Palimpsest: Nearby Mu Xin
By Alexandra Munroe

The single imperative of modern Asian artists is to define a space that absorbs the cultures of traditional Asia, the classical West, and of modernity. Few artists are able to arrive at an authentic synthesis. Fewer still are able to create a genuinely original art that goes beyond a mere integration of artistic forms and styles to achieve an intelligence that transcends the boundaries of, yet resonates with, all three cultures. The artist and writer Mu Xin does this with uncommon grace, so that one feels not that a pastiche has been made, but that a self-evident wholeness has been discovered.¹

A child of privilege, educated in the Chinese literati tradition and a profound student of Western art and literature, Mu Xin responded to modern China’s catastrophes and the deprivations of imprisonment by practicing his faith in art as the ultimate human touchstone. From early on, he sought to “take from the spirit of Chinese tradition” but aspire toward “a high level of freedom necessary to create international art.”² By necessity, he found that freedom in a state of absolute mental reclusion. The will to nurture the “ivory tower” of his creative and intellectual life while sentenced, both literally and figuratively, to a “prison tower” of horrifying desolation lends to his work a rare depth of moral austerity and imaginative power.

Mu Xin’s family was targeted early on in the political upheavals that swept across China with the fall of the Qing dynasty, Japanese aggression and the Pacific War, and the civil war between the Nationalists and Communists. Following the death of his father when Mu Xin was nine, the family fortune and position fell rapidly into decline. Like most intellectuals in the late 1940s, Mu Xin rallied around Mao Zedong’s vision for a new China, but he soon was disillusioned. Between the Communist victory in 1949 and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, his family was dispersed, imprisoned, or killed and their estate destroyed. Mu Xin chose to survive the tumultuous times by not participating in official life, holding low-profile posts in various Shanghai and Hangzhou crafts collectives, where he earned some reputation as an exhibition designer. He studiously avoided the Communist party art establishment and was never married.

Even so, Mu Xin could not escape a common fate of artists and intellectuals under Mao Zedong’s regime: he was imprisoned three times, spending more than ten years incarcerated or at hard labor, and twenty of his booklength manuscripts and hundreds of paintings that he had produced in secret were confiscated and destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).³ Unlike thousands of artists who stopped making art, went mad or committed suicide as a result of severe treatment, Mu Xin’s mental integrity triumphed. “They can destroy my work, but they cannot destroy my talent.” Yet despite his passive resistance to the political violence and
oppression that swirled around him from 1949 until his move to New York in 1982, Mu Xin rejects being labeled a dissident. That, he argues, is just another form of ideology. Rather, what has allowed Mu Xin to steel his mind from so much terrible pain and waste is his belief in the sacred worth of creation. He remarks:

I feel that those tragic experiences are extremely hard for human nature to bear. Human nature does not need to bear them.... In a gravely adverse situation, you are obliged to hold your own life in your mouth—like a tigress holding her young in her mouth—and be the first to advance—not retreat—to prove yourself worthy of your moral responsibility.  

Thus life, when linking life, grows vigorously, ad infinitum.4

Most artists of Mu Xin’s generation succumbed to the erratic prescriptions of what was deemed politically useful art in post-liberation China, lurching from traditionalstyle guohua to Soviet-style Socialist Realism. Mu Xin’s significance lies in his choice to ignore political ideology and artistic fashion, forgoing seduction or co-option in favor of a deep and private cultivation of his aesthetic and philosophical ideals. With remarkable ease, he communes with the great artists, writers, and philosophers of the Chinese literati, European Renaissance, and modern humanist cultures as if they were guests in his own studio (fig. 2). It is his “conversations” with artists as various in time and place as Wang Wei, Leonardo da Vinci, and Leo Tolstoy, and his feelings of resonance with the spirit of their art, that are the subject of the Prison Notes and a series of landscape paintings, collectively titled Tower within a Tower. Both were produced during two periods of incarceration during the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. They are among the few extant works from Mu Xin’s past in China. “By day I was a slave,” Mu Xin recalls of his circumstances. “By night,” when he created these works under the cloak of darkness, “I was a prince.”

