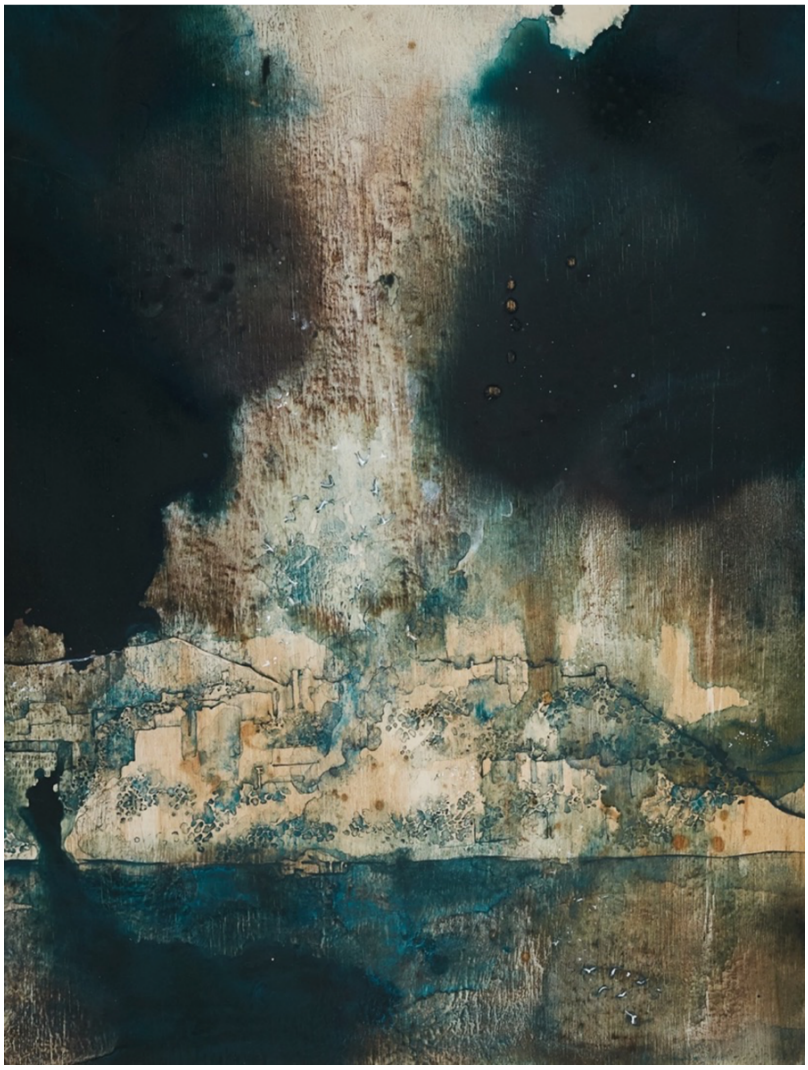
BOUIE CHOI YUK-KUEN'S *The Mountain City* (2019)
Paul Serfaty, Hong Kong, October-November, 2020

Created in 2019 in acrylic, *The Mountain City,* young Hong Kong painter Bouie Choi's latest exercise using wood as a base for her paintings and the precursor of a series of works in the same medium made in 2020, is a modest 41cm x 32cm, but it packs a punch dramatically exceeding its small dimensions.

The painting seems to mark some cataclysmic event, whether of good or evil import is unclear, but there is a mighty struggle going on between the overweening deep dark blue-black clouds that intrude from the sides of the work, and the dynamic, vertically striated, white swirling column - of light or cloud or liquid or energy? - that rises up its centre; or possibly has forced its way down between the inky masses that weigh threateningly over the still-bright landscape beneath.



A small city is set on cliffs behind a mass of water in the foreground, its ramparts outlined, its walls shining bright, as if lit-through from behind, while a lace-work of trees intercalates the rising surfaces. Everything that should be solid glows as if transparent, while the darkness looms about it, opaque, weighty where it should be insubstantial. The lake below - if lake it is - reflects feebly the energies above, as if the encroaching clouds were seeking to snuff out the light, while a small finger, (a dark cock's comb?) of darkness rises from bottom left out of the water mass, reaching up in sinister shape; though sea-birds swirl, sole living sights, at lower right, and a spiral of flying forms gyrates inside the column of light at the heart of the work, as if lifted by air masses moving upwards. A small fisherman's shack – or perhaps a rock - at the base of the cliffs, sits, silent.

