CHAK 翟宗浩

Landscapes and Other Natural Occurrences
山水與其他自然意象

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Creating Air: A Conversation with Chak

Chak graduated from the Department of Fine Arts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1981, where he studied with the modernist master Liu Kuo-sung. With his students, Liu stressed the necessity of considering multiple artistic traditions and unconventional modes of brushwork as a way to transform Chinese painting. During his undergraduate years, Chak incorporated a broad range of contemporary theories and materials, for which he received many prestigious awards, including honours from the Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial (Hong Kong Museum of Art, 1979) and Youth Art Now: Asia (Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1980). After graduation, he was awarded a Monbusho Scholarship to continue his education at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts. Chak then went on to study in the United States, completing an MA from Ball State University in 1986, an MFA from Queens College in New York, a residency at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine and the National Artists Program at the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York City. Throughout the 1980s and early '90s, Chak's work was shown widely in Hong Kong, New York, Tokyo and Taipei. After living abroad for nearly 30 years, he returned to Hong Kong in 2009. The following conversation took place at the artist's Fotan studio and at the University Museum and Art Gallery (UMAG) at HKU between October and early December 2019. The discussion between Chak and UMAG curator Christopher Mattison moves from the philosophical underpinnings of Chak's paintings—rooted both in Descartes and classical works like the *Zhuangzi*—to his experimentation with various mediums and types of brushwork, which combine to form the basis for his definition of 'Chinese Painting'. Over the decades, Chak has explored both contemporary and traditional elements in his landscapes, while considering the limits of human expression via the forms and colours of the natural world.

Christopher Mattison: You routinely emphasise the importance of the philosophical framework behind your art, and that a crucial layer of your creative practice is a variant of the Cartesian paradigm—one in which you swap out 'I think' for 'I paint'. Does this mean that you define yourself, at least in part, based on Descarte's explorations into the relationship between the mind and sensory experience?

Chak: Let me address your question with another philosopher—Martin Buber—who uses the natural world to explain the relationship between the linked terms of 'I-Thou' and 'I-It', which I find helpful when discussing my art. In Buber's line of reasoning, these pairs of terms do not signify any particular thing, but are meant to suggest the relationships between individuals ('I') and the broader world ('Thou' or 'It'). It is key to note these terms are not innately in contradiction, but due to conflicting viewpoints, the final results can differ. For example, when a forest is viewed as an isolated object (as an 'It'), the trees run the risk of being reduced to firewood or construction material. But when the forest is placed on equal footing with humanity, the natural world's ability to renew itself and to transform the human eye is similarly reinforced.

When an audience relegates a painting to coloured powder and linseed oil, the physical materials are no longer able to reach beyond their chemical foundations to something more profound. Perhaps it is most useful to consider the 'Cartesian paradigm' as an attitudinal shift in our various relationships. In Buber's words, "I become through my relations . . . All real living is meeting". My paintings are concerned with sensation as viewed through our relationships with the natural world. I think it is crucial to stress the metaphysical nature of my artwork, so that the gouache, oils and acrylics all become part of the transformation between mind and sensation.

CM: As you point out, in Buber's argument the natural world is considered an integral part of human experience; the forest is never reduced to a commodity. Such a focus on exploring and representing human sensation via these relationships, or 'meetings', with sensory experience does raise other issues when considering Descartes' suspicions about sensation as a basis for knowledge, but I understand the basic impulse to use the construct—"I paint therefore I am"—as a way to question your artistic practice. Referring back to your undergraduate training with Liu Kuo-sung, does your choice of materials also tie in with your understanding of being an artist?

Chak: Individual brushstrokes are merely pointers and physical markings of a 'Now'—the present moment, which serves as 'proof' that I am alive. When applying a dab of ultramarine to the canvas, it feels like I am actually creating air, which may culminate in me painting a sky over a horizon. The magic of this moment occurs right in front of my eyes, and through a form of actualisation—in this case brushstrokes—a specific instance is rendered into a frozen sign. Representing our own 'presence' on canvas is a considerably more complex act.

Gabriel Marcel's theory of 'Primary and Secondary Reflection' is similarly concerned with this same nebulous query of 'Who am I?'. As an artist, I often begin with Marcel's concept of 'Primary Reflection', which is composed of the stages of personal inspection, analysis and a visual deconstruction of one's physical surroundings. The following part of his theory, 'Secondary Reflection', continues with the stages of internalisation, reconstruction and a final rearrangement of the investigated elements. One could make an analogy to his theory and the phoenix's legendary series of reincarnations, and by and large the overall process does contain a sense of the mythical and a striving for divine perfection.