“Blood Roots”

Mu Xin was born February 14, 1927, in the village of Wuzhen in Zhejiang Province, the only child of a wealthy family of local aristocratic descent. His real name is Sun Pu; his art name, Mu Xin, means “spirit of trees.” The southeastern province of Zhejiang has historically been a political, economic, and cultural center of China, and together with neighboring Anhui and Jiangsu, has produced the great majority of China’s important painters and innovative schools of painting since the tenth century. The city of Hangzhou, not far from Mu Xin’s birthplace, gave rise to the Southern Song Academy and attracted such Yuan and Ming masters as Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), Huang Gongwang (1269–1354), and Wang Meng (ca. 1308–85). It remained a vital art center right through the twentieth century, when the modernist Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940) founded the influential National Hangzhou Arts Academy the year after Mu Xin was born. This area also commands those sites that are most resonant within the repertory of Chinese landscape painting and classical poetry—sites like the Yellow Mountains and West Lake that conjure a millennium of lyrical laments on exile and subtle dissent.5 Mu Xin once remarked how his “childhood and adolescent years were spent struggling in the sedimentary deposits of an ancient
culture.” Its rich soil would later sustain him; Mu Xin’s painting titles are rich in references to the south’s legendary bridges and pagodas, misty rivers and layered peaks.

Born into a traditional family, Mu Xin received a classical education under the guidance of eminent private tutors. Such study imparted a philosophy of self-cultivation and respect for the cultural past based on reading books and perfecting the “elegant pursuits” of calligraphy, poetry, painting, and music. These years provided the foundation for Mu Xin’s later literary achievements; his rare mastery of prose and poetry styles spanning the history of Chinese literature has earned him cult status among intellectuals in Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora. An essential element of this classical training is the emphasis on interpreting the works of past masters within a vital time-space continuum; relevance is rarely historicized but rather internalized. Commentary—insight and penetration into the works of great artists—is interchangeable with creation.

In the canon of Chinese literati culture that Mu Xin studied, periods of supreme artistic expression and creative revolution frequently corresponded with episodes of immense political and social turmoil. With the imposition of foreign Mongol rule in the mid-thirteenth century, Chinese scholars resisting assimilation withdrew from politics and society. Living humbly, they pursued selfcultivation through art. Rejecting the artistic precedents of the morally discredited Southern Song Academy, Yuan dynasty artists such as Zhao Mengfu sought to express their moral purpose through a systematic revival and creative exploration of archaic models. Because traditional images of paradise were often set within the golden age of high Chinese antiquity, the primitive was equated with perfection; in this utopian setting conceived by the creative mind, artists survived by becoming oblivious to the turmoil of dynastic change. Zhao’s choice of early models connoting his dissatisfaction with the ruling regime established the abiding literati notion of holding up the virtues of the past as subversive critique of the present. Later, with the Manchu conquest and establishment of the Qing dynasty in 1644, the Ming loyalists—known as yimin (remnant subjects)—withdrew from society to escape persecution and lived as recluse scholars and artists. Many of them, disillusioned by the failure of traditional Confucian values to save the country from corruption and defeat, turned to Buddhism for solace. Painting—understood as silent poetry in the literati tradition—was for them not only a means of protest but also a psychological defense against a turbulent and menacing world. Known as the Individualists, artist-monks such as Shitao (1642–1707) once again revolutionized the tradition of Chinese landscape painting through a rigorous denial of artistic orthodoxy, political coercion, and mental placidity.

