BORROWED LIGHT

The most important things to paint are those which cannot appear. The heart of the matter is not trees and mountains, or portraits, or crosses as in Ding Yi's paintings[i]. But the things which can appear are the only means painters have of gesturing towards what cannot appear. Time is one of those, ethics another. Time cannot appear, since a painting is still. A space or a place can be depicted; I'm interested in places that are soaked in time.

I'm showing two paintings in Xi'an, *Splendours of the Imperial Capital* and *A Cottage at Year's End*. Both were painted before I had visited China: each one imagines a site I had never seen. *Splendours* pictures Xi'an and confuses it with Chang'an, the ancient capital: the city and its ghost. I imagined the city walls in the summer's heat, but were they the walls that enclosed the Tang capital or the Ming period walls we see today? I thought of how the Tang city had collapsed, then expanded again, the houses and roads of Chang'an disappearing, then others coming into being as Xi'an grew once again.

A Cottage at Year's End imagines Wang Wei at his retreat in the mountains at Lantian. Looking down at the dusty world, he sees not the city or the Shaanxi plains, but the past itself dividing. Oddly, what he thinks contains a phrase taken from Su Shi, who hadn't been born yet—a note of anguish from Wang's future, which is our past. I read Wang Wei's poetry almost daily for ten years. On a summer evening, I would walk to High Park with my copy of his poems, and sitting inside a circle of pine trees, reading, I would look up to see the willows turn to silver. On certain evenings, I could imagine Chang'an into a half-existence, the ancient city and his estate in the mountains growing slowly out of his poems. The willows across the ravine in the park were the willows of the Tang capital growing out of a different soil.

For ten years, I was immersed in Wang Wei. The poets Roo Borson and Kim Maltman and I wrote poetry together, as Pain Not Bread. We took apart critical introductions and translators' forewords to the Tang poet, reworking them, stitching scraps together, writing new passages or making whole poems sparked off by the scraps we had found. We read literal translations of the poems, inverted the meaning or extended metaphors until they were stretched almost to the point of exaggeration. We were looking a way of writing that felt always secondary, like standing in a hallway full of echoes. Eventually our experiments became a handful of finished poems, then a manuscript, and finally a book, *Introduction to the Introduction to Wang Wei*. The texts that appear in my paintings are made from phrases and passages from those same poems, but now they too have been taken apart and stitched together again to speak of new contents. I no longer know who the author of these texts is. Pain Not Bread? The critics and translators who introduced Wang Wei to us? Wang Wei and the other Tang poets whose words were taken up by the translators and critics? Huang Tingjian said that in Du Fu, there was not one word that did not come from somewhere else. This seems right, since all culture is collaboration with the dead.

Years after the book appeared, I finally visited Xi'an. Friends drove me into the mountains, looking for the site of Wang Wei's now-vanished estate. We navigated with an image of his painting of the estate in the mountain range, driving towards the peaks he had depicted so many

centuries ago. The air grew cooler and fresher. Periodically we would stop to ask the way. We were always on the wrong road, always backing up, trying a different road, correcting our journey, never arriving. Eventually we had to give up. Perhaps the site has been lost, that there is no longer anyone who knows where it was. Perhaps it is not a place that could be found on any map. I imagine it as a cottage permanently located at the year's end.

In the Qing dynasty, Lu Ciyun had tried to find his way to the site of Su's *Red Cliff Ode*. He failed just as we had, writing, "When I try to retrace his tracks, it is as elusive as clouds and mists." His failure like my own was a kind of imagining: what you seek will always elude you. And yet this is in some way right and just. The world is not there to be captured: the weather of the imagination is clouds and mist. As it turned out, the real Xi'an did not displace my imagined Xi'an. When I remember walking its streets, visiting Beilin or Cao Tang Temple, they seem both real and unreal, they float on a sea of time and appear against the background of what I had imagined. Lu Ciyun was correct. "Su Shi, at this place, was filled with nostalgia for Cao Cao. Those who come here after the poet-immortal's time are, in turn, filled with nostalgia for him." Century after century people arrive, looking for what they will not find. But perhaps the centuries part, and feelings are transmitted.