Bound up in such a dilemma, we can remain caught in the stage of introspection, along with Marcel, who wonders—is a farmer still a farmer when he leaves his land? Or a sailor when he's not at sea? The survival of the individual components of these pairs are inextricably linked, and it is impossible for me to say whether the individual brushstrokes, or the broader concepts behind the visual elements, are more or less vital to me as an artist. What I do 'know' is that I need to paint.

CM: In this equation, the brushstrokes, the element of craftsmanship, are integral to your analysis and representation of the natural world. What seems crucial here is the form of contemplation that you aspire to create for audiences, assuming that you do have a particular audience in mind.

Chak: To be honest, I never really consider an audience. My focus has always been on exploring and conversing with the trees and hills that are otherwise largely ignored. Painting for me has never involved an attempt to appease any third party, but instead to target a subject's essence, to recreate its 'being'. This is what seems most natural to me.

In terms of the actual brushstrokes, within some schools of contemporary art, skill and technique have become subordinate to conceptual gimmicks. This can be seen, in part, as a result of the Duchampian legacy that questions art's fundamental nature. Based on his revolutionary feat of manipulating the 'readymade' into a form of self-expression, we often forget Duchamp's foundational years as a highly accomplished Cubist painter. Numerous aspiring artists, influenced by his later innovations, have blindly stepped into the world under the false notion they can create meaningful work without an appropriate level of craftsmanship. This is problematic. To my understanding, practical competency is a basic requirement for any artist. The more skillful we become, the more easily and profoundly we can fulfil our desire to communicate. Artists who deal in shallow forms of visual language will quite naturally convey shallow ideas.

CM: In terms of artistic practice and competency, could you speak a bit more about your specific process and materials?

Chak: My daily routine is not particularly interesting. I usually get up early, eat breakfast, spend a couple hours reading, go for a walk and then take care of chores. I work on my paintings in the afternoon light, and in the evening I concentrate on unfinished sketches and set out a plan for the next day.

As for materials, over the last year I have been using acrylics to create a type of Chinese ink wash as a hazy background. There is an inherent fluidity to acrylics that proves useful when creating this effect. As an art student in the late 1970s, I was intrigued by the wave of Photorealism in the American art scene. In response to this, I spent several years trying to incorporate airbrush work and acrylics into my more traditional oil paints. I gave up on these experiments relatively quickly as I found the acrylics and airbrushed paints expressively lacking, and my heavier brushstrokes often collapsed as they dried. Forty years later, I now have a better grasp of the control needed, and I have begun to experiment with the water-soluble nature of acrylics as a way to layer and complement the oils.

CM: In one of our preliminary conversations you mentioned struggling with getting the acrylic paint to 'pop'—that it doesn't shimmer like oil. Could we examine one of the more recent works where you use both oils and acrylics? I am also curious about how the 'hazy background' relates to the remainder of the canvas.

Chak: *Early Spring* is a good example. Traditional Chinese painting uses a limited set of inks that are naturally more agile than oils. De Kooning, the master of Abstract Expressionism, used safflower rather than linseed oil because it dries more slowly, allowing him a longer amount of time to work on each canvas. I use water-soluble acrylics in a similar manner to create a splashed-ink effect. I could also add turpentine and linseed to my oils, but I believe the end results of those combinations are a bit thin and not nearly as striking.

CM: But within the paintings, what is the actual intent of the layer you refer to as a 'hazy background', and does this relate to how you sometimes start by building up areas of white in the centre image. There is a point, often in the middle or lower third of your work, where the movement of the brushstrokes is constricted and then surges ahead. I'm thinking of the drawing *Brotherhood of Streams* or the two-panel painting *Mountain Chorus*. These strictures, where the brushstrokes and waters are roiling around an object, could be either an origin point or a moment of erasure.

Chak: People have both passive and active aspects. When we view art, we are often limited by the images depicted by an artist, while we also can actively generate new reveries out of the visual stimulation. As far as the layers of white, and the blue used for the ocean and sky, one literal interpretation of the image is certainly of the natural world surging through Hong Kong, but these swatches of colour are also closely related to the prescribed compositions emphasised in Western formalism and the traditional blankness sometimes found in Chinese painting. A common theme in this and many of my works is the static versus the kinetic world. As the proverb states, "The trees long for peace but the wind will never cease." Within any moment of calm, it is possible to feel an invisible force moving. The whiteness is used to represent another key opposition in my works—'scattering/gathering'—which is highlighted by the condensed movement of the strokes.

