



SHANSHUI

**Reduction to the Essentials: an
Autodidactic Path to the
Non-Representational**

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By; Marcus Kneip

Painting and especially drawing has always been my passion. Even as a child, I was fascinated by Japan, although my conception of art at the time went in a completely different direction, that of the Baroque. But I've always liked the simple dignity of Japanese architecture and the nature mysticism of Shintoism. At first, I painted almost exclusively figuratively. I specialized in portrait painting and copied portraits of the Old Masters, especially Velázquez. At that time I was already working mainly monochrome in pencil and grey chalk. Since 2011 I have focused exclusively on ink. Since black has always been my preferred color in the artistic process, I decided to go with this shade completely. I liked the essence and simplicity of the black ink. In its simplicity, it dispenses with everything non-essential. Working with black ink leads me to the essence, I often think of X-rays when looking at my works.

As my painting technique became more and more simplified, I quickly came to the Japanese conception of art and thus to the aesthetic con-

cept of *wabi-sabi*. [The Japanese terms *wabi* 侘 and *sabi* 寂 are usually mentioned in the same breath. *Wabi* stands for the plain, simple, essential and *sabi* for the maturation process of aging. Especially the way of tea (jap. *Chado* 茶道) stands for the symbiosis of both principles.] I have read many works on Japanese art philosophy. I think Tadao Ando 安藤 忠雄 came up with a sentence that was meaningful to me: "Reduce, reduce further and further without losing poetry". The book *Pas-sagère Du Silence* by Fabienne Verdier is also of great importance for my work. This artist lived in China for many years, where she was initiated into the secrets of Chinese calligraphy and painting by old masters. Her work is magnificent, her paintings are very fine and show great sensitivity. Although I agree in many ways with Daoism, I see myself more as an individual in search of his own artistic expression. But I'm working on myself. I also read a lot about *Chan* (jap. *Zen*). I also meditate sometimes. However, *Chan* seems too harsh and strict to me. I prefer Europe-



Siri, ink and red paint on paper, 50 x 64 cm, 2016



an philosophers like Eckhart von Horchheim or the Stoics. I think their philosophy has lot of similarities with *Chan* and Daoism. It impresses me how cultures have come to such similar results of wisdom.

I've often been asked why I only get involved in this minimalist form of art. The answer is very simple: nothing else satisfies me. It's like a kind of marriage that I entered into with the ink. Whenever I try to change the technique, it doesn't bring me any spiritual development. Only painting with ink seems to be the right way for me. And since I am not financially dependent on the sale of the paintings, I fortunately do not have to adapt to the Western understanding of art for variety and new forms of expression. I prefer to stick with Tanizaki Jun'ichi-ro 谷崎 潤一郎: "Mastery, that's just the patina that results from many years of tireless polishing."

The limitation to a few abstract, spontaneous lines may have resulted from my enthusiasm for informal art. Spontaneously, pictures of K.O. Götz, Franz Kline or Hans Hartung come to mind - their work was certainly a role model for me. With the ink I found my own way. Julius Bissier's

work, especially his inner confrontation with himself and his work, also influenced me greatly.

In my early 40s, I found my own style. The non-representational came more and more to me in my spiritual search. It was my individual way of expressing myself. In the first few years, my ink paintings were often even more representational. One can recognize new figures in it. Admittedly, I have often tried to depict organic creatures – marine animals or plants – in an abstract way. This, however, gave way more and more to the creation of organic forms, or rather signs, which were supposed to be new, which no eye had ever seen before. And they shouldn't imitate calligraphy either. This sentence by Julius Bissier serves as a guideline for me: "A picture should be like a sign: concise, simple, true, hard as nature, happy as nature and sad as it."

