

Li Gang and Vital Ink Painting

By David Adam Brubaker

How will Chinese artists express today self in relation to nature and society? What style will express equilibrium in a way that satisfies persons who think globally? Perhaps choice of style springs from a thought such as this: one or more of the senses manifests self in union with some precious element in nature that leads to compassion? What then does “union” of self with nature mean? How can paper and ink convey such a union? It is difficult to say, when modern voices state that science tells us what exists and that roots of self are beyond self-observation. Li Gang’s paintings are of great value, because he addresses questions of balance, precious sensuous existence, compassion and community, and choice of technique. He faces these difficult questions, because he must as an artist who seeks to *revitalize* ink painting.

The answer seems simple: the artist must express concrete life. Guo Xi says: choose and convey a subject that can be wandered about and lived in. Yet, what composition and subject-matter expresses *living and wondering within nature* for the contemporary viewer who is also in the habit of scientific thinking? Compositions that depict nature in terms of material events are clear in their way. But the individual’s own uniqueness of contact with existence is still obscured. Li Gang’s question, I believe, is this: what parts of technique belonging to traditional ink painting will awaken each viewer to *intimate contact with nature and others*, so that each is aware that life is more than 10,000 useful things?

The Choice of Technique

With regard to traditional materials and techniques, Li Gang’s faces a dilemma: How much change should there be in contemporary ink painting? If there too little, his work will

produce in the viewer an awareness of paintings by “ancients” in the past. This is risky: the present-day viewer may mistake resemblance to a past style as the goal and fail to notice that the artistic purpose is to promote union with nature *in present practice*. If there is too much, he may risk losing continuity with a treasured tradition of painting that aims to bring the viewer closer to nature and harmony with others. What is the right balance in technique and style?

Li Gang conducts experiments to find a technique that will satisfy. Some conventions of the past are definitely abandoned. No recognizable objects! No brush! No strokes! Paper is folded, dipped, stained, and stamped. Ink *seeps* delicately and partially, leaving areas of unmarked openness within unrefined paper. Thick marks emerge by pouring, and square and cylindrical containers are tools for stamping ink! At first glance, Li Gang’s concentration on ink and paper may seem to bring results that are unconventional, clumsy, and poor imitations of mountains, waters, and modern social life. Yet, this rule-breaking is for a roughness and originality that Shitao would surely appreciate. No eating of leftovers from the ancients! No mere copying of “sweet achievements” pioneered in the past.

This turn to a non-objective style is a skillful and purposeful strategy. Li Gang’s unconventional marks in ink, balanced with manifest areas of open formlessness, prevent the viewer from conventional thoughts of familiar *things*. He keeps the viewer on the path of moral awakening, because his ink-play jolts us away from thinking that life is identical to our knowledge of empirical events. Moreover, the “clumsy” method increases concentration on the intertwining of ink and paper. Shitao himself uses strokes that are odd, unusual or grotesque to remove the idea that equilibrium arises merely from perception and duplication of the *form* of some ancient style.

The Works: Picturing Uniqueness of Sensuous Existence

How does Li Gang's bold style bring the viewer to an awareness of *closer* contact with nature? If we look at Li Gang's paintings, it becomes very clear that they help us to think of elemental contact with nature, where uniqueness of sensuous self-existence is inseparable from compassion for others. Li Gang's marks and voids inspire us to think about relationships between personality (traits of thinking and feeling), refreshing contact with nature, perception of natural environment, and the community of self-sentient beings.

With [014-2011] and [016-2011], Li Gang creates elements of style and a distinctive artistic vocabulary that can be described in four stages. First, there is a rectangular unit that is repeated many times in roughly the same size and shape. Within each individuated rectangular unit, there is a marked core of dark ink that is of some unique shape and unrepeatable form: hooked, round, curved, sharp, small, dribbled, textured, or dense. Sometimes a single unit has a core consisting of a cluster of tiny drops of black ink.

