

SHANSHUI PROJECTS: 1ST INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

THE POETICS OF SILENCE

THE MOUNTAIN IN ART AND LITERATURE

艺术与文学中的山
静谧的诗学

PROCEEDINGS OF SHANSHUI PROJECTS 1ST INTERNATIONAL
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 **Akademie**
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PREFACE

At a time marked by climate crisis and an ever-widening rift between humanity and nature, the *Shanshui Projects 1st International Symposium: The Poetics of Silence – The Mountain in Art and Literature* invites reflection on the role of mountains in artistic and literary imagination—not merely as aesthetic subjects, but as spaces for ethical and ecological reckoning.

Mountains, with their imposing presence, have long inspired both awe and reverence, serving as thresholds between the earthly and the transcendent, the human and the wild. They challenge our relationship with the environment, questioning anthropocentric perspectives and opening pathways to deeper engagement with the natural world. This volume brings together multidisciplinary contributions that explore the mountain as allegory, as a realm of silence and resistance, a source of spirituality.

Through the voices of scholars and artists from diverse backgrounds, the proceedings of this symposium—organized by Shanshui Projects in collaboration with the College of Fine Arts of Huaqiao University and the Academy for West-Eastern Dialogue of Cultures (Akademie für west-östlichen Dialog der Kulturen)—seek to build bridges between cultures and disciplines. They suggest that art and literature can serve as vital tools in reimagining a more sustainable balance with nature.

Whether as pilgrimage destinations, sanctuaries, or symbols of a threatened wilderness, mountains call us to deeper contemplation—to an aesthetics of silence that may well be the only poetry capable of guiding us forward.

The Editors

Giacomo Bruni, Zuha Rasheed



Since the dawn of civilization, mountains have held a privileged place in the human imagination. Far more than mere geographical features, they have emerged as powerful and ambivalent presences, embodying spiritual, philosophical, and aesthetic symbols of extraordinary complexity. They have been venerated as the abodes of gods, feared as inhospitable and untamed realms, and contemplated as sources of inspiration and introspection. This collection arises from a desire to explore how diverse cultural, religious, and artistic traditions have interpreted, represented, and experienced mountains, transforming them into mirrors of humanity's deepest tensions and aspirations.

In ancient cultures, the mountain stands as an axis mundi—a sacred pillar connecting heaven, earth, and the underworld. This archetype recurs in strikingly similar forms across traditions: Mount Meru in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist cosmologies; biblical Sinai; China's Kunlun; or Greece's Olympus and Athos. Indigenous cultures, such as the Sámi, likewise recognize mountains as cosmic and sacred. It is no surprise, then, that this symbolic verticality inspired sacred architecture: Egyptian pyramids, Mesopotamian ziggurats, and Mesoamerican temples all sought, through form, to echo humanity's yearning for the divine.

In China, the mountain (*shan* 山) has held a central role in spirituality, aesthetics, and philosophy since antiquity. For Daoism, it is a place of retreat, regeneration, and the pursuit of immortality. Buddhism built temples and monasteries upon them, forging a profound symbiosis between natural landscape and spiritual presence. A quintessential example is the *Shanhai Jing* (《山海经》, Classic of Mountains and Seas, 4th century BCE), a mythological compendium describing peaks inhabited by fantastical beings, miraculous plants, and local deities. In *shanshui* (山水, "mountain-water") painting, mountains are never mere backdrops; they are living presences, interlocutors with whom humans seek harmony and contemplation.

In the West, the relationship with mountains has been more ambivalent. For centuries, they were viewed with suspicion—associated with primordial, untamed forces. The Greeks placed deities like Dionysus, symbol of ecstasy and chaos, upon their slopes; the Romans preferred cultivable, controllable lowlands. In the Christian Middle Ages, mountains were seen as sites of hermitage but also spiritual peril, where the devil tempted saints and nature revealed its harshest face. They were often relegated to the realm of wild beasts, outlaws, and those marginalized by civilization.

Yet even in medieval and Renaissance Europe, mountains inspired scholarly and contemplative engagement. A notable example is Valerio Faenzi's *De montium origine* (1561), a lesser-known but remarkable text compiling ten theories on the origins of mountains, revealing how Renaissance thinkers sought to reconcile scientific inquiry with lingering mythic and theological frameworks.

A pivotal moment in the Western imagination was Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux in 1336. His account oscillates between awe at the alpine vista and a self-reproach (guided by Augustine) for admiring creation over the Creator and ourselves. Here, we glimpse an early, if unresolved, attempt to recognize landscape as an aesthetic category.

Until the 18th century, Western appreciation for mountains remained rare. Leslie Stephen (father of Virginia Woolf and a pioneering mountaineer) captured this tension in *The Playground of Europe*, recounting a Swiss mountain guide's preference for London's "dreary expanse of chimney-pots" over the view from Mont Blanc—a stark contrast to the Romantic reverence that would soon follow.

With Romanticism, mountains gained full aesthetic and symbolic dignity. Artists like Caspar David Friedrich and poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley enshrined them as realms of the sublime: spaces where humans confront their fragility before nature's grandeur, yet also find revelation and spiritual connection. In *Mont Blanc* (1816), Shelley writes: "The wilderness has a mysterious tongue / Which teaches awful doubt"—capturing the Romantic intuition of mountains as both wondrous and unsettling, elevating and humbling.

In our contemporary world, marked by climate crisis and a growing disconnect from nature, redefining humanity's bond with mountains becomes not just a cultural pursuit but an ethical imperative. Western radical environmentalism—from Arne Naess's deep ecology—echoes Daoist wisdom, urging a symbiotic rather than domineering relationship with the natural world.

This volume, then, is an invitation to rediscover mountains not as passive scenery or exploitable resources, but as living interlocutors and silent teachers. In their stillness, in the ancient wisdom of their peaks, lies a guide to renewed awareness. They offer paths to reconnection: with ourselves, with slowness, with resilience. They teach humility in an age obsessed with noise, spectacle, and speed. To retreat "into the mountains," as in Chinese tradition, is to suspend distraction and reclaim clarity. Each essay in this collection adds a tessera to the mosaic, revealing how mountains have inspired—and continue to inspire—poets, philosophers, and seekers of meaning.

If we learn to listen, mountains may yet be our greatest teachers. They lift the spirit, purify the mind, and quiet the heart. In a world racing toward the oblivion of its own soul, their ancient, silent presence might remind us how to live.

Giacomo Bruni



Mountain and Rivers are my Teachers. The Concept of Learning from Nature in the Tradition of Chinese Landscape Painting

By Thorsten Schirmer

Mountains have shaped my experience of nature since early childhood. Born in Hannover, the nearby low mountain ranges were obvious destinations for frequent weekend and holiday trips. I've developed a talent for writing in the first years of school and at the same time discovered that drawing suited me. By my father and grandfather I was given a positive approach to educational topics such as culture, geography and art, which awakened my interest in foreign countries and cultures. At the age of 12 I discovered the teachings of Kongzi and Laozi, and soon after the Chan (or Zen) Buddhism. I absorbed all information I could find about East Asian culture. With great passion, I devoted myself especially to Chan Buddhism and Daoism, until at the age of 14 I found a book about Chan art that would have a lasting effect on me. The works of Chinese monk painters of the 13th century and their Japanese successors of the 14th and 15th centuries depicted there were a revelation for me. The expressive pictorial language, concentrated on a few forms, and especially the landscape as the subject of this contemplative painting, struck me directly in the heart. Without the slightest doubt, it was clear to me that I wanted to follow this path and paint in this way.

From the very beginning, the landscape was the predominant theme of my paintings, in which I soon specialized completely. I had spent a lot of time in nature from an early age, so I felt inwardly connected to this subject like no other. These memories and impressions gave me the strong be-

lieve of being able to spontaneously translate this theme into the painting style of Chan Buddhism. I have never had the feeling that I work in a foreign tradition. Rather, the artistic way I took when I was just 14 years old felt like a way back home for me. Two years later, with the same inner matter-of-factness, I discarded the brush in order to paint from then on only in direct contact with the painting surface using my fingers.

My encounters with old masterpieces were important to my further development, but essentially I found my sources of inspiration in the landscape itself. In Chan painting, the artist focuses on the interplay of form and emptiness. Mountain peaks and rocks, trees, the sea coast, lakes and rivers, clouds and fog are the essential components that make up a landscape in the tradition of East Asian ink painting. In order to study them, I have to search for landscape impressions. This resulted in intensive travel, which continues to this day.

Like Wu Daozi, I neither paint in the landscape nor do I make sketches. When I walk through a beautiful landscape, I contemplate it. As soon as I see a mountain or rock, no matter what shape and size, I enter into an inner relationship with it. I never get tired of this kind of contemplation. It is essential for the act of painting to understand inspiration as an impulse and not as a blueprint. One is well advised to wait and see what takes shape in the spontaneous painting process on paper.



Yujian, *Mountain village in clearing mist*, ink on paper, Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo



Yujian, *Autumn Moon over Dongting Lake*, ink on paper, Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo



Yujian, *Returning Sailboat from a Distant Shore*, ink on paper, Idemitsu Museum of Art, Tokyo



Rock formation in the Harz Mountains near my hometown Hannover, Germany

All the impressions of mountains in my mind have to be transformed into the essence of form. In our memory all impressions undergo a natural process of abstraction. We remember the essentials, while unimportant details are faded out over time. What remains is a kind of essence, gained from images and moods, which our memory has reduced to the core of what we have experienced. In painting, it often happens that impressions emancipate themselves from the real experience over time and a transformation into a new image takes place.

The way of painting in the sense of Daoism and Chan Buddhism is like sailing onto the ocean. As soon as the leash is loosened and the shore disappeared from view, the mainland loses its meaning, the port from which the journey began is little more than a distant memory, which contours fade in the face of infinity.

During my travels through China, I was able to visit some of the most beautiful mountain landscapes in the country, which made a deep impression on me and gave me a special access to

the understanding of Chinese painting. Of course there are areas of special natural beauty all over the globe, of which I have seen quite a few. However, landscapes such as the Huangshan or the mountains of Guilin correspond to the Chinese soul in a special way and are not by chance among the most popular sources of inspiration for Chinese painters. To visit them, to stand in the same mountains from which my Chinese role models once drew their inspiration, always brings me closer to the roots of my art.

It is always and everywhere possible to contemplate the landscape, whereas the actual theme of Chan painting, the dissolution of the form through clouds and fog, presupposes that these weather phenomena are timed in the right place at the right time. Certain conditions are required to produce the desired effect. If, for example, heavy clouds settle over the mountain peaks, days can pass in which you can't see anything at all, so drifting clouds and fog, which constantly change the image of the mountains, are the best. How such in-



Pine trees and rocks cover the Mingtanshan in Anhui Province.

spiration can affect the artistic work is documented in the following description of my trip to Mingtangshan. Located in the eastern Chinese province of Anhui on the northern edge of the subtropics, this peak, located about 40 kilometers northwest of the district town of Yuexi, belongs to the Dabieshan Mountain Range. Emperor Han Wudi (156-87 BCE) was so taken by its beauty that he had built a temple there, which gave the mountain its name. Thanks to its steep rock faces, which are often cloudy due to the climate, and bizarre pines, the 1563-meter-high Mingtangshan looks almost like a Chinese landscape painting. My visit to the mountain took place in the summer of 2018.

A Journey to Mingtangshan

Dense morning fog lies over the rice fields as we pass the first hills. Beyond the city limits of Luan, we have taken the highway in the direction of Yuexi and are now already in the foothills of the Dabieshan Mountains. Violent summer thunderstorms have passed over the country during the night, the humid air is warm and announces another hot and humid day. But the sun is still fighting against the last rain clouds, which follow the nightly storm as a rearguard. The road is new and almost empty, so we make rapid progress. Whitewashed farmhouses nestle beyond the narrow fields into the fresh green of a bamboo forest. Clouds rise from the valleys, nourished by the rain of the night. They promise me the chance for the best painter's weather. While in the West this term means a clear day with lots of sun, in China it is the exact opposite. Clouds and fog are the weather conditions appreciated by painters for the perfect impression of a mountain landscape. So I hope that the clouds will stay until our arrival. But when we finally leave

the highway, the sun has already prevailed. The valley in front of the Mingtangshan describes a wide arc, which we follow uphill until the first view of its summit opens up to us. The clouds are still dancing up there, so my hope for painter's weather is getting new nourishment. The Mingtangshan rises steeply above the surrounding mountain ridges, which seem to gather around the ruler's throne like a court. We pass a small tea plantation and finally reach a parking lot. Dense mountain forest welcomes us, the temperature is already beyond the 30-degree mark, and the high humidity makes the climbing an extremely sweaty affair. So we decide to shorten the way to the summit with the cable car, whose station soon appears in front of us. We don't have to wait long for a cabin, because there are only a few hikers on the road this morning. Soon we float up, while passing tall Huangshan pines and huge rocks. Once at the top, we are greeted by a light breeze that cools us gently and keeps the clouds moving. We take a path under the crowns of countless pine trees. To the left, the deep valley yawns, bizarre pine branches reach out into the void. Suddenly the road opens up a view of our actual destination. A path clings to the rock face, which drops abruptly into the abyss, decorating the peak like a headband. At first glance, it seems to defy gravity and is anything but trustworthy, but solid pillars anchor it in the rock, just like the roots of the pines, whose heads proudly stretch over the abyss. With some respect, we enter the construction. As we follow the path around the first summit, clouds rise up again from the valley. The path in front of us disappears into nothingness, suddenly mighty pines confront us, which are immediately swallowed up again by the emptiness. Now it is "painter's weather" at Mingtangshan.

The change from moment to moment completely captivates me. With every step, the picture changes. Rocks appear, shapes change from deep black to light gray, only to finally dissolve completely.

Where the veils of clouds break up for seconds, rocks float weightlessly in empty space, pines grow rootless out of the nothingness. Everything around me seems to be in motion, the image of the landscape changes from moment to moment, its fragments are coming and going. The Mingtangshan gives me a moment of magic, the magic of which creates a world that looks like an image of the sacred mantra from the Heart Sutra: "Form is nothing but emptiness, emptiness is nothing but form," the clouds, rocks and pines seem to recite as the game of transformation continues. I am completely devoted to looking, not to miss a second of this miracle. I cannot say how long I spend in this contemplation. Time seems to have been suspended, has lost its effect on me. Only the present remains in my consciousness, in which I drift from image to image, like the veils of clouds over the rocks and pines. As the forms regain their clarity, we follow the path further around the summit. Suddenly we stand on a glass floor that offers a view into the abyss. Clouds drift through the valley deep below us, crashing against the foot of the rock face and the lower mountain ridges that surround the Mingtangshan.

Finally we reach an inn that sticks to the rock like a swallow's nest. Filled with all these impressions, we decide to take a break. The abyss below us is filled with emptiness, the opposite path leads straight into nothingness. The recitation of the mantra, it seems, will also guide our way back.

The processing of inspiration

Under the impression of this experience, I began a series of paintings, on which I worked almost for one and a half year. The essential thing about my approach was that I did not try to process the concrete impressions of my Mingtangshan visit. These found their way into my work on a more abstract level. The interplay of form and emptiness, triggered by the ideal conditions of the weather in combination with the spectacular mountain landscape, were a rare treasure of inspiration for me. In such moments, when the colors fade and nature takes on the flowing tones of the black ink, when form dissolve and emptiness takes its place, I can feel an almost magical connection between the real landscape and my painting. On Mingtangshan I felt a perfect congruence between the outer and inner world, like I as wandering through my own paintings. I first had such an experience in 1990 on Jiuhuashan, a sacred Buddhist mountain in the south of Anhui, and later on other mountains inside and outside China. Each time, it seemed to me like homecoming, a strong feeling from which I could draw my creative energy over a long period of time.

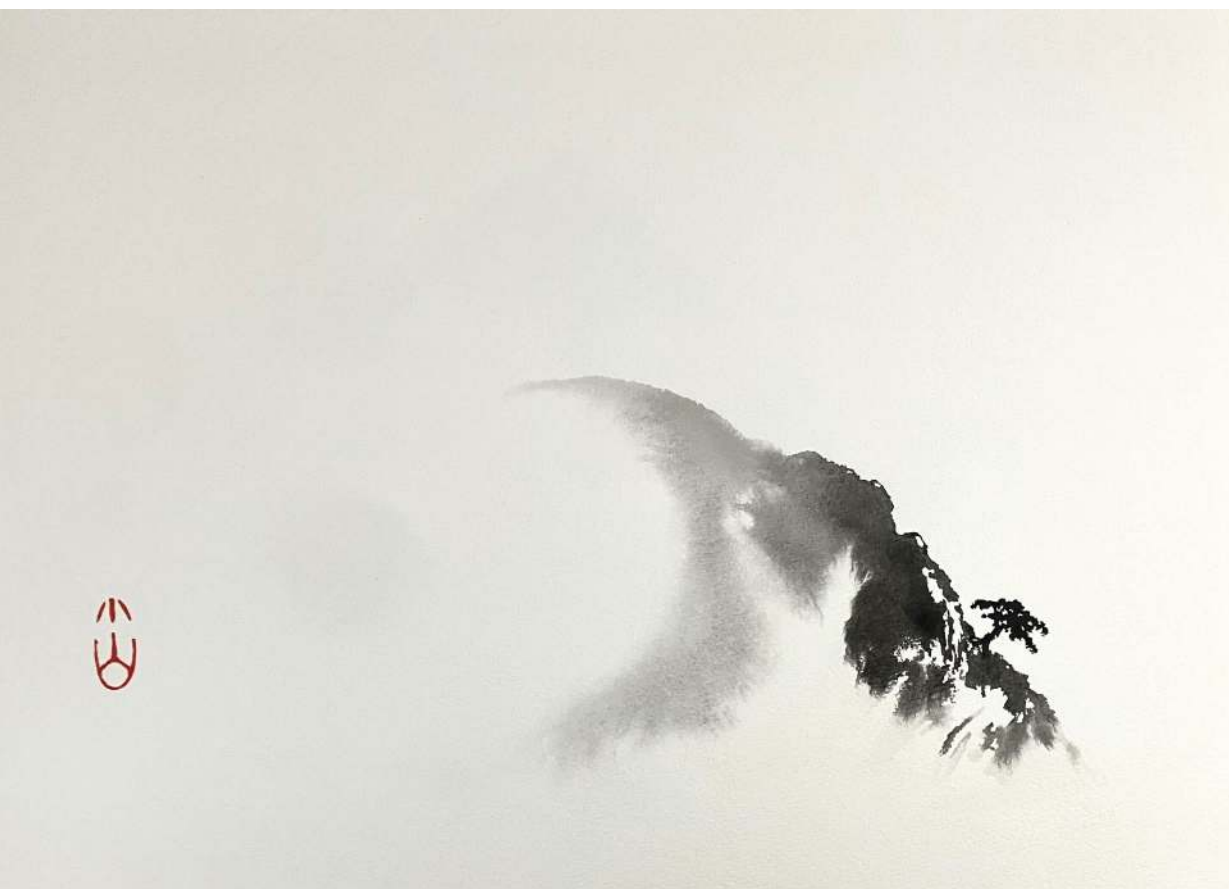
In addition to this spiritual experience, I was inspired by the Huangshan pines at Mingtangshan. Here, too, I was not interested in depicting individual trees in concrete terms, but in adapting the pine as a type. While the rock symbolizes the positive force *Yang* and the clouds the negative force *Yin*, the pine stands in China as a symbol of life energy. The motif becomes a proxy for human existence in the eternal play of transformation of *yin* and *yang*, form and emptiness. What the Mingtangshan has also taught me are the different forms of transformation



Clouds are rising up to the mountain top of Mingtanshan



The play of form an emptiness.



Thorsten Schirmer, fingerpainting, 29,7 x 42 cm, ink on paper (x3)

of the trees. I saw strong pines with black silhouettes, looking like powerful signs of life, while the rock around them dissolved into nothingness. I saw tiny silhouettes in the distance, clawing into the stone of the mighty peak. I saw pine trees grow up out of nothingness and take shape, while others fade from solid ground into the void. I saw pines rising from the dense mountain forest like a ruler over his subjects and proudly presenting their crown, but also lonely pines with barren branches standing on the edge of the abyss. I included all these aspects in my paintings. Each of these forms preached to me in its own way.

To accept mountain and water as teachers means to be in harmony with them, to contemplate their countless manifestations. If the inspiration is strong and the intense pure, if I am ready in the process of painting to give up every will and wish, if the ink

takes shape in this way unintentionally, then perhaps in a magical moment the true, essential image of the Mingtangshan succeeds. It becomes true and essential by expressing the words of the holy mantra: "Form is nothing but emptiness, emptiness is nothing but form."

Becoming the Mountain

By: Angelo Capasso

Mountain and water: the spirit of *shan shui*

The Chinese expression "shan shui" refers to a form of traditional brush and ink painting that depicts natural scenarios or landscapes (mountains, rivers, waterfalls). The origins of *shan shui* dates back to the V century, under the Southern Song Dynasty founded by Emperor Taizu of Song²; its theoretical structure grew out of the three religions that permeate Chinese culture: Confucianism, with its rules for government and social behavior; Taoism with its profound spiritualism; Buddhism and its rich and structured cosmology and idea of the afterlife. There are substantial differences amongst the three religions that need to be stressed.

Confucianism is the religion of good governance: Confucius lived in the VI century b.C. - during the so called Axial Age, the age of the great thinkers in Europe, India and China (Plato, Buddha, etc.). Confucius' Era is known as the most chaotic Era in Chinese history, when the Zhou dynasty (11th-3rd centuries), at the end of its fortune, suffered the continuous military arrogance of other belligerent kingdoms. Since his youth Confucius devoted himself to study, favoring above all the ancient rites, music and poetry. Confucius is known for his theories on social and political behaviors. In the *Dialogues (Lunyu)*³, a work composed by Confucius' disciples and considered a collection of conversations, aphorisms and anecdotes, the divine entity par excellence, the "heaven" ("tian")

recurs very rarely; that did not mean that since he: "never speaks of extraordinary events [...] and of divinities"⁴, he denied the supernatural. Instead, it is the profound political-social crisis of the time that leads him to reserve exclusive attention and concern for the society: "If you do not know how to honor men, how can you think of honoring divinities and spirits?"⁵. On the opposite side of Confucius' attempt to achieve social and political harmony was Tao.

Taoist philosophy was founded by Laozi, a contemporary but also an opponent to Confucius. Tao, "the way", according to Laozi is the absolute principle underlying the universe, combining within itself the principles of "yin" and "yang" and signifying the way, or code of behaviour, that is in harmony with the natural order. The yin-yang principle illustrates the way in which the universe is founded on a balance and harmony between masculine/feminine, positive/negative, light/darkness, active/passive, life/death etc.. The interpretation of Tao contained in the *Tao-te-Ching* developed into the philosophical religion of Taoism, indicating the common goal of the Taoist practice in the self-cultivation to reach the individual ascesis for a deeper appreciation of the Tao and a more harmonious existence. ⁶The "way" is therefore a pathway outside of worldly issues and matters: Taoism ethics emphasize such virtues as effortless action, naturalness, simplicity, and the three treasures of compassion, frugality, and humility.

The third spiritual context that signi-

fies Chinese culture is Buddhism. It seeped into China in the 1st century A.D. at the time in which the Han Dynasty reached the Pamir knot.⁷ In the beginnings its diffusion was very limited. Buddhism's popularity spread and became the dominant religion during the Three Dynasties (V century). Its good fortune continued with the reunification operated by the Sui (581-618) and then during the Tang Dynasty (618-902), when it reached its cultural peak. In the middle of the 9th century A.D., however, the excessive power of the Buddhist monasteries created a conflict of Buddhism with the Imperial authorities which determined its decline and a rebirth of Confucianism. Buddhists believe that human beings have the potential to become free from suffering by practicing meditation and cultivating a lifestyle prescribed by the Buddha. Buddha's teachings (the *Dharma*) are based on the belief that life does not end with death: after human beings die, they reincarnate into a new form which can be a deity, a human, an animal, or some lower creature like a hungry ghost (a being with a small head and huge stomach, and therefore always hungry), or an inhabitant of hell. It is believed that all positive thoughts and actions cause good *karma* and may direct one into being reborn in a higher form. The consequences of one's negative deeds, bad karma, may result in rebirth in a lower form. This endless cycle of rebirth, called reincarnation, reflects the impermanent nature of human existence. Buddhism is a doctrine that advocates the renunciation of the world; also Buddhism is far away from Confucianism: Buddha wants to "leave the world" that is experienced as pain; Confucius wants to govern it.

The three religions Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism are in some aspects very far from each other. They became a unified way of thinking under the Song Dynasty, when China was definitively reunified, the same time when *shan shui* grew out of the fusion between the worldly man (Confucius), the hermit (Tao) and the eternal movement of the wheel of life (Buddhism). In fact, although the essential elements of the landscape painting, mountain and water, may seem closest to the spirituality of the Tao and Buddhism, a phrase coined by Confucius "the wise take pleasure in rivers and lakes, the virtuous in mountains" (*Analects*)⁸ demonstrates how the Nature represented in *shan shui* is also part of any political philosophy. *Shan shui* then absorbs in itself worldly as well as metaphysical issues. The civil governance finds a unity with the Taoist conception of the worldly man as an inseparable part of the universe and harmony: mountain and water are two indispensable elements for this spiritual goal and consequently play a prominent role in Chinese Art. China's geography inevitably plays a prominent influence on Chinese culture and is the major reason for the spreading of *shan shui* painting: large mountainous terrain makes up most of the country, water is abundant in the Central and Southern regions, and three of the world's greatest streams, the Yellow River, the Yangtze and the West River, define much of the land. This natural environment has shaped China's culture and traditions and molded the minds of her people. Mountain and water are subjects of Chinese mythology and symbolism: ancient Chinese mythology abounds

⁸ The *Analects*, also known as the Sayings of Confucius, is an ancient Chinese philosophical text composed of sayings and ideas attributed to Confucius and his contemporaries, traditionally believed to have been compiled by his followers. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Analects>

¹ Chinese: 山水; lit. 'mountain-water'

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Song_dynasty

³ [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialoghi_\(Confucio\)](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialoghi_(Confucio))

⁴ Confucius, *Lunyu* VII, 12

⁵ Confucius, *Lunyu* XI, 12

⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taoism>

⁷ The Pamir knot separated China from the three regions of Central Asia, Inner Asia, and Northwestern India.



Xu Longsen 徐龙森, *Literary Mind and The Carving of Dragons II* 《文心雕龙》 Ink on paper, 310x422 cm, 2016

with tales of mountain mysticism. Mountains not only offer a life in seclusion, devoid of restraints, but also a wealth of stimulating shapes, a multitude of colors and the ever changing moods so typical of mountainous surroundings-impressions of this kind are apt to reveal the all-pervading spirit of the universe to the perceptive mind. Nature's sheer power and grandeur is more easily comprehended in a setting with rugged peaks capped by misty clouds. The Taoist notion of water is yet more essential: Laozi employed water as their chief metaphor because water is omnipresent, embracing all living things with no trace of partiality; it is also the great mediator between contrasts, forever seeking balance, continuously dissolving and solidifying, it attains an infinite number of fresh manifestations of unity by way of perpetual transformation. The superior qualities of water are to be emulated by man: it follows its own course and always fills the bottom level, equivalent to the wise man being true to himself and maintaining a low profile. Water is the emblem of the unassertive. Taking the path of least resistance, always yielding, its effectiveness is unsurpassed.

Mountains play an important role particularly in Buddhism: with an unerring sense for scenic grandeur, Buddhist monks set up monasteries in the pristine mountain wilderness. These sites became gathering grounds for those seeking spiritual enlightenment, islands of hope for the deprived and the disheartened. The narratives of pilgrims spread the word of the magic spell cast by China's great mountains, of the healing powers of Nature on the soul. For some high-minded literati, seeking refuge in the mountains became the only alternative to compromising their ideals. Individuals who were willing

to sacrifice careers and luxuries in an immoral world for a frugal, pure existence in the mountains became models and were immortalized in poetry and painting for centuries to come. The Six Dynasties period, then, was a time when a large number of people came to view Nature as a refuge, in a spiritual or political sense. It was also the time when Nature as a motif entered the arts. Landscape painting as a genre was born and would soon outstrip all other forms. Whether creating landscape paintings, gardens or *penjing*⁹ - Chinese artists have not sought to recreate Nature in a realistic manner. Never has outward resemblance been a major objective. A superior piece of art possesses the quality to transmit life, to convey the very spirit inherent in Nature. In pursuit of this goal, the artist concentrates on the essential, leaves out all superfluous detail, eliminates anything that would distract the viewer's attention. Mountain and water are the primary compositional elements, the quintessence of Nature, the bones and the blood of the earth. *Shan shui* then celebrates a perfect harmonic marriage in landscape which synthesizes in the two poles of cosmic energy, the yang (positive) and the yin (negative). Yang and yin are mutually generative and mutually supportive, and the key to ultimate wisdom is held by those who know how to keep both principles in their proper balance. Mountains and water form such an ideal yang-yin pair.

Shan shui is strongly rooted in China's culture, it represents a form of *ars perennis* in China, interpreting China's soul's aspiration to eternity: infusing historical events with metaphysical inspirations. It is a never ending tradition that continues with contemporary art in the XXI century. There are many examples of *shan shui* painting artworks in the contemporary Chi-
[9 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penjing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penjing)

nese scene, amongst which the most interesting is Xu Longsen's paintings¹⁰:

¹⁰ On Chinese contemporary art I curated the exhibition "Onda anomala. Il lavoro dell'arte fuori e dentro la Cina: Cao Fei, H.H. Lim, Wang Du, Xu Tan, Yan Pei-Ming, Yang Jiechang, Zheng Guogu", during Manifesta 7 (Trento, 16 July - 10 August 2008) and Xu Longsen's exhibition large retrospective "Xu Longsen - Dall'Alto di Due Imperi", at Museo della Civiltà Romana (Rome 21/06/2011 - 24/07/2011). In 2011 I also took part of the conference "Landscape Reborn", international conference on Landscape in Chinese culture and art, at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. This event is organized by SOAS, the National Art Museum of China, and is sponsored by Asian Art in London (AAL). Participants: Roderick Whitefield (Sinologist, Art Historian), Wang Tao (SOAS-University of London), Shane Mcoslin (SOAS-University of London), Jan Stuart (Director of Asian Art Dept. British Museum), Clarissa Von Spee (Chinese Art Collection, British Museum), Zhang Hongxing (Chinese Art Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum), Jiang Jiehong Curator (Director of Chinese Visual Art Center, Birmingham) Fan Di'an (Director of National Art Museum of China), Chen Lusheng (Deputy Director, China National Museum), Yu Hui (Director of Research Dept., The Palace Museum of China), Chen Kelun (Deputy Director, Shanghai Museum), Li Xiaoshan (Director of Research Center of Contemporary Art), Nanjing Art Academy, (Director of Museum of Nanjiang Art Academy), Wang Yuechuan (Professor of Pecking University, Director of The Art of Calligraphy Research Institute of Pecking University), Li Xianting (Art Critic, Director of Songzhuang Art Museum), Shao Dazhen (Professor of Central Academy of Fine Art of China), Zhu Qingsheng (Art Historian, Professor of Pecking University), Xu Bing (Artist, Deputy Director of Central Academy of Fine Art of China), Cai Guoqiang (Artist), Xu Longsen (Artist), Wang Jianwei (Artist, Art critic), Chang Tsong-zong (Art Critic, Director of HongKong Hanart Gallery, Chairman of Asian Art Archivi), Clare Xu (President of Asian Art Archive), Wan Liqing (Director of Visual Institute, The HongKong Polytechnic University), James Elkins (Art Historian, artcritic, Professor of Chicago Art Institute), Colin Mackenzie (Chief Curator of Chinese Art, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art), Xu Jie (Director of Sanfransisco Asia Art Museum), Angelo Capasso (Professor of Contemporary Art, Art Critic, Curator) Xing Xiaozhou (Curator), Jacques Giès (Director of Musée Guimet, France), Richard Vinograd (Christensen Fund Professor in Asian Art Department of Art & Art History Stanford University), Si Han (Curator, Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm).

his work is strictly related to the traditional *shan shui* that he has updated with a new monumental format. The sculpture, calligraphy and painting studies he has carried out over the years are poured into the large rocky landscapes that the artist, and consequently also those who observe them, are called upon to climb with their gaze, climbing up the very long Xuan paper canvases, to undertake an individual journey that leads him to identify with the natural spaces represented. A painting to contemplate that recalls the very essence of oriental spirituality, where only through immersion and contemplation of nature, in particular of the peaks that recall the majesty of the Chinese mountain landscape, man is able to reconcile with nature itself, rediscovering his own balance and inner peace in a sort of regeneration ritual.

