of her choice, she cannot evade her background anymore than we can evade ours, although both Bian Hong and artists in the West artists may try as hard as they can.

In Bian Hong's case, the painterly consequences of her move have not resulted in a complete redetermination of her style. The complete abstraction of her calligraphy is evident in works dating to more than a decade ago. The "New Calligraphy" series consists of these abstractions, which are brought about by pen and ink and a calligraphic stroke but bear little resemblance to an actual character or group of them. Deliberate abstraction in Chinese art is a relatively new development; it looks like Zao Wou-Ki ushered in this awareness as a painter working in Paris. But his paintings come closer to Western abstract painting, whereas Bian Hong, and those of us who write about her, are correct to see her efforts as a continuation of Chinese mind. It may be that further developments by the artist, occurring in the cultural openness of New York, will move her increasingly in the direction of Western abstraction. At the same time, we need to be hesitant in this opinion because the Chinese tradition of calligraphy is already established over more than the course of hundreds, even thousands, of years, and can bear up under the pressure of a geographical move such as Bian Hong's. Art tends to be fully understood only a couple of generations after it has been made; moreover, it is important to respect the differences of the culture from which it originates. At the same time, though, maybe Bian Hong's calligraphy tries to bring about a merger. This is more or less impossibly hard, but, again, it has been tried before-

-for example, in the paintings of veteran New York painter Pat Steir, we find stylistic similarities in Chinese art that agree with her sense of Western nonobjective painting. The question remains, however, whether such open influence is true appreciation or merely borrowing.

Currently, we tend to call such influences appropriation when they are assumed by an artist from a dominant, historically colonizing culture. But in Bian Hong's case, the reverse is occurring--although by someone who is coming from a great imperial culture of her own! So maybe the borrowing on her part can actually be seen as an equal exchange. In a 90-centimeter-square example taken from "New Calligraphy," produced in 2005, we see what at first looks like a completely nonobjective work done in black ink. But then, looking more closely, Bian Hong's viewer finds traces or parts of characters. The tension between the floating field of dark brushstrokes and the more particular elements of the partial characters results in a painting of remarkable interest, particularly for the (Western) viewer who cannot make sense of the characters, whether or not they are legible as Chinese. By basing her art on the legacy of visual and literary cohesion in calligraphy, Bian Hong draws our attention to the past, even it is also true that Chinese calligraphic painting has, over the course of its history, sometimes been notably free--to the point of abstraction. But she also, at the same time, suggests that literary meaning is possible in her art. Thus, the work presents a conundrum that links its esthetic power to reading, as it would inevitably in Chinese calligraphic painting. But for those of us who cannot read Chinese, abstraction dominates from the start. This is interesting for a cultural writer from the West because it yet again renders an Asian artist "inscrutable," to use the prejudicial term.

In fact, the term can be immediately discarded. Bian Hong's art takes place within a well-established, recent spectrum of Chinese visual play with meaning or its lack in the use of characters--the unreadable writing in *Book from the Sky* shows that very well, and that work is now almost thirty years old. Therefore, it can be said that a short, but real, continuum exists for this kind of calligraphic play in contemporary Chinese art. But, additionally, any reading of this painting that veers toward the question "How Chinese is it?" repeats the Western mistake of turning this brief legacy into a discussion of innate Chinese traits rather than looking at it as a series of decisions made by contemporary artists who were trying to innovate. All artists do this, from all over the world, but the history of Chinese calligraphy is sufficiently rich to allow for an ongoing, present and future, examination of its *own* origins and achievements as art. Given the muddle we are currently in with regard to painting, it makes sense to read current efforts as the reasoning of artists who look across cultures and time. But, it is fair to ask, wouldn't that destabilize rather than give a base to exploration? It is hard to say. Classicism no longer remains classicism when it is required to pay tribute to work outside its own achievement, and while Bian Hong's version of classicism indicates a fond regard for past accomplishments, it cannot only be that if it is to survive as contemporary art. She, like everyone else, has to make it new.

Another work by Bian Hong, also from 2005, is formally an abstract scroll, 178 by 48 centimeters. It might be too much to see the painting as abstract narrative, but the imagery does change as the scroll descends, moving from dense blots of ink against a dark background to a lighter middle and then back to the darker environment punctuated by black splashes. The painting--and this work is more a painting than a calligraphic piece--cannot be subsumed within a Western tradition. In 2005, Bian Hong was still in China, living with her family a bit outside of Beijing. Her references were most closely Chinese, although surely she had access to the Western art of the moment. In this example, we find her exploring the innate properties, physical and metaphysical, of her own background. The triple changes in style and atmosphere echo but do not imitate the changes in geography and people that are seen in traditional, horizontal scrolls. The small splotches we encounter look rather like nerve cells in an open field, while the middle portion has the feeling, if we were to jump to another culture, of something that the minimalist artist Agnes Martin might have painted. This leap across cultural divides by now feels more than slightly tread-worn, but both the method and the meaning of much art now being done face the same problem when the work of another culture is being borrowed. Bian Hong's integrity can actually be found in her *resistance* to change even as she effects it, although, unlike her recent move to the States, this hardly feels like conscious choice. How does one resist an imposition in style, experienced by the outsider artist who is researching something different from herself? One's affiliations and nature inevitably surface, especially if the first culture the artist belongs to is esthetically as strong as Bian Hong's China.

