

Sullivan Collection of modern Chinese art presents memorial of love and friendship

Judith van Praag

Entering the Foster Galleries at the Seattle Asian Art Museum you immediately notice two oversized portraits in the smaller gallery in the back. The depicted subject –once as a young, once as an elderly woman– appears to be holding guard over the exhibited collection.

These huge portraits of Khoan Sullivan, painted by Qu Leilei, a member of the dissident Star Group (1980s), are both dated 2002. The image of the older Khoan goes accompanied by the words, "I have a way", according to the curatorial text, a phrase typical for Michael Sullivan's late wife. For some Khoan may have been the muse; in Pang Xunqin's portrait, the features of her Scottish Great Grandfather shine through in her complexion and the color of her hair. The whole show in effect, seems a memorial to love, friendship, and Khoan's way of bringing people together.

Michael Sullivan, who is considered to be the scholar and connoisseur of Chinese painting in the West, and Khoan who was a bacteriologist, started receiving art as gifts from their friends when they made their home in the province of Sichuan in Western China in the 1940s. It wasn't until much later that they were able to buy art, and make conscious choices themselves, among which were abstracts.

"Nothing freakish or of mere transient interest," writes Michael Sullivan in the catalogue which was published in 2001 at the time that the couple's complete collection was exhibited in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, Great Britain.

In the catalogue introduction Sullivan states that he and his wife never set out to be collectors. The exhibit at SAAM, with only 69 paintings just a small part of their total collection, is by no means a complete overview of 20th century modern Chinese art.

This said, you know not to expect any work by the more daring off-kilter Chinese modern artists to be represented in the exhibit at SAAM. The paintings, prints and illustrations at hand are family friendly and un-confrontational.

"The exhibition of modern Chinese paintings doesn't attempt to provide a narrative of the development(s) or determine whether a linear approach to studying 20th Century Chinese Landscape painting is feasible or appropriate. The works can be enjoyed on their own merit," reads a note in the gallery. This seems a necessary disclaimer, since especially the Western eye, untrained in reading the characters which give added meaning to a Chinese painting must lose out on that extra touch, the double entendre.

Entering the exhibit with the knowledge that during the Cultural Revolution painting landscapes was considered a dissident act, that creating art for art sake was despicable and that one could be punished severely, may shed some light on what is so special about painting landscapes in the (latter part of the) 20th Century.

That painting a traditional landscape could be an act of defiance, is indeed an odd notion for Western art lovers. In that respect it is easier to accept painting in a style reminiscent of the Impressionists –as a departure from traditionalism– as a more daring step into modernity.

At the same time it's interesting to know that Wang Jia'nan's use of vibrant colors in the large landscape "Listening to the sounds of the autumn mountains" (which was used for the catalogue's cover illustration), could be called revolutionary.

Sullivan writes, "...It seems that for the Chinese artist there is no such thing as pure abstraction." He calls the New Ink Painting movement an expression of the resistance that some artist feel to the overpowering influence of Western art, and the need to re-establish Chinese values; a reason why they would return to the art of calligraphy. But not necessarily straight forward up and down characters, but overturned, as is the case in Gu Wendu's work.

As for someone who settled outside China, such as Zhuang Zhe, the painter of "Boulder", who for all appearances creates pure abstract art, when probed by Michael Sullivan he admits that he's still painting landscapes.

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