Mount Hua is Xu Longsen's favorite natural environment for its landscapes and the setting of his journey. It is one of the five sacred mountains in China, located about 120 km from the city of Xi'an, Shaanxi province; it is a place out of time and dotted with centuries-old Taoist temples immersed in uncontaminated nature. The particular extension of Xu Longsen's canvases absorbs the artist's contemplation and embodies the extension of his thought, which seeks to trace its boundaries through painting. On Mount Hua nature meets beauty, it comprises five summits which give it the appearance of a flower: the Facing Yang Summit, the Jade Maiden Summit, the Lotus Flower Summit, the Cloud Terrace Peak and the highest and most dangerous of them all, the South Peak. Legend has it that Laozi once held a sermon on this mountain. From then on, Taoist temples arose in the area, visited by thousands of people every year, despite the impractica-



bility of the route leading to the summit. Sensory perception is transmuted into reality through art that captures the vibration of energy, "resonance" as defined by Xu Longsen, whose work as an artist acts as a modulator that regulates intensity. It is through the mutual exchange of energy that the strength of the mountain becomes perceivable, even by the spectator, as a fertile breath that generates the cosmos. In China, "mountains and water" are combined because they are the origin of the vibration of which the artist is the "resonant", the blade of grass blowing in the wind. Landscape finds its roots in the heart, or rather the mind/heart, which is also an inseparable unit in Chinese landscape, the fusion of oppositions in a unique balancing act: it is the synthesis of the sky with the ground, humankind with nature, the masculine with the feminine, yin with yang.

The solitude and the desert: earthworks and land artists

In the Western World, the first examples of landscape paintings are found as decorations on the Roman villas' walls or on vases and other utensils. It is only at the end of the XV century that the term "landscape" emerged in art to denote a painting whose primary subject matter was the natural scenery. It sprouted in the Dutch language, "landscape", introduced by Dutch painters who used it to refer to paintings of inland natural or rural scenery. Since the XV century landscape paintings grew exponentially in its diffusion in Europe thanks to the vast production in the Netherlands. In that region, the strong influence of Calvinism (which prohibited the diffusion of sacred paintings outside of churches and religious places) favored the flourishing of alternative pictorial images such as peasant life, still life,

country, rural and marine landscapes. Before becoming an art genre, landscape was used in the English speaking world referring to "a system of human-made spaces on the land", or an "area of the Earth's surface and the general being that which can be seen by an observer". With its use in painting, "landscape" becomes the depiction of a portion of Nature according to the artist's sight.

Art history records few examples of landscape painting *ante litteram* before it became a genre. The first example of landscape is generally considered Leonardo da Vinci's *Paesaggio del Valdarno* (1473): it is a drawing which represents a view of the Valdarno (the Arno river's valley, Leonardo's birthplace), showing two rocky promontories, dotted with castles, where the Arno river runs and winds through trees, bushes and fields in the distance. Leonardo did that drawing probably as a sketch for a larger painting; it is also possible that the young Leonardo, at that time a pupil of Andrea del Verrocchio, created the foreshortening for pleasure, according to a habit of the artist which Vasari gives an account of in *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550). Leonardo made a significant contribution to the nascent landscape painting because he made it an archive of natural varieties, just as compositional variants.

The most relevant revolution in landscape art takes place in the in the United States in the second half of the XX century. It origins with the *Earth Art* exhibition, inaugurated on 11 February 1969 at the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. The show exhibited the work of artists such as: Jan Dibbets, Hans Haacke, Neil Jenney, Richard Long, David Medalla, Robert Morris,

Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson, and Gunther Uecker. It defines the beginning of the "Land Art" scene, although the definition "land art" was not used before it became the title of Gerry Schum's film broadcast on the German TV (channel 1 of Sender Freies Berlin SFB) on 15 April 1969 (at 10:40 pm). The documentary "Land Art" records the work of the *Earth Art* exhibition without narration or commentary through a simple reproduction made by a fixed camera and the single shot, following a shooting method in line with the emerging underground cinema. Using television as a medium for art (a TV gallery) was an unusual and experimental approach at the time with the goal of making contemporary art accessible to a wide audience, questioning also the exclusivity of the gallery as an exhibition space for art. Since Gerry Schum's film, "land art" became the name of a trend which identifies art with the real, a new interpretation of landscape painting where the earthworks incarnated the symbolism that lived in landscape painting into the real. Land Art, as a label, was evidently more suitable because it showed an affinity with the traditional landscape paintings in a new relationship with Nature. Actually there is a strong relation with the original landscape painting, as many of the landscape painters were also cartographers, making maps, so they already knew the world in its physical dimensions: Land Art was the attainment of a long time project that brought the art of the artists outside of the picture frame inside the everyday world. The US territory became an open air museum where art works shared their territory with Nature. Since its beginnings Land artists have disseminated the American territory with their interventions. The greatest concentration of Land Art works is in the southwestern area of the United

States, amongst deserts and mountains: Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas and Utah. It is the area marked by large arid and desert spaces: in Nevada there are *Double Negative*, *Complex City* and *Dissipate* by Heizer, a not far from Walter De Maria's *Las Vegas Piece*. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* is located in Utah and Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*. In Arizona, south of Utah, is James Turrell's *Roden Crater*. Near Utah, in New Mexico, Walter De Maria built the *Lightning Field*. That is the area where the Native Americans, about 40,000 years ago, arrived after crossing the Bering Strait from the Asian continent towards North America, then descending from Canada to the South. It is the land of one of the first groups of migrants in the Americas, the Clovis, and the Navajo, Apache, Hopi and Ute. "Should these art forms flourish and develop we shall soon need a kind of National Geographic for Aesthetes"¹¹. Earthworks have very strong common characteristics: despite the extremely disparate origins of Earth Art, several sculptural concerns are widely shared by Earth Artists, including a total absence of anthropomorphism and a pervasive conception of the natural order of reality. The conceptual bases of the works vary greatly, but visually they all tend to be unpretentious and relatively unobtrusive. The works are without physical support, without base, grounded in their environment either indoors or out. The result is an unframed experience with no one correct perspective or focus. Each work cannot be taken in at a single glance. The spectator has to experience the different stages of the system if he wants to experience the whole work, which has its own life span.

¹¹ Hickey, Dave. "Earthscapes, Landworks and Oz.", *Art in America* September-October 1971, 45.



Walter De Maria, *Lightning Field*, © Estate of Walter De Maria, 1977

The most common perceptible aspects of earthworks is their straightforward manner: in many cases the medium is presented intact with minimum formal modification; the landscape, as revisited by land artists, opens up to far-reaching cultural implications that concern not only the formal aspect of the work, but also tangential issues, such as its documentation, communication, maintenance, protection and originality. The specific transience of the works on the territory/earth (earthworks) gives a primary role to photography, which becomes the "original copy" of the work. The debate on original/copy intensifies at the end of the sixties, in parallel with the discussions on the "death of art", a political-cultural act with which central issues for art such as the copy, the fake, the multiple, the fetishism of collecting and the object-commodity are summarized in a single question: what is meant by "original"? This debate intensifies around the earthworks and includes them on different fronts: from the choice of photographers (selected by the artist on the basis of their willingness to follow the artist's instructions and to renounce the copyright on the image) to the development of shooting techniques and methods; up to the use of images within the media. Traditional landscape photography for land artists does not have a complete meaning, it is not the cast of reality, it is instead the "trace" of it, it is the "clue/index" of the site, the testimony of its existence.

Robert Smithson, a protagonist in Land Art, in his essay *Entropy and the New Monuments*¹² calls the Law of Entropy as the main scientific support to his work and to Land Art. Derived from physics, like inertia, the law of entropy describes the decay of energy in a system by measuring the degree

of chaos within it¹³. According to the second law of thermodynamics, an isolated system always loses energy, meaning that its energy is converted into another form - since it can never be lost - and the entropy within the system is maximized until it reaches an equilibrium point. Entropy was a constant issue throughout Smithson's art and writings. He explored his ideas involving decay and renewal, chaos and order through which he became known with his *Nonsites* and *Heathworks*. Smithson spoke at length in his interviews and essays about entropy and his notion of time. In *Entropy and the New Monuments* he wrote: "...the sprawl of urban sprawl, and the infinite number of dwellings produced by the postwar economic boom, contributed to the architecture of entropy" and further "entropy is a condition that is moving toward a gradual equilibrium", he explained that in his art he sought to represent the entropy of existence, the human attempt to uselessly counteract this entropy and the mechanisms that relate man, a finite and mortal being, to nature, a concept that instead borders on the infinite and the unlimited. For Smithson, entropy has become a way to fuel his artistic practice by giving structure to the 'life' of his works excavated in the environment. Essentially, for him, entropy is translated into "time as biological decay or evolution."¹⁴. This is the essence of Land Art and its evident challenge to the original landscape painting: art that sprout, grows and dies like any other natural being.

Land Art's common features can be summarized in four main features (and four examples):

1. Earthworks as temporary monuments
2. The visible and the invisible

¹³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Entropy>

¹⁴ Smithson, Robert, *Entropy and the New Monuments*, 1966.

3. Depth and surface: beyond perspective
4. Incarnating ideas: becoming the mountain

1. Earthworks as temporary monuments

Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty (Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1970).

Spiral Jetty is undoubtedly the best-known work of Land Art. It is a great construction work created with the use of approximately six thousand tons of black basalt and earth in the Great Salt Lake, part of the original lake Bonneville (located at an average altitude of 1,280 m, with a length of approximately 120 km and a width that varies between 48 and 80 km, and an average surface area of 4,400 km²). The name of the lake underlines its high salinity which is associated with the presence of very few living species (mainly small crustaceans of the *Artemia salina* species). The salinity has increased due to a road intervention which, since 1959, has prevented the introduction of fresh water into the Lake from the Bear, Weber/Ogden and Jordan rivers. They are these geo-environmental conditions and the visual aspect of the overall context, in which the pink color of the water (due to a red pigment in the bacteria and algae that survive in the extreme salinity) contrasts with the white of the salt crystals and the black of the basalt boulders, which contributed to Smithson's choice. But *Spiral Jetty* is not just the site-specific work. As in the tradition of conceptual art (as teaches the Joseph Kosuth main work *One and Three Chairs*, 1965), the title of the work identifies a stratification of conceptual operations involving other media: specifically, film and writing. Smithson's work, in fact, in addition to being an earthwork, it is a film and an essay. It's Utah's National monument.

2. The visible and the invisible
- Walter De Maria, *The Lightning Field, (Catron County, New Mexico, 1977).*

The installation presents itself as a field of approximately three square kilometers where Walter De Maria has placed four hundred high energy bars (metal poles) driven orthogonally into the ground waiting to be captured by the electrical energy released by lightning. It is a natural threat, or rather, in Walter De Maria's theories a *conditio sine qua non* for art, as the artist specifies in his essay *On the Importance of Natural Disasters* (1960). In that text De Maria rehabilitates the Burke's category of the Sublime contained in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), the first complete philosophical exposition for separating the beautiful and the sublime into their own respective rational categories. De Maria explains that the land artist's work is not limited to the representation of the Sublime; rather, it is the cause. The compelling and risky experiences of the eighteenth-century Grand Tours carried out across the Alps are transformed, with De Maria's works, into a direct experience of the "mysterium tremendum"¹⁵ inherent in the sacred, into a secular version of it. In the ritual of contemplation of the work, the DIA Art Foundation, which administers its maintenance activities, asks each spectator for a declaration of liability in relation to what could happen. A formality that also recurs in a previous exhibition by the American artist (in the gallery this time), namely in *Bed of Spikes* (1968/69): a minimal object in the shape of a bed, made up of rectangular stainless steel bars on which a regular series of very sharp spikes rises.

¹⁵ Otto, Rudolf, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford University Press, 1923, pp. 12-13.



Jan Dibbets, *A Trace in the Wood in the Form of an Angle of 30° Crossing the Path*, 1969.

3. Depth and surface: beyond perspective

Jan Dibbets, *A Trace in the Wood in the Form of an Angle of 30° Crossing the Path* (1969).

After exploring the woodland near Six Mile Creek several miles from the Museum, Dibbets found a large clearing in the forest where a path crossed a naturally beautiful site next to the creek. With a clothesline attached to large rocks, Dibbets and a small crew of students marked out a large V on the ground, each arm of which was approximately five feet wide and one hundred feet long. The turf within each arm of the V was turned over with pickaxes and shovels, except where the V was intersected by the path. Several times during the course of the exhibition, snow fell in the area, giving the work a continually varying appearance. Dibbets considers the long walk through the woods to the site of his work to be part of the piece.¹⁶ The choice of Jan Dibbets, one of the "non-Americans" among the artists participating in the historic Earth Art, falls within the scope of his research focused above all on the photographic process. Jan Dibbets is undoubtedly the artist with the strongest relationship to the origins of landscape painting. Through his work on/with photography Dibbets analyzes its structural elements as already in the paintings of Piet Mondrian and their seventeenth-century Dutch forerunners. The studies that Dibbets carried out between 1967 and 1969 are the basis of the "correction of perspective" of *Those Perspective Corrections* were based on a simple anamorphic principle: using strings, Dibbets "draws" a trapezoid on a lawn, then photographs it from a point of view that allows him to effect its transformation into a square. [...] In the first two *Corrections* the artist is still feign-

ing ignorance of the consequences of the anamorphic character of the photographs. The photograph relegated to a secondary role seems [...] like the illustration of a process embodying a dual questioning of our way of seeing and our way of transcribing what we see.¹⁷ In *A Trace in the Wood* the correction takes place directly on the landscape: Dibbets creates a transversal passage that intersects and interrupts the forced perspective created by the double path that crosses in depth in a V. In Schum's film, the intervention of the Dutch artist *12 Hours Tide Object with Correction of Perspective* is formalized in a trapezoid traced by a tractor on the sand which optically transforms into a square. Schum masterfully closes that intervention with a non-cinematic fade, but according to a natural process that identifies a peculiarity of Land Art works, that is, their being subject to natural laws: the slow cancellation of the artist's work occurs when the high tide arrives.

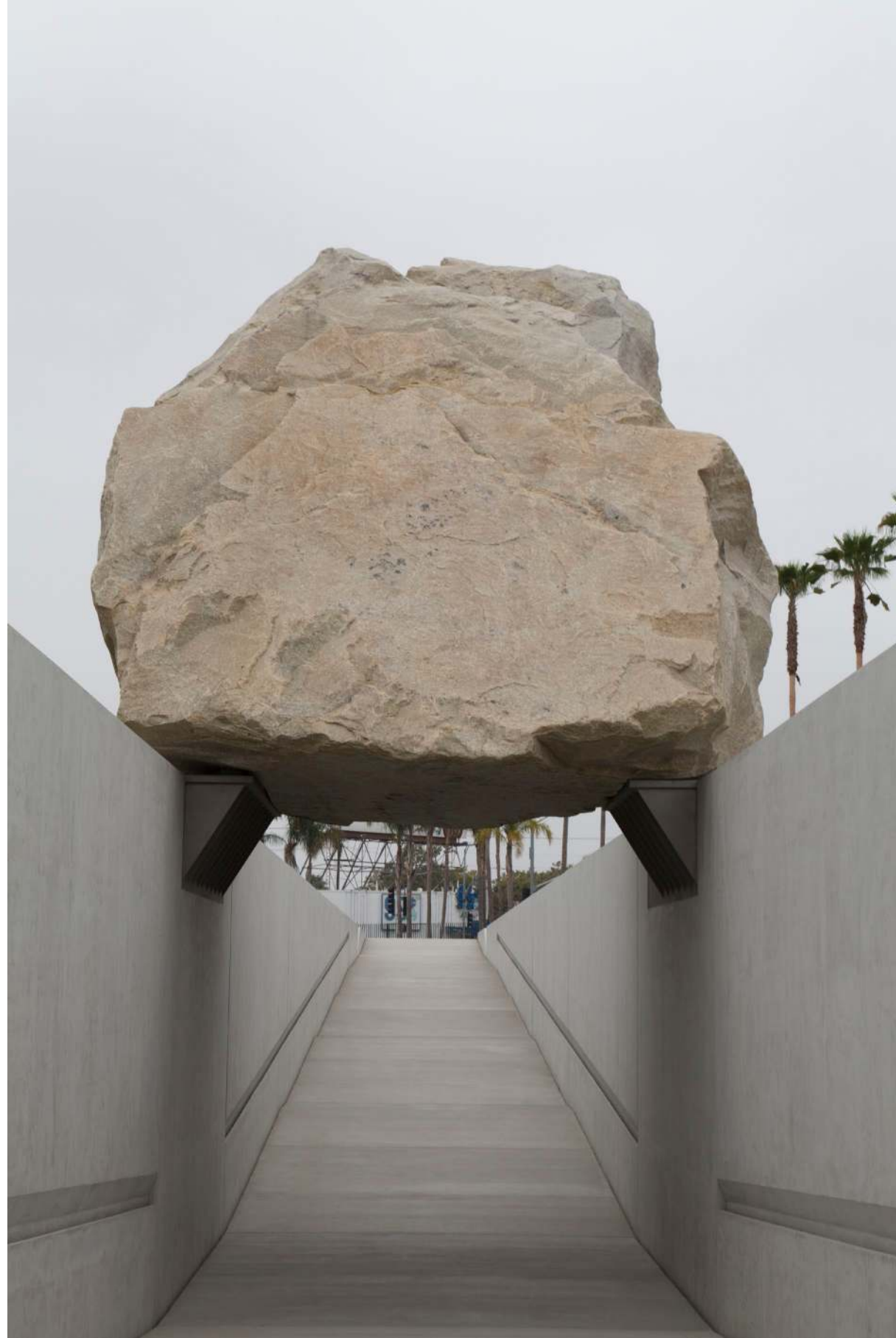
4. Incarnating ideas: becoming the mountain

Michael Heizer *Levitated Mass* (2012 Resnick North Lawn, Los Angeles County Museum of Art).

With Land Art, the traditional symbolism related to landscape painting inevitably incarnates into real Nature. The wide symbolism which since the first Dutch landscape paintings permeate the artist's imagination, and then flourished with Renaissance, Baroque, Neo-Classical and the Romantic painters, vivifies with land artists in the real world, particularly, because choosing to build their sets in the desert, land artists brought back to life the ancient spirits that were part of the Native Americans. The artists then is a sort of shaman, who gives life to ideas thou his work, healing ideas in

¹⁷ Verhagen, Erik. Jan Dibbets: *The Photographic Work*. Editions du Panama, 2007, 38

Michael Heizer, *Levitated Mass*, 2012, Los Angeles County Museum of Art © Michael Heizer





Robert Smithson, *The Annual Summons*, 1970 (Great Salt Lake, Utah)
(photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni) ©Holt-Smithson Foundation



Blue marble, photograph of the Earth taken on 7 December 1972 from the team of Apollo 17 from a distance of 29,400 km on their trip to the Moon.

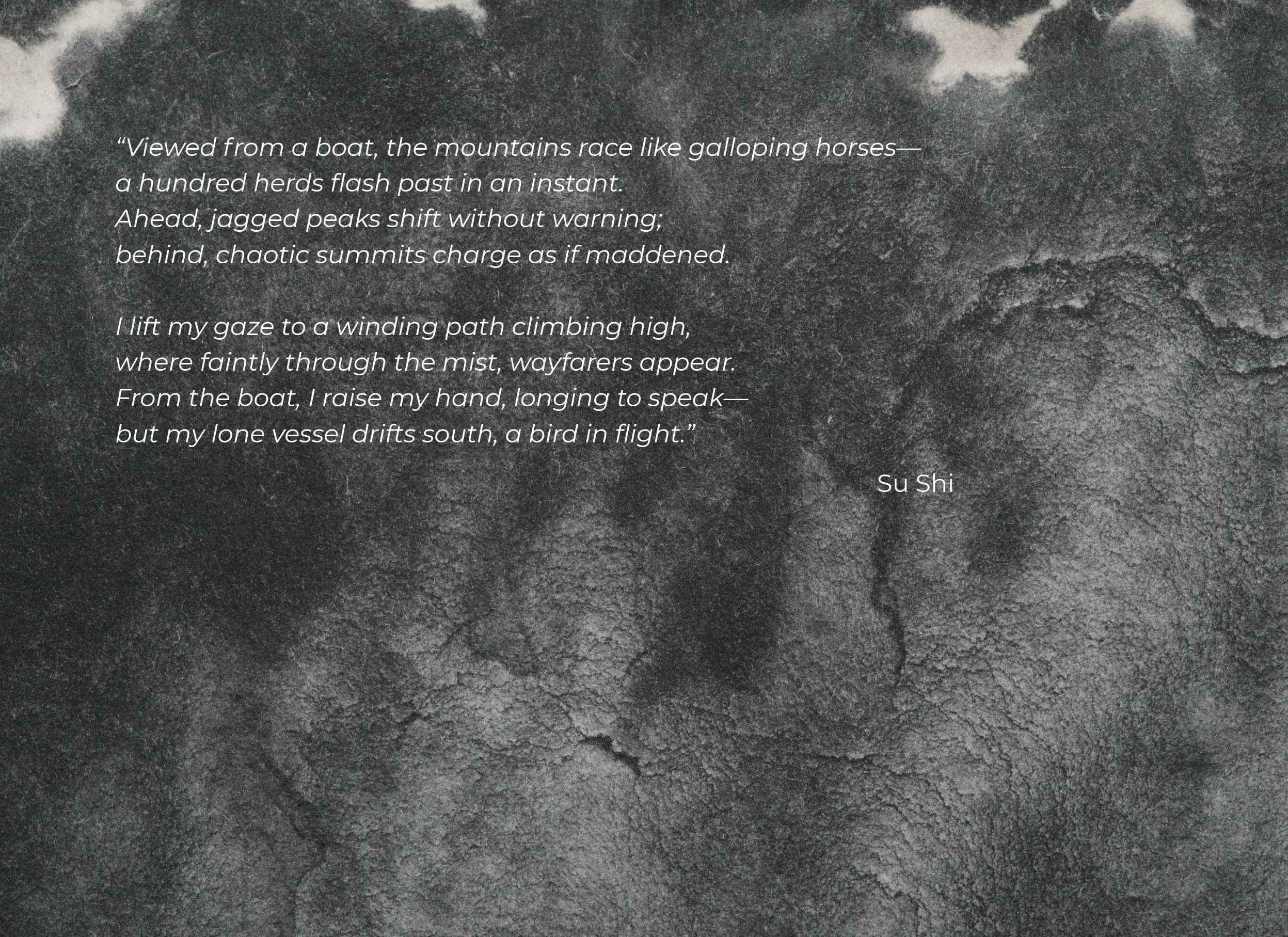
the capitalist consumerist society. The distance between the Natural (primitive) and the Urban (capitalist) world is overcome by Michael Heizer *Levitated Mass* (2012) with his updated version of land art. With *Levitated Mass*, for the first time Nature becomes part of the urban scape and makes a collision between two worlds. *Levitated Mass* was originally conceived by Heizer in 1969; a drawing of the work is in the collection of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. The original attempt to build the sculpture took place in 1969 when a 120-ton rock was obtained by Heizer in the Sierras above Reno, Nevada. Although a slot depression had been excavated in a northern Nevada dry lakebed to set the megalith on, the rock proved too heavy to load, breaking one of the two cranes being used. The slot was never combined with the megalith. In 2007, Heizer was working at the then *Pyrite-Hubbs Quarry* in nearby Riverside County when a 340 ton megalith came off the quarry wall during a detonation. The large size and im-

pressive scale of the boulder were perfect criteria to realize *Levitated Mass*. It was soon developed between Heizer and LACMA director Michael Govan that this work could be constructed at LACMA. The nature, expense and scale of the installation attracted discussion within the public art world, and its notable 106-mile transit from the Jura Valley Quarry in Riverside County. It is a man made Mountain within the urban territory. It is a replica of a work that Heizer did in 1982 in Manhattan, also called *Levitated Mass*, but in a much smaller, carved rock set on hidden supports, and does preserve this "floating" effect. Heizer rarely explains or comments on his work and has never offered a public explanation of *Levitated Mass*'s meaning or significance. He has however described the piece as being "static art" and emphasized the importance of the boulder's size and of the work's longevity, saying that the work is meant to last 3,500 years. Heizer's work is fully documented in *Levitated Mass: The Story of Michael Heizer's Monolithic Sculpture* (2013) a documentary by filmmaker Doug Pray that tells the story of the transportation of the boulder from Riverside to Los Angeles, while also examining Heizer's body of work. The film weaves together the story of the reclusive Heizer, the ambitions of a major metropolitan museum, and the public's reactions to this massive display of modern yet eerily timeless conceptual art. The massive 'land sculpture' by Heizer, references the expanse of art history – from ancient traditions of megalithic stones to modern forms of abstract geometries and cutting-edge feats of engineering. The installation follows a reverse line, not artist to the desert but Nature in the urban scape.

That mass levitating on top of a building proposes an image that is also one

main inspiration of land artists at their beginnings: the first images of the terrestrial globe seen from the moon. On October 24, 1946, NASA took the first images of Earth from outer space, flight monitoring continuous imaging, resulting in a time-lapse-movie reel. Not published as Earth observation images until 1950. Taken by the V-2 No. 13 suborbital spaceflight. In 1972, about twenty years had passed since the first experiments, the satellite photo of planet Earth *Blue Marble*, taken by the Apollo 17 crew at a distance of about 45 thousand kilometers, became a public image. It is the photo that revealed to us the physiognomy of the planet we inhabit. A few years before that ambitious use of photography, the earthworks implemented a project that intended to extend the gaze into the totality of space. A total gaze directed towards a "desolate landscape," the one from the Moon to the Earth, according to a definition by Jay Friedlander. "Isolation is the essence of Land Art"¹⁸, De Maria says, giving a hint that it comes from a spirituality that has a very long lasting and borderless tradition housed in the human soul.

¹⁸ De Maria, Walter. "Some Facts, Notes, Data, Information, Statistics and Statements." *Artforum* 18:8, April 1980, 58



*“Viewed from a boat, the mountains race like galloping horses—
a hundred herds flash past in an instant.
Ahead, jagged peaks shift without warning;
behind, chaotic summits charge as if maddened.*

*I lift my gaze to a winding path climbing high,
where faintly through the mist, wayfarers appear.
From the boat, I raise my hand, longing to speak—
but my lone vessel drifts south, a bird in flight.”*

Su Shi

Exposé - "Poetics of Silence"

By: Heinrich Geiger

Without a certain mindset – I call it frame - there is no perception of landscape.

A landscape opens up a peculiar view of the world. It has an almost rhetorical competence when it is placed in its historical and socio-cultural context (frame). One example of this is an anthology by Rudolf Borchardt from the year 1927, which includes texts by more or less well-known scientists and writers in the German language with travel experiences from European and non-European countries (Indonesia and India also feature). These, in turn, come together to form intellectual landscapes. The title of the anthology *Der Deutsche in der Landschaft* (*The German in landscape*) raises the question of whether the perception of landscape is fundamentally culturalist in nature?

Against this background, I will talk first about three different ways "How landscape speaks". At the end of my paper, I will talk about the moment when landscape becomes silent.

How landscape speaks 1

In his highly acclaimed essay *Landscape* from 1974, Joachim Ritter tried to get to the heart of the modern experience of landscape. The essay is based on two assumptions: 1) Landscape is a manifestation of nature as opposed to culture. 2. Nature as landscape is not simply given, it is a product of "the theoretical mind". The point of reference for Ritter's reflections is Francesco Petrararch's letter to the Parisian theologian Dionigi di Borgo San Sepolcro. In the letter, which he wrote on the evening of April 26, 1336, he reports on the ascent of Mont Ventoux, which he had always looked

up to since his childhood days. Having read the day before in the Roman history of Titus Livius that Philip the Macedonian king had climbed Mount Haemus in Thessaly, from which two seas could be seen at once: the Adriatic and the Black Sea, he decided to climb it together with his brother.

A book or a reading experience triggered an Italian poet's desire to climb a mountain. As he later wrote in his letter, he enjoyed a "completely unobstructed panoramic view" from its highest point. For Ritter, Petrarch stands in the tradition of Greek theoria as a "contemplative contemplation": having reached the high plateau of the mountain, he perceived the fascinating spectacle (*spectaculum*) of the landscape stretching to the distant horizons. An undertaking of epochal significance, according to Ritter, as Petrarch had experienced nature as landscape for the first time on the heights of the Ventoux, whereas antiquity had only known nature. Petrarch, as Ritter sees him, "climbs the mountain, leaving all practical purposes behind, in order to participate in the whole of nature and in God on the summit, driven solely by the desire to look, in free contemplation and theory."

With his ascent of Mont Ventoux, Petrarch opened up a new perspective on nature. Ever since Jakob Burckhardt euphorically discussed him in his *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* in 1860, his letter to the Parisian theologian Dionigi di Borgo San Sepolcro has been read time and again as a document that marks a historical caesura between the medieval negation of the world and the modern

view of nature. However, the panoramic landscape that Petrarch's gaze falls upon from the heights of Mont Ventoux is not, as Ritter believes, simply nature, but an infinite interplay of nature and human culture. For Ritter, Petrarch seeks participation "in all of nature and in God" in his contemplation of the world.

This cannot be inferred from Petrarch's text. On the contrary, instead of the great whole encompassing above and below, the sensual and divine world, and a cosmos revealing itself to theoretical contemplation, he sees above all the infinite abundance of the individual. Petrarch's world is not a well-ordered cosmos, but a sea of contingency. In contrast, the ONE to which Augustine would like to lead him in the imaginary dialog of the *Secretum* disintegrates into an incalculable diversity. The real is the individual: "Omnis res extra animam est realiter singularis et una numero" (Every thing outside the soul is in reality individual and one in number). The sentence from Ockham's *Liber sententiarum* is symptomatic of Petrarch's world view, albeit with one important difference: while nominalism postulates the experience of the individual in general, the signature of Petrarch's multifaceted work is the experience of the individual in its incalculable diversity.

To have raised the status of the contemplation of nature - that is Petrarch's achievement. The contemplation of nature as an overwhelming spectacle flashes through his work. The temptation and the pleasure of looking, the admonition to cross a threshold, the special nature of the undertaking, the happiness of contemplation and a kind of conversion. The world of books is accompanied by the experience of nature during the ascent of Mont Ven-

toux. Petrarch's appreciation of a life in close proximity to nature is nothing less than a correction to the powerful tradition of inwardness.

It was not only Augustine, but also Socrates who justified this turn inwards: Nature told him nothing, therefore he remained with man. This was formulated against the philosophy of nature in order to be able to detach man's self-image from the requirements of nature. The interior space of reflection was to prove more significant than the surrounding landscape. Augustine had justified his objection to the pleasure of the eye by pointing to the overwhelming greatness of man's inner self. Accordingly, Petrarch shies away from the overwhelming sight of the landscape in order to commit himself to the Augustinian ideal of inwardness.

The moment of devotion to the sensory impressions is brief. Petrarch immediately reaches for his copy of the *Confessiones*, the work of the Church Father Augustine, which Francesco Dionigi, to whom he will write his letter about the ascent of Mont Ventoux, once gave him. He opens the volume and comes across the passage in the 10th book where Augustine, while gazing at the beauty of the landscape, urges self-knowledge: "Even if the mountains and the oceans cause astonishment - the ability of man to remember all this with his eyes closed and to revive it within himself is even more overwhelming." And: "the spectacle of the outer world is no match for the greatness of the soul." Moreover, it is a wasted effort to climb a mountain with so much zeal and sweat when the real problem is man's desires fueled by earthly urges.

The contemplation of everything earthly instead of the contemplation

How a landscape comes into being. Three steps 1



of the eternal becomes an equally important option for Petrarch, even if he may still shy away from it. He perceives landscape in the “modern sense”, i.e. he releases the landscape elements from their functional context and thus makes it possible to discover the landscape as a manifestation of the diversity of the world. What is new is the contextualizing, space-constituting power of the gaze from an elevated position. Only in this way, in the individual gaze, can the landscape become an aesthetic experience. In the suction effect of the view from the height of a mountain, a radically new experience, no longer held in bounds by *theoria*, becomes possible.

We may conclude: Landscape is never itself, it is only created in its perception and within a certain frame which we may call a “cultural frame”. The gaze defines proximity and distance, but also the section of perception. It unites the data of the manifold individual into a second-order totality: the world, which unfolds a life of its own due to the unifying effect of the gaze in landscape painting. In this second-order totality, a tension arises between worldly orientation, the sensual, and inner orientation. In any case, the enormity of the sensual-aesthetic experience of landscape makes Petrarch resort to a strong formulation in his letter: “*obstupui*” (I marveled). He was astonished, as I would like to explain further, because he realized the priority of the particular over the general, the presence of the manifold. From the top of the mountain, he first looked down and observed the clouds. Then he looked at the snow-covered Alps. He saw the mountains of the province of Lyon to his right, and even the Gulf of Marseille to his left. The Rhone was almost before his eyes. It is no coincidence that polyphonic

music developed precisely at the time when the polyphony of nature was perceived in the landscape.

How landscape speaks 2

“While Petrarch sees mountains, rivers and the sea and not the artificial order of human settlements, the view of the mountaineer in China is directed at people and their settlements, at past times and the future in the sense of being cut off from both, but above all at himself.” This statement by Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer again shows that landscape speaks to us in many different ways. The question posed at the beginning: How is a poetics of silence possible? comes closer to a solution at this point, however, because it is raised in an intercultural context. A poetics of silence is closely linked to the intellectual conditions in the respective culture in which it arises. It is closely linked to the question of what the intellectual prerequisites are for the world to become a landscape at all.

