

Synthesis of Traditional Chinese Techniques with Contemporary styles

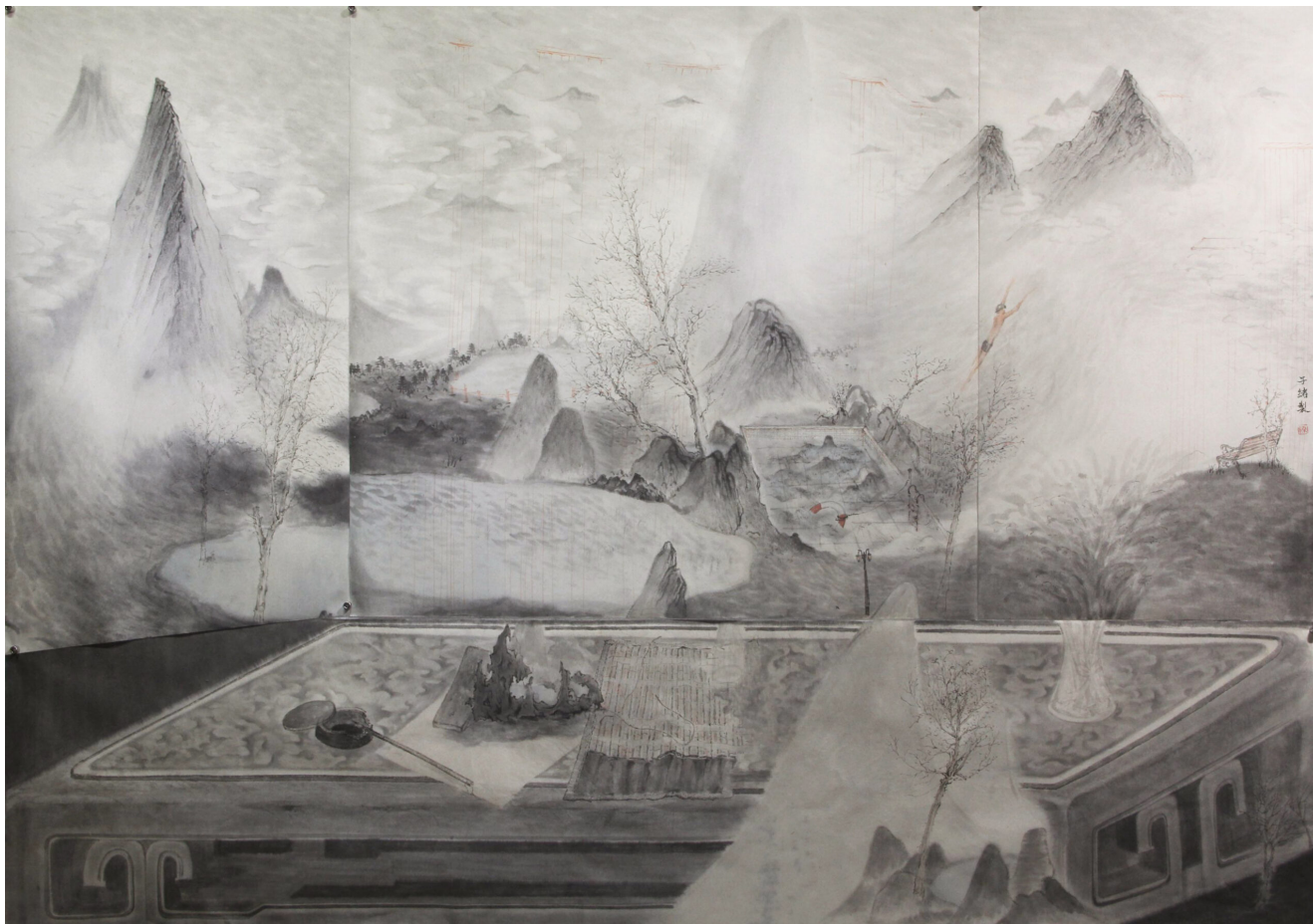
Qian ZHAO & Pengyu ZHU , Zixu CHEN 曹 强 & 彭昱, 陈子旭

After experiencing the pandemic, they have changed from focussing on the ideal to reality in their daily lives. In terms of their artworks, they have all changed from reality to the ideal. Qian ZHAO, Pengyu ZHU and Zixu CHEN were from the same Chinese university but majored in completely different fields—landscape architecture and Chinese painting, but their creations during 2020 all tend to combine Chinese Tradition and Contemporary art techniques and ideas.

