

Mio Pang Fei: “Neo-Orientalism”, from Journey to Legacy

LEONOR VEIGA*

ABSTRACT: This essay suggests that Mio Pang Fei is a visual artist imbued with a strong intellectual agency. His artistic life and practice have been devoted to originating a model for a cultural encounter between East and West, which he names Neo-Orientalism. To perform his intended project, he produced a substantial body of work and wrote various essays. Through these outputs, he exemplifies and communicates his cultural mission of opening new paths for a Chinese art which he considers to be in need for reformulation.

The strategy to communicate artistic programmes through text is central to the avant-garde. Avant-garde manifestos advanced the intentions and strategies of artistic groups that aimed to change the way art was made and received. Mio Pang Fei departs from this tradition but differs from it: the artist-author communicates his programmes but declares it as a task for several generations and without a specific set of features.

KEYWORDS: Neo-Orientalism; Manifesto; Avant-garde; Chinese Art; Western Modern Art.

Introduction

Neo-Orientalism is the life project of Chinese artist Mio Pang Fei (b.1936, Shanghai). This project is materialized in two branches: 1) a body of theory which includes a "manifesto" for future generations

and 2) an artistic practice that reflects the thinking which Mio started to develop since the mid-1960s. In general terms, Neo-Orientalism is a cultural meeting between East and West performed through artistic practice. It is conducive to finding a middle point where both traditions meet—Western painting and traditional Chinese painting—in order to create a third possibility that matches the two without annulling their own features, histories and discursive capacities. This is what I have termed “Third Avant-garde”, a set of practices in which aspects of both traditions—in this case modern art and traditional Chinese painting —coeval.¹ Generally, Third Avant-garde practices disrupt the art historical conviction that relates avant-garde to the “new” and rejecting “old” ways, including tradition, which was seen as the opposite of modernism. These practices are always started by individual artists who not only wish to address their close community(ies)

*Art historian and curator, Leonor Veiga is currently associated with the University of Lisbon through the project “A History of Presence: a dialogue between Portuguese collections of material culture from Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian artists”. She is also co-curator of ARTFEM, *Women Artists 2nd International Biennial of Macau SAR* (2020). Leonor Veiga holds a PhD from Leiden University (2018). Her dissertation is entitled “The Third Avant-Garde: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia Recalling Tradition” and was awarded the Humanities Best Dissertation Prize by the International Convention of Asian Scholars (2019). Her curatorial work (2006–2020) includes exhibitions in Indonesia, Mozambique, London, Macao and Lisbon. Her writing on arts (2010–2020) has mainly focused on non-Western art.

Curadora e historiadora de arte, actualmente associada à Universidade de Lisboa com o projecto “A History of Presence: a dialogue between Portuguese collections of material culture from Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian artists” e co-curadora da ARTFEM, Mulheres Artistas, 2.ª Bienal Internacional de Macau SAR (2020). É doutorada pela Universidade de Leiden (2018) com a dissertação “The Third Avant-Garde: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia Recalling Tradition”, vencedora do prémio Melhor Dissertação em Humanidades pelo International Convention of Asian Scholars (2019). O seu trabalho curatorial (2006–2020) inclui exposições na Indonésia, Moçambique, Londres, Macau e Lisboa. A sua escrita nas artes (2010–2020) tem-se focado maioritariamente em arte não-Occidental.

through cultural models that are regarded as foreign to them, like modern art within a Chinese context, but also want to recover and (re)appropriate their cultural heritage. Artists who approach art this way, by negotiating the two realms (the local and the international), often have an in-depth knowledge of the two cultural systems they negotiate with. And this is the case of Mio Pang Fei, as affirmed by Chinese art critic Shui Tian Zhong: “Mio’s post-abstract art is a very special phenomenon. It makes us realize how much an artist can achieve if he has intimate knowledge of both traditional Chinese art and modern Western art.”² At the time of his praise, in 1993, Zhong was the Director of the China Art Research Institute. His recognition that Mio’s oeuvre effectively expanded the possibilities of traditional Chinese painting was of utmost importance, especially because the circumstances in which Mio migrated to Macao one decade earlier could be regarded as those of an artist in exile. It was in this territory managed by the Portuguese government until 1999 that Neo-Orientalism found a place to freely manifest itself and start its journey toward becoming an intellectual and artistic legacy for future generations of Chinese artists. Mio’s exiled situation is specific but not unique; in fact, many artists worldwide have experienced being uprooted from their countries to freely make their art. This is reminded by Australian art historian Caroline Turner: “We do need then to acknowledge the significance of historical contexts [and remember that artists] have often faced personal danger” because their artistic production was regarded as opposing the art supported by their country’s political regimes.³

How does Neo-Orientalism surge and what does it signify?