Landscapes may contain cities, other traces of settlement, traffic routes, rivers, streams, lakes, high-voltage pylons or landfill sites. But that is not the essential thing. What is decisive is the whole of the landscape, which lives from the tension between activity (*natura naturans*) and a goal of activity, the things or even a work (*natura naturata*).

Significantly, we only ever speak of “world” and “nature” in the singular when we look at a landscape, as is the case in the *Book of Zhuangzi*, for example. In it, the Dao and nature are only ever referred to as the ONE, as Richard Wilhelm translates it. Although not only the image of nature has changed over the course of history, but also man's awareness of his

position in it, the tendency to see the one nature in the landscape - despite the high-voltage pylons and the garbage dump, despite ants, chicken grass, rubble or piles of excrement - prevails. What is seen is “the constant presence of nature, which always remains the same, which supports and encompasses the changes of human history”, as Wolfgang Kluxen has stated for Western culture. But is that also true for Chinese culture? Zhuangzi would add that a path must be traveled to experience nature as the ONE. Man must wander. He must transcend the multiplicity of being in order to penetrate the “castle of non-being, where everything is one”. Hiking in the mountains, however, has a meaning all of its own. Schmidt-Glintzer has already given us a first important indication of this in the above quote.

*

Because people are aware of the permanence of nature and the transience of human life, there is often something painful about climbing mountains in China. Pan Yue (247-300 AD), a scholar of the Western Jin Dynasty (265-317 AD) from what is now Henan Province, said: “When you climb a mountain, you think of the distant past and mourn the present.”

Pan Yue's quote shows that people often have to mourn a multiple experience of loss in the panoramic view that they get from the top of a mountain: Past and present have been lost to him. While thinking about the past can be comforting, despair dominates when looking at the present. As Achim Mittag has observed, the lament that was still associated with the act of mountain climbing and summit views in the Chinese Middle Ages disappeared in the 16th century, when the desire to travel began to develop. The journeys, which had a spiritual-religious dimension and took

on the character of secularized pilgrimages, now followed a deep longing for purification and purity.

Two traditions: Virtue (*de* 德) and magic. Both were significant for the mountain metaphor and thus also for a certain understanding of nature in traditional China. The first tradition is based on a saying by Confucius, which is recorded in the Discourses (*lunyu*) 6:21. According to this, the mountain is assigned to the person who possesses the Confucian cardinal virtue of “sense of responsible action” (*ren* 仁). This is the Noble One, who in Confucianism represents humanity not only in the spiritual realm. He is also the wise ruler of a kingdom in which virtue (*de*) shines. The second tradition speaks of the dream of being able to climb the mountains like a saint. However, because this dream cannot be realized without the aid of magic, chapter 17 of *Baopuzi*, which dates back to the 4th century AD, states: “If you go to the mountains without magical precautions, you will eventually come to harm.”

How landscape speaks 3

Mountain massifs rise out of a misty gray void, the likes of which can only be found in China. Some of the bizarre formations appear to be overgrown with bushes, while here and there what appear to be scrub and branches protrude adventurously from a crevice over the abyss. On closer inspection, however, the mountain peaks of this typically Chinese-looking landscape gradually mutate into the upstretched buttocks of men and women - this can be seen quite clearly. This monumental work - *It Looks Like a Landscape*¹ measuring 306x612 cm - does not lack a certain irony. Nevertheless, the artist Liu Wei

¹ see p.52, Editor's Note



How a landscape comes into being. Three steps 2, 3

does not really seem to be mocking the time-honored tradition of Chinese landscape painting - his carnal topography is too sublime.

Assembled into a texture from pre-defined components, a painted Chinese landscape can be “read”. The eye wanders in the picture over paths and bridges, past rock formations and waterfalls, bamboo groves and wooded hills and in this reading immerses itself in a whole that is more than the sum of its parts: a living cosmos that breathes a hazy breath of life. The components of this macrocosmic “living being”, which represents a Chinese landscape, are not very different from the building blocks of the human microcosm: rocks are like bones, water is the blood, the vegetation sprouting from the humus is the hair growth on the skin. So, the art work of Liu Wei is not mocking the tradition of Chinese landscape painting.

In China, the art of landscape painting is called “painting of mountains and water” (*shanshui hua*). The pair of terms mountain (*shan*) and water (*shui*) refers to the main elements of a Chinese ideal landscape, which, crucially, is constructed like the human body. Never an image of real existing areas and regions, it represents the cosmos in which the human being is embedded as a tiny but indispensable component. As Chinese *Shanshui* painting is composed of recurring elements, set pieces such as pine trees, waterfalls, lonely pilgrims, bridges and rock formations can easily be used as modules for digital, interactive images. The extent to which the tradition of fine ink paintings by old masters is continued by contemporary artists, criticized, broken with irony or deliberately negated is to some extent left to the interpretation of the viewer. It should be noted, however, that the

custom of referring to old masters is as old in the history of Chinese painting as painting itself - which brings us to the point at which we can begin the conversation about the poetics of place.

How landscape becomes silent

Beauty owes itself to a momentary point - the 'manic' moment of the happiness of aesthetic experience. The feeling of touching a sun-warmed rock holds a similar truth to the contemplation of ink paintings or works of written art. The aesthetic phenomenon opens the eye, the sense, in one point and the heightened sensitivity towards the obvious becomes the source of meaning in unexpected moments and in places previously overlooked.

Accordingly, Chinese ink paintings are more than maps: they not only enable people to find their way and determine their position, but also to open them up to their dreams and fantasies as they wander through landscapes. The “marvelous” (*miao*) plays an important role, which is why seeing is not just a mere perceptual technique, but the epitome of a successful life. It could be described as follows: seeing enables a permeability that no longer forces nature into the position of an opposing object. It is all about the goal of increasing attention, with which an unclouded presence becomes possible. In order to prevent eloquence and promote silence, the viewer must become a pure medium. The unobstructed view and the presence that comes to rest are two moments that intertwine and reinforce each other. Instead of asking whether we can decipher the elements of a landscape painting, both Petrarch's letter to a Parisian theologian and the Chinese landscape depiction are

about enabling an experience that is not held in check by any theory. Where the immediate gaze is not sufficient, however, literature can (not must) be consulted.

Landscape in the modern sense, as it appears for the first time in Petrarch's *Ventoux Letter*, presupposes the removal of landscape elements from their functional context and thus the discovery of landscape as the appearance of the diversity of the world. It is the cohesive, space-constituting power of the gaze from a lofty position that grants what is seen a new kind of self-reference and frees it from a possible center of meaning, for example a religious one. The landscape later became eloquent when it was made the experience of the thinking eye in 15th century painting. The subject of this new painting was the world and not, as in Chinese landscape painting, nature as a force or movement which is beyond fixed in terms.

In Chinese aesthetics, landscape paintings presuppose a viewer who becomes aware of himself and his position in the world by looking at it. The laws of nature behind the natural phenomena leave him in awe and amazement, as he believes he recognizes their eternal validity. Beauty and natural law are inseparable. The mountains and water in the Chinese landscape therefore demand nothing more than an open approach. A phenomenology derived from walking is helpful here. It means that the body thinks best when the mind stops thinking, when it is decoupled from the body.

The very best way to achieve this is to walk steadily for hours in a landscape or, as we may also say, in “nature”, in a long rhythm of uninterrupted movement, until the brain not only knows the movement, but feels it as the resting center of being. Poetics of Silence.

The Mountain as a Symbol of the Human-Nature-Society Relationship in Chinese Photography and 'Post-Shanshui Art'

By: Marco Meccarelli

Mountains have long been central symbols in Chinese culture, sacred spaces where humans, nature, and society converge. In traditional landscape painting (*shanshui hua* 山水画), mountains transcend their natural form to become metaphors for cosmic order, spirituality, and the pursuit of inner harmony. The depiction of roads or paths in traditional Chinese art often guides the viewer's eye deeper into the work. These pathways create a sense of physical and spiritual journey, inviting the observer to engage with the landscape on multiple levels. Traditional Chinese landscape painting conveys a sense of time within a static image by using compositional rhythm, depth, and symbolic cues, rather than relying on narrative progression. This blending of time and space creates a meditative experience, where the landscape is not merely a snapshot of nature but a reflection of a larger, cosmic order.

When photography was introduced in China and developed as an art form, many photographers adopted the visual and symbolic style of traditional *shanshui* painting. Mountains continued to link the spiritual and physical worlds, reflecting the same philosophical ideas as in the paintings. However, as China modernized rapidly, the role of mountains in art began to change, especially in the artistic movement known as "post-shanshui art". We explore how mountains have been re-interpreted in Chinese photography and post-*shanshui* art, showing the changing relationship between humans, nature, and society.

Certain compositional and aesthetic features of landscape painting

In the Chinese artistic tradition, painting has never been regarded as an isolated or autonomous art form; rather, it has historically been integrated into a broader system of literati practices that also includes calligraphy and poetry. Together, these 'Three Perfections' (*sanjue* 三绝) form a unified mode of expression, where image, writing, and gesture are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.¹ Still, it is understood as an integral component of brush arts, a triadic practice that encompasses poetry, calligraphy, and painting, typically in that hierarchical order of cultural significance. This interrelatedness reflects a broader aesthetic and philosophical unity wherein each medium enhances and complements the others. It is common for paintings to be inscribed with poems, composed by the original artist or added later by admirers, connoisseurs, or subsequent owners. These inscriptions serve not merely as decorative additions but as interpretive extensions that deepen the emotional and symbolic resonance of the visual composition. The poems guide the viewer's perception, enriching the landscape's affective and intellectual dimensions.²

1 Benedetti L. Meccarelli M. *Le tre perfezioni dei letterati cinesi*. Vol. 1: Dalle origini al XIV secolo (Roma: Orientalia editrice, 2024).

2 Jonathan Chaves, "Meaning Beyond the Painting: The Chinese Painter as Poet," in *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting*, ed. Alfreda Murck and Wen C. Fong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 431-458.

Often described as "voiceless poems" (*wusheng zhi shi* 无声之诗), Chinese brush paintings aim to convey a sense of immediacy and expressive vitality.³ The ideal painting, according to classical Chinese aesthetics, embodies *qiyun shengdong* 气韵生动, a concept that signifies the presence of rhythmic vitality and inner spirit.⁴ This principle goes beyond technical proficiency, emphasizing the artist's capacity to animate the work with a living spirit that reflects both emotional depth and cultivated perception. *Qiyun shengdong* thus represents a synthesis of external form and internal energy, where the brushwork becomes a conduit for the dynamic expression of the artist's heart-mind (*xin* 心). Central to this aesthetic are spontaneity, freshness of perception, and the intensity of realization, qualities that are inseparable from the nature of the materials used. The ink, brush, and paper demand an immediacy of execution: once a brushstroke is made, it cannot be corrected or erased. As a result, the painter must carry a fully formed mental image before touching brush to paper, translating

3 The term "voiceless poems" in Chinese aesthetics often refers metaphorically to landscape paintings that evoke the silent poetry of nature-the hills and rivers themselves-as if they were poems without sound. This concept extends the meaning of poetry beyond words to the visual and emotional expression found in scenery, suggesting that landscapes can communicate poetic meaning silently through their forms and atmospheres.

4 Among the most influential concepts in the history of Chinese aesthetics are the Six Principles of Painting (*liufa* 六法), articulated by Xie He 谢赫 (died after 532) in the preface to his treatise *Gu Huapin Lu* 古画品录 (*A Record of the Classification of Ancient Painters*). The foremost principle, *qiyun shengdong*, refers to the dynamic and vital energy that animates a successful work of art. In this context, *qiyun* 气韵 signifies the inner vitality or essential nature of the subject, its intrinsic reality, captured through the painter's expressive brushwork and cultivated sensibility. See Wang Shixiang 王世襄, *Zhongguo hualun yanjiu* 中国画论研究 (*Studies on Chinese Painting Theory*) (Beijing: Sanlian-shudian, 2013), vol. 1, 24-25.

ing internal vision into external form in a single, fluid gesture. This method privileges not revision but the clarity of thought and the disciplined intuition that guides the hand in real time.

The artistic process in Chinese landscape painting begins with the artist deeply internalizing the external natural world as they perceive it. This means the painter first absorbs and contemplates the landscape, not just as a physical scene but as a source of spiritual and emotional inspiration. The next step transforms this natural environment into a symbolic expression of the artist's inner thoughts, feelings, and worldview. The resulting painted landscape thus becomes more than a mere depiction of nature; it acts as a cosmogram-a visual map or representation of the cosmos that reflects the artist's understanding of the universe and their place within it.⁵ In this way, the painting embodies a harmonious unity between the external world and the artist's inner life, conveying profound philosophical and spiritual meanings rooted in the Chinese cosmological worldview.⁶

The elements of classical Chinese painting are thus not only depictions of nature but also representations of the features the artist considers most essential and meaningful within the natural environment. This synthesis of external and internal, spatial and temporal, makes Chinese landscape

5 Marco Meccarelli, "Painting with Light and Shadow: Theoretical and Technical Assumptions of Pictorial Landscape in Chinese Photography," in *Italian Association for Chinese Studies. Selected Papers 4*, ed. Attilio Andreini and Federica Passi (Venezia: Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, 2022), 69-85.

6 A traditional understanding of the universe as an interconnected, dynamic system where nature, humans, and the cosmos are harmoniously linked, shaped by principles from classical Chinese thought. See Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

painting a profound reflection of both the world and the self.

Thus, in traditional art, the mountain was more than just a natural feature; it was a symbol of cosmic order and human striving for inner balance and unity with nature. It served as a metaphor for moral and spiritual ideals.

The Traditional Role of Mountains in Chinese Landscape Art

To understand how the role of mountains in art has changed, it's important to first look at their traditional role in *shanshui hua*. The term *shanshui* 山水, meaning "mountain-water," refers to the key elements of these paintings, which often carried deep philosophical meanings, particularly linked to Daoist and Confucian thought.⁷ Daoist philosophy, with its emphasis on *wu wei* 无为, or non-action, and the pursuit of harmony with the *Dao* 道, deeply influenced this tradition, which values living by nature. Confu-

⁷ These two natural elements—mountains and water—are not merely compositional features; they symbolize complementary forces within the cosmos, reflecting the Daoist principles of balance and harmony between *yin* and *yang*. The mountain, stable and unmoving, is associated with strength, stillness, and permanence (*yang*), while water, fluid and yielding, represents softness, adaptability, and impermanence (*yin*). Together, they articulate the dynamic equilibrium central to Daoist cosmology, which values the interdependence and cyclical transformation of all things in nature. In addition to their Daoist connotations, *shanshui* landscapes also resonate with Confucian ideals. Mountains were often linked with the moral integrity and elevated virtue of the *junzi* 君子, the cultivated gentleman-scholar. Painting or contemplating such landscapes was therefore not merely aesthetic, but also ethical and intellectual—a way to cultivate inner harmony, self-discipline, and moral clarity. Through *shanshui hua*, the artist did not strive to replicate the natural world as it appeared, but rather to express an inner vision of the world as it ought to be: ordered, harmonious, and infused with meaning. This synthesis of visual form and metaphysical insight distinguishes *shanshui* from Western traditions of landscape representation, anchoring it firmly within a Chinese cultural and philosophical framework.

cian ideals, stressing social order and the cultivation of virtue, encouraged a balance between humans and the world, viewing landscape painting as a means to contemplate moral principles. The way *shanshui hua* depicted mountains emphasized their height, using perspectives that made viewers feel as if they were being drawn upward, symbolizing spiritual ascent. The use of empty space around the mountains also reflected Daoist principles of *wu wei*. Rather than promoting literal inactivity, *wu wei* encourages acting in harmony with the natural flow of the universe, allowing things to unfold spontaneously without force or resistance. In this sense, empty space symbolizes stillness and openness, creating a balance that aligns with natural forces and invites a sense of tranquillity and unity with the environment. This approach embodies the idea that true harmony and effectiveness arise not from aggressive effort but from gentle, unforced alignment with the world's inherent rhythms.

Within the Chinese artistic tradition, each landscape — and consequently every mountain depicted in painting — was understood not merely as a representation of the external world, but as an expression of the *xin*, the heart-mind of the painter. Far from being a neutral or objective rendering of nature, the painted mountain embodied the artist's inner state, moral cultivation, and philosophical reflection. The act of painting a landscape was thus an introspective process through which the external scenery became infused with the rhythms, emotions, and thoughts of the individual. In this way, the mountain in Chinese painting served as both a mirror of the cosmos and a projection of the self, revealing the deep interconnection between inner life and the natural world.

Mountains are imbued with profound symbolic meaning in both Chinese and Indian cosmological traditions. In Chinese thought, they often represent the ascent of life—a metaphor for the individual's journey marked by winding, arduous paths toward self-cultivation and harmony with *tian* 天, a complex notion encompassing heaven, moral principle, and cosmic order.⁸ The mountain thus becomes a liminal space between earth and sky, matter and spirit. Similarly, the mountain holds a sacred place in Indian cosmology, where it is frequently envisioned as the womb of the earth—a generative, maternal force that connects the human realm to the divine.⁹ Across both traditions, the mountain stands as more than a physical landmark: it is a symbol of transformation, elevation, and the soul's striving toward transcendence.

In classical landscape painting, particularly during the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties—periods renowned for their flourishing arts and culture—mountains were often seen as symbols of the sacred and the sublime. These images were linked to ideas of immortality, spiritual enlightenment, and retreat from the troubles of the human world. Mountains were depicted as places where sages and hermits would go to meditate and connect with nature.

Mountains in Chinese Photography

With the advent of photography in China during the mid-nineteenth century, artists and intellectuals began to explore the medium not merely as a technological innovation, but as a new visual language capable of both documenting external reality

⁸ Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002).

⁹ Diana L. Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography*, Harmony Books, 2012.

and reimagining it through culturally resonant forms. Although photography initially entered China through Western scientific and colonial channels—introduced by missionaries, diplomats, and entrepreneurs—it was rapidly adapted to fit indigenous artistic paradigms. Most notably, Chinese photographers and critics sought to integrate it within the aesthetic and philosophical frameworks of *shanshui hua*.¹⁰ Rather than treating photography as a purely mechanical act of visual capture, many Chinese artists perceived it as a potential extension—and in some cases, a reconfiguration—of the literati painting tradition (*wenren hua* 文人画). This approach emphasized subjective expression, the evocation of mood (*yi* 意), and the embodiment of moral or philosophical ideals, particularly those informed by Daoist and Confucian cosmologies. As Wu Hung has noted, early Chinese photographers often viewed their work not as a rupture with tradition, but as a dialogue with it, using the camera much like the brush—to interpret rather than to replicate nature.¹¹ Through careful manipulation of composition, perspective, light, and tonal gradation, these photographers emulated the spiritual depth and poetic resonance characteristic of *shanshui* painting, foregrounding the mountain as a natural motif and a symbolic site of cultural continuity.

This 'sinicization' of photography highlights the fluidity of artistic media in late Qing and Republican-era China, where adopting new technologies frequently entailed re-articulating

¹⁰ Marco Meccarelli, Foo Yee Wah, and Andrea Flammini, "China and the West in the Art of the Nineteenth Century: A Cultural and Historical Review of the Relations between Painting and Photography," *Ming Qing Studies* 2013, 117–60.

¹¹ Wu Hung, *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2004), 17.

existing visual and metaphysical concepts. Here, the photographic image was not a break with the past, but a modern medium to express timeless Chinese landscape ideals: harmony between humanity and nature, and the cultivation of interiority through visual form.¹²

In traditional *shanshui* painting, the mountain is not merely a natural formation, but a site of cosmological, moral, and philosophical significance. Rooted in both Daoist and Confucian frameworks, these landscapes were often constructed from memory and imagination rather than direct observation. They functioned not as topographical records but as idealized environments in which human presence is minimized or rendered symbolic. When Chinese photographers began turning their lenses toward the natural world, many retained this conceptual orientation. The photograph became a space in which the temporal and spatial constraints of the medium were stretched to accommodate older modes of representation—those in which landscape serves not as a mirror of reality, but as a reflection of cultivated inner vision.¹³

One of the most influential early figures to explore the intersection of photography and traditional Chinese aesthetics was Long Chin-san 龙钦三 (Long Qingsan, 1892–1995), whose work occupies a critical threshold between classical ink painting and modern photographic practice. Trained in both literati painting and Western photographic methods, Long developed a hybrid visual language that profoundly shaped the trajectory of Chinese photographic art in the twentieth century. His engagement with

photography was not grounded in the documentary realism typically associated with the medium in the West, but rather in a deeply philosophical and compositional approach drawn from Chinese art history.

Rejecting the idea of an instantaneous snapshot, Long meticulously assembled his images through a technique known as ‘composite photography’ (*jijin sheying* 集锦摄影), layering and combining multiple negatives in the darkroom to produce highly orchestrated landscapes. This method mirrored the traditional Chinese landscape painter’s approach, in which nature was not copied directly but reimagined through the lens of cultural memory, moral contemplation, and artistic convention. Long Qingshan’s montages not only resurrect the visual structure of *shanshui* painting but also aspire to its metaphysical depth and symbolic resonance.

His photographs frequently emphasize the vertical grandeur and spiritual symbolism of mountains, enveloped in swirling mists, threaded by meandering rivers, and punctuated by pavilions and lone figures—iconic elements evocative of Northern Song and Yuan dynasty landscape masters such as Fan Kuan 范宽 (ca. 960–1030), Guo Xi 郭熙 (ca. 1020–1090), and Ni Zan 倪瓒 (1301–1374). The connection between photography and painting is so deeply ingrained in Long Chin-san’s artistic vision that his work has come to be known, not coincidentally, as *huayi sheying* 画意摄影—“pictorial photography.” This term underscores the extent to which his photographic practice draws upon, and reimagines, the compositional principles, aesthetics, and spirit of traditional Chinese painting.¹⁴

¹² Ivi, pp. 27–28.

¹³ François Jullien, *La Grande Image n'a pas de forme ou du non-objet par la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, «L'ordre philosophique», 2003), 30–33.

¹⁴ Marco Meccarelli, “Painting with Light and Shadow: Theoretical and Technical Assumptions of Pictorial Landscape in Chinese Photography,” 76–77.

Long Jingshan, *Drawing Water from the River at Dawn*, 1934



These works were not mere visual homages; they constituted a deliberate reinterpretation of classical ideals through a modern medium, embodying the persistence of Chinese cosmological thought—particularly the Daoist notion of unity between humankind and the natural world—within the evolving visual culture of Republican China.

Long's oeuvre thus stands as a foundational example of how photography was not simply assimilated into Chinese art but was reconfigured in ways that sustained and reactivated indigenous pictorial traditions. His legacy continues to inform the conceptual strategies of contemporary Chinese artists who navigate between the weight of tradition and the conditions of modernity.¹⁵

This approach—deliberate, meditative, and richly intertextual—allowed Long to create landscapes that resist the conventions of Western modernism, particularly the emphasis on spontaneity and the so-called “decisive moment.”¹⁶ Instead of privileging the transient instant, as figures like Henri Cartier-Bresson advocated, Long constructed time within the frame, allowing different temporalities to coexist in a single image. This conceptually layered treatment of space and time reflects the broader epistemological foundations of Chinese aesthetics, in which the landscape is not passively observed but actively composed according to metaphysical and poetic criteria.¹⁷

15 Zhang Pinxing 张品兴, Yin Dengxiang 殷登祥 ed., *Zhonghua dangdai wenhua mingren dacidian* 中华当代文化名人大辞典 (*Dictionary of Chinese Cultural Celebrities*), (Beijing: Zhongguo guang-bodianshi chubanshe, 1992), 210.

16 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographers*, ed. Michael Sand (New York: Aperture, 1999), 22–25.

17 Jason C. Kuo, “Landscape Painting and the Notion of Time in Chinese Aesthetics,” in *Word and Image in Chinese Art: Essays in Honor of James Cahill*, ed. Ju-hsi Chou and Julia F. An-

The Shanshui hua in Chinese contemporary art

Long Chin-san's innovative approach to photography significantly impacted subsequent generations of artists. His legacy is evident in contemporary Chinese art, where artists continue to reinterpret the *shanshui* tradition. Long Chin-san's legacy can be felt in the work of contemporary Chinese artists and photographers who similarly seek to navigate the tension between tradition and modernity. Figures such as Wang Qingsong 王庆松, Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, and Yao Lu 姚璐 continue to manipulate digital and photographic tools to construct landscapes that are simultaneously ancient and hypermodern, allegorical and political. These artists, like Long before them, resist the idea of the photograph as a transparent window onto the world. Instead, they use it as a means of constructing meaning—layered, unstable, and often critical. The enduring resonance of landscape as a symbolic system thus confirms the adaptability of *shanshui* aesthetics within a technologically mediated visual culture and underscores the persistent role of mountains as sites of memory, cultural continuity, and philosophical inquiry in Chinese art.

In the context of contemporary reinterpretations of the traditional Chinese relationship between humanity and nature, *shanshui hua* continues to exert profound influence. Several contemporary Chinese artists demonstrate this tradition's persistence by reframing classical motifs conceptually. Among them, Huang Yan 黄岩's *Chinese Landscape: Tattoo* (1999) stands out as a particularly compelling example. In this work, the artist transforms the human body, specifically the back, into a canvas for a traditional draws (Lawrence, KS: Spencer Museum of Art, 1991), 145–157.

landscape painting. Rendered in the classical *shanshui* style, the ink-painted mountains follow the compositional logic of literati painting, yet they are inscribed not on paper or silk, but directly onto human skin.¹⁸

This radical displacement of the pictorial surface reconfigures the relationship between body, image, and nature. The human back is transformed into a symbolic site where natural forms and the human figure converge, thus giving visual form to the deeply rooted Chinese philosophical concept of the unity between Heaven and humanity (*Tianren heyi*, 天人合一).¹⁹ In this world-view, which draws on both Daoist and Confucian traditions, the human being is not an external observer of nature, but rather an active participant in the cosmic order. Huang's choice of the back—an intimate and vulnerable part of the body—evokes both the somatic dimension of lived experience and the meditative journey toward harmony with the natural world. The title of the work, *Tattoo*, further reinforces this meaning. The tattoo, unlike paint or ink on paper, suggests permanence: an image that becomes inseparable from the body. In doing so, Huang underscores that the bond between humans and nature is not ephemeral, but inscribed into the very fabric of existence.

By merging the traditional aesthetics of *shanshui hua* with the corporeality of contemporary performance and conceptual art, Huang reactivates classical Chinese thought within a modern visual vocabulary. The landscape on skin ceases to be merely

18 Maxwell K. Hearn, *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*, exh. cat. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, [2013]), 103.

19 François Jullien, *La Grande Image n'a pas de forme ou du non-objet par la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, «L'ordre philosophique», 2003), 115–17. Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 276–78.

representational; it becomes an embodied statement on ecological entanglement, cultural continuity, and identity. This synthesis between heritage and experimentation is emblematic of a broader trend in post-socialist Chinese art, in which tradition is neither rejected nor simply repeated, but critically recontextualized.²⁰

Liu Wei 刘伟's *It Looks Like a Landscape* (2004) similarly reaffirms the foundational Chinese concept of humanity's inherent interconnectedness with the natural world. Specifically, the work appears to depict a conventional photograph of the iconic karst topography associated with Guilin. However, closer examination reveals a startling subversion: what initially seem to be mountain forms are, in fact, nude human bodies, contorted and densely arranged to mimic the familiar silhouette of natural peaks. This visual deception destabilizes the boundary between the organic and the environmental, between the corporeal and the geographic.

Rather than documenting nature or merely replicating its visual codes, Liu constructs a composite landscape in which the human body is not only embedded in but ontologically indistinguishable from the terrain. This transformation operates on both aesthetic and philosophical registers. On a visual level, the work collapses traditional categories of figuration and landscape, erasing distinctions between bodily form and topographic structure. On a metaphysical level, it enacts a key tenet of classical Chinese cosmology: that the human is not external to the natural order but a constitutive element within it. This notion, rooted in the shared animating force of *qi* 气, underlies the aesthetics of *shanshui hua*, in which landscape

20 Peggy Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 112–17.

Huang Yan , Chinese Landscape Series No. 3, 1999



《中国山水·身体》之七 1/2 1999 黄岩



Liu Wei, *It looks like a landscape*, 2004

is not conceived as a passive backdrop but as a dynamic expression of the same vital energies that circulate through all phenomena.

Liu's intervention may be seen, therefore, not as a departure from tradition but as a reactivation of its philosophical core through contemporary media and conceptual strategies. Like Huang Yan, who inscribes classical landscape motifs directly onto the human body, Liu repurposes the grammar of *shanshui* to interrogate the ontology of landscape itself. Both artists critically engage with—and ultimately unsettle—the modern Western dichotomy between nature and culture, reasserting instead a Chinese paradigm of continuity and relationality. Their works demonstrate that classical landscape painting persists not merely as a visual genre but as a living epistemological framework, capable of reconfiguring how we envision the relationship between the human and the natural in an era of ecological and cultural transformation.

The Emergence of Post-Shanshui Art

The long-standing tradition of *shan-*

shui hua has undergone significant transformation in the face of contemporary environmental and sociopolitical challenges. As scholars and artists reassess the symbolic and aesthetic functions of landscape imagery, a new trajectory has emerged within Chinese art: post-*shanshui* art. This movement retains the visual grammar and philosophical underpinnings of classical *shanshui hua*, yet reconfigures them to respond to the complexities of the present era.

As Wu Hung observes, contemporary artists are no longer interested in presenting images of natural beauty in simple or unproblematic ways, nor are they concerned with creating visual pleasure through the contemplation of harmonious, easily accepted forms.²¹ Instead, many artists engage critically with the theme of nature, often foregrounding the tensions between tradition and modernity, or between local and global contexts. Wu Hung notes that contemporary Chinese artists have shifted their focus

²¹ Wu Hung, *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art* (Hong Kong: Time Zone 8, 2008) and Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History 1970s–2000s* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014).

toward exploring complex relationships between memory/history, nature/culture, and the local/global, frequently adopting experimental and performative approaches that challenge conventional aesthetic values. This transformation marks a decisive break from earlier traditions in which landscape and beauty were depicted as stable, universally appreciated ideals.

“Contemporary Asian art is no longer confined to a single geographical sphere, nor is it defined by the artist's ethnicity”.²²

As Wu Hung argues, this redefinition of artistic priorities and strategies has propelled Chinese artists onto the international stage. They interrogate and reinvent the visual language of nature and landscape, moving far beyond mere representations of beauty. Rather than celebrating untouched nature, many artists now engage critically with the consequences of rapid industrialization, urban expansion, and ecological degradation. Yin Jinan 尹劲南, a prominent scholar of tradi-

²² Wu Hung, *Making History*, 251.

tional painting, has argued that these developments have given rise to a distinctly modern form: the “post-*shanshui* image in the postmodern era”.²³ Gao Shiming offers a compelling interpretation of the transformation of *shanshui* painting in the twentieth century, asserting that it no longer functions merely as a medium for depicting harmonious natural beauty.²⁴ Instead, he argues, it reflects the devastation and disorder inflicted upon the landscape by modern Chinese history's cultural and political upheavals. This historical trauma, Gao suggests, has fragmented traditional symbolic forms, resulting in a visual language characterized by rupture and instability. Similarly, curator Lü Peng 吕澎 contends that in response

²³ Yin Jinan, “The Evolution of Chinese Contemporary *Shanshui*,” in *Shanshui: Poetry Without Sound? Landscape in Chinese Contemporary Art*, ed. Peter Fischer (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 45. Elena Macri, “Being, Becoming, Landscape: The Iconography of Landscape in Contemporary Chinese Art, Its Ecological Impulse, and Its Ethical Project,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 16, no. 1 (2017): 37.

²⁴ Gao Shiming, quoted in Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 303.



Wang Wusheng, *Huangshan A104*, 1984

to this dislocation, contemporary artists increasingly turn to traditional Chinese culture, not as a fixed repository of meanings, but as a dynamic archive to be critically re-examined and reimagined.²⁵ He describes this process as an active “search for resources” within the classical tradition, pursued through the lens of contemporary sensibilities and concerns.

These observations highlight the dual orientation of post-*shanshui* art: a renewed engagement with classical modes of representation alongside a critical examination of the very conditions threatening the landscapes portrayed. The term “post-*shanshui*” signifies not simply a chronological succession after traditional landscape painting, but a methodological and thematic reinvention. In this contemporary idiom, mountains cease to be secluded spiritual retreat sites and become powerful symbols of ecological and social tension. Post-*shanshui* works are frequently visual indictments of pollution, consumerism, and humanity’s alienation from the natural world. This redefinition of landscape reflects broader concerns about environmental sustainability and cultural continuity. In his 2011 study “The Evolution of Chinese Contemporary Shanshui”, Yin Jinan examines how the rapid and often unregulated urbanization of Chinese metropolises has catalysed the emergence of post-*shanshui* as a new artistic paradigm. Here, the landscape is no longer a space for meditative contemplation but a terrain marked by rupture, crisis, and transformation. Rather than simply representing nature, post-*shanshui* artists foreground its destruction, articulating a visual language of warning and reflection.