新冠肺炎疫情期间，他们从理想转向现实，在日常生活和艺术创作中，从现实转向理想。曹强、彭昱和陈子旭来自同一所大学，但专业完全不同——景观建筑和国画，但他们的创作在2020年都倾向于结合中国传统和当代艺术技法和理念。



Make A Dream 梦, Qian Zhao 钱超 & Pengyu Zhu 彭宇, 2020



山水 116×166cm 纸本，Zixu Chen 陈子旭，2020



山水-六 48×15cm×6 纸本，Zixu Chen 陈子旭，2020



图1 69×138cm 纸本，Zixu Chen 画，2020



图2 69×138cm 纸本，Zixu Chen 画，2020



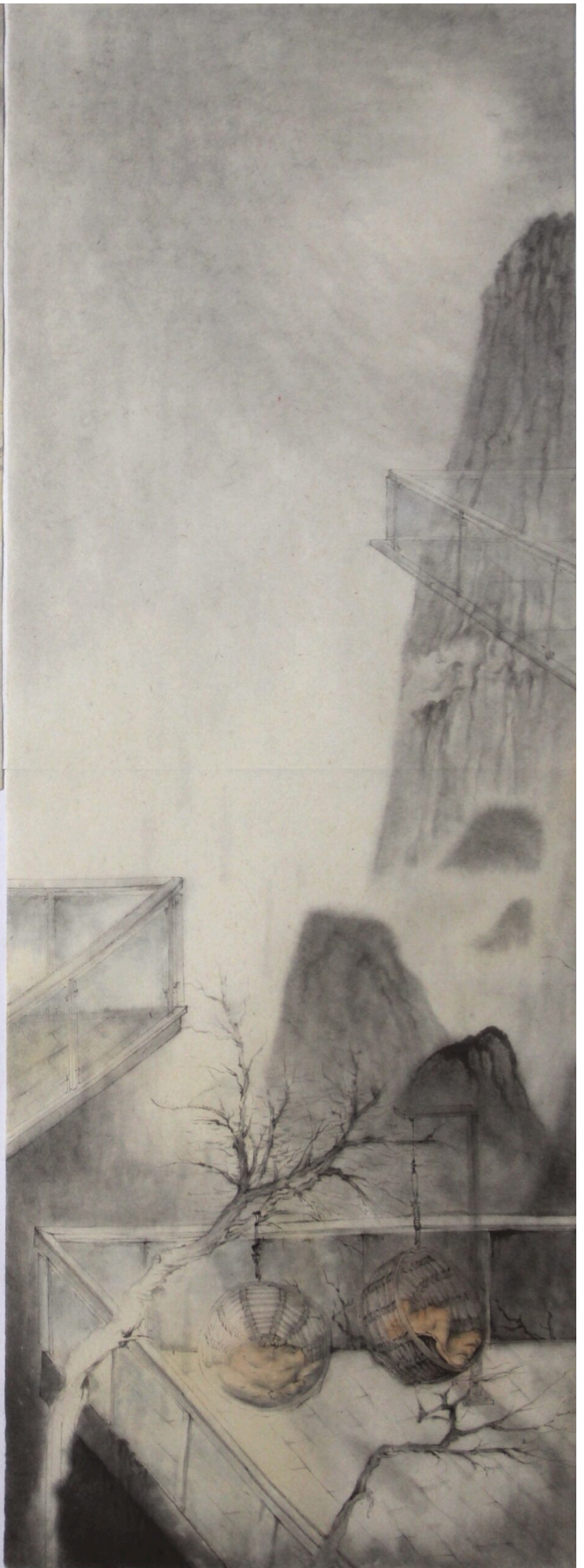
Room 69×138cm 纸本, Zixu Chen 中国, 2020



桥 49×74.5 纸本, Zixu Chen 中国, 2020



Figure 1-1 48×49.5 cm, Zixu Chen, 2020



子惜-子惜 97×70cm 纸本水墨，Zixu Chen 子惜，2020



山水-山水 82×67cm 纸本墨彩, Zixu Chen 作品, 2020

Biography

Qian ZHAO, Pengyu ZHU: Students of Landscape Architecture at Renmin University of China

