

Interview with Lee Ufan  
by Henri-François Debailleux

*Where do you think your painting stands in relation to this second half of the twentieth Century?*

For a long time, the question asked by painting was, "What does one paint?" After that, modern painting asked, "What are the elements that constitute painting?" Lucio Fontana proposed a new space with his slits, Yves Klein with the monochrome surface, Barnett Newman with "division." These are all fascinating approaches. But the internal elements in those oeuvres are so powerful that it is difficult to establish their correspondence to the outside world. For them it is enough to be painting itself. For me, the fact that painting has a pre-established character as the intermediary *between idea and reality* is very important. I have, therefore, tried to re-establish the imaginary dimension and the correspondence, to recapture gesture, the dimension of the body and reality.

*The first thing that strikes someone looking at your work is the importance of the notion of emptiness. What meaning does this have for you?*

Emptiness is indeed, the central issue in my work. Modern man is afraid of emptiness and refuses to acknowledge it. This is because emptiness, the void, corresponds to what man has not filled, to what he has not done. I myself am very sceptical about the fact that we attribute value only to what man has done. That said, it would be wrong to think that I like only emptiness. What interests me more precisely is a certain kind of emptiness; emptiness placed in relation to fullness. For me, the void is the space that is created by interference or interpenetration between what is painted and what is not painted, between what is done and what is not done. It is the space that is created in encounter, in reciprocity. Taken in this sense, emptiness is neither totally my own production, nor objective emptiness. And it is not about something mystical in this notion of space. In relation to the Buddhist void, which is too idealistic, the emptiness I am talking about is a phenomenological situation. It is the place where man is in relation to what transcends him. It is also the place where one can talk about the value of art's being.

*What is the value you attach to the rather austere and rigorous motif that you work through from one canvas to the next, like a set of variations?*

I want to be connected to as much of the world as I can, but through an intervention that itself is minimal but intense. I am looking for an absolute relation between my active participation and the passivity of the world. Consequently, I refuse all forms of expression based on the multiplication and expansion of self-consciousness. I therefore try to limit myself and be restrained so as to be receptive to the outside. That is why my painting can seem austere. Indeed, this attitude is not unrelated to my Buddhist and Confucian background. Above all, though, it is linked to my will to find the origin of the work in a place beyond my own self. My paintings have thus become compositions based on simple variation, by paring down the elements of painting. The repetition comes from my desire to make each touch more meticulous, firmer, more right. And it is this difference between touches that creates the variation.

*HOW do you use chance to set this up?*

Modernism, which sought for the oneness of reason and the world, excluded the outside world, and denied chance, which is the other face of the outside world. Now, for me, expression is non-identity. What matters to me is not the expression of the self, but entering into relation with the outside world via the intermediary of my body. And the work is the place of meeting with the outside world. Still with chance, of course; in fact, it's even the unpredictability of this encounter that I find so exciting.

*Does the positioning of these motifs serve to create figures, insofar as one can link them together visually, or do they evoke an imaginary path?*

My painting does not exactly offer a figure, or, indeed, a composition. I think of it as a medium term. It

expresses a relation to space and creates a relation to the viewer. I also want there to be a poetic dialogue with them, for the work to stimulate their imagination, for it to enable them to reach out beyond the canvas and open up to the infinite world outside.

*What connection do you make between this notion of the imaginary and the principle of the maze?*

It's a very important subject. Seen from outside, the maze does not exist. When you look at it from close up, there is a rule, like in the game of go. And there, you can understand the layout from the geometrical elements. If my works suggest a maze, it is because they are in relation to the unknown. In spite of their simple, clear appearance, they are connected to the indefinite, to the outside. When you enter into them, multiple paths open up and it is the dialogue with these paths that inspires the imagination. But this imaginary space is not given in advance, that is to say, my works are not mazes of the imaginary inner space. It is impossible to sense the maze in a work that is generated automatically. True, it may create infinite space, but it is a space where everything is defined in advance, and therefore with no room for the imaginary.

*Do you consider this motif as a form of writing?*

I think that my work is closer to writing than to painting, in the sense that there is no representation. For me, writing is not a simple recording of knowledge but, rather, the poetic expression of a certain relation. It is a ceremony and an exercise so that the moment when my body meets the canvas is an elevation. Seen from this angle, writing is the work of differentiation and reflection.