As Richard Barnhart writes in his essay here, “Landscape Painting at the End of Time,” Mu Xin’s expressionist lamentations are grounded in the cyclic tradition of Chinese literati radicalism, what the artist calls his “blood roots.” He, too, witnessed a cataclysmic dynastic change which politically discredited his social class and education, and left him, both mentally and physically, a solitary recluse. “I would not fail to live up to what art had taught me,” he has remarked, “even when deprived of the right to create.”
Chinese tradition was only part of Mu Xin’s education. What distinguishes him among his peers is his original explorations of European culture and modernity. From his teenage years, he was keenly aware of the debates on educational reform that championed the necessity of Western learning. In the wake of the 1911 Qing collapse, cosmopolitan Shanghai emerged as the center for these and other extraordinary discussions on China’s modern political and cultural fate. The intellectual crisis had begun in the 1890s with the dissolution of the imperial system and the social, moral, and spiritual order it both mandated and symbolized. As China faced increasing threats to its autonomy from Japanese and European powers, culminating in the humiliating defeats of the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 and the Boxer Indemnity of 1901, the need to open up to modern Western science, technology, and thought became imperative. The early reformists Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929) advocated education in practical Western knowledge that would be assimilated into a Confucian ideal of national culture and identity. However, steeped in his studies of Confucian rhetoric, Mu Xin came to realize that this approach, which shaped the debates on modernism in the late Qing and early Republican periods, was deeply flawed. By focusing on what was useful only, Kang and Liang inhibited true progressive thinking and, Mu Xin believes, greatly misunderstood all the West had to offer.

As Wu Hung recounts in his essay here, “Reading Mu Xin: An Exile Without A Past,” Mu Xin was profoundly shaped as a teenager by his access to the private library of Mao Dun (1896–1981), a leading May Fourth intellectual and distant relative, that was built on the ruins of an ancient pagoda near Mu Xin’s home. A translator, literary critic, historian, and one of modern China’s greatest novelists, Mao Dun introduced Chinese readers to a wide range of Western literature and literary thought, including realism and naturalism. As Japanese, Guomindang, and Communist troops waged war across southern China in the late 1930s and the 1940s, Mu Xin retreated to Mao Dun’s abandoned library, where he discovered the great minds of ancient, Renaissance, and modern Western thought. “There I enjoyed reading all of the masterpieces of world literature, when war and chaos ruled outside.”

Among the publications in Mao Dun’s library were the complete periodicals of the New Culture and May Fourth movements. Championed by students of Western learning, these movements arose from the failure of political revolution in 1911 to rouse the sleeping dragon and make China a modern nation. The generation’s rallying point was the event of May 4, 1919; what began as a demonstration to protest China’s treatment at the Paris Peace Conference developed into a national movement for cultural and political awakening, a search for a new world view free of feudalistic thinking. In journals like Xin qingnian (New Youth) and Xin chao (New Tide), the May Fourth intellectuals, cosmopolitan by temperament and nationalist revolutionaries by vocation, debated the discourse on modernity—how to achieve an authentic culture that was both modern and Chinese, enlightened and autonomous. The literary giant whose essays and short stories forged a new Chinese literature on the pages of these journals was Lu Xun (1881–1936), whom Mu Xin came to hold in the highest esteem and counts among his imaginary commune of great minds. Lu Xun believed passionately in an inner-driven literature of self-expression. More tellingly for Mu Xin, Lu Xun held the ideals of art high above revolution, criticizing the use of art for vulgar political purposes and cautioning against the ever-present threat of artistic
repression. “Ivory towers,” he wrote in 1927 as political violence erupted across China, “exist in the real world where political oppression is unavoidable.” Lu Xun’s ideals would steel Mu Xin during decades of political tumult from any ideology other than the private cult of self-expression.

Books aside, the progressive intellectual society that centered around Shanghai was a further inspiration for Mu Xin’s discovery of European culture. While the rest of China remained relatively isolated from contact with the West, Shanghai’s foreign-language bookstores that Mu Xin came to haunt contributed to its status as a center of enlightenment. Foreign students, embassies, capitalists, revolutionaries, cabaret performers, artists, and missionaries made Shanghai one of the world’s most cosmopolitan cities in the 1930s and 40s. (Mu Xin recalls that while hospitalized as a child a Western missionary doctor gave him his first picture book of Renaissance art.) His family’s business connections in Shanghai stimulated further exploration of the city’s vibrant life, including its concert halls, where Mu Xin developed another abiding passion—Beethoven and Chopin. By the age of eighteen, his identity as a traditional Chinese man of letters and as a self-taught Western humanist was formed. Years later, he would describe his twin poetic archaism with the comment: “I am a Greek born in the Xiao-Xiang region.”

