

The Soul of Flowers

Flowers have their beautiful elegance that imparts the impression of delicacy and fragility. Artists who work on flowers have the focus mostly on external forms and hues. Other than the symbolism passed down from historical references, it seems rather difficult to explore further content in them.

The peony gives a grand appearance with diversified species that display their fullness and sophisticated looks; therefore, they are acclaimed as the flower of prosperity. In Li Ruzhen's novel entitled *The Dream of the Fantasyland*, there is a narrative. One day, Empress Wu got drunk and commanded all flowers to bloom in the wintry air. Most flowers became threatened and dared not resist against her order, so they all bloomed in full. Only the peony felt the blossoming time was not right, waited for the order from the Goddess of all Flowers, and opened as the last one. Empress Wu was enraged and demoted her to Luoyang. Even though it is a legend, it tells the idea that the peony has its unique personality.

The American-Chinese artist Cai Zhuomin has worked on various themes for painting, but eventually selected the peony. We all know that Chinese traditional painters in gongbi (fine figure brushwork) and yibi (freehand brushwork) have painted extensively on this subject matter. However, the ways Cai Zhuomin employs oil painting to specialize in expressing the peony and develops her own styles are uncommon. As a female artist, she possesses her born sensibility and inherent ability for subtlety. Through her constant work and dialogues with peonies, she eventually has found her artistic voice and creative inspiration.

At first, Cai Zhuomin centers only on the magnification of the partial peony and uses her realistic language to express the interrelationship of the petals and change of hues. Her work naturally reminds viewers of Georgia O'Keeffe and how Cai Zhuomin's painting lacks purity and simplified strengths. As a matter of fact, she is quick to sense this limitation and the possibility that she might have become an artist living in the shadow of O'Keeffe. She then strives to have her own ways to translate the motifs of peonies. She is passionate in music and hopes to foster visual images of peonies through her study of musical tempos. This attempt has been unquestionably successful. Peonies through her brushstrokes have become more abstract and she has developed more enriched forms. Simultaneously, she has gained more suggestive depths to this flower. Cai Zhuomin has selected musical terms and forms to denote the various sections of her serial artwork so that we may appreciate the rhythmic forces as we follow the musical hints. If we straightly adhere to the visual language, Cai Zhuomin's peony series can be grouped into three categories: the first is when she continues to use the early techniques to work on the partial peonies which ends up in achieving maturity of pictorial designs and hues, as in *Birth*, *Motion*, *Illuminates* and *Being Gentle*. The second is when she renders the multi-layered petals and arteries into mountains and rivers to produce predominantly monotone landscapes, as in *National Champion*, *Waves* and *Grief*. In the third type, based on her peony-themed focus, she proceeds to express in the contemporary language, as in *The Way* and *Blue Rays*. In these works, O'Keeffe's presence is diminished, since Cai Zhuomin has channeled her holistic designs to present her personal feelings and moods.

Cai Zhuomin has named these peony paintings as *The Peony Symphony*, building her crossover between music and art. More importantly, her work presents the realization of a female artist to give her profound and subtle interpretations to peonies. Her work is aesthetic, but she has captured the soul of peonies through aestheticism that allows her viewers to meditate beyond the apparent delicacy. We look forward to Cai Zhuomin orchestrating more brilliant movements through her future brushstrokes.

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