This struggle between visible and invisible, dark and light, this inversion of solidity and emptiness feels eternal. It could be a medieval depiction of nature's terrors or represent a deity's intervention. It could be an observation of a different world by a distant but related civilisation, like us onlookers outside the frame of action. It could be a human conflict in a defined time and place. Or all of these, linked by the artist's awareness and our own visual experiences as viewers of works of art from different cultures and times. It could have been rendered in poetry, but finds this highly compressed expression in the visual. The most likely

time, place and event that gave rise to this work are well remembered in Hong Kong and fit the sense of symbolic tragedy it evokes.

The event must surely have been the battle between Hong Kong's police, directed by government to snuff out all efforts to support the popular movement against its policies, and a student body, perhaps infiltrated by outsiders, determined to resist.[1] This took place on 12th November, 2019, at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (香港中文大學), Bouie Choi's *alma mater*,[2] which sits above Tolo Harbour in north-eastern Hong Kong.

For any Hong Konger who believed in the protest movement and its aims, this was the culminating battle between the establishment and young believers in a better future for Hong Kong. While for social conservatives, it was the moment when it became vitally necessary to confront civil disobedience that had turned into active resistance. The physical outcome was defeat for the students, but the moral outcome was, for supporters of the protest movement, a clarification of rights and wrongs, delivered against the police and against the government.

It is part of the intelligence of the artist that she does not identify any time and place, nor take sides, nor show any human presence nor, therefore, engage human emotions for or against any specific event, social or political; though the drama, tension and ambiguity of the images in her work are emotionally powerful, especially for those who experienced the underlying realities. This creator's reticence also maintains ambiguity for the viewer concerning what he sees in the painting, therefore concerning what *different* viewers may believe they saw in Hong Kong in November, 2019, allowing all to suspend judgment and admire the image, rather than try and discern any intent behind the work.

To deliver this effect, Bouie Choi uses both Western and Chinese methods and materials, and benefits, intentionally or not, from the varied cultural references that Hong Kong residents can bring to understanding her art. Without extending the long debate on intentionality in art, it can safely be said that if artists successfully display, to viewers from different cultures, events or emotions or philosophies that those different viewers feel they have in common, then drama or tragedy or hope may translate effectively even without the intention that that should happen, and even if the cultural affects or conclusions may be different between those cultures. One man's heroic stand may be another's needless sacrifice. Psychologists affirm what art historians know:

> "Another interesting difference with respect to perspective in a more general sense is related to the pictorial subjects of Western and Chinese paintings. Western artists favor object-centered scenes, whereas Chinese artists prefer context-oriented scenes."[3]

I'd add the obvious correlate, that each group of viewers anticipates the corresponding artist's culturally related intention: westerners may ask: "What are we looking at?" and Asians: "What is going on?". Still, to believe that Choi may have identified what *unites* viewers is not without its difficulties even within single cultures. Chinese aesthetic standards would classically demand harmony as a core value - an acceptance of an underlying unity that recognises the world is essentially one - while this work projects a very Western view of drama and conflict, and does not shun them. Within Asia, however, Japanese aesthetic values can embrace rather than reject conflict as part of the world.

Furthermore, if we look at Chinese artworks that reflect conflicts similar to 'The Mountain City' we may conclude that traditionalists can find much to admire in Bouie Choi's image-making.

