

The Mollywood Series

The ink painting that will be the main topic of this chapter (Figure 2.1) was on display in a large exhibition dedicated to landscape painting at the Hong Kong Museum of Art, a show organized in 2020 at the occasion of the museum's reopening after refurbishment. Titled *A Sense of Place—From Turner to Hockney*, it consisted mainly in an important selection from the Tate Britain Museum and presented a wide range of artists and understandings of the concept of landscape, from J. M. W. Turner and John Constable to David Hockney and even Tracey Emin as well as Richard Long. Even though none of the works made by Hong Kong artists in the accompanying shows were given a catalogue, they were mentioned in the preface of the catalogue dedicated to “A Sense of Place” by the museum director, Maria Mok. First, she described two paintings made by local artists as being “added” to the group of artworks from

the Tate Britain: “To complement these British landscapes, we have added a special section featuring ‘Hong Kong viewpoint,’ in which we have invited two contemporary Hong Kong artists, Simon Wan and Joey Leung Ka-yin 梁嘉賢, to present their photographs, mixed media works and Chinese painting in order to initiate new dialogues between traditional and modern art and between East and West.”¹ The absence of these two Hong Kong artists from the catalogue published by the Museum of Art made it very clear that they were relegated to the “East,” so prominently inscribed against the “West” by the museum director in her preface. This is not the place to address the issues inherent in this uncritical use of the concepts of “East” and “West,” but it was to be expected in the context of an institution whose function seems to perpetuate these problematic clichés. After all, the entire narrative used by the Hong Kong cultural authorities, from the Hong Kong Tourist Association to the Leisure and Cultural Services



Figure 2.1 Joey Leung Ka-yin 梁嘉賢, *Mundane Mind* 煩人的凡腦, 2019. Chinese ink, drawing pen, gouache, acrylic, color pencil on paper, 200 × 540 cm, set of 6 pieces. Courtesy of the artist.

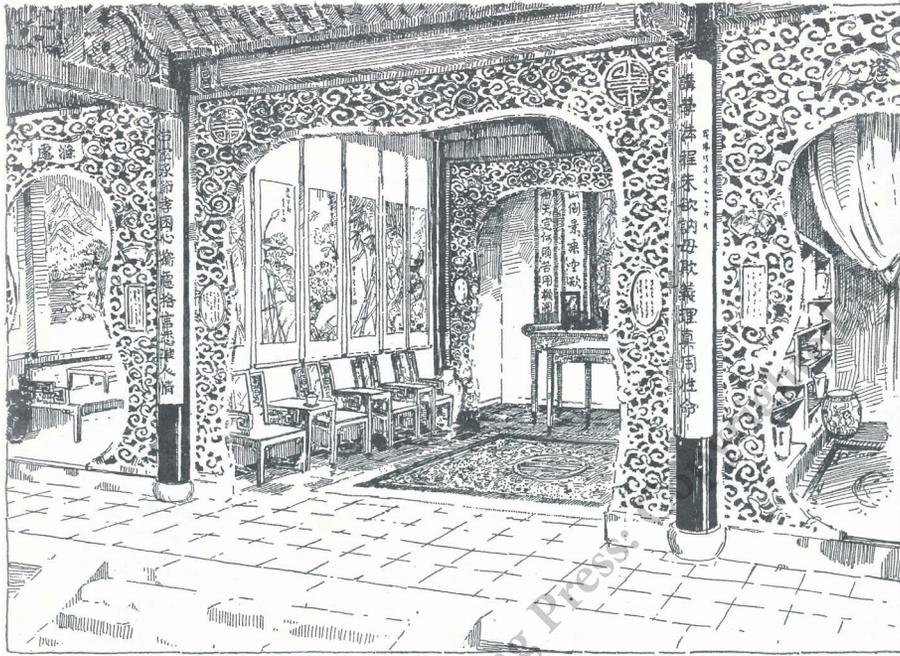


Figure 2.2 In R. H. Van Gulick, *Chinese Pictorial Art As Viewed by the Connoisseur* (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1993), 73.

