

Transcending Reality & Re-imagining the Canon: Work by Valentina Battler

“The *Symphonic Dances* is Sergei Rachmaninoff’s coded summing-up of his life and his testament at the same time, and perhaps also a certain prediction fixed in musical images”.

“When I saw Chinese scroll paintings on the walls...I could physically feel my body vibrating as I walked past them. Every time I rushed eagerly to that house in order...to feel this strange magnetism. It was exactly like love”.

(Valentina Battler)

As these distinct statements suggest, Valentina Battler has invoked both the traditions of synaesthesia and the influence of art and craft from China and Japan in a wide-ranging aesthetic, a central aspect of which has been a responsive engagement with both cultural difference and thematic continuity.

Like indigenous painting from China and Japan, Battler’s aesthetic has its basis in calligraphy and line. Historically, the use of calligraphy arose from cast inscriptions and different styles of writing which in turn resulted in the emergence of spatial compositions and compositional criteria for evaluating ever more sophisticated brushwork. From the Han dynasty onwards (206 BCE-589 CE), painting emerged as the major expressive art in China, although in deference to what had been a principally literary culture, it adapted to decorative and allusive forms of practice.

Despite differences in subject matter, all of Battler’s compositions are composed on high quality Xuan paper – durable, flexible, thick in texture and arctic white. Made from sandal wood and bamboo pulp, it was first associated with the Tang Dynasty (618-906 CE). Traditionally mounted with black frames (a device which Battler continues), its name refers to Anhui’s ancient south Xuan Prefecture which has a 1000 year history of manufacture although Jingxian county is now the major base for the making of this traditional form. According to convention, Xuan paper is listed as one of the ‘scholar’s four treasures’ – the other three being the writing and drawing brush, the ink stick and the ink slab.

Although Battler’s work is stylised and figurative, her practice is not principally driven by narrative or storytelling traditionally understood, but rather through an intense concentration on motif and form, tropes which have underpinned aesthetic practice in China for over 5,000 years. This selection of distinctive

pen, ink and watercolour compositions reference the imaginative melding of music, poetry and composition – either directly through the appropriation of particular named musical scores, as with the response to Rachmaninoff's symphonic piece, or by copying and adapting the calligraphy and motifs of landscape and still-life composition from China or Japan. In several of the images, the marbled- effect of the technique subtly references the print iconography of Japanese Manga – an appropriation which concedes other hybrid and more contemporary cultural forms.

Of the fifteen compositions exhibited here, three works theme a visual interpretation and a poetic response to the *Symphonic Dances Op.45*, the last work completed by the Russian composer, conductor and pianist, Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943). *Part II Temptation*, *Part III (10) Hell* and *Part III (8) Hell* are taken from the suite of images 'Transcending Reality' examples of which were initially showcased as part of the group exhibition, *When The Fairytale Never Ends*, guest curated by Lara Pan, at the ford/PROJECT art space (January-February 2011).

A professional concert pianist by training and a graduate of the St Petersburg Conservatory, Battler's suite of images from which these have been selected for exhibition, visually re-interprets Rachmaninoff's composition, originally titled *Fantastic Dances in three parts, Noon, Twilight and Midnight*. The phantasmagoric symbolism of the various images also echoes the dance style of Rachmaninoff's score and captures the composer's intention to choreograph the three movements into a continuous and integrated whole.

Battler has described the fashioning of the suite as a 'communion' and 'co-creation', not just of the émigré composer's symphonic piece, but also as an evocation of the Hell and suffering evoked by Dante's *Divine Comedy*. These themes are hinted at in the fatalism and lyricism of Rachmaninoff's final work itself which obliquely references the imagery of the '*Dies irae, dies illa*' (the 'Day of wrath and day of mourning') from the Latin mass for the dead. This apocalypse is directly themed in the diptych *Part III (8) Hell* and *Part III (10) Hell* in which a swirling and demonic phantasmagoria featuring the trumpets and bells of the Last Judgement summon the quick and the damned.