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[1] https://hongkongfp.com/2019/11/12/hong-kong-police-protesters-battle-night-cuhk-campus-university-head-among-tear-gassed/

[2] Where she took her BA in Fine Art before doing her MFA at Chelsea College of Art in London

[3] Aesthetic Preferences for Eastern and Western Traditional Visual Art - Identity Matters; Front. Psychol. 7-1596; Yan Bao, Taoxi Yang, Xiaoxiong Lin, Yuan Fang, Yi Wang, Ernst Poppel and Quan Lei p.6

First, power and its effect on intellectuals are key in Chinese art history – power drove the literati away from political centres. And in terms of subject-matter, the idea of chaos and the presence of symbols expressing power, such as dragons that dwell and battle in clouds, are found in classical art as well as in contemporary explorations of classical themes. Turbulence is not absent from ancient art: see southern Song artist Chen Rong's "*Nine Dragons*" handscroll (46 cm×1496 cm).

Theory, too, supports this view: as Qian Zhongshu noted, Liu Zhou (514-565) who lived long ago under the Northern Dynasties "believed that suffering could activate potential genius; and he observed that even Su Shi, saw beauty in ugliness or sickness".[4]

In contemporary Chinese art-criticism, scholars such as Li Zehou insist, furthermore, that given the dedication of Chinese culture to exploring all aspects of truth, it would be wrong for artists to shy away from pain, which is part of our experience of life.

> "In the course of the increasingly frequent contact and intercourse with world cultures, the most important task for the Chinese, if they are to cultivate, remold and raise their aesthetic capacity is how to absorb the deep experience of misery and painful cruelty in order that the life force of their traditions may be deepened and strengthened. It must be especially emphasized that the "integrity of man and nature" in the Chinese tradition will no longer remain in the form of harmony and serenity, but will appear in a process full of conflict, misery and struggle...".[5]

Amongst Chinese artists, the chaos the accompanies creation is treated and portrayed as such by Tai Xiangzhou, a pupil of Liu Dan, in his '*Chaos'* series; and of the older generation, Zao Wou-ki did not shy away from drama and the battle of light and dark in his *Cloud Dragon Ascending* (right), made in 1959 during his 'Oracle Bone' period and itself an inheritor of Chen Rong's masterpiece, the "*Nine Dragons*" handscroll.

However, though we can see in Choi's work the influences of

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[4] See Zhongshu Qian in *Patchwork - Seven Essays on Art and Literature*; East Asian Comparative Literature and Culture, Volume: 1; "Poetry as a vehicle of grief", pp.192-194: "In a later age, Su Shi (1037-1101) has said in one of his letters: "On the trunks of trees are knobs, on rocks can be seen haloes, and rhinoceros horns can in places be translucent. Things can thus be sickly and imperfect to please the human observer with their particular charm""

[5] Li Zehou, *Four Discourses on Aesthetics* (Meixue sijiang tiY), trans. He Sui (unpublished manuscript, 1993), p. 331., referred to in *The Transformative Power of Art: Li Zehou's Aesthetic Theory*; Jane Cauvel: Philosophy East and West , Apr., 1999, Vol. 49, No. 2, "Subjectality" 主體性: Li Zehou and His Critical Analysis of Chinese Thought (Apr., 1999), pp. 150-173, at p.166

her Chinese heritage, not least in the 'splashed ink' and the use of line to express form, and although clouds and empty space are staples of Chinese art in its exploration of the energies of life, light and creation, the most striking parallels with Choi's use of light and dark to express energy, power, conflict and tragedy, are in Western artworks that concentrate, especially, on aeschatological events.

Furthermore, as we will explore further, the juxtaposition of light and dark to create powerful effects tie in to long-established subliminal understandings. Light can be understood as the feminine, generative and receptive principle, dark can be linked to an aggressive, masculine and dominant principle. Take the image of light on a mountain city in the fourth of The Cantos, a 'poem of some length' created over 50 years by the West's most important Imagist poet, Ezra Pound. Pound embraced the Chinese fusion of word and image and implanted it in the Western poetic canon, bridging the gap between the visual and the poetic. Canto IV (1923) 'images' light:

> Palace in smoky light,
> Troy but a heap of smouldering boundary stones,
> ANAXIFORMINGES! Aurunculeia!
> Hear me. Cadmus of Golden Prows!
> The silver mirrors catch the bright stones and flare,
> Dawn, to our waking, drifts in the green cool light;