Second, in each individuated rectangle, the dark core (of odd calligraphic dotting) bleeds into the paper and arrives by subtle gradation at an open area of pure paper unmarked by ink. The thick core marks that cannot be taken back are able to mingle by gradation with an observable openness that is *evident and manifest*. Though this internal "void" or band of emptiness may be called "formless" from the standpoint of perceptual experience of definite marks, it is an openness sensuously presented. It is not a negative shape: it is no shape at all. Nonetheless, it is the appearing of an actual extensiveness that has no distinct parts and no determinate magnitude in time or space. Sometimes the sensuous void is created opaquely by white pigment, as in [015-2011], where the dimension of sensuous emptiness seems present as an alternate heart for some dark dot. In [0002-2010], the opaque white seems to be a primary element that dissolves experiences and appearances of physical space.

Third, continuing with [014-2011], the viewer finds that there is often a second seeping or gradation that begins with the intermediate “void” and proceeds outward to a gray atmospheric field that displays perceptible textures and features. The textures in this third zone sometimes bring to mind traditional strokes of ink used to represent phenomena in nature, such as the crevices of mountains. Some of the rectangular units in [016-2011] have outer bands of gray contain marks that are crisp and topographical; and some corners seem to contain appearances that are wispy and wave-like.

Fourth, whether the outer reaches of a given rectangular unit consists of void or of the band of textured phenomena, the viewer observes the crossing of a boundary and transition to a neighboring rectangular unit that has its own unique version of marked core, sensuous void, and field of distinct textures. Some neighbors are joined at their voids, while others are joined at their textured atmospheres. Sometimes one neighbor brings a void to the border, while the other brings a gray field of phenomena. In one case, in [015-2011], the dark cores of two neighbors advance right to the edge and stop just short of each other at the boundary.

What interpretation can we develop for this narrative of multiple units, each with some interior configuration of dot, void and gray texture? Our answers here will help explain the value of Li Gang’s paintings. With thoughtfulness, we can notice how “clumsy” marks communicate a philosophical narrative about self-in-union with nature and a principle of social harmony. Human life provides analogs for his vocabulary: dots for instinct and emotion that shape personality; formless voids for direct contact with one of the senses (such as the eye) that displays a unique and elemental whole of sensuous existence; gray fields of distinct textures for phenomenal appearances in environment; and finally the unit of living individuality (dot, void and appearances) is repeated to create many precious individuals who are equal members in community.

The moral import of this vocabulary of rectangular units becomes clear, when the repetition of “cells” or units begins to create a community. The viewer begins to think of both local and global communities, in which each individual possess its own quirky core, sensible void, and zone of appearances. Some neighbors are immediate, as when one brings to the boundary an open void or a gray texture that seems mirrored (most exactly in the interior of the neighbor next door. Other neighbors are global and far away on the other side of the composition. There are some hints that the community as a whole, as one, is not immediately visible to any one individual. One interior void is vivid and sensuous to the unit containing it, but each of the other neighbors has access only to its own singular sampling of dots, voids and gray atmosphere. Neighbors must replay on representations or symbols to communicate with each other about these obvious inward voids.

The x-ray quality of [019-2011] suggests to me, again, that Li Gang is picturing for us a whole community, even though each self-sentient unit of manifest sensuous existence (or each singular instantiation of a “void”) can directly observe for itself neither the heart of any other member nor the all the members of the community, as a whole. Despite the impossibility of one neighbor having direct acquaintance with the interior of another, each unit of living is unlikely to have serious doubts about the unique existence of its neighbors, because each can model and project an idea of unique existence from self-observation of its own manifest openness or “void.”

With regard to the inability of one unique self-sensuous unit to access the sensuous void and perceptible appearances possessed uniquely by its neighbor, it is instructive to compare Li Gang’s work with two of Robert Smithson’s sculptures from 1969, *Chalk Mirror Displacement* and *Nonsite (Essen Soil and Mirrors)*. In Smithson’s work, the sensuous void or “mirror” (exhibited as the surface of a physical mirror) is *combined* with the imagery and appearances reflected from the interior of chalk. By sifting and separating the manifest band of sensuous “void” from the gray band of textured appearances, Li Gang enables us to think more clearly

about the difference between the manifest “formlessness” of sensuous existence and the distinct appearances or images that are noticed within it during perception.