In one of the earlier transpositions, *Part II Temptation*, a limp and arched woman, whose curved form fashions an arabesque in deliberate counterpoise to the vortex which defines the centre of the composition, is swept up in a demonic embrace (Battler returns to the formal motif of the arabesque in *Geisha*). The events depicted are not readable in terms of more conventional ideas of duration and temporality, but decipherable through what can be imagined – and felt – of

Rachmaninoff's accompanying score. Battler's aesthetic is one of cadence realised through poetic composition.

This transposition of musical motifs from the composer's work follows a tradition of artistic re-visualisations which has in fact worked in both directions. As Peter Vergo notes in the recently published monograph, *The Music of Painting*, Rachmaninoff's own symphonic poem, *Island of the Dead* (1909) was influenced by Arnold Böcklin's painting *Die Toteninsel* (c.1880-6). Vergo notes that no less than ten compositions, ranging from work by Max Reger (1873-1916) to Felix Woyrsch (1860-1944) were directly or indirectly inspired by this painting.¹ Battler's suite of works provides an updated and contemporary meditation not just on existential 'last things' but reprises this reciprocating influence between music and painting from an earlier stage of avant-garde modernism.

The interplay between the visual, composition and music which is themed here was among the formative practice of a host of now well known artists. Practitioners as diverse as James McNeill Whistler, Edvard Munch, Wassily Kandinsky, Mikhail Matiushin, Luigi Russolo and Meret Oppenheim variously investigated the perceived sound equivalents of colour and tone in a range of paintings, installations, photography and performance. Kandinsky's work, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910) became an iconic manifesto which not only explored aspects of synaesthesia and aesthetic practice, but also defined a distinct cultural sensibility for a new age. Subsequent experimentation by Paul Klee, Yves Klein and John Cage offered more subversive takes on this tradition, variously melding performance with atonality, classical music scores and even silence (Cage's three part composition *4'33"* was emblematic of the latter).

In other ink on paper works, such as *Racer* and *Target*, Battler images the dramatic and martial themes of chariot racing and hunting, although these are explored through allusion in which the key iconographical motifs only are referenced; the hunter and his bow, rather than the quarry and the distance over which the arrow must travel to reach its target. Similarly, in *Racer*, a rearing horse tethered to a wheel of a chariot suggests the kinetic energy of its title – we are left to fashion the broader vista and context in our mind's eye.

Three further compositions image the human against the framing device of swirling lines and *sfumato* effects which Battler deploys in the 'Transcending Reality' suite. In the portrait format *Masquerade. Spanish Dance*, Battler explores the socially ritualised expressiveness of dance in juxtaposition with the exteriority of the mask – conventionally part of the Dionysian persona.

In the more traditionally conceived images, *Other World* and *Japanese Garden*, the marbled *sfumato* effects frame the domestic and natural vistas of each composition. In *Japanese Garden* the specificity of spring cherry or plum blossoms make a veiled reference to an earlier landscape tradition associated with the work of Hua Yen (1682-1755) and Kao Ch'i-p'ei (c.1672-1754). Both fashioned ink on paper and handscroll images, the latter using a specially grown fingernail as a pen nib.ⁱⁱ The symbolism of *Other World* is more elusive. A traditionally attired Japanese woman in reflective pose is surrounded by a *sfumato* abstract effect which might be read as an imaginative projection or exploration of the noumena

The remaining six ink on Xuan paper and watercolour compositions specifically foreground examples of flora and fauna which have either a topographical, historical or cultural resonance within Chinese and Japanese cultures. In previous exhibition catalogues of work, such as *Symphony of Ink* (Stella Art Gallery, Paris 2006), *Rhymes and Images* (Central House of Artists, Moscow 2003) and *The Soul of Mine* (Moscow 2000), Battler has explored and re-imagined the traditional landscape motifs and ideas associated with Wang Liushi with evocative scenes of birds, flowers and weeping willows accompanied by a shi poem or an aphorism.

The pen, ink and watercolour compositions *Bamboo*, *Winter Tale* and *Chrysanthemum* respectively theme and realise iconic motifs. Within Asian cultures, the chrysanthemum is regarded as a noble flower which traditionally signifies joy, long life and good fortune – although co-incidentally it is also the official flower of the City of Chicago. But within Japanese culture it is associated with the annual 'Festival of Happiness' with the chrysanthemum's unfolding petals perceived as emblematic of a perfect form. The deliberate foregrounding of the motif might suggest some of these older and historic connotations and its valorisation by Kong Qiu (more commonly known through the Latinised name, Confucius), as a proper object of meditation and study.