Pound describes Troy, destroyed through the passion of its prince, Paris, for the temptations of Sparta's queen Helen. Through mythic transformation we may transfer the words to Hong Kong: students fall for Lady Democracy, whom they wish to lift onto Hong Kong's peaks, and whose image they create and, dancing, carry up there at night; but their love affair provokes their government to the harshest response. So it is that literary academic Henry Mead words on Pound's image-making - "*responsive priapic violence*" –become too applicable to Hong Kong:

> "... this is a secret rite, which the intrusive viewer can only glimpse. The delights of the dance seem far removed from scenes of war, but… they stand in causal relation to that destruction.
>
> ... this fecund pastoral space suddenly acquires a "crescent" of coast and sea, "green-gold", setting the scene for the arrival of Venus a symbol of erotic femininity. Instead, a "black cock" erects itself to greet her, a dark note erupting against the green gold backdrop. The arrival of the goddess of love, disrupted by a crude, threatening potency, recalls the destructive side of male desire. The assertion of possession … and the pursuit of Helen, ending in the razing of a city. These lines announce that the poem will deal with a feminine allure from which all the light images of the poem proceed, but that it also recounts a responsive priapic violence. Together these result in atrocities that are unbearable to behold, and thus demand revenge and/or release through metamorphosis: crises originating in the provocative power of the feminine subject."[6]

This is the power of myth: it identifies the roots of man's dreams and failures, even across centuries. Youth's attachment to the beauty of an idealised principle provokes a violent

[6] Readings in the Cantos: Volume I (Ezra Pound Center for Literature at the University of New Orleans), Richard Parker (ed.), Henry Mead, *Canto 4*, pp.59-60

backlash. And Bouie Choi's treatment of light – especially its mutual engagement with its correlate, darkness, required by the unity of opposites which the Modernist movement and Pound, a key member, had absorbed from Chinese culture - is made subjectively true in *Mountain City*: the light seems to emanate from within, to represent an inner beauty, perhaps lost to the outer world (but surrounded by an encroaching darkness); Pound's poetic image in Canto XVI describes his experience of the still-dying Venice, his transition from perceiving the external world, natural, man-made, historic, to experiencing an inner radiance, that consoles:

> Flat water before me,
> and the trees growing in water,
> Marble trunks out of stillness,
> On past the palazzi,
> in the stillness,
> The light now, not of the sun.

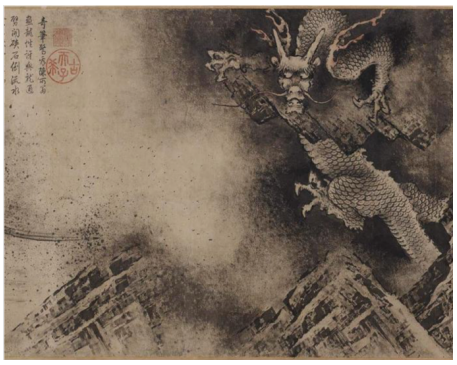
That light is one of inner knowledge, of belief and respect for powers that may have lost their temporal quality, but retain their eternal strength; those are the qualities found in Bouie's Choi's vision of a *Mountain City*: a source of light, even of power, but from now under existential threat, tense, dynamic, light shining through the very walls of the City, yet mysteriously frozen.[7]

If we return, for now, to the materials used by Choi and the effects she creates, we find the rawness and grain of the wood as a backdrop to the paint offers textures that paper cannot, and lets her employ greater aggression in attacking the surface to scrape away paint. Indeed, scraping through the layers compresses, mashes together the elements of the image as well as of the physical materials that reinforces the sense of violent interactions occurring (xíng 行?). This process reveals vertical striations, the grain of the underlying plywood, that create a sense of energy and direction in the central 'cloud', while the specially prepared wood absorbs and spreads the paint in ways similar to paper, but with greater resistance to absorption, so that the textures that peep through the thinnest areas of paint are actually wood, where woods would be in reality.