Mio Pang Fei has devoted his life to his art. “If it was not for the art, I would not have left [China].”⁴ His commitment to his practice is inseparable from his mission, his act of social agency: that of performing a cultural encounter between two distinct cultures. His art can be situated in the interstices of Chinese traditional



Portrait of Mio Pang Fei. Image courtesy of the artist.

painting—his compositions appear suspended in the canvas, and brush strokes applied follow the principles of the formal and canonical language of traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy—and Western modern art, which rejects history and realism and instead values abstraction, embraces experimentation and formalism and brings about an emphasis on materials, techniques and processes. These criteria are evidenced in his written explanation, published in the *Review of Culture* in 1997:

*‘Neo-Orientalism’ [...] uses calligraphy, signs, brushstrokes and colour (ink) of Oriental art. It contains the ‘vital spirit’ of Chinese tradition, is filled with the inspiration of enlightenment and it is expressed through Western concepts. It uses the most effective media, materials and methods, such as displacement, separation and reconstruction, to arrive at many different layers of meaning. It is filled with a concern for humanity and the meaning of life. Orientalism, as a global art form, will bring East and West together in cultural harmony, engineering a new path to enlightenment and thus challenging the superficiality of today’s popular art. It is an art bridging the gap between the past and present. It is destined to become the common spiritual expression of mankind in the future.*⁵

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As a programme, Mio's Neo-Orientalism resonates with postmodern expressions that were taking place globally since the 1970s. Yet, Mio declared that postmodern attempts by Chinese artists (both inside and outside China) were "suicidal", because of their aim to define a new cultural attitude through "anti-cultural" content.⁶ To countermand this fault, he proposed Neo-Orientalism, a new—a *third*—cultural system which seeks to adopt a more rational and cultural stance because of its programmatic intent of an intercultural meeting of what was regarded as opposites. He declared: "Chinese culture is in need for transformation, [something which will not be achieved] if Chinese painters do not understand and practice traditional art."⁷ To him traditional arts are paramount for contemporary creation. He says, "Tradition is a fact. Some people consider it an overburdening presence, but I personally see it as an enlivening influence... change transforms tradition into a relevant entity."⁸ Tradition, as Mio suggests, is not opposite of modernism. His act of agency includes changing traditions in a way that makes them relevant in our time. Here, Mio meets the thinking of Indian curator Geeta Kapur, who envisions that the introduction of traditional arts within modern art practices was not only a form of resistance against established discourses, in and outside the country, but it was equally conducive to an avant-garde in which traditions regained their critical value. Kapur affirms that through this involvement, "tradition is turned into a critique and culture into a matter of practice and both together into a civilizational discourse that goes beyond the nation-state and third worldist dogmas."⁹ This combination (of traditional arts and modern art practices) in a Chinese context is Mio's Neo-Orientalism, which acts like an avant-garde because 1) it denies history—including the history of Orientalism, a nineteenth-century term that was immortalized in 1978 by Edward W. Said, who regarded Orientalism as prejudicial, because its roots resided in European preconceived notions of Asian culture that resulted from European explorations of Asian countries. Said considered, and Mio agrees, that superficial contacts are insufficient to understand another culture—and 2) instead acts in the now and works toward projecting a

better future. Its recuperation of the past is topical, and its engagement of traditional arts—in this case, traditional Chinese painting—mirrors the coexistence of multiple temporalities in our time. The avant-garde performed by postmodern artists including Mio shows that, as Filipino art historian Patrick Flores affirms, "artists belonging to post-colonial cultures are involved in negotiating both Western modernism and the indigenous traditions of art,"¹⁰ which perform as innovating agents, and not just as traditions' passive recipients.

As an artist, Mio was confronted with a dilemma: whether to consider his art by historic or personal considerations. If using art historical discourses, he had to regard himself as a Western modern artist or as a traditional Chinese artist. So, he decided to search for a new construct that would eliminate limitations of ideological nature and create a space where he could exist outside this dichotomy. So, he suggests that his theoretical project perform "an examination of Eastern culture from a Western perspective."¹¹ This is done by reforming both traditions, thus capturing their relevance today. It is fair to say that Mio's contribution for art historical discourse is revolutionary; the cultural perspective provided by Neo-Orientalism contains a response from the East towards the contradictions originated by the West. He affirms that this new product is a language residing above nationalisms and capable of creating a meeting between the two sets of cultural influences, while declaring it a global form bridging East and West, past and present. To him, this exercise "is more than just a cultural attitude", it constitutes a "cultural strategy."¹² In addition, he indicates that while this strategy sustains his own art, it may also guide the practice of contemporary Chinese artists. Yet, he notes: "Creating Neo-Oriental art requires study and practice of both Oriental and Western culture".¹³ He equally observes that the century-