“Mental Roots”

Although exceptionally talented in musical and literary composition, Mu Xin chose to study Western-style painting at university. In 1946, after the conclusion of the Pacific War, he entered the prestigious Shanghai Fine Art Institute (Shanghai meizhuan). Founded by Liu Haisu (1896–1994) in the first year of the new Republic, the institute was a center for Western-style art education. Liu, who had traveled for extended periods to Japan and Europe, taught an expressionist style of oil painting after van Gogh, Matisse, and Picasso. But by the time Mu Xin began his studies in Western-style painting, Liu was calling for a synthesis of Chinese aesthetics and European art, citing Cézanne and the seventeenth-century eccentric Shitao as the two great pillars of non-objective art. Both, he argued, created paintings that “express” rather than “represent.” Liu’s language of East-West polarity and the complexity of conflicting idioms (oil painting versus ink painting, traditional style versus modern style) dominated the debates on Chinese painting. Early on, Mu Xin felt that these discussions were operating on a superficial level of medium and style with little or no agreement on the principle of creative self-expression itself. Disappointed, he left the institute to pursue informal studies with an elder friend whose philosophy was closer to his own—Lin Fengmian.

Lin Fengmian (1900–91) was among the early Chinese painters to travel to Europe, where he came to paint in a Fauvist style. Like Liu Haisu, he was consumed by the theoretical and practical challenge of achieving a synthesis of Chinese and modern European art, but Lin approached the problem from the inside out. He understood that a strong concept of self and individualism was critical to building any level of meaningful integration. An influential teacher at the National Hangzhou Arts Academy from 1928 until 1949, Lin extolled the artist’s feeling as
the spiritual foundation of modern art. Matisse’s famous words from his 1908 *Notes d’un Peintre* were core to Lin’s ideas: “My principal aim is to express myself…. Composition is the art of making a decorative arrangement of elements from which the painter can choose to express his feelings.” Mu Xin was among such painters of later international renown as Wu Guanzhong (b. 1919) and Zao Wou-ki (b. 1921), whose ideas on modernism were informed by their relationship with Lin Fengmian. For art to happen, Lin taught, the artist must first be born.\(^\text{11}\)

As Jonathan Hay discusses in his essay here, Lin Fengmian’s influence on Mu Xin may have extended to style and medium as well. Specifically, Hay identifies Lin’s pioneering use of ink-and-gouache on paper and his practice of “lyric ink painting” as a context for understanding Mu Xin’s work.\(^\text{12}\) This lineage, rooted in the Shanghai-Hangzhou discourses of the 1930s and 40s and also shaped by Japanese modernism, explains part but not all of Mu Xin’s special place in modern Chinese ink painting. While Lin played a key role in creating the “bridge” for many Chinese artists’ encounters with European art, formally their realm of interest remained tied to the Ecole de Paris, especially Fauvism. Their stylistic affinities—pushing representation to the edge of abstraction, using bright colors and a loose, expressionist brushwork to create a flat, lyrical surface—demonstrate a belief in the necessity to appropriate, integrate, and reinvent modern art while remaining loyal to traditional Chinese subject matter. What Lin and others did not always realize were the limits of their own perspective.

