

The Dream of Peonyland

The peony has been acclaimed as “the sky fragrance and national champion” since the Tang Dynasty. The legend says that Empress Wu in her great passion visited Luoyang to meet her special flower. Likewise, countless Chinese poets have composed poetry or ci-poetry about it. The Song master Tang Xianzu, who excelled in the narratives of dreams, created the protagonist of Du Liliang in *The Peony Pavilion*, a personification of the peony. Another such personification is the character of Yang Ruohua in *The Story of the Fantasyland*, as depicted by Li Yuzhen. This flower was rarely featured among Ming and Qing artists, though it had become extremely popular among folk-art craftsmen. There was the fine line between grace and crudity as well as rich-tasteless merchants and pure-lofty scholars. Now, Cai Zhuomin displays an impetuous fondness for peonies, especially in the white and pink serial paintings. Her work also reveals a trace of Du Liliang in Kungu opera and the rhythmic air of Chinese water and ink painting.

Cai Zhuomin has been greatly influenced by western culture and civilization. She was born in Hong Kong, graduated from the University of Hong Kong, received her doctoral degree from Columbia University, and has taught at a few universities in the United States of America. Pursuing her dream of painting, she developed her own style visiting museums of New York, Washington, Philadelphia Boston and San Francisco, learning from the great Masters, from da Vinci to Andy Warhol. Because she could not enter the rhythmic world of Chinese water and ink tradition and the heritage of Chinese romantic poetry in the U.S.A., she returned to Beijing to pursue this reality and study oil painting in 2008.

Western music centrality of the tonic, dominant fifth and minor third bears a triad structure in a similar way as the golden ratio of ($X^2+X-1=0$). These three elements are primary in Western musical composition, namely the melody, harmony, counterpoint, polyphony, and transposition that build perfection. Besides, Western musical composition has parallel notions as in Chinese ci poetry in the Song dynasty, a form of poetry based on lyrical meters in music. Cai Zhuomin has great interest in these musical forms, and constructed her extraordinary design of 40 peony-featured oil paintings matching with musical forms. She concentrates on the white, red and blue. The white reflects the soul of the Chinese literati painting, while the red and blue give the spirit of Chinese folk art. The red and blue symbolize happiness and purity, which allude to life and the starlit celestial space. She enlarges the partial beauty of the peony, stripped of its leaves, and accentuates its movements and hues. Her flowers give rise to the gentle qualities of classic feminism, as in *A Mystical Form*, *Adorn*, *Inebriated* and *Peek*. She also attempts to present her pictorial designs in the abstract and modernity in the paintings of *Sky Peak*, *Blue Rays*, and *Arteries*. At the same time, she strives to give suggestiveness with philosophical allusion through *Simple*, *the Innocence*, *Motion* and *Spirit of Flower*. An overview of her works gives the appearance of a little fugue and a theme-and-variation form.

A Tang dynasty poet aspires, “The peony champions after all withering flowers.” Many artists no longer focus on this flower, but Cai Zhuomin is sensitive and holds onto this flower. She demonstrates her unusual heartfelt love and diligence to craft her basic skills and artistic expressions. In many trips, she has flown from Beijing to Luoyang and then back to Philadelphia; over many years as in one day, she builds her peony fantasyland on her canvases that exhibit her moods and sensibility. She cherishes the adage of Li Shimin, the Tang emperor. “When you learn from the masters of first caliber, you gain mid-level expertise. When you learn from mid-level teachers, you but show low-level performance.

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