CM: For most of your life you have lived in hyper-urban settings—Hong Kong, Tokyo and New York City—but your paintings and drawings are concerned exclusively with layers of the natural world, and you seem uninspired by the palimpsests of urban structures. For example, over the past few years the view outside your studio window has been altered by the encroachment of a massive new housing complex, but your focus has remained squarely on the trees and their movements, their specific interplay of light and shadow against the hills.

Chak: Cities are, by definition, full of people. Every day we encounter thousands of individuals in a seemingly interconnected network, while unwittingly taking part in a complex process of alienation and estrangement. Our unconscious identifies each of these people as moving objects and most of these 'objects', in return, classify us just as indifferently and anonymously. Such a movement towards dehumanisation and objectification has become the basis for our relationships with much of the world. Within all of these highly compact and complex urban environments, we face the very modern issue of not always having the physical or mental capacity to efficiently maneuver and adapt to the expanding stimuli. We are literally suffocating in concrete and steel.

But within the realm of the natural world, such turmoil and trepidation completely disappears, at least for me. We climb hills to decompress. Trees lean against each other in solidarity and offer shade. Shadows rippling in the wind amplify rather than obstruct the setting sun. One might regard our relationship to nature's physical elements as unidirectional, but the natural world has its own way of communicating. It embraces humanity and provides each of us a space for contemplation.

CM: Earlier you mentioned the need to 'communicate' and you have raised the point here again in relation to nature. One of the things I find most intriguing about the theoretical basis of your work is your awareness of the limitations of both text-based and visual languages. You seek to capture the imperceptible layers of sensation without idealising your own practice.

Chak: That's me channelling Wittgenstein on the limits of language! I view the cityscape as a fabricated structure with its own rigorous logic and set of rules, and I am inherently uninterested in such artificial constructs. In opposition to this, the natural world provides me the freedom to explore sensation and human experience through purely visual and 'natural' elements—an endless palette of forms, lines, shapes, compositions and hues. No matter how abstract the final outcomes, my representations of nature are inseparable from the physical trees, rocks and coastline. On canvas, the various elements (shapes and shadows) are allowed to ferment and expand into various states.

Perhaps because of their essence, rivers and the wind are often used to signify nature's immense power. And within life there are moments of surging forward, sudden retreats and then silence. This recurring loop of movement and stillness is the metaphysical basis for my work, as well as how I approach daily life and my understanding of the infinite. Dust from the stars will eventually fade, and the layer of 'culture' created by a writer or painter is really nothing more than a cosmic blip in a world that will continue to evolve long after humanity's presence has faded.

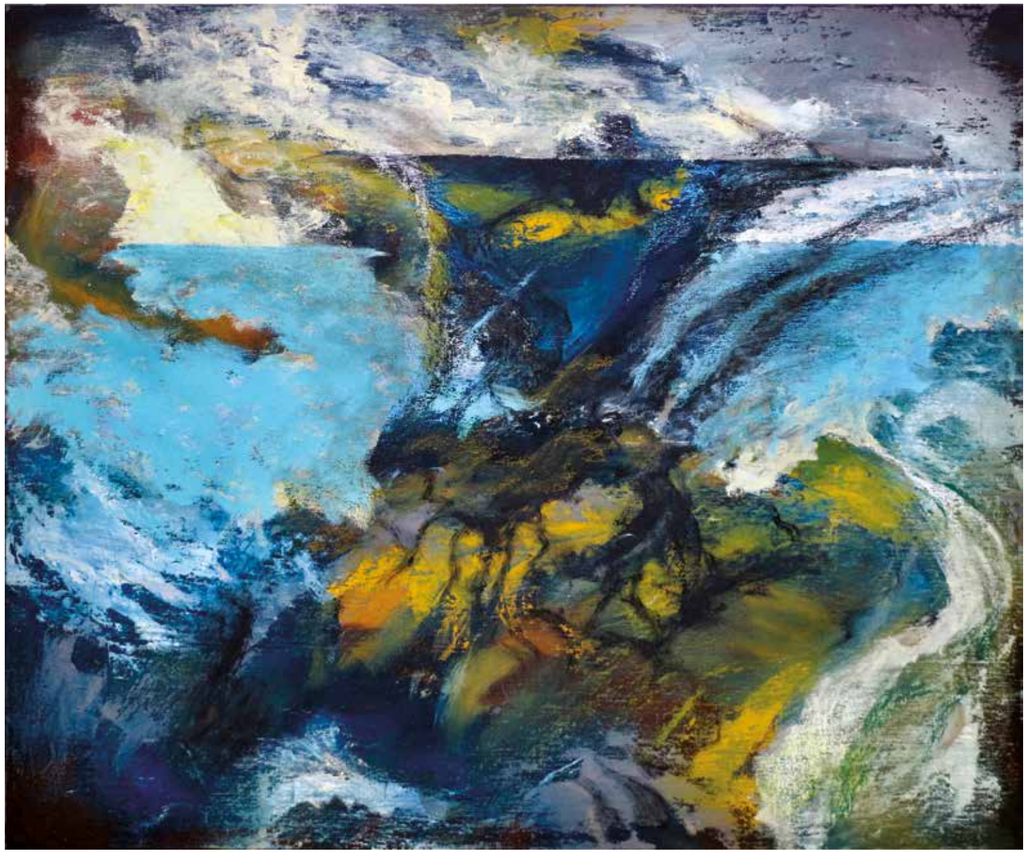
Returning briefly to Wittgenstein, his explorations of the ultimate limits of language reminds me of the tale in the *Zhuangzi*, where the fish Kun and bird Peng are used to express the vastness of the natural world. In the story, Kun is so many thousands of miles long that no one is able to measure its length, and when Kun transforms into the bird Peng, its back is so broad that again it is impossible to gauge. What excites me most about this metaphor is the immanent energy—that Peng can fly hundreds or thousands of miles with just a single flap of its wings. In short, humanity's impact is limited, while the natural world's ability to express itself is infinite.