By using thinned down acrylic paint, creating substantial areas of deep blue tones in this work, she immediately brings to mind the use of Chinese ink in classical painting, splashed over paper in a game that mixed skill and chance, Pomo - 泼墨 - used since the Tang Dynasty, AD 618-907, but mostly made famous in modern times through the works of Zhang Daqian (1899–1983), who used his 'blue and green' splashed ink technique to create wonderful effects,[8] in which chance forms part of the creation of the work's appearance. In Choi's work, the 'bubbles' that have formed and broken to the right of the pillar of cloud, and are mirrored by the dark

[7] The inner-created form of this light also reminds one of psychoanalyst C.G. Jung's description of an African sunrise: "Gradually the swelling light seemed to penetrate into the very structure of objects, which became illuminated from within until at last they shone translucently, like bits of colored glass. Everything turned to flaming crystal. The cry of the bell bird rang around the horizon" C. G. Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections, p. 268.

[8] Though New York's Metropolitan Museum notes of Zhang's 1965 '*Splashed Color Landscape*', in its collection: "Zhang maintained that such works, which he first made in Europe in 1956, derived from the "broken-ink" techniques of random splashing and soaking used by Tang-dynasty (618-906) artists, but it seems more likely that Western abstract art encouraged him to develop the Japanese technique of splashed colors that he had used in earlier works." See https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/49805, accessed 6/10/2020



concentrations of paint to its left, represent a similar kind of accident to that Chen Rong sought through use of spattered ink (spat or flicked to create speckles on the clouds, see left) in his work of power and turbulence; while the transparency of the Song ink clouds is mirrored in the translucency of Choi's thinned down acrylic. In addition, as the use of wood allows a greater physical sense of friction, violence and drama to be evoked in the contemporary work, the physically distressed surfaces produce a reality that paper cannot unless broken.

In Michael Ayrton's "*Icarus Falling*" (right) the artist used hard wax, embedded with bones and worked with a palette knife to put across the violent end to which Icarus' rise into the brilliant sky had been consigned as the sun's brightness melted the wax that bound his wings.

Wings also appear in Choi's work, in the form of the white wings of birds circling in the foreground, offshore; also above the towers of the 'ramparts'; and most importantly in the rising pillar of cloud or light in the centre, reinforcing the sense of movement and tension created by the striations running vertically between the amorphous if bulging darkness, which, on account of the progressive thinning of the paint as it approaches the central light-energy, seems to be encroaching on this pillar. The birds import extra meaning, not just for their potential as symbols, but also because Choi lives next to Hong Kong's most important wetlands,[9] to which migrating birds bring (and are intended to carry into her painting) a sense of the natural, of the potential for peace and calm in a city that tends to excessive human density and tension. In this work that brims with tension, they offer the only element of release.

Yet these birds' identity, like much else in the painting, remains elusive: too many to be sea eagles; too energetic to be cranes; too disorderly to be geese, they are probably gulls. Perhaps here in present day Hong Kong, as Lewis Mayo comments of older times: "The *Order of Birds* in the Guiyi jun (歸義軍) - the autonomous Han-Chinese dominated warlord regime which ruled the oasis of Dunhuang in the ninth and tenth centuries - was a product of politics." If 'political', these birds of Choi's, that stay circling over land and sea (though described in the old texts as grey, not white like Hong Kong's gulls) could fulfil the protective role referenced by Mayo:

> "The Guardian of the Marshes (huze niao 護澤鳥) (literally, 'the bird which guards the swamps') acts as sentinel, guarding the portals of the palace, in charge of 'divisions and obstacles'. Clearly a wetland bird, its name conveys its defining attribute - protection. … When it sees people it always calls out and does not depart, resembling an official in charge of guarding and protection, hence its name." [10]

Amongst other winged creatures associated in art-history and mythology with light and dark, good and evil, are dragons - in Asian and Western cultures - and angels, in the Christian West. Dragons can be good (Feilong 飛龍, the Cloud Dragon) or trouble (Yazi, 睚眦, the Dragon King's 7th son, god of battles and victory); and winged angels can be on God's side or fallen, on Lucifer's.

