

## **The Tranquil Gaze and Transcendence: Season Lao's Visual World of Creative Landscape**

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### **The Interdependence of Emptiness and Reality**

The art of Season Lao (劉 善恒) is exhibited in the architectural space designed by Kenzo Tange (丹下 健三) , creating an intriguing dialogue between reality and illusion. The unique museum, with its clever combination of basic shapes and simple materials, appears pure and solemn, displaying a sense of sanctity and catharsis akin to that of a religion. The theme of Season Lao's exhibition is “An Empty Room Turns White for Enlightenment (虛室·生白),” in which the “empty room (虛室)” resonates with Kenzo Tange’s philosophy in spatial design, revealing the spiritual essence of the “Pan-Oriental” philosophy of nature: Asian culture’s emphasis on “reality (實)” as the interface of “emptiness (虛),” and “emptiness” as the essence of “reality.” The external exemplifies the internal, both of which are connected and mutually reflective, interdepending yet hindering each other at the same time. Thus, “emptiness mentality” is necessary, as “emptiness” does not equate to “nothingness.” The former actively accommodates the body and generates action, while the latter is passive and withdraws.

The pronunciation of “empty room (虛室)” in Chinese (Xu Shi) is quite similar to “emptiness and reality (虛實),” giving rise to its double meaning. The “empty room” enables us to explore new dimensions of the body and mind. It is a space that can be emptied out and filled back up, overflowing and cleared out again in an endless cycle. In this “empty room” designed by the artist, people can refocus on themselves and find inner peace; in other words, to observe oneself, then liberate the self from within. As the museum gradually rises from on the sparkling water surface, vapor and clouds envelop Season Lao’s installation artwork “An Empty Room Turns White for Enlightenment (虛室·生白),” symbolizing the interplay of gentleness and strength, which could perhaps be viewed as representing the manifestation of Yin and Yang. As quoted from Tao Te Ching by Laozi (老子道德經), “The epitome of goodness is like water. Water benefits all things and does not compete with them. It dwells in lowly places that all disdain, comparable to the teachings of Taoism.” (上善若水。水利萬物而不爭, 處眾人之所惡, 故幾於道。) The Chinese philosophy of Taoism advocates overcoming stubbornness with the

gentleness, and the empty space is similar to water, embracing all things while remaining unobtrusive, achieving the highest state of truth, goodness, and beauty (真善美). Coincidentally, Lao's Chinese name also contains the character for "goodness (善)," indicating his close relationship with water.

### **Sparing White as Black, and Nature as Inaction**

The second theme in "An Empty Room Turns White for Enlightenment (虛室·生白)" is "turning white (生白)." Apart from echoing the pure white tones of Museum of Asian Arts of Nice, France, it also resonates with the call for traditional "Pan-Oriental" art, in which the invisible white space formed by the intersection of black lines in calligraphy is the key. Another example is the "keeping space (留白)" in ink paintings, which presents a dynamic scene, creating the rhythm of life and aesthetics. In a landscape painting, the blank spaces suggest clouds and flowing water, demonstrating that the concept of "leaving space" is the cultivation of "vivid qi and rhythm (氣韻生動)." White is the carrier of black, and "nothingness (無)" is the source of "somethingness (有)." "Staying black (當黑)" is easy, but "turning white (生白)" is difficult, as the former is a dominant act of strength, while the latter is a sacrifice, a consideration of the overall situation and its relationship. "Sparing white as black (計白當黑)" is also a strategy and attitude that exhibit "turning retreats into advances (以退為進)" in ink paintings. Season Lao appropriates and further sublimes this sentiment in his artworks. His "empty space" and "vivid qi and rhythm" originate from nature. The sky and earth within the images are moments of spiritual and dynamic intersections of "emptiness (虛)" and the "reality (實)" that had once existed somewhere, and not completely within the control of the artist. This artistic method resonates with the inner philosophical view of "nature as inaction (無為自然)."

Blankness is one of the sources of hedonism. When Immanuel Kant's disinterestedness comes into play, the brain is freed from laboring for survival and cognition, thus inducing a state of relaxation. For example, when viewing a scenery of fading lotus leaves, what is before one's eyes is the beauty of form, allowing imaginations to dominate bodily experiences beyond the desire of interest. Season Lao does not think that the artistic experience can be accomplished through descriptive processes, but rather views art as a sensory experience in the present. American literary critic Susan Sontag uses "against interpretation" to explain that direct artistic experience is something that cannot be fully replaced by words. Just as described in German philosopher Martin Heidegger's "Dasein" phenomenology, the sense of bodily presence is within the moment now and here. Under these premises, the artist's greatest challenge is to meticulously interconnect and permeate the elements of white in a low-tone palette, creating a meditation of organic unity combined with a fusion of the artwork image, the exhibition space,

and the viewers' participation, directing them to the possibility of enlightenment, as indicated in the title, "An Empty Room Turns White for Enlightenment (虛室·生白)." This enlightenment is not dependent on external stimuli, but rather the epiphany of Zen that originated from an inner spontaneous strength.

