



Scroll painting (2015) by Ross Lewis, ink on paper collage, 108 x 914.4 cm

Chinese Painting Finds New Expression

By Tiffany Wai-Ying Beres

Ross Lewis is an American artist and arts educator who is internationally known for creating art that engages with the Chinese literati tradition. With a deep-seated fascination for China and its culture, in his twenties Lewis began studying Chinese landscape painting, calligraphy, under the tutelage of notable artist/collector CC Wang in New York. Lewis' interest in Chinese art, history, and Mandarin language, brought him to China and Taiwan, where he studied mounting at the National Palace Museum, and over the course of a decade he had the rare opportunity to visit and exchange ideas with some of the modern masters of Chinese painting. As a result of these experiences, Lewis has come to develop a distinct visual language, which bridges key aesthetic and philosophical sensibilities of the Eastern artistic traditions to his Western context.

In his recent exhibition, *Dancing with Rope*, curated by art historian Dr Shen Kuiyi, Lewis brings his most recent breakthrough series – his *Rope Paintings* – to China for the first time. A departure from the conventional use of the Chinese brush, Lewis uses instead an ink-soaked rope as his primary means of marking the paper surface. A personal diary of experiences, these paintings take on towering dimensions yet still evoke the subtle and sophisticated brushwork of literati painting. By developing these works into installation art, Lewis has been able to translate traditional literati concepts beyond the intimate personal space of ink painting, and into the public realm. The show is currently on view at the Sichuan Fine Arts Museum in Chongqing, until 5 November. In this interview he discusses his career and work with Asian Art Newspaper.

Asian Art Newspaper: Can you give me an introduction to your artistic background?

Ross Lewis: I come from an artistic family and one of my earliest childhood memories is that of sitting with my Grandpa Louis on the living room sofa and drawing images together from the newspaper. This undoubtedly planted the seed for how I source ideas and images especially in my *Rope Paintings*, in which I often work from images and text that I cut out of the newspaper. I have studied with many notable Chinese artists and painters who left an indelible imprint on my life, including my mentor CC Wang (1907–2003), but then I also worked with several other artists who deeply influenced me, including Philip Pearlstein, Athena Tacha, and Krishna Reddy. I have been lucky to have so many influential teachers and experiences in my life; it would be impossible to name them all.

AAN: What was it like to study with CC Wang?

RL: My art teacher in Taipei, Professor Li Yihong told me that when I returned to New York the only teacher with whom I should continue my studies was CC Wang. Somehow I was pointed in the direction of Arnold Zhang, CC's prize student who vetted me and got Professor Wang's approval to bring me in on weekends at his apartment

on East 69th Street in Manhattan. On the weekends there was a group of Chinese and Westerners who hung out at CC's studio. Some were art historians such as Mike Hearn seeking first-hand experience with the brush. At the beginning, you would get a *huagao* (sketch) to work from which CC had painted. As I progressed, I was eventually able to work directly from originals in his collection.

AAN: What was the most significant thing that CC Wang taught you?

RL: He taught me how to really look at Chinese painting, and also that brushwork and line were the key elements to understanding Chinese traditional painting. CC always said that line was like voice. You could recognise someone by their line just as you could when you heard just a few notes sung by a great opera singer.

AAN: What brought you to China and Taiwan in the late 1970s and 80s?

RL: My desire to explore other places was fuelled by conversations I had with the great writer Jorge Luis Borges, whom I escorted around campus when I was a student at Oberlin. Borges asked me why I stayed at this school in the middle of Ohio; he said: 'You need to live in the big city where there is



Rope Painting installation by Ross Lewis

drugs and sex so that you can learn about life.' So I applied to the Oberlin-in-Taiwan programme. I did not know much about Taiwan, but ended up living there for three and a half years. During that time I worked as a translator at the National Museum of History in Taipei, studied Chinese painting most extensively with artist Li Yihong and scroll mounting with the chief scroll-mounter at the National Palace Museum.

