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The Lyricism of Solitude

Recent Ink Work of Li Jian Gang



Exhibition Reading Material
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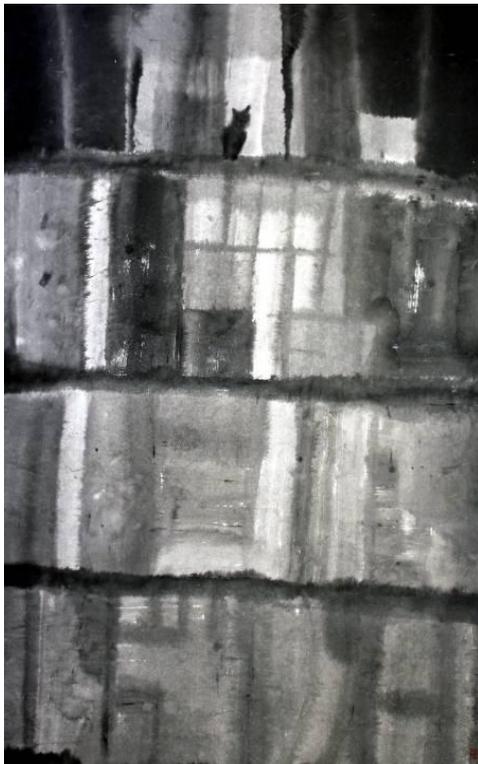
“As light and shadow ceaselessly transform within dimensions of black, white and grey; life unfolds itself amid the matrix of the city and we find ourselves entrapped in a castle-like dream.”

Li Jian Gang

Born in 1954 in Henan, Li Jian Gang specializes in the Chinese “*da xieyi*” (freehand) painting method of cityscapes. Combining lively brushwork and ink smudges with sensitivity and virtuosity, his paintings usually draw a sepia-toned or monochromatic palette that stretches the tonality of Chinese ink, and are at times furnished with colour washes that appear minimal yet fluorescent in effect.

As a centuries-old medium that bespeaks monumental traditions, the art of Chinese ink painting is typically preoccupied with the valorization of nature and the harmonized co-existence between man and environment. To preserve this important aesthetic and spiritual quest, artists of the past were determined to seek retreat in the countryside to create paintings free from the burden of walled-up desires, politics and daily inanities.

Today, the indomitable spirit and sublime beauty of nature is hidden behind increasing layers of veils; removed even farther from the reach of the modern man whose fate unravels against the rise of city-states and systematized metropolises.



Instead of scrambling for grand old illusions, the arising solitude and spiritual void relating to man’s quotidian struggle for a sense of place and belonging in a complex city is exactly that, which is poetically epitomized in the work of Li Jian Gang. His lyrical and often atmospheric compositions of urban subjects – be it a striking city skyline or a contemplative “viewfinder” moment – are images of fascinating beauty tinged with wistful nostalgia.

Li Jian Gang, *Tale of a City*,
Chinese ink on paper, 74 x 115 cm

The expressive effect of ink wash is perhaps one of the most unique characteristics of Chinese ink painting and Li Jian Gang demonstrates the treatment with much finesse.

Dusk, for instance, relies on the artist's bold, heavy use of wet technique and his perceptive handling of ink smudges allows the piece to flourish with an outstanding ethereal quality. The architectural features are projected in loose forms, as if engulfed by the cloudy evening sky while the last few traces of light linger in the distance. Although seemingly effortless to the eye, to achieve the layered flows and hard edges in such a designated manner would require ink washes of varied intensity to be overlaid with a good balance of delicate control and calculated spontaneity.



Li Jian Gang, *Dusk*,
Chinese ink on paper, 69 x 39 cm

The city with its elaborate and cacophonous layers need not necessarily be a demonized antithesis of nature; even as Li Jian Gang posits philosophical inquiry into man's place and pursuit for meanings within our modern-day labyrinth, he stops short of wallowing in urban loneliness and melancholia. In some other works, vast and intricate architecture exudes an awe-inspiring dimension and stands as an unyielding testament to civilization's progress.

Expounded in soft brushwork that incorporates the traditional Chinese ink techniques of *baimiao* (outlining) and *da xieyi* (freehand), *A view of Oxford* is one such example. Spotting a stunning European skyline adorned by the English perpendicular gothic style of architecture, the painting is a powerful image of contemporary sensibility steeped in rich East-West cultural traditions.



Li Jian Gang, *A View of Oxford*, 2011, Chinese ink on paper, 125 x 100 cm

In an era when many Chinese artists struggle to express the modern-day life through the Chinese ink medium and traditional genres, Li Jian Gang stands out for his brave and progressive approach. His compositions are seldom littered with human presence; yet humanistic thoughts lie abound in these delicately-rendered moments of twilight and quiet contemplation. Captivating and refreshing, Li Jian Gang's paintings artfully marry technical prowess with philosophical notes, and exemplify a spirit contemporary with his time.