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Fong Chung-ray at Eighty: Between Modern and Contemporary

Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco

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Fong Chung-ray's recent exhibition of new work, entitled *Between Modern and Contemporary* and presented at the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco, was a triumph by the eighty-year-old master. It included nearly twenty large, even monumentally scaled, works constructed in the artist's now signature collage technique of using distressed and torn acrylic fragments and deeply layering them to canvas in elegant compositions. A few of these recall aerial landscape views or maps, sometimes in hues of blue and white suggesting land masses and water, and wrinkled, scarred and peeling flesh or paint, although the more typical chromatic harmonies of the works in this exhibition were subtly earth-toned. Several of the works in the show incorporated extended shreds of text. In Fong Chung-ray's work, text often has the appearance of *sgraffito*, of being scratched into the surface, adding to the impression that we are looking at and through several layers of walls that are simultaneously transparent and opaque. The incorporation of Chinese text is among the first signifiers that they should be understood as Chinese painting, but they can be seen as abstract works as well, and framing them within different art historical terms and contexts illuminates how the paintings operate on multiple levels and in different dimensions.

Fong Chung-ray, *Between Modern and Contemporary*, installation view. Courtesy of the Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco.

Fong Chung-ray, *Between Modern and Contemporary*, installation view. Courtesy of the Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco.



Fong Chung-ray, *2013-7*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 195.6 x 144.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



The text fragments in Fong Chung-ray's paintings are difficult to decipher but are often drawn from Buddhist scriptures,¹ although the artist has also incorporated other poetic sources in recent works; for example, a painting from 2011, entitled *2011-6*, features three poems by Mao Zedong. The rich warmth of these images suggests the artist's personal familiarity and engagement with Buddhist texts, and, indeed, Fong Chung-ray has studied

such texts for more than twenty-five years. In a recent essay entitled "A Retrospective Look," the artist noted:

In the 1980s, out of curiosity I started reading Buddhist scriptures. I became greatly impressed by the teachings of the translated Indian Sanskrit and was especially absorbed in its elaborate description of time and space. Whenever the scriptures refer to time it is described as infinite without a beginning or an ending. They also state that 'seeing through birth and death will bring forth one's tranquility.' When one elevates one's vision beyond the span of an individual into the universal process of 'forming, maintaining, decaying, and nonexistence' suddenly the pressure of time disappears into the infinity of the universe. Individual pursuit of fame and fortune pales in front of such infinite time and space. In the past, I thought of art as a noble cause and I was a young artist with the mission to innovate and revitalize while maintaining the tradition of Chinese ink painting. I realize now this was only an illusion, set up to put me in a box.²

The artist's personal experience of maturing, aging, and, in 2002, surviving a terrible car accident in which his wife was killed has likely only enhanced the profundity of his understanding of these passages.

In the same essay, Fong Chung-ray talks poetically about walls, linking the imagery of his paintings to a larger conceptualization of his own artistic exploration. He writes about his early work and the influences he absorbed from the abstract expressionism movement in New York. He articulates a beautiful metaphor about the process of finding his source at the border of specific limitations:

Looking around, our eyes see everywhere the signs of destruction left by time. For example. . . . Weather wearing a wall tends to leave signs of decay. . . . These traces are completely beautiful and completely abstract. I have always wanted to break free from the boundaries of traditional landscape in my painting: I suppose I should learn from these weather-worn walls³.



Fong Chun-ray's images of decrepit walls also sometimes evoke mountain landscapes—seemingly representing the porous edge of his aesthetic encounter with the ancient tradition of landscape painting. The gold to brown to grey/black colouration in these works evokes crumbling bricks and parched earth, and their highly textured surface recalls sun-damaged paint and crackled ceramic tile, with the text fragments peeling off and blowing away like dried posters and old notices pasted on walls. Interestingly, decades earlier, Fong Chung-ray also theorized the limitations of abstract approaches to painting and writing:

Fong Chung-ray, *Between Modern and Contemporary*, installation view. Courtesy of the Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco.

I feel more and more strongly that our modern art, in spite of its appearance of creativity, is in fact impoverished. . . . We have long insisted upon the superiority of abstraction, but sufficient detachment tells us that no single theory is the ultimate truth of art. . . . What survives the wash and crash of the tide are works of art created with universal compassion and quiet acceptance of life.³

Here again, the artist's goals are principally philosophical and reflective. Although this passage was authored long before the suggestion of walls appeared in his work, he describes the wearing of the tides of time that erodes the edges of the idea as more significant than the artist's primary conceptual or formal engagement with his work.

