

The National Art Museum of Ukraine
Lee Sun-Don Art Exhibition – Simply Astounding

Date: 24 Jun, 2010 ~ 08 Aug, 2010
Time: Wed. ~ Fri. 10:00 ~ 17:00
Sat. 11:00 ~ 18:00



Venue: Ukraine 01001Kyiv Grushevskogo Street, 6

The Ukrainians take pride in their National Art Museum of Ukraine for its collections of precious art works. Originally called the City Museum of Antiques and Art, it was the first public art museum built by Ukrainian cultural elites in Capital Kyiv during the late 19th century. Going through several phases, the museum became the National estate in 1919. During the German occupancy in World War II, the museum was named "The State Museum of Eastern Arts"

Title: 3-Abstract-D / Black & White: Covenant, Year: 2009, Oil on Canvas, 145x145cm (100F)

3-Abstract-D / Black & White: Covenant

and began to include Russian Art into its collections. After Ukrainian independence, the museum changed its official name to "The National Art Museum of Ukraine" in 1994, becoming the most prominent national art museum of Ukraine displaying mostly art works by top artists of Ukraine and Russia. The Museum curator KOSTIAANTYN and Ukraine Art Fund director OKSANA, visited Professor Lee Sun-Don's "Individual Oil Painting Exhibition" held in Venice Biennale in 2009 and both had great admiration to Professor

Lee's works. They exercised great enthusiasm for Professor Lee to have an individual art exhibition in the National Art Museum of Ukraine in June. Professor Lee Sun-Don's individual exhibition is to be centered on "Totemic Energy Oil Painting". The museum selected the series that are the most representative of Professor Lee's art creation, providing Ukrainian art lovers the most comprehensive introduction and understanding of this legendary contemporary artist.

The Artistic Philosophy of Freedom

Oleg Sydor-Gibelinda

Usually the place of partings and losses, Ukraine, for once, is becoming a place of encounters, even if just for a moment. Two freedoms meet: the West, charmed by the East, and the East, which, in turn, has taken from the West all it had to give and can now itself teach the West a thing or two. The artists chosen may seem an odd pairing at first: one took up painting at 34, almost exactly the age of his younger colleague, our benevolent virtual compatriot. But then again...

Kyiv will be the setting for a group show of two artists: the Irish-born Michael Murphenko, who has lived in Ukraine for many years and even changed his name to reflect the local language, and Chinese master Lee Sun-Don, Third Patriarch of the Zen-Buddhist Forshang school, painter, teacher, translator, pianist, musician, and founder of the international cultural Forshang World Foundation. It is his first time in Ukraine, but, hopefully, not the last.

The 'freedom' bit is there for a reason. After all, Kyiv was the birthplace of Mykola Berdyaev, prominent thinker and proponent of the idea of freedom, who would later emigrate, yet it was here where he began his career. Berdyaev was a native of the Kyiv Pechersk district, where the two artists' exhibition is now on view. Meanwhile further to the south, in the city of Odessa, one of the

pioneers of abstract art, Wassily Kandinsky, lived, studied and exhibited his work. He, too, would later join the ranks of emigrants from our land. His favourite colours ever since his childhood were "lush bright green, white, carmine red, black and ochre", and Lee Sun-Don would approve of such a choice. Experts such as Eleanor Heartney in her essay, *The Mind in Freedom*, draw parallels between Kandinsky's paintings and the work of our Chinese contemporary, though they never fail to point out their fundamental differences. It is notable that a key milestone for Lee Sun-Don – are there any coincidences in life? – has been a painting entitled *Freedom Beyond Freedom*, auctioned off in 2007 for a record price ever paid for an Eastern master. Be that as it may, the artist himself never intentionally sought out success, seeing as he dismissed long-established stereotypes of Chinoiserie, both rocaille and new types. Instead, he creates his own visual archetypes combining age-old tradition and strikingly modern subjectivism.

