

# THE POWER OF

# FENG-SHUI

## IN THE ART OF

# MAI CHENG ZHENG

By far one of the most exciting developments in recent art is the continuing confluence of Eastern and Western aesthetics. Finally those once distant twains that, according to the racist Kipling, were never supposed to meet, have not only met but merged with a vengeance, and we are all the richer for it.

One of the more auspicious examples to prove this point is the work of Mai Cheng Zheng, a Chinese painter living and working in Oslo, Norway, whose solo show *Feng-shui Art: Ancient Signs* can be seen from November 28 through December 17 at Noho Gallery, 168 Mercer Street.

Although the Chinese have been practicing feng-shui for four thousand years, most Americans have only become familiar with the term in recent decades. Feng-shui, which translates from Chinese as 'wind and water,' is the ancient science of arranging the elements of one's life, particularly one's living and working spaces, to be in accord with nature. Practitioners of feng-shui claim that the proper positioning of one's desk or bed can have a profound affect on one's energy, one's work, and other aspects of one's life, bringing them into harmony with nature and increasing not only one's creative efficiency but also one's sense of well being.

Mai Cheng Zheng took this longheld belief system a step further when she began to apply the principles of feng-shui to the art of painting as a student at Beijing's Central Academy of Arts and Design in the late 70s. In 1981, however, after seeing an exhibition of works by the Norwegian expressionist Edvard Munch in the National Gallery in Beijing, she became enamored of Expressionism. Determined to study in Munch's homeland, she was accepted at the State Academy of Arts in Oslo, and later received a post graduate scholarship at the Art Academy in Bergen.

In true multicultural fashion, the artist who became a Norwegian citizen in 1989, resumed her interest in feng-shui, teaching Norwegians to arrange their working and living spaces more efficiently. At the same time, as a fine artist, she began reintroducing feng-shui principles, along with more Western elements (such as her preference for oil paint over ink) into her work as well.

Since, Mai Cheng Zheng has become internationally known for her auspicious synthesis of Eastern and Western aesthetics, with exhibitions in such prestigious venues as the National Gallery in Beijing, where she first discovered Munch, and Espace Bateau Lavoisier in Paris, a gallery that once represented Picasso. She has also exhibited in Germany, Belgium, and Iceland, and had solo shows at Galleri Asur in Oslo.

In her most recent exhibition at Noho Gallery, in Soho, the first thing that strikes



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one about Mai Cheng Zheng's work is the balance that she achieves between contemporary immediacy and timeless beauty. In paintings at once funky and elegant, her use of fragmentary figurative imagery and graffiti-like scrawls and signs within largely abstract color areas can recall no less an enfant terrible of the untrammelled gesture than the late Jean Michel Basquiat.

Mai Cheng Zheng, however, employs such devices in a less aggressive and more deliberate manner, to achieve balance and harmony rather than dissonance. She accomplishes this by always balancing cold colors with warmer ones. She also invariably sets up contrasts between forms and shapes that are small and large, creating a sense of their being near or far. Thus she brings the principles of yin and yang, or positive and negative, which are the basis for feng-shui, to bear in her compositions.

There is an impulse toward the sumptuous and the exquisite that moors Mai Cheng Zheng's work not in the monochromatic Literati tradition, from whose gestural vivacity certain Abstract Expressionists drew inspiration, but in much earlier 8th century Chinese tomb paintings, with their combination of delicate linearity, earthy mineral colors, and tactile fresco surfaces. Her use of vibrant reds, gold hues, and glistening blacks, in combination with more subdued colors, harks back, too, to the lacquered opulence of the Tang dynasty.

Then there are disparate elements in Mai Cheng Zheng's personal semiotics that refer even further back to prehistoric cave paintings: simplified bison, horses, antelopes, and other fanciful beasts, as well as rows of running human figures

laid down in slashing black strokes that in their staggered urgency suggest the precise instant when images verged on ideograms, that magical moment of metamorphosis when pictures became written language. These signs are derived from sources as diverse as her own Chinese heritage, Nordic runes, and Egyptian hieroglyphics, all of which she combines to express universal commonalities.

Mai Cheng Zheng also combines such archetypal signs with more contemporary elements adopted from expressionism and action painting, such as skeins and drips ala Pollock, to achieve dynamic juxtapositions of figure, form, and gesture. Whip-lash calligraphic strokes are employed quite masterfully to animate the surfaces of her paintings in much the same manner as Cy Twombly's scrawled phrases.

These calligraphic elements are especially plentiful and energetic in Mai Cheng Zheng's painting *Silk Road*, where various staid rectangular forms are juxtaposed with a sinuous and intricate network of linear shapes that dance in swarming profusion over a surface further enhanced by partial scrapings revealing the layered imagery that may be referred to as 'aesthetic archaeology.' Here, the interaction between static and fluid elements is especially dynamic, demonstrating this artist's belief that 'only when two opposite forces are acting together, do we get energy.'

By contrast, *Inventor of the Wheel* is a bold composition that juxtaposes superimposed rectangles in brilliant red and yellow hues with the silhouetted figure of a man, a wheel, and a rearing animal. In this painting, Mai Cheng Zheng's use of texture is especially sensual, with striated impastos contributing considerable tactile

appeal to the overall design. An intriguing array of smaller signs and symbols are scrawled within the rectangle containing the central figures, and the painting is further enlivened by four irregularly shaped roundish red forms that float down the right side of the composition, providing a buoyant contrast to the more austere geometric shapes.

A fanciful array of symbols, depicting the graceful flight of various creatures is the central focus of the painting entitled *The Riders' Tale*. Here, too, the overall composition is apportioned into rectangular divisions, with two large squares delineated in brilliant red, gold, and rainbow hues, dominating the center, and two vertical rows of smaller gold squares bordering both sides. This is an especially engaging painting, its compartmentalized composition of interlocking 'frames' suggesting an almost cinematic sequencing, its lively pictographic imagery conveying the sense of an epic narrative or myth.

In other paintings such as *The Movement of History* and *The Jar of Signs*, Mai Cheng Zheng elaborates upon similar themes in distinctly different ways. The latter painting is an interesting compositional departure, with the boldly outlined contours of a large vase surrounding various silhouetted human and animal shapes, suggesting culture as a container for history, a receptacle for our common human heritage.

Indeed, it is precisely her ability to encapsulate archetypes and universal themes in vital visual terms that makes the art of Mai Cheng Zheng ultimately valuable and rewarding.

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