Peninsular
半島地區
182.8 x 243.8 cm | 2019

Mountain Chorus
山嶺之謳歌
182.8 x 243.8 cm | 2019

The Big Blue
海天一色
182.8 x 243.8 cm | 2019

Traveling Couple
旅途中的情侶
41.5 x 56.5 cm | 2011–18



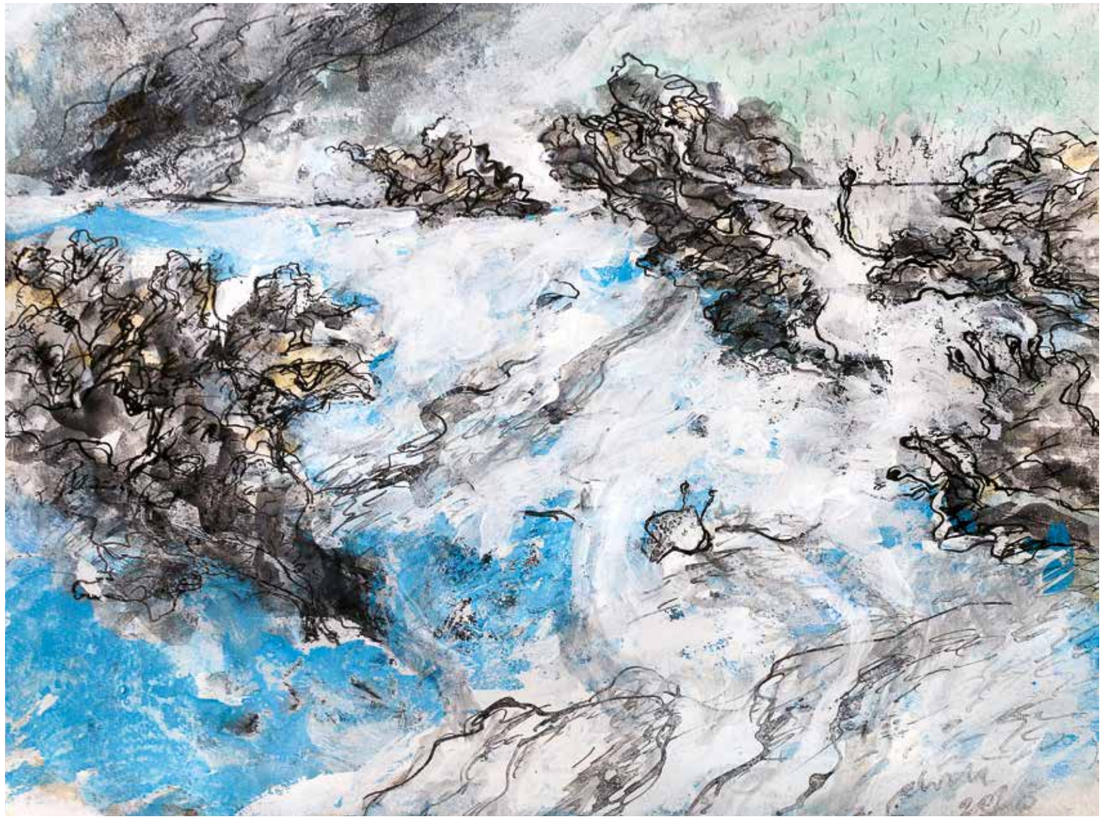
Coming Storm
暴風雨的來臨
50.1 x 59.7 cm | 2019