In fact, Fong Chung-ray has explored the edge of Chinese landscape painting and abstraction since the late 1950s, when he eschewed representation for non-objective painting. Born in Nanyang, Henan province, in central China, in 1934, Fong Chung-ray first fled to Canton to escape the Chinese Civil War and eventually relocated to Taiwan in 1949, at the age of fourteen. There, he studied art for only one year, beginning in 1952. In 1957, he founded an art association with artist Hu Ch'i-chung (b. 1927, Zhejiang province, China; d. 2012, Los Angeles, CA) in Taiwan and began exhibiting with the Fifth Moon Group (founded 1956) in 1961, then and today recognized among the most important Chinese modernist art associations of the twentieth century. Fong Chung-ray was impressed with and attracted to founder Liu Guo-song's (b. 1932, Bangbu, Anhui province) decision to return to Chinese ink and paper as his media, a decision that Fong Chung-ray himself also made, in 1963. For his early explorations in ink, Fong Chung-ray fabricated a hand-made brush from palm fiber and worked on cotton, hemp, or rice paper in an attempt to create a new kind of brush stroke and an innovative image. Even then, his compositions conveyed a fragmented space and his palette largely confined itself to browns and greys. While it is valuable to situate Fong Chung-ray's early career within this art historical context and early link to the Fifth Moon Group, it is important to evaluate his career more broadly.

For example, it is interesting to remember that several artists of the Fifth Moon Group relocated to the United States, where they continued their artistic extension of Chinese painting in a modernist abstract idiom. After receiving a Rockefeller Fellowship, Fong Chung-ray visited the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii and then travelled throughout the United States and Europe in 1970 and 1971; he then moved permanently to San Francisco, in 1975. His Fifth Moon Group colleagues like Hu Ch'i-chung had earlier relocated to San Francisco, in 1971, and then to nearby Carmel, in 1973; while Chuang Che (b. 1934, Beijing) moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1973 and later to New York City, in 1988. Both artists extended the language of Sino-American abstraction in significant ways



Fong Chung-ray, 2013–15,
2013, acrylic on canvas,
228.6 x 176.6 cm. Courtesy
of the artist.

and incorporated non-traditional materials in their work; Chuang Che's work also explored collage and elements of calligraphy. Beginning in 1978, Fong Chung-ray established a long-standing relationship with Triangle Gallery in San Francisco, exhibiting there in 1982, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2011, as well as frequently sending work to Taiwan and Hong Kong. The Triangle Gallery regularly introduced Asian artists working in abstraction during

its fifty-year history spanning the years 1961 to 2011, ending only with the death from pneumonia of its Dutch/Swedish owner, Jack Van Hiele, at the age of ninety-three.

But Fong Chung-ray's late work is stylistically distinct from that of these peers. In the recent works featured at the Chinese Culture Center, Fong Chung-ray's surfaces are built up from fragments of acrylic paint first applied to plastic and allowed to dry and then pulled off from the plastic and applied to a large canvas. The irregular shapes and shattered textures give his work a sense of age and deterioration, but his process can be linked to that of an earlier generation of artists who developed varied approaches to abstraction. In 1956, artist Paul Horiuchi (b. 1906, Oishi, Japan; d. 1999, Seattle, Washington) created a collage entitled *Weathered* that incorporated torn shreds of black, red, and green coloured paper and also included calligraphy. Horiuchi was inspired after seeing an outdoor bulletin board in Seattle's International District where Chinese-language advertisements and notices had started to peel after a rain; he made similarly elegant torn-paper collages in formats that included folding screens, his signature format until his death. Horiuchi is today embraced and exhibited as an "Asian American" artist because he was born in Japan but participated in the Seattle art scene. Yet his work recalled the late-1940s and early-1950s close-up black-and-white photographs by Aaron Siskind (b. 1903, New York; d. 1991, Providence, Rhode Island) of peeling wall paint that were exhibited at the Charles Egan Gallery at the same time Egan was exhibiting the first generation of abstract expressionists, with whom Siskind was friends. Similarly, Mimmo Rotella's (b. 1918, Calabria, Italy; d. 2006, Milan) early 1950s *décollages*—a term referring to an image created by cutting apart and tearing away paper and inspired by dilapidated billboards in Rome—is another non-Asian modernist precursor of Fong Chung-ray's special technique, along with the work of earlier collage artists like Kurt Schwitters and George Braque, the artist who coined the term collage.

But collage techniques were first invented in China at the time of the invention of paper (perhaps 200 B.C.). Perhaps even more closely connected

Paul Horiuchi, *Weathered*, 1956, collage on board, 71.4 x 87 cm. Collection of Tacoma Art Museum, Gift of Paul and Bernadette Horiuchi, 1988.1.1.



and relevant to Fong Chung-ray's recent work is the art of Tseng Yuho (b. 1925, Beijing; currently living in Beijing), whose work has also been exhibited in Asian American theme exhibitions. Tseng Yuho first received a classical calligraphy and painting education in Beijing, but in 1949 moved to Hawaii, where she soon experimented with abstraction. By the late 1950s, Tseng Yuho had developed a personal collage technique she called *dsui-hua*, or assembled painting; she began exhibiting with Edith Halpert's acclaimed New York Downtown Gallery in 1960. Tseng Yuho has explained that her *dsui-hua* was based in scroll-mounting techniques, thus establishing a distinctly Chinese historical foundation for what we commonly refer to as "collage." Fong Chung-ray's recent work is also closely aligned with Tseng Yuho's: It is often similarly warm in tone and equally suggestive of portals or gateways. These collage masters remind us of the long history of Chinese collage and the sophisticated requirements of paper mounting as an integral dimension of Chinese culture.