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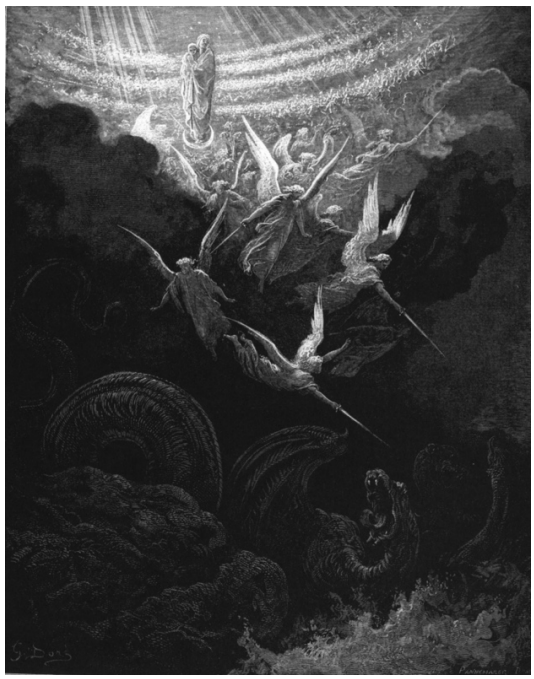
[9] The Mai Po marshes in north-western Hong Kong, protected under the 1971 Ramsar Convention

[10] *The Order of Birds In Guiyi Jun Dunhuang*, East Asian History· Number 20, December 2000, p.1, at p.29, Institute of Advanced Studies, ANU

We have seen examples of Chinese winged dragons. In Western culture and art, angels are the winged figures most evocative of light and dark, notably as imagined by Gustave Doré in dramatic biblical scenes - fighting with Satan and his fallen angels. Doré shows us the white wings of the angels of St Michael wheeling against the surrounding darkness while the brilliance of the light of the Lord supports their battle, until Lucifer falls: and note the dragon in the darkness below.



Pillars of light, storms, energy, the tension between bright and dark, translucence and obscurity, by implication good and evil, are found in works dealing with God's appearance on earth.
In Western Europe, Milton's poem *Paradise Lost*, Dante's *Paradiso* and *Inferno* and incidents from the Bible inspired artists to create works such as Dore's. And the terror of nature was closely related to this. For example, the connection of sky and ground by densely falling pillars of water disturbed Durer so much, even seen in a dream, that when he awoke, he created a work, '*Dream Vision'* and annotated it fearfully "…when I awoke my whole body trembled and I could not recover for a long time".[11]

[11] "In 1525, during the night between Wednesday and Thursday after Whitsuntide, I had this vision in my sleep, and saw how many great waters fell from heaven. The first struck the ground about four miles away from me with such a terrible force, enormous noise and splashing that it drowned the entire countryside. I was so greatly shocked at this that I awoke before the cloudburst. And the ensuing downpour was huge. Some of the waters fell some distance away and some close by. And they came from such a height that they seemed to fall at an equally slow pace. But the very first water that hit the ground so suddenly had fallen at such velocity, and was accompanied by wind and roaring so frightening, that when I awoke my whole body trembled and I could not recover for a long time. When I arose in the morning, I painted the above as I had seen it. May the Lord turn all things to the best."

A similar but inverse sky-earth connection, expressly visualising the presence of God, inspired Benjamin West, the American-born 2nd President of the Royal Academy in London (after Joshua Reynolds) when he painted the biblical *Joshua passing over the River Jordan with the Ark of the Covenant*: Joshua was leading the Israelites, and the irresistibility of God, who had stopped up the river waters from flowing so that the passage of the river could proceed, is shown by a dramatic column of light and cloud shrouding His power and mystery.

Are these affinities between different cultural traditions more than coincidence, or just the accident that comes with Hong Kong, a city of diverse heritage?