While Mu Xin’s work raises the central question that concerned Liu Haisu, Lin Fengmian and indeed artists of all tendencies after the May Fourth movement—how to achieve an authentic Chinese modernism—his response transcends the East-West polemic that has historically framed the debate and defined the fashions of artistic styles. He emerges from the mid-century discourses independent of the developments that shaped mainstream modern Chinese painting styles, whether academic, modernist, official or subversive. His Chinese references are more ancient, drawing from the deep past of the Wei (220–265), Jin (265–316) and Tang (618–907), while his European influences are often more contemporary, drawing from Surrealism. The contemporary ink-painter Liu Dan (b. 1953) has remarked that “modern Chinese art is stifled in the grammar of Chinese art, but Mu Xin breaks through that grammar to go back to the original source of meaning. He gives the mystery back to art.”\(^\text{13}\)

The fact is that Mu Xin’s painting stands alone in modern Chinese art. Perhaps what makes him so unique a phenomenon is his cultivation of the artists and poets of the high Italian Renaissance. While most Chinese painters—in ink or oil—equated modernity with an abstract or expressionist brushwork learned from European or Japanese models, Mu Xin absorbed the morality and values of modern philosophy itself. Modernism, he knew, is not merely a style but a system of thought whose revolutionary roots lie in Renaissance humanism. Through an extraordinary process of insight and mastery, Mu Xin evolved as an artist and intellectual with “mental roots” in fifteenth-century Florence. He became a kind of humanist who places man and letters at the center of worldly existence, linking individual self-development and secular life with the sublime. Renaissance humanists, who included scholars, writers, and artists, believed that virtue is inseparable from good art and that moral order is the highest reality which art should mirror. Mu
Xin came to share these ideals, believing that “if you aspire to make high art, you must live your life high.” By claiming the power of individual self-expression, he could reconstruct the world’s teachings in his own language.

Among a pantheon that includes Botticelli, Michelangelo, and Raphael, Mu Xin feels closest to Leonardo da Vinci. From childhood, when he came upon photogravure reproductions of Leonardo’s works in foreign art books, Mu Xin was struck by the “miraculous beauty and grace” of his vision. He refers to Leonardo as “my early teacher.” Indeed, Leonardo’s paintings and drawings reveal an approach to nature and art, and a fusion of painting and drawing, that resonate with Mu Xin’s work, as if the Chinese artist has divined the soul and touch of the Renaissance master. A detail of the background landscape in the portrait of Mona Lisa, reproduced in a monograph that Mu Xin has owned since he was in his twenties (fig. 3), presents a vision of mountains, gorges and rivers that inspires the kind of awe and desolation one feels looking at Mu Xin’s dreamlike mindscapes. Like Leonardo, Mu Xin represents nature as an atmosphere suffused with psychic forces that can be felt but not shaped. Towering peaks and riverbanks seem to be decomposing into dusky ether, suggesting a Leonardo-like supernaturalism of shifting, numinous ground. Forms emerge from depth and darkness bathed in halolike light and softened through a palimpsest of erasure. The near-mystical intimacy of Leonardo’s art resonates in Mu Xin’s paintings, which were created with no audience in mind other than his master’s spirit (fig. 4).

To those unfamiliar with Mu Xin, the presumption of a connection to da Vinci may appear eccentric. But it is precisely because he assumes a level of communication with artists and thinkers of world history that Mu Xin achieves international character. As recent studies of modern Chinese ink painting make clear, the focus of artistic discourse and identity since at least the 1940s was nationalism and various forms of political ideology. The very term for traditional-style painting—guohua (literally, national painting)—originated in the National Essence Movement of the Republican period and retained connotations of political and social conservatism. At its most radical, it was construed as “against modern” or “against Western.” By definition, guohua was “a rough compromise between accepting the legitimacy of past forms and an attempt to reinvent the context from which that legitimacy is drawn.” Within this framework of entrenched binarism, coupled with isolation from the international art world, the project of transcending “China” was obstructed from the start. Remarkably, Mu Xin managed to free himself from what he calls this “filial burden” to achieve wholeness among the divergent artistic forces of his day. His perspective is, “Culture is like wind. It knows no boundaries.”