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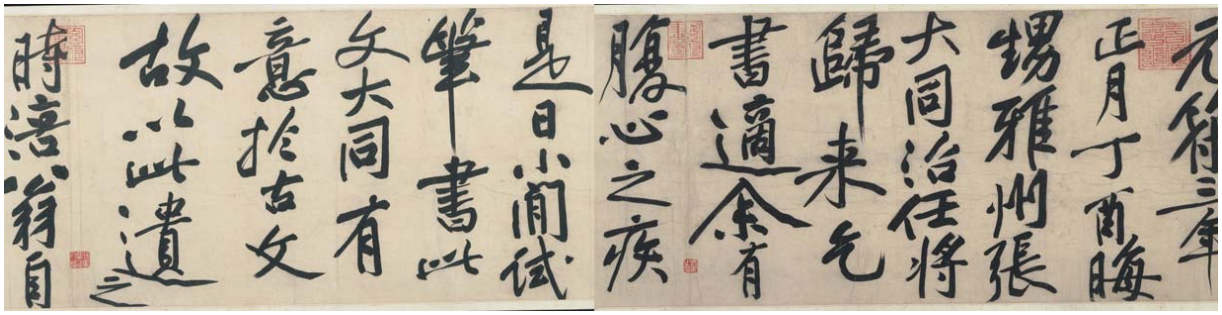
I used to believe I could give up painting before I could give up reading poetry. Perhaps I loved Wang Wei because he was both poet and painter, though he believed that neither one was the heart of the matter. "In this long life, mistakenly a poet, in a past life, a painter it seems. Unable to give up these remaining habits, I happen to be known to the world." They were just habits, and fame accidental. Yet there was something here that was crucial. Centuries later Tang Yin wrote, "I've found a painter's brush that also writes poems." I was searching for that same brush, but couldn't find it in the culture I had inherited. But during the Wang Wei years, my wife, the artist Janice Gurney, found a book of Chinese calligraphy for me. I had little interest in it. I couldn't read a single character, and besides, I was much more interested in Chinese painting. Yet it grew on me, and one day I suddenly *saw* it.

What usually interests Western painters like Mark Tobey or Brice Marden is the gestural quality of the cursive writers like Huaisu or Zhu Yunming: we see calligraphy as though it were a type of abstract painting. For me, the great example instead was Su Shi's *Cold Food* scroll because it clearly wasn't a species of abstract painting. Instead it was both literature and visual art at the same time. There is nothing like this in Western art. The scroll is beautiful in itself, but beautiful too in how it spilled out over what for us in the West are completely different categories. And so I fell into calligraphy.

I didn't want to do calligraphy myself—I'm a Western painter, at home in my studio with my brushes and paints. But my immersion in calligraphy was the sign of a slight dissent from my own time: I saw in it the chance to change my understanding of what art is, or could be. So I didn't want to imitate the *appearance* of calligraphy, as Brice Marden had. I wanted instead to make Western paintings that could *function* in some loose way like calligraphy did, as both a visual object *and* a literary object. I thought often of Feng Zhi writing his sonnets, carrying something of Rilke's voice into China's poetry, borrowing light from a German room.

It was Su Shi's *Cold Food* calligraphy that first attracted me, so startlingly fresh, like peonies or slanting rain, then Huang Tingjian's *Scroll for Zhang Datong* with his wobbling wavering black brushmarks, his sense of patterning that imprinted itself on me[ii]. Periodically I would show different calligraphers to Janice, and ask which one she preferred; she always chose Wang Xizhi. But I preferred Su and Huang, both more flawed, and, it seemed to me, more individual. Gradually I was drawn to rubbings—those white characters gleaming out from black backgrounds seemed like something possible for my painting—and then to calligraphy carved into stone. Mi Fu said there was nothing to learn from calligraphy in stone, but at the Forest of Stele, I studied the *Yan Family Stele* with its stiff, vertical hand carved deeply into the plum-brown stone and Liang Shenqing's lovely *Yushi tai* tablet, with its beautifully restrained pattern of clerical script. I was looking for calligraphy that I could translate into oil paint and canvas, materials which are so much heavier, so much less fluid and quick than brush, ink, and paper. I was searching too for a kind of visual patterning which could work in my modern world of computer typesetting, with English letters instead of Chinese characters, with colour instead of black ink on the whiteness of paper.[1]



