

Yafeng Duan – Dark and Bright

Breathing is a term, which holds deep spiritual significance in the creative vocabulary of the Chinese artist Yafeng Duan. Introduced to the tradition of ink-wash painting by her father at an early age, Duan developed her artistic instinct through a close observation of nature — by tracing the enigmatic Qi, a vital force that links all living beings together. In classical Chinese philosophy, Qi (breath) is a fundamental category similar to energy in Western philosophical teachings. The captivating patterns of Duan's abstract landscapes are ethereal footprints of Qi, observed and captured on her breathing canvases.

Yafeng Duan's works find connection to traditional Chinese painting through an intense relationship with nature. However, her further education at the Bauhaus University in Weimar led the artist to reconsider her initial understanding of art, and to develop a synthesis between formal practice and frequent rebellion against it. According to her own statement, Duan uses European techniques to give her paintings a haptic quality and physical presence. Her methodical approaches reflect the processes that shaped the evolution of 20th century art through to the New Abstraction of 1990's.

The deeply introspective atmosphere of Yafeng Duan's abstractions is transmitted through the spatial superimpositions of color fields and the interplay of linear constellations. Multilayered sculptural brushstrokes recall earth formations shaped by age-old geological processes. Translucent, watery layers of paint exude the soothing stillness of a lake on a hot summer day. The interest the artist takes in the concept of duality can be observed in „Bright Paintings“ and “Dark Paintings”, the two key series of work Duan has been developing for more than 10 years. The oscillating compositions in „Bright Paintings“ actively dialogue with the dense textural layering of “Dark Paintings”, influenced by the works of Danish neo-expressionist Per Kirkeby. In both series, Duan uses color overlaps to play with the perception of space, allowing it to alternate, build and disappear.

In the non-narrative abstract compositions of Yafeng Duan, color is a language encouraging a subjective game of association that preserves the possibility of ambiguity. This explains the intuitive application of paint on her canvases: the spontaneous oscillations of Duan's brushstrokes follow the deep breathing of her transcendental landscapes. Rather than creating them, the artist watches the elements in her paintings evolve and interact with each other.

For Duan, the process of painting is the result of a subjective decision, detached from the politically conditioned contemporary narratives. Simultaneously existing in different, often contradictory cultural contexts, the artist explores dichotomic ideas with a gentle curiosity. Though now distanced from the tradition of Chinese ink-wash painting, Duan's art preserves a spiritual element within it — what Kandinsky called “stimmung”, the essential spirit of nature. Soulfulness is an intrinsic quality of Yafeng Duan's art. Approaching the inner world of shapes and textures, she experiments with the inherent aesthetic potential of nature. The pictorial atmosphere intuitively created by the artist is a mental space where time is frozen and gravity is suspended — a place that allows the viewer to reconnect and breathe. wieder erneute Mischen ein und desselben Ausgangsmaterials.

Text: Karina Abdusamalova