

Tactile Resonance: The Spirit Painting of Wang Chuan

By Robert C. Morgan

Words can be overly complex in discussing certain kinds of art. Rather than trying to say everything at once, words should be kept to a minimum so as not to interfere with the process of seeing. In some cases, even labels and titles become unnecessary, if not superfluous. The absence of explanatory signs is closer to the Buddhist way, and to the way of the artist, Wang Chuan. His delicate brush paintings on paper, including his oil and acrylic paintings on large canvases, say everything they need to say without overstating the case. From the beginning, even before the brush touches the surface, whether paper or canvas, there is emptiness on which the slightest trace of the artist's brush may be felt instantaneously. In our electronic age, it might be compared to a monitor screen without a blip where no additional description or explanation is necessary. The sinewy lines that emerge from his brush speak their own language as if to accentuate the emptiness already there. Like "Lao-tzu" - reputedly a courtly archivist who later became a wandering sage in the sixth century B.C.E. - the words become superfluous except that they point in the direction of the Tao, or "the way." From my (American) perspective, Wang Chuan's paintings do something very similar. They constitute a form of "spirit writing" that points the way. Although he lives his life as a Buddhist, Wang Chuan knows the way as another expression of emptiness. There is no real contradiction. As a secularized artist-monk, his calligraphic ink paintings reveal the trace of non-Being (*wu*). This, in turn, coincides with nature in all its various manifestations. This would include the rising snow-capped mountains, the rain clouds, the waving reeds in a summer's breeze, the roaring cascades, the grass valleys, rocks, boulders, and ascending pine trees. Wang Chuang no longer needed to copy these visual attributes in the literal sense as he might have done in the early eighties. Rather he transformed his idea of nature from description to a form of absence or "emptiness." His delicate lines, wandering through space, his winding knots, and indeterminate intersections of lines, abstract characterizations, fruits, houses, smudges of ink, complex networks, zigzags, and chromosome-like contours reverberate with a purity of mind. Just as the Tao advocates that silence is better than enunciation, Wang now believes his lines and spaces are superior to his earlier arbitrations of meaning. He was no longer interested in the simulated copy. He is in search of the real, even if filled with anxiety or delicate passions – also associated with acts of nature, within nature, within the sound of the winds and the brightness of the stars. Therefore, just as nature has no mind, it manages to retain its structure.

More than twenty years ago, Wang Chuang said: "Freedom only exists in abandonment." This is when he discovered the Ink Spot or single point on the blank surface, the "emptiness" where human constellations are formed that reiterate those already placed in the universe. In 1990 – the year after the controversial uprising in Tiananmen Square – Chinese art was different that how it appears today. In addition to the marketing attention given to artists associated with Political Pop and Cynical Realism, there was also interest in American Minimalism. Prior to 1990, Wang Chuan had been working with a type of colorful hard-edge abstraction more or less from a Western point of view. Ten years prior to that, he was producing obsessive Western-style oil paintings, such as *Farewell, Village Road* (1980), which dealt with traditional Chinese themes, but had little revolutionary content related to its stylization. When he discovered Minimal Art, Wang shifted his

emphasis towards reductiveness by eliminating all visible or recognizable subject matter on the canvas to a single point. Among Chinese painters, Minimalism had already ignited a return to traditional, more metaphysical ideas, in art. This could have been a misreading of work by artists such as Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre in that these artists were less concerned with painting and more involved with placing primary forms into actual space. Even so, what Chinese artists were doing in response to Minimal art had its own validity despite the fact that the American pragmatist or empirical point of view took precedence over metaphysical idealism. The only Minimalists at this time who espoused a metaphysical physical position were Robert Smithson and Ronald Bladen. The others, listed above, were more involved in an epistemological idea that seemed to coincide with the pragmatic approach to making art and an empirical approach to receiving it.

The point at which calligraphy or ink brush painting connects with these artists is interesting and perhaps has been misunderstood by American art historians. In fact, the conceptual aspect of calligraphy is essential to the approach and to the appearance of the work. The reduction of the form as interpreted by the artist is also essential. What connects the American Minimalists with the new ink brush paintings, such as Wang Chuan, is a structural point of view where the parameters of representation in art are laid bare. And the only thing left to achieve is to return to the essentials below the surface of easier rehearsed or predictable meanings. This, in fact, was Wang's agenda. Once he left the notion of borrowed subject matter from the external visual world, Wang wanted to return to the essence, to reduce all subject matter to one thing, one idea – the Ink, Spot. That was after Tiananmen Square. Another revolution was in the air and the Ink Dot was a radical move to replace the traditional confines of representation, just as the Black Square had served Malevich with the same purpose seventy-five years earlier in Russia.

