

Yahon Chang, a spiritual heir to the Literati painters of the Song dynasty, written by art historian and critic Susan Moore, an arts writer for Financial Times and associate editor of Apollo.

If Yahon Chang were a western artist, he would be described as a maverick, an Outsider artist. For this Taiwanese painter is, essentially, self-taught, but also untroubled by the prevailing concerns of so much contemporary art practice. Like those celebrated European autodidacts Henri 'Le Douanier' Rousseau and Paul Gauguin, he long remained a 'Sunday painter' too, a businessman who for decades was largely unknown to - or not taken seriously by - the art establishment. Yet it is precisely his lack of formal training and his independence as an 'outsider' that has allowed this deeply thoughtful, profoundly spiritual artist to find a wholly original voice as a contemporary ink painter.

To find that voice, Chang has undertaken a long, difficult journey. It is as much a quest as a journey. The 70-year-old has drawn from artistic traditions eastern and western, and from the philosophies and practices of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Zen and Christianity. He has delved deeply, and painfully. The constant in this process, however, as both emotional mainstay and means of expression, has been the brush – first picked up at the age of six or seven when he was taught to write at home in Shuli, in the central region of Taiwan (both calligraphy and painting are the art of the brush dipped in ink). He has used these traditional Chinese brushes even when working in western oils or acrylics, and there is always at least one in his pocket – soothingly tactile, and usually crafted from horn or bamboo, its tuft perhaps silken rat's whiskers or the ear hair of an ox.

It was when he stopped drawing with a brush – he began his career working in interior and architectural design (his father did not consider fine art as a suitable profession) – that Yahon Chang lost his equilibrium. In his early forties, a stressed entrepreneur successfully growing his various business interests, he suddenly found himself dizzy and depressed, unable to walk properly, eat or sleep. His doctors could find nothing wrong but suggested there was an imbalance in his body. During a business trip to Japan, he saw a group of monks coming down the steps from a temple and had the overwhelming desire to paint the effects of what he saw. He painted for three days and nights without stopping and found himself re-energised and cured, and vowed - for the sake of his health and his sanity - never to stop. The story is telling, although Yahon Chang is far from being alone in using the creative act as a form of therapy or spiritual salvation. What marks his work out is his persistence – and his humility - in striving to find within himself the universal, exploring through a discipline of mind and body that liminal state between being and heightened consciousness.

At one point, the very act of painting – more precisely, painting and chanting – was a form of transcendental meditation. The oil on canvas paintings he produced during these trance-like states were blank, dark (in both senses) and heavily impasted heads, frighteningly expressive – to me at least - of that notionally desired state of cessation

or nirvana. More recently, he has experimented working blindfold and using ink and long, custom-made brushes to make highly physical, gestural and part-performative pieces on large sheets of rice paper laid on the floor. The resultant work, marks created during movements derived from Tai-Chi, is made not so much in an altered state as in one becalmed, open and attuned, and absolutely in the moment.

It is tempting for any western viewer to make an easy analogy between this kind of automaticity and the gestural action painting of the Abstract Expressionists, but there is an essential difference. For the Abstract Expressionists, this process was a form of catharsis, while for those classical Chinese 'Literati' or scholar-painters who combined poetry with calligraphy and painting, it was more about self-reflection. Yehon Chang has always admired a particular tradition of classical Chinese ink painting, the Xie Yi or 'sketch style' made famous by the Southern Song dynasty Zen painter Liang Kai (c. 1140-c. 1204). The objective of this kind of painting is to evoke a subject or atmosphere with minimal use of detail, to achieve a simplicity and spontaneity that also allows for the beauty of accidental effects.

He has sought, too, an expressive fluency of line, evident in his many series of figurative paintings, his sculptures – effectively line forged in iron – and in his calligraphy. (Revealingly, Chang always travels with a reproduction of a celebrated work by Wang Xianzhi, a calligrapher of the Eastern Jin dynasty (344-386) who formulated the one-stroke cursive script, which combines all the characters in a text in a single stroke.) In his own calligraphy Yehon Chang is not writing a word but using brushwork to express the word's meaning to him.

After the death of his wife May-Der, the artist converted from Buddhism to Christianity and since that time his work has become increasingly less figurative and increasingly joyful. His figurative work was in any case never a representation of the outward appearance of the world. In his maturity, he has also returned to the traditional media of ink and rice paper, understanding that the roots of the Chinese ink painting tradition are where he may best develop his own language and find its most effective means of expression. Yet this ever restless, curious artist is still experimenting. He has, temporarily at least, given up the monumental scale of his site-specific installations and performance pieces in favour of smaller panels, working on sheets of paper that are the largest of the quality and smoothness that he requires – 3m by 1.6m – but having them custom-made in three to five layers. Such is the quantity of ink that he uses, and the force of his brush, that traditional paper would break. If the paper is made thicker, the ink does not bleed in the way he wants it to. This densest and darkest of black ink permeates through the layers to achieve completely different effects, and each layer can be peeled apart. He does not always prefer the top layer.

Although working with longer brushes was less tiring and allowed for more fluidity of movement, the effect was more about gesture on the surface of the paper. Chang has returned to shorter brushes and greater combustion. Usually a calligrapher only

employs the tip of a brush, but he is choosing to push down to the stomach or base of the brush in order to connect his heart to his mind and his soul and feel the resultant energy. His subject is the sentiment of the moment, a joyful realisation of an emotion or thought that has touched or moved him. He describes these bursts of creativity, up to 20 minutes long, as explosions of expression.

Yahon Chang does not share the almost obsessive concern for technique or presentation that marks most contemporary ink painters. As he jokes, he has no proper technique – the full extent of his training came from sitting at the feet of the well-respected master Bo-Luan Liu (1923-2005) during six hour-long public demonstrations back when he was 15 or 16. In fact, his paintings are almost shocking in their blatant lack of finesse, but it is this, the uncontrived, authentic voice found in Yahon Chang's simplicity, purity and joyfulness of heart, that make him a spiritual heir to the Literati painters of the Song dynasty. They, too, forged a style quite unlike that of their professional counterparts.