My first trip to China mainland was as a tourist with my parents on a tour to Guangzhou in 1978. Later, I returned as a tour guide. At night, after my tour groups had gone to sleep, I would go to meet various artists. This was when I went to the Zhejiang Fine Arts Academy and met the great artist Lu Yanshao, along with several other teachers and students in Hangzhou. Later I was introduced to other well-known ink painters such as Zhu Qizhan, Li Keran, Cheng Shifa, Liu Danzhai, etc. I even made a small 'illegal' film in which several of the old-time artists including Chen Zhulai, the seal carver, were interviewed using a camera borrowed from a friend.

AAN: You eventually abandoned using the Chinese brush and begin experimenting in other media? What was the impetus for this change?

RL: In spite of being able to achieve a sense of depth with ink tones on *xuan* paper, I was continually searching for a way to build up more layers of colour. For a brief time, I followed the Abstract Expressionist approach of using house-painting brushes with acrylic paint on hemp paper that I painted from both sides. I even tried canvas but never took to it as the paint sits on the surface unlike the way it is absorbed by the paper. I came back to Chinese brush for a couple of years when I did a series of about 100 drawings using ink and water soluble crayons. However, this ended when I picked up the rope.

AAN: How did you discover your rope painting technique? What is the significance of rope painting for you?

RL: My 'rope painting' arrived quite accidentally. Back in 2009–2010, I was fooling around at my worktable and there was a piece of string that I dipped into ink. I pressed it onto paper and immediately realised there was some potential there. From then on I was totally engaged with using rope, ink and collage. Rope dipped in ink unleashed a world of ideas for me that brush never could. I think the brush on painting limited me with all the historical expectations that came with it. I treasure the variety of lines that I get by using the rope; they may be similar to a brush-stroked line, but they are somehow even more effortless. Rope seems so natural to me now, like an extension of my psyche.

AAN: Your newest rope painting works seem to be a collage of materials, emotions and personal stories. Can you explain a little bit about how and what you paint?

RL: I paint what I feel and think. The space is not a narrative space, but rather one in which all sorts of spatial connections and visual relationships can occur. I am very influenced by the flat and yet deep space of Chinese calligraphy. The edge of my new works and the interiors all have rips which provide the emotional jolt to my works. They also add a sculptural response to the rope line. The imagery varies from figurative to more purely abstract shapes. I usually feel most satisfied when the work is not very literal. I like the sense of discovery to be inherent in the process of viewing. Ultimately, my work is about life with all of its ups and downs. For me this is like the opposite qualities so prized in Chinese calligraphy of wet and dry or fast and slow movements.

AAN: Tell me more about the idea behind your 'Scroll Machine'

RL: The idea of the Scroll Machine originated in the 1980s. Looking to create my own calligraphic language using the Chinese brush and ink, I turned to rendering dance movement to capture the psychology and gesture of the figure in my own pictorial language. I realised that working in a rectangular format inhibited me from moving with the dancer in time and space. With no convenient way to view the scroll painting I came up with the idea of a scroll machine, which is equal parts Torah, film spool and Chinese hand-scroll. I have also been refining a monumental scale motorised scroll machine that will accommodate a 7 x 30 foot painting. I look forward to finishing this before the end of the year.

AAN: What was it like having your first solo exhibition in Beijing after some 30 years practising in New York?

RL: I feel this was a homecoming of sorts. So many artists have taken elements of Chinese art and integrated them into their work in a superficial way, but my development started with a grass roots understanding of Chinese ink painting that has permeated my being for all these years. To finally be able share my appreciation and innovation within this ink tradition with the people that inspired my artistic career has been immensely humbling.

AAN: How do you think a Chinese audience responds to your work? Is it different from Western audiences?

RL: I think the Chinese audience responded a lot to my whimsical side but also had great appreciation for the reverence I have for their traditional cultural sources. It was very gratifying that many members of the public came up to me, took photos of me and my work, and continue corresponded with me on WeChat. In Beijing, it was also fulfilling moment to do educational workshops with a variety of Chinese children. In particular, I worked with a group of underprivileged children from a remote village in Yunnan. What was amazing to see how quickly they took to my ideas using collage and rope line dipped in paint or ink. They were so creative and enthusiastic.

AAN: What are your upcoming projects?

RL: After Chongqing, *Dancing with Rope* travels to the Duolun Museum in Shanghai. In addition, I am planning an exhibition in New York for 2016.