

## Professor Zhao Peisheng

### XinYin 心印

*"The void – that play of emptiness and fullness which composes everything and reveals the meaning of nature" Antonio Tapies 1*

*"The ant's mountain is the man's rock – and the man's mountain is a cosmic pebble" John Hay 2*

Zhao Peisheng's exhibition XinYin 心印, presents us with a historical and cultural context for a contemporary discussion about authenticity, not only of self but also in truth to materials and process; about the inseparable and perceptible nature of content and form; and of being 'present'. As with the three hundred million year old great foraminate limestone rock that from as early as the eighth century began to be harvested out of lake Tai near Suzhou has symbolized the *imperceptible* nature of things in various contexts of it's use, it is this *imperceptible* nature that Zhao is interested in and transformation as the natural process of life for all spirit and matter.

In its natural waterbed, Taihu rock shaped by the natural forces of tides and eroded by acids was slowly transformed. Its cultivation within Chinese society has also transformed it into culturally inscribed objects that pertain to the momentum of earth's energy and forces, shi 势, and the virtues of humanness, particularly within the five ascribed qualities of Shou 瘦, Zhou 皱 Lou 漏, Tou 透 and Chou 丑, where stones reflect the organic structure of the world. The Shizilin Garden in Suzhou where many Taihu rocks now shape the garden's labyrinth of caves and symbolic mountains and creatures, has been a primary site of enquiry for Mr. Zhao.

It is the gift of the Chinese imagination to see a mountain in a few configured small rocks or pebbles as in the well practiced ancient craft of creating landscapes from carefully arranged small stones and plants, or as in Pei's miniature stone mountain range that stretches and reflects across the Suzhou museum courtyard, that leads us into Zhao's contemporary re-work - as does the philosophical and poetical canon that accompanies this human endeavor and explains a Chinese metaphysical and material view of the world. Du Wan in his Stone Compendium describes stones of Lake Tai, their surfaces as covered in small cavities, arbalest pellet nests, wrinkled in net-like relief. And the Song

poet Su Dongpo was said to have lit incense inside a Taihu rock as the drifting smoke reminded him of mists in the mountain. The foraminate Taihu rock form is particularised by its inner structure and outer surface, the balance of Yin and Yang describes its existence, and its material surface is the interface by which we can know it.

Chan Buddhism, Dao philosophy, physics, and the study of human nature through observation form the locus of Zhao's intellectual framework from which he is motivated to create his artworks. His title for this installation 'XinYin' 心印 alludes to 'sincerity', and that in 'xin' 心 (heart mind), the intertwined emotional and mental human dimension, the traces of his life's path as impressed upon him cannot help but be reflected in his works. We are thus guided into the works with the suggestion that for Mr. Zhao there is no separateness between he and his art works. His aesthetic ideal presents as life in art and art in life and his works trace his will to genuineness 认真.

The idea of existence and nonexistence and creation of pictorial form through the influence of Chan and philosophy of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu on artists but also as an expression of explicit virtues relating to various perspectives from within the syncretic philosophy of Neo-Confucianism, Daoism and Chan Buddhism was reflected in aesthetic debates of the time and continues to influence and stimulate artists today; and is apparent in Zhao's work and underlying philosophy. Naturalness and spontaneity brings forth sincerity of a gesture in a genuine expression of the moment; the cultivation and mastery of a skill and the control of it, frees the artist from thought at the still point of execution; one's relationship to nature and engaging the subjective; the self or the absence of self and how to reveal the inner qualities of subjects for a more direct apprehension of the world. Breaking convention and representation through new modes of expression is the physical manifestation of change in this context for Zhao and represents a shift in how the subject is viewed and perceived. In relation to Chan this is what being 'present' means. James Cahill the Art historian remarks in his lectures on the influence of Chan from the late Northern Song onwards, "Look at the brushwork – not the scenery", as artists such as Liang Kai and Mu Qi and Xia Gui, (to name only a few) turned attention to the surfaces of their works to convey new intent and subjective meanings through unconventional brush and ink work.<sup>3</sup>

*"Dreariness and indifference are feelings that are hard to portray (in a painting)...Flying, walking, speed, slowness, things with little depth of meaning, are easy to perceive; but leisure, harmony, solemnity, tranquility, ideas that are more profound are hard to give shape to". Ouyang Xiu 4*

*'Song artists painted trees with twists and turns but the Yuan artists Huang Gongwang and Wu Zhen went to the other extreme: the simpler the better' Qian Du 5*

Against this traditional context Zhao Peisheng's works unmistakably allude to Taihu rocks but he doesn't seek to represent *them*, but to *re-present* the spirit of them in new forms. There seems nothing unnatural when encountering Zhao Peisheng's ceramic (and metal) forms that indeed they are imbued with some fantastic and strange quality as though they were barely separated from their maker's hands. They ask to be held and touched in the manner that you reach to pick up and hold, examine and even caress an interesting or beautiful rock naturally. They hold resemblances to natural things and objects wanwu 万物 but you can't exactly put your finger on what they are, you can only describe them in their relatedness to qualities or material relationship to the natural world. They can be animals and comets, just as you can see stone Lions in the heaped grotto of the Shizilin garden, they convey the much admired unique and original quality of Chou 丑.