Department which is running the museum, hinges around the concept of Hong Kong as the place where “East meets West,” but again, this is not the topic of this chapter.² For convenience’s sake, and at the risk of falling into another set of oversimplifications, I will use the term “Euro-America” instead of “West” from now on.

The works of Joey Leung Ka-yin have been the topic of several passages in my two books on art in Hong Kong.³ I was attracted by her take on the practice of Chinese “fine line painting” (*gongbi* 工筆), a very laborious method of depicting extremely detailed figures with lines and colors, and by her quirky narratives. Even though she actually did not use the Chinese brush to paint, preferring drawing pens and pencils, her choice of format as well as

the general aesthetic choices she made painting her subjects will all remind viewers of the stereotypes of “Chinese painting.” Hanging scrolls, horizontal or vertical, are frequent in her works and her use of the written text inside the painting is clearly a reference to Chinese literati painting. Even in the case of *Mundane Mind*, the technique of display derives from the past of Chinese art. It happens frequently, especially after the Ming dynasty, that large landscape paintings, or groups of related paintings like the flowers of various seasons, would be made in a series of hanging scrolls hung side by side, as this print of a rich mansion’s interior shows (**Figure 2.2**).

As for the quirky content of her paintings, they can also be found in a series of comic strips she made for local newspapers in Hong Kong in the early



Figure 2.3 Joey Leung Ka-yin, *Good View, Great Time: Element 123* 良辰美景系列之元素 123, 2007. Drawing pen and color pencil on paper, 94 × 96 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

2000s, a medium she used to such interesting effects that I analyzed them by comparing them with the idea of Superflatness advocated by Takashi Murakami 村上隆 (born 1962), certainly the most famous contemporary artist who explored the limits between the high art of painting (or at least objects reminiscent of painting) and the low art of comic books (this too is not the main topic of this chapter, but just as “East” and “West” are always problematic, so of course are “high” and “low” when it comes to art). However, where the Japanese artist advocated a form of neutral cultural artefact, where the cultural origins of an artwork are somehow erased by the commercial veneer applied to it, it was clear that Joey Leung was pursuing, in all her works, an exploration of her own roots as a Hong Kong artist. Her belonging to the

local culture is everywhere in her work for those who would know where to look, and it begins with her use of the Cantonese language and its literary tradition. In a 2007 article on female artists in Hong Kong, Koon Yeewan, who focused on the sexual connotations of the mountain in one of Joey Leung’s works, had already stated her exploration of writings steeped into Cantonese culture. She wrote, about the painting titled *Good View, Great Time: Element 123* 良辰美景系列之元素 123 (**Figure 2.3**):

Leung refers to Chinese traditional painting by evoking a typical landscape painting of a central mountain with a fisherman in his skiff. But the central mountain long used as a symbol of the emperor as part of the cosmology of landscape, is now embraced by a young lady and turned into a

phallus. Her short dress has motifs of young deer with one such deer climbing up her skirt. On top of this mountain are a willow tree and an apartment building. The poem plays with the term "willow" long used to denote female desirability, and uses it as a homophone for "foreign (new style) apartment" and "foreign (hip) babes."

Next to the willow is a foreign apartment.

Inside the foreign apartment is a foreign babe.

Each day the foreign babe appreciates the willow.

Life as such is joyful without a care.

The style of the poem mimics Cantonese poems, which are often satirical rhymes. This one is no exception. It satirizes the stereotypical desires of Hong Kong men—foreign apartments and women, but where "foreign" is used to refer to new and hip, rather than ethnic origins. . . . willow landscape flaunts female sexuality, endorsing the complexities of women as possessions and possessors.⁴