My first impression is that nothing seems to be impossible for Lee Sun-Don. He paints as effortlessly as he breathes, his brushstrokes incredibly light and the images they produce full of fascination, sometimes bordering on visual shock. According to some of the Eastern teachings, this is the way to experience truth, which may even include the articulation of the odd sacrilegious paradox. (The other option, sometimes unnoticeable to the casual observer, is a long, arduous journey "of three thousand li", as the famous saying goes. Last year, yours truly was sweating and walking in circles around the Venetian district of Cannaregio trying to find Lee Sun-Don's exposition in the Biennale maze, when sheer serendipity led him to the longed for Palazzo Pisani Santa Maria with its *Create & Change*.) The artist, however, does not go as far in his search. The nature of painting accounts for the paradox of contemplation, expressed in Lessing's *Laokoon*: "since art eternalises a single moment in time, it should not depict anything which can be thought of as transitory."

Lee Sun-Don does not avoid the transitory, but, having touched upon it, he moves on to higher insights and deeper awareness. He is a symbolist par excellence and an impressionist in one, provided

that these attributes do matter in this case. He sometimes (though rather rarely) seems to be showing genre scenes, however, as in *A Happy Little Boy*, the work is always based on something very removed from everyday life, such as Buddha portraits in 2D and 3D. Odd as it may seem, the main thing literally lies on the surface, and is therefore not always immediately evident – after yet another European paradox read from Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*. According to Bonito Achille Oliva, curator of the artist's abovementioned Venice project and legendary transavantgarde theorist (he visited Kyiv as far back as 1997 to give a lecture), the Chinese artist "aims to massage the atrophied muscle of collective contemplation, thus delivering society from a merely spectacular concept of beauty." Lee Sun-Don's paintings are always spectacular, and more than that: they are a spectacle of profound spirituality. Reality is transitory and ever changing, and the artist strives to grasp the pattern of this changeability. To our mind, it is a beautiful and fascinating pattern. He seeks to grasp it not through arrogant intrusion, but by contemplating it as serenely as his *Transcendental Meditator* (2008) sitting on the river bank silently opposing the skyline of skyscrapers on the other side of the river. He opposes, but also owns it, drawing from it his power.

The composition of interceding is a recurrent theme in Lee Sun-Don's work, only the vector can run parallel to the surface of the canvas (*Benefactors Are All Around*), alternatively, the viewer himself finds himself as a hypothetical counterpart, bewildered by the heavy, exacting looks of the bodhisattvas (from the eponymous series). Actually, all the stages of a notional human "Life" unfold against a similar metropolitan backdrop. Here, the essence of the individual is reduced to an intense white core, modified here and there by bluish and brownish wrinkles, which does not in the least make the stages seem any less natural. They may denote – the author does not give any pointers this time, so let's think for ourselves: Sleep, Despair, Love, Enlightenment etc. (all the way down to Suicide – in a bathtub? – or merely a Ritual Bath?). The mundane opposite of this mini-series (also a part of *Secular World Series*) is the "sorrows and joys" narrative of the so-called one-dimension man (as per Herbert Marcuse), tragically incapable of realising his tragedy in the hurly-burly of modern life. Conversely, harmonious equilibrium with nature is achieved by the character of

a different work: the character contemplating the Moon "a thousand miles of the secular world." On this subject our fellow countryman Berdyaev wrote: "It would be a mistake to think that the average man loves freedom. A still greater mistake would be to suppose that freedom is an easy thing. Freedom is a difficult thing. It is easier to remain in slavery. The love of freedom, the desire for liberation is a sign of higher development, showing that man inwardly stops being a slave." (Man's Slavery and Freedom, which the author considered to be "the most radical" of his books, was written as far back as 1939). This immediately brings to mind the image of the hysterically miserable Conductor, stuffed with buttons/pills, or of the utterly distressed Transformer, crushed by his environment.

