

PAINTING BY WAY OF RABBIT

by Ruth Noack

*"All is therefore movement around form, movement of non-formal significations that are added to a work, but also and above all movement of forms themselves."*<sup>1</sup>

**The Amateur Connoisseur Starts to Regard a Painting (ill. 1)**

Though considered an expert in contemporary art, with one documenta firmly under her belt, she quickly realized that on this occasion, she was out of her depth. Without formal training in Chinese art, without any experience of looking at ink painting, without knowledge of the Chinese language or the physical memory of holding a brush about to touch the paper, the marks made on the large scroll were illegible. To claim knowledge would be an outright lie, to profess insight would amount to ill-mannered conceit.

Nonetheless, the ink was pulling her in, tempting her with what all good art boasts: the promise of a riddle to be solved. Alas, as one of those who keep falling in love with what cannot be possessed, she knew that this riddle would never be solved. Finite meaning escapes us, just as the snow-covered mountaintop, which had seemed, upon first sight, close enough to touch, recedes just as the wanderer draws near.

Lacking the means to proceed further toward an understanding of the painting, she cast her glance around the artist's studio and it chanced upon a table bearing ink painting paraphernalia. And it dawned on her that she was situated at a scene of production, a space currently shared by finished and unfinished work, by artist and viewer. Just as Shao Fan is constantly grappling with painterly problems, she struggles with an approximate reading of the work. It might not be scholarly or even well-informed, but it is a true record of spectatorship. And though this record might reveal an unfortunate lack of clarity, our shared contemporaneity demands that each of us persist in the struggle to make better sense.

**On Details**

Shao Fan's brush yields a profuse range of expression. From half-a-million little strokes, each signifying a single hair of a rabbit's coat, the volume of the animal might be grown. From a mixture of parallel streaks, hued washes, and scraggly lines—lines, which are alternately made to appear by the density of marks or the sudden absence of all information—a rock formation might be piled up. (ill. 2) Large areas of a painting might appear empty to the undiscerning eye only. For closer scrutiny lays bare that the rice paper has been washed in several layers of thinned ink, revealing its structure and resulting in subtle discolorations. The white specks, patches, and marbled lines affect an ethereal substance. The painterly planes and calligraphic traces are bound together in harmony.

Among the plenitude of detail that pleases the viewer's eye a small number of graphic lines stands out. They depict an eye or a mouth (ill. 3) and they offer us the most beautiful rendering of a rabbit's claws that has ever seen the light of day. (ill. 4) The mouths of Shao Fan's ink-painted rabbits function as a centering device, the point where the energy coursing through the image is gathered up and held fast. In a cadence of visual impressions, a rabbit's mouth brings precision. At times, beyond this precision lies an abyss. (ill. 5)

The figuration of the rabbit's claws does not clamor for center stage. It is easily overlooked, a humble note to an otherwise impressive portrait of the animal's being. Yet, to this spectator, its lines, reminiscent of a Buddha's hands or resonant with the incisions on an ancient statue (ill. 6) were the true seat of the artist's spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Molino, Introduction, in: Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art* (1934), New York 1992, p. 26.

### Portrait of a Rabbit

From a large scroll hanging on the wall, a monumental rabbit stared at her. Its size was astonishing, significantly larger than life. The rabbit's ears pointed toward the sky, substantially increasing its overall height. Its sheer bulk and the density of its body spread out in a triangular shape toward the ground, giving the figure extraordinary weight and gravitas. Indeed, it was a curious depiction for what is, in actual life, an animal of prey. Certainly, in its symbolic form, a rabbit counts for something. But this rabbit was no symbol; this rabbit was hyperrealistic.

Adding to the animal's might was its central placement on the picture plane. She was looking at a singular figure hovering in a space devoid of any distraction, a space simply defined by the line of an infinite horizon. Consider the stark contrast to Shao Fan's earlier oil painting of *Hare on the Moon* (2010, ill. 7). A tongue-in-cheek play on the popular association of the moon's crater with the figure of a rabbit, this vignette can also be interpreted in reference to the Western tradition of the *memento mori*: Among other riches, a *memento mori* might present a piece of game, e.g., a dead hare, so as to call to the viewer's mind the ephemerality of all worldly pleasure. Note that the horizontal line is drawn almost straight through the middle of the painting, giving the spectator a high vantage point from which to look down at the offering on display.

What a difference a lower horizon can make! In the ink painting, it was the rabbit that dominated the space, governing her gaze. And no wonder, for this portrait came from a long, imperial line. (ill. 8)

### On Sketches

*"Nothing explains the genesis of forms, nothing that is except forms themselves and their encounter with other forms."*<sup>2</sup>

The sketchbook of an artist is a precious thing. Here, his ideas first manifest in visual form. Here, the problems of form are articulated and worked through. Some sketches are witness to problems that have been discarded; others await a life in flesh.

As she turned the pages, rabbits abounded. A rabbit in the grass, staring at us with red eyes (ill. 9). Another one, its fur hardly distinguishable from the blades. (ill. 10) Two rabbits in tandem. And then came a threesome. (ill. 11) They posed a painterly problem in a particularly persuasive way: as layers upon layers of ink are deployed by the painter to build up the body of the things that are being depicted and, simultaneously, to bring to the fore each object's essence, how can the things be made to adhere without losing their singular character and substance?

She was thinking: 'How can a blade of grass be a blade of grass and a rabbit hair be rabbit hair, when they come from ink that is flowing through the same brush held by the same hand? Maybe, Shao Fan has not yet attempted to elaborate this sketch in a full-scale painting, because it stands in for the painter's mystery? Maybe the problem of the three rabbits is not a problem of composition? Maybe it is not a problem that can be solved by a trick of perspective, by making two of the rabbits slightly smaller or incrementally darker, so as to allow them to drop back in the space? Maybe it is a problem at the intersection of visualization and symbolization?'

