

**Being neither Close nor Aloof:  
On Paul Beumer's Recent Works**  
Ching-Ling Wang

I.

Being an art historian and a curator, one of my habits when viewing an artwork is to reconstruct the whole creation process; my eyes are looking at the piece but in my mind I imagine each step from the original conception through to the final work. By doing so – at least this is how I was taught – one can understand a piece of art and an artist more completely. This method, at times, does not work well with certain types of artwork, as is the case with *Untitled* painted by Paul Beumer in 2015. The painting has a misty atmosphere painted in ink with only a few tones. It reminds me of the cold, gloomy, and rainy November sky in Amsterdam. The surface of the painting shows water stains in various layers, they overlap one another and created an extraordinary texture.

Is it abstract or figurative? How was it done? What is artist's method, wet-in-wet or ink-wash? Or did he add something in the ink, maybe salt, or washing powder? Could it be alum, perhaps glue, or something else? And where is the beginning; and the end? All these questions appeared immediately in my mind but I couldn't envisage an answer, let alone to be able to reconstruct the whole creative process. I could only guess that perhaps the artist splashed some ink on the paper and dropped water onto the surface of the paper at different times.

In representational form, the painting reminds me also of the mists and clouds painted by Daoist painter Chen Rong (act. first half 13th century) in his magnificent masterpiece *Nine Dragons* dated in 1244, despite their renderings being completely different; Chen Rong used ink on a dry brush to sweep or rub on the surface of paper to create a misty atmosphere; on the other hand Paul Beumer called on time and nature to assist in his art creation. Nevertheless, their concerns are the same: the expression (of ink and brush).

Later I found out, the artist splashed the ink and left the painting outside in a frosty winter climate for several days so time and nature could take their part, together with the artist, to complete this work. The spontaneity in this painting brings to mind the ink techniques used by painter Wang Mo (d. ca. 800) active in the 8th century. According to Zhu Jingxuan's (act. ca. 806-835) book *Famous Painting in the Tang Dynasty (Tangchao minghua lu)*:

He excelled in splattering ink to paint landscapes, hence he was called 'Wang of the Ink' [...] There was a good deal of

wildness in him, and he loved wine. Whenever he wished to paint a hanging scroll, he would first drink, then after he was drunk he would splatter ink. Laughing or singing, he would kick at it with his feet or rub it with his hands, sweep [with his brush] or scrub, with the ink sometimes pale and sometimes dark. According to the forms and appearances [thus produced], he would make mountains and rocks, clouds and water. The response of hand to thought was as swift as the creation itself. He would draw in clouds and mists, and wash in wind and rain, as if with a divine dexterity. One can look closely and see no trace of the ink blots. Everyone finds this miraculous.

(translated by Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, 2012)

Wang Mo's painting, unfortunately, has not survived. But I imagine, it would probably look like Paul Beumer's *Untitled* (2015) which to me is an abstract figurative painting, for example, a landscape; but the same time also a figurative abstract painting that transmits a certain fluid, unstable or even disturbed spirit or mind.

## II.

In recent years Paul Beumer has engaged in creating his artworks mostly with ink rather than painting in oil, such a dynamic switch, to an artist, is not only an experiment but also a great challenge. Such transformation could have been inspired during his period in residency at the Rijksakademie and completed during various residencies and prolonged working periods in China and Taiwan.

Ink, such a conventional medium, has a long history in China. The art critic Zhang Yanyuan (815–907) in his *Famous Paintings through History (Lidai minghua ji)* argued that ink is competent to depict all colours:

By the yin and yang innumerable forms are fashioned and produced, order is brought into chaos by their mysterious influence, while the indescribable spirit alone is revolving. As the plants and trees diffuse their glory, the red and the green appear, the snow-clouds begin to whirl and strew their white powder, then the mountains and the sky stand out in deep blue, finally the phoenix appears with all the five colours.

Therefore, when by revolving the ink one brings in the five colours, it is called to grasp the idea, but if the idea is fixed on the colours, the forms of the objects will become deficient.

(translated by Osvald Sirén, 1936)

In the eleventh century, accompanying the emergence of literati painting, the 'ink plays' were seen as a vehicle to reflect an image of the literati painter's mind. To those painters, the naturalistic depiction of objects was not the priority of painting. Whether it was a landscape or bamboo was immaterial, the external images of the depicted objects are only a conductor to transmit the internal spirit which is revealed through the expression of ink and brush. To some degree, Paul Beumer's works can be seen as a kind of 'ink play'. He certainly enjoys playing with ink and all his joy is fully portrayed in his works.

Paul Beumer plays with ink in different ways, on different papers, cotton, silk, and various fabrics. He combines the techniques of painting and dying, he folds the cloth and dips or soaks it into the ink to create different textures; he sometimes washes the ink away; or sometimes immerses the cloth repeatedly, over and over again, until the result reaches his expectation.

The experimental spirit of Paul Beumer can also be traced back to the artistic tradition of his homeland, for example the seventeenth century Dutch painter and print maker Hercules Segers (1589/90–1633/40) who also constantly and continuously experimented.

In the context of modern Western painting, the technique of automatism was initially explored by Dadaists and Surrealists as an artistic technique in which the artist suppresses conscious control over the production process, allowing the unconscious mind to have a greater sway. One of the most experimental Surrealists, Marx Ernst (1891–1976) left everything to chance, he included such unpredictable techniques as *frottage*, *grattage* or *decalcomania* in his paintings to create abstract textures. To the viewers these textures at first represent nothing at all, but, like cloud formations they encourage the viewer to see things in them. Automatic techniques were further explored by abstract expressionists in the post-war period. Jackson Pollock's (1912–1956) paintings were made with controlled action, and yet governed by chance like in an automatic process. They retain the possibility of evoking figurative shapes and illusionistic space. Paul Beumer's experiments play the same tune but on different instruments.

### III.

An artist's mind is expressed through his hand; a painter's brush is the extension of his hand. In his recent works the extension of Paul Beumer's hand is not only the brush, but also a thread, or even a paper clip, anything that can help him to reach his goal to portray the image

of his mind. He also tackles the concept of the brush, the boundary of painting; some of his works would be viewed on the ground, or even as installations (in the white cube of a gallery or outdoors).

It seems to me, Paul Beumer is trying to find his position between the Eastern and Western painting traditions, he maintains a distance, neither too close nor too aloof with respect to either of them. A paragraph that was written by Lu Ji (261-303) in his *The Poetic Exposition on Literature (Wen fu)* seems appropriate to sum up this essay and Paul Beumer's experiments in recent years:

A composition comes into being as the incarnation of many living gestures.

It is (like the act of *Dao*) the embodiment of endless change.

To attain meaning, it depends on a grasp of the subtle,

While such words are employed as best serve beauty's sake [...]

Such moments when mind and matter hold perfect communion,

And wide vistas open to regions hitherto entirely barred,

Will come with irresistible force,

And go, their departure none can hinder.

Hiding, they vanish like a flash of light;

Manifest, they are like sounds arising in mid-air.

So acute is the mind in such instants of divine comprehension,

What chaos is there that it cannot marshal in miraculous order?

[...]

For it is being, created by tasking the great void.

And 'tis sound rung out of profound silence.

(translated by Chen Shih-hsiang, 1953)

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