

My Vision Of Paradise: Retrospective Of Lalan's Art

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Curator: Wu Qinrui

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A VIEW OF OPEN-ENDEDNESS: THE ART OF LALAN

Initially named Xie Jing-lan, Lalan was a French-Chinese female artist. While the artist and her works were unfamiliar to the Chinese, in France she was an eminent abstract artist, with her paintings housed in the permanent collection of the French Ministry of Culture. Besides being recognised as an artist, she was also a known composer, having joined SACEM in the 1960s. Aside from composing, Xie also studied modern dance under the guidance of Karin Waedner at the American Community Center in 1949. Influenced by Martha Graham, in the 1950s she performed with Mexican dancer Guillermo Palomares. In 1973, the French Ministry of Culture granted her a special award allowance for her research and promotion of "integrated art," a trinity of music, dance, and painting.

Showing an extraordinary creativity, Xie traveled between the fields of painting, music, and dance with great ease. Since childhood, Xie displayed a genius for music and dance. Before leaving China for France in 1948, she studied soprano at the National Art College of Hangzhou and the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Shortly after her arrival in Paris, she enrolled in the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris, studying musical composition under Darius Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen. Later she furthered her studies under French-American composer Edgar Varese, studying "electronic music," which was fashionable in the West. In the sixties, she composed performances for Karine Weahner's modern ballet group at Theater Recamier in Paris, dubbed background music for the performance of Rita Roitman's dance group at the Kaufmann Concert Hall in New York, and worked with Christ Marker and Jacques Veinat in composing film scores.

Although Xie's gift for music and dance played a great role in the later creation of her abstract paintings, the direct influence of her ex-husband Zhao Wou-ki cannot be ignored. Once a teacher at the National Art College of Hangzhou, Zhao was inspired by its president Lin Feng-mian (who had studied in France) and was keenly interested in Western modern art practice. In 1948, when Zhao and Xie arrived in France, New Abstractionism was on the crest of a wave in post-war Paris. The art of this new movement echoed the spirit of American Abstract Expressionism, or "Art Informal," emphasizing unconscious, spontaneous, and random creation. Georges Mathieu and Soulages, two representatives of New Abstractionism, became close friends to the couple, and it was they who encouraged Zhao to turn to abstract painting. At the time, Xie studied music and dance, visited art museums, and acted as Zhao's muse. She hadn't started painting yet, but her heart and soul were already bathed in art.

In 1956, Xie and Zhao were divorced. In 1958, she married artist Marcel Van Thienen,

rechristened herself Lalan, and began painting independently. She said, "I came to know something about modern paintings from my former partner. The moment I stopped being a muse for him, I found myself unable to live without painting". Qtd. in Tang, Ling-yi, and Pierre Colombel. "The Making of Water." *Lalan, the Orchid*. Taizhong: Hsing Tai. She chose abstract painting, or in other words, she had an inherent adaptability to this form of art. Abstract painting, which she had fallen in love with due to her ex-husband, granted her the openness to create by focusing on individual expressive freedom. The artist's intention, according to Kandinsky, is to express his or her spiritual response or decision through lines, colors, spaces, and movements, without any reference to things in the perceivable nature. Artistic representation, therefore, does not necessarily call for the comprehensive imaging system or the strict rules of traditional Western graphic art; nor does it require long-term execution.

Lalan studied representational art early on but soon became dissatisfied. "Xie Jing-lan tried in her early career life to do representational art, drawing a number of portraits and charcoal sketches, but soon got bored. It seems that she was not proficient enough, and her works appeared somehow affected" (30). Qtd. in Thompson, Sophy, and Antoine Chen Yen Fon. "Lalan." *Lalan, the Orchid*. Taizhong: Hsing Tai. As to abstract painting, which emphasizes the free expression of the human spirit, Lalan's practice and understanding of music and dance enabled her to adopt its concept and form very quickly.

As early as 1957, when she began her career as a painter, Lalan introduced elements of Chinese characters into her works. The oriental script and calligraphy caught the eye of the New Abstractionists in post-war France. The Chinese practice of incorporating writing in painting and the symbolic characteristics of pictographs also attracted many Western viewers.

In his early works, Zhao Wou-ki often employed oriental characters also. As to Lalan, who had been born and bred in a well-educated family and received a traditional education, it was natural for her to use Chinese characters as an element in her work. In 1956, Lalan returned to China for a brief visit, during which time she reconnected strongly with her native country, strengthening her determination to paint with cultural elements of her own mother tongue.

