

Intervention: Paintings by Chonggang Du

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The recent paintings by Chonggang Du are interrogations of the qualities of nature and its representation. The works emerge in an epoch where hybridity is one of the general conditions. This is not only the emergence and prevalence of artificial intelligence and machine learning, but also the era of the 'great acceleration' in which human intervention is part of the 'complex, multi-causal [...] set of processes that have altered the Earth system' (Ellis 2018, p.53). Chonggang states: "environmental problems abound. There is global warming which increases the likelihood of natural disasters. Old forests are reduced in the name of construction, development and mining. The environmental damage – whether it be on land, in the sea, or the air – is severe."

Chonggang's paintings emerge out of a complex context with a range of cultural references and his own personal experiences. His reading of environmental change and global warming in the Anthropocene are informed by Chinese aesthetics and painting traditions. He says, "My paintings relate to Zen and the landscape paintings of the Song Dynasty (960-1279). They belong to the realm of stillness and emptiness."



Intervention No.2, 2018, charcoal, Chinese ink, acrylic, Watercolour on linen, 137cm x 183cm

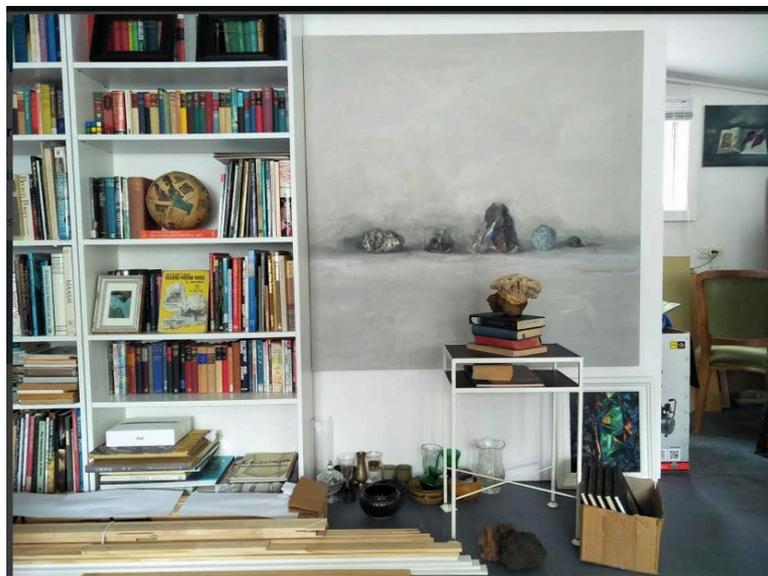
The painting, "Intervention No.2", fuses a human bodily form with that of a rock formation: a meeting between biology and geology. Chonggang states, "it seems to be a biological organ, or a penis, but it is a new object. I have joined two pieces of rock together to come up with this form. This new shape is concrete and abstract, and it is expressed in a complete form. Abstraction is that it does not specifically reflect the objective natural existence or does not seem to be the usual thing."

Antecedents. Yi-Fu Tuan, a cultural geographer, argues that landscape painting "requires, as a necessary condition, a society that is prosperous and exercises a large measure of control over nature" (Tuan, 1998, p.109). He cites the genres of Chinese and European landscape paintings as being expressions of the human will to 'culture as escapism' (Tuan 1998). Culture is founded upon the human will to escape our own animality and the forces of nature. The term 'escapism' though is

imbued with negative connotations: it is a practice founded upon the wilful forgetting of 'reality' and the avoidance of problems. For Tuan, "culture is more closely linked to the human tendency not to face facts; [it is more closely linked to] our ability to escape by one means or another, than we are accustomed to believe" (1998, p.5). Idyllic nature comforts: "the millions of cameras clicking away on scenic routes, the seaside, all sorts of parks and wilderness areas, are the most prolific generator of a picturesque conception of reality" (Tuan, 1998, p.174).

The 'middle landscape' is the space in between separation and engagement with the natural environment. It is the 'escape from nature [...] its uncertainties and threats'. Tuan rejects the separation of his own human, animal body as being distinct from 'nature' (Tuan 1998, p.xiii). This relates well to Chonggang's own imagining of the body as landscape, in which a penis is somewhere between a root of a tree or a stone – existing in a range of textures and hardness (see Intervention No.2, above). Nature is both source of wealth, comfort and a threat endangering livelihood. The will to conquer and control the landscape is the source of human anxieties which imbue the forces of weather with agency. Tuan writes, "a tropical forest, for example, provides for the modest needs of hunter-gatherers throughout the year, year after year. However, once people start to change the forest, even if it is only the making of a modest clearing for crops and a village, the forest can seem to turn into a malevolent force that relentlessly threatens to move in and take over the cleared space" (Tuan, 1998, p.10).

Studio. The studio at the back of Chonggang's domestic space is a kind of archives of materials used in his thinking *for* his paintings. The studio of an artist is like the rehearsals of a symphonic orchestra or the scraps and fragments from a composition edited out of from the final score. It is here we see the details and the sifting of materials and components which comprise the process leading up to a curated, refined and edited exhibition. While the studio may be disjointed, jumbled and messy, the exhibition becomes coherent and unified.