A defining feature of post-*shanshui* art is its invocation of *guyi* 古意, often translated as “archaic meaning” or “the manner of the ancients.” This concept does not signify a nostalgic return to the past, but rather a critical engagement with tradition as a source of conceptual and aesthetic innovation. Artists draw upon the motifs, brushwork, and symbolic vocabulary of classical *shanshui hua* to create works that address contemporary realities. In this way, tradition serves as a dynamic framework for interrogating the present, rather than a style to be merely replicated.

This critical engagement is particularly evident in the photographic works of Wang Wusheng 汪芜生 (1945-2018) and Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁. Wang’s black-and-white images of Huangshan 黄山 evoke the misty atmospheres and tonal subtleties of Song dynasty painting, yet beneath their apparent timelessness lies a latent sense of fragility, as these natural wonders face increasing threats from tourism and environmental degradation. Huangshan has been a central motif in Chinese art for centuries, and Wang’s photographs function as both homage and elegy. Yang Yongliang extends this dialogue by merging digital media with traditional landscape aesthetics.²⁶ In works such as *Phantom Landscape* and *The Peach Blossom Colony*, Yang Yongliang constructs vast mountainous vistas from urban detritus—high-rises, smokestacks, highways, and electrical wires. This jarring juxtaposition of traditional landscape forms with symbols of industrialization critiques the environmental cost of China’s rapid development, forcing viewers to confront the dissonance between idealized nature

26 J. Yao, “The Expanded Aesthetic: Landscape and Contemporary Art in China,” in *Ershi shiji shanshuihua yanjiu wenji* (二十世纪山水画研究文集), ed. Huang Jian 黄剑 (Shanghai: Shanghai Shuhua Chubanshe, 2010), 358–59.

and polluted reality. The result is a composite image that resembles a traditional ink painting from afar but, upon closer inspection, reveals the dystopian undercurrents of modernization. This strategy of digital montage continues the legacy of artists like Long Chin-san, who assembled photographic fragments to create unified yet artificial landscapes.

Yao Lu 姚璐 similarly adopts the formal structure of *shanshui hua* to mount an environmental critique. His digitally altered photographs present idyllic mountain scenes that, upon closer viewing, are constructed from piles of garbage draped with green netting to mimic grassy slopes. The tension between beauty and decay in these works makes visible the costs of economic development. Mountains, once sites of cosmic balance and self-cultivation, become metaphors for degradation and loss.

In all of these examples, post-*shanshui* art functions as both a continuation and a rupture. It preserves the compositional strategies and philosophical concerns of classical *shanshui hua* while deploying them to critique the sociopolitical and ecological conditions of contemporary China. In doing so, post-*shanshui* not only reclaims the landscape tradition for the present but also reimagines its potential to articulate collective anxieties and aspirations.

Conclusions

Mountains in both traditional *shanshui hua* and post-*shanshui* art serve as profound symbols of the intricate relationship between humans, nature, and society. In traditional Chinese landscape painting, this relationship is rendered as harmonious, reflecting Confucian and Daoist ideals that emphasize alignment with the natural

order. Mountains symbolized cosmic equilibrium and humanity’s proper place within it, fostering a worldview in which society coexisted peacefully and respectfully with the environment.

However, in post-*shanshui* art, this equilibrium has been profoundly unsettled. Mountains are no longer depicted solely as serene and spiritual refuges; they have become powerful symbols of the tensions and contradictions of modern society. Central themes include environmental degradation, accelerated urbanization, and the deepening estrangement between human beings and the natural world. What was once a site of contemplation and harmony now expresses the fractures within the human–nature–society triad.

This transformation—from spiritual emblem to instrument of social critique—demonstrates how the function of art evolves in response to shifting cultural and societal values. While traditional *shanshui hua* presented an idealized vision of harmony, post-*shanshui* art confronts the complexities of the present, using the mountain as a lens to examine urgent environmental and sociopolitical issues.

Studying this evolution reveals how traditional visual symbols remain deeply resonant in contemporary discourse. The mountain endures as a potent and adaptable image—capable of expressing both timeless philosophical insights and pressing contemporary concerns. As China continues to face environmental and societal upheaval, the role of the mountain in art is likely to develop further, providing new perspectives on the evolving relationship between humanity and the natural world. Post-*shanshui* art preserves the visual idioms of classical landscape painting

25 Lü Peng, *A History of Chinese Contemporary Art: 1949 to the Present* (Milan: Charta, 2010), 249.



Yang Yongliang, *Phantom landscape*

while embedding them within frameworks of critique. It responds to the rapid transformations of China's urban landscapes by honoring tradition and simultaneously reinterpreting it to address modern tensions. In this context, mountains remain potent cultural icons, but now convey a heightened sense of warning and loss. Though the aesthetic vocabulary of traditional painting is retained, its message has shifted to underscore the growing discord between human society and the environment. Once a symbol of serenity and harmony, the mountain now evokes the dislocations wrought by industrialization and ecological

destruction.

The depiction of mountains in Chinese art has thus undergone a substantial shift—from emblems of spiritual ascent and cosmological unity to platforms for critical reflection on environmental decline and social rupture. This reimagining mirrors broader societal transitions, as modernization continues to destabilize the balance between human life and the natural world.

The post-*shanshui* movement's deliberate recovery of *guyi*—the archaic or “ancient idea”—as a foundation for creative innovation adds further layers to this artistic evolution. By reengaging historical motifs in light of contemporary con-

cerns, artists establish a dynamic dialogue between past and present, enriching the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of their work.

In post-*shanshui* art, the mountain largely relinquishes its role as a vessel of individual *xin* expression and becomes a privileged vehicle for political, ecological, and societal critique. This shift reflects a significant reorientation from inward reflection to outward engagement, foregrounding collective challenges over private introspection.

One may argue that what we observe in contemporary landscape art is not a break from tradition, but rather an intensification of a latent trajectory within it: a movement from a binary human-nature relation toward a triadic configuration that includes society as an indispensable third term.

While classical *shanshui hua* emphasized the spiritual harmony between the individual and the natural world, often as a mode of moral cultivation, post-*shanshui* practices expand this relational model to encompass the social. In doing so, they open the landscape genre to new semantic registers, addressing environmental injustice, urban displacement, and historical memory.

This broadened triad—human, nature, and society—reflects the entangled conditions of the Anthropocene, in which the separation between natural systems and human structures has become increasingly untenable. Rather than abandoning its philosophical roots, post-*shanshui* rearticulates them within a framework attuned to contemporary urgencies.

This study offers only a point of departure—a threshold from which to enter the rich, unfolding terrain of post-*shanshui* art. As China continues to navigate profound ecological and societal shifts, artists are reimagining the ancient legacy of *shanshui hua* in bold and unexpected ways. From this dialogue between past and present, new aesthetic visions will rise—visions attuned to the fractures and flows of the human-nature-society nexus, and charged with the power to both reflect and transform our collective future.



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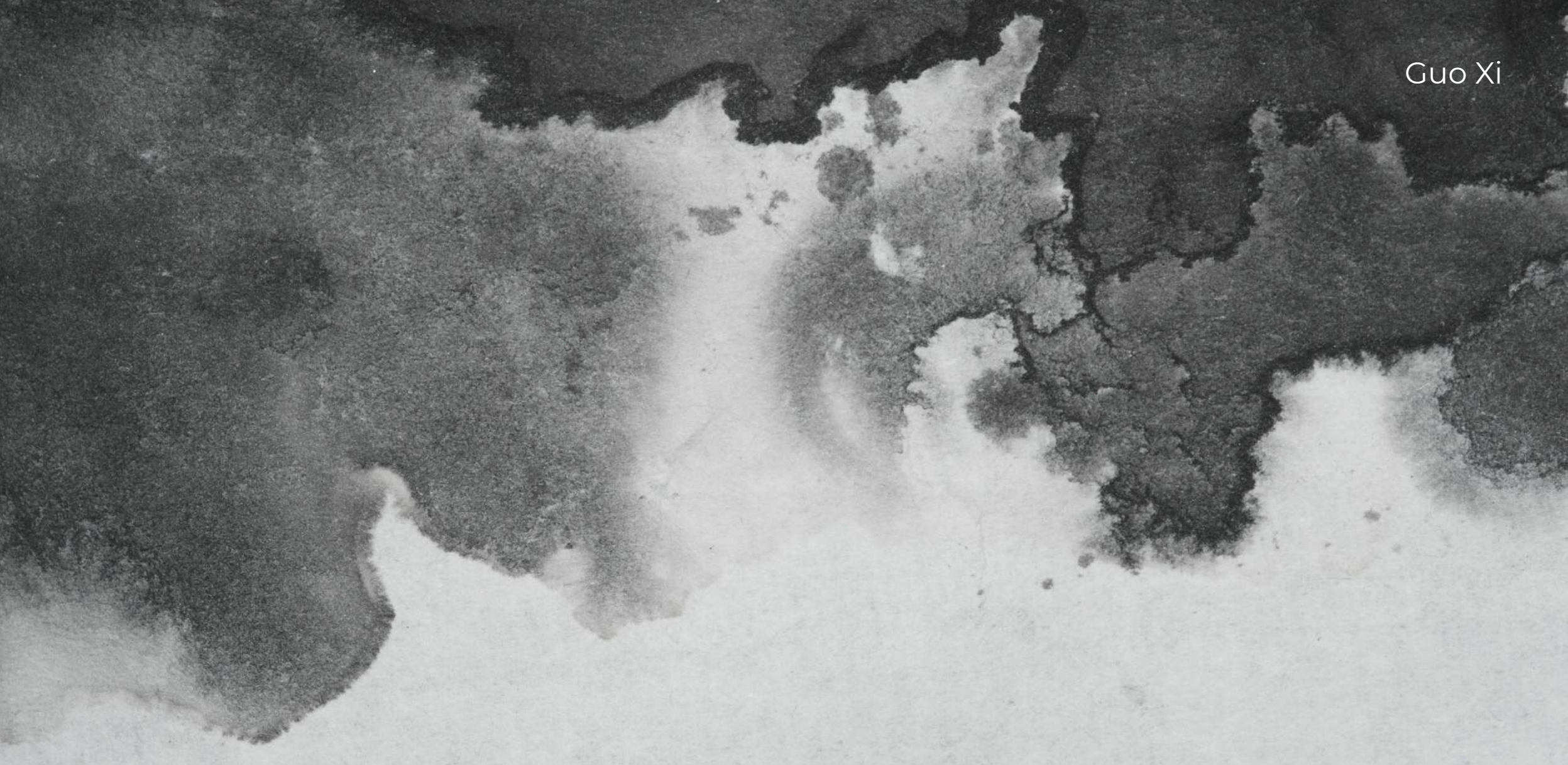
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"Waters are the veins and arteries of the mountain; plants and trees its hair; mists and clouds its vigor and character. The water gives life to the mountain, its outward beauty is bestowed by plants and trees, while its charm and elegance come from clouds and drifting fog. The mountain is the face of the waters; its pavilions and terraces are its eyes and brows; the fishermen its vitality. The source of the water's allure lies in the mountain, while the pavilions and terraces lend liveliness, and the fishermen a sense of warmth. This is the essence of mountains and waters."

Guo Xi



Mountain Perspectives in Europe with Reference to Hermann Hesse's Tales *In den Felsen* ("In the Rock") and *Der Geheimnisvolle Berg* ("The Mysterious Mountain")

By: Johannes Balve

The topography of landscapes has always been a subject of description in our understanding of the world. Human beings seek to comprehend their surroundings by ascribing meaning to the land, sea, and mountains. However, the way these elements are perceived is shaped by cultural contexts. In this essay, I will provide a European perspective on one of these landscape elements: mountains.

The Bible offers important inspiration in this regard. Key messages, such as the Ten Commandments, were received by Moses on Mount Sinai. Jesus' most significant sermon is named after the mountain from which he spoke to his disciples. In ancient Greece, Mount Olympus was the mountain of the gods, and the Titans attempted to storm it from other peaks.¹ Over fifteen hundred years later, Dante's *Divina Commedia* introduces the Mountain of Purgation, which sinners must ascend to reach heavenly paradise. Around the same period, another Italian, Petrarca, conceived mountain climbing as a metaphor for expanding intellectual perception in the quest for truth.

In the long history of Europe, the mountain has held many meanings. It has been more than just a natural object resisting human conquest—it has

also served as a mirror of culture, an element of mythology, and a subject of theological and romantic thought. Mountains have even had significance for philosophy, notably in the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger, which trace their roots to older traditions in Latin and Greek literature.

In this essay, however, I will focus on the mountain in literature using examples of Hermann Hesse that are particularly worthy of analysis, specifically two stories that explore mountain climbing.

First, a few remarks on Hesse himself and his role in the literary world. Born in 1877 in Calw, a town in southern Germany, he left for Switzerland in 1912, where he spent most of his life. He became a Swiss citizen and eventually settled in Montagnola, a village by Lake Lugano near the Italian border. Today Hesse, the Nobel laureate of 1946, is less present in the seminars of German academia than abroad.² While I worked as a professor for German at a Japanese university, I was surprised to find a different perspective. A Japanese colleague once explained to me that his gateway to German literature was through Hesse, whose work had always inspired him. Across the Pacific Ocean, Hesse became famous in the United States even earlier. By the late 1960s, he was

2 Gunnar Decker's biography of Hesse is not only an excellent introduction to the work and life of Hesse, it also examines the author's difficult relationship with Germany and the hostile attitude of German literary critics towards his work. Decker, G. Hesse. *Der Wanderer und sein Schatten. Biografie.* (2012) München

suddenly catapulted to global fame, almost overnight. The countercultural "hippy" generation saw him as a role model. The cult film *Easy Rider*, with its title song "Born to Be Wild" by the rock band Steppenwolf, even contributed to making Hesse's novel *Der Steppenwolf* (1927) a bestseller. Unfortunately, Hesse did not live to witness this late burst of fame, as he had passed away in 1962. Even if Hesse himself would likely have disdained the cultural frenzy surrounding him—he was a withdrawn, sensitive writer and a conservative, educated bourgeois—it remains worth asking why he became a cult figure for the hippy movement and an inspiration for an entire generation.

There was, of course, much misunderstanding, but also possible parallels to Hesse's earlier life. To understand this better, we need to look back at a youth movement that began at the turn of the 20th century. This movement centered on life reform and tackled issues that still resonate with young people today: natural healing methods, nutritional reform, a new awareness of the body, nudism, free dancing, esoteric theories, meditation practices, and, in general, alternative ways of living. A group of artists, intellectuals, doctors, and life reformers founded a community at Lake Maggiore in Switzerland—this place was called "Monte Verità," or the "Mountain of Truth."³ In 1907, Hermann Hesse briefly became a part of this community.

How could this be? Hesse was a successful, married writer with a country house, a wine cellar, a garden, a

3 A short intellectual history of the life reform movements at Monte Verità is given by Yme B. Kulper. Yme B. Kulper. *Tolstoyans on a Mountain: From New Practices of Asceticism to the Deconstruction of the Myths of Monte Verità.* Journal of Religion in Europe 6 (2013) p. 464-481 See also Noschis, K.: Monte verità, Ascona et le génie du lieu, PPUR, Lausanne, Coll. Le savoir suisse, 142 pp.

wife, and a son. Why did he join such a community? Monte Verità was a place that ignited the imagination, a destination for dropouts and refugees from civilization, for those weary of city life. It symbolized slowing down in contrast to the acceleration experienced in industrialized society. Hermann Hesse described his situation in this time as a severe crisis - physically but also internally. Yet Hesse's quest for personal, spiritual cleansing at this natural mountain sanatorium was at odds with the anarcho-communist principles of the community's founders. Conflicts soon arose also among the members, and Hesse chose to find his own path by wandering through the wild Swiss mountains surrounding the community.

In the mountains, he sought an intense encounter with nature. Clothing became more of a hindrance than a necessity for him. He practiced naked hiking and even allowed himself to be photographed while doing so. He slept outside, shunned all the comforts of civilization, lived ascetically, and pushed himself to his physical limits. These experiences are reflected in his story *In den Felsen*⁴ ("In the Rock"). It is a tale of life in a mountain hermitage, where questions about a new philosophy of life emerge. Does the ascent of the mountain offer a space for reflection? Does it lead to spiritual purification or self-knowledge? And does man succeed in integrating himself into the natural world, in reconciling the inner self with the external landscape?

The protagonist of the story seeks his 'hermitage' in the mountains, travelling naked, with his clothes in his backpack, wearing only a hat and sandals. Thorns scratch his skin, the sun burns him, yet he still sings hap-

4 Hermann Hesse. *In den Felsen. Notizen eines Naturmenschen.* Autobiographische Schriften I., Sämtliche Werke, Bd. 11 (2002). p. 314-322



Werner Friedli, *Certenango, Montagnola*, ETH Library Zurich, Image Archive / LBS_H1-012909

py songs, feeling the joy of the wild, beautiful landscape. Despite the continuous rain, he has nothing to eat, no books, only a pencil and a notebook, and lives in a wooden hut. Here, he feels that he is 'returning to the original life', and that 'dormant instincts' are awakening.

However, he soon reaches his limits. At one point, he loses his linen hat to the wind, runs after it through the brush and stones, gets lost, and feels feverish from the sun's heat. Back at the hut, he has no water, cannot sleep on the hard ground, eats his last piece of bread, searches for a stream to quench his thirst, and lies down in the sun, his skin completely burnt. In great pain, he returns to the hut, where he lies down, unsure whether he will sleep or die. The next day, he feels somewhat better and resists the temptation to descend to the fishing village for help. He endures hunger, but with sufficient water to drink, he digs himself into the earth near the stream 'to test the cooling and healing powers of the earth'. As his hunger increases, he feels clear-headed: „Ich sah meinen Zustand und meine Umgebung mit merkwürdiger, momentaner Überklarheit und mikroskopischer Deutlichkeit.“ (I saw my condition and my surroundings with strange, momentary clarity and microscopic clarity.) (p.318). At this point, the narrative reaches a turning point. „Schön ist es, nachts auf der Rast im Moos zu liegen und durch Gezweige die Sternbilder anzuschauen (...) bei leise strömendem Regen unterwegs zu sein und das weiche, linde Wasser zu fühlen, wie es von den Haaren und den Schultern über die erfrischte Haut hinabläuft.“ (It is wonderful to lie on the moss at night during a rest and look through the branches at the shining constellations (...) to be on the move in the soft, gentle rain and feel the soft,

gentle water running down from the hair and shoulders over the refreshed skin.) (p.321).

Gradually, the torture of hunger fades. In the coming weeks, he begins to feed on wild strawberries, occasionally descending to the village to buy nuts, though he feels increasingly like a stranger to civilization. Back in the mountains, the stream quenches his thirst, and his skin adjusts to the sun, turning dark brown. He feels like a deer in mountain clefts, slender, tough, nimble, and his senses became keener. He smells strawberries from afar, knows the winds, storms, cloud formations, and weather signs. Apart from his physical recovery, he experiences a renewal in his 'spiritual life': "Geduld, ein wenig mehr Bescheidenheit, das ist auch ein kleiner Fortschritt in der Wahrhaftigkeit, und die ist doch unsre oberste und wertvollste Tugend." (A little more patience, a little more humility—that, too, is a small step forward in truthfulness, and that is, after all, our highest and most valuable virtue.) (p.322).

In this story, which was influenced by his experiences at Monte Verità, Hesse seems to suggest that reconciliation with nature is possible. However, he concludes that this path does not lead to self-knowledge or spiritual liberation. Soon after, his experiment with Monte Verità comes to an end, and he returns to the bourgeois world.⁵

Despite this, Hesse continues to grapple with the relationship between man and nature. There is no better place for this encounter than the isolation of the mountains. Yet, unlike philosophers such as Nietzsche with

⁵ The connection between Hesse's literary activity and his experiences in the community of Monte Verità is examined in Martin Radermacher's essay *Hermann Hesse – Monte Verità -Wahrheitssuche abseits des Mainstreams zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Zeitschrift für junge Religionswissenschaft 6 / 2011

his *Zarathustra*⁶, Hesse is not using the mountain as a metaphor for enlightenment from a higher perspective. What fascinates him is the primal nature that confronts the human individual. A year later, in 1908, he wrote *Der Geheimnisvolle Berg*⁷ ("The Mysterious Mountain"). In this story, the theme shifts to the conquest of nature's last untamed corners—the mountains that have not yet been climbed.

The approach in this tale is entirely different. For the protagonist, mountaineering is about conquest. He is driven by a desire not only to conquer women but also unclimbed mountains. He could be viewed as the counterpart to the sensitive mountain hermit from *In den Felsen*. The problem, however, is that all the beautiful mountains have already been scaled and made accessible—turned into tourist destinations with infrastructure like cable cars and restaurants, making them part of the denatured human world.

Cesco Biondi, the protagonist of *Der Geheimnisvolle Berg*, earns his living by guiding tourists through these mountains, which have become commodified as vacation spots. His true passion, however, is for Monte Giallo (Yellow Mountain), an ugly, barely accessible peak that has been ignored by everyone else. Cesco develops an obsession with this mountain, and his greatest ambition is to reach its summit. The more he attempts the climb, the more familiar the mountain becomes to him, and a friendly relationship begins to develop between them. But over time, the inaccessible moun-

⁶ Sean Ireton explains in his essay the mountaineering in *Zarathustra* as an allegorical function. Sean Ireton. *Ich bin ein Wanderer und Bergsteiger* (in English). *Colloquia Germanica*, 2009, Vol.42, No.3, Mountains in the German Cultural Imagination (2009), pp. 193-212

⁷ Hermann Hesse. *Der geheimnisvolle Berg*. Die Märchen. Sämtliche Werke. Bd. 9 (2002), p.33-41

tain increasingly resists him, and Cesco's affection turns into hatred. His frustration grows after he falls and breaks his arm during one of his attempts. He makes several more attempts, the last one with a companion. A gust of wind catches him as he walks along a ledge, and just like in *Im Felsen*, the hat is blown away. He chases after it and falls into a canyon. As he lies dying in the canyon, Cesco experiences the sublime nature of the mountain. The mountain appears to him as an ancient being that has outlasted the history of mankind. "Er sah noch einmal denschartigen Bergrücken, sternenbeschieden in der kalten Nachtbläue stehen, er hörte noch einmal das vielstimmige Rauschen und Quirlen der unsichtbaren Wasser in den Schluchten, und während er seine Hände erstarren fühlte, verzog er das harte Gesicht zu einem kurzen, wilden und befriedigten Lächeln, das beinahe wie Schadenfreude aussah und doch nichts anderes bedeutete, als dass er das Geschehene begriff und billigte (...). Der Berg behielt ihn bei sich. Er konnte nicht gefunden werden" (p.40). (He saw the jagged mountain ridge bathed in starlight against the cold night sky one more time, heard the many-voiced rushing and swirling of the invisible water in the gorges one more time, and as his hands went numb, he twisted his hardened face into a brief, wild smile of satisfaction, almost schadenfreude, as if to say that he finally understood and accepted what had happened (...) The mountain kept him with it. He could not be found).

It is only in the moment of death that the story's protagonist learns the secret of the mountain and is reunited with nature. The mountain embraces him, taking him within itself. The message seems to be that union with nature is possible only in death; in life,

the individual faces growing alienation due to the exploitation of nature for human purposes. For Hesse, who also faced dangerous situations while hiking in the Alps, the mountains remained a symbol of the complex relationship between man and nature throughout his life.

Decades later, Hesse described the Alpine landscape from the Jura Mountains using an image first employed by Friedrich Hölderlin in his poem “der Wanderer”⁸ as a skeleton: “*das Rückgrat Europas, vor uns hingelegt wie das eines Riesenfisches*”⁹ (Europe's backbone in front of us, laid down similar to that of a giant fish), stretching for hundreds of miles across Europe, “*eine starre, klare, kalte, fremde, ja bittere und drohende Welt aus Fels und Eis (...). eine strenge, wehrhafte Barrikade durch die Mitte unserer Welt, ragte hart und messerscharf erstarrt wie ein hundert Meilen langer Lavazug, die Kette der Alpen in den kühlen Herbsthimmel.*” (a fortified barricade at the center of our world rose sharply and razor-sharp into the cool autumn sky, frozen like a hundred-mile-long lava flow.) “*Es war eine Art Grausen, die Empfindung eines mit Wonne gemischten Erschrecktwerdens und Frierens wie beim Empfang eines sehr kalten Wasserstrahls (...).*” (There was a kind of horror, the sensation of being frozen and frightened with delight, like being hit by a very cold jet of water (...)).

To summarize, the perspective that Hermann Hesse offers on the mountains is distinctly European, character-

ized by the tension and antagonism between the individual and nature. However, Hesse also explored other perspectives, particularly Eastern ones, in his numerous writings on Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. He became especially known for his novel *Siddhartha*, a book about the historical Buddha. *Siddhartha* represents an attempt to synthesize Eastern and Western thought, bringing together Buddha and Heraclitus. Hesse strove to build bridges between these traditions. This openness for non-European cultures might also have influenced the impact of his reception outside Europe. On the other hand it is not surprising that cultural influences shape reading preferences. Therefore international interest in and appreciation for German literature does not always align with that of Germany itself. Hermann Hesse serves as an illustrative example of this phenomenon.

“The smaller one comes to feel compared to the mountain, the nearer one comes to sharing in its greatness. I don't know why this is so.”

Arne Naess

8 Fernhin schlich das hagre Gebirg, wie ein wandelnd Gerippe, Hohl und einsam und kahl blickt' aus der Höhe sein Haupt. Friedrich Hölderlin: Sämtliche Werke. 6 Bände, Band 1, Stuttgart 1946, S. 211-214

9 Hermann Hesse. *Beschreibung einer Landschaft*. (1946) Betrachtungen und Berichte II, 1927-1961. Sämtliche Werke. (2002) Bd. 14, p.210-211

The Mountains of Sápmi: Art, Culture, and Perception in Sámi Homelands

By: John C. Ryan, Francis Joy, and Peter Armstrong

windy tundra

tundra winds

fragrances

a ptarmigan's flight

following the shape of the land

cloven hoofs click

life

the herd on the mountain slopes

-from Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's
*The Sun, My Father*¹

Introduction

In the above lines from Sámi poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, the mountain is a sacred and sentient subject existing among other expressive entities—tundra, wind, ptarmigan, reindeer, and river. Throughout his writing, the mountain is a prominent ancestral presence. Named from the Sámi terms *jiehkki* for “glacier” and *várri* for “mountain,” the Norwegian peak *Jiehkkevárri* “stands watching / *Eallenvárri* where avalanches rolled.”² For Sámi people, mountains are communicative beings endowed with consciousness. As threshold environments, they mediate the boundaries between the world of the living and *Sáivo*, the mythical world of underground beings such as *háldi* who protect certain places, animals, and people. Yet, at

the same time, mountains supply the material requirements of Sámi livelihoods including seasonal pastureland for reindeer herds. Figure 1 is an image of a *sieidi*, or sacred place, at Saltfjellet, a mountainous area in Norway that marks the cultural boundary between the southern and central parts of *Sápmi*, the Sámi homeland areas. Throughout *Sápmi*, there are *sieidis* in the form of unusually shaped rocks indicating where, in some areas, the Sámi people once performed sacrificial and offering rituals to *háldi* to help balance the natural order and ensure successful hunting and fishing.

Our objective in this article is to trace the recurrence of mountains as sacred landscapes in Sámi culture through a focus on the traditional drums of contemporary drum maker Peter Armstrong (a co-author of this article) and the poetry of writer Nils-



1

Aslak Valkeapää. In order to contextualize the significance of mountains in their creative work, we begin with an overview of Sámi people, *Sápmi* as their homeland, and *Sáivo* as the other world. The Sámi are the Indigenous people of Northern Europe whose ancestral lands of *Sápmi* traverse Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of north-west Russia. *Sáivo* is a spiritual realm located at the base of mountains and bottoms of deep lakes of regions located within the Arctic areas but also further south where there are no mountains but lakes and where there particular anthropomorphic rock formations which signify ceremonial sites, often located by water. Understanding the significance of the *Sáivo* world within Sámi cosmology is essential to appreciating the role of mountains as representations of gods and goddesses as well as ancestral cultural landscapes because they are often tied to Sámi family names, thus offering Sámi families and reindeer protection and good health. Following an elabo-

ration of Sámi people's relationship to *Sápmi* and *Sáivo*, our discussion shifts to an overview of pareidolia as the perception of the sacrosanct landforms of *Sápmi*. As a connective faculty, pareidolia reflects the patternicity—or pattern-thinking—structuring the work of Armstrong and Valkeapää. Pareidolia, we argue, engenders cosmological identification with more-than-human beings. Armstrong's drums feature mountains and their spirits among reindeer, crane, trees, *lavvus* (traditional dwellings), and *sieidis* (offering places). Mountains that can communicate vital information to the *noaidi* shaman are called *passe-ware* or “holy mountains.” Comparably, the poetry of Valkeapää narrates the sacred resonances of *Sápmi*'s peaks and fells. The poet-singer engages in dialogue with mountains as ancestral beings through his performance of the *yoik*, or traditional chant. In the conclusion, we suggest that the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous creative traditions such as drum making and *yoiking* are essential to the con-

1 Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, *The Sun, My Father*, trans. Ralph Salisbury, Lars Nordström, and Harald Gaski (DAT O.S., 1997), original edition, 1988, 80, italics in original.
2 Valkeapää, *The Sun*, 46.

servation of mountain ecologies and cultures in Northern Europe.

Sápmi and Sáivo: Mountains as Sacred Landscapes in Sámi Culture

The Sámi are the only Indigenous people of the European Union³ or, more precisely, of Fennoscandia, the geological region encompassing the mainland's of Norway, Sweden, Finland, Murmansk Oblast, the Karelian Republic, and northern Leningrad Oblast in Russia.⁴ Although demographic data varies, research estimates that the Sámi comprise between 80,000 and 100,000 individuals across central and northern Norway, central and northern Sweden, northern Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of north-western Russia.⁵ During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Sámi were known by the exonyms *Lapps* or *Laplanders*, applied by outsiders and regarded as pejorative today.⁶ The nine recognized Sámi languages spoken in these four countries are considered endangered due to the histories of assimilation that have impacted traditional knowledge

systems.⁷ Like their ancestors, many Sámi people pursue semi-nomadic reindeer herding, requiring deep experiential understanding of the fauna, flora, topography, waterbodies, and seasonal cycles of the land.⁸ During the migration of reindeer, Sámi families would traditionally construct temporary dwellings known as *goahtis* and *lavvus* from timber, fabric, and peat moss.⁹ In addition to animal husbandry, contemporary Sámi livelihoods involve hunting, fishing, gathering, craft-making, education, and tourism.¹⁰ Sámi religion, moreover, is a “pluralistic phenomenon” which today, is varying widely across the region and often integrating pre-Christian shamanistic beliefs with Lutheranism and other traditions.¹¹ Sámi polytheism acknowledges a variety of natural deities inhabiting mountains, rocks, lakes, trees, and animals.

As ethicist Anna Lydia Svalastog and historian Gunlög Fur observe, “Sámi 7 Hanna Helander, Pigga Keskitalo, and Tuija Turunen, “Saami Language Online Education Outside the Saami Homeland—New Pathways to Social Justice,” in *Finland's Famous Education System: Unvarnished Insights into Finnish Schooling*, eds. Martin Thrupp, Piia Seppänen, Jaakko Kauko, and Sonja Kosunen (Springer, 2023), 303–4.

8 Inger Marie Gaup Eira, Ellen Inga Turi, and Johan Mathis Turi, “Sámi Traditional Reindeer Herding Knowledge Throughout a Year: Herding Periods on Snow-Covered Ground,” in *Reindeer Husbandry Adaptation: Adaptation to the Changing Arctic*, eds. Svein Disch Mathiesen, Inger Marie Gaup Eira, Ellen Inga Turi, Anders Oskal, Mikhail Pogodaev, and Marina Tonkopeeva (Springer, 2023).

9 Mathis Persen Bongo and Inger Marie Gaup Eira, “Learning by Herding – Transmission of Sámi Reindeer Herding Knowledge and Skills,” in *Reindeer Husbandry Adaptation: Adaptation to the Changing Arctic*, eds. Svein Disch Mathiesen, Inger Marie Gaup Eira, Ellen Inga Turi, Anders Oskal, Mikhail Pogodaev, and Marina Tonkopeeva (Springer, 2023), 126.

10 Trude Fonneland and Tiina Äikäs, “Introduction: The Making of Sámi Religion in Contemporary Society,” in *Sámi Religion: Religious Identities, Practices and Dynamics*, eds. Trude Fonneland and Tiina Äikäs (MDPI, 2020), 2.

