

Hong Kong's Art Magazine

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# Wesley Tongson

*The Journey*

By DeWitt Cheng

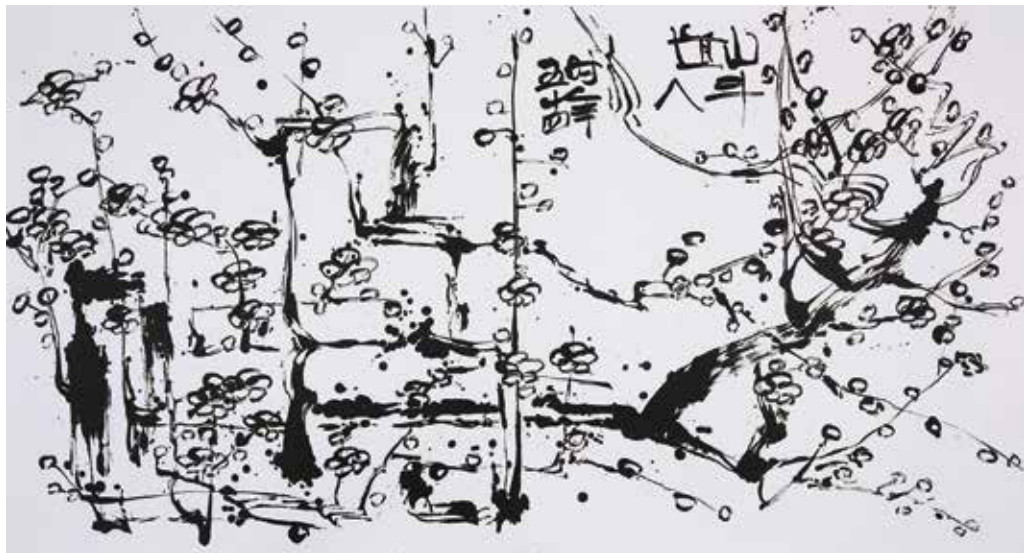
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Courtesy Cynthia Tongson and Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco.

The idea that life is a spiritual journey was once common in European and American religious culture: *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan's 1678 allegorical adventure of a Christian soul, used to be required reading. Spirituality has largely fallen by the wayside, however, replaced by modern materialism. In developed countries now we focus on scientific and economic progress, and largely neglect the spiritual aspect of life, still part of the social menu of traditional cultures, which patronising contemporary standards adjudge backward.

生命是一場靈性之旅，這一理念一度在歐美的宗教文化中盛行：約翰·班揚1678年關於基督靈程經驗的寓言作品《天路歷程》曾一度是必讀書目。靈性或精神性現今已不再受吹捧，被現代唯物主義取而代之。如今在發達國家，我們關注的是科學和經濟發展，幾乎忽略了精神生活。後者雖依舊是傳統文化中的一部分，卻在當代被屈尊對待。





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The paintings of Hong Kong artist Wesley Tongson (1957-2012), aka Tong Ka Wai, in *The Journey* at San Francisco's Chinese Culture Center through March 9, 2019, constitute a spiritual pilgrimage as well. Curated by Catherine Maudsley, and featuring biographical notes by Cynthia Tseng, the artist's sister – who, she reveals, did her brother's art homework when he was a child, before his interest in art surfaced in adolescence – the show reveals a talented hand, both disciplined and intuitive, at the service of a restless, relentless creative drive.

Tongson, who grew up in a Chinese Christian family in Hong Kong, was diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 15, in spring 1973. Shortly afterwards, at age 17, he declared an interest in studying traditional Chinese painting, and began taking lessons, encouraged by his family and teachers. Says Tseng: "Due to his illness, Wesley could not do anything else. Art was the only

thing he could do. He was good at it and it was what made him happy, so my parents were supportive and encouraged him to continue. Wesley was a lonely person. Later, when he retreated into his own world, he disconnected with friends and family. Art was his life; it gave him purpose and the courage to go on: his constant companion. He found solace in his art. He was able to cope with his illness," including his paranoia and the side-effects of his medication. "Without his art, I honestly don't know how he would have survived all those years."