Needless to say, the meaning of Lee Sun-Don's art does not end with this rather abstract – more is not necessary – criticism of the Western life-style. Actually, the anonymous City of the Yellow Devil could signify anything from Tokyo to Hong Kong, and not just London, Berlin or New York (as it was called by Maksim Gorki in an essay bearing the same title). Actually, it can be classified as criticism only with great reserve. Lee Sun-Don not as much criticises as he reflects beyond exposure and fascination. The canvas is his arena for thought, his tools are brushes, oils, and, in many cases, acrylics, which provide shapes with characteristic vividness of colour. (Michael Murphenko goes without acrylics, instead, he likes to work with pencil, and is as much a graphic artist as he is a painter). These are decidedly traditional European tools of visual creativity, with which the Eastern artist sometimes seems to have a connection. For instance, there are his many variations of "white on white", which are reminiscent of Piero Manzoni's Achrom, or the ultra-expressive, iconic nature of the stain, which is another parallel to Western art, in this case to the American Non-Figurative of the 1950ies.

Yet the Eastern painter knows something which most of his artist colleagues from the other side of the world don't. Despite all its indisputable achievements, modernism has failed to prevent the devaluation of the Word, i.e. its visual manifestation which would

also reveal its grand essence. Western conceptualism has only managed to postpone the collapse which has long ago overtaken the Western world. On the other hand, modern Eastern culture has never renounced its calligraphic heritage, sometimes even engaging in fruitful collaboration, of which the paintings of the Third Patriarch of the Forshang School are a prime example. His compositions, a combination of images and ancient letters, are truly original stylistically and have no analogies in Western art (the meaning Michael Murphenko's Message comes from an entirely different, purely individualistic source, therefore the letters coming off the scroll are soaring forlornly in empty space), quite the contrary, the West should even learn from him. Even when Lee Sun-Don decorates the surface of the image (The Sutra of Great Wisdom), the meaning of the artwork goes beyond simple ornamentality, although it does not deny it: it just considers it a first step to knowledge.

Lee Sun-Don's work indeed offers a "new Eastern alternative" to flat Western pragmatism (from which we should exclude talented outsiders, such as one of our artistic guests who has the honour to exhibit his work alongside the master), studied and reflected in-depth, as we have already seen, by the Chinese painter. His oeuvre is, in turn, closely studied by the West, represented by a recognised curator, a young Irish lad, and, of course, the Ukrainian viewer, provided that Ukraine is to be considered part of the West. It is more like a casual crossing of cultural and civilisational currents, which has led to this exhibition in Kyiv. This crossing was not coincidental, though... "The spirit of Ukraine is a spirit of freedom," writes Oksana Gryshchenko rightly. She was the curator behind the Mavka exhibition in which Michael Murphenko also took part. The latter often seems to respond to the silent challenges of his elder colleague. One should think that Ukrainian audiences will take pleasure in Lee Sun-Don's floral symbolism, his sophisticated cult of the sunflower, which fascinated also the great Ukrainian filmmaker Oleksandr Dovzhenko, but here it finds many incarnations in "Daughter..." – and the same flower. The artist loves the wild beauty of many flowers, but this one is his favourite. The exhibit also features Ukrainian national chthonic images dealing with the same subject, brilliantly depicted by Murphenko.

However, there is more to it than the choice of similar motifs. Without a doubt, Ukraine will hospitably welcome the artistic "ambassadors of freedom" from two different parts of the world – the West and the East. Our country, time and again seduced by freedom but, unfortunately, never choosing it wholeheartedly and with conviction, is a place of several cultures. To draw a comparison on an individual level: the sage Taiwanese master, artist and thinker reconciles fragments and methods of different philosophies in his quest for Truth. To quote Oliva again: "The network of signs develops beyond temporal ineluctability and necessities." Let's learn from this foreigner how to shake off the karmic burden hanging over Ukraine and the rest of the world.

Oh well, we'll make it through. Art will help us. Lee Sun-Don and his work are with us!

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