old Western fascination by Oriental art persists today. This is visible in the continued appropriation and employment of some of its attributes in the work of several Western artists, while indicating the continued importance of Oriental art globally.¹⁴ Concurrently, he also testifies the modernization of Asia and its greater global relevance in economy and politics. So, in his view, the contemporary is the propitious moment for Chinese artists to claim their rightful place in the artworld. His affirmation stems from the fact a longstanding culture spanning five thousand years has been recovered. Orientalism, in which the distant Other was regarded through the lens of the West, did not allow for such cultural affirmation. The Chinese (as well as other peoples who were judged by this regard) had to surpass this imposed inferiority by reassessing their culture. This is what Mio's life enabled him, and it constitutes the genesis of Neo-Orientalism. So, the contemporary allows for such cultural affirmation of Chinese artists. To Mio, the Neo-Oriental artist must start by deeply respecting Oriental culture—something that was not possible before due to a collective sentiment of loss originating in the high impact of the Opium wars, Westernization of life and the Cultural Revolution of 1966 which removed a large portion of Chinese cultural pride. So, once this mental place of pride is achieved, then, attempting to revitalize oriental art, the Neo-Oriental artist may adopt certain Western aesthetic ideals.

Mio Pang Fei's journey: two phases, a four-step process

Mio's journey can be divided in two main phases: thinking Neo-Orientalism (until 1982) and making Neo-Orientalism (after 1985). While Neo-Orientalism is present in both phases, before 1985 it was never fully materialized, because it remained a secret endeavour, practiced and planned by the artist in isolation. This first period corresponds to Mio's life before moving to Macao in 1982. The second period

starts with his first Neo-Oriental exhibition, in the Camões Museum of Macao, in 1985.

Since the 1950s, while he was attending the Fujian Faculty of Arts, Mio felt the need for a new path for Chinese art. When he left the institution in 1958 with an excellent academic record, he was versed in most Western art, having studied Soviet Realism and all European art until 1850. Yet, he noticed that all post-1850 art, from post-Courbet art to post-Realist art, was not being taught at the academy. He found out that several movements including Impressionism and Cubism, alongside with several interesting modern artists were forbidden in China, leading him to a secret self-learning journey of Western modernism. The research was difficult to achieve; he found modern paintings in small-scale photographs appearing in architectural magazines showcasing European villas. The scarcity of materials and sources of information meant that his education concerning modern art remained fragmented until after Mio moved to Macao in 1982. With China already immersed in the Great Leap Forward period (1958–1961), Mio was assigned a job at an exhibition hall in Fujian Province. There, he worked as a poster designer. During this time, he continued his secret study of Impressionism, and began looking at other schools including Post-impressionism, Fauvism and Cubism. In 1962, he decided to live from art and moved to Shanghai. Now working as a professor at an art academy, he continued studying Western art in secrecy, painting it in perishable Chinese rice paper and watercolour. He mixed materials such as oil colours with ink and water, in an attempt to find a suitable primer to enhance his artworks. Every time he finished a painting, he destroyed it. Except for the most recent works, made around 1975, all his production was either lost or destroyed by the artist.¹⁵ But in 1966, he stopped painting: “It was too dangerous.”¹⁶ Because of the intention to “sweep away all devils and monsters” attached to the Cultural Revolution, Mio was targeted, interrogated and jailed. This traumatic experience resulted in his belief that pursuing his personal interest

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in Western modernism would endanger him. During those days, Mio thought more than he practiced and reflected on which path to take. He thus asked Master Liu Haisu (1896–1994) for guidance. It was Liu, a renowned painter both in Chinese and Western traditions, that advised him to take Chinese calligraphy and traditional painting lessons. Under Liu's influence and tutoring, Mio immersed himself in studying the calligraphy and painting of China, practices which he keeps up to this day. Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s Mio studied seal characters, official script and running hand. Then he studied the painting of the four major schools of the Yuan or Mongol dynasty (1271–1368), which includes the Southern tradition, the Han tombs murals and folk art.¹⁷ As a lecturer in Shanghai, Mio encouraged his students to think, learn techniques, and also to understand the thinking and techniques of other painters, including Western ones. These were the fundamental preconditions of what would materialize as his Neo-Orientalism since the mid-1980s.



Mio Pang Fei practicing Chinese calligraphy. Source: documentary *Mio Pang Fei*. Image courtesy of Pedro Cardeira, Inner Harbour Films.