11 Fonneland and Äikäs, “Introduction.”



people are participants and agents in complex relations and have a part in both Fennoscandian and global histories.”¹² Understanding these “complex relations,” especially to mountain environments, requires appreciating the significance of *Sápmi* in the Sámi worldview. Traversing Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia’s Kola Peninsula, *Sápmi* (in northern languages) or *Saepmie* (in southern languages) refers to the ancestral homelands of the Sámi people.¹³ Figure 2 delineates the location of *Sápmi* across four nation-states and provides place names in the Northern Sámi language. The shaded area represents the current extent of *Sápmi* with its southern boundary demarcated by the cities and villages of Trondheim, Norway at the mouth of the River Nidelva; Östersund, Sweden; Kolari, Finland; and

Sosnovka, Russia on the White Sea. As Europe’s only Indigenous society, the Sámi occupied these areas until displacement and Christianization began to intensify in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the present era, Sámi mostly inhabit northern Fennoscandia except for people residing in Oslo, Stockholm, Helsinki, and other urban centers. In Sámi languages, the term *Sápmi* denotes “a region,” “a language,” and “a human.”¹⁴ As the “Land of the Sámi,” *Sápmi* supplies the range of resources required for material existence and spiritual well-being.¹⁵ *Sápmi* comprises diverse environments—from extensive coniferous forests and coastal areas near the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans to highland habitats characterized by fells and the Caledonian mountain ridge.¹⁶ According to North Sámi historian Veli-Pekka Lehtola, a “common thread for all Sámi groups is the adaptation of their way of life to the yearly cycle of nature and to the specific local natural en-

12 Anna Lydia Svalastog and Gunlög Fur, “Introduction,” in *Visions of Sápmi*, eds. Anna Lydia Svalastog and Gunlög Fur (Arthub Publisher, 2015), 11.

13 Hermanstrand, et al., “Theoretical,” 8; Siv Ellen Kraft, “Sámi Indigenous Spirituality: Religion and Nationbuilding in Norwegian Sápmi,” *Temenos* 45, no. 2 (2009): 179–206 [179], doi: 10.33356/temenos.7900.

14 Valkonen, et al., “Introduction,” 3.

15 Lehtola, *The Sámi*, 46, 88.

16 Lehtola, *The Sámi*, 88.

vironment.”¹⁷ As both a geographical and cultural designation, therefore, *Sápmi* figures prominently into the depictions of mountains in the work of drum maker Peter Armstrand and poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, featured in this article.

The Sámi people of Norway regard mountains as sacred because the entrances to *Sáivo*, “the underworld,” are located at their bases.¹⁸ Gods in human or animal-like forms are known to reside on mountains and by lakes and rivers as physical manifestations of *Sáivo* spirits. The spirits of Sámi culture reside in *Sáivo*, the other-than-human realm where deities, spirits, and deceased ancestors or *saivoolmak* provide guidance and wisdom to the *noaidi*, a term translated variously as “healer,” “shaman,”¹⁹ or “religious specialist.”²⁰ In contrast, the Sámi of Finland understand *Sáivo* as an upside-down underwater domain located beyond a small hole at the bottom of deep double-bottomed lakes.²¹ For Sámi cultures across *Sápmi*, the guardians of the *noaidi* take the form of snakes, fish, birds, reindeer, wolves, bears, and other spirit animals inhabiting *Sáivo*. Moreover, along with animal entities, the spirits of deceased *noaidi* dwell in *Sáivo* where they protect the reindeer herds of the living world. To be certain, the landscapes of *Sápmi* bear traces of ancestral activities in lakes, mountains, and *sieidi* or

ceremonial sites.²² As a case in point, Saana—or “Sána” in the Northern Sámi language—is a 1,029-metre-high fell in northern Finland near Kilpisjärvi Lake that is held sacred by Sámi people. For further illustration, there is also Tromsdalstinden, a 1,238-metre mountain near Tromsø, Norway that looms over the landscape with its commanding shape and height. Sacred mountains such as these are “dangerous” and thus demand “respect” and “distance” due to their otherworldly powers.²³ Closely connected to Sámi spirituality are the drum and the *yoik*, both essential to *noaidi* ceremonies and to the perception of mountains as sacred topographies.²⁴

Landscape Perception in Finland: Pareidolia as Pattern-Thinking

It is crucial to bear in mind that, in Finland, there are no mountains below the Arctic Circle. The country's highest peaks—Halti, Ridnitšohkka, Kiedditšohkka, and Kovddoskaisi—are located in the far north close to Norway. Found throughout Finland, however, are sacred rock formations known as *sieidi* in the Northern Sámi language and *seita* in Finnish. Some of these were perceived cosmologically as mountains by the distant ancestors of the Sámi. In the country's southern areas below the Arctic Circle, sacred places as such were perceived to contain faces, heads, mouths, eyes, ears, and other anthropomorphic shapes in stone formations manifest within them. In the form of paintings, Sámi ancestors created an enduring archive of human and animal interactions with spirit beings on these rock complexes. Prominent examples of these

22 Fonneland, *Contemporary*, 67.

23 Siv Ellen Kraft, “The Making of a Sacred Mountain: Meanings of Nature and Sacredness in Sápmi and Northern Norway,” *Religion* 40, no. 1 (2010): 53–61 [60], doi: 10.1016/j.religion.2009.08.011.

24 Kraft, “Sámi,” 188.

complexes include the Astuvansalmi paintings created circa 3,000–2,500 BCE on a conspicuous boulder along the shoreline of Lake Ylovesi in south-east Finland. The massive rock resembles the head of a slumbering god whereas its paintings feature images of men, women, moose, fish, foxes, bears, wolves, and boats.²⁵ The Astuvansalmi paintings present narratives of inter-species communication between people, animals, and spirits. A second example of such a formation comes from the prehistoric rock paintings at the head of the Verla rapids of the River Kymi in the south-east of the country.²⁶ The Verla paintings include “a small horned anthropomorph ‘riding’ an elk figure”²⁷ as well as depictions of a human figure and moose just above the waterline of the river. The stone itself is shaped like the head of a bear.

It is possible the prehistoric ancestors of the Sámi people regarded anthropomorphic boulders at Astuvansalmi, Verla, and elsewhere as sacred mountain microcosms suitable for rock paintings that would serve as mediums of interchange between the earthly and spiritual worlds. Historically, the Sámi ancestors associated boulder formations on southern rivers and lake shores cosmologically with the high peaks of *Sápmi*, as gods and spiritual beings in both human and animal forms, as well as fish and reptile forms, creating a spiritual and psychological terrain connecting land forms across time and space. Located in western Finland between the village of Äkäslompola and the Swed-

25 Antti Lahelma, *A Touch of Red: Archaeological and Ethnographic Approaches to Interpreting Finnish Rock Paintings* (The Finnish Antiquarian Society, 2008), 25–28.

26 Francis Joy, “Shamanism and Rock Art: The Dancing Figure and the Stone Face at Hossa, Northern Finland,” *Suomen Antropologi* 32, no. 1 (2007): 77–89.

27 Lahelma, *A Touch*, 56.

ish border, for instance, Pakasaivo is a sixty-metre-deep spring-fed lake with a name that invokes the *Sáivo* underworld. In addition to its sacrality, Pakasaivo is hydrologically unique in that its lower and upper water layers never intermix due to a thermocline, or transitional zone, at a depth of approximately 12.5 metres.²⁸ The water below the thermocline is low in oxygen but high in hydrogen sulfide; these chemical conditions have the ability to preserve objects sunken in the lake for millennia.²⁹ Located north-east of *Pakasaivo* in Pallas-Yllästunturi National Park is *Äkässäivo*, a “steep-walled ravine lake” featuring Seitapahta, an anthropomorphic stone head measuring ten metres wide and thirty metres high.³⁰ Well before Christianization began to intensify in the seventeenth century, Sámi people understood the lake and its distinctive rock formation as a powerful ceremonial site entreating respectful relations. According to the Finnish ethnographer Samuli Paulaharju writing in the 1920s, “not everyone dares to go behold [Äkässäivo]; at least not those who are faint of heart, for the ravine lake is overlooked by towering rocky walls.”³¹

In Sámi culture, human and creaturely forms perceived on boulders such as Seitapahta manifest cosmological landscapes gathering human and non-human beings of the past and present. These shapes apprehended in stone formations signify the existence of supernatural beings. Understood as the perception of sacred phenomena that manifest on rocks, stones, boulders, mountains and other ecological materialities, pareidolia mediates between the spiritual and

28 Metsähallitus, “Mysterious,” para. 1.

29 Ibid.

30 Metsähallitus, “Äkässäivo and Seitapahta,” accessed November 25, 2024, <https://www.nationalparks.fi/en-US/akassaivoandseitapahta>, para. 1.

31 qtd. Metsähallitus, “Mysterious,” para. 1.

17 Ibid.

18 Trude Fonneland, *Contemporary Shamanisms in Norway: Religion, Entrepreneurship, and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 29.

19 Konsta Ilari Kaikkonen, “From, Into, and Back: Translations of the Sámi Words *Noaidi* and *Noaidevuhta* in Context,” *Religion* 49, no. 4 (2019): 539–70, doi: 10.1080/0048721X.2018.1505673.

20 Fonneland, *Contemporary*, 9.

21 Metsähallitus, “Mysterious Saivo Lakes,” accessed November 25, 2024, <https://www.nationalparks.fi/en-US/akassaivoandseitapahta/mysterioussaivolakes>.

earthly worlds. In studies of environmental perception, pareidolia refers to the discernment of familiar and meaningful images in backgrounds or textures that activate one's curiosity, imagination and creativity.³² For neuroscientist Lorenzo Diana and colleagues, pareidolia is closely connected to creative cognition:

"When looking at backgrounds, textures (e.g. clouds, rocks, and walls), or simply at elements or objects in a particular spatial arrangement, we often perceive seemingly real patterns resembling, for example, faces, animals, body shapes, and so forth."³³

Pareidolia, moreover, is encompassed within a broader range of projective faculties known as *apophenia* or "patternicity."³⁴ Pattern-thinking entails the identification of meaningful patterns in the everyday world. Rather than illusory "sensory deception,"³⁵ pareidolia induces sympathetic identification with both natural and preternatural environments. According to philosopher Roy Brand, pareidolia is integral to spiritual experience as a "universal human phenomenon [evident in those] who attribute a will and consciousness to everything. Gods, humans, animals, the dead, plants, the weather, and often inanimate objects, are all seen as having an appe-

32 Lorenzo Diana, Michael Frei, Alvin Chesham, Denise de Jong, Kathrin Chiffi, Thomas Nyffeler, Claudio L. Bassetti, Nicole Goebel, Aleksandra Eberhard-Moscicka, René M Muri, Thalia Goldstein, and Oshin Vartanian, "A Divergent Approach to Pareidolias—Exploring Creativity in a Novel Way," *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 15, no. 2 (2021): 313–23, doi: 10.1037/aca0000293; Derek Hodgson, "Seeing Beyond Pareidolia: Implications for Palaeoart," *Rock Art Research* 40, no. 2 (2023): 159–185.

33 Lorenzo, et al., "A Divergent," 314.

34 Hodgson, "Seeing," 160.

35 Cornelia Kaufmann, Neelya Agalawatta, Tim Outhred, and Gin Malhi, "Phenomenal Insight: Pareidolia—I See?" *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 53, no. 1 (2019): 89–90 [89], doi: 10.1073/pnas.2401196121.

tite or will, a viewpoint, and cognitive abilities."³⁶ Through projection and communication, pareidolia bridges the lacustrine and montane, the human and more-than-human, and the ordinary and otherworldly. Nonetheless, we recognize the difficulty in drawing a comparison between the Western concept of pareidolia, the abodes of spiritual beings within *Sápmi*, and their possible manifestations within trees and rock formations. These interconnections deserve further research beyond the scope of this article. Yet, encountered throughout *Sápmi* and elsewhere—including across southern Finland—pareidolic resonances can be said to inspire art, crafts, poetry, song, and spiritual practices, as demonstrated by the drum making of Peter Armstrong and the poetry of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää.

The Mountains of Sápmi on Drums: The Work of Peter Armstrong

As an instrument of divination and "ecstatic excitation," the drum has been a vital part of Sámi culture for thousands of years.³⁷ The seventeenth century, however, marked the widespread confiscation and destruction of Sámi drums associated with the *noaidi* and sacred places.³⁸ Due to its integral role in *noaidi* rituals, the drum became the principal object of the missionary campaign to dispel animistic beliefs and convert Sámi

36 Roy Brand, "Pareidolia," accessed January 3, 2025, <https://www.parterreprojects.com/pareidolia-1>, para. 3.

37 Åke Hultkrantz, "The Drum in Shamanism: Some Reflections," in *The Saami Shaman Drum*, eds. Tore Ahlbäck and Jan Bergman (The Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 1991), 12.

38 Francis Joy and Peter Armstrong, "The Beliefs and Practices of Peter Armstrong, Sámi Drum Maker and Healer and the Expressions of Sámi Religion in a Contemporary Setting," *Shaman: Journal of the International Society for Shamanistic Research* 31, nos. 1–2 (2023): 61–88 [62].

people to Christianity.³⁹ During this turbulent period, nonetheless, the drum assumed a significant function as a symbol of Sámi resistance to cultural loss as well as a source graphically documenting the confrontation between Indigenous and Christian spiritualities.⁴⁰ The drum continues to serve as an expression of Sámi sovereignty and traditions, as evident in the work of Peter Armstrong, a Sámi shaman, healer, drum-maker, and handicraft instructor from Kiruna, Swedish Sápmi.⁴¹ According to Armstrong, "the Sámi have always held mountains as sacred because they host diverse life forms and communicate their powers to the Sámi shaman. Mountains perform this work energetically. Known to talk, mountains can be

heard if the listener is properly attuned to their voices. The shaman reads or interprets the mountain's

39 Kraft, "Sámi," 189.

40 Håkan Rydving, "The Saami Drums and the Religious Encounter in the 17th and 18th Centuries," in *The Saami Shaman Drum*, eds. Tore Ahlbäck and Jan Bergman (The Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 1991), 29.

41 Joy and Armstrong, "The Beliefs," 88.

energy as a means to gather crucial information."⁴²

In many Sámi languages, a mountain with the capacity to communicate to the shaman is known as *passe-ware* or "holy mountain." Such mountains have a supernatural power that resides within them and watches over the forests of the area. The shaman

also has his own personal sacred mountain with its unique expressions and healing pathways. At the same time, a mountain will communicate with reindeer and other animals about potential hazards in the environment. Figure 3 is a contemporary Sámi drum made by Peter Armstrong from pine wood and covered with reindeer skin. The top section features a Sámi shaman

holding a drum in a holy place or *passe-ware*. This is where he encounters the spirits. At the top right side of the drum is the shaman's helper in the form of a bird. At the top left side is the Sámi god of the wind, *Bieg-golmái*, who ensures that the mountain is kept clean and clear. Suspend-

42 Peter Armstrong, Email to Francis Joy, August 1, 2024.



ed above the mountain is a Sámi sun design. The middle and lower sections of the drum depict a reindeer, crane, trees, *lavvu* (traditional dwelling), and *sieidi* (offering place).⁴³

Figure 4 features an oval-shaped contemporary Sámi drum created by Armstrand from pinewood and a reindeer skin. The upper section of the drum

includes a Sámi sun, which is a motif drawn from a seventeenth-century drum. The sun is positioned at the centre of the Sámi cosmos. In addition, there is a bear on the holy mountain. In Sámi culture, bears are sacred animals, and so it is not uncommon to find one illustrated in the mountain landscape of a drum.

In the northern sky, the bear constellation plays a major role in the astral mythology of northern peoples. At the bottom of the drum are two mountain grouse. These birds hold a special status in Sámi culture as weather messengers. In the winter grouses are white but, in the summer, they turn brown. They are difficult to see on the

mountain in winter because of their colour. In the late autumn, when encountered by the roadside, the grouse herald that snow would soon arrive. In the late spring, when people are wondering if the winter has ended, if they notice a white grouse by the road, it means more snow is due. One could say the mountain is an interlocutor who informs the grouse and the birds, in turn, inform humans.⁴⁴

Figure 5 features a drum by Armstrand depicting a sun above the sacred mountains of *Sápmi*, which are covered in snow, as are the trees. A grouse with a white coat is also visible. The black and white designs of the drum signify both the light and dark aspects of existence. The winter in

Sápmi can last between six and seven months of the year. When the grouse is brown in the summer, it is very difficult to see because it is camouflaged in the land. The sun and mountains close to the sky are linked to astral mythology and the spirits of Sámi culture. When the sun sets behind the mountains, the skyline and horizon

become beautifully coloured in both warm and cold seasons.⁴⁵ In all three examples of Armstrand's contemporary drum-making practice, mountain landscapes are intimately connected to Sámi spirituality and *Sápmi* ecology. More than an inanimate landform or mere geological designation, the *passe-ware* is a living ancestral ecology connecting the *noaidi* to the world of spirits and deities in order to acquire information, heal suffering, and maintain good relations between beings. A similar perception of mountains as sacred topography is apparent in the poetry of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, the subject of the next section.

The Mountains of Sápmi in Words: The Song-Poetry of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää

Known as Áilu the Northern Sámi language and by the stage name Áillohaš, poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää was born into a reindeer-herding Sámi family in 1943 in Enontekiö, Finland and passed away in 2001 in Espoo, Finland. He lived in Finnish *Sápmi* until his father's death after which his family moved to Norwegian *Sápmi*.⁴⁶ Valkeapää was one of the most

prominent Sámi artists and activists of the twentieth century. In addition to his standing as a major Sámi poet, Valkeapää was a *yoiker* (traditional Sámi singer), musician, composer, performer, artist, photographer, painter, and cultural ambassador.⁴⁷ He released thirteen albums between 1968 and 1994, highlighting his prolific and wide-ranging creativity.⁴⁸ Valkeapää's

versatile innovations across multiple genres continue to contribute distinctly to the revitalization of Sámi culture, especially the *yoik* tradition, and the advancement of the Sámi rights movement.⁴⁹ The landscapes of *Sápmi*, including its peaks and fells, feature prominently in his varied body of work.⁵⁰ For instance, the cover design of Valkeapää's



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⁴⁷ Ibid.
⁴⁸ Discogs, "Nils-Aslak Valkeapää," accessed November 29, 2024, [https://www.](https://www.discogs.com/artist/791141-Nils-Aslak-Valkeap%C3%A4%C3%A4)

[discogs.com/artist/791141-Nils-Aslak-Valkeap%C3%A4%C3%A4](https://www.discogs.com/artist/791141-Nils-Aslak-Valkeap%C3%A4%C3%A4).
⁴⁹ Tuija Hautala-Hirvioja, "Traditional Sámi Culture and the Colonial Part as the Basis for Sámi Contemporary Art," in *Sámi Art and Aesthetics: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Svein Aamold, Elin Haugdal, and Ulla Angkjær-Jørgensen (Aarhus University Press, 2017), 101.
⁵⁰ Harald Gaski, "Nils-Aslak Valkeapää: Indigenous Voice and Multimedia Artist," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 4, no. 2 (2008): unpaginated, doi: 10.1177/117718010800400211.

⁴⁵ Ibid.
⁴⁶ Lehtola, *The Sámi*, 129.



album *The Magic of Sámi Yoik* (1998) depicts a vibrantly hued landscape evocative of autumn with an angular peak in the background, a rounded fell on the right side of the composition, and birch trees occupying the foreground (Figure 6).⁵¹ Valkeapää's painting conveys the "enchantment of the land" and the "'magic' of the yoik" experienced by the artist as his performance "animates the environment

51 Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, *The Magic of Sami Yoik* (Finlandia Records, 1998).

and brings forth to attention some of its possibilities, such as heightened presences, memories, or affects."⁵² The album *The Magic of Sámi Yoik*, among others, presents an example of the convergence of poetry, song, visual art, and the sacrality of Sápmi's mountains in Valkeapää's work.

Like Armstrand's drums, Valkeapää's poetry represents mountains as com-

52 Stéphane Aubinet, *Why Sámi Sing: Knowing Through Melodies in Northern Norway* (Routledge, 2023), 78, 79.

municative entities embedded within Sápmi's network of ancestral relations. In 1974, Valkeapää released his debut poetry book, *Gida ijat čuovgadat* (*Spring Nights So Bright*), and went on to publish nine collections over three decades, all in the Northern Sámi language.⁵³ Of note within his poetic oeuvre are *Ruoktu vaimmus* (*Trekways of the Wind*),⁵⁴ *Beaivi, áhčážan* (*The Sun, My Father*),⁵⁵ and his final collection, *Eanni, eannážan* (*The Earth, My Mother*).⁵⁶ The principal concerns of his writing range from Indigenous solidarity, Sámi cosmology, and Sápmi as the Sámi people's homeland to reindeer herding across the seasons, kinship with all beings, and the *yoik* as culturally vital. In navigating these and other biocultural themes, Valkeapää moves fluidly between creative genres, as Tuija Hautala-Hirvioja astutely remarks:

"A comprehensive approach to creation was typical of Valkeapää's art—he was a synaesthete. While painting, he heard drawings and pictures as music and words. When making music, he saw colours and heard words. And when writing, he heard music and saw colours in his mind."⁵⁷

Valkeapää's work threads visual and textual expressions into an integrated whole. Consequently, the design of his poetry, including the position of words on the page, is a crucial element of his composition. In its content and form, for example, *The Sun, My Father* expresses a Sámi conception of other-than-humans as sentient agents gifted with a language animated by

53 Hautala-Hirvioja, "Traditional," 101–2.

54 Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, *Trekways of the Wind*, trans. Ralph Salisbury, Lars Nordström, and Harald Gaski (DAT, 1994), original edition, 1985.

55 Valkeapää, *The Sun*.

56 Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, *The Earth, My Mother*, trans. Harald Gaski, Lars Nordström, and Ralph Salisbury (DAT, 2017), original edition, 2001.

57 Hautala-Hirvioja, "Traditional," 102.

the land including its alpine habitats. Valkeapää's verse thus inflects the cultural and ecological connections between pebbles, stones, lichen, moss, creek, wind, tundra, and other performative personae who "whispered / spoke / made a yoik."⁵⁸

The musicality of Valkeapää's poetry is central to the power of his work to evoke Sápmi's mountains as living presences. Integral to this context is the *yoik*, a Sámi singing practice regarded as one of the oldest continuous musical traditions in Europe. Comparable to the chanting practices of other cultures, the *yoik* is a vocal capacity received by the singer from the environment to bring forth the presence of subjects by mimicking their sounds, forms, and behaviours.⁵⁹ Although condemned as sinful during the seventeenth-century conversion of the Sámi to Christianity, this ancestral form of performance has come to symbolize the recuperation of Sámi cultural traditions.⁶⁰ Consequently, the *yoik* is a vehicle of social and ecological transformation. In *Trekways of the Wind*, the poet alludes to this singing tradition early in the collection:

"In evening the bluethroat sings
It is spring
In me
too something
melts teases out a smile
awakens a yoik."⁶¹

The bluethroat's song animates—"awakens"—a *yoik*, highlighting the imbrication between singing, performance, and non-human vocalization in the Sámi worldview. The *yoik* is a medium through which human and non-human voices intermingle to generate a shared utterance that includes the bird and the mountain, among others.

58 Valkeapää, *The Sun*, 39.

59 Aubinet, *Why*, xii–xiii.

60 Lehtola, *The Sámi*, 28, 108–11.

61 Valkeapää, *Trekways*, 39.

Comparably, Valkeapää's attunement to *Sápmi*'s articulations is evident in *Goase dušše* (*The Bird Symphony*).⁶² Although not a *yoik* per se, the one-hour arrangement of dripping water, croaking frogs, singing birds, crashing thunder, and other environmental sounds follows the progression of the seasons from spring to autumn, and from fells to coastlines.⁶³

Across his poetry collections, Valkeapää asserts the cultural significance of *Sápmi* as the Sámi homeland traversing the political boundaries constructed by nation-states. Representing *Sápmi*'s myriad voices, Valkeapää's writing conjures the polyvocality of sentient beings in dialogue. Through an alchemy of agencies, his lyrical texts become the language of *Sápmi* channelled by the poet-performer. Recognizing the land as kin, the opening verses of *Trekways of the Wind* offer a prayer-like greeting:

"Bures bures dear brother
how do you do dear sister
How nice to meet you again
see you
Your eyes shining."⁶⁴

The translation preserves the Sámi term *bures* for "hello." The poet addresses *Sápmi* as familial—as brother and sister—personified with "eyes shining." Rather than strange and ominous, the land offers refuge within its sensuous embrace. Often dedicated to a person, place, or animal, *yoiks* tend to incorporate a performer's ancestral relations, staging an individu-

alized means to know one's heritage vis-à-vis specific places:

"Our ancestors kept fires on Allaorda
on Stuorajeaggis' tufts
in Viiddesčearru
Grandfather drowned in the fjord
while fishing
Grandmother cut her shoe grass in
Šelgesrohtu
Father was born in Finjubákti in burn-
ing cold."⁶⁵

The preceding lines reveal the speaker's deeply interconnected knowledge of family and environment including *Sápmi*'s mountainous features. The toponym *Allaorda* refers to "high timberline," *Stuorajeaggis* denotes "the large marsh," *Viiddesčearru* means "wide mountain," *Šelgesrohtu* signifies "shining brush forest," and *Finjubákti* is translated as "the leaning cliff."⁶⁶

Valkeapää's language evokes the sensuality of *Sápmi*'s mountains, a landscape that might appear barren, harsh, and unwelcoming to an outsider. His work brings the musicality of the land to the fore, deepening the correlation between poetry and song. Throughout the section "Bluethroat, Twitter, Sing" of *Trekways of the Wind*, musical notation accompanies the poetry and drawings.⁶⁷ Within the synaesthetic symphony of the text, the modern world's waste, pollution, and poison contrast acutely to the pure springs of *Adjagorsa*, or "grandfather's gulch," and *Adjajohka*, or "grandfather's creek."⁶⁸ The sensuousness of *Sápmi* continues thematically in *The Sun, My Father* in which the sights, sounds, smells, and sensations of the mountains figure conspicuously:

62 Ibid., 216.
66 Ibid., 2.
67 Ibid., 118–94.
68 Ibid., 146–47.

"step by step
smell of green, the first grass
blue heather
Angelica
wood sorrel
upland waters
towards the sky

from peak to peak
these lands
the valleys
the high mountain slopes
over the forests
towards the
coast

meadows
reindeer calf moors
land where calves are born."⁶⁹

The poem expands spatially outward from grass, heather, and angelica to peaks, slopes, and valleys, then, finally, to the meadows "where calves are born." The poetic progression from the microscale to the macroscale to the moor underscores the significance of reindeer herding in Sámi cosmology. In this way, Valkeapää positions mountains within the sensuous ecology of *Sápmi*.

Conclusion

"on the mountain peaks
on high peaks
colorful adorned birds
singing like the bluethroat
deep down in mother's lap
silver veins of creeks
lakes glittering like stars."⁷⁰

The resilience and adaptability of Indigenous creative traditions such as drum making and song-poetry are crucial to the preservation of mountain ecologies and cultures in Northern Europe. In *Sápmi*, mountains are connected to local livelihoods such

69 Valkeapää, *The Sun*, 42, italics in original.
70 Ibid., Verse 539.

as fishing, reindeer herding, berry and mushroom picking, and practices intertwined with folklore and local traditions. The above excerpt from Valkeapää's work is an example of an Indigenous poetic ecology in which language interweaves with the materiality of land. The *yoik* is the language of *Sápmi* rendered sensory. Accordingly, the binaries of nature and culture, human and non-human, vocalization and silence, blur and dissolve. Valkeapää's poetry and Armstrong's drum making demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous creative traditions in response to the present-day precarities of the Anthropocene including, in the case of *Sápmi*, land clearance, wind turbine construction, broad-scale mining, and seasonal dislocation from climate change. Moreover, although the term pareidolia refers to an array of phenomena that have human and animal-like characteristics, it is necessary to take into consideration possible connections to the mythologies associated with local traditions of, in this case, the Sámi people. Different spiritual beings exist both above and below the ground in northern and Arctic environments, so it is necessary to consider whether faces and forms perceived in natural environments are representative of powers from within their domains and, as a consequence, have influenced certain manifestations. When taking this into account we see how these forms might indeed be connected to local identities, powers, and sacred landscapes, inspiring songs, art, poetry, drum-making, and other creative expressions in an era of acute ecological change. In this way, appreciating the visionary legacies of Armstrong and Valkeapää are more important than ever.

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Johannes Rach & Odvardt Helmoldt von Lode, *Ceremonial Drum from Meråker*, 1767



The great image has no shape "大象無形"

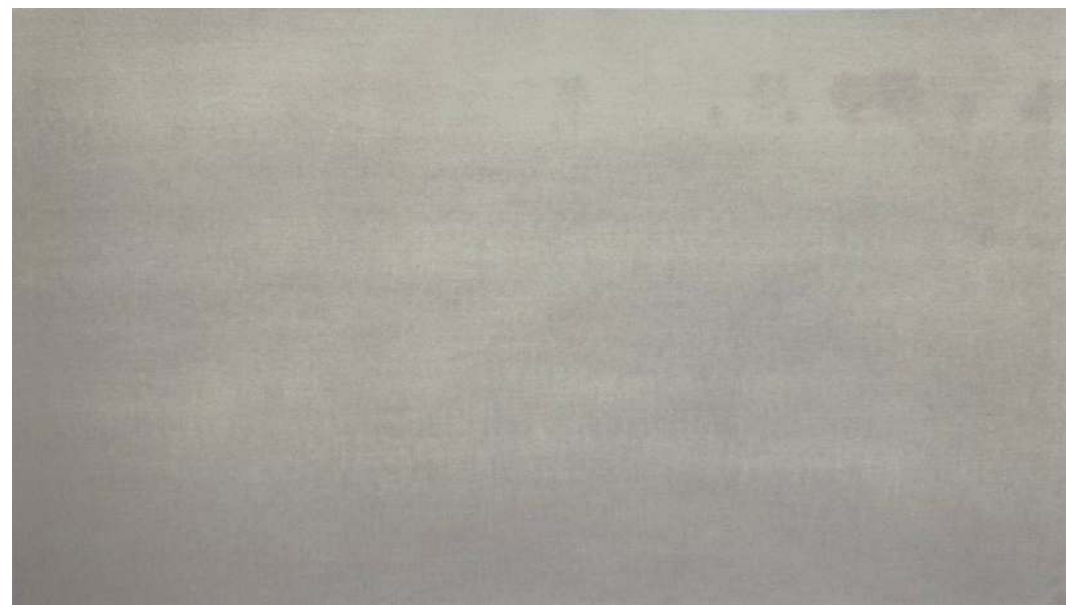
A look at China. Qiu Shihua's contemporary landscape painting

By: Dagmar Dotting

This article¹ is divided into two parts. The first section introduces the principle of Tao² using *Daode jing* and discusses the background. The second part tries to transfer these principles to the pictoriality in Chinese mountain-water painting.³

I.

Contrary to what might be expected from a philosophical treatise, I would like to start my lecture with a contemplative silence and invite you, without further commentary, to dive into the pictorial worlds of the contemporary Chinese artist Qui Shihua.⁴ This is the picture for which I would now like to initiate you for a two-minute intensive encounter:



Qiu Shihua, *Untitled*, Oil on canvas, 110 x 193 cm, 2001

The title of my lecture refers fragmentarily to chapter (in consequence as §) 41 of the well-known *Daode jing* 道德經 by Laozi. This book is a collection of life wisdoms and is regarded as the cornerstone of the Taoist teaching, which is divid-

¹ This article was realised at the Faculty of Humanities (FHS) of Charles University, Prague in the context of the research project *Life and Environment: Phenomenological Relations between Subjectivity and the Natural World* (Grantová agentura ČR, č. 401/15-10832S).

² The arrangement of personal names is used as is customary in the respective cultures. This means that when Chinese or Japanese personal names are mentioned, the family name is in the first place. Quotations from German sources have been translated by the author and are always reproduced in the original source citation. For the term "sense" for Tao translated by Wilhelm, the author retains the term "Tao" as in the original. The transcription from Chinese corresponds to the Pinyin transcription.

³ The Chinese meaning of the so-called mountain-water painting (chin. *shān-shuǐ-huà* 山水畫) is based on the ancient Chinese idea of the origin of the world. The mountain, as a male principle and the water as a female principle, are interdependent in the creation of all things. The philosophy of the world in eternal change already lies within itself. This kind of painting, developed in the 2nd century CE, has changed up to the present only in its forms of expression, but not in its principles.

⁴ Qiu Shihua, born 1940 in Sichuan/China, lives and works today in Beijing and Shenzhen/China.

ed into two parts: The first deals with meaning (the Tao 道) and the second with life (De 德)⁵, with both parts intertwined. The origin of this collection is not clearly dated, but it is classified in "the time of the warring empires" (5th - 3rd century BC). According to Chinese tradition, Laozi is said to have lived during the time of the Spring and Autumn Annals in the 6th century BC. This period was marked by unrest and wars in China and was the heyday of Chinese philosophy,⁶ as many scholars thought about how peace and stability could be achieved again. There is also no certainty about whether the person Laozi actually existed, or whether the text is rather a collection of writings by various persons. Whether the "official" Li Er, (with the scholarly name Be Yang (Count Sun), later Lao Dan (old teacher), and then given the honorary name Laozi), really existed, is therefore strongly doubted today.