中国美术学院美术考级教材

Zixu CHEN: Young Artist – MFA Chinese Painting in Chinese National Academy of Arts

中国美术学院 – 中国美术学院美术馆

Interview with Zhao & Zhu

The names would be abbreviated as “Cleo” (Cleo CHEN), “ZHAO” (Qian ZHAO) and “ZHU” (Pengyu ZHU).

(中国美术学院“中国美术学院美术馆”)

Cleo: Can you tell us how you organised your life and work during this time? What has been changed?

ZHAO: Before the pandemic, we were in the same class and dormitory at school, so it was easy for us to communicate with each other. The outbreak occurred during our winter vacation, so we could only talk online and at home. My schedule was mostly involved writing papers or graduation projects during the day and then busying myself with other things at night.

ZHU: At that time, the pandemic was serious and the virus was spreading, so I tried not to go outside, and I also felt a little panicky. I seemed to repeat the same routine every day—like searching for materials or creating my artworks at home. The most significant change in this time that I noticed was that everyone around me was now wearing masks.

ZHAO: Now our vaccine programme has been administered widely, and with this, our life has basically returned to normal. Except for we need to report upon entering or leaving our school but there are really not too many restrictions at all.

ZHU: Our lives had returned to normal last summer, but it resurged again last winter.

中国美术学院美术考级教材

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Cleo: What changes have you experienced or discovered in this time? Whether it is in your life or your creative work? What do you think is your pivot to cope with the pandemic?

ZHAO: Being able to go out was the aspect of my life that was mainly affected, especially long-distance travelling. We were also asked to show the QR code pass whenever entering or exiting the busy areas. There were also restrictions that limited the number of people that could do activities indoors meaning that our sources of entertainment were limited.

ZHU: In this period too, I think the public has become more disciplined. For instance, people would agreeably wear masks or monitor temperature when getting on the bus but it also felt quieter not only at the bus station but in many places.

My mind has also changed a lot, I used to think that I could get what I want only through my own efforts, but now I find that my world can be affected by many other external factors. What is more, my goal was clearer, I would plan everything in advance prior to the pandemic.

ZHAO: Many unexpected things happened during the pandemic, like not knowing when we would be going back to school, for example. I used to think of myself as an idealistic person, this period made me become more realistic in my daily life but, in art, it has gone the other way from reality to ideal.

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Cleo: When did you start to create the artwork *Dreaming*?

ZHAO: We started this at the beginning of last March. Previously, everyone was optimistic and felt that the virus, the pandemic, everything like that would be over soon. Hence, when it came to the theme of our graduation project in mid-March, I decided that I would like to create an idealistic surrealist artwork, and the work was finished at the end of last May.

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Cleo: I noticed that you are students majoring in landscape design, so what inspired you to create the artwork? Why did you choose to build amusement facilities beyond the Forbidden City – (The Forbidden City, as the palace of Chinese Emperors during the Qing Dynasty of Chinese history) rather than beyond other sites?

ZHU: Both of us were art students and we used to paint. Therefore, we would pursue aesthetics and artistry first and, then, we would plan the details when making the landscape which would have the look of architecture about it.

The context of the work was during the increasing severity of the pandemic period. The meaning behind the work, then, was that we hoped that the people who lived in isolation could go outdoors, so the whole building was in sharp contrast with the

solemnity of The Forbidden City.