During this time, Mio saw the work of Huang Binning (1865–1955), which gave him hope of finding a path of abstraction for traditional Chinese painting. Something within it was abstract, but how could he start a Chinese abstract art? He started by identifying Chinese art's potential, including the use of line and abstraction, as well as its weaknesses, such as its strict canonic programming. Still studying and researching, he concluded that on the one hand Chinese art,

particularly painting, was in need of reform and that on the other hand Western modernism was moribund. So, he started a new path, postmodernism, and called it Neo-Orientalism. In 1975, Mio conceived the painting *Nightmare*, a painting showing the traces of traditional brush strokes most commonly made of liquified Chinese ink despite being produced in gouache (a thick and opaque substance). In retrospect, Chinese art critic Pun Kim Ou said about *Nightmare*: “it integrates Western and Chinese culture flawlessly [...] At that time, the character of Mio's art began to be shaped.”¹⁸

In 1982 started the second period of Mio's Neo-Orientalism. Decided to provide a better life to his wife and daughter and aware that he could no longer live and act in accordance with the socio-political reality of the People's Republic of China, in December 1982 he embraced a semi-exile in Macao. His first years in Macao were difficult: busy with several odd jobs to sustain his family in Shanghai, he did not paint. In 1985, Mio met Sun Xi Kun, of the Macao Yiyuan Calligraphy and Painting Association, and showed him photographs of artworks he had left in Shanghai because border officials rejected their entering into Macao. Sun directed him to António Conceição Júnior, director of the Camões Museum at the time. Then, Conceição Júnior was decided to change Macao's artistic panorama. So, after looking at Mio's photographs, he approved an exhibition one month later. Mio soon found that those artworks he had left behind in Shanghai with his family had perished: all his Neo-Orientalist experiments from the mid-1970s were irreplaceably damaged. Decided to survive, he started working from scratch and produced several works for his first exhibition, held at the Gallery of Casa Garden. The show was a huge success; this gave him the confidence to continue working. In 1986, through a scholarship of the Macao Cultural Institute, Mio travelled to Europe, where he visited several art museums, thus enabling him a greater understanding of Western modernism.

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An important aspect of Mio's production relates to abstraction. According to him, Western painters do it well, whereas Chinese painters do not. Yet, he conceives that essential aspects of Chinese art, like the concept of "vital spirit", or *Qi*, essential for the creative process—may be conducive to abstraction in Chinese painting and calligraphy. In addition, line as the fundamental element of Chinese painting can lead to abstraction, if *Qi* is cultivated. To him, if a dialogue between Oriental and Western art is to be performed, it will undoubtedly be based on the recognition of abstract elements.

Mio's reputation has grown since the 1990s, both in Macao and overseas; in 1992 and 1993 he held his first solo exhibition in Beijing and Shanghai; alongside the artists of the Macao Circle of Art Friends, he started to exhibit internationally in Taiwan, Kuala Lumpur, Lisbon, Fukuoka, Bandung, and neighbouring Hong Kong in several group shows. On the occasion of the Shanghai Biennale 1998, Chinese critic Liu Xiao Chu identified a "post-calligraphic" tendency in Mio's work *Harmony and Contention* of 1997. On this large painting, Mio used other materials like grease, oil, asphalt and painted in a manner that alludes and recalls Chinese calligraphy. This is what makes him an innovator who continues a tradition of calligraphy, and thus permits him to be a Third Avant-garde artist who uses tradition in a progressive way. In the



Harmony and Contention. Artist: Mio Pang Fei. 1997. Mixed media, 324 x 480 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

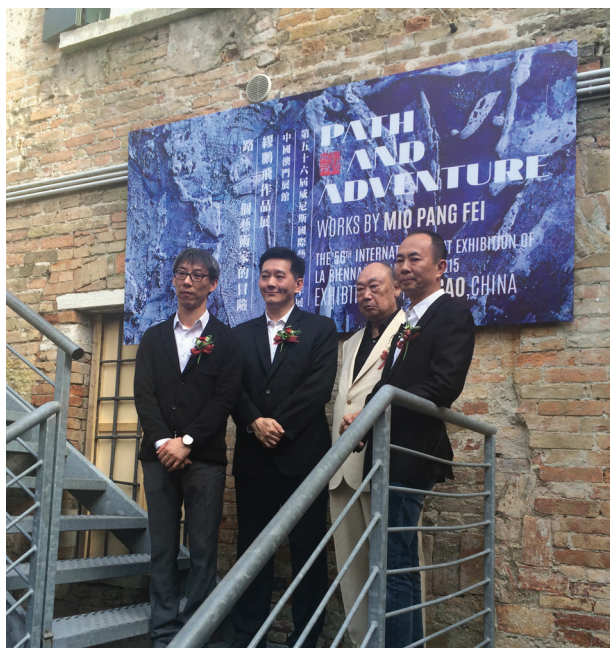
following decades his reputation continued to increase; he started to publish texts explaining his conceptual framework, continued to exhibit and received awards both in Macao and internationally. In 2012, Mio had a large retrospective at the Galaxy Casino, in Macao. In 2014, Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Cardeira produced the documentary *Mio Pang Fei*, in which he covers his life and art, and in 2015, Mio represented the Macao SAR at the 56th edition of Venice Biennale, a remarkable show in the career of an artist.¹⁹



Opening of Mio Pang Fei Art Collection Exhibition at the Galaxy Macao, 2012. Image courtesy of the artist.