The Prison Notes

Mu Xin was imprisoned at the age of forty-four during the height of the Cultural Revolution. For eighteen months between 1971 and 1972, he lived in solitary confinement in the basement of an abandoned air-raid shelter in Shanghai. Known as “people’s prisons,” these arbitrary Red Guard jails made state prisons that provided minimal food, hygiene, medicine, and exercise seem
civilized by comparison. Starving and locked in darkness, Mu Xin willed his mental survival by writing. The *Prison Notes* are sixty-six pages inscribed recto and verso in tiny, stitchlike script on thin sheets of paper that he purloined from the supply provided for the forced confessionals known as “self-criticism.” He then folded these sheets of writings into small squares and hid them in the cotton padding of his prison garb. Altogether, they amount to some 650,000 characters. Miraculously, he was freed with the *Notes* intact.

This exhibition and catalogue are the first time that the *Prison Notes* have been presented to the public. For this occasion, the literary scholar and translator Toming Jun Liu conducted an interview with Mu Xin and translated excerpts from the *Notes* that are published here. Nearly indecipherable, the *Notes* have taken on what Mu Xin calls a “second layer of significance” with the perspective of three decades past. While historians and critics of the Cultural Revolution will try in vain to extrapolate hard evidence of a crippled and traumatized mind, an intellect wrecked by tyrannical oppression, the traces collected on these sheets suggest a different reality. In Mu Xin’s words: “I was rejected by the absurd world at the time. So I built a more reasonable but magic world in which I sincerely lived.”

Rather than drown in the depths of deprivation, he endured through the will of his imagination; his abject solitude in fact gave him solace from “the riots outside.” Regardless of their content, the intense power of the Notes’ serial accumulation of sixty-six worn, ink-blotched sheets offers a record and vision of Mu Xin’s mental life in jail. The Notes thus survive as a visual testimony to the perseverance of self when all attributes of identity, all references to normal life, have been ruined. In a typical stance reminiscent of Lu Xun and rare among Cultural Revolution memoirs, Mu Xin insists on their apolitical status:

> I do not want the manuscript to be identified with any kind of ideology. It is my wish that the manuscript, in its original form, would establish its independent existence in the nameless, constant realm of the conceptual.

If the excerpts from the *Prison Notes* offer scant description of the wretchedness of cell life, they do indicate the extent to which Mu Xin had internalized world literature and culture by the time he was imprisoned. St. Anthony, the Russian poet-revolutionary Lermontov, Rousseau, Wagner, Cézanne, Montesquieu—all are voices in Mu Xin’s writings. He invokes their words, or the memory of their words, to guide and illustrate his search for moral truth. In the madness of Maoist China, the most difficult challenge for those who stayed alive was to sustain mental integrity. The significance of the *Prison Notes* lies in their record of one artist’s ability to do just that by a rigorous exercise of will and self-expression. “I never abandoned my own judgment or my own selection of what is right and wrong or good and evil in the world, never abandoned my will, or the endless manifestations of my will.”

For Mu Xin, knowing moral truth has always been the necessary condition for creating “eternal life” through art.

*The Landscape Paintings*
When the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, Mu Xin was serving a hard labor sentence in a Shanghai factory. The aftermath was no kinder; from 1977 to 1979, he was placed under house arrest. During this period, he conceived a series of fifty landscape paintings to celebrate his fiftieth birthday; he completed the suite at number thirty-three. These works and a related painting of a bamboo and prunus (see fig. 1) are virtually the only surviving corpus of Mu Xin’s visual art. They are intentionally unsigned.