ZHAO: The Forbidden City was closed after the outbreak. So, we used our skills to design and install a temporary landscape for the future for people to enjoy and play to cope with emergencies of the pandemic. It also had the contrast that Pengyu ZHU mentioned before, that the atmosphere of The Forbidden City was very solemn but the one of an amusement park was lively. There was also a contrast between the material selected for this piece – wood and steel which represented the conflict between history and the present. We mainly used this contrast to express the aesthetic and quality differences.

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Cleo: In my view, this work also implied that the country was still very optimistic about the pandemic at the beginning. The Forbidden City symbolised the general environment of China while the thoughts of the mass of people were reflected in the amusement park. There is a tangible contradiction between enclosure and optimism.

ZHAO: Yes, it also meant that no matter what kind of difficulties we're encountering, we could overcome them with a positive attitude.

ZHU: Yeah it felt like the pandemic was a depressing topic, and the pressure of it all might be eased a bit by making an amusement park.

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Cleo: How did the pandemic affect your work?

ZHAO: The pandemic mainly impacted the form of the work I did which changed from face-to-face communication to being online. This meant that it was very easy for any information about work to be delayed and that always generated many different issues. And, also, the issues I have mentioned before.

ZHU: The biggest issue was travelling. The health QR code, temperature monitoring, and wearing a mask were quite time-consuming. Mentally, I was sort of concerned at first, but then I got used to the online classes and they even felt quite fulfilling and convenient.

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Cleo: Has your perception of art changed since the pandemic? If so, how, exactly?

ZHAO: In fact, there have not been many changes. Art and design were both means of expressing ideas and could reflect current social situations or existing problems. There were some changes in my mindset like, when creating landscapes, we would take this problem into consideration—whether we could have previously prevented some issues that may arise in the future.

ZHU: I feel art has become more fundamental. I used to think of art as something like caviar— it was something only the upper-class people played with and enjoyed, and there is nothing useful about it. After enduring this period, I have found a lot of artistic ideas which emerged from these events, and this made me truly feel that art and real-life were closely related, and art was not just for entertainment.

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Interview with Chen

The names would be abbreviated as “Cleo” (Cleo CHEN) and “CHEN” (Zixu CHEN).

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Cleo: How did you do with your life and work during the pandemic? What was changed from before?

CHEN: The outbreak happened during my senior year of college, and I was preparing for my graduation and the preliminary examination for postgraduate. According to the pandemic, the examination was delayed to be held in May or June. Simultaneously, Heilongjiang which is the city I located in was always on lockdown, so as a result of all things mentioned above, I was very depressed those days, the only thing I could do was keep studying.

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Cleo: Could you talk about the changes you’ve found or experienced during this period? What’s your Pivot like?

CHEN: My normal life has changed a lot. My high school was in Beijing so I seldom wanted to go back because I was used to living independently. However, I became accustomed to staying

at home which caused by the pandemic this year. As for my Art creating, I've changed my material from colourful ink to wash painting. I have experienced a hard time doing this because my colourful ink paintings were based on sketching, so I could only create wash paintings due to there was no way for me to sketch with the condition of lockdown. I was used to painting with colourful ink, so at first, I felt particularly dull when painting washes painting which only had one colour of black, which actually just in line with my mood at the time. As a result, my later paintings had some elements of the swimming person or lifebuoys.

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Cleo: When did you start to conceive the work of *Settled to Look on the Emerging Clouds* 雲々々々々々, *Growing Freely-Mountains and Seas* 山々々々 - 海々, and the *Scenic Spot* series artwork 風景画?

CHEN: The “Growing Freely” series artworks have started long before, I think it has represented the status of my art creation—some of my paintings were conceived previously while some totally weren’t. I always painted by following my vague feeling, I’d like to pile up elements in my mind, so each element was like a USB flash drive of my memory. “Growing Freely” means that I would start with a tree or a mountain, and then gradually growing out of them with significance.

