

Pacific Overtures

Perhaps it is not such a quirk of fate that Valentina Battler would be drawn to the rhythms and beauties of Chinese painting. She was born in the city of Astrakhan in Russia, not far from the country's border with China, and trained as a classical pianist. Like artists schooled for a serious concert career, traditional Chinese painters spend years learning the fundamentals of their art and must draw on a huge reservoir of patience to master the skills required. But Battler did it mostly on her own. "You surround yourself with books, surround yourself with paintbrushes and paper," she says, "and everything goes wrong for years. It's a completely different way of working from European painting. You can't correct anything. Once the ink touches the paper, that's it."

Nonetheless, Battler persevered, teaching herself so well that her works have been validated as true Chinese painting by the Shanghai Academy of Art. She has also absorbed much of the philosophy that underlies this ancient way of art and has written persuasively of its relationship to poetry, craft, and music. In earlier times in China, both painting and calligraphy were the most highly appreciated of the arts, their emergence tied to the philosophies of Taoism and Confucianism, which presupposes a joint creative work from both the artist and the viewer. "Painting is always unique and depends on the minutest of details," the artist says. These include the pressure of the brush, the concentration of ink, the motion of the hand, and the structure of the paper. Paradoxically, although apprentices learned traditional Chinese painting by copying from a master, Battler notes that this art "is unique in its essence" because the spirit cannot be copied.

In the 15 years that she has dedicated to perfecting her vision, Battler's work has fallen into several broad periods. In the first, it's possible to see her amazingly swift mastery of her calling, as she turned to time-honored subjects like bamboo, birds, and flowers. The assurance of her technique is such that the Western critic would be hard-put to say these were not the works of carefully tutored Asian artists (and it might be noted that the leaves and branches in the paintings *Bamboo* and *Loneliness* show the same dazzling panache of the pianist who effortlessly tosses off a difficult passage of music).

In the second, the artist ventured into more personal terrain, choosing subjects that often have a more Western orientation or are inspired by European works like "Swan Lake" or Dantesque visions of hell. Mysterious geishas put in an appearance, and Battler's approach becomes ever more dramatic as swirling eddies of ink surround the subject matter, an adaptation of an ancient Japanese technique known as *suminagashi*. The "marbled" effect results when ink is dropped into water and derived originally from a Chinese method of "drawing" on the surface of water. Battler also introduced pastel and dry India ink, bringing an ever greater complexity to her surfaces.

In one series of works, "Transcending Reality," the artist wrote poems to accompany the paintings. This is also part of an old Chinese tradition, as both painters and poets break down complex ideas into their most basic elements. Because the Chinese use pictographs for communication, words, symbols, and images meld together to create art forms that

are almost indistinguishable. Indeed, calligraphy is itself an art that combines both painting and writing.

Lately Battler has been working on a series of paintings based on Rachmaninoff's Symphonic Dances, not as an illustration but more as a philosophical interpretation of the great Russian composer's last masterpiece. It's said that these works allowed Rachmaninoff to indulge in a nostalgia for the Russia of his birth, and one wonders if Battler is not drawn to the theme as a way of paying homage to her native land.

Viewed in its entirety, Valentina Battler's paintings show a remarkable fusion of talents and interests: her accomplishments as a pianist are finding new forms that result from a fascination with the artistic legacy of Asia. Whereas many artists in the East are now cleverly mining Western strategies (Minimalism, Pop Art, Abstract Expressionism, or the Duchampian antics of Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst) to make their products seem up-to-the-minute, Battler seems to be looking for a way of working that follows a genuine impulse to give life to her own visions. It's a uniquely personal response to globalism, and one is eager to see where it will take her.

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