Not only did Tongson survive; he thrived, visibly, in his art. The paintings on board and paper, framed or mounted onto wooden strainers, are artfully laid out in the venue's three small galleries, with pairs of large coloured landscapes flanked by monochromatic calligraphic paintings, facing each other: landscape and calligraphy, the



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香港藝術家唐家偉（1957–2012年）於2019年3月9日在三藩市中國文化中心舉辦的畫展《唐家偉：旅塵》，同樣是一次心靈的朝聖。是此展覽由毛岱康擔當策展人，圍繞唐家偉的姐姐唐慧中所撰寫的人物志展開。據唐慧中透露，小時候她總幫著弟弟完成美術作業，直至弟弟少年時期開始展露出對藝術的興趣。展覽展露出一隻才華橫溢的手——訓練有素又直抒胸意，在永不安分、源源不斷的靈感驅動下創作出一幅幅佳作。

唐氏成長於香港一個中國基督教家庭，1973年春天，15歲的他被診斷患上思覺失調症。17歲時，他說自己想學傳統中國畫並在家人和老師的鼓勵下開始接受此方面的教育。姐姐說：「弟弟由於疾病困擾而無法從事其他事情，藝術是他唯一能做的。他做的很好也快樂，所以我們的父母非常支持，不斷鼓勵他繼續下去。家偉性格孤僻，之後，他退守到自己的世界中，和朋友、家人都斷了聯繫。藝術就是他的生活，陪伴著他，給了他繼續向前的目標和勇氣。他在藝術中找到慰藉，得以抗衡疾病包括自己的妄想症和藥物帶來的副作用。如果不是藝術，老實說我不知道他還能否捱過這些年。」

唐家偉不僅捱過了這些年，還在藝術中傲然蓬勃。原先在畫板和紙上的繪畫，經過木質裱框被精心展示在展館的三個小展區中——成對大幅彩色山水畫的兩側面對面擺著單色的書法。山水畫和書法，這一國畫中的兩極經過現代主義的神韻與奔放的薰染被重新演繹和詮釋。毗鄰走道中的小幅作品揭示了唐家偉為之聞名的潑墨作品的發展軌跡，作品隨附文字，出自這位有幾分緘默的藝術家和他卓越地守護者他的創作的姐姐的手筆。

儘管按照時間順序追溯藝術家軌跡的展示方式會是更合意的選擇，展覽空間卻決定了展出安排；留心的觀眾可以揣摩出其美學發展蹤跡，此外各類風格的作品也在相互吐露心跡。在香港讀中學的時候，唐家偉開始學習傳統中國畫的風格和主題，如松、梅、竹以及它們各自的象徵意義和諧音意——長壽、堅韌和報喜。經過不斷的磨練，1977年畢業前他成為了一名近代年輕儒學國畫家。1977–1981年，他在安大略藝術學院學習西方繪畫，尤其專注於畢卡索。同時他開始嘗試潑墨畫，這或許受到傑克遜·波洛克當然還有張大千（1899–1983年）的影響。張大千是近代一位多才多藝的現代主義國畫大師兼藝術鑒賞家和臨摹大





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twin poles of traditional Chinese painting, recapitulated and reinterpreted with modernist verve and dash. Along the adjacent hallway are smaller works that show the evolution of Tongson's famous splashed landscapes, accompanied by writing by the somewhat reticent artist and his sister, a talented keeper of the flame.

While a chronological arrangement that traced the artist's development would have been preferable, the space dictated the arrangement; attentive viewers can puzzle out the progression, however, and the works of various styles speak to each other anyway. While still in high school in Hong Kong, Tongson studied traditional Chinese painting styles and themes, such as pine trees,

plum blossoms, bamboo, with their symbolic and homophonic associations with longevity, perseverance and congratulation respectively. With incessant practice, he became a young latter-day *guohua* painter in the retired-Confucian-scholar mode before graduating in 1977. At Ontario College of Art from 1977 to 1981, he studied western painting, especially the metamorphic Picasso, and began experimenting with splashing ink, probably influenced by Jackson Pollock and certainly by Zhang Daqian (1899-1983), the versatile modernist master, and virtuoso mimic/forged of older masters, who sported an antiquarian long beard and flowing robes, and developed a late splashed-paint style, *pocai*, which came, as Tongson writes in a letter, directly from his heart.