Since our view today would like to focus on the spiritual in China, we take a closer look at § 41, which can be found in the second part of *Daode jing*, and others:

上士聞道

"Higher people hear of the Tao

勤而行之

They diligently practice it

中士聞道

Average people hear of the Tao

⁵ Both terms can be translated in many ways. *Tao* 道: path, flow, principle and meaning; *De* 德: power, life and charisma, virtue, goodness.

Since the following quotations are taken from the German translation by Richard Wilhelm, the slightly Christian aftertaste is inherent in this translation. Therefore no translation is taken over here for Tao. Tao is translated in the German version by Wilhelm with sense. Laotse, Taodeking, Übers. von Richard Wilhelm, dtv. Beck, München, 5. Aufl., 2010. For the American publication the translation by Derek Lin' is used with the Chinese original and the German translation of Wilhelm in the source. <https://taoism.net/tao/tao-te-ching-online-translation/>

⁶ Confucius (551 - 479 BC), Zhuangzi (365 - 290 BC), Mengzi (372 - 289 BC)

若存若

They sometimes keep it and sometimes lose it

下士聞道

Lower people hear of the Tao

大笑之

They laugh loudly at it

不笑不足以為道

If they do not laugh, it would not be the Tao

故建言有之

Therefore a proverb has the following:

明道若昧

The clear Tao appears unclear

進道若退

The advancing Tao appears to retreat

夷道若類

The smooth Tao appears uneven

上德若谷

High virtue appears like a valley

大白若辱

Great integrity appears like disgrace

廣德若不足

Encompassing virtue appears insufficient

建德若偷

Building virtue appears inactive

質真若渝

True substance appears inconstant

大方無隅

The great square has no corners

大器晚成

The great vessel is late in completion

大音希聲

The great music is imperceptible in sound

大象無形

The great image has no form

道隱無名

The Tao is hidden and nameless

夫唯道

Yet it is only the Tao

善貸且成

That excels in giving and completing everything."⁷

⁷ <https://taoism.net/tao/tao-te-ching-online->

What does this mean?

Chinese mountain-water painting is closely related to the idea of the Taoist world origin. The world emerges from the mutual conditionality of the bipolar principles of yin (female) and yang (male), which form an immanent closed spiritual system.⁸ In it, the Tao is always based on a movement of constant change. From its being, it accommodates the visible in the invisible and the hidden is always in correspondence with the unhidden. This correspondence behaves like indeterminacy in transition. The Tao is flowing and at the same time moves all things. The path of the Tao arises from this change. In the beginning, there are always the factors of Yin and Yang; through their change, the path - the Tao - arises. The Tao is therefore also to be understood as an "inner", as a hidden thing – the source of all phenomena whose reason is groundless. It is that which is enveloped in figurative absence and is therefore present.

“道隱無名

The Tao is hidden and nameless.”⁹

So it says in the above mentioned § 41. and in § 1, which decisively defines the concept of the whole book, the Tao, which is interpreted as unpronounceable:

§ 1 道可道 非常道

The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao

名可名 非常名

translation/; Laotse, *Taoteking. Das Buch vom Sinn und Leben*, Übers. aus dem Chinesischen v. Richard Wilhelm, dtv C. H. Beck, München, 5. Aufl., 2010, § 41, S. 53.

8 A widespread symbol of the principle is the *Taijitu* , in which the white Yang (light, hard, hot, male, active, movement) and the black Yin (dark, soft, cold, female, passive, calm) are represented opposite each other. The signs are also found in the *Yijing* ("Book of Changes"), which is dated to the time of the Western Zhou Dynasty (about 1045-770 BC).

9 Ibid.; cf. Laotse, § 41, p. 53.

The name that can be named is not the eternal name

無名天地之始

The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth

有名萬物之母

The named is the mother of myriad things

故常無欲 以觀其妙

Thus, constantly without desire, one observes its essence

常有欲 以觀其徼

Constantly with desire, one observes its manifestations

此兩者 同出而異名

These two emerge together but differ in name

同謂之玄

The unity is said to be the mystery

玄之又玄 眾妙之門

Mystery of mysteries, the door to all wonders.”¹⁰

In Laozi's opening formula, the Tao is unnamed and is the source from which the forms, both the ideal (Greek *eidos*) and the creative forms, are in their essence constantly brought forth. The metaphor of flowing and the infinite source of creative power is also used in § 4:

“道沖而用之或不盈

The Tao is empty; when utilized, it is not filled up”¹¹

“Due to the version of the Tao, the "way", the Chinese Taoists (to me) seem to be the ones, among all religious and philosophers, who least insinuate or construct for the purpose of asserting an overall context of the phenomenon of life. (...) The formulas of the Laozi assign to beings and things an origin that neither appeals to faith nor counts on the persuasive power of a deduction, nor is based on the special background of a (mythical)

10 Ibid.; cf. Laotse, § 1, p. 9.

11 Ibid.; cf. Laotse, § 4, p. 12.

history or a cosmology.”¹² This is how the French sinologist François Jullien describes it.

Since the Tao does not hold on, it cannot be constituted. It is not a settlement and makes no systemic beginning. Since it has nothing absolute, it has no existential being, because with that it would lose its definition of being, which eludes any specification. Therefore the non-being contains at the same time the being which shows itself in another form (§ 1). Thus, the indeterminacy in the determinacy emerges here, i.e. the "there is" (chin. 有 *yôu*) and the "there is not" (chin. 無 *wu*) at the same time. This source ground always remains undifferentiated, diffused and changeable. A brief look at the etymology of the fourfold root of the Chinese sign for Being follows:

The reasoning that logic is not based on Being as existence but on Existence is shown in the fourfold root of the Chinese sign for Being. Referring to the Chinese root of the sign for Being, the following meanings arise:

shì 是 being (sein)

cún 存 being (sein)

zài 在 be located (sich befinden)

yôu 有 have/own (haben / besitzen)

Each aspect contains different nuances in the concept of existence. The *yôu* 有, as having, is to be spatially classified.

What does this mean for painting?

Everything that 'there is' (有 *yôu*) has its beginning in 'there is not' or non-existence (無 *wu*) as § 1 says.

§ 40 天下萬物生於有

“The myriad things of the world are born of being

12 Jullien, François, *Das große Bild hat keine Form*, trans. from French into German Markus Sedlaczek, Fink Verlag, München, 2005, p. 37.

有生於無

Being is born of non-being.”¹³

Jullien continues: "The more Chinese painting will detach itself from the representational function in the course of its development, the more it will approach and explicate this striving: If the painter achieves a work of "wisdom" by painting mountain peaks appearing and disappearing in the mist, or tree tops that appear and disappear, or a path running in and out, it is because he paints things less than objects placed in front, stretched out in their presence, but because he grasps them according to the logic of immanence, which reproduces them appearing-disappearing, and how in his stroke he encompasses the whole process - the "way", the Tao - that allows them to exist.”¹⁴

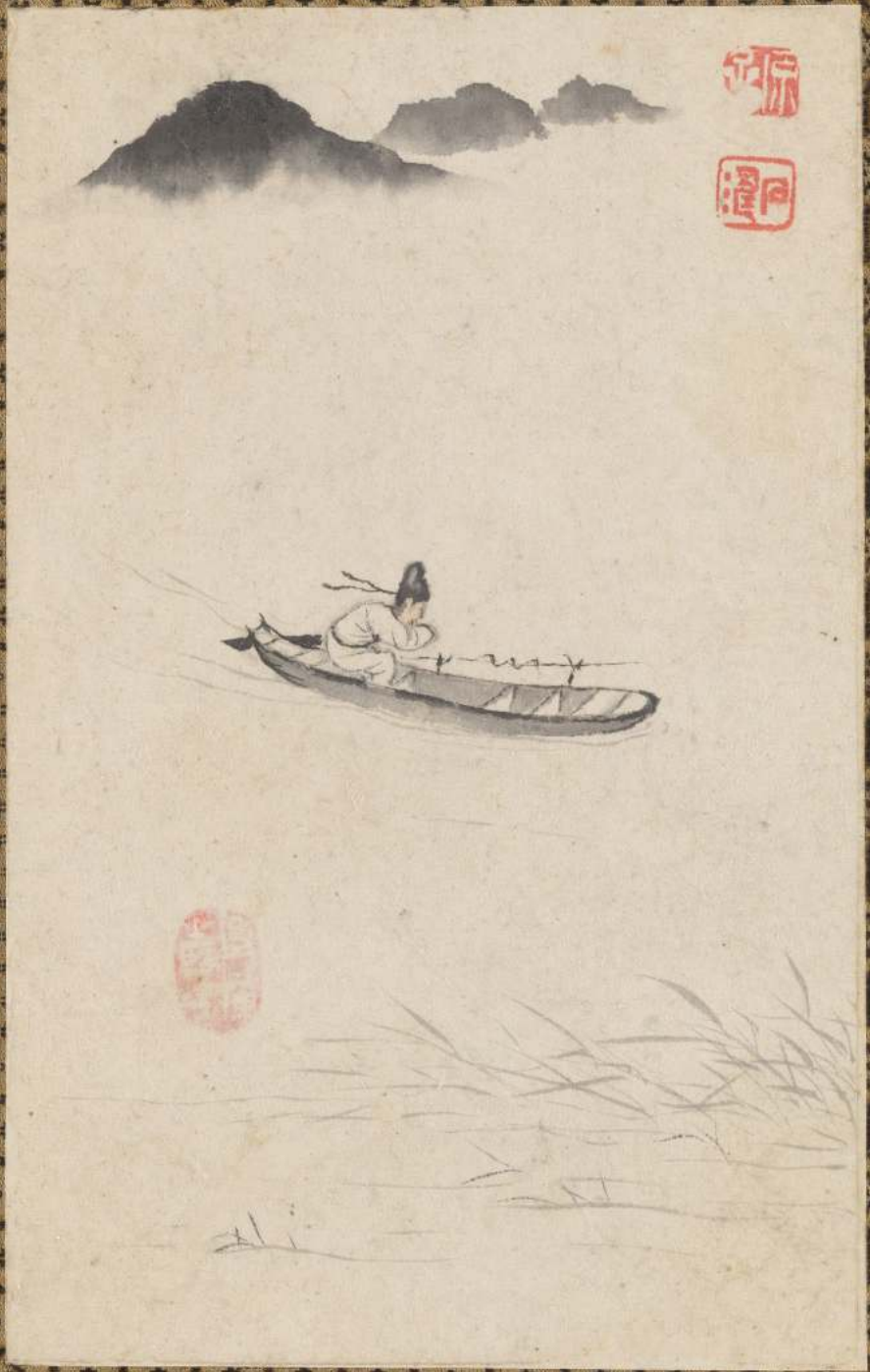
Clearly this 'there is' (有 *yôu*) and at the same time 'there is not' or not-being (無 *wu*) is found in the emptiness of the mountain-water painting of the Chinese Song (Song 960 - 1279) - and Yuan time (Yuan 1279 -1368). Thus it is not only the free space in the picture which carries this emptiness, but in the present with which mountains and water are brought into the picture. They connect the visible and the invisible world by the *qi* (breath of life), which becomes noticeable within this correspondence of mountain and water. In the work of the Zen monk Yu Jian (13th century) *Mountain village in clearing mist*¹⁵ this correspondence reaches a degree of abstraction that reminds one of Western modernity.

The transformation and thus the course of *qi* is very clear in the work of Shitao (1642-1707), *Boats on the Yangtze*, in the mutual transformation of

13 Jullien, op. cit., p. 38.

14 Jullien, op. cit., p. 38 - 39.

15 See p. 63. Editor's Note.



潦倒清湘客因尋故舊過
 買山無力住就枕宿奉寧
 放眼江天外餘心付小亭扁舟
 偕子顧而且不算丁
 白多江柳留別
 林下人
 停書之過
 登舟極目

water as mist to mountain.

"Shitao (...) explains the one brush-stroke as "the origin of all that is given, the root of ten thousand apparitions. Its use is manifested in the spirit, it is hidden in man".(...). "16

A contemporary example is the Chinese artist Li Xi, who refers to Qiu in her work and thus combines classical Chinese art with contemporary art. "In her work, the choice of motifs, composition and painting technique bear witness to a profound engagement with Chinese culture, Taoism and the Buddhist religion. In her play of forms, she transfers the principle of being present and absent by transforming the lines in her ink painting like an abstract play of forms into scenic impressions. In doing so, she does not consciously control the flow of the line - the highest primacy of Chinese pictorial art - during the painting process in order to create a concrete form, but leaves it to the form itself to from the line flowing towards it. With this view, she takes up the principle of traditional mountain-water painting: the focus is on the expression of the image from within the artist and not on the realistic depiction of nature.

Thus, the seemingly abstract forms of the painting *Bardo-Mind Landscape* are transformed in the imagination of the viewer, first vaguely, then more and more clearly, into trees, clouds, waves or bizarre rock formations. The artist paints her own mind map in a state of meditative contemplation, in the state of a "soul landscape" which describes the intermediate state of

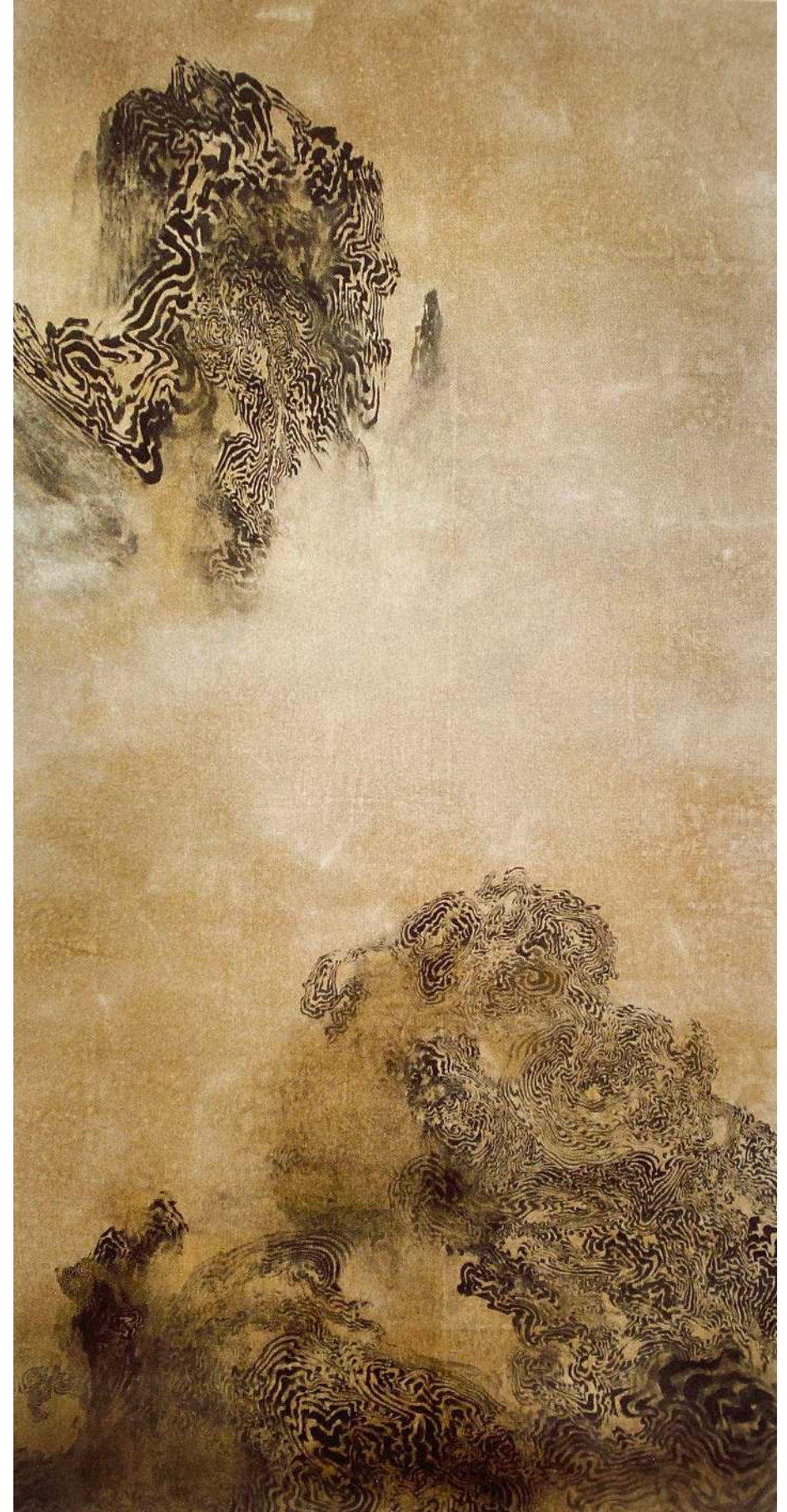
a *bardo*.¹⁷ According to the tradition of the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, a person experiences various states of consciousness during his life, as well as before and during reincarnation; these experiences are stored in the subconscious. Li Xi elevates this metaphysical development of the mind to the subject of the picture and at the same time carries it out practically in the process of finding the picture by letting the forms - or, as Shitao puts it (...) - "that which lies beyond the outer edges of the world", flow from her own *bardo*.¹⁸

The circular non-being-being in it holds an immanent structure of the world, which is clouded with a naturalness, a world of continuity and dynamics as well as spontaneity. It makes no sense to ask where the water ends, where the mountain begins. The emptiness of the seemingly unpainted surface is the space in between, which is representative of what is hidden in the world, of "the dynamic

¹⁷ Bardo: In some schools of Buddhism, bardo (Tibetan བར་དོ་ Wylie: *bar do*) or *antarabhāva* (Sanskrit) is an intermediate, transitional, or liminal state between death and rebirth. It is a concept which arose soon after the Buddha's passing, with a number of earlier Buddhist groups accepting the existence of such an intermediate state, while other schools rejected it. In Tibetan Buddhism, *bardo* is the central theme of the *Bardo Thodol* (literally Liberation Through Hearing During the Intermediate State), the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.(...) Some of the earliest references we have to the "intermediate existence" are to be found in the Sarvāstivādin text the *Mahāvibhāṣa* (阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論). For instance, the *Mahāvibhāṣa* indicates a "basic existence" (本有), an "intermediate existence" (中有), a "birth existence" (生有) and "death existence" (死有) (CBETA, T27, no. 1545, p. 959, etc.). Here quoted after: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bardo>, 23.05.2018, 08.58 MEZ; El. The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Awakening Upon Dying. 2013. by Padmasambhava (Author), Chögyal Namkhai Norbu (Commentary), Karma Lingpa (Author), Elio Guarisco (Translator). Shang Shung Publications & North Atlantic Books.

¹⁸ Lenz, Katja in: Fischer, Peter (Hrsg.), *Shanshui. Poesie ohne Worte? Landschaft in der chinesischen Gegenwartskunst*, Kunstmuseum Luzern, Ostfildern, 2011, p. 132.

¹⁶ Qiu Shitao, *Aufgezeichnete Worte des Mönches Bittermelone zur Malerei*, translated from Chinese into German and commented by Marc Nürnberger, Mainz, 2009, p. 9; here quoted after: Fischer, Peter (Hrsg.), *Shanshui. Poesie ohne Worte? Landschaft in der chinesischen Gegenwartskunst*, Kunstmuseum Luzern, Hantje Cantz & Kunstmuseum Luzern, Ostfildern, 2011, p. 132.



Li Xi, *Bardo-Mind Landscape*, Mixed media on canvas, 320 x170 cm, 2009

law of reality".¹⁹

The emptiness is to be understood as the place where change takes place and from this empty space the possibility arises that its fullness only becomes apparent. In emptiness lies the possibility for people that through emptiness their hearts become a mirror of themselves and their world. In "contemplative action"²⁰, it is precisely by contemplating the emptiness in the heart²¹ - the original emptiness that man carries within himself and from which he draws the water as the source of all forms of manifestation - that it is sensitized. In rhythm with space and time, the law of transformation takes place in the world as a reflection of the heart.

Existence is, as the word itself says, emergence (lat. *ex-sistere*), an emergence from the undifferentiated source ground. But it is not the Tao itself that exists; it only exists in an as-if state. Here being refers to the root *cún* 存. As an example, Jullien trans-

19 Cheng, François, *Fülle und Leere. Die Sprache der chinesischen Malerei*, Merve, Berlin, 2004, p. 54.

20 Nishida, Kitarō, "Selbstidentität und Kontinuität der Welt", Übers. E. Weinmayr, in: Ohashi, Ryōsuke (ed.), *Die Philosophie der Kyōto-Schule*, Texte und Einführung, Verlag Alber, 2. Ed., Freiburg im Breisgau 2011, p. 87 – 88.

21 The term 'heart' here refers to the meaning in early Chan Buddhism, which later developed as Zen Buddhism in Japan. The heart as the spirit of the heart (心 chin. *xín*, 心 jap. *shin*) is to be provided here in connection with the spirit of the heart that acts like a 'world logo'. The heart mind contains all knowledge and so every little heart is connected to the big heart mind. The potential of the great Spirit of Heart is invested in every little Spirit of Heart. In this tradition, the process of knowledge is located in the heart mind and not in the consciousness process in the brain as in Western ideas. Spirit of the Heart does not mean the heart as an organ, but as a place of knowledge.

The emptying of the heart means to detach the heart mind from imaginary images, as part of the eightfold path (great vehicle), which is the basis in all Buddhist schools.

lates it in § 41 with "Sunken! As if it might exist."²² The Tao thus does not behave as present in the form of a category of being; it not only retains a concealedness, but it is also linked to contingency in time. It is-there and is at the same time also not-there. Temporality is the aspect of the *cún* 存 in being. Thus it brings indeterminacy to the expression and within the mountain-water painting it can be recognized as a non-substantial 'in-between'.²³

Out of this indeterminacy meaning is formed and the essence of things emerges from it. That is why the formless form corresponds to that of an archetype. Or, as it is called in § 35, of an *imago mundi* (a large archetype), which already contains all forms, but which cannot itself be brought into a designed form, because otherwise it loses the claim of the 'great image'.

"There is a reality that comes up blurry and fused...
Born of heaven and earth,
Silent! Abysmal!"

(Laozi, § 25)²⁴

"Thus the formless precedes that which has form not only as a starting point or origin, but is its operating, generated basis from which that which has form continuously emerges. While that which has form is easy to imitate, the formlessness of the basis is difficult to grasp. But how is such a thing to be understood whose form cannot be observed, but whose

22 Trans. from Jullien in: Jullien, François, *Das große Bild hat keine Form*, trans. from origin French into German by Markus Sedlaczek, Fink Verlag, München, 2005, p. 48.

23 This 'in-between' is not a spatial or temporal interspace, but a topoi, a referencing place-holder on the basis of which "something" can only become substantially apparent. Example: The shadow needs the light but also a space in which the shadow can show itself. The shadow already contains the image, but is not the image itself.

24 Jullien, op. cit., p. 58.

connection can be seen? Or, to put it another way, what is the nature of this formless form on which the painted form is based but does not paint it?"²⁵

Just this can be experienced well in the pictures of Qui Shihua. At first sight, this appears to us as a simple white surface. If the gaze lingers longer on these pictures, small shades and vaguely indistinct areas appear, which then develop into landscapes. Qui's pictures need time to unfold completely and can therefore be seen again and again. It is precisely the moment of the undifferentiated - the blurred - that gives this painting its quality and corresponds exactly to what the Daoist principle means. It is the emergence of the indeterminate that immerses the viewer in an atmosphere of the intangible. Let us look at the painting one last time²⁶.

II.

Qui Shihua's paintings were first shown in Germany in the exhibition *WeiBes Feld* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Hamburger Bahnhof/ Berlin 2012. In his interview on the exhibition *WeiBes Feld*, he comments on his paintings exhibited there as follows:

"There is no East and no West. No past, present or future.

It is all about the viewer. What the viewer sees in the painting is also in the painting.

The mythical is not perceptible, we only see the ordinary, but the mythical is in the ordinary.

Trust perception not words.

...confuse terms, perception is the essential."²⁷

25 Jullien, op. cit., p. 37.

26 See next page, Editor's note.

27 <http://www.art-in-berlin.de/incbmelvideo.php?id=2415>.

Pictures are the expression of the specifically inner logic of recognizing cultures. They embody their own reality of the world. But how can we read works of art from China and Japan, which are influenced by Taoism and Chan/Zen, with a Western view? Do they open up to us at all with our visual convention or is it rather unnecessary to have another level of 'translation'?

Qiu's white landscape painting not only embodies a refusal of reliable visibility, but also sets in motion transitional processes that enable us to remain suspended in threshold states. They require the viewer to pause in order to unfold in his diffuse and milky imagery. Only after longer contemplation do worlds of images open up which reflexively suggest their own pictorial realities, only to dissolve again into their materiality when approaching the canvas more closely. The picture as seen does not hold on to the materiality of the canvas; the colours - as places - give the pictures a reason to open up.

Once again mountain-water painting (chin. *shān-shuǐ-huà* 山水画)

Qiu bases this kind of silent painting on his cultural heritage of mountain-water painting. From the 5th century onwards, however, this type of painting differs from European landscape painting, which was only recognized as a separate category from the 17th century. The special appreciation of mountain-water painting in China indeed testifies to the different understanding of landscape within the terminological difference to Western landscape painting. Whereas in European pictorial semantics, landscape is a perspective representation of a moment of view of a world in whose opposite its perceptual worlds unfold, Chinese mountain-water painting is

based on the spirit of a special way of relating to the world.²⁸ It should be noted that mountain-water painting was originally seen in the form of scroll paintings and thus unrolled piece by piece in the horizontal. Thus, only parts of the whole could be recognized and in the temporality of the unrolling, the picture already had a narrative component.

"'Mountain-water' symbolizes dualities that span the world and the infinite exchanges that result from them."²⁹

Likewise, their approach to unrolling makes it subject to a time limit. The picture offers no point of capture or fixed position, either inside or outside the picture. Rather, the extensive landscape is changed by the manual unrolling of it, in that it can be experienced through a visual empathy. There is something narrative inherent in the picture. Qiu expressed this in his initial quotation. The scroll painting invites the viewer to wander through the landscape, to linger and pause at 'places',³⁰ in order to let the entirety have an effect on him, as is the case in a narrative. A "living in the picture" as a settling in, however, is denied him. This term, coined by the Chinese painter and painting theorist Guo Xi (郭熙 1023 - ca. 1085) in his work *Exalted Mood to Forest and Spring* {published posthumously by his son Guo Si (郭思)} has since then stimulated the discourse on the relationship between picture and viewer.³¹

"'Dwelling in the picture' consequently presupposes a way of seeing that opens itself decisively to the unfolding of multi-faceted pictorial experiences, rather than registering and exploring

28. Jullien, op. cit., p. 150, 151.

29 Ibid.

30 These 'places' also behave like the 'in between', see footnote 23.

31 El. Obert, *Welt als Bild*, p. 347 – 359; Jullien, op. cit., p. 174 -188.

every detail individually."³² This means the corporeality through which the image is integrated is in the act of creation as a mood, i.e. to grasp its inner meaning, the heart spirit (chin. 心 *xīn*) as a state of mind and as the origin of all action.³³

"The mind is from the outset in an active relation to places in an environment and to life situations in which it is involved as a result of the corporeality of being human"³⁴

Thus, the mountain-water landscape picture demands from the viewer a view of the mood of the real world and not just an art-understanding, iconological view.

The picture does not represent; it refers to the mood of the self and its reality as a world, and thus stands out from mere signs that are denied. The viewer finds what is really real in the picture by staying in the 'place' of this world - momentarily mirrored in his own self. In the landscape picture, there is at no time a fixed picture within the picture.

"In it, a much broader view comes to light at this point, namely that the in being is inherent in this environment, which is determined by situation and orthography. In the picture, it is precisely a living, in Guo Xi's case a living in the mountains, that has to be made possible, which is as being in the picture up to a physical entering into this world. The observer should be able to choose with his whole person his stay at this place and in this environment."³⁵

An externally subjective view of the world cannot be embodied in it -

32 von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Between presence and absence. Qiu Shihua's landscape painting*, p.16.

33 Obert, op. cit., p. 347.

34 Ibid.

35 Obert, op. cit., p. 345.

rather, a subjective panoramic image unfolds over this world. The subject moves in an immanence of the image that forms his existence, his being in. A location in the wholeness of the picture is therefore no longer bound to temporality, as already indicated in Qiu's opening quotation.

The world as such is precisely a pure counterpart in which man could disappear. The world is precisely dependent on an orthodox and temporal unfolding "in" the individual existence.³⁶ The action is also integrated into this. The act and the mood of the painter, who is himself immersed in the landscape, is inwardly united with it and immerses himself in its mood. Only in the mode of his self-forgetfulness is it possible for him to embody this world visually. The leitmotif here is the Taoist state of non-action (*wú-wéi* 無為), and other moods such as *zìrán* 自然 (of-self-so) and *lǐ* 理 (paths of reality) are also worth mentioning, but will not be discussed further here.

Not only do the sinologists Obert and Jullien point in this direction, but these thought movements are also found within the newer phenomenological research.

Hans Rainer Sepp also integrates living existence as the physical embodiment of the human being in a There into his thinking. The body as a mediating place stands as the first boundary of a place of existence, as the first spatiality (exteriority) in the There to experience the world. Being-There is being at the border to our person. The person (lat. *persōna*, the mask) is the image (of lat. imagination) of our self. In the *persona* (mask), the person sets up in his mask - between his self and the world of the imagination. "This imagination (lat. image, imagination) is his living space *oikos* which is constituted by means of language and symbols."³⁷

36 Ibid.

37 El. Sepp, *Die Utopie des Bildes*, p. 27.

Thus, the painter must also be prepared neither to depict simple real landscapes nor mere inner states of mind, but to allow a pictorial world to emerge within himself.

On the canvas there is no visualization of fixed forms (Greek *eidos*), but the phenomena of transformation, whereby the form cannot be separated from the process of its appearance. In the process of emergence and seeing the work of mountain-water-painting- [...] - a relaxed and concentrated attitude is required, which allows a coexistential engagement with the sensual, perceptible world. [...] "Images of the world" permeate our thinking,"³⁸ says Obert, referring to Martin Heidegger's famous quotation:

"The world has always been in some way a picture of itself, a proving "world view".³⁹

François Jullien speaks here of a particular disposition of the viewer:

"Dis-possibility means that the inner disposition towards each new "so" as it "blooms by itself" (*ziran*), remains open and fluid."⁴⁰

Thus we do not enter an objective world, but through our subjective existence, the world becomes aesthetically experienceable and real. Only then do we see it, as was shown in the example of Qiu's picture. Only after the eye has been in the picture for a required period of time does its landscape (mental attitude) become apparent, which again behaves coexistently with the observer.

Seeing is thus to be seen as an opening to the outside. The process of seeing resembles a partial absence of one's own state of mind, or as Maurice

38 Obert, op.cit., p. 39 – 40.

39 Heidegger, *Zeit des Weltbildes*, p. 86, in Obert, op.cit. 40.

40 Jullien, op.cit., p. 195.

Merleau-Ponty describes it:

"Seeing is neither a particular mode of thought nor a self-presence; it is a means of being absent from myself, of witnessing from within the split of being through which I alone become myself."⁴¹

Being - Not-being: Visible - Non-visible: Place

Influences of the Chinese and Japanese arts were transported back to Europe via the New York School in the post-1945 period. This way of seeing/hearing now influenced artists in non-imaging painting in Europe and stimulated a new reflection on seeing and the formation of reality. The focus was on the possibilities within the limitation of materiality, especially the effect of colour,⁴² in its own interrelation and in the context of space, as well as the interactive relationship between image and viewer. The work *Abstract Painting #20* by Ad Reinhard is shown here as an example. I would like to confront Reinhard with Qiu in order to show the differential attitude despite the external similarity in the legibility of these pictures.

Reinhard, influenced by Zen Buddhism, addresses the interrelationship between the visible and the invisible in his paintings as well as in his art historical writings, and shows a clear proximity to Merleau Ponty's thinking.

"Both break away from a dualism that has long been binding for Western thinking and no longer understand visibility and invisibility as diametrically opposed. From a rational dualistic point of view, the visible belongs in the world of the tangible. [...] Mer-

leau-Ponty breaks away from this when he is interested in 'the invisible of this world, that which inhabits this world, supports it, makes it visible'⁴³

At first glance, this image also appears as a monochrome black surface, similar to Qiu's image, which is a whitish translucent surface. In their working process, both artists apply colour pigments to the canvas in layers, which, in the case of Qiu, are created by superimposing several layers of white glaze, and in Reinhard's case, by mixing colour pigments of the primary colours into black, in a slow, continuous process of becoming these pictures. Both artists work systematically over long periods of time on these series, which are marked by constant practical repetition and a slight differentiation of the formulation possibilities within the self-imposed framework of action. Of own work, Reinhard claims:

"Vision in art is not vision.
The visible in art is visible.
The invisible in art is invisible.
The invisibility of art is visible."⁴⁴

Seeing is involved in the processes of constant overlooking and not seeing. Thus, the picture behaves as a place (*topos*) where the phenomenon of pointing in a sense is presented in a new way in variable forms. If we approach the painting a little closer, the picture will disappear and our seeing suddenly perceives all the more the structures of the canvas and the application of paint.