In 1960, Lalan had her first solo exhibition at the Greuze Gallery. These early abstract works contain elements from bone and shell inscriptions, calligraphy, and the carving on bronze ware and stone tablets, forming saturated compositions in darkish tones, through which we see her vigorous and rhythmic brushwork. "Composition" (1960) and "Commencement" (1963) emphasize the technique in tableau composition and are strongly colored. She poured and sprinkled blue and brown paint to form a base, then overlaying bold strokes of black and white that resemble Chinese calligraphic lines. These lines became integral to her paintings, yet Lalan deprived calligraphy of its semantic function, presenting Chinese characters as aesthetic symbols that gradually mutate into stylized lines.

The contrast between light and shade and the space-substance juxtaposition were among the problems that Lalan strove to solve. During this period, she created a series of works that vie between brightness and darkness, such as "Through the Woods," "Light," and "A Duel in Words:

A Dispute between Light and Shade." Rembrandt-esque light gradually trickles out from the dim tableau, but black ultimately prevails, and the tableau grows darker.

Lalan's method of painting was closely tethered to her training techniques as a dancer. Abstractionism emphasizes the status of random, spontaneous, and impulsive creation, whereas her long-term dance exercise enabled her to control her body superbly. Martha Graham's modern dance pays great attention to spinal motion, it focuses on how the body contracts and stretches and how the limbs reach out, developing a special technique of moving up and down on the ground. Moreover, this type of dance underlines the psychology of dancing and tries to manifest the mental activity, the emotions, and the transfer of sub-consciousness throughout the body movement.

Lalan found such training and concepts enriching her creation of abstract works. As she observed, "the movement in painting is driven by the voice and action in the body." She usually laid the canvas on the ground and painted as if doing a traditional Chinese painting. She drew fairly fast, without preconception. She did not sketch a draft or care about the formalities of paintbrush application. She worked through the intense yet moderate physical exercise.

In the middle-to-late 1960s, Lalan created a number of watercolors. More flexible and freer than oil colors, these watercolors were softly tuned and turned from emotional venting to gentle self-speculation. Painting elements were drawn from her most beloved music and dance, with drifting lines resonating with the rhythm of dance. During this period, she gave up the earlier compositional saturation, set the black ink lines drifting and swinging at the center of the tableau, arranging the space more loosely than her oil paintings.

At that time, modern art in the West had already entered a new period, in which new artistic concepts, such as conceptual art, performance art, and pop art, impacted and updated both artists and the publics' understanding of what art really was. Abstractionism was questioned and regarded as an elite form of art, beyond mass comprehension and as such, exclusionary. Living in Paris, it was impossible for Lalan not to feel the momentum of the new art movements, and she soon began reconsidering and adjusting. For approximately one year, Lalan did not create. Instead, she began to study the Chinese classics and sought inspiration from the Taoist philosophy of Master Chuang. In viewing Chinese traditional landscapes she became interested in the unique compositions of Ma Yuan and Xia Gui of the Southern Song Dynasty.

The result of her reading and meditation was a re-orientation: to reject the artistic trends of the West and to integrate her native culture. Around 1970, Lalan started to create works with concrete images. The works she created over the next decade or more could be called "mountain-and-water paintings" rather than "landscapes." Unlike their Western counterparts, traditional Chinese landscapes, even the works of Fan Kuan and Guan Tong, which are considered closer to realism, seldom represent the external landscape faithfully. The purpose of drawing was not to reproduce the physical world but to highlight the expression of an individual's inner "landscape," and "to imitate Nature with the power of mind." With titles such as "Traveling among the Mountains and Streams" and "Natural Wonders of Xiaoxiang," Lalan's

favorite artists, Ma and Xia are known for their bold technique. However, the mountains and waters in their paintings still belong to the tradition of portraying *shen* ("spirit") and the externalization of aesthetic perceptions, for the purpose was to express the painter's emotional accumulation instead of depicting landscapes. Lalan adopted the compositional patterns and the *Weltansicht* of those paintings while completely abandoning such techniques as dry-brush. In the work of the 1970s, the asymmetric structure is often employed, which is reminiscent of Ma's and Xia's compositions. The peaks have meaningful outlines and the spheres that resemble the sun or the moon appear repeatedly, while the colors are soft and clear. The thick coating that regularly features in her early seems to be absent, and the tableau is handled in a light manner with more fluidity. Yet none of these works has any identifiable scene of the outside world, instead, they are even more concise and abstract than traditional Chinese landscapes. In their indefinableness, there is no trace of reality, and all seems to be part of a sequestered wonderland. These are the symbolic images of the painter's pursuit of inner truth and feelings via the physical world.