Settled to Look On the Emerging Clouds was the work I created after graduating. Chinese ancient painting was very different from the West which emphasized forms and colours of paintings. Chinese painting focused on the vivid quality flowing inside the painting. Talking about this, I'd like to emphasize the feature of "vivid quality flowing inside". Aiming of performing that, I try the painting technique of arranging

rows after rows, it was also an attempt of experimenting with the traditional space painting approaches. The sharp peaks painted in the "Mountains and Seas" were like the thorns in my life, so after drawing the thorns "out", I felt much better than before. The **Scenic Spot** was the work I've just started to work on. This work was inspired by the Taihang Mountain and the Sanya Forest Park that I go for sketching a while ago. Mountains performed in the Chinese ancient painting were mostly innominate ones, but nowadays, most of our painting elements were taken from the scenes spots. Therefore, the work was done. What satisfied me more were the little person standing on the bridge and the viewing platform they were more appealing to me according to my aesthetic standard.

The ***Scenic Spot*** was the work I've just started to work on. This work was inspired by the Taihang Mountain and the Sanya Forest Park where I went sketching once a while ago. Mountains depicted in Chinese ancient painting were mostly unidentified ones but nowadays, most of our painting elements are from scenic spots. What satisfied me most about this work was the little person standing on the bridge and the viewing platform, they were more appealing to me and my aesthetic standard.

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Cleo: Among all these works, which one do you like best? and why? What has inspired you to create it?

CHEN: I used to like *Settled to Look On the Emerging Clouds* most because it has my mood and status during my vacation. In addition, because it took a while to paint, it has collected

various elements of different painting techniques or languages making it more complete. Whereas now, my favourite is the **Viewing Platform**, and later, I would like to keep adding the element of the small person depicted in the painting. In terms of inspiration, I admire the brushstrokes of Western oil paintings. I also like Baroque and Impressionist paintings, so later I may enrich my paintings with these sorts of references.

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Cleo: I found that these works were very different from the previous sketches, so do you want to go into the field of contemporary art later? If so, which sort of art theme do you want to focus on?

CHEN: I am longing to go into contemporary art. Chinese landscape paintings mainly emphasising the looks of paintings, sometimes I get tired of this aesthetic, so I want to make my pictures look like works that focus on our contemporary world and which cares more about the different meanings of our lives.

European artists such as Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer both suffered a lot during childhood, so their artworks can be viewed as giving us a sense of reflection, guilt, or anger, which are really powerful ideas to convey. However, I am living a normal life, so I often feel that my paintings are too mediocre. I tried living in an intense and extreme manner, but I found it hard for me to use painting to record my reality and ideas. As a result, I may still focus on the expression in the picture itself at the moment.

At present, I still want to imitate more iconic paintings and many contemporary paintings are inspired by ancient themes. Like Lei XU, an artist who aims to promote the spatial

feelings expressed in Chinese Landscape Paintings and his paintings are very novel by use of this method. I see this as a great example of a method for generating a symbiosis between the contemporary and the traditional. I thought a lot about this recently, and I feel there are many different potential ways I can pursue these ideas.

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Cleo: How does the pandemic impact your art creation?

CHEN: The pandemic presented me with some barriers, and this period also represents my Pivot from undergraduate to postgraduate. Before the pandemic, I lived carefree like being in an ivory tower, but I was forced to pivot to become pragmatic and think about how to make money because my family was suffering from financial pressure.

In response, I developed my learning to focus more on which styles were popular in national exhibitions, and drawing more completely, in order to find a job. Owing to the fact that holding a solo exhibition or academic exhibition was not as convenient as the national exhibitions, I also thought about developing a fixed painting language at this time. It was a hard period, and I found that I work that I once felt satisfied with later revealed itself to me as something which was not what I wanted or intended to produce. Therefore, I had to adapt again to focus on my mood and surroundings, and I'm trying to let myself be satisfied in any given situation.

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On the relationship between art and technology, the development of photography has helped art's development rather

than just being a tool of recording a moment and has contributed to art technologically. For instance, an example from history, the moment of the ballerina lifting her leg in Degas's painting, ***The Ballet Class (La Classe de danse)***, was probably aided with the help of a camera. The printing technique produced photo albums which helped art's education a lot. So, to end and, in my opinion, the development of technology has smashed down barriers to aid art's development and I think this will continue.

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