

Snow and Ambition – Regarding the works of Season Lao

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The Church of St. Paul is a symbol of the city of Macau and a famous tourist attraction. However, the building, established during the first half of the 17th century, consists now of just the front wall being held up. Standing like a giant bas relief, it seems to be a stage backdrop for an epic about the rise and fall of this land. Everyone who underwent compulsory education in Japan knows that the Western country first contacted by Japan was Portugal, one of the champions of the Age of Discovery. Although the two countries' interaction, which began in the first half of the 16th century, went on for less than a hundred years, its traces can be found to the present day in various fields, such as food and language. However, surprisingly, it is not well known that most of these came to Japan via Macau, Portugal's base in the Far East. And in the period when Christianity became a subject of oppression in Japan, Macau also turned into a target destination for followers; it is said that some among them were involved with the construction of the aforementioned Church of St. Paul. Afterwards, Macau's development lagged behind due to Portugal's defeat in the fight for hegemony with the emerging Netherlands; consequently, this city welcomes the 20th century with its Western European civilization, preserved from many centuries ago.

Season Lao was born and raised in this Macau. He was born in 1987, and experienced the transfer of sovereignty to China as a 12 year old. He started his activities as an artist during his studies at the Multimedia Department of Macau Polytechnic University; having searched for the identity of his hometown through research in China and Portugal, he presented it in photographs and videos. Among them, “百年棗荳園 Páteo do Mungo”, announced in 2008, holds a very important meaning for his early career. The occasion of its production was the redevelopment heavily promoted in the area at that time. This led to his birthplace, a traditional building group, becoming subject to demolition; upon learning this, he began to produce works focused on the lives of the people living there, and eventually this action brought about the result of preserving the cityscapes in the region. He visited his current base, Hokkaidō, in the following year (2009); he was fascinated by the snowy landscape and the ruins of the coal mines, and decided to immigrate to this place. He fulfilled an

important role there as a bridge between cultures; when the Church of St. Paul was built in the Sapporo Snow Festival of 2016, he cooperated with the Macau City Tourism Board in this event, opening an exhibition commemorating the 10th anniversary of his hometown's registration as a World Heritage Site.

Having lived in the North where the year is reset by "Winter" limiting human activities, and having experienced the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in 2011, his concept of art creation changed to a more multi-layered and robust one. Namely, it is said that, in addition to the strong interest in human beings and regional communities as seen in "百年菘荳圃 Páteo do Mungo", his works came to reflect his observations of nature. His adoption of hand-made washi (Japanese paper), which allows for the visual or tactile perception of plant-based fibers, is also a change that ties into this. The pursuit of such materials culminated successfully in a mixture of "modeling using machines originating in Europe" and "traditional Japanese materials made from plants"; this way he realized works which belong both to the West and the East, and which are both artificial and in harmony with nature.

On the other hand, if we turn our eyes to these pictures, it is possible to discover commonalities with presentations in East Asian traditional painting. Let's give an example here with the painting methods introduced in "Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden" from the Qing Dynasty, which is known as the encyclopedia of Chinese painting. At its beginning, in "picture theory", it cites "The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams", written by Guo Xi in the early Song Dynasty, where for such extremely basic skills as the drawing of lines and points 12 techniques are introduced. The point to note here is that there are two types of techniques based on the color of the support instead of the ink. Specifically, one method is to create a hazy scene with faint ink, making use of the ground color of the silk canvas; another one is to create what is seen as a waterfall-like motif with an ink coating. Many of Season Lao's photos are of snowy landscapes, and the snow in these is expressed exactly by the exposure of the support. Furthermore, haze and waterfall, which are mentioned in "Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden" as examples of presentations that make use of the color of the support, both consist of water in different states; snow is also understood as another such state.

By the way, as a subject, abandoned coal mines have roughly the same importance as snow for Season Lao. The author's interest in the state of affairs where the source of energy that supported the modernization of the world was left behind by the era might be greatly related to how he witnessed the ups and downs of a culture from up close, by being born in a city symbolized by beautiful ruins, and by experiencing such things as the crisis of his birthplace's demolition due to redevelopment triggered by the transfer of sovereignty. In addition, experiencing accidents related to nuclear power, which was seen as the next generation of energy, immediately after immigrating, must have had a strong influence on him.

Finally, there is one more thing deserving a special mention. This is the fact that Season Lao always maintains a practical attitude in his activities. He states about his own creation process: "70 percent of it is philosophy and technique, the remaining 30 percent is the objective". The philosophy is to explore the coexistence of man and nature, the objective is to have people thinking about "continuity". While the subjects of his work are coal mines, which evoke a sweaty sense of machismo, they are polished to convey a very peaceful and lyrical atmosphere. Here, if we regard the works again while being aware of the author's statement, a certain strategy stands out, that expects us to be interested in affluent and intelligent people who are well-versed in the power that moves society. At the same time, the author considers this aspiration to be desirable. He also says that he "wants to bring Macau's contemporary art to the level of the global standard". A strong determination for his objective, and a wide field of vision—perhaps the blood of the people from the Age of Discovery, who have come across the sea to open up a new era, might be flowing in his veins somewhere.