Chinese, Northern Song dynasty, 960–1127
Huang Tingjian 黄庭堅, 1045 - 1105
Scroll for Zhang Datong (Zeng Zhang Datong guwen ti ji 贈張大同古文 **), 1100
Handscroll; ink on paper
Calligraphy: 34.1 x 552.9 cm. (13 7/16 x 217 11/16 in.)
Colophons: 34.8 x 303.3 cm. (13 11/16 x 119 7/16 in.)
Mount: h. 36.4 cm. (14 5/16 in.)
Gift of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951
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photo: Bruce M. White
Photo credit: Princeton University Art Museum / Art Resource, NY

The more I immersed myself in calligraphy, the more my paintings turned towards the European past. The text in *A Cottage at Year's End* refers to a Chinese poet, but that text takes part in a Baroque drama of light and darkness. Perhaps the painting's surface is the point at which two cultures meet, where what I have been able to absorb of two very different visual

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[1] My PhD research in Northern Song calligraphy was supported by Canada's Social Science and Humanities Research Council. I am deeply grateful for this public support.

cultures collide. The painting is laid out as though it were the *Yan Family Stele,* a rigid grid of letters to be read in vertical rows. But its light and space are European. I think this experience of two places, or two cultures at once is at the heart of contemporary experience. "I is another," said Rimbaud, "Real life is elsewhere." But no, real life is both here and elsewhere, now and then, without being reconciled.

When I first embarked on these paintings, I thought that in Su Shi and Wang Wei I had caught a glimpse of how to resolve disparate things. But as I worked, I began to see, first, that looking and reading were incommensurate—that you could not do both at once—and so some aspect of the work was always escaping. Then I began to see that these European and Chinese inheritances and influences exist in a tension that will not resolve.

I said earlier that the most important things are those things which cannot appear. In my paintings this issue is more complex than usual, because only texts appear. The important contents appear, not through painted images, but through poetic images. This is painting's "elsewhere," an admission that the crucial things can't be shown. If they appear in my paintings, they appear through poetry's means, not those of painting. At the same time, especially in the more recent ones, the words themselves appear as an image. They are depicted—as though they were an object in world of light and shadow. The means by which something crucial could appear is itself an appearance. I think this is how the paintings come to wonder about themselves, to wonder what they are.

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Both of my paintings in this exhibition have more to do with architecture than nature, just as their titles suggest. The subject of *Splendours of the Imperial Capital* is a city*, A Cottage at Year's End* refers to Wang Wei's estate in the mountains. In spite of the beauty of the natural world, I'm drawn to the architectural environment. The stone steles which I love are like architecture, built by craftsmen, made to endure the weather. The making of a painting, like the construction of any type of architecture, always requires labour. Though many contemporary forms of art no longer depend what we can understand as labour, painting and architecture still require it. In the built environment I feel the expression of history, "the expression of history that is compelling, aesthetically, because it is etched by the real suffering of the past," as Theodore Adorno wrote.[iii] Nature seems exempt from this. But the relationship between the human world and the natural may be changing. Du Fu wrote that mountains and rivers survived while the state collapsed. Can mountains and rivers today survive our large-scale projects? Why should spring still bother turning green[iv]?

Lotus Sutra, 2011
oil on canvas, 69" x 30"
Courtesy of the artist

If nature appears in my paintings, it appears as a way of comprehending the human world. In the painting titled *Leaves,* "The body, the senses are leaves of the self." My *Lotus Sutra* (which is not the Buddhist *Lotus Sutra)* says, "In its range and beauty and from a distance the desire to be without desire looks like a mountain range." Lines of poetry are acted on by natural forces, as though they had been left out in the weather. *Ghost Sutra* reads, "No sutras, no hymns, no doctrines, only these next lines blown about by the wind"—there seems to be no gulf between human and natural worlds. In *Continuous Elegy,* geological features possess the capacity to assess

the value of a human life: "Only mountains should judge the dead, but what if their greenness never ends?" Much of this attitude I learned first from Wang Wei; later I learned from the wider world of Chinese thought. "The myriad creatures are nourished together and do not harm each other," says *The Doctrine of the Mean*. This could never have been written in Canada, a country where Joseph Légaré's 1845 and 1848 paintings of *The Fire in the Saint-Jean Quarter* are experiences of a deeply-rooted terror of being abandoned to nature. The ruined houses of Quebec are dwarfed by a cold and dark sky, a threatening immensity of space.

