

Meng Huang

The rime of the forgetful ocean

By Christopher Moore

*Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.*

— Samuel Taylor-Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Part II, 1834

The walls are covered with water. Waves lap at the canvas edges. Sometimes, sunlight and the sky reflect off the swelling water as it crests and shimmers. Sometimes, the surface swirls warmly in pinks, reds and yellows; others its blues reflect back glimpses of undefinable color-flecked scenes. Sometimes, it is morose, the green tone threatening and cold. We know this, this way of reading color and context, because we have learnt it. There is no ship on the horizon though, no horizon at all. There is no land, no ship, no end. For all we know, the sea is infinitely wide, infinitely deep. It will consume us completely. What is below the surface? Whom is she hiding?

Constantly in motion, the sea – often called “she” – is the immortal subject and impossible metaphor. In Hokusai’s woodblock print, *The Great Wave of Kanagawa* (c.1829-33), she is a roiling Tsunami seemingly on the cusp of engulfing Mount Fuji. In Caspar David-Friedrich’s, *Das Eismeer* (1823/24), her jagged, romantic beauty is tempered by the horror of the shipwreck. In Gerhard Richter’s *Seascapes*, she threatens memory itself: the perceptual reality of photography versus painting, the act of historical recording, is questioned: is *she* reliable? All these visions are constructed, and like the sea itself, their very making is also an act of effacement.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Liu Xiaobo, died last summer whilst in custody. His body was hastily cremated, and his ashes dispersed at sea, apparently in an attempt by the government to prevent the establishment of any permanent memorial to the writer’s passing. However, as film-maker Zeng Jinyan noted, “Now, Liu Xiaobo is everywhere.”*

In this new series of paintings, Meng Huang pays tribute to his longtime friend, Liu Xiaobo. In the first instance, Bōlàng (波浪) or ‘waves’ is a metaphor for the act of forgetting, in Liu’s case, officially sanctioned. The movements of the sea are not so easily controlled though. In Meng’s paintings, the act of erasure is simultaneously one of inscription: Meng is recording – witnessing – the movements of the waves, making their momentary states somehow fixed and permanent, if not quite eternal.

The paintings also play another, subtler role though. In Chinese history and culture, poetry, calligraphy and politics are intimately entwined – think of the Song dynasty emperor Huizong (1082-1135), famed poet, painter and calligrapher, or Mao himself, both renowned poet and calligrapher. Writing is thus the instrument of power, but it is also the means by which one speaks to power, as Liu Xiaobo did, recording the lives of ordinary people. Meng Huang’s waves represent the effacement of memory but also figure the act of writing in the Chinese tradition, using ink and water. Especially as exemplified in water calligraphy – the practice of writing calligraphy in water on the ground – the permanence of the art arises not from the inscription, which is inherently ephemeral (ultimately even for oil paintings) but its ongoing practice by the calligrapher: the act of remembering through repetition.

In Meng’s paintings, the light source, while unseen, always comes from above, the top-center of the paintings, casting its rays over the waters, coloring and highlighting the waves. In a sense too, they are pure *shān shuǐ* (山水) or ‘water-mountain’-style paintings, idealized landscapes incorporating imaginary mountain and river scenes, only here the mountain is obscured. His presence is felt though, he’s just out of view. In fact, it is the mountain that defines the shape of the water, the peaks and valleys of the waves.

On a long display shelf rest 46 oblong porcelain tablets, like so many loose blank pages. Each tablet contains a secret name, written in Tibetan Braille, a version of the code used by the blind to read by touch. Tibetan Braille was invented in 1992 by Sabriye Tenberken, a German social worker, whom Meng Huang met. The raised dots on the plates spell out the respective names of protestors who died by self-immolation, the fired clay memorializing acts that transformed people into ash, heat and air. The plates form a material counterpart to the waves, which remain untouchable.

“Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony”

— Samuel Taylor-Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Part IV, 1834

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**Family scatters ashes of Chinese Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo into the sea*, LA Times, July 15, 2017
(<http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-china-liu-burial-20170715-story.html>)