Golden Dusk
金色的黄昏
41.2 x 64.1 cm | 2019

Postmodern Landscape
後現代的風景
50.1 x 59.7 cm | 2018

Co-existence of the Clam and the Waving Sea
海的兩面——風平浪靜與波濤洶湧
50.1 x 59.7 cm | 2019

Heartland
心臟地帶
32 x 41 cm | 2017–19



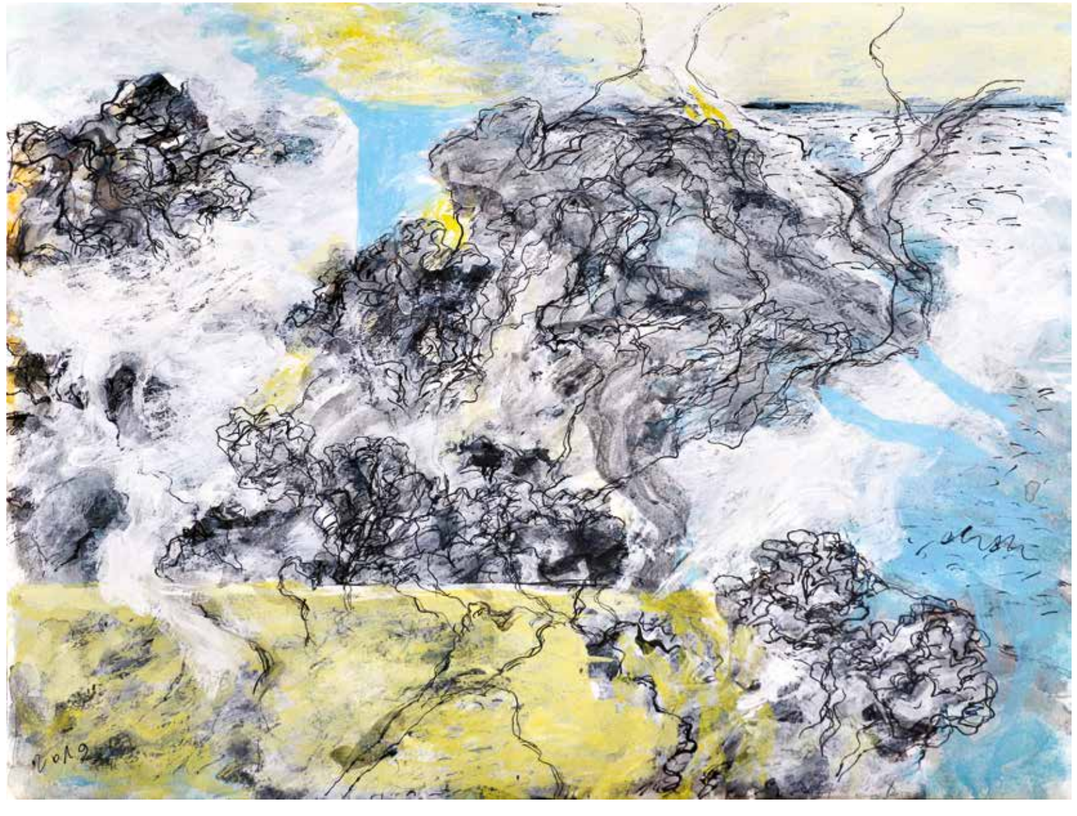
A Nice Breeze
一習輕快涼風
32 x 41 cm | 2018

White Clouds as Hydrogen Balloons
恰似氫氣球的白雲
29.5 x 41.9 cm | 2018

Dance of the Tako
舞步章魚
29.5 x 41.9 cm | 2019

Long Walk
漫長遠足
30.1 x 62.8 cm | 2019

Distant Horizons
遠方的水平線
30 x 40 cm | 2019



Through the Window
窗外遠眺
30 x 40 cm | 2019

A Broken Heart
一顆破碎的心
30 x 40 cm | 2019

Neo-geometric Landscape
新幾何的風景
30 x 40 cm | 2019

Out the Old Garden Window
故園窗外
32 x 41 cm | 2017–19