We will return to the significance of this use of the Cantonese language in the last section of this chapter. *Mundane Mind* belongs to a series of "hair landscape" paintings Joey Leung has worked on since 2018. Titled in English the "Mollywood series," the artist plays with words such as the name Molly, which could be identified as a stereotype of femininity (any other feminine first name would have fitted but, as we shall see, it was chosen here for its phonetic quality) but, more importantly, with Bollywood, the Mumbai-based Indian movie industry, which seems to include into this group of painting the sort of exuberant and colorful nature of that kind of entertainment. Even though colorfulness and exuberance are there to be seen, it is a very different emotion the artist is actually exploring. It very often happens with Hong Kong artists that the Chinese and English titles of their works

vary, and sometimes very significantly. This allows for rich semantic ambiguities that are not lost on an artist like Joey Leung for whom text always plays an essential role. The Chinese title of the "Mollywood series" is "Hair Island" (*Maodao* 毛島 in Putonghua, but *Modo* in Cantonese, the syllable "Mo" being evoked by the name "Molly"), which seems to focus more closely on the landscape elements represented in these ink paintings. This title derives from the expression *famao* 發毛 (*faatmo* in Cantonese), which literally translates as "grow hair," but signifies to be panicked, scared, or nervous. We will see that nervousness and dissatisfaction are always the main theme of the paintings in this series. To clarify her intentions, the artist wrote a statement at the time she began working on it:

There is no time for worries in this city, all we do is to consume, indulge and light up the sky with vague smiley fireworks. Time also does not allow me to ignore my troubles, nor to forget my helplessness.

To face this ridicule, I pile up all the troubles and worries and transform them into mountains and rivers, forming an island named "Mollywood."

Hair in this series is a metaphor of "worry." When hair (worry) grows, it forms mountains and rivers. It also works as a kind of new bush strokes to form landscapes. Different from traditional brush strokes, it does not look like the real mountain texture and it doesn't aim to. I am trying to create an imaginary space which is close to the real world mentally/emotionally. It seems like an adventure to explore the unknown.⁵

The "new brush strokes" (*cun* 皴) mentioned in this statement refer to a central technique of landscape painting in China. Usually translated in English as "surface strokes" (in French *rides de surface* [surface wrinkles]), they form a long list of various ways to apply the ink on the surface of the painting in order

