

TWO DIFFERENT VEHICLES FOR A SINGLE SOUL

In the West after the Renaissance, it was not uncommon for an artist to work in two or more genres. In the East too, especially in China in earlier dynasties and in surrounding countries, well-educated officials and citizens were respected for their mastering of plural disciplines of art. In the present day, however, we find few who practice painting and sculpture with equal zeal and who succeed in both. This may be partially due to modern systems of education. But a more fundamental reason is that painting and sculpture are actually quite different, despite their apparent similarity.

Ordinarily, an artist's mind needs only one mode of expression, one passage, even when the artist makes an objet or installation piece with mixed media. But painting and sculpture are so unlike that an artist's soul must pass through two distinct channels when working on these two forms in parallel. Two different passageways, or rather vehicles, for a unique soul. This must be a difficult maneuver, similar to that of riding two horses at one time.

Jun T. Lai is, in my opinion, one of these rare artists who seem to have solved this problem, for she is highly creative in both painting and sculpture. These two art forms coexist in her in a profound way without either losing its distinctiveness. But how and why?

The paintings of Jun T. Lai always express a unified and sensuous atmosphere and have a cleansing and healing effect upon the viewer's mind. To console and heal the disjointed, disillusioned and withered minds of the viewer — this is truly a proper role for painting to play. Her work carries the same power as that of traditional Chinese landscape paintings in ink from the Sung to Ming dynasties. They also have the spirit of Western painting from Impressionism to Abstract Expressionism. Chinese ink painting and Impressionist art were both born in regions abundant with water, light and a humid atmosphere. It is no accident then that Lai frequently introduces into her painting such meteorological elements as flowing water or permeating light in both her technique and in the subject matter. She also gives special importance to the spontaneous play of the brush, as did the Chinese literati-painters and the American Abstract-Expressionists.

Needless to say, such a masterful play of the brush mediates hand and matter, tying the artist gently to the outer world. Color, too, harmoniously handled by this genius, acts as a mediator and easily overcomes the dualistic distinction between oneself and other, subject and object. It brings unity not only onto the picture's surface, but also to the relationship between the picture and the viewer, joining them by creating between them a rainbow of color and feeling. Thus all the virtues of Lai's painting combine to integrate or fuse the world of man and nature exposed to disunion, into one of unity, and to reconcile things foreign to each other. She does this merely through painterly means, without recourse to any socio-political messages, nor by using any conceptual maneuvers. In this artist, indeed, painting enjoys a complete harmony between its purpose, its effect and the necessity of doing it.

Unlike the consolation and healing that her paintings bring to the viewer, Jun T. Lai's sculpture evokes a

tension and a desire for conversation. In contrast to her painting in which each individual element dissolves into a united, and rich atmosphere, her sculpture assigns full independence to each component part. By this, Lai's sculpture is to be distinguished from most works of object and installation made of mixed media now in fashion. Her work provokes a thrilling sense of motion, a puzzling sensation, a tactile seduction and sometimes an erotic exchange among these independent objects, and this interchange then continues between the sculpture and the viewer. In her sculpture every part functions to convert things from independent equanimity to a multi-dimensional and dynamic relationship, from solitary existence to an encounter with the other parts. The energy flows in the opposite direction from her paintings in which all elements are oriented from multiplicity to unification, from disunion to harmony.

In this multi-dimensional space, things foreign to each other seek to relate, not in a mechanical, conceptual or schematic way, but in a vital and generative fashion — as naturally as one calls to another (conversation), two wish to become three (love). To create such a relationship is indicative of a profound imagination; one that sees a mirror within the depths of its own consciousness and which reflects the cosmic movement of life. This may be the reason why elements of Lai's sculpture are often seed-like in shape. The seed is indeed, a carrier of infinite time and the generative agent that brings forth a new being or life.

Jun T. Lai's sculpture has had seed-like elements as its prototypes since its origin when she began to sculpt in the mid-1980's. At that time her painting had achieved the highest level of purity so as to appear as a luminous substance, a light source. From this light source flowed out inexhaustible existences, casting their material shadows, that is sculptures. Therefore her sculpture tends to move in a direction reverse to that of her painting, and shows a characteristic mode of developing in which a large variety of life phenomena comes forth from a seed as if it came from a source of light. Lai seems to have made these developments and choices by mere intuition. However, they are in fact rational, which is once again proof that she is a great artist of rare caliber.

Toshiaki Minemura

art critic and professor at Tama Art University, Tokyo
April 6, 1995