Joseph Légaré
Canadian, 1795 – 1855
The Fire in the Saint-Jean Quarter, Seen Looking Westward, 1848
oil on canvas
Overall: 151.1 x 220.3 cm (59 1/2 x 86 3/4 in.)
ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO
Purchase with assistance from Wintario, 1976
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The artist Jeff Wall had an insight which is crucially important in understanding Canadian art—an art that, like China's, is rooted in depictions of the landscape. In an essay explaining why he periodically made landscape photographs, Wall wrote that, "studying settlement forms is not separable from working out picture types; it's not possible to do the former without doing the

latter.[v]" He was speaking in broad and general terms, meaning that we could examine Fan Kuan or Ni Zan in this same way. But Wall would have been aware that his use of the word, "settlement" has a very specific resonance in Canada, where the term "settler culture" refers to the history in which Europeans—at first chiefly French, English and Scottish, and later, immigrants from all over the world—came to the land populated by aboriginal peoples and wrested it away from them. The descendants of those settlers, people like myself, have a very very different relation to the land and its history than those aboriginal inhabitants whose land the continent had been for thousands of years. Outside of the aboriginal nations, there are few people in the Americas who have any experience of that continent before industrialization: that history shapes us in our human nature.

What type of picture are my paintings? Before modernism, paintings in Europe were distinguished and valued according to what genre or type of picture they were. This followed from what subject matter they depicted. There was a hierarchy to these picture types: History Painting was the most important, next was the portrait. Both of these were valued above what were called "the lower genres"—scenes of everyday domestic life, landscapes, and finally, the still life.

The size and subject matter of *Splendours of the Imperial Capital* suggest a picture carried forward on the dwindling momentum of History Painting. But where history paintings were an imagined depiction of an event, in this case it is not an event that is depicted but a site where a multitude of significant events took place. The time to which it refers is a measured time, the time of a recorded history. *A Cottage At Years End* corresponds instead to the "lower genres": a depiction of everyday life, its subject matter is domestic and intimate. Its time is personal, not measured and administered—it mutates, divides, multiplies itself and is only ordered by the tenses brought to it in language. And yet at the same time, neither painting is a "picture." Where a picture should appear, a text appears instead. The picture borrows the form of Chinese calligraphy, but that calligraphy appears in the light and dark of the Western painting tradition.

The forms of settlement are a city and a retreat in the mountains. Thinking of Wang Wei, these correspond to the administration of government and a retreat into reclusion. In the West, these would correspond to the public and the private domains, which are understood as opposed. Wang Wei wouldn't have seen it this way. In the larger Confucian tradition, the individual cultivation of the self was necessary if a larger social harmony was to be possible. In the West, the individual is felt to be constrained by the larger society. My paintings are placed in this contest of historical cultural understandings, they are my own attempts to find measure. "I study calligraphy in order to learn the Doctrine of the Mean," said Liu Yuxi. I wish I had said that, but instead I find myself thinking of Su Shi—who believed that to bring balance to one's time, it was sometimes necessary to lean in the opposite direction.

-Andy Patton

[i] I am grateful to Lorenz Helbling of ShanghART for introducing me to Ding Yi's work and generously spending time discussing its subtleties.

[ii] I wish to thank Cary Liu of the Princeton Art Museum, who generously allowed me to study this great work.

[iii] Theodore Adorno. Aesthetic Theory, (Minneapolis: Uinversity of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.64.

[iv] "Why should spring still bother turning green" is a line from the poem "Mountains and Waters (An Introduction to Du Fu)" in *Introduction to the Introduction to Wang Wei* by Pain Not Bread.

[v] Jeff Wall. "About Making Landscape," in *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007), p.170.