Mio's trajectory can equally be viewed as a four-step process, mirroring the lines of Palestinian cultural theorist Edward W. Said's description of the path of an idea.²⁰ First, there is a point of origin, a set of initial circumstances in which the idea comes to birth or enters the discourse. Mio recalls, "I first started thinking along the lines of Neo-Orientalism in the early 1960s at the time of the Cultural Revolution in China."²¹ Second, a distance is transversed. Then, the idea moves from an earlier point to another time and place and reaches new prominence. In 1982, Mio Pang Fei moved to Macao, where he found a safe atmosphere to pursue his investigation. Third, a set of conditions—including acceptance and inevitably, resistances—that confront the transplanted theory or idea which make possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it may appear to be. Since Mio's presence in Macao, Neo-

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Mio Pang Fei at the Venice Biennale, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.

Orientalism went through several moments. Some of these moments were successful, including exhibitions in Macao and overseas exposure in Singapore, Hong Kong, Europe and later China, but others were acts of unacknowledged resistance: in 1985, all his Neo-Orientalist production created in China until 1982 was declared irrecoverable. Said's fourth and last stage of the development of an idea pertains to its full or partial accommodation and incorporation. This phase is in some extent transformed by its new uses and its new position in time and space. Mio's theory was first published in Macao in *Review of Culture* in 1997. From then on, it became public property and reached other forms of development. The documentary by Cardeira is one of the most significant examples of Neo-Orientalism's afterlife.²²

Mio's Aesthetic Production

Mio's Neo-Orientalist style is complex; it combines calligraphy, aspects of traditional Chinese painting and culture with Western modernism. His paintings are frequently large-scaled, occupying large

surfaces (2m x 2m is a common size), and thus may recall ancient mural art; his tones are frequently earthy and vibrant colours appear on the details (which sometimes allude to graffiti and engravings on walls); his lines are frequently abstract, resembling strokes of Chinese calligraphy which are sometimes painted through contemporary media including spray and texturized with sand and asphalt. Frequently, he uses spontaneity as a recourse and thus dripping, collage appear to "overcome the inertia and passive contemplativeness of Chinese culture", says Portuguese art critic Eurico Gonçalves.²³ In his opinion, Mio's abstract expressionism "is ugly, disagreeable, repulsive, inconvenient, and deliberately botched, but vigorous and monumental."²⁴ These characteristics are better regarded within installation works of which the series *Water Margins*, *On Human Condition* and *Post-Calligraphy* are the best examples. Mio has been working on these series since the early 1990s, showing that his programme is broad and does not tire itself immediately.



Mio Pang Fei at the Venice Biennale, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.

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Water Margins (1990s) is probably Mio Pang Fei's most effective Neo-Orientalist demonstration: it not only constitutes a multimedia constellation of elements, it is his personal review of the thousand-year-old Chinese classic novel *Tales of the Water Margin* (Shui Hu Zhuan 水滸傳), also translated as the *Outlaws of the Marsh*, the *Tale of the Marshes* and *All Men Are Brothers*, titles that appear in Mio's work. This story from the late northern Song Dynasty is part of Chinese collective consciousness. It describes a peasant rebellion of 108 men who start a revolt against the government in the Liang Mountains, by the Yellow River. Their intent is to rob from the rich to give to the poor, to kill corrupt bureaucrats, redistribute the wealth, etc. Eventually, the Chinese Emperor grants them amnesty. This men's group unites through justice based on principles of loyalty and brotherhood. But as the story develops, these fundamentals are corrupted. As a result, every one of the 108 heroes has his own tragic story, making *Water Margins* a bloody story of rape, death, betrayal,

loyalty and justice. Mio used some of the marsh's bandits: the educated man Wu Yong (or Wu Song), the warrior Lung Chun-yi (or Lu Junyi), and the monk Luo Tsu-sun (Lu Zhishen). Through them, he questions mankind's self-slaughter and metaphorically addresses his own reflections on the human condition and the meaning of life. This thinking process on humanity would lead him to develop another Neo-Orientalist series, *On the Human Condition*, after 2000.

These three paintings demonstrate different stroke possibilities: when applying calligraphic gestures to figural representation, the Chineseness of traditional classic painting is implied, yet this constitutes a totally new form of representation. The three depictions of Wu Yong show common attributes: the hair and apparel, his hand gesture in sign of command, and his pose, with a right foot to the side, are similar. This is Mio's way to communicate with a vast Chinese audience: by applying codes that are known to them. Nevertheless, his representation and the drawing scale and the



Wu Yong of Shui Hu. Artist: Mio Pang Fei. 1996. Mixed media on wood, 200 x 135 cm (each). Photographs by Leonor Veiga.