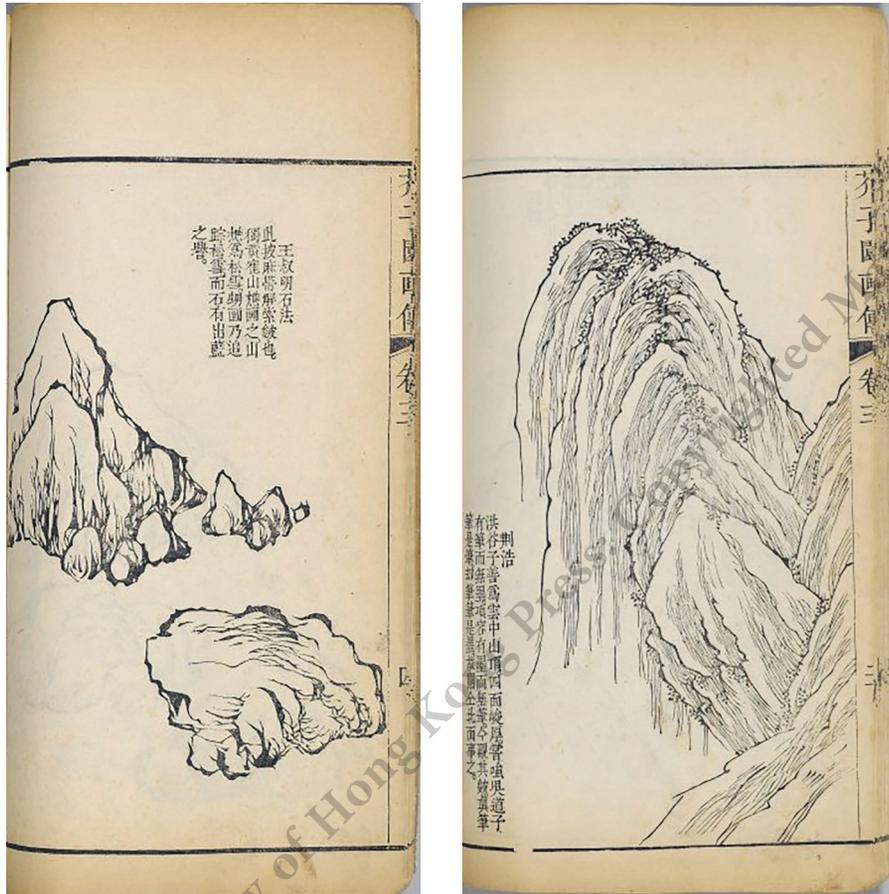


Figure 2.4 Examples of various surface strokes used to shape rocks, with “hemp fiber brushstroke” (*pimacun* 披麻皴) on the top rock (left), and of those used to shape a mountain face in the works of Jing Hao 荆浩 (c. 885–915) (right). Two pages from the *Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual* 芥舟學畫編, 1782. Woodblock printed book, ink and color on paper, each 29.8 × 17.3 cm. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Reverend J. J. Banbury, 05.583. Photo courtesy of Brooklyn Museum.

to form natural formations such as rocks and plants. One of the most commonly used of such brushstrokes for rocks and mountains is, for instance, the “hemp fibre brushstroke” (*pimacun* 披麻皴), sometimes applied with fairly dry ink as in these examples from the famous *Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual* 芥舟學畫編 (Figure 2.4). One painting from the series exemplifies perfectly how the hair of

Joey Leung’s maidens can be used to mimic the traditional brush strokes of literati landscape painting. *The Carefree Stone* 不煩石 (Figure 2.5) represents three young women: one is standing, letting her hair flow through her fingers; another one is sitting on the ground and brushing her hair; and the third one, only her panties and thighs visible, is crawling inside the mass of hair. These three characters, extremely



Figure 2.5 Joey Leung Ka-yin, *The Carefree Stone* 不煩石, 2018. Ball pen, acrylic, gouache, Chinese ink, color pencil on paper, 85 × 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

young and seemingly emotionless, are all contained within an undifferentiated mass of hair, making it impossible to identify whose hair viewers are looking at when beholding the painting. Once the viewers have seen the general layout of the painting, they start realizing that they are in the presence of giantesses. Within the mass of hair, other characters and objects appear: a pair of gnarled trees, a minuscule

bather with a swimming cap, a bark attached to one of the girls' toe, a white rabbit jumping, four golden shapes looking like clouds, another minuscule figure reading inside the hair. The only exception is a bird whose proportions seem to be on par with the main human figures, until the viewer realizes that it has in fact human legs, maybe a stand-in for the artist as it will appear again in other paintings from that series.

The figure reading seems to occupy a cave within this mountain, while a very long lock of hair emulates the cascades of the mountains of literati landscape painting. These two indications, and the general composition of the painting, are immediately readable as an imitation of a literati landscape painting. Relevant examples of such landscape paintings count in the tens of thousands over a period of at least nine centuries, since the aesthetic and philosophical foundations of literati painting were established during the Song dynasty. One example from the early Qing dynasty in the 17th century, by the major artist Wang Yuanqi 王原祁 (1642–1715), is enough to establish this “family resemblance” between Joey Leung’s figures and the mountains of literati landscape (Figure 2.6). We will return to this comparison later in this chapter since both the visual analysis of such works and the theoretical texts written by literati artists will be used to clarify how much they are defined by the patriarchal structure of Chinese culture, a position undermined by Joey Leung thanks to her visual choices. In *Mundane Mind*, a much ambitious painting in terms of scale and detailing, Joey Leung expands the “landscape” by arranging many more giantesses—either nine, if you count heads, or eleven, if you count the pairs of hands—with similar masses of flowing black hair. Their faces are as emotionless as the ones in *The Carefree Stone* and they are occupied by the same kinds of fairly pointless activities: taking care of themselves, or rather their bodies,



Figure 2.6 Wang Yuanqi 王原祁 (1642–1715), *Interpretative Copy of Huang Gongwang 仿黃公望山水圖*, 1703. Ink and color on paper, 110.2 × 46.5 cm. Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art (ref. no. XB1992.0129).