### **The Elegance of Simplicity**

The world is vast with no shortage of wonders, and the universe is all-encompassing; it's not necessary to complicate, for returning to simplicity and tranquility can help us understand this vast and wondrous world. The key is within the mindset, as seen in both Oriental and Occidental philosophies. A piece of stone, a cloud, or a broken branch may lead us into the boundless past or soaring sky. What is needed is a medium and imagination. This is the aesthetical attitude of stillness in motion that corresponds to the ever-changing environment. English poet and painter William Blake once said, "To see a World in a Grain of Sand/ And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/ Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/ And Eternity in an hour." The poem *Auguries of Innocence* echoes the concept of "the elegance of simplicity." They both possess theoretical affinity, which emphasizes the power of purity. The ancient Chinese hermit PANG Yun (龐蘊) of Tang Dynasty showed similar sentiments in the following, "With a pure heart, lotuses blossom everywhere; a world in a flower, a Buddha in a leaf." (一念心清淨, 處處蓮花開; 一花一世界, 一葉一如來。) In summary, the legendary "Land of Peach Blossoms (世外桃源)," also known as earthly paradise, is not somewhere far away, but in fact nearby. Just lower your head or look up and search around. It is, in fact, a change within the "heart."

To enter the serene and elegant world of aesthetics as described above, what we need is "attention" and "care": use our eyes to scan our surroundings and our hearts to feel the world around us. This kind of ritual is like a religious ceremony, allowing our physical and mental states to slowly settle down, so we may focus on integrating the self and the world. When it comes to Season Lao's artworks, the first thing that strikes me is his role as the "usher of aesthetics". He leads viewers into a contemplative visual world, a modern perspective on Oriental aesthetics leaning towards purity and tranquility. Through viewing and thinking, one can settle oneself mentally and physically, achieving the possibility of transcendence.

Skilled in creating sceneries and atmosphere, Season Lao uses them to evoke a "transcendent state of mind," where one's mind and body together can observe the self in a simple yet elegant manner, allowing beauty to brew and wander. The notion of "the elegance of simplicity" is not actually simple, as less can be more, and a part can become the whole. According to the Taoist philosophy, emptiness and whiteness are the origins of all things, as "the Tao gives rise to one, one gives rise to two, two gives rise to three, and three gives rise to tens of thousands of

beings.” (道生一, 一生二, 二生三, 三生萬物。) His visual installations are organic and transparent, drawing from common elements found in ancient Oriental cultures, such as the smoke and clouds of nature, the intertwined mountain ridges, and the low-key grayscale tones. He invites viewers to explore the subject by opening their visual mechanisms within a particular space. Exploring aesthetics is a journey that every viewer must take, and Season Lao’s artworks skillfully guide the present audience through this process of self-reflection, cultivating the potential for “intersubjectivity,” allowing the mind, body, spirit, and nature to be loosened and be replaced.

Kenzo Tange’s design of Museum of Asian Arts of Nice and Season Lao’s “An Empty Room Turns White for Enlightenment (虛室·生白)” exhibition seem to resonate harmoniously with each other, both possessing the attribute of “the elegance of simplicity” that is worth savoring over and over again.

### **The Universe, Metamorphosis, and Transformation**

“An Empty Room Turns White for Enlightenment (虛室·生白)” exhibition emphasizes the embodied state of aesthetics that reflects thinking and observation. The physical cannot be transcended, and the darkness can only be occupied, but the emptiness can bring about infinity, while the whiteness creates vitality. This is also why the words from *Stray Thoughts on an Autumn Day* (秋日偶成) were quoted at the beginning: the natural environment fluctuates with human emotions; thus it is the “heart” that determines the external world. However, humans must take a “detour” beyond the visible form to access the path towards the universe. It is only in change that there is an opportunity for transcendence, and one must abandon materialistic desires to reveal one’s true self. From conception to presentation, Season Lao, an artist of a Chinese cultural background that shares the Japanese view of nature, has a profound appreciation and exhibition of the natural philosophy of “fully ignoring the self and the surrounding world (物我兩忘).”

Season Lao’s “An Empty Room Turns White for Enlightenment (虛室·生白)” is an exhibition of the saying “gaze upon the moon, not the finger pointing to the moon (以手指月並非月).” The purpose of this art exhibition is not a materialistic showcase, but to inspire and develop a sense of aesthetic space. Just like pointing at the moon, the finger is not the moon itself, but rather a medium. The finger is not the ultimate goal; it is only by looking towards the bright moon hanging in the sky that the imaginative journey may be completed. Season Lao believes that art should not emphasize the superiority of materials and techniques; in other words, crossing the physical boundaries of artworks through the “transmutation of substances” is what the art experience pursues, in all its emptiness, whiteness, and flow. The meaning of being a creator of

aesthetics lies in developing artistic media and inviting viewers to enter this mysterious and profound space, to breathe and feel the beauty of the primal throb of life. Season Lao's aesthetic conception implies that the pleasure of aesthetics lies in simplicity and ethereality. Visual simplicity and audio stillness create a pure and calm atmosphere, allowing the imagination to run wild. This alternative art experience reminds us to return to the organic purity and seek the essence of art. That is what art is.