The lines painted by Wang Chuan constitute a saga told by a blind man who is not really blind. They come into existence through the slightest movement of the brush without external dependence on any cause and effect relationship. His work evolves from absence to presence – what practitioners of Rinzai Zen (*dhyana*) know as *wu-nien* or *wu hsih* (without mind or without thought). Wang Chuan's art aspires to transcend the limits of materiality and of the veritable medium with which he works. This point is emphasized in a letter written to a colleague from Qincheng Mountain in which he expresses the following: "The perfect state in a painting cannot be reached through any brush techniques. The real technique for obtaining perfection has no form thus cannot be seen from the canvas. They are just being. If you understand what I am saying, you will know my painting."

Having met Wang Chuan through a mutual artist-friend in connection with the *Qi Yun* exhibition, we finally had an opportunity to meet for dinner at the Grand Sichuan restaurant on St. Marks Place in New York's East village. Wang Chuan's remarkable character, insight, and humility became clear on several occasions as our conversation unfolded during our dinner. Prior to this occasion, I had seen several catalogs with reproductions of Wang's work on paper and was readily impressed by his work. Our meeting revealed a common thread, a passionate interest in painting from an Eastern perspective combined with mutual respect and empathy. Although we did not share a common language, communication was made possible through translation. In the process

of our conversation, I discovered he was from Chengdu and that religion has played an important role in his life. My understanding was that religion was also a kind of philosophy. When he spoke of Zen, for example, he seemed to speaking directly in relation to everyday life, more as a philosopher analyzing the turmoil and disparate realities that ordinary people encounter while living their lives in the secular world. Even so, I was interested in how philosophy or spiritual thinking could relate to art – his art, in particular – which encompasses a long cultural history, endemic to Chinese artists, returning back to the great landscape artists that preceded the great literati painters who worked in exile during the Yuan Dynasty.

Nevertheless I could not resist listening to the words – in translation – as Wang spoke, thinking all the while as to the connection I felt with both his ink paintings as well as his powerful and pervasive oil and acrylic paintings on canvas. If Wang had appropriated a western medium, he had indeed transcended the medium through the act of painting. During this period in his life when he was confronted with what doctors perceived as terminal cancer in 1998, Wang decided to paint vigorously for as long as he could paint everyday. At this stage of his career, he was only interested in abstract, what Westerners might call “gestural abstraction” (a more generic term for Abstract Expressionism) in contrast to a more concrete or hard-edge approach that Wang has been doing for most of the 1990s until struck with a serious illness. This condition – which constituted an imminent life/death conflict – proved the impetus for the artist to immerse himself totally in gestural abstraction. Western psychologists or psychiatrists might refer to this kind of engagement or transformation as a form of “sublimation” – a term used by the inventor of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud – to express resolution of conflict through conscious displacement. Put in layman’s terms, this means that Wang was confronted his mortality. Yet wanted desperately to continue his life as a painter. This was the overwhelming focus of his mind. His attention was completely given over to life and art. Therefore, he takes the energy that could become a negative obsession and turns it around so that the energy is finding distinct positive outlet. For Wang, it was a matter of working every day: “Being an observer gives you control, but to let things go is to reach a comprehension of life and escape death.” In the process, Wang was further determined he would convert to Tibetan Buddhism and become an “artist-monk.” This afforded him the opportunity to bring philosophy and painting into a unified whole through an approach that could restore his health and provide a new lease on life. He discovered how to live independently and autonomously as an artist and it gave a reference point where the dharma occupied his thinking and brought him back to life. The Buddhist dharma is very close to the Taoist concept of “the way” in that it is literally “the path” toward enlightenment. In Wang’s case, enlightenment was the means to visualize the world through painterly action and through envision life as being totally immersed in nature as a form of “emptiness” - the energy held within the ongoing pulsation of an infinite universe.

The Shenzhen scholar Yan Shanchun describes the artist’s mental condition in the years following the suppression of the Tiananmen Square uprising and after the Ink Spot exhibition in 1990 and during the years that preceded his illness. Although Wang was able to displace these negative tendencies and to heal himself, and then eventually commit himself to Buddhism, the depression never entirely went away. According to Professor Yan, Wang was eventually diagnosed with a bipolar disorder, a type of schizophrenic behavior where sudden feelings of joy and heightened

ecstasy are replaced with paranoia and obsessions over petty anxieties. Such bipolar disorders are characterized in terms of extreme emotional shifts that are difficult for the subject to predict or control. Professor Yan believes this condition has inadvertently contributed to the artist's greatness as a painter and that Wang has emerged as a truly classical calligrapher. By combining Roger Fry's notion of the "structural" line, used in the representation of figures and objects, and the free "calligraphic" line, Wang has evolved a breadth of understanding in his art that few of his peers have achieved. His line exists alone with its own emotion, rid of character references, and therefore is able to roam freely without repeatable imagery.