Meanwhile, Lalan tried to combine music, dance, and painting in her experimentation of "integrated art." In 1971, she had a solo exhibition at the Gallery Jacques Desbriere in Paris, playing electronic music that she had composed and performing modern dance against a big screen backdrop, on which she had painted a landscape. The music and the rhythm of the dance complemented the landscape. This is typically what she meant by "integrated art," uniting painting, music, and dance into a trinity. Lalan called it "Spectacle Performance", and she delivered such performances on many occasions between 1971 and 1982. The three-fold screen, "A Sudden Blue," which was later acquired by the French Ministry of Culture, was created as a background for her "integrated art."

It could be said that Western art shared a single trend after WWII: it strove as much as possible to cast off narrow traditions, break from the old boundaries, and welcome highly adaptable elements. While painting developed Duchamp's concept of "readymade," music began to include sounds from everyday life, such as market activity, bird songs, human breathing, and even industrial noise. Expanding the scope of music by becoming more open-ended, Lalan studied and performed this kind of electronic music. At the time, female American artist Laurie Anderson integrated violin music, singing, electronic music, and video images at her exhibitions, whereas Lalan performed music, dance, and painting simultaneously in a single space. Both were striving to break down artistic barriers.

In some other works of hers, like "Dance," "The Flyer," "Butterflies' Love," "The Dance of Flowers," and "The Dancing Woman," Lalan revealed the rhythm of dance through line. The lines, rhythmic and melodious, seem to be gracefully dancing in the breeze. Roger Fry described Lalan's paintings as "dancing lines drawn by hands only". With her frequent trips to China and her relocation to the Mediterranean town of Acacia after the 1980s, Lalan's works underwent new changes. Concrete images disappeared from her oil paintings and paper works, as she returned to abstraction. In the paper works, she often adopted the form of vertical rolls by using pencils to sketch lightly and spontaneously, tenderly laying richly colored lines in a downward manner. In the oil paintings, she scattered fine particles in the center or on the

edges of the tableau, then embellishing with irregular running lines.

Unlike her earlier paintings, her works at that time no longer presented calligraphic symbols. The lines appear gentle and rhythmic, the former rigidness vanished. The colors are brighter, often incorporating light yellow hues, a rarity in her work. In the oil painting, "The Pear Tree in the Storm" (1993), she splashes a delicate yellow against the grayish background of the canvas, adding complex ink lines that create a musical rhythm which poetically resembles the sound of pearls falling on a jade plate. Lalan conveyed a message of vernal beauty and briskness through color and line. In later works, she sustains the structure with lines despite trying to accentuate the space. Her masterly use and control of line is the characteristic, or rather, the soul of her works.

Already in the epoch of post-modernism, after the 1970s, photographic realism became favored in the realm of Western art. Abstract art became old-fashioned, but Lalan maintained her original standpoint. An introspective artist, she constantly observed and analyzed her own mind in the process of creating, always staying faithful to her true feelings. Ultimately, she attained to the apotheosis of "portraying my heart with my hands", establishing the ideal unity of her art and the world. Always curious and energetic with an open mind, Lalan was willing to embrace the new, enabling her art to be open-ended. She continually adjusted her style in accordance with her understanding of life and the universe, finally achieving a seamless perfection in the mutual integration and complementation of painting, music, and dance, and in the application of elements from traditional Chinese painting to abstract painting, which is categorically Western.

As Linda Nochlin remarked in her book, *Lost and Found: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, a woman who chooses a career, especially one in art, is overthrowing conventions. Whether she rebels against the family or receives support from it, she must be strong in mind to fight on in the arena of art, or otherwise reluctantly assume the stereotypical role of wife and mother—the only role society has assigned her. Only with dedication, tenacity, and an enthusiasm for ideals and techniques can a female have, and maintain, success in the art world. Lalan is a strong case for Nicholin's argument. Her artistic pilgrimage has been a long journey from the time of her first husband, she walked, stopped, and walked on again and finally, through genius and diligence, Lalan discovered the best method of linking art with this world.

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