Jean-Luc Nancy calls this place the 'ground of the image':

"The ground for the images is the

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, *Das Sichtbare und das Unsichtbare*, p. 198

⁴⁴ Barbra Rose (ed.) *Art -as-Art. The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhard*, (New York, Viking Press, 1975) Berkley and Los Angeles, University of California Press 1991, p. 67; here quoted after Berswordt-Wallrabe, p. 24.

Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting # 20*, oil on canvas, 127 x 50,8 cm, 1956

power of the image - it is also non-place. [...] The reason for the images is the power of the image - it is also non-place."⁴⁵

"The image is separated in two simultaneous ways when it acts as a detachment and at the same time release. In the detachment, the image distances itself from the ground and allows it to occur."⁴⁶

"The image phenomenon introduces itself, silently enters the border of the world of things and yet is not itself a thing. It preserves the distinctive and remains on the edge of the world of things as a world of disposition."⁴⁷

In relation to the image of Qiu, this pictoriality, which builds up slowly for a time and then disappears at the same moment, can be experienced as an ontology of being and not-being within the image situation. According to Hans Rainer Sepp, the picture functions as a place of ideas in the sense of a threefold utopia:

1. "it suggests as an un-place in the between self and world
2. on the floor of the un-place of an imagination of real reference
3. with the still outstanding and in this sense utopian goal of gaining stability, to transform it into a stable place."⁴⁸

This is especially true for the visual experience of the *White-Fields* of Qiu.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Nancy, *Am Grund der Bilder*, p. 20.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴⁸ Sepp, *Die Utopie des Bildes*, p. 29.

⁴⁹ El. further Jullien, p.40,41, p. 50,51, p. 63, pp. 66,67.

The constant change of the forms draws new world views again and again. In it, Qui Shihua's pictures behave as described in *Daode jing* § 41: "the big picture has no ultimate form". New forms open up to the viewer again and again, provided that he has the necessary time to stay, which these pictures initially demand of him.

If the language of space and spatiality is within Western painting, this means that the creation of a spatial illusion in the picture is to be understood. The viewer is thus assigned a perspective for viewing, which is usually outside the picture. This state of affairs is particularly well understood in the landscape painting of Joseph Anton Koch (1768 - 1839) or Claude Lorrain (1600-1682), both of whom emphasise the aspect of sublimity according to Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant.⁵⁰

At this point, I would like to take up Robert Rauschenberg's White Paintings in order to emphasize the different statement regarding the spatiality of Qui's work. Rauschenberg's prominent series White Painting negates any inner-pictorial difference and thus marks images of a zero-denotation.⁵¹ This confrontation with the mere factuality of a monochrome, unframed, square white surface does not offer the viewer's eye any length

of stay. Rather, attention is paid to the surrounding space by consciously including light, the reflection of color, the "volume of the exhibition space" and the respective light and shadow conditions in the field of perception through the composition of the picture.

"Since it thereby becomes clear that the painting we are examining is subject to the very same influences as we are, the situation existing at any given moment in time assumes particular importance as the point where many different influences converge."⁵²

While Rauschenberg refers to a transcendental environment, we experience an inner-pictorial spatio-temporal illusion in Qiu's *White Fields*. Both spaces, however, elude visual and conceptual expression by creating a diffused atmosphere that presses on our self. In James Turrell's light installations, these spaces can be experienced in a very extreme way, in which the physical boundaries of space are removed and the physical body is initiated into an experience of placelessness, a state of suspension by being completely thrown back on sensual perception.

Conclusion

In the juxtaposition of the listed paintings by Qiu, Reinhard and Rauschenberg, Odo Marquard's⁵³ question is finally raised in the room:

"How much of a picture may one eliminate without its ceasing to be a picture?"⁵⁴

50 El. Burke, Edmund, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* (Philosophische Untersuchung über den Ursprung unserer Ideen vom Erhabenen und Schönen), 1757; and: Kant, Immanuel, *Criticism of judgment* (Kritik der Urteilskraft), 1790.

51 This concept goes back to Nelson Goodman, cf.: Goodman, Nelson, *Sprachen der Kunst*, p. 31. Charles William Morris already presupposed this 'zero denotation' in his theory of signs: "Since a rule of use says what a sign can denote, but since the sign does not have to be used in such a way that it denotes, there can be signs that denote nothing, signs that have zero denotations" Morris, C. W., *Grundlagen der Zeichentheorie, Ästhetik der Zeichentheorie*, translated by Roland Posner with the collaboration of Jochen Rehbein, Frankfurt/Main, Fischer Verlag, 1988, p. 47.

52 Von Berswordt-Wallrabe, op.cit., p. 28.

53 German Philosopher, born 1928 Stupsk, Poland, died 2015 in Celle.

54 Odo Marquard, Hans Blumenberg. *Entlastung vom Absoluten*, „Du“, no. 11/1991, p.25; Quoted after von Berswordt-Wallrabe, op. cit., p.34.

Qiu's positioning in his increasing omission of colour and form contains a negation of pictoriality and yet, precisely for this reason, highlights the spaces in which the visibility of the picture as a place can be experienced in a differentiated way.

A "living in the picture" is consciously denied to the viewer, in order not to allow him or her to be in the world with the reliability of his or her own seeing and thus to be set up in the world. Indeterminacy takes the place of material factuality in order to effectively show meaning in the process of perception. In contrast to a mimetic visual language, the East Asian arts are based on emptiness in order to find the whole "world" in it.

In Qiu's examination of landscape, a localization of the world is essentially revealed, which already has its basis in the contemplating self. A constant dialectical world rising and falling results in connections that diagnose a crisis-like relationship to the lived environment. Qiu's pictures suggest imaginary spaces that do not offer the viewer a place of refuge or recreation (*oikos*), but rather shake him by excluding stability within the world reference. They are a bland, visible-non-visible, immanent structure of coexistences.

Ad Reinhard and Rauschenberg, on the other hand, fall back on Western visual conventions by reducing formal imagery to a minimum and thus offering what is externally effective within the situation as experience. They are representatives of an "aesthetics of absence"⁵⁵ and react to the stimulus

55 El. Waldenfels, *Spiegel, Spur und Blick. Zur Genese des Bildes*, p.14, here quoted after von Berswordt-Wallrabe, p. 39. Paul Virilio and Peter Weibel describe this process of dematerialisation as an 'era of absence', which produces an aesthetic based on the *absum*, in its meaning of distance and spatial distance, as well as lack, loss and dematerialisation. Media art takes up the experiences of the first artistic signs in

satiation and increasing rationalisation. However, if Qiu's pictures remain an inexhaustible source of temporary illusions, Reinhard and Rauschenberg only achieve their effect via the context to the imaginary surrounding space.

The foggy, diffuse, insipid blurriness in Qiu's paintings can be read as an essential quality of these.

"As Plato describes in his *Politeia* (510a), there are not only images in the world, but there is a world of images that is located on the threshold of dreams and waking, of day and night, in the twilight of the "nocturnal day" (521c), which Plato's spreading enlightenment, those *lumières* of reason, persistently resists. Images mean that it will never be all day."⁵⁶

If pictures silently oppose a clear conceptual logic and offer a pure rational alienation, this is largely true of Qiu Shihua's painting. He thus presents a challenge to encounter seeing in a new way in an intercultural scientific discourse.

The reduction of the warning to visibility was taken up in the Western art world, particularly from the 1960s onwards, through its influence from Asia. If this emptiness is offered as a place, it is precisely by its refusal to be pictorially represented that it harbours a potential that forces the viewer into a new role.

which an aesthetic of absence is discernible - especially since 1945 (Fontana, Manzoni, Klein, Cage and others already mentioned) - as well as the tendency to dematerialise the artistic object and other strategies of immateriality that dominate both art and theory in the 1960s and 1970s (as Frank Popper analyzes in 1975 in his book "Le déclin de l'objet", which also points to the process of dematerialisation and dissolution of the art object). If we look at the changes driven by technology, these experiences become even more apparent.

56 Ibid., p. 14, quoted after von Berswordt-Wallrabe, p. 36.



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<http://de.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/810290/die-abwesenheit-der-abwesenheit-eine-reise-in-qiu-shihuas>

<https://taoism.net/tao/tao-te-ching-online-translation/>

The World of the Mountains

By: René Böll

For me, experiencing nature is always a wonder and I rediscover its richness every day. I try to live and work as a *pictor doctus* similar to the *wen ren* in China. I use sketches as an inspiration not as an display an exact place. For me colour is material and immaterial at the same time, it eludes precise definition, it is so wonderfully ambiguous - it belongs to the physical world without really being material.

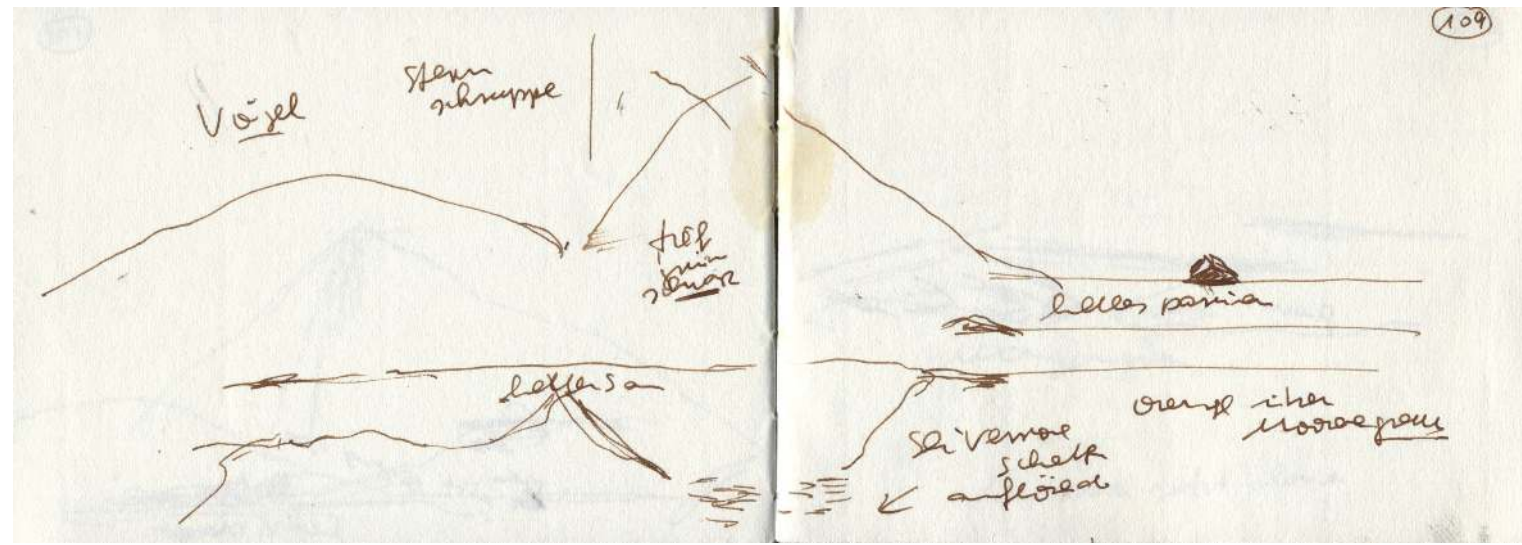
When I travel, I draw studies of nature in small sketchbooks, but these serve more to engage intensively with the landscape than to use it as a model. They serve to absorb the landscape, to experience and feel it, to become part of the landscape. For me, the connection between water and mountains is particularly inspiring. I find this connection particularly in Ireland, but also on the Galápagos Islands.

The first mountain in my life I saw in my life, I was 6 years old, – I am a typical resident of the lowland – was this mountain on Achill Island, the Slievemore this is Irish and means great mountain.

A small mountain lake on Achill Island has become my favored place and I have spent many hours and nights there in solitude and seclusion. I visited the lake in sunshine, rain, storm and dense fog. For me it has the same importance as the Monte Victoire for Paul Cezanne, I paint it several times.

Keem Bay on Achill Island famous through Instagram and the Film *The Banshees of Inisherin* a spoiled place in summer time – as Hans Magnus Enzensberger wrote: The tourist destroys what he is looking for by finding it. (Picture 03)

Slievemore,
Achill Island



*Small mountain
lake,*
Achill Island





Keem Bay,
Achill Island



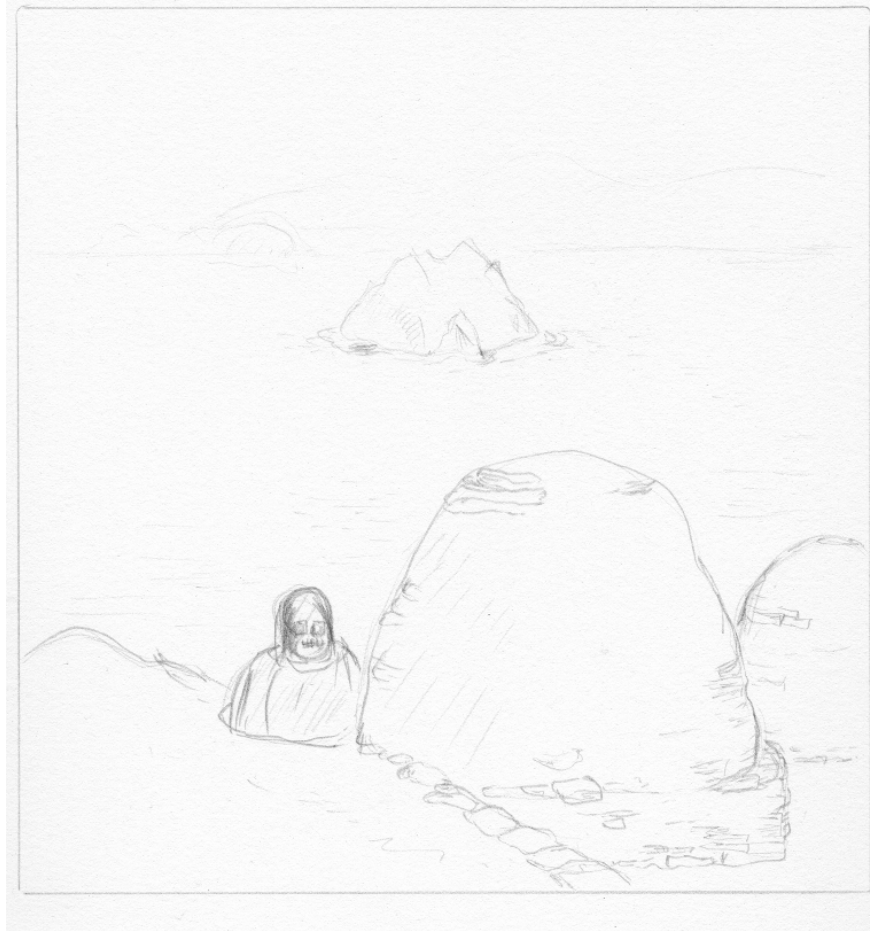
A very special experience was travelling to the Skellig Island on the Atlantic coast in South Ireland, an island 12 kilometers outside the coast with a monastery 200 Meters above sea level built in the 6th century. It's really a magical place.

Good pictures deliver something that cannot be obtained outside this medium and defies explanation through words, they have their own specific way of perception, they need no explanation and no translation into another language. Landscapes as archaic, idiosyncratic and un adapted as they may seem in today's art scene are sometimes reminiscent of a time when communication with nature was an important step towards becoming human in European and East Asian culture too.

These landscapes radiate tranquillity and solitude. They are places that are far removed from the distracting and wearing effects of noisy civilization.

The retreat into nature was not only an important way to find oneself in Chinese Taoism, but also in the mysticism of the Middle Ages the retreat into solitude was an important step towards self-knowledge. This shows the Croagh Patrick, the holy mountain of Ireland, its told that the St. Patricks fasted and meditated there for 40 days. A pilgrimage is made in July many people climb barefoot. We climbed first in the early sixties, when the pilgrimage was done at night, today it is prohibited during the night before many people were injured even died.

In recent years I have also been studying the Cillíní, the secret cemeteries for children who died unbaptized on Achill Island, Ireland. These cemeteries are located in remote valleys, on small hills.



Skellig Island



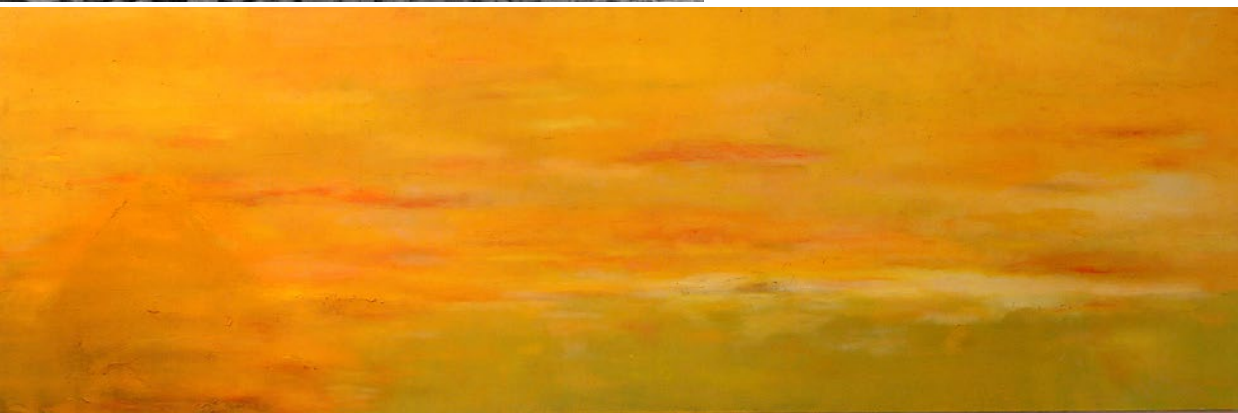
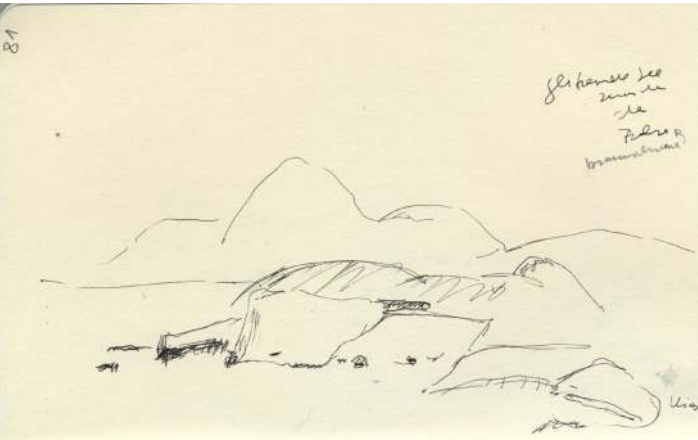
I also wrote some poetry about the Cillíní.

Very important were my journeys to South America specially Ecuador and Bolivia, at the foot of the Chimborazo, the mountain is more than 6300 Meters high and the summit is the place the furthest away from the center of the earth, in the early 1980s was a village of the so called "hieleros" – the icemen of the Chimborazo. The people climb the mountain to get ice blocks from the glaciers and sell the ice on the market. A tradition dating back

in pre-Inca times. The last one to do so died on in September 2024. One picture shows the poet and songwriter of the village. Also children were climbing the mountain.

The Illiniza Twins. The highest mountain Illiniza Norte in Ecuador on the right, 5100 Meters, I have climbed in my life.

Around 1977 together with my wife in our little publishing house we published the book of Domitila Barrios de Chungara *Let Me Speak*, a book about the life and the political fight of Domitila, a women living in the famous tin mine Siglo XX, of Bolivia about 4500 Meters above sea level. Later on, in 1980, I was invited to participate at a political meeting of the tin miners in the famous and I took photos of Artemio Camargo Crespo, who in 1981 was later on killed together with seven comrades by the fascist militia police in La Paz, Bolivia during the regimen of Banzer. There is a monument in La Paz for Artemio and his comrades using my photo.



Cillíní

Croagh Patrick





Hieleros



Mt. Illiniza Norte

Mt. Chimborazo

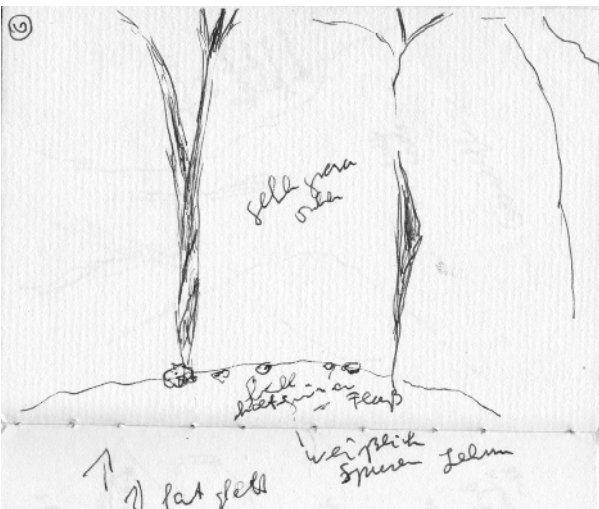
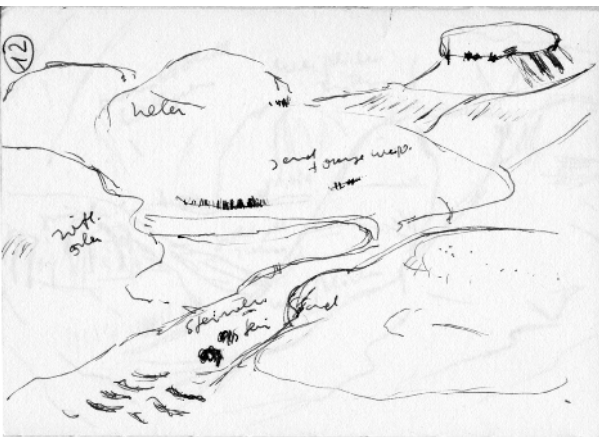
Artemio Camargo Crespo



The other photos show the blind miners Sigo XX, blind because of the delayed dynamite explosions.

In 1997 I made a study trip with my colleague Gu Gan, a Chinese calligrapher and we painted in situ in the Gobi Desert and in the grottos of Dunhuang in Gansu on the silk road.

In 2009 I worked together with Gu Gan on painting with citations of Hölderlin in his studio in Beijing.



Gobi Desert

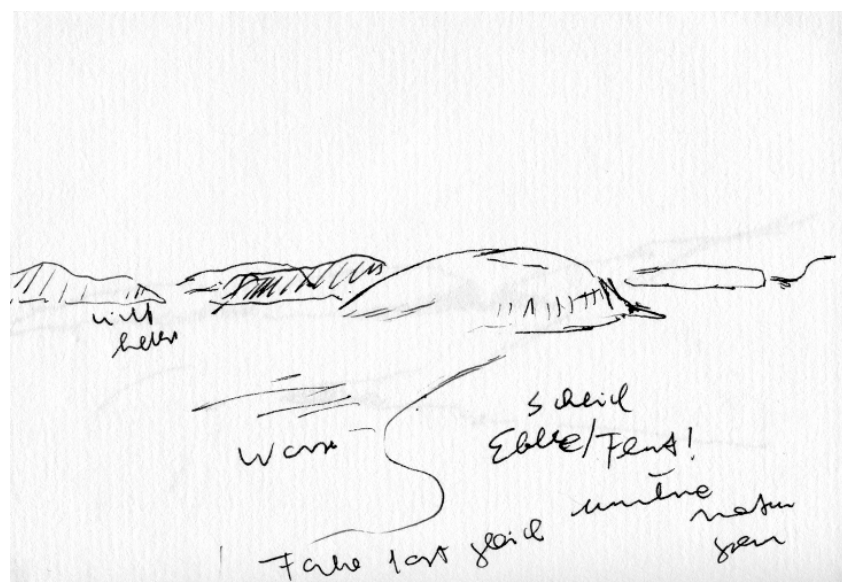


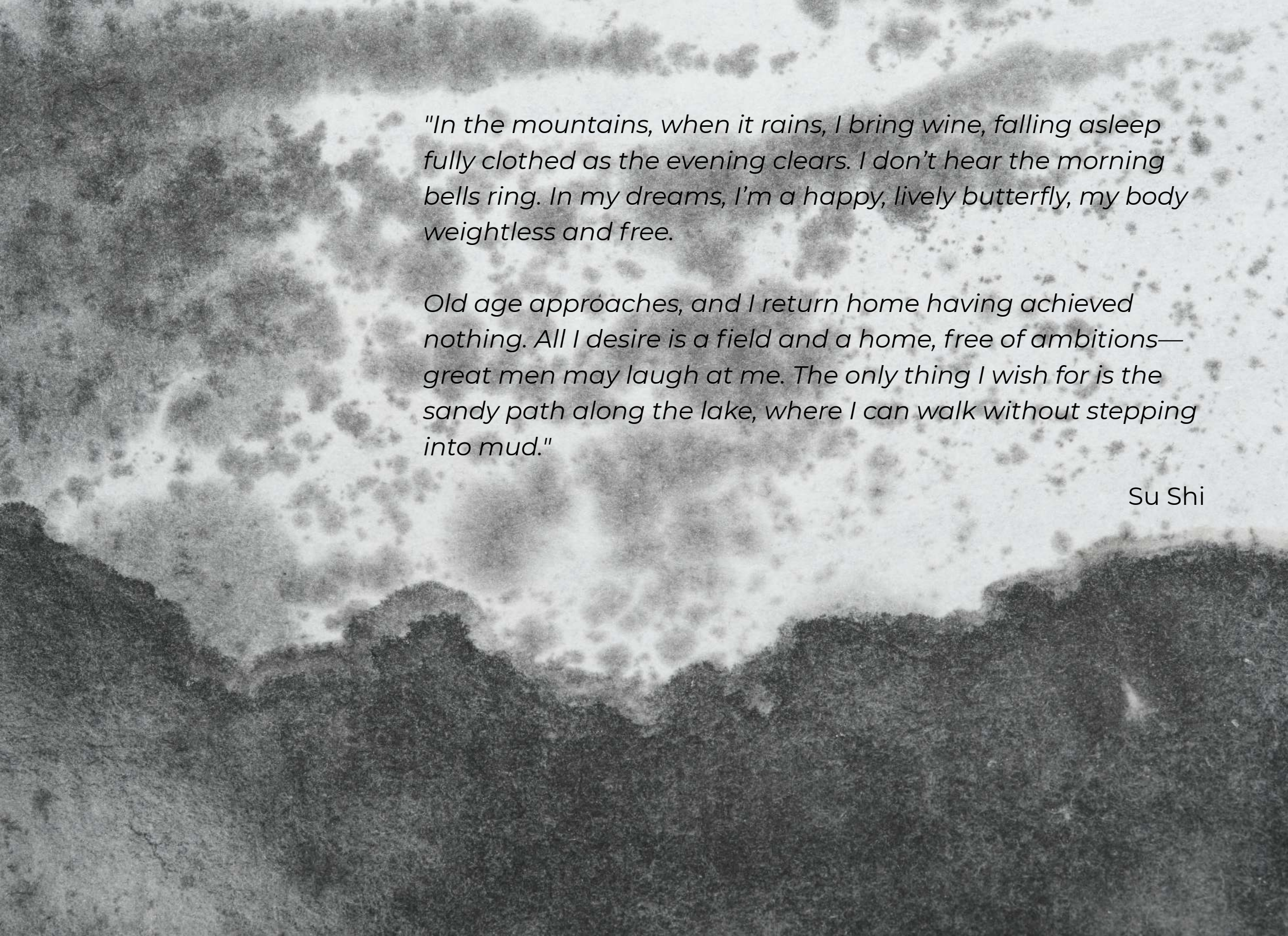


Dunhuang Grottos



Hölderlin citations





*"In the mountains, when it rains, I bring wine, falling asleep
fully clothed as the evening clears. I don't hear the morning
bells ring. In my dreams, I'm a happy, lively butterfly, my body
weightless and free.*

*Old age approaches, and I return home having achieved
nothing. All I desire is a field and a home, free of ambitions—
great men may laugh at me. The only thing I wish for is the
sandy path along the lake, where I can walk without stepping
into mud."*

Su Shi

The Sublime as an Expression of the Feminine Divine. The Emergence of Spirituality Through Stone.

By: Theopisti Voga

The concept of the Sublime, as it first appeared in the rhetorical art and drama of Ancient Greece, was later established as a significant notion in philosophical aesthetics, literary theory, and art history. From the earliest study of the Sublime, *On the Sublime* by Longinus (Περὶ ὕψους 2, 7.2-8.1, 10, 1)—a treatise attributed in various manuscripts to an anonymous author, Dionysius or Longinus, or Dionysius Longinus (1st century CE)—where the grandeur of elevated thought and language is described, we move to the 18th century, when the concept of the Sublime underwent a conceptual expansion.

Notable thinkers such as Anthony Ashley-Cooper, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury in his work *The Moralists* (1709), John Dennis in his book *A Journey Over the Alps* (1688) and Joseph Addison in *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* (1705) extensively expressed the pleasure derived from the boundless forms of nature and, consequently, the awe and reverence they inspire. The transformation of the Sublime and its highly contrasting aesthetic properties were particularly influenced by the descriptions of British writers who traveled through the Alps. In their accounts, the wild grandeur and beauty of the mountains are recorded as prime examples of this aesthetic experience.

The idea of pleasure accompanied by terror and awe was further developed through these experiences, establishing the Sublime as a concept that merges contradictory emotions such as pleasure and fear, attraction and

repulsion. The delightful kind of terror, the grandeur, the extraordinary nature, and the beauty of the Alps summarize the British description of the Sublime. The concept of the Sublime and the majestic mountain has since often become synonymous, with the viewer reflecting both pleasure and aversion, where the Sublime is not merely an aesthetic quality opposed to beauty but a quality of greater significance.

A significant contribution to understanding the sublime, was made by Immanuel Kant in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (*Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, 1764 and *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 1790), who distinguished it into three forms: the noble, the splendid, and the terrifying. According to Kant, the Sublime is not limited to the aesthetic pleasure of beauty, but transcends normality, reaching levels that may cause terror or awe. Schopenhauer also focused on the sense of human insignificance in the face of the vastness of nature, attributing an existential dimension to the Sublime—one that encompasses mortality and the simultaneous unity of humanity with the Universe (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, 1818, vol. III).

Equally interesting is Friedrich Hegel's interpretation, who recognized the tendency of "Eastern" cultures to express the Sublime through formless artistic creations. Hegel presents this idea in his work *Lectures on Aesthetics* (*Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, 1835–1838). Specifically, in his analysis of the forms of art, Hegel describes

symbolic art (*Symbolische Kunst*) as characteristic of Eastern cultures, where the Sublime is often expressed through indefinite, exaggerated, and formless artistic creations. According to Hegel, this tendency reflects the spirit's effort to express the Absolute, though without yet fully capturing it in a clearly defined form, as seen in the classical art of ancient Greece.

The intricate details of Chinese and Islamic art, often depicting patterns and abstract shapes, highlight a sense of spiritual grandeur that transcends form and material, directing the viewer toward the divine. The quest for grandeur that evokes awe, fear, and a profound aesthetic experience continues to be examined and reinterpreted, but it always remains an expression of the human desire for the incomprehensible and the eternal. Finally, the Goddess movement was a revivalistic Neopagan religious movement which includes spiritual beliefs and practices in the late 60's. It revolves around Goddess worship and the veneration for the divine feminine. An anthropologist such as Johann Jakob Bachofen with *Das Mutterrecht*, 1861 (Original title: *Das Mutterrecht. Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaiokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur*) and Ernest Borneman with his work *Patriarchy, Das Patriarchat. Ursprung und Zukunft unseres Gesellschaftssystems* (1975), examined the ideas of prehistoric Matriarchal Goddess Cultures in the Mediterranean region.

Today, in the era of innovation in digital technologies and artistic production, new media art, bioart, and genetic art based on computers and Artificial Intelligence have emerged, while new technologies weave a new kind of Sublime: the "technological Sublime."

As the Sublime is found in the cosmic dimension and, at the same time, science points out that the elements that compose humans are shared with the inorganic elements of matter, it becomes evident that humans are also part of it, even as a memory through the cellular memory of ancestral cells that all living organisms possess. Furthermore, subatomic particles as elements of matter yearn, once they have transformed into known cosmic beings, to return in decay to what they originally came from, as Anaximander (611-545 BC) mentions. Thus, the stardust that created the Earth and the mountains is the same that, through other bonds, evolutionarily produced a being with a consciousness of its existence.