At this intersection, where painting and calligraphy meet, an artist needs all his wits about him. For it is a dangerous thing, the realization that some painterly problems cannot be solved by astuteness of mind alone. It is a dangerous thing, the understanding that they also cannot be solved by the body's proficiency alone. Only the daring will acknowledge that they need the simultaneity of both. And only the very courageous artist will admit that, however hard he works, any solution will remain at the beck and call of luck.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

### Lucky Picture, Rabbit Snake

One day, Shao Fan embarked upon a new painting revolving around the snake and rabbit motif. He must have been contemplating the subject for a good while, for the sketchbook holds several drafts of the two animals in various stages of entwinement. People say, if you see a snake around a rabbit in real life, it means good luck. Someone had told her that this symbolism is similar to "dragon surrounding tiger," but that (given the unlikelihood of anyone chancing upon a dragon) the rabbit-snake scenario is considered more believable and thus thought to make more sense. She did not ponder long over the conundrum of how the Chinese mind can jump from tiger-dragon to rabbit-snake. Her own Western and more morbid imagination called up the memory of a horror film from early silent cinema. It showed no more than a cage full of sleepy snakes and, among them, one very frightened rabbit, dolefully hopping about. In contrast, Shao Fan's rabbit was still—and looking straight at her.

This is what she saw:

Both animals are frozen in time, caught in a moment of intense, dynamic movement: the snake exquisitely undulating upward in a rising serpentine; the rabbit pointing all extremities toward the sky as if it had been thrown into the air and is just about to tumble down onto its rear. On antithetical trajectories, the snake is bound toward heaven, the rabbit toward earth. The way the animal is rendered reinforces the contrast between other-worldly and worldly form. The snake is positioned as if on a single slanting plane slicing through the image and the rabbit (despite intertwining with the snake as one might with a ladder) inhabits the three-dimensional world envisioned here. One is depicted with the great detail and precision of graphic illustrations, the other is shown as a body in shambles, all furry fluff, yet with weight and the ability to cast a shadow. One is abstract, the other concrete.

She remembered that a certain incongruity of elements sharing one and the same composition was not unusual in the long history of Chinese ink painting. When one visualizes an imaginary landscape with a viewer in mind, the emotional quality of rocks and mountains, of waterfall and mist, the sense of space as it reveals itself to the wandering eye, the rhythm of motifs from far and from near, and the texture of brushwork, all gain prominence over banalities such as a shallow coherence of design. She could recognize aspects of this tradition in the painting in front of her: The motifs were there, such as rocks and water. A variance of style was manifest as well, in swirling waves executed as an ornamental pattern and in falling water rushing to a formless void. Also, she detected some changes in perspective. She did not know Shanshui. Otherwise, further points to compare might have revealed themselves.

And yet, this was, she thought, no traditional work. This was too bold a compression of all the elements into the frame. It seemed to her as if the flats and props of a theater had all been drawn to center stage. And here they stood, the painted silhouettes of physical matter in space, making a strangely exciting new pattern. To follow the pleasure of this pattern meant understanding it as the work of an illusionist: whereas the image is formed as an image in reference to something coming from the realm of the visible, if we accept this image as a representation of the visible, we also accept it *as an image* and thus *not of the realm of the real*. In other words, she considered this painting to be entirely, openly, and beautifully artificial.

### The Artist Begins Making Tea (ill. 12)

Who would place a snake-and-rabbit configuration so prominently in such a landscape? Only a contemporary artist can do so. It would be a grave mistake to think of Shao Fan as anything else. In this painting, everything is too large and too close for traditional tastes, she thinks. For traditional tastes, snake and rabbit would be somewhere to the side or half-hidden in the background, to be chanced upon only after a little while. Not "BAM!" in the middle of the scroll. Exercising the freedom of scale and shifting perspective to such radical effect: standing tradition on its head!—his is a move that requires Shao Fan's contemporary mind. On the other hand, this painting is no postmodern deconstruction. The symbolism of the rabbit and snake remains intact and its depiction is quite earnest—and masterfully done, in a perfect entanglement of conceptual and realist modes.

Drinking tea from very old cups, she understands something very simple: Our contemporaneity is made from what was before us. We cannot refuse it. But to return to it would be a mistake, a regression. To deny the chasm that separates us from the past by mimicking tradition would be a worse mistake, a falsehood.

The past needs to be considered, studied, interpreted, even honored or criticized, just as problems need to be addressed and worked through instead of abandoned in favor of the next new fashion. To take the past seriously is the right of the living. To take the present seriously might prove to be necessary in order to envision a future. To take ourselves seriously in our interests and passions might be the only way to survive. Someone is doing this by painting a rabbit. And through his ink paintings, we can do it too.

Text: Ruth Noack, art historian, curator of Documenta 12 in Kassel

March 2016

- (ill. 1) Exhibition view, *Chinese Whispers*, Kunstmuseum Bern, Switzerland
- (ill. 2) Detail, rocks
- (ill. 3) Detail, rabbit's mouth
- (ill. 4) Detail, rabbit's claws
- (ill. 5) Detail, rabbit's red mouth
- (ill. 6) Family collection of Shao Fan, detail of Buddha statues, Beiwei
- (ill. 7) *Hare on the Moon*
- (ill. 8) Emperor Taizu, Ming dynasty, Palace Museum, Taipei
- (ill. 9) Sketch
- (ill. 10) Sketch
- (ill. 11) Sketch
- (ill. 12) Shao Fan's and Anna Liu's tea table