*Do you give it a kind of brand-image status?*

The repetition of this motif can effectively be seen as a brand image. But that is not my aim. My approach is thus fundamentally different from that of certain artists who multiply their self-expression and systematically deploy it in the form of a logo or pattern on any support. What they want is to "colonise" the world by inscribing their pre-established motif. In their expression there is only the repetition of the same. Difference is excluded. It is, in other words, a way of excluding and denying the other. Whereas the question for me is how to get back to the outside and to welcome the other into expression. The work is simply a structure for allowing the imagination to establish a poetic correspondence with the exterior. It is therefore important to distinguish the different origins of the motif and the different meanings of repetition.

*You work with the notions of point, line, surface and plane. How do you relate to Kandinsky, for example?*

The elements that elicit a simple reaction are elementary forms such as the square, the circle and the triangle, or indeed the rectangular and vertical plane, which are closer to the conceptual. Surface, line and point appeared in my painting because of restriction, the limitation of expression, whereas Kandinsky found them by analysing the elements of painting.

*What is the importance of gesture for you?*

The gesture of painting (or making a sculpture) involves my body, and it is impossible to replace it with someone else's. For a long time, the body was seen as a tool for expressing consciousness, a position that Merleau-Ponty roundly refuted. As he very clearly showed, the (my) body does not belong only to (my) consciousness, but is part of the world. And to act on this body that is part of me and part of the world, one must simplify and hold back the expression of the self. That is why gesture can bring in the elements and the external force that do not belong to me. Such a gesture is expressed in a pure and ordered style. And there is a tension because the body belongs to both kingdoms.

*Why do you work with non-colour?*

The truth is that I would like to have all the colours, but it is impossible to use them all in the work. Also, if I chose a colour then it would immediately express a particularity. That is why I choose the shade of grey: it

keeps a certain distance, both from reality and from the conceptual world. It is sufficiently suggestive and implicit. It's the same, too, with the sculpture: I don't want the material, the colour of the metal or stone to serve any specific idea. I want them to be neutral and suggestive.

*You work in both painting and sculpture. What do these two practices bring each other?*

Painting is made within a pre-established surface, even if it suggests an exterior. Sculpture is made within a relation to time and external space, even if it is the expression of the artist's inner space. In other words, in painting you can evoke the indefinite exterior in a clearly delimited plane surface, and in sculpture you can express the interior within an exteriority. The flatness of painting belongs to the domain of ideas by virtue of its indirect character, whereas sculpture is linked to the immanence of space and matter. Painting is indirect and imaginary; sculpture is direct and reversible. Depending on the vibration I feel between my interior and the exterior, and depending on the vector of this vibration, my work takes shape either as painting or sculpture. I do not want to be totally engaged with the ideal world, nor totally with the real world. Both attract me. That is why I like to work with the complementary relation of painting and sculpture.

*Why do you use untreated materials like stone and steel? Does this non-treatment have the same meaning for you in sculpture as the non-painting that you mentioned earlier?*

It was often thought that the work of art was something that was made totally by the artist. But this conception of the artwork as the expression of the artist's self was given a good shaking up by Marcel Duchamp's readymade. With the introduction of the object produced automatically by a machine, the myth of personal expression took a real knock. What can you do after the advent of an artwork that is only partly the expression of the artist? What can you do after the work that criticises industrial society? My response to this is to introduce what is not manufactured, working from the principle that seeing, choosing, borrowing or displacing are already part of the act of creation, since for me it is impossible to simply have something that does not suggest any trace of the artist and leave it at that. My *raison d'être* as an artist lies there, in this problematic that consists in linking doing and non-doing. I try to connect to the outside world by linking the natural (stone) and consciousness (man) with a simple sheet of iron. I use stone and sheet iron as they come, which is how they contain the outside world. That is why it is important to have that borrowed, or pre-established or suggested aspect. Because it is extracted by man from stone, metal is therefore half-abstract. It is therefore suited to playing an intermediary role.

*With hindsight, what view do you take of Monoha, the Japanese movement that you led, and that had a number of things in common with Minimal Art, Arte Povera, Support-Surface and Anti-Form - all those many movements that flourished in the 1960s and through to the mid-1970s?*

It is difficult to establish relations between these movements and Monoha because there wasn't enough information available in Japan at that time. That said, Monoha did play a role in contemporary art and left its mark with its critiques of the limits of productivist thought of industrial society and of its unintended consequences. We were criticised for the dispersion of our style, which was due, precisely, to the introduction of the external. We were also criticised for insufficient formalisation. I do not contest these criticisms. But, after Monoha a lot of attitudes and directions appeared that were interested in the external in matters of expression.