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size of brushstrokes are reminiscent of Spanish artist Antoni Tàpies' (1923–2012) paintings. What Mio is doing is not a simple rejection of tradition, as the painting is very Chinese in form and content. He is actively transporting the viewer to the realm of earthy primitive mural art, and etchings made in archaeological sites by disrespectful contemporary men, or possibly tourists, which degrade a fading, yet present past. While these artworks may live in



Bandits of the Marsh, Water Margins Series. Artist: Mio Pang Fei. 1996. Installation view. Image courtesy of the artist.



Bandits of the Marsh, Water Margins Series. Artist: Mio Pang Fei. 1996. Installation view. Image courtesy of the artist.

isolation, Mio presented them alongside others within a large-scale installation entitled *Bandits of the Marsh* which was presented in Macao in 1996. It is comprised of several media, including paintings with calligraphic strokes, ready-made items, cloth

scrolls, lamps and altars. The *Bandits of Marsh* travelled to the Shanghai Art Museum in 1999. On the occasion, Feng Yuan, Director of the China National Museum of Fine Arts, put forward that, without dispute, Mio's works are contemporary in form, yet contain a deeply traditional Chinese spirit.²⁵

The installation contains several elements: a medium-sized mural painting sided by wooden planks (resembling bamboo slips, another traditional art form in China and other parts of Asia), a central floor installation containing wooden boxes, plaster hands, and lamps. The portrait series of the heroes such as Wu Yong inhabits the walls on the side. Separated by long scrolls of textiles, each hero is given his or her own throne and space for viewer's contemplation. The longest painting of the installation reports the 108 heroes' stories, now viewed as 108 heavenly stars destined to the noble tasks of implementing divine commandments, and upholding justice, by rescuing the deprived and subduing the corrupted. "One cannot but accept that this theme is universal in its significance and that it touches on social connotations,"²⁶ says Portuguese professor António Andrade. The social commentary is imbedded, and the choice of an impactful theme shows Mio's angle—the human side of the story. This is substantiated by the central installation, where several hands, out of the grave, come to the surface claiming for justice. Mio says that the installation also refers to those who supported the 108 heroes.²⁷ Close to the longest painting of the installation, there is an empty chair. It alludes to the empty throne of general Chao Gai, who died before the "Grand Assembly of the 108" took place. He nevertheless remains present as a spiritual guardian of the outlaws, and ceremonial sacrifices are made in his honour.

During the 1990s, Mio worked on this series and the installation evolved and gave place to *All Men Are Brothers* (another possible translation

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for the novel's title). It shows scrolls and hanging hands claiming justice surrounding the empty general's chair. The malleability of the installation is also consistent with the artist's intent to go against trends and by conveying his ideas through aesthetic practice. These variations within *Water Margins* have allowed him to deconstruct and integrate the story differently, to combine painting with installation whenever needed, and to integrate Chinese calligraphy and stories with abstract forms. *Bandits of Marsh* allows him a space to analyze the culture he inherited and the Chinese people through a markedly contemporary display. In all its elements the installation demonstrates the extent history can penetrate modern art, as its Chinese components are present both at a conceptual and material level. In so doing, and in accordance with his Neo-Orientalist principles, Mio transcended Western modernism and traditional Chinese paintings and calligraphy.

On Human Condition, Mio's second Neo-Orientalist series, is comprised of many elements—the previous work *All Men Are Brothers* has also been integrated in this series, showing versatility and crossing over of different works. The installation *Dong Mei Ren*, however, reveals the story of Empress Xiao from the Sui dynasty (581–618 and preceded the famous Tang dynasty), known for her beauty and



Don Mei Ren (Oriental Beauty). Artist: Mio Pang Fei. 2004. Installation view. Image courtesy of the artist.



Don Mei Ren (Oriental Beauty). Artist: Mio Pang Fei. 2004. Installation view. Image courtesy of the artist.

intelligence. Even if it is not possible to know much about her, she remained in collective culture as *Dong Mei Ren*, a courtly title meaning "Oriental Beauty". The work records the beauty of the royal consort as much as it comments on beauty as incorporeal. This is evidenced through the rotten sculpture lying in the front of a balustrade of planks: "no matter how beautiful, after some time, decades, thousands of years they become a stack of whatever. I wanted to reflect on this."²⁸ Mio used the twelfth scene from the *Admonitions Scroll*, *Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies* to bring in the contemporary topic of women's rights.²⁹ This is an important aspect of his practice—that of finding contemporary messages in the 2000-year-old manuscripts—and giving them a contemporary twist (written texts on wood find