My analysis of Wang's painting comes from a different point of view, more likely tied to a Western idea. I find it somewhat difficult to see Wang's intrinsically Chinese concept of painting in relation to the two aspects of line discussed by Roger Fry. However, my major problem with Yan's analysis is more in relation to seeing Wang's breadth of geometry and lyricism as somehow representative of a Bipolar disorder. My tendency is to understand the generation of lines that emerge in Wang's ink on paper or oil and acrylic on canvas as coming through the art itself, rather than by way of some external factor contingent related to medical science. Here I would like to make a comparison with an exhibition of the late work of the Abstract Expressionist painter Willem DeKooning that opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (in collaboration with The Museum of Modern Art in New York) in 1997, coincidentally the year of the painter's death at age 93. During the exhibition, there was much commentary by American news media to the effect that the artist had suffered from a type of dementia related to Alzheimer's disease at the time the paintings were made, mostly in the 1980s. The problem with these claims is that the viewing audience assumed that the reason this group of painting used a sparser line and more open space than DeKooning's work in the 1970s, was due to dementia, not to the decision that perhaps he wanted the paintings to be structured in this way. Here I am arguing against using a criterion removed from the artistic process or aesthetic decisions that somehow justifies the existence of how the work appears. I doubt that the dementia had much to do with DeKooning's painting, as I doubt that the Bipolar disorder had anything to do with Wang Chuan's paintings. This does not deny the possibility of medicine symptomology in either case. But it does question whether we can forfeit the workings of the artistic process in favor of external circumstances. Obviously this is done to give the general audience that nothing very little or anything at all about abstract painting a scientific reason as to what the work exist. There is no justification for this other than pandering to easy solutions to understand difficult art that instant media reportage in the twenty-first century is always willing to provide.

So, then, let's consider Wang's paintings from the point of view of what they are – in this case, intelligent and acutely sensitive abstract paintings.

It is true that he worked from the perspective of geometry in the difficult period of the 1990s, but in recent years, the perspective has evolved in a different direction. It would appear that the indeterminate wavering of Wang's line – a line without character reference, and therefore removed from ideographic origins in the strict sense – can move easily between paper and canvas, and therefore between ink and oil and/or acrylic paint. In this sense, the artist is correct, even on the most literal level, his work has been able to transcend the medium. He is now working within the

context of freedom – not freedom without limits, but a kind of freedom fully and responsibly tied to its origins without making them too evident. One can say that Wang remains a calligrapher but he is explored another time and another space. He has broken the relativist equation of science from the early twentieth century, the notion of “space/ time” proposed by the Hungarian Bauhaus artist, Moholy-Nagy. In Wang’s case the impulse to paint weaves between space/ time and back and forth from one surface to another, at with pigment and at other times without pigment, something densely painted, and at other times, so delicately inscribed almost to the point of floating away as if at any moment the line will drift off the page into thin air. But this kind of line not stand in opposition to the power of his dark, fluid canvases, often inscribed with ideograms, or etched with hand or brush as if transposing natural earth substances from lava, coral, tangled weeds, or splintered rock. In any case, the concept inextricably bound to his paintings – as is the act of painting by which they are made on paper or canvas – is liberated from the history of painting as a medium, whether from the East or West. Now the medium hovers between time and space ready for use as the painter decides the moment that the work will come into being, into its own sense of time. This is the transference in air from fluid medium to surface, the between-ness essential to the act of painting, where all decision float until given the urgency and the point of status. Now Wang can take the literal aspect of the Ink Spot and move it into the terrain or air space, to give it a metaphorical function removed from definition. As he has made clear, these painting are “written by the body.” One might easily have said this about Pollock as well, but Wang is of a different space and another time.

He is between the tactile and virtual climates of the present. He feels the tension as he paints as if transforming this westernized idea of opposition that (mistakenly) defines globalization into a most holistic encounter, another kind of visualization that will open doors to freedom through another access. Wang Chuan lives and performs as a painter willing to open doors of perception (Huxley) and discover alternative ways to enter the virtual world without losing his grip on the tactile phenomena provided by nature. He works from his knowledge of Seal characters going back to the Han Dynasty. He purposefully dissolves these characters using an indeterminate style of painting possibly reminiscent of Pollock or the Swiss painter, Paul Klee, or the French poet, Henri Michaux. But Chuan’s manner of painting is preeminently Chinese (Wu Wei or Li Chien). The energy (qi) in Chuan’s paintings is impossible to quantify. The vigor and focus of his actions as a painter move beyond language. The work is born into the realm of the ineffable, close to the center: To know is to paint without knowing.

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