The depiction of bamboo stems of clumps by water (traditionally associated with masculine virtue), has become a familiar image within the repertoire of Chinese landscape painting. Iconographically, along with the chrysanthemum, the plum blossom and orchid, it has been described as one of the 'Four Noble Plants'. Evergreen and supple, bamboo has been prized for qualities of longevity, flexibility and its practical use in design and crafts.

According to Craig Clunas, its pictorial origins are traceable to work by Guan Daosheng (1262-1319) who employed the motif within a broader allusive framework. One apocryphal story is that the tears of the mythical sage Emperor Shun fell onto the bamboo groves growing along the banks of the Xiang River

upon seeing his wives throw themselves into the river on hearing of his death.ⁱⁱⁱ Thereafter, the motif of bamboo was sometimes associated with marital fidelity, although artists and calligraphers could often choose more personal reasons for using the motif in their work.

The noticeably more decorative works, *Loneliness*, *Peacock*, *Shyness* and *Winter Tale* combine pen and ink with watercolour which lift and tone the compositions. Here Battler depicts emblematic animals and natural forms. *Loneliness* – a bare twig in a winter with a single songbird; *Shyness* a stylised Crane, the Chinese national bird of good fortune, fidelity and longevity. In such compositions the viewer is dispossessed of a reading which might depend upon an extensive or underpinning narrative.

With a classically Modernist painting, we are compelled to look again at line, colour and the elaboration of the form. Although the depiction of the Crane (*Shyness*) and the *Peacock* are both immediately recognisable subjects, such an intense visualisation of a motif renders it (eventually) almost abstract in appearance. Although the former image features the framing device of branches and blossom, there remains a deliberate spatial ambiguity; the viewer remains uncertain of the fictive depth within which the motif has been composed. Like Modernist paintings we are in fact reminded less of artifice but of the profound *materiality* of both the image and the process of its making.

In her manifesto essay ‘What is Modern Art’ (Translated by P.Sorokin, 2011), Battler draws attention to what is perceived as the specificity of art from China; the centrality of copying and method; the respect for the classical ‘masters’ and the nuanced interdependence of text and image within a broader cosmology, entirely remote from the concerns of Western modernism. As she notes in her essay, copying has been one of the foundational and historic principles of Chinese aesthetic practice:

Such copies are always considered to be the original work of art, since the artist who copied something from a classic understood the meaning of the brushstroke...the force of pressure, thickness, the curvature, thickness of the ink, rhythmic quality – these are the essence of the depicted object’s character; they are its language.^{iv}

Battler’s description evokes comparison to some of the ‘Six Laws’ or the ‘Classification of Ancient Painters’ formulated by Xie He (c.500-35), in which particular traits of art are listed, including vitality, method of using the materials, the relationship of the image to the object, the deployment of colour, the placement and arrangement of the motif and the central importance of copying models.^v

Although, as scholars like Clunas have noted, the text is disputed, the importance of copying and attempts to formulate method have remained a continuous strand within art practice across mainland China through over 5,000 years. This sheer stretch of time has tended to magnify critical readings which identify continuity and consistency with adaptations and adjustments of genre arising only through dynastic changes, the culture of travel and the vagaries of court fashion.

Valentina Battler's aesthetic explores various registers. In some cases, pen and ink compositions conform to an elegant and dutiful copying of the canon of classical practice just mentioned. In doing so, she re-instates a tradition defined by continuity and pragmatic assimilation. But in other compositions, there are different imaginative and creative nuances at play. Like an audience listening to an atonal score, or a freeform sequence of jazz notes, we feel and see an unfolding and virtuoso musical improvisation which occasionally changes the home key.

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ⁱ Peter Vergo, *The Music of Painting*, Phaidon, 2010, pp99-100.

ⁱⁱ Mary Tregear, *Chinese Art*, Thames & Hudson, 1987, p187

ⁱⁱⁱ Craig Clunas, *Art in China*, Oxford History of Art, 1992, p148

^{iv} Valentina Battler, 'What is Modern Art' (Translated 2011)

^v Clunas, *Art in China*, p46