It follows that Li Gang’s seemingly non-objective style is a counterweight to late-modern expressionism, where marks symbolize material effects produced by a free and rootless ego, instinct, or biological conditions. Li Gang’s work displays a *counterinstance* to egoistic accounts of self, because he pictures the individual person as able (when needed) to counter personality with awareness of the intimate and observable sediment of sensuous existence that is outside all desire for objects. It is the unique and sensuous “void” that offers the individual a refreshing place of rest and relief from perceptual experiences of feelings, emotions and events. It is important for the viewer of Li Gang’s work to notice that observable “voids” are distributed across the community of individuals, with a frequency that matches the cores of dark ink. With Li Gang’s work as a helpful guide, the viewer concludes that the unique person is not essentially disembodied thinking; each person is equally and essentially also an unmarked sensuous medium or “void” that serves as a betweenness for contact with nature and others. Li Gang counters the tired modern model of the rational individual who casts the light of intellect so that opaque, dark and dangerous nature can become transparent to scientific knowledge.

Some of Li Gang’s paintings are of interest, because they *fail* to present expected signs (unmarked paper or white pigment) of the openness of sensuous existence that is usually at the heart of each individual unit. For example, in [013-2011] and [018-2011], the vividness of the void of sensuous existence is missing or barely present in many units that contain dots. Many ink dots are surrounded or swallowed-up entirely by gray atmosphere; there is no manifestation of the band of white. This loss of unique hollows of sensuous existence brings a gray cast that is reminiscent of Goya’s etching, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (1797-99). But Goya’s theme is an unsettling absence of rational consciousness, whereas Li Gang’s paintings seem to imply instead that it is loss of awareness of sensuous existence, not the loss

of intellect and cognitive understanding of things, that may cause the loss of moral equilibrium within the person.

The lack of white voids within the interiors of some individuals units also reminds me, in a way, of Giacometti's figures, which suffer compression from material conditions that threaten harm. The minimal and elongated figures in *City Square* (1948) are successful in provoking thoughts of the human condition and life that survives despair. But Giacometti (and perhaps Jean-Paul Sartre, as well) still seems to begin from the premise that to exist in nature is to experience, suffer and act upon physical and material phenomena. By contrast, Li Gang *adds* the thought that the individual person is connected with nature by direct acquaintance with a manifest hollow of sensuous existence, before reason imposes categories of mind that restrict thoughts of nature to experiences of phenomena. By his art, Li Gang helps each of us to think of sensuously presented nature as an immediate context of self-sentience that is reducible neither to instinct, nor to imagining, nor to events for which there are scientific explanations. The star-like pattern of hollows in [019-2011] suggest that the whole of existence is dependent upon self-observing individuals who can find in sensuous existence an intention for empathy and compassionate action.

Li Gang's Path

Li Gang's style forges a path in contemporary art that meets important needs. Works in ink showing subtle gradations from form to formlessness are well suited for symbolizing the transition from personality, to wholes or "hollows" of sensuous existence, and finally to experiences of particular phenomena. His vocabulary of self-observing individuals implies a principle of compassion based on samples of precious sensuous self-existence that cannot be objectified. The white areas or "voids" in his paintings are analogues for a context of sensibility – a seldom mentioned "bottom" or soil – that is essential if the stages of cognitive, emotional, and perceptual experience are to emerge. Li Gang helps each of us to move closer to

awareness of our own respective samples of sensuous existence, contexts that go unmentioned if we speak only about perceptual experiences of objects and events.

Li Gang shows us that ink painting can contribute to a contemporary avant-guard of a new sort. He does indeed preserve key features of ink painting and traditional aesthetics, while creating art of great originality that expresses the intrinsic worth of each unique life of sensuous existence. As Wang Lin states so well, Li Gang's works are a sign that ink painting is likely to give us more and more possibilities. Li Gang is able to revitalize the technique of ink painting, because he has revitalized traditional thoughts of the preciousness of each and every unique life that gives heart to community. We can eagerly hope that Li Gang will continue to create more works that will offer us more possibilities for awakening to awareness of ultimate value, intimate union with nature, and our belonging to community.