Tseng Yuho, *Mural No. 4* from *Western Frontier*, 1964, nine-panel mural of palladium and gold leaf, handmade paper, tapa cloth, and acrylic paint mounted to pegboard masonite, 292.1 x 340.4 x 4.4 cm. Collection of Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, gift of Wachovia Corporation, 2008.76.4.1-9.



The 2014 Fong Chung-ray exhibition at the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco was curated by Manni Liu, herself a prior director of the Center, at the invitation of the Center's curator Abby Chen. It was Chen who specifically suggested to Fong Chung-ray that he create a huge new work for the gallery's largest wall, and this painting with its ambiguous calligraphy is one of the exhibition's most striking. Chen also insightfully subtitled the exhibition *Between Modern and Contemporary*. In so doing, Chen acknowledges Fong Chung-ray's long relationship to both modernist collage traditions and abstract expressionism. Chen recognizes that Fong



Chung-ray has developed a completely contemporary approach to Chinese art that incorporates calligraphy using ancient religious texts—and reinvents paper mounting within a completely new realm of reassembling and rearranging dried, crackled, and etched acrylic fragments of paint onto large-format canvases.

Fong Chung-ray, *Between Modern and Contemporary*, installation view. Courtesy of the Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco.

As noted above, these innovations can be linked to the earlier work of Asian American artists like Paul Horiuchi and Tseng Yuho. Although “Asian American” was first coined only in 1969⁴—both before and after works by Horiuchi and Tseng were being featured in group exhibitions together⁵—it signals another potentially valuable terminology for contextualizing Fong Chung-ray’s practice. The term Asian American—as opposed to terms like Abstract Expressionism or even Chinese painting—articulates an alternative transnational context and links diverse artists with backgrounds from East Asia who are connected by their engagement with creating art that involves paper mounting. Fong Chung-ray, Paul Horiuchi, and Tseng Yuho all extended the scale of their work in collage to mural formats.

Fong Chung-ray’s achievement is further emblematic of the generation of diasporic Chinese artists who were dispersed internationally after

Wei Jia, *No. 1779*, 2010, gouache, ink, pastel, xuan paper on canvas. 132.08 x 132.08 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



China's Civil War but who significantly advanced Chinese visual art and culture in powerfully original and visually compelling ways. This generation has yet to be fully appreciated and recognized. Still, their simultaneous engagement with aesthetic tendencies based in specific American

and Chinese avant-garde movements offers an expanded context for today's flourishing of Chinese art globally. For example, an excellent and almost concurrent exhibition at the Museum of Chinese in America, New York, entitled *Oil and Water: Reinterpreting Ink* (April 24–September 14, 2014) and curated by Michelle Y. Loh, featured the art of three artists (Qiu Deshu, Wei Jia, and Zhang Hongtu) who all developed their practices in China during the Cultural Revolution and who also spent time in the United States. That Qiu Deshu and Wei Jia's work bear a direct connection to Fong Chung-ray's is notable in this context. Qiu Deshu's ink paintings regularly feature paper rips and tears that were initially inspired by seeing "cracks in the ground" in which the artist sees "profound truths." Wei Jia's collage technique of working with hand-made paper involves "a rigorously repeated cycle of tearing, mounting, and painting, which contributes serendipitous combinations"⁶—again recalling Fong Chung-ray's own technical approach. Clearly, Fong Chung-ray's place in this expanded view of the development of contemporary Chinese collage warrants further recognition and analysis. But as the artist has continuously reminded us in his own statements, such art historical measurements of the significance of his work are ultimately meaningless. What has deeper value is the appreciation of the depth and subtlety of his meditation on time and a Buddhist understanding of impermanence.

Notes

1. The Buddhist scriptures quoted are highly poetic and esoteric. One fragment in Fong Chung-ray's painting entitled *2013-7* is from the Surangama Sutra 大佛頂首楞嚴經 and translates as: "The awakement-wisdom ocean-uses is always pureness and perfection (覺海性澄圓), the mind at the perfection-pureness perceives one's instincts with instinct (圓澄覺元妙)." Translation provided by Abby Chen.
2. Fong Chung-ray, "A Retrospective Look," in *Fong Chung-ray: A Retrospective*, ed. Shu Jianhua and Xu Xinru (Santa Clara: Silicon Valley Asian Art Center, 2013), 10–11.
3. *Ibid.*, 10.
4. The designation Asian American was first coined by scholar Yuji Ichioka (1936–2002) in 1969.
5. Horiuchi and Tseng were grouped together in the 1965 Pacific Heritage exhibition, organized by the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, which traveled to the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco, the Art Gallery at U.C. Santa Barbara, and the San Diego Fine Arts Gallery—as well as in the 2008 exhibition *Asian/American/Modern Art: Shifting Currents, 1900–1970*, organized by the de Young Museum.
6. Wei Jia artist's statement, quoted in Michelle Y. Loh, "Oil and Water: Reinterpreting Ink," in the exhibition catalogue *Oil and Water: Reinterpreting Ink* (New York: Museum of Chinese in America, 2014), 20.