As an accomplished ceramicist who has abandoned 'shape' at this time, Zhao Peisheng fashions his forms through the process of kneading, puncturing, scoring, firing glazing and smelting - the result; a recombining of the elements - a process of alchemy, the power of suggestion and your imagination to penetrate the mysteries of form and the formless, the aesthetic and meaning to be discovered in Shou 瘦, Zhou 皱, Lou 漏, Tou 透 and Chou 丑. These qualities are the focal point from which his forms are derived. They hold the notion that you can find the universal in the particular. They contain many starting points to apprehending meaning or making new meanings in some such pieces for example, that are with molten metal oozing from them - as in the quality 'Lou' 漏, an unobstructed void suggesting verticality, with holes or crevices that allow water to leak and percolate or the spaces that air might escape or circulate through. Not unlike our bodies as a system to take in and expel. Or as in the gathering of small black and white nodule type forms that could be likened to Du Wan's 'arbalest pellet nests' creating the concaves in his forms, the inversion of Tou 透, that is foraminate, perforated and pierced. Its large holes suggesting horizontal forces and flow, thus inferring time and space - the relationship to permeability that allows gases or fluids to flow through rock influencing the continuing process of change and instability. 6

His surfaces are scratched, scraped and gouged, are perforated, cracked and pointed. Zhou 皱 is a wrinkled, creased crumpled surface quality. The surface caused by pressures or organic decomposition. We might then consider in the quality of Zhou the passage of time and the natural forces that have caused the slow transformation of petrologic forms in the earth, or consider our own mortal bodies as we observe our wrinkles marking the decay of cells and ageing process from the sun's rays, or the ravages of the wind. Whichever, we are compelled to consider the relative qualities of a surface as an interface to how we perceive and interact with the world of things and how the world of things are formed and transformed, by nature and by humans, or where we are reminded of some former historical resonance.

Zhao's shapes are myriad, some are twisted and contorted, some stand stable and balanced, and the introduction of supports to the work offers a further relative context to frame the object in space. Shou 瘦 is slim, lean or emaciated, like the ribs in a body, a cavity where the flows of dynamic exchange take place.

In Tou 透 together with the quality of Lou 漏 and Shou 瘦, we are given a fully three-dimensional form to imagine the expanding and contracting (universe) (body) the flow of qi, vitality and life, the passing of time.

And, in Chou 丑 there is uniqueness, originality, ugliness, or character. A comic role in traditional opera, Chou expresses by cultural connotation clownish human characteristics and is essential to provide contrast.

As in Wu Guangzhong's painting of the Shizilin grotto in the Suzhou garden, you think you see an eye – or is it a line around a hole? And suddenly the work is in play! Or is it alluding to the primitive, an unknown power. In the abstract there is something real and vice versa. All ideas and action springs from a source.

In Zhao's works perhaps their resonance is all the more powerful through familiarity in the Chinese psyche, and as emergent 'new nodes' in the thread of a continuum, that is the influence of traditional Chinese philosophy upon what must be considered an archetypal form, the Taihu rock. As with the Catalan artist Antonio Tàpies who often favored process over product, who meditated on the void and looked to the transmutative powers inherent in certain materials in his alchemical art experiments, Art is a social practice, the product of its time and regardless of a style, its differences are rested in society. In Zhao's process he seeks to find the 'splendid point' that

articulates the essence of natural transformation in his works, the still point in the creative act. According to Zhao, this is not only an idea; it requires true 'presence' and sacrifice in the process of making. In this there can be pain but then joy of the happy accident is something desirous to achieve, these are often the moments of true magic when creative forces come into play and the unexpected opens new possibilities. He attempts to "abandon form but never meaning", to breathe new life into the continuation of a very long tradition in the appreciation of rocks, and to draw us into the fascinating macro-microcosmic world they allow us to appreciate. Zhao's work contributes to a cultural renewal through the reinterpretation of a centuries old practice.

*"To be fixed is temporary, to move in and out is to endure" John Hay,7*

Amanda Allering

阿曼达·阿勒丁

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- 2 Hay, John. "Structure and Aesthetic Criteria in Chinese Rocks and Art." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 13 (1987): 5-22. Web.
3. James Cahill, "The Beginnings of Chan (Zen) Painting and Muqi" <http://jamescahill.info/a-pure-and-remote-view> (2011).
4. Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty, A Study of Chinese Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press HK 1994).
- 5 Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty, A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, (Oxford University Press HK 1994).
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- 7.Hay, John., ed., *Boundaries and surfaces of self and desire, Boundaries in China*, (London 1994).