If it is true that contemporary art is as much a portrayal of conception as it is a demonstration of technical mastery, what happens when an artist sides with skill? Bian Hong's art is obviously skilled, the result of years of practice. But the paintings she makes also present the consequences of intellectual decisions, even if they are not arrived at in complete awareness. It looks like today it is necessary to work, at least partially, within a conceptual framework--the length of cultural history leaves us no choice. So Bian Hong looks very much like a contemporary practitioner in her *decision* to work abstractly. In the West we may rely too much on theory, preferring intellectual purpose over actual expression. But an idea only goes so far. The history of contemporary art has already shown us the limits of an approach keyed only to thought--now that the movement has is over, conceptual art is beginning to look arid. And this, then, is why painting will not go away. If, in New York, painting culture is renewed by someone on the margins or outside its boundaries, we can only congratulate that person for his or her contribution to a painting culture that has become burdened by the repetition of its own cognizance. And given the weight of past achievements. Bian Hong's paintings may not *belong* to us, but they do add to the spectrum of what is now taking place. It is the result of an acceptance here to include people from other cultures, as well as the decision of people from other places to reside in a city like New York, where traditions vie freely.

The danger is that even such openness may eventually become a cliché. And this may well have happened in a general sense. With the internationalization of an art language, art has lost its specificity, which likely results in a qualitative loss of expressiveness. No movements seem to be arriving on the horizon. Instead we have the single practices of artists like Bian Hong, which we can even describe as virtuous, given the courage she has displayed in rearranging her life. In a more recent painting, Bian Hong has demonstrably contemporized her references with a triptych of three canvases, horizontally arranged, that in each case include a photograph of Andy Warhol, showing his face half in darkness, half in light, with his hand to his mouth. His image occurs in the middle right of each painting and is framed by a horizontal U-shape of painterly activity, which is to our eyes utterly abstract (traces of characters may be suggested). The stroke marks feel a bit brushier than usual in Bian Hong's art, a bit more open in their references to New York lyric abstraction. The middle black painting is flanked on either side by paintings whose black strokes occur on a light lavender ground. The Warhol photograph occurs in black and white. Here we see Bian Hong demonstrating her awareness of relatively recent developments in Western painting--the slightly altered changes found in serial repetition, her paintings' open homage to the artist who permanently redirected contemporary art toward fun and cultural democracy. For this writer, the junction is strange but inevitable; we recognize the pervasiveness of a pop painting culture in Asia (especially Japan). Bian Hong can only bow to the situation she has taken on, but it is also true that she refuses to give up the style of her original idiom. This is cooptation and resistance occurring in the same moment. It must feel to the artist like the only means of approaching the cultural differences she is experiencing in her life in New York.

In Bian Hong's most recent efforts, she is painting abstract, ribbon-like lines on a black field. The overall shape of these paintings is circular and small. The curling ribbons look like they are slightly abstracted versions of ribbons found in paintings in the caves of Dunhuang, the extraordinary sites of Buddhist art in China's northwest. Thus, it again appears that Bian Hong is stating her painterly allegiances, which will eventually stand as demonstrations of cultural pride. More than a few Chinese artists have rediscovered their heritage *because* they moved here: what is antiquated and dull in one's home takes on new interest far away. The artistic impress of such a discovery is nothing new, either in the West or Asia--long, long ago, Dunhuang was a stop on the Silk Road, a trade route roughly connecting the West and the East. We keep on re-finding cultures as if we were the first! This is of course untrue, but contemporary art rejects the accumulations and findings of history in favor of a new myth: an egotistical sublime based on what is actually a *proprietary* recognition of difference, cultural but heavily politicized. Again, we are mistaken, but it doesn't matter--artists need inspiration as always. China may have too much history, while New York may not have enough. Misunderstandings, conscious or not, may result from the exchange, but the exchange has become equal, in the sense that a Chinese artist like Bian Hong is referring to *her* past and not ours (we remember that Zhang Huan started out brilliantly in Beijing with performance art based on hearing such work being done here, shifting

performance to feats of endurance; interestingly, he lived in New York for for more than a few years but returned to Shanghai, where he is re-making fragments of Buddhist sculptures). The urge to return to what we know is deeply felt; it is also likely a better way of creating. Very few painters from China have been able to completely internalize the Western idiom; to be honest, Zao Wou-Ki's work looks rather vague to an American audience (but when I saw the show of his art recently at the Asia Society with Bian Hong, she studied the paintings with genuine admiration). Maybe we don't know any more how these affiliations take place in the creativity of painters, but increasingly it looks like our unknowing doesn't matter. To a painter, to someone like Bian Hong, it simply matters what works.