Before human language was produced, thought was non-verbal, and language was non-cognitive. Over time, action gained subjective meaning, that is, it became consciously purposeful. The prehistoric Cro-Magnon, in contrast to the Neanderthals, had higher-order consciousness and a more advanced brain and were the main precursors of the first representational art. Between Neanderthals and early Homo Sapiens, the first representational art of the Upper Paleolithic emerged, along with early naturalism in depiction, with much of prehistoric art found either deep within caves or produced from the primary material of caves and mountains. The Venus figurines, delicately carved, are considered not only symbolic expressions but complete works of art. These earliest known depictions of the human female form, which are the initial imprints of symbolic behavior, reveal the ability to hold an abstract concept in mind, sharpening their evolutionary edge in the struggle for survival. Relating the representational art of Venus figurines to the natural char-



The Venus of Hohle Fels,
Germany, 35.000 BCE



The Venus of Galgenberg,
Austria, 30.000 BCE



The Venus of Dolni Vestonice,
Czech Republic, 28.000 BCE



The Venus of Lespugue,
France, 26.000 BCE



The Venus of Willendorf,
Austria, 24.000 BCE



The Venus of Moravany,
Slovakia, 23.000 BCE



The Venus of Brassempouy,
Slovakia, 22.000 BCE



The Venus of Yuliyevich,
Russia, 16.000 BCE



The Venus of Monruz,
Switzerland, 11.000 BCE



The Venus de Milo,
Greece, 2nd century BCE

acteristics of mountains brings forth the phenomenon of pareidolia in pre-historic minds. There is an inherently designated area of the visual brain specialized in detecting and encoding human contours and another for animals. Visual representation facilitates perception, so if subjects imagine a form, they are more likely to detect a degraded version of an object. We know that the human brain is tuned to detect human forms and animals. This can be observed in certain perceptual phenomena, including illusory lines and shapes, filling in, line continuation, and predictive hypothesis. The tendency to see imaginary forms in response to ambiguous arrays of materials activates the visuo-neural system. For the prehistoric artist, possibly a woman as we will discuss later, observing the evocative contours of rocks leads to projective super-images that are transform into re-representations through stone carving. One of the most interesting discoveries in visual science is that human behavior can be biased or influenced by external stimuli that are not consciously registered. In the prefrontal cortex, mirror neurons create mental representations, and it appears that at least some aspects of language are rooted in the way humans see, touch, and feel the world. Silent perceptual processes, however, influence behavior that individuals remain unaware of. Therefore, it can be said that the evocative features of mountains served as unconscious elements that activated either the perception and production of female forms in cave interiors or the crafting of figurines from parts of stone that resembled the female body type, sometimes utilizing a crack or crevice in the rock to represent external features of the female gender, thus turning a silent signal into a symbol.



Example of pareidolia

The sanctification of mountains, which evidently dates back to prehistory, is revealed both through physical identification with the primal cosmic material, as mentioned earlier, and with the innate tendency for elevation toward what is high. The ascent journey upward the Transcendent was for millennia the essence of the creator of the world, and this upward direction is considered the path toward divinity or spirituality. In this transcendent journey is inscribed the memory—whether it is memory or perhaps a cellular memory in the depths of the cells—the feeling of absolute emotional security in a community that had not yet discovered individuality, otherness, isolation, and loneliness. Just as the infant cannot distinguish the boundaries of itself from the mother, so too could Paleolithic man not distinguish from Mother Nature. The relationship between the two sexes was more balanced than in any subsequent phase of humanity. The oldest human skeletons that have been found show minimal height differences between men and women, as there was no division of labor and thus no gender dominated the other. However, the guiding role of the female in wild animal packs allows us to hypothesize that human packs were also led by women. The female hunter continued for a long time to play an equal role with the man, in some cases even a leading

one, creating a matrifocal culture. The myths of the Mistress of Animals, the Prehistoric Huntress Goddess, are so numerous and widespread across all cultures worldwide that they leave no doubt that they contain a deep core of truth. Although there is debate and different readings from researchers, the significant archaeologist Gimbutas, (*The Living Goddesses*, University of California Press, 1999) speaks of a matrilineal society where the craftsman or craftswoman of the Venus figurines confirms the spirituality and emergence of symbolic thought in the effort to communicate with the Great Goddess. The pregnant Venus figurines promote the active, dynamic Female force that generates Life through the spiral pattern of birth, life, death, and rebirth. The inverted triangle of the pubis, which symbolically contrasts with the triangle of the Mountain, points to the path to the earth that gives birth, the underground with its chthonic forces of death and the rebirth of nature that culminates at the highest point of the Mountain. By creating these figurines, prehistoric humans undoubtedly transformed the recognition of Life, Health, and Fertility into cultural symbols.

The oldest depictions of the female form found so far in many locations across Europe number around 250 figurines and belong to the Upper Paleolithic Period 45,000-13,000 years ago. It is debated whether two of them, the Venus of Tan-Tan and the Berekhat Ram Venus, could belong to the Middle Paleolithic Period, 200,000-500,000 years ago. These images of full-figured mature females were mainly made from limestone, like the famous Venus of Willendorf, or from clay, ivory, and bone, and in some cases, they take the form of reliefs on rock surfaces. The choice of

Mountain material for the creation of the figurines aligns with the fact that the Alpine range in Europe is almost entirely formed of limestone, and large, compact masses of limestone show pits, caves, openings, and formations due to erosion.

The identification of the primary material of the mountain with its semantic meaning in early human artistic production also identifies the form of the Mountain with the content and symbolism attributed to it. It is impressive that the evolving human brain grasped this meaning and created the artistic equivalent, transforming it into the first recorded sacred, religious, and ritualistic narrative. The evocative sacred mountain is depicted softly in that which did not exist before, in a primal conception revolutionary and decisive for human civilization. It is not clear whether humans created art or whether art created humans. What is certain, however, is that the imposing mountain, both materially and symbolically, through the concept of the Sublime it reflects, played a decisive role in the malleable, adaptable, nascent human brain. From the earliest forms of atavistic Art to the modern Digital Sublime, the artist approaches the concept of the Sublime through their anxious effort to soar to celestial heights, seeking spiritual transcendence and enlightenment. Beyond their height and the awe they evoke, the stone masses are the primal material that is transformed into female, mother, and fertility by the first creators. The stone Venuses emerge from the material of the Sacred Mountain to rise again, this time to worship birth, earthly life, and mortality. Subsequently, all ancient civilizations will connect their traditions with Sacred Mountains, as places of worship, the abode of gods, and spiritual contemplation. The Sublime, offering the in-

exhaustible and vast, works dynamically and evolutionarily toward the viewer, who, by marshaling their mental powers to grasp it, transcends the boundaries of the human, mortal, and finite, in order to reach its height. The Paleolithic Venus figurines may be realistic depictions of real women, ideal representations of beauty, or symbolic fertility icons in an era when Europe was in the last ice age, and thus fat on fertility points symbolized hope for survival and longevity in a dangerous environment. A significant study conducted by the Dutch Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine Niko Tinbergen Nikolaas (1907–1988), on gull chicks demonstrated the relationship between the intensity of the stimulus and the expected outcome. This may perhaps provide an answer as to why, while the figures have exaggerated breasts, bellies, genitals, and buttocks, conversely, the head, face, arms, and legs are merely suggested or entirely omitted. The hypothesis of the great neurologist Professor Ramachandran in *The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes Us Human* (2010), supports that an over-emphasized element of gender in a figurine may better signal what it wants to convey and thus serve as a spiritual guide. The prehistoric Venuses bear the religious, sacred role of the Great Mother Goddess, drawing their power from the supernatural, magical forces of the stone extracted from the beloved mountain.

In today's rapidly shifting and transitional era, art embraces technology, science, and social imperatives. Within this framework, the Divine Feminine and the Sublime unexpectedly influence artists, expanding the field of inspiration and contemplation.

The Divine Feminine is no longer confined strictly to the female form and

motherhood. Instead, it is redefined, touching upon the concept of creation itself, energy, and interconnection with nature—a transformation reflected in contemporary artistic movements such as biotech art, virtual reality (VR), and Land Art. Artists such as Ana Mendieta and Marina Abramović explore the relationship between the female body and the landscape, drawing inspiration from archaic and pagan traditions. At the same time, many emerging and established artists employ new media, such as digital sculpture, to reimagine the form of the Great Mother in a digital world. The Sublime, long associated with awe and transcendence, is being redefined in contemporary art, both through natural experience and technological advancement, giving rise to the concept of the "Technological Sublime".

The sense of awe, once evoked by mountains, oceans, and the grandeur of nature, now emerges from electronic data, artificial intelligence, and the vast expanses of the digital universe. A new generation of artists seeks a novel and unprecedented experience within virtual environments, the metaverse, and works that explore humanity's relationship with infinity, investigating the Sublime beyond the physical realm in digital space.

Contemporary artists, navigating between past traditions and modern technological evolution, propose a new approach to the representation of the female form and essence, while at the same time expressing deep concern for the wounded natural world. Furthermore, as each civilization shapes its own perception of space, today's emerging digital space inspires artists to explore new forms of spirituality and awe. This reaffirms the idea that art continues to serve as

a bridge between the human and the divine, from the Paleolithic Venus figurines to the age of algorithms.

Some notable contemporary artists excelling in this field include:

Yannis Melanitis is a Greek artist active in BioArt, Art philosophy and science combining biology with art and technology. His work explores the relationship between humans and genetic engineering, synthetic biology, and post-human evolution, creating artworks that redefine the boundaries of the body and identity.

Kevin Mack is a digital sculptor and award-winning visual effects artist who creates abstract organic forms using AI and generative art.

Marco Brambilla uses video and VR to reinterpret mythological and religious figures in new digital worlds.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer creates interactive installations that explore the relationship between the body, technology, and motherhood.

Harm van den Dorpel explores digital sculpture through algorithmic forms that suggest post-human entities.

Jon Rafman works with 3D sculpture and virtual worlds, incorporating mythological and symbolic elements.

Freeka Tet creates surreal, monstrous digital figures that play with the concept of creation and motherhood.

Sofia Crespo works with AI and 3D modeling, creating biomorphic forms inspired by nature and fertility.

Auriea Harvey is a digital sculptor combining mythological elements, human forms, and 3D technologies to

explore femininity.

Marguerite Humeau constructs bionic totems and archetypes using 3D techniques to reinterpret the mystical history of motherhood.

Summarizing, although this form of art may appear primitive compared to the great achievements that followed and continue to emerge, it still inspires visual artists, neurobiologists, anthropologists, and writers. The timeless archetypes and the human biological response to symbolic art and the universal Sublime resurface in contemporary artistic creation.

Beyond its immense significance for understanding the evolution of symbolic thought, its reinterpretation through new perspectives in the fields of arts and sciences serves as an example of artistic abstraction and purposeful artistic documentation, combined with scientific rigor and innovation. Above all, however, it proclaims that Art, which operates within the collective unconscious, is the threshold humanity must cross to reach its ultimate pursuit: spirituality through poetry in all its forms

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Theopisti Voga, *Brain MRI*, acrylic on canvas, 50x70cm



Two perspectives on the "Poetics of Silence - Mountains in Art" Eva Koethen on "Sign, Image, Reality"

By: Eva Koethen

Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water. Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it. The soft overcomes the hard; the gentle overcomes the rigid. Everyone knows this is true, but few can put it into practice.

Laozi

The consistent pliability of the water is contrasted with the materially solidified compression of the mountains, the stony mightiness of a mountain range. At the sight of its majesty, man is reminded of his organismic smallness, which is deeply anchored in the consciousness of the Far Eastern *shanshui* tradition. One might consider the world-famous masterpiece by Yu Jian 玉涧 in the first half of the 13th century, *Mountain Village in the Clearing Mist*¹, which makes people appear to be integrated into nature as a whole, in the dual sense of being sheltered in both emergence and disappearance.

The sculptural miniatures embody a different approach to nature, transposing the material tangibility of large dimensions into small formats. We find them in Japanese miniature landscapes, commonly known as Bonsai, small trees grown in containers and shaped into desired forms through root and leaf pruning. Originating from the tradition of Far Eastern Garden art - referred to as *Peng Jing* or potted landscapes in China—this cultural practice has also been adopted in the West.

From a Western perspective, one can also connect with a practice that translates objects of everyday perception into artistic processes, as happened in modernism with Cubism. This anchoring of artistic activity in everyday experiences, which initiates

transformations, has fascinated me since ever and is also reflected in my miniatures.

I am particularly interested in the tension between the embodied material presence and the imagined reality reference it entails. By initially disregarding the real dimension of the enormity (or even overwhelmingness) of the mountains and only bringing the picture plane into play through a subsequent photographic "blow up," different levels of reality representation are created.

In contrast to the two-dimensionality of drawing and painting, my starting point is a three-dimensional "marking" with small material fragments. These are found objects that have fallen out of everyday use, catching my attentive eye and, with their repurposed structures, textures, and figurative appearances, challenging the (material) imagination. This is particularly evident in works related to my stays in China. During a lengthy interview with Judith Elisabeth Weiß ("Kunstforum"), she asked me about the origin of the unimaginable in my pictorial montages, which she views as a key element. I then began discussing the Zhangjiajie Mountains, which had deeply fascinated me and inspired an artistic homage to the bizarre landscape. This homage consists of several material miniatures of an urban nature—as embodied in the high-rise elevator to a high plateau—as well as photographs I had taken

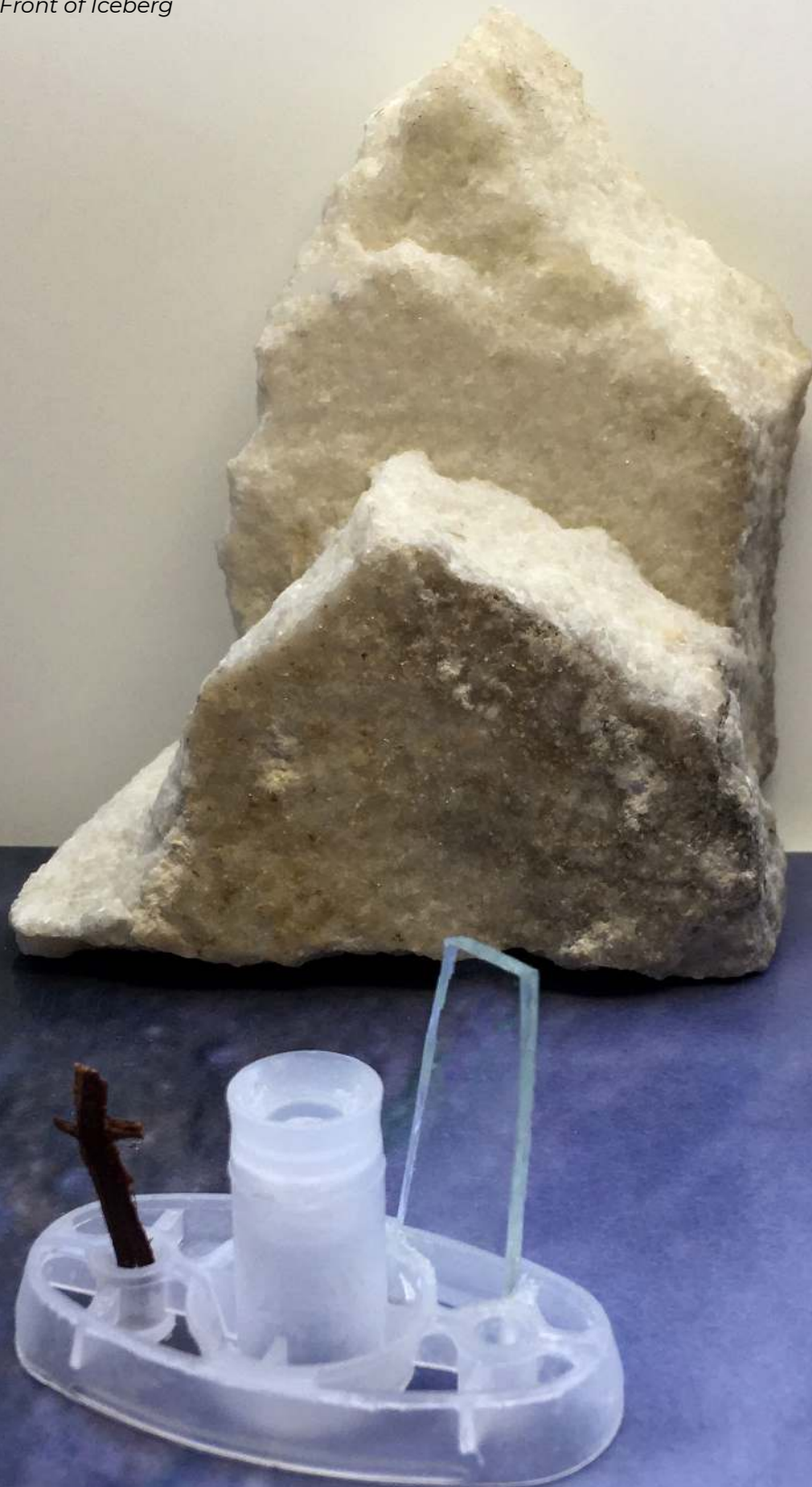
Mountain Landscape - Near and Far



¹ See p. 63, Editor's Note



Bastion



on-site.²

The documentary images from back then had long been buried, until the moment when I formed the smallest structures that reminded me of my photographs. They are not a template for my objects, but only with an object reminiscent of photography does the deposited material re-emerge. Working on the miniatures has nothing to do with representation; rather, I love materials and am led by the tactile to "unthinkable" memory images. Only when I construct the small objects can I see the striking connections, and the artistic work on them leads to newly conceived photographic shots. During her intensive examination of the ensemble, Judith Weiss added a cinematic dimension: "The mountain spontaneously brings me to a classic film that I have just come across again: In Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, a mountain becomes the central location of the events. Superficially, it is a simple science fiction film about encounters with aliens, but between UFOs and light spectacles, there are many other levels. Essentially, it's about encountering the unknown and the question of what this unknown means. The two protagonists feel magically drawn to the mountain, on which the huge spaceship with the peaceful aliens will eventually land. They only have a sense that this mountain has significance, but cannot anticipate anything. The film has great symbolic power in relation to art. Because an interesting aspect is that the protagonists sculpturally shape and draw this visionary mountain as if driven, to give expression to their inner intuition. They must relate to this unknown. The image they create precedes the actual event, and when they finally stand at this mountain, they suddenly understand the connections. They do

² *Das Werk - der Weg*, Barton Verlag, 2023, p. 86-96

not seek the form, but the form finds them." And this aspect, which already preoccupied Willi Baumeister in his considerations on the "unknown in art," fully applies to my way of working. (aus: „Über gleiche Gewichtigkeit“. *Eva Koethen im Austausch mit Judith Elisabeth Weiss*, 2024) Indeed, I perceive artistic creation as an intertwined metabolism of opposing cohesions in "superpositioned states," whose inscrutability constantly challenges new artistic concretions.

The kind of unknown also emerges in "surreal" extensions of my work through focusing on individual sculptural elements. This was the theme of last year's exhibition at Tenri Paris and is reflected in tangible montages that reveal hidden aspects and present transformations.

By encapsulating the figurations under the term "Sous-Realism," I draw on Surrealism as a philosophical figure according to Wolfram Högerebe, who assigns the concept of the "Überseiendem", not the superstructure, but the substructure as the "carpet of life." The fabric of these life experiences led me to the density and strength of an 'sous-real imperative' that simultaneously supports and limits us while we believe we are soaring into the air... Last but not least, the theme reminds me of an old Chinese proverb that has long moved me: "Man takes his law from the Earth; the Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven takes its law from the Tao. The law of the Tao is its being what it is." In conjunction with my pictorial examples it is hoped that the images presented - and not only the original sculptures and photographs - convey the opening of perception to a multi-dimensional, ambiguous reality reference and enrich intercultural exchange!



Mountain Drawing of a Giant Dragonfly

The Surreal Monumentality in the World of Miniature

By: Meng Schmidt-Yin

The artworks of Eva Koethen can be viewed as a kind of "Postmodern Art" in miniature form. She sensitively combines similar, often human-made elements with those from nature to achieve a fascinating synthetic effect and explore the complex relationship between humans and nature. Despite employing ordinary objects, she creates a vision that transcends and surpasses reality. Her works are not only formal breakthroughs but also the result of profound reflections on the aesthetics and philosophy of Postmodernity. By blending human-made elements with the "natural medium," she challenges the boundaries of traditional art and creates an entirely new synthetic experience.

The questions raised by these artworks go beyond the realm of aesthetics and touch on deeper cultural, social and philosophical issues. Upon viewing, recipients are led into a "supra-real" realm of art that involves a profound exploration of human existence and the natural order. This experience of the supra-real evokes a reflection on the self and nature and stimulates a variety of feelings and thoughts. When contemplating the works of Eva Koethen, associations inevitably arise with the concept of landscape aesthetics, particularly with the art of Bonsai, which serves to express aesthetic sensations and philosophical reflections on natural landscapes through artworks. The art of Bonsai is a practice that represents grand scenes in limited space, a marvelous creation that encapsulates everything within it. In comparison to traditional Chinese Bonsai art, Eva Koethen's work demonstrates a modern landscape aesthetics, combining contemporary notions of natural beauty and human-nature relationships.

To provide readers with a better understanding of the aesthetics and philosophy of bonsai art, I would like to first explain the concepts and forms of bonsai. The Chinese word for bonsai is "盆景" (*Pénjǐng*), which literally translates to "pot landscape," while the Japanese word is "盆栽" (*Bonsai*). Although these terms may sometimes seem interchangeable in the West, they represent different concepts and art forms with distinct meanings and aesthetic goals in the Chinese context. Bonsai refers to the practice of planting and cultivating trees in containers, typically for aesthetic or practical reasons. It is designed to be admired up close, emphasizing the beauty of the individual specimen. This method of planting places greater emphasis on the growth and health of the plant itself, with the container serving both decorative and root-limiting purposes. The primary purpose is to appreciate the natural beauty and healthy growth of an individual plant, resembling more of a gardening practice.

In contrast, Penjing aims to create a refined or impressive miniature natural landscape. It integrates not only trees but also rocks, mountains, rivers, and other landscape elements to create an ethereal atmosphere. By depicting these miniature landscapes, it attempts to portray various beauties of nature and abstract concepts of time. It is not merely a representation of beauty but also an artistic creation and philosophical statement, embodying a deep understanding of nature, time, and life. It is spectacular and allows the viewer to contemplate nature from different perspectives, experiencing the sense of grandeur and majesty of nature from a microscopic viewpoint, akin to the perspective of a deity. Through Penjing, artists can express feelings such as tranquility, solitude, peace, and joy, similar to traditional Chinese landscape paintings. Although Eva Koethen's art does not originate from bonsai, there exists a profound resonance and connection between them, both expressing the human desire for natural beauty and respect for the order of nature.

Insect Mountains





Winterreise and Der Zauberberg, a multi-layered approach to Nature

By: Matthias Drescher

(Transcription of the speech)

Dear Giacomo, dear Thorsten, thank you so much for arranging this very attractive symposium. When you sent the invitation, Mathias Wendt, Giovanni Banfi and I had just decided to prepare a little concert event. It will focus on two major works of art: on the one hand, on a famous series of songs, the so called *Winterreise*, by Franz Schubert, which is based on the poems of a young poet called Wilhelm Müller. The other subject will be the novel *Magic Mountain (Der Zauberberg)* by Thomas Mann and how this novel has been influenced by the *Winterreise* of Schubert and Müller. The book, *Der Zauberberg*, is one of the most famous German novels. It was published in 1924, 100 years ago, while the poems of the *Winterreise* were published in 1824, precisely 200 years ago. So, the timing seems very good - and in fact, your invitation itself sounds a bit as if you wanted to celebrate the book.

Obviously, this is not the case, but nevertheless, the overlap between our subjects is such, that we felt encouraged to present some of our ideas. To make it simple, we decided that I would speak alone, so that Giovanni and Mathias Wendt don't bear a responsibility.

I hope that you don't mind if I don't focus on mountains, but more generally on nature. And, as I have to emphasize here, I only mean Nature in Western Art, not in China, for instance. Anyhow, Nature is a unifying experience for us all and it has been used as a kind of language by the three artists of our project. All three of them were fluent

in it, so to say, and they all three have added their specific accent. Nevertheless, they are very different, with very different talents: a poet, a composer and a novel writer.

The poet was first. Wilhelm Müller was a young intellectual at the time of German romanticism. He published a series of 24 poems in 1824, as I said. He used images of nature, of travelling in a winterly landscape, to describe the loneliness and the sadness of the traveller. His (the traveller's) heart was broken by love, and possibly, if you look more closely, by political repression.

Nowadays, romantic representations of nature are very familiar to us. We are used to them, especially to the dreamy and the spectacular ones, like a sunset on the beach, for instance. In fact, when such images are produced today, we regard them as a little cheap and even as kitsch.

But in Müller's time, this way of expressing one's sensitivity was still quite new. In German literature, it had appeared in the second half of the 18th century. Actually, one of the first great books which celebrates nature in order to describe the deep feelings of the writer was the novel *Werther* by Johann Wolfgang Goethe. It was published in 1774, that means 250 years ago - another nice anniversary. Although this sounds like a long time ago, we could as well be surprised. Why have German poets only started so late to use Nature in an emotional manner? Hasn't it been around since ever and are we not all exposed to it, so that it is a perfect platform to transmit our feelings?

In fact, Nature has been a subject of great poetry very early on - just think of Homer, Vergil or Walther von der Vogelweide, the early German poet. So, what's new? Don't worry, I know that this is an enormous subject, and that it is much too big for this occasion. What I do want to emphasize at this point is the change and the development. Wilhelm Müller may have had similar feelings as the young Goethe and he probably was influenced by him, but it stops there. Before Goethe, we do not see that sensitivity yet, at least not with German authors. And although there are beautiful images of Nature in ancient poetry, like with Walter von der Vogelweide, there have been long epochs which did not use them for their soft feelings. Therefore, Müller's natural imagery was relatively new and, at the same time, it was somehow fleeting and temporary. It was soon outdated, as we can see by our own reaction when someone uses it today. This is what I want to stress at this point.

Anyway, Franz Schubert was a contemporary of Wilhelm Müller and he was of almost the same age. Therefore, he did not have any difficulty in accepting Müller's language - all of the contrary. He felt strongly inspired and he has followed Müller's text closely. Although he must have agreed with its political complaint, his (and Müller's) main point in common is the expression of loneliness. This is what Schubert's music is about in an overwhelming manner. It is so overwhelming that in fact it lets us forget our slight distance to the simple poetry of Müller and it elevates the whole to a great expression of human feelings.

Müller and Schubert were both specialized artists and they both worked independently to express their per-

sonal sentiments. They did not know each other and yet they created one coherent masterpiece of art, in a two-layered approach. What helped them was their common German language, but also their similar sensitivity for nature. It gave them a common ground on which they could express their anxieties. It seems that it needed this common ground with another artist to let Schubert write his best music which touches everybody.

As you may notice, I am insisting on two things: First, that the sensitivity to Nature as shown in the poems of Müller was a relatively new phenomenon and that his way to express it was temporary and transitory. Second, that the emotional truth of the *Winterreise* is due to Schubert's deep understanding of Müller's imagery.

Together, this means that the *Winterreise*, as a masterpiece of artistic cooperation, is the result of a very rare event. It is due to the coincidence in time and in sensitivity of two artists whose talents complement each other. We should be particularly happy about it and we can hardly hope for another, similar coincidence.

Nevertheless, there is another piece of art which has been strongly influenced by Müller, so to say, and that is *Der Zauberberg, The Magic Mountain*. It is not a symbiosis within one same generation, like between Müller and Schubert, but a far distance impact. Ian Bostridge, the famous singer, a tenor, has described this impact, and in our little concert, Mathias Wendt will compare some extracts of the novel with specific songs of the *Winterreise*.

The influence is remarkable, especially if we take into account how much everything had changed in one

Davos.

Kurhaus.

Promenade.



Switzerland Davos - Kurhaus & Promenade, Tomaszewski postcard, 1908

century. Let me stress one aspect: The *Winterreise* describes a scenery which was realistic at its time. A lonely man walking past barking dogs in a freezing cold – that's how travelling could look like in these days. To us, the settings of the poems, like the stagecoach and the post horn, seem romantic in themselves. But initially, they were a part of the real life of Müller and Schubert, and this real life was used to illustrate their feelings.

In one century, this reality had almost disappeared. Life had become fast and technical, urbanized and so on. Hans Castorp, the main character of *The Magic Mountain*, travelled to Davos (where the story takes place) in a comfortable train ride. Nevertheless, the book was meant as a *Winterreise*, a winter voyage, par excellence. So, it very obviously connected to Schubert's famous piece, especially in the morbid atmosphere of Davos, which at the time was the place to cure tuberculosis.

One would expect that the book will show this connection to the *Winterreise* even more directly, and in fact, it does: there is a long chapter called *Snow*, which lets the hero get lost in the deep snow of Davos and in his own hallucinations. It shows the similarities as well as a fundamental difference between the two works of art. The traveller of the *Winterreise* is suffering an existential crisis and his voyage takes place in a realistic surrounding. It is so tough that it even lets him hallucinate for a while. Nevertheless, it remains an immediate experience, both physical and emotional, and Schubert and Müller transmit their feelings as directly as it is imaginable, without any loss.

Hans Castorp, instead, is a sensitive and spoiled young man. His experi-

ence in Davos is existential too, but in a soft manner and it illustrates ironically how Thomas Mann perceives the world. The story seems realistic, just like in the *Winterreise*, but its message is not direct. The readers are not carried away by their feelings, but they discover, appreciate and are amused by the wisdom of the writer. Even the adventure in the snow is full of irony. Although the surrounding is harsh, the readers don't suffer. In fact, they don't pay much attention to the nature as it is described, but they try to understand the meaning of the text.

Very simply said, *Winterreise* is an emotional experience, while *Der Zauberberg* is intellectual. For Müller and Schubert, Nature had still been an immediate and unquestionable fact of life. Thomas Mann, instead, has experienced the repackaged version. Therefore, his book is not very forceful when it comes to Nature, but it rather uses it as a building block of a world panorama. We could say that a piece of art, that means the *Winterreise*, has taken over the role which in Müller's poetry was the one of Nature alone. For Thomas Mann, this art is an inspiration, a guide and an imagery, almost like the wintery nature had inspired Müller and Schubert.

That lets me come back to what I emphasized before: although our relation to Nature appears almost eternal, its treatment in Art has always been changing. Until recently, this was due exclusively to the human mind, because Nature itself remained almost unchanged. What did change was the way humans would see it.

Then, shortly after Wilhelm Müller and Franz Schubert, this stability was lost. Western societies started to have a strong impact on Nature. Not in a slow manner, like it had always hap-

pened, but very fast. Industry, big cities, factories, train traffic etc – all that somehow reduced Nature in size and it increased its distance to people. Suddenly, the development of the human mind had provoked a feedback loop, in which humans had an impact on Nature and, subsequently, became themselves influenced by this impact.

As usual, artists were among the first to react. For them, the sudden change and the distance were a strong challenge. Just consider the discussions in Paris between academic painters and impressionists. After a while, nobody could keep up the traditional, immediate reaction to Nature, because they were not exposed to it anymore - not in the old way. And when they did as if nothing had happened, their art was considered as academic and as kitsch.

In this dramatic development, a hundred years are a long time. Thomas Mann had not experienced what the *Winterreise* describes, nor did he want to reflect that kind of experience. Instead, he produced a vast panorama of modern life, and for that panorama, he sort of processed the *Winterreise*. He must have been deeply impressed by its intensity and its existential depth. Nevertheless, he does not try to create the same intensity, but he lets the reader reflect about it. He prefers to transmit deep thoughts rather than deep feelings. Certainly, that was his personal choice and also a matter of talent. He was not a poet, but a novel writer and he does not speak for other artists. In fact, Art has not stopped to provoke profound feelings, there is no doubt about that.

Nevertheless, and coming to a conclusion, I think that the comparison of *Winterreise* and *Der Zauberberg* shows an important turning point. It shows that the ancient role of Na-

ture will not be the same again. We knew that we cannot enter the same river twice. Still, what happened here is more than that. It is fundamental and it has come very suddenly. I believe that we are not yet fully aware of all its implications. There are many of them, but I would like to stress one. It works in two directions, the first is the following: The less we are exposed to Nature how it used to be, the less can we grasp how it inspired the ancient artists. As simple as that. It means that we are being cut off from an important element of our art tradition. This is not easy to digest and art historians will hold against it. They have always been good at sophisticated interpretations. But in fact, the only consolation which really helps, may come from the development itself. As I said, there are two directions. Nature is being cut back, that is inevitable and we have to cope with it. But for the same reason, ancient art is gaining a surprising new role. As we know, much of its strength was provoked by the impact of Nature. Consequently, great art is a perfect testimony of this impact. It may not go into details, but it is conserving and transmitting the essence of it, namely the feelings of the artist. And although we will not fully understand them, we will be touched by these feelings and we will continue to respond to them - just like Thomas Mann has responded to the emotional depth of the *Winterreise*.

Thank you for your attention.

*"He who climbs upon the highest
mountains laughs at all tragedies,
real or imaginary."*

Friedrich Nietzsche



Giacomo Bruni

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