Backstage, in the Studio

The studio has display tables and piano stools which are turned into plinths with which to display a rock. The rocks or roots are painted; sometimes completely, sometimes only partially. The up-turned roots, from large trees, become some kind of tangled mess. They are separated from the element which is adored and loved as being picturesque and for being rendered into Instagram photography. By the entrance, is a small bonsai plant sitting in a miniature pebble garden. Chonggang has raked

the ripples in the garden with a finger. The studio and domestic space are marked by remnants, fragments and leftovers of what is generally referred to as nature. But, then Chonggang tells me, “nature is not nature any more. Water is not water.” This statement foreshadows the anxiety towards environmental destruction of which is Chonggang’s increasing concern.

Dao. By the entrance to Chonggang’s studio is a rock through which has grown a plant. This rock-plant combination is not merely an aesthetic piece of decoration. Rather it provides a moment for reflection and proof of a Daoist idea. The plant, something soft, has grown through the rock, causing it to split in half. That which is ‘soft’ is stronger than something ‘hard’. Chonggang also gives the example of water dripping on to stones and causing them to erode. The domestic space, which Chonggang has crafted since moving to Melbourne’s suburbs some 15 years ago, shows his curatorial interests and his practices of care. The domestic space and the front and back gardens are carefully manicured. Plants of Australia, China and Japan, intermingle and create a calm domestic space which attract birds. These birds too have featured in Chonggang’s earlier paintings.

Art of the Anthropocene. This age – these times - known as the Anthropocene, is increasingly marked by a sense of urgency. Conflicts between conservationists and multinational corporate interests are daily fodder for the news. The urgency expressed by protestors marching on city streets and shouting slogans is fobbed off by glib and general statements made by politicians who condescend that their government is fulfilling international expectations, while other nations don’t even fulfil their most basic expectations. The Anthropocene is not simply marked by the human intervention with and the adaption of nature, but by the balance in this equation. The natural world – weather, ecosystems – are changing rapidly and beyond human control as a result of too much mining; too much pollution; too much waste.

Chonggang’s paintings emerge out of an anxiety over environmental damage: “People are accustomed to relying on chemical products to improve efficiency and quality. For example, agriculture relies on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, industrial production pollution, etc., which changes the soil structure, water is also polluted, and people who depend on water for life are mutated, and then genetic mutations lead to natural structural disorders. Fast-paced and excessive development across countries fuelled by special interest groups has led to what we call ‘economic growth’ and ‘profit gains’. Consumerism has been heavily advertised across the globe and since become our culture. Now our bodies and minds are inextricable from the very machine that is damaging our home. We don’t want desertification, we don’t want to see forests burnt to ash, we don’t want air and water pollution and we don’t want to live in the world that has become a concrete wasteland. We must take action to protect the natural world.”

The Anthropocene is characterised by “habitat loss, hunting, foraging, pollution, species invasions, and other human pressures are increasingly threatening populations of vulnerable plant and animal species with extinction, leading to rapid global losses of biodiversity. While land use for agriculture and settlements transformed significant areas around the world long before 1950, human population growth and the richer diets supported by industrial economic development caused both a rapid global expansion of land use and broad increases in land use intensity, including a major rise in the use of irrigation and agricultural chemicals” (Ellis, 2018, p.58). Chonggang’s watercolour, *Drifting*, is a part of this exploration. He explains:

The roots of dead trees may be twisted and withered, but they remain strong. They represent the endurance of life’s forms beyond the human scale of time and move us towards deep time – to the eternity of the earth, the moon and the sun. These roots reflect the symbiotic relationship between the natural world and those who inhabit it. Dignity and freedom are manifestations of this relationship in harmony. But human greed and selfishness, as well as sheer ignorance of the laws of nature, have led to global warming and more frequent natural disasters. Our life nurturing and sustaining environment will eventually be destroyed.



A Dystopic, Daoist reading of the Anthropocene
Intervention No.3, 2018, charcoal, Chinese ink, acrylic, Watercolour on linen,
122.5 cm x 82.5 cm.

Concluding Remarks. The story of contemporary Chinese art told in *The Phoenix Years* (O'Dea, 2016) contrasts with that of Chonggang's career, for he fits into a diaspora of artists. His work is inseparable from his own cultural knowledge and references yet separate from the cultural context which is fuelled by rapid economic growth and expansion of cultural interests and consumption. Here in suburban Melbourne, with the Dandenong Ranges as a backdrop, Chonggang's work is distanced from the hoopla of much popular and sensational work. Instead of drawing on dramatic economic or political developments, Chonggang's paintings engage with the older, quieter expressions from earlier incarnations of Daoist philosophy. His paintings also extend the articulation of landscape painting as outlined by Tuan. The 'middle landscape' is no longer present and the sense of human control of nature has been lost.

Chonggang's distance from China, and life in Melbourne's suburban fringe, inform his creative practices which exist in varying tensions and resolutions. He curates his domestic space with plants, trees and arrangements which rub Chinese and Australian aesthetics up against one another. The garden material and his carefully designed and improvised space provides the source material which push his paintings into local and global concerns to the environment and its human intervention. His backyard may be idyllic and comforting; the paintings though are suggestive of an Anthropocenic dystopia.

References

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