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parallels in the *lontar* scrolls, traditional in Java and Bali for instance). *Dong Mei Ren* is an installation with calligraphy that contains rich associations to the past. The work evokes ancient books made from silk and bamboo, which the artist explains recall Chinese calligraphy's early days. "This is the precursor of the roll,"³⁰ he says, reason why planks are conjoined by a rope (in the past, very thin pieces of wood were connected by a line and then rolled together). Coloured planks with inscriptions by Mio rest against the wall; in front of them lies a sculptural (human) figure—that of Dong Rei Men, whose beauty we cannot access because

it is disfigured. On closer inspection, traces of newspapers are traceable in the sticks, some of which are coloured. Through this installation, Mio exercises his calligraphic skills, while reprinting the admonitions and tackling current gender issues.

On Human Condition equally announces Mio's subsequent work on calligraphy, an artistic technique that he was trained in with Master Liu Haisu. The *Post-Calligraphy* series, from 2006, uses traditional Chinese calligraphy in an expressionist form. In some works of the series, traditionalism is evident, especially in terms of support and configuration, but in other works, as shown in the



Post-Calligraphy, Black and White Series. Artist: Mio Pang Fei. 2006. Painting on canvas, 181 x 141 cm (each). Image courtesy of the artist.

illustration, traditionalism is concealed: the script is so enlarged that it looks like an appearance of calligraphy. It is this set of possibilities that Chinese critic Liu Xiao Chu declared "post-calligraphic".

Water Margins, *On the Human Condition* and *Post-Calligraphy* constitute a Neo-Orientalism applied, both at an expressionist and theoretical level: the installations and the paintings look to the past for present guidance. The use of these old cultural constructs demonstrates that Mio's artistic vision includes China's long history and culture while it looks for other references to revitalize it. His new style is grounded in a modern creative language while its subject is intricately Chinese. On his way, Mio has effectively explored the conflict and harmony between eastern and western cultures. And in the process of self-discovery, Neo-Orientalism has provided artists with new guidelines.

Mio Pang Fei's Neo-Orientalism: the making of a Third Avant-garde

Mio's life work is dedicated to finding a new path for Chinese art which would include himself, as an artist trained in Western art and in traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy. This is unique; it is not frequent that artists delve into theorization and creation of a new set of principles in the form of a legacy beyond the visual. Frequently, avant-garde movements used recourse to the manifesto to make their intentions clear to the public, and as a manifesto of a group of individuals who intended to reform art. This is an important aspect of Neo-Orientalism: it is an avant-garde that originated by an individual, and it is the only postmodern avant-garde that left a written outcome to guide future generations.

Throughout his life, he understood that traditional Chinese painting was in need of transformation; he equally identified that Western modernism's abstraction could provide a solution.

Yet, Western modernism was not permitted in China, and looking for it was too dangerous. Nevertheless, he saw more relation of this particular moment of Western art with traditional Chinese painting than other currents such as Soviet Realism, a style that was integrated within Chinese art for means of propaganda during the Cultural Revolution, which were completely alien to the thousand-year-old Chinese culture he knew. So, while being lectured in Chinese calligraphy and painting, in secrecy he researched to better understand Western modernity.

Mio believes that much can be learned from tradition. His relationship with tradition is one of inevitability, deriving from his nationality and current reassessment of traditional values. He sees tradition as a living entity that must be acknowledged. Mio's initial Neo-Orientalist trials (before 1982) were always made after much reflection and away from public eyes. As his impulse to live from art grew, he moved to Macao in 1982. There, he experienced a welcoming audience since his first show in 1985. Soon after, he started to write about his vision. The manifesto *Neo-Orientalism* advocates the study and analysis of past styles—not necessarily the ones he studied, but a plethora available in the broad range of traditional Chinese art—as a fundamental ingredient to break out in a new direction. On his part, he took the path of conjoining that knowledge with Western modernism, but he admits that other paths are possible. So, he decided to write about his vision, which was finally possible to share with the public. His writing not only conveys his thinking but advances the need for future generations to continue the reformation of traditional arts through new art forms which will not corrupt them but rather revitalize them.