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家。他留著古人式的大鬍子、穿長袍，創立了近代潑墨風格——潑彩，正如唐家偉在信中所言，此為其「心畫」。

唐家偉1981年回到香港，受業於顧青瑤和黃仲方，並繼續探索及精進無筆水墨創作的技藝。他受台灣畫家劉國松老師所創的水拓法、漬墨法和拓墨法的啟發——將紙浸入漂浮著墨汁的水中，從而獲得出現在精美書本迷幻扉頁上的漩渦式、宇宙般的圖案。這些巧奪天工的山水畫，融合了悠久主題與新穎畫法，受到評論家、收藏家以及香港、北京、蘇州和倫敦各地博物館與畫廊的讚譽。他的想像源自大乘佛教中的西方極樂世界，他將那富於質感雖為即興創作卻不可思議之完美的作品叫做自己的禪宗天山，並略帶諷刺和驕傲稱呼自己為山斗道人。到了後期，唐家偉終於開始棄用畫筆，通過用手、手指和指甲創作山水畫——

他將意念直接揮灑於紙上，如同波洛克用棒滴下一圈圈、一連串的顏料。

實之有幸，三藩市中國文化中心得以呈現唐家偉如此多產的作品。此得益於唐家偉家族近期組織的一系列展覽，這位才華異稟，勤奮而如隱士般的家人實為讓他們自豪。其中包括幾件尤為值得呈現的作品：三幅1992年的書法潑墨畫——《光》、《福雨》和《神之光》，其中的象形圖既精雕細琢又如行雲流水，既意境深遠又易於消散；作品《紅梅滿地》（1993年），以大小適宜、恰如其分的朱色墨水滴下的朵朵紅梅為傳統的田園主題賦予了巨大爆發力；作品《梅5》（2011年），果實累累的樹叢慢慢融入一副舞蹈圖或樂譜中；《山1》（1995年）與《神山》（1993年），令人不言而喻，細小而神奇的奇跡，猶如重拾天堂。



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Tongson returned to Hong Kong in 1981, studying with Gu Qingyao and Huang Zhongfang, and he continued experimenting with and perfecting various non-brush ink application techniques. He was instructed by Taiwanese painter Liu Guosong in ink staining, rubbing, dyeing and marbling – floating ink on the surface of water and dipping the paper into it, capturing the swirling, cosmic patterns used for the psychedelic end papers of deluxe books. These masterly landscapes, combinations of time-honored themes and new techniques,

garnered praise from critics and collectors, museums and galleries in Hong Kong, Beijing, Suzhou and London. The artist, whose visions originated in Mahayana Buddhism's Western Paradise, and who called these richly textured works, improvised yet impossibly perfect, his Zen Mountains of Heaven paintings, referred to himself at the time, with irony and pride, as *shandou laoshi* (mountainscape teacher). Finally come Tongson's late, monumental landscape paintings, created with his hands, fingers and fingernails, without tools: direct transcriptions of his nervous system, like Pollock's loops and skeins of liquid paint flung from a stick.

San Francisco is fortunate to have even this modest sample of Tongson's prodigious output of work, the latest of a series of exhibitions assembled by the Tongson family, which can take pride in the achievement of its prodigiously talented, hard-working, solitary son. It includes a few extraordinary works worth singling out: the three 1992 calligraphic splash paintings *The Light*, *Blessed Rain* and *God's Light*, pictograms that seem to be both carved and liquid, monumental yet evanescent; *Red Plums Over the Earth* (1993), a traditional bucolic motif given explosive energy, with the plums represented by perfectly sized and placed drops of vermilion ink; *Plum 5* (2011), with fruit-laden trees dissolving into what appears a dance diagram or musical score; and *Mountain 1* (1995) and *Misty Mountains* (1993), small, magical miracles of evocation: paradise, regained.