At the time Monoha was not recognised. I myself was rejected for several exhibitions. I therefore decided to make use of all the resources I had: personal exhibitions, writing, symposia, etc. We met every day with young artists who were in the same position as myself. We debated and analysed our ideas and projects. In general, everyone tended to show their work in solo shows, but we did take part collectively in some big exhibitions. My role was to liaise between the members and write in order to make us better known, simply because I was the oldest and enjoyed writing. These texts have in fact become a precious documentary resource for finding out about the meaning of what we did. Later, starting in the 1970s, I also tried to get Monoha known around the world in the course of my frequent travels. From the start Monoha did not exist as a group. Each of the artists involved took a different direction.

*You talk about the outside world a great deal. Where do you set the frontier?*

Today it is quite common to see artists introducing unadulterated reality into the field of expression. The gallery or museum becomes the framework into which a piece of life is introduced as content. This has nothing in common with what I say about introducing the outside world by borrowing or by suggestion. I can understand the approach that consists in reducing the distance between reality and expression, but I don't think we should destroy the frontier between the two. In fact, I don't think that expression has a particular or prestigious status. I simply believe that the relation between expression and reality, or between expression and idea, involves a solution of continuity. Because when expression is identical to reality, there is no room for the imagination. When you are face to face with a work, in a dialogue with it, you need to be able to move towards another dimension. If there isn't this possibility of transferring dimensions, then what is the point of expression?

*What is your approach to space?*

Physical space isn't very important to me. What interests me is space as a place. The place is a space opened by the presence of something, as a result of my participation. It is not only space, nor only the object. The place is a space-time. It is close to the concept of space-between (*ma* in Japanese), which is created in the relation with the person perceiving it. In Japan, you can see empty rooms decorated with a small flower. Here a living, luminous space is opened up by the presence of this little flower.

*And to time?*

The fact of being born in Asia influences my perception of time. People in the West look for eternity in art and architecture. Whereas in a region where it rains a lot and everything changes very quickly, we see eternity in change. The cyclical aspect of life is manifested there. In a way, disappearance is felt more strongly than appearance. In my work, too, the temporality of being is stronger than its longevity. Death or disappearance is not the end. If man's autonomy is linked to the notion of space, time can be understood as the world's automatism.

*Your desire to convey a sense of the ephemeral therefore implies the omnipotence of space and time. HOW do you fight that?*

That reminds me of Heidegger, when he said that the artist is engaged in a struggle between the world and the earth. There is no device for fighting or resisting the power of space and time. I find a few columns in the desert or a few fragments of paint on the walls of a cave tremendously inspiring. What I see there is the tension between the human will to endure and the brute force of nature. The work is between these two opposing forces: causing to disappear and wanting to endure. Ruins and fragments are moving because they illustrate this situation very clearly. A complete work in which the human will is triumphant does not move me at all. When I make a brush mark or when I move a stone, I try to give them a provisional, transitory character. I try to give the Impression that they are on the frontier between being and nothingness, and that they could disappear at any time, and that at the same time they are strong enough to withstand. It is not my will that my works should endure against all odds. Someone once asked me what I would do if the canvas yellowed and if the touch faded. There can't be an answer, because everything will disappear eventually. What the work of art can do is in effect show and give a sense of the existence of these two worlds, that of appearance and, at the same time, that of disappearance, which is the very condition of all existence.

When I make a brush mark on the canvas, I hold my breath, I concentrate and I pray that my hand, the brush and the canvas will be in harmony. My artistic work is accompanied by prayer and reflection, as is the case with sporting performance, a scientific experiment or life in a monastery. This is because creation is an encounter, a call and an answer. I can never be proud of what I've done. In each canvas, even if the results look the same, I have felt something different and am doing something different. If seeking is the active expression of my will to go somewhere, work is the exercise of the passivity that is receptive to what comes.

*What is your relation to Taoism?*

There's no direct relation. I would simply say that I am influenced by the Taoist attitude that consists in understanding the world in its relativity and in its reciprocity. There are some words of Chuang-tzu's that I like a lot: "From close-to, it's me, from afar it's the other."

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