My paintings are designed with glasses and with the discreet use of a brush. I always use glasses with a wide, rounded rim. I only use a specific watercolor paper. I experimented a lot here in advance. Originally, I mainly relied on the capillary effect of

Forced, ink on paper, 30 x 40 cm, 2013



the water in interaction with the paper. I quickly began to manipulate the flow of movement of the ink in the water with brushes. However, the results were too comparable to existing works by other artists. I also missed the organic element. An organic design language has always suited me. With the glasses I get this realized well, because the round shape is already predetermined and the chance when working is even better. Usually, I first squirt the ink onto the paper using a small dispenser bottle. This may or may not be moistened. On the basis of the lines, which were created largely randomly, spontaneously and quickly, I begin my work: mainly with glass, then with a broad-bristled brush. My works are created within a few minutes. That was also one of the reasons why I decided to use this technique. In the beginning, I painted like the old masters – layer by layer. Pictures took weeks. That wasn't for me at all, I was looking for the spontaneous.

I used to try to recreate organic shapes. However, the more I dealt with Far Eastern philosophy, the "reproduction" faded into the background and the strokes and organic structures took on a life of

their own, an anthropomorphic form as an independent being or living organism. This is also where ideas of Shintoism come into play for me: everything organic has a soul. This is also my personal view of things in nature. I also get inspired by calligraphy, but more subconsciously. The aesthetics of a beautiful font are very attractive. However, I don't copy calligraphic signs, my way is that of "giving birth" to signs. Something is finding its way out of me. As soon as I approach the picture to be painted with a ready-made idea, it comes to nothing. First comes chance, if one can speak of coincidence, then the conscious.

After painting almost exclusively monochrome for 11 years, I sometimes lacked the freshness of another color. I have already tried a few things in this regard, for example by setting a red dot. I also colored backgrounds. The result, however, was too garish and striking for me. However, in my eyes, only the black ink allows for the spiritual depth of my paintings.

I work for the public relations department of the Koblenz Hospice Association. I have always been interested in dying and death, both from a

Untitled, ink and red paint on paper, 50 x 64 cm, 2019





Plunato, ink on paper, 50 x 60 cm, 2012



Saint, ink and red paint on paper, 50 x 64 cm, 2017



religious, philosophical and artistic point of view. For the first time, I have found a professional topic that really interests me, the work is fulfilling for me. The more I have to deal with dying people, the more I ask myself about the meaning of my life. What can you look back on when you're dying? My paintings are my children, my legacy to posterity.

I used to paint every day. A good work often required ten works that ended up in the trash. I already mentioned that the thought of the sustainability of my art brought me from other techniques to ink painting. However, at some point I was quite repelled by the enormous paper consumption of my works. I thought a painter would only be a painter if he paints regularly. Regardless of losses, I also had to succeed in creating "masterpieces". The load was greatest when I had time off. Often everything went wrong and I was frustrated. I felt that it was the satisfaction of my ego that devoured so much material. Compared to the "passions" of many other people, this consumption may be harmless, but it bothered me enormously, especially since there were already so many works available. Nevertheless, a creative person cannot live without

creating something. So in the meantime I started drawing again. Many drawings were made, the paper waste was significantly less than with the ink paintings. But these drawings had no soul. They may have been sophisticated, but lacked any form of spirituality for me. So my art works only with ink. Many people in my personal environment can't understand that I use to paint always the same and always in black ink. But I don't mind that anymore. The Far Eastern conception of art in particular teaches us to be frugal and mindful with our material. That's what I've learned in the meantime - even if there are sometimes setbacks that lead me back to my earlier thoughts and concerns. I know that my work is evolving. However, no longer to the extent and pace of previous times. In addition, my pictures are not intended to serve an idol of their own, but to show me the way to a universal spirituality or to inspire me to do so. Maybe one day I'll be completely independent of it. Maybe they serve as a catalyst for me. In some of my works, I had the impression that the Dao was taking its course - with me as a medium. My journey should continue into the non-representational, towards signs or unknown symbols with their own soul.





Envas, ink on paper, 50 x 64 cm, 2014