

The Art of Chunming Yu: An Omniscient View

Chunming Yu is an artist of two worlds. Trained in the traditional art forms of his native China, Yu has also been greatly influenced by traditions of the West, particularly those of European artists of the Baroque era. His paintings are a stylistic fusion of Eastern iconography, vantage points, and perspective coupled with a devotion to the subtleties and emotional power of light through a layering of chiaroscuro, the interplay of light and dark.

This coupling is accomplished in a deceptively quiet manner, belying our immediate recognition of this or that influence. His works contain the refined and delicately nuanced chiaroscuro of paintings by Rembrandt van Rijn, one of the artists Yu readily identifies with and from whom he appropriated stylistic techniques. He blends them seamlessly into his unique vision of traditional Chinese culture – as seen through its domestic architecture – and the sometimes perceived separateness of that culture from the West, the competing subcultures within his native land, and, perhaps even more importantly, the underlying oneness of all cultures, be they East or West that unifies us all. It is this subtext of Yu's work that is expressed mainly in the melding of traditional Chinese aesthetics with the stylistic and technical influences garnered from the artist's extensive study of Western masters.

Many of Yu's paintings share with the viewer a bird's eye view of a traditional Chinese village, the thatched or tiled rooftops puzzled atop of one another, rising higher and more distant as our view recedes. It is an omniscient view.

There is no mistaking the cultural flavor of these works. Though perhaps unfamiliar with an intimate knowledge of the various locations the painted villages depict, they speak to us of communities steeped in history, a connotation that indicates a strong cultural heritage. We understand that these are locations familiar to the artist and his own cultural history, but it is the overarching downward view he gives us that removes any particular identity and enables the viewer, regardless of his or her personal cultural identification, to associate and identify with the image.

The vantage of the downward view expands our understanding of the true meaning of "village." We know these are Chinese locales, and there are strong visual indicators that would make them seem to be nothing but. It is through the artist's marriage of influences, East and West, however, which enables us to see them as universal. Yes, the indicators clearly signal China, but the infusion of chiaroscuro, that most Baroque of symbolic techniques, adds a dimensionality that is familiar to Western audiences as well. We see "China," but we intuit any traditional village with which we may also be familiar. Light plays at the contours of each separate yet interlocked

building, always emphasizing the interplay between separateness and connection. The evidence of life further enhances this universal identification. While we do not see life itself, we are given many indicators of its presence: lights flickering in tiny anonymous windows, a cart by the lane, boats navigating their way across the canvas, and it is in these small signs of life that we are able to imagine ourselves. Those could be our lights, were we looking down upon our own village or town.

A strong lightmotif, or recurring image that appears in many of Yu's paintings is a waterway, often dark and mysterious, traversing its way down the canvas, bifurcating the portrayed villagescape in two. In a psychological sense water often refers to a great spiritual unknown, the mystery of life beyond the apparent which we all – like the tiny boats that dot the waterways – must traverse. The two halves of the villages seem to be separate, an apt metaphor for our own perceptions of our existence in the world, but in fact, they are not. Bridges inevitably appear, spanning that mysterious stream of our unconsciousness, to connect the otherwise disparate halves. Just as Yu transcends cultural singularity through his expert blending of Eastern and Western painting techniques and styles, so do his works play upon the viewer's understanding of their relationships to one another, even if oceans of water and millennia of time separate them.

Chunming Yu may be an artist with feet planted firmly in two worlds of artistic tradition, but the message of his works truly reveals the oneness of us all. It is an omniscient, and rewarding view.

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