The Landscape Paintings are small, each measuring some thirteen by seven inches, and are executed in gouache and Chinese ink on Western-style watercolor paper. Their size made them easy to hide, and his chosen materials were readily available. In this series, Mu Xin constructs from the poetic tradition of Chinese landscape a kind of requiem for China’s cultural past. A requiem, but played in a piano sonata form. His titles evoke the ancient eras of Wei, Jin and Tang —references that conjure in the literati mind the noble and lofty pursuits of China’s greatest poet-sages. Kuaiji, Jinling, Wangchuan, the Su Embankment, the road to Shu—all are place names that call to mind the deep past of Chinese cultural history. The subject of lament, of exile from a golden past, has defined centuries of Chinese landscape painting. Mu Xin embraces this tradition but departs from it as well; there are no sages traveling through these desolate places, no pavilions festooning their fantastic gorges. Barnhart writes how Mu Xin’s images are “overcome by time, worn and faded, almost obliterated, as if by the ravages of physical decay and the darkening of memory.” Yet penetrating through the shadows in each of Mu Xin’s paintings is a supernatural light, the presence of a hermit-poet’s soul, or maybe hope.

Although the subject of the Landscape Paintings is Mu Xin’s conversation with Chinese history, the techniques invert Chinese tradition and are wholly modern. Each painting originates in a process Mu Xin calls “controlled coincidence,” whereby a first level of color and form is applied to the surface by techniques that are reminiscent of monoprints, frottage, and decalcomania. Responding to the images that emerge by chance from such encounters, Mu Xin then articulates his vision with a Chinese brush. But where the contour line in Chinese painting is defined by an ink brush stroke, Mu Xin’s outlines emerge like halos from beneath and beyond the dark foreground forms. He draws upon the monochrome tradition of ink on white ground and then reverses it by substituting color to create space and depth.

Surrealism, which Mu Xin encountered as a student through books and arts magazines and followed well into the 1960s until access was barred, could have provided a source for his experimental surfaces. Specifically, Mu Xin’s paintings appear to have been aided by the automatic technique of decalcomania. Known as “transfer painting,” decalcomania is a process whereby the artist spreads gouache on a sheet of paper, lays another sheet on top and presses it, and then peels off the second sheet. This technique produces sponge-like effects suggesting exotic flora, rock formations, clouds or undersea encrustation. The fantasies decalcomania generates made it popular among Surrealist poets and painters of the 1930s, who exploited it to make their bizarre dreamscapes of the subconscious mind (fig. 5). But it was only with Max Ernst’s adoption of this technique to oil in such apocalyptic landscapes as Europe after the Rain
that the poetic possibilities of decalcomania were fully realized (fig. 6). In works like *Half Thousand Li of the Ruo River* (pl. 19) and *Wisps of Auspicious Clouds* (pl. 33), Mu Xin employs a similar process to achieve extraordinary landscape effects.

Other painting surfaces suggest processes of burnishing, as if the artist had rubbed multiple layers of ink to achieve a silvery, graphite-like sheen on the paper surface. This recalls the quality of photogravure that was the common type of reproduction in art books that Mu Xin collected in China. His encounter with Renaissance paintings and drawings, for example, was entirely through such books with their soft, monochromatic tones and satin finish pages. Works like *Pure Bamboo by a Cool Stream* (pl. 1) and *Slumbering Stones at a Quiet Pond* (pl. 26) are thus naturally evocative of intaglio prints. This quality lends to Mu Xin’s paintings an atmosphere of indecipherable antiquity. He divined the essence of Renaissance art not by its painterly quality, which he never knew, but through its reproduction in photogravure—a creative misinterpretation. But getting to know art through a book, Liu Dan has remarked, allows one “to possess the image as if it were your lover’s picture.”

For centuries, the real subject of Chinese ink painting has been the artist’s personal interpretation of the existing tradition. This was not just an apprenticeship to history, but a dialogue with the past and often an oblique criticism of the present. With the *Landscape Paintings*, Mu Xin assumes a position in this thousand-year lineage despite going outside China and beyond Chinese antiquity for his sources. What makes Mu Xin leap into the realm of profound originality is his modernity. In the *Landscape Paintings*, he creates a poetic tension between intimacy and distance, text and erasure, presence and absence that can best be described as a palimpsest.