they are surrounded by flowers and many of the same objects as in *The Carefree Stone*. Here too, the mood is of mild despondency. As in traditional literati painting, Joey Leung added an inscription that clarifies these characters' frame of mind:

我以為是常識的，原來不是常常識
 下沉通通無礙的，專家指數據清晰
 那些我想忘記的，偏頑固如萬年漬
 如果淚會流乾的，為何還在滴滴滴
 空氣尖銳荒謬的，呼吸有何營養值
 明明定好目標的，突然眼瞓又無力
 世事要事無常的，永恆不變怎解釋
 我的腦袋平凡的，難以理解煩人的

I thought it was common sense,
 turns out it's not.

This sinking [feeling] is entirely unavoidable,
 statistic experts rely on clear data.

Those are things I want to forget,
 but they're as stubborn as a million year old stain.

If the tears flow until they dry up,
 why are they still dripping?

The air is sharp and absurd,
 what is the nutritional value of breathing?

You want to clearly set a good goal,
 and suddenly your eyes are powerless.

If the world is impermanent,
 how do you explain it never changes?

My brain is nothing exceptional,
 it is so hard to understand it becomes annoying.

This classical poetic structure has been used by Joey Leung in many of her paintings, the verses being rigidly structured and containing exactly the same number of characters. The grammar employed is,

however, oscillating between contemporary and more classical forms. We will see later in this chapter how Joey Leung’s poems can still be seen as belonging to the Cantonese tongue in spite of the fact that there is nothing particularly Cantonese in the language used in that poem. As for its content, it is part of this “growing hair” series: it clearly puts into words what these young women are thinking and express the disappointment and doubts inherent in life in a city like Hong Kong. Not knowing what the future holds, living with pollution, feeling powerless, there is little to look forward to. The notion of impermanence (*wuchang* 無常) introduced towards the end of the poem, a Buddhist notion, is not even a consolation since it cannot be resolved with change: everything remains the same and the only feeling one can get is that of boredom. Keep in mind that this painting was painted in 2018, things have changed in Hong Kong since then and this chapter will address this issue especially in regard to local culture. As for now, we will look at more details of *Mundane Mind* and compare the painting with earlier examples of female representation in Chinese art.

***Mundane Mind* and “Paintings of Beauties”**

Obviously, the depiction of female figures is far from rare in Chinese painting. From *The Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies* scroll of Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (c. 344–406), representing aristocratic women upholding the patriarchal mode of behavior expected from educated persons, to the paintings of feminine beauties by the Ming dynasty painter Tang Yin 唐寅 (1470–1523), who was considered to be a literati painter even though he was not a member of the civil servant class to which the vast majority of

literati belonged, there are many female figures standing out in the paintings of male artists. There are also some female artists of renown within the literati artworld, their lives and artistic productions having been the subject of many monographs and chapters of histories of Chinese painting, but they generally painted flower and birds and some landscapes. Some art historians even emphasized the problematic point that women were not forbidden access to the world of artistic production, thus trying to prove that “Chinese culture” was never misogynistic. But we shall see later that, in spite of the presence of these rare figures, some daughters and wives of literati families and other famous courtesans of multiple artistic and literary talents, the fact remains that literati culture was always male-dominated, which makes of Joey Leung’s paintings an interesting and quaint take on the conservativeness inherent in literati painting. To return to the representation of female figures in Chinese painting, we can provide interesting case studies to understand better what these representations were in the deeply patriarchal society of the late imperial period.

Towards the end of the 18th century, and most of the 19th, a genre painting of a new kind emerged in the form of the “painting of beauties” (*Meirenhua* 美人畫). The most famous representatives of this trend were the professional painters Gai Qi 改琦 (1774–1829) and Fei Danxu 費丹旭 (1801–1850). The fact that these two painters were selling their works for a living was, however, problematic in the context of literati art. Tang Yin in the 15th and 16th centuries already represented a contradictory example in the context of literati art: although his friendship with famous scholars of Suzhou put him squarely in the world of literati art, the fact that he failed the public examinations giving access to the civil service, and that he sold his paintings for a living, gave