If Mio's trajectory was accidental, his working method was chosen. This is his act of agency; one which ties his intent to respect the integrity of Chinese culture, which he found to be in need of

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transformation, with a system which is alien to it. This is the reason why he stresses the technique of calligraphy as a source to make change: calligraphy owns a repertoire theoretical and foundational aspects that can be transposed into contemporary reflections and used as part of the methodology. Mio Pang Fei's Neo-Orientalism started from a deep study and reflection of both traditions and schools of representation, especially traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, and modern European aesthetics. As such, it is fair to say that

Neo-Orientalism *makes* a tradition, as it looks for a solution that harmonizes these two antagonistic forces. Equally, it must also be considered an act of *making* traditions for its proposal *to transform a culture*—the Chinese—through an artistic reform, bound in the philosophical and conceptual reassessment of some of China's most important historical novels. And, in accordance with his Neo-Orientalist principles, Mio transcended both Western modernism and traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy. **RC**

NOTES

- 1 Leonor Veiga, "The Third Avant-Garde: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia Recalling Tradition" (PhD thesis, Leiden, Leiden University, 2018), <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/62200>.
- 2 Shui Tian Zhong, "Mio Pang Fei and His Neo-Orientalism," in *Mio Pang Fei* (Macao: Macao Polytechnic Institute & Macao Foundation, 1999), 359. Shui Tiang Zhing (b. 1935, Lanzhou, China) is a researcher and renowned art critic from China and former director of the Graduate School of Fine Arts of the China Academy of Arts.
- 3 Caroline Turner, ed., *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005): 9.
- 4 Pedro Carreira, *Mio Pang Fei, Documentary* (Inner Harbour Films, 2014), <https://vimeo.com/96661921>.
- 5 Mio Pang Fei, "Neo-Orientalism," *Review of Culture*, no. 30 (1997): 181.
- 6 Mio Pang Fei, "Neo-Orientalism," in *Mio Pang Fei* (1999), 352.
- 7 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 1997, 176–80.
- 8 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 178.
- 9 Geeta Kapur, "Contemporary Cultural Practice: Some Polemical Categories," *Social Scientist* 18, no. 3 (1990): 58.
- 10 Patrick D. Flores, "Revisiting Tradition and the Incommensurate Contemporary," *Broadsheet* 41, no. 4 (2012): 238.
- 11 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 1997, 181.
- 12 Luo Yi Pin, "Realm of Poetic Mind: Mio Pang Fei and His Neo-Orientalism," in *Above & Beyond: Neo-Orientalism Art Exhibition Mio Pang Fei*, ed. Joey Ho Chong I (Macao: The CAC - Círculo dos Amigos da Cultura, 2012): 17.
- 13 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 1999, 354.
- 14 Appropriation is defined as the direct duplication, copying or incorporation of an image (a photograph, a painting by an artist who represents a different context. These gestures not only alter the significance of the appropriated object, they equally question notions of originality and authenticity which are central to Western art. Yet, the act of "stealing" from someone and "making one's own" is essential for the avant-garde, which denies the notion of original and authentic.
- 15 Mio recalls that most of his productions from the 1960s and the 1970s were lost because humidity glued all the artworks together. The only remains are archival photos that he used to repaint some of these works.
- 16 Carreira, *Mio Pang Fei*.
- 17 Xue Yao Xian, "Entering Purgatory: A Brief Biography of Mio Pang Fei," in *Mio Pang Fei*, (1999): 235–6.
- 18 Kim Ou Pun, "Above & Beyond: Neo-Orientalism Art Exhibition by Mio Pang Fei," in *Above & Beyond*, 30.
- 19 Speciale Venezia 2015 – la biennale: eventi collaterali (parte 1), <https://youtu.be/Rwpgf1rlmpY>
- 20 Edward Said, "Travelling Theory," in *The Edward Said Reader*, eds. Andrew N. Rubin and Moustafa Bayoumi (London: Granta Books, 2001): 196.
- 21 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 1997, 175.
- 22 Carreira, *Mio Pang Fei*.
- 23 Eurico Gonçalves, "Mio Pang Fei — The Audacity to Be Modern in the Orient," in *Mio Pang Fei*, (1999): 254.
- 24 Gonçalves, 254–5.
- 25 Feng Yuan and Ung Vai Meng, "Preface," in *On Human Condition, Artworks by Mio Pang Fei*, ed. Hou Seng Chan (Macao: Macao Museum of Art, 2004): 7–17.
- 26 António Andrade, "On Mio Pang Fei's 'Tales of the Water Margin' Paintings Series," in *Mio Pang Fei* (1999): 344.
- 27 Mio Pang Fei, *Mio Pang Fei's Avant-gardism*, interview by Leonor Veiga, trans. Cristina Mio U Kit, 17 November, 2015 (Unpublished recording/manuscript).
- 28 Carreira, *Mio Pang Fei*.
- 29 "Admonitions Scroll," Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, accessed February 22, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Admonitions_Scroll.
- 30 Mio Pang Fei, *Mio Pang Fei's Avant-gardism*.

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- . "Neo-Orientalism." *Review of Culture*, no. 30 (1997): 175–81.
- . "Neo-Orientalism." In *Mio Pang Fei*, 346–57. Macao: Macao Polytechnic Institute & Macao Foundation, 1999.
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