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Mu Xin left China in 1982 and has lived in New York ever since. He has concentrated on writing; from 1984 to 2000 he published twelve books of essays, fiction, and poetry which have established him as a prominent literary figure in Taiwan and among the Chinese diaspora. He lives alone, writing late into the night, surrounded by portraits of his close friends—Tolstoy, Leonardo, Nietzsche, and Virginia Woolf. He abides by Flaubert’s idea: “Reveal art; conceal the artist.”

While the artist acknowledges that the *Tower within a Tower* series was created in part as a form of resistance to post-liberation China, he is wary of having them displayed to the public in order to “shout injustice or grievance.” That would require the condition of having an audience which has never been present in the artist’s mind. Mu Xin’s work may testify to the persistence of human imagination when oppressed by “a world of absurd reality.” But ultimately, as he reflects, “Art is direct perception. It can only be direct perception.”

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1. Mu Xin (b. 1927), Bamboo and Plum: Paired Purities. Ink and gouache on paper, 39 x 19 cm. Collection of the artist
5. Oscar Dominguez (1906–57), Untitled, 1936. Gouache transfer (decalcomania) on paper, 35.9 x 29.2 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York
6. Max Ernst (1891–1976), Europe After the Rain, 1940–42. Oil on canvas, 55.8 x 148 cm. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Caitlin Sumner Collection

Notes
1 Several friends and colleagues have contributed to my appreciation of Mu Xin’s art and thought, and thus informed the shape of this exhibition and essay. I was introduced to Mu Xin in 1992 through the artist Liu Dan, whose deep friendship with Mu Xin and insight into his extraordinary creative accomplishments have inspired and guided every step of this project. I am also grateful to the painter Chen Dan Qing, who helped gather my earliest reference material on Mu Xin, and to Professor John Rosenfield and Professor Wu Hung, who encouraged our pursuit of this exhibition long before more than a handful of people in the country knew who Mu Xin was. Looking at Mu Xin’s paintings with the following scholars shed light on my own thinking: Richard Barnhart, Wen Fong, Jonathan Hay, Maxwell Hearn, Stephen Little, Kimerly Rorschach, and David Sensabaugh. Others whose ideas were valuable during my research are Wu Hung, Rebecca Karl, Andrew Solomon and Toming Jun Liu. Highest gratitude goes to Robert Rosenkranz whose belief in the power of free expression and creative achievement has given this project life.

2 Mu Xin, interview with the author. Unless otherwise indicated, all Mu Xin quotes are taken from a series of undated interviews the author conducted with Mu Xin from 1994 until 2001 at the artist’s residence in Queens, New York. These conversations were mediated and interpreted by Liu Dan.

3 Mu Xin was incarcerated in state prisons in 1956 and 1968 for six months each time. He was in solitary confinement in a Red Guard people’s prison from 1971 to 1972, after which he was sentenced to hard labor in a factory for seven years, including being under house arrest from 1977 to 1979.

4 See Toming Jun Liu, “A Dialogue with Mu Xin,” in this volume, p. 143.


See Wu Hung, “Reading Mu Xin: An Exile without a Past,” in this volume, p. 41.


Not surprisingly, the new Communist government that came to power in 1949 after decades of war did not favor Lin Fengmien’s individualist ideas. He was labeled a maverick and denied official sanction. Maintaining an aloof position in the shifting arts bureaucracies, he assumed a reclusive and apolitical existence. Mu Xin continued to look to Lin as a gauge of the times: “If Lin is alive,” he thought, “art is still alive.” He transferred that mandate upon himself sometime during the Cultural Revolution, when Lin destroyed a decade of his own work by scrubbing it to pulp on a washboard in fear of Red Guard attack. “The person who is afraid to lose his life, loses,” Mu Xin later reflected on Lin’s tragedy. “The person who is not afraid to lose his life, overcomes.”


*Guohua* refers to works painted with traditional Chinese pigments and ink on a ground of *xuan* paper or silk, and is generally translated as “traditional Chinese painting.”


“*A Dialogue,*” p. 141.

Ibid., p. 140.

Ibid., p. 139.


“A Dialogue,” p. 140.