And if the artist will not speak of her intention, can associations such as are suggested here tell us anything about the work? Art historian Norman Bryson comments, exploring parallels between paintings and texts in terms of intertextuality:

> "… painting possesses a discursive aspect. Its narrative dimension, its legible structures, its iconography, its denotations and connotations are all discursive, and can also be considered as information. Everything in painting that is like text can partake of the structures of dissemination and interpenetration; everything one can "read" in a painting potentially belongs to the universe of information and its disseminating flows. But painting may also possess aspects irreducible to information."[12]

A helpful formulation by Barzilai and Bloomfield is adopted by Larry Lavender to explain how intertextuality impacts choreography (clearly even more 'non-textual' than painting) – it states:

> "Because all present texts, literary and critical … are permeated by past ones, no text is ever self- contained or sufficient unto itself. Every text is an intertext, a network of scraps and fragments, a set of relations formed with and by other texts."[13]

I would adapt this language, despite the reservations expressed by Bryson, by changing the word 'text' to 'image'. All viewers bring their cultural history to the viewing of works of art, and to deprive ourselves of the framework provided by the historical setting of Hong Kong for exploring the work of a Hong Kong artist would be bizarrely limiting. The twin – or even multiple - traditions under which Hong Kong residents came to understand the world add too much richness to be discarded in the interests of 'purity' of analysis of 'the work itself'.

Indeed, even if we return to the very basics of the image before us, to a portion we have only partially explored - the foreground - we find our past experience of Chinese and Western artforms is immediately triggered. The subject-matter, the tones, the colours, the simple facts of the picture: a border between land and sea, and air and sea; a hut/rock; reflections, mostly of darkness; the textures of the paint – all these enrich our intellectual and emotional response.

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[12] *Intertextuality and Visual Poetics* - Norman Bryson - Style, Summer 1988, Vol. 22, No. 2, Visual Poetics, pp. 183-193 at p.188
[13] *New Criticism and Deconstructive Criticism, or What's New?;* Shuli Barzilai and Morton W. Bloomfield- New Literary History , Autumn, 1986, Vol. 18, No. 1, Studies in Historical Change, pp. 151-169

The foreground is water, lying under sky and earth. As water, it is still, unmoving; and though it does reflect aspects of the scene, it does not reflect the violent energy of the sky and clouds, setting up a further element of compositional tension. Instead, a mixture of calm and dread seems to pervade it. The hut or rock, though empty of people as is the rest of the scene, still evokes simplicity and closeness to nature. The form of this object recalls that in Shitao's *Fisherman's Hut at Dusk*.[14] But it is a still place in a sea of stresses – not least the adjacent "black cock" of implicit priapic violence. The absence of any man in Choi's work enhances the sense of foreboding that is reinforced by the Stygian gloominess of the third pool of darkest blue-green 'splashed-ink', lying below the borderline between rock and water, that mirrors the hardness of the cliffs.

This lowest section of Choi's painting has a very specific impact, absorbing completely the pulsing energy of the rising column of light directly above it. In its sepulchral feel, it brings to mind the totemic vision of a journey across water, to a place that links man to another world, one guarded by Charon, the ferryman of the Styx, who would take you across its dark waters to reunite you with your fate. Sombre depths, reflecting stone-like textures reinforce the gloomy message. This feels akin to the *Toteninsel* of Arnold Böcklin, in the 1880 Basel version – whose very slight lightening of the sky above allows one to feel the ferryman is freeing the white-clad soul from a difficult present, carrying it on to a better life.

Despite all this backfilling of related art-impressions into the uncertain mystery of a work's creation and meaning, its first impact is on our hearts.

Our felt sensations are of drama and pain and tumult... or if the white, bright elements impress us with their suppressed potential for betterment, we will nonetheless feel distress at the oppression and the power of the dark looming over and around, and sadness at the waste, the misdirection of optimism implied by the underlying political love story. But those reflections and thoughts on meaning come later. As viewers – whether pained or perplexed – the emotions evoked are what make this painting pierce us and us remember it.

The artist offers no words about any of this.

Sometimes it is silence that speaks loudest.

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[14] "*Fisherman's hut at dusk*" leaf 3 from "Album for Liu Shitou (Liu Lang)"山水十二幀冊 (石濤) Shitao (Chinese, 1642–1707), Boston Museum of Fine Arts (detail)