

The Uses of Chinese Ink Art in the “100 Views of Baobabs”

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20th July, 2014

James Delaney does not use Asian art techniques just to infuse his works with an exotic feeling, he uses them thoughtfully and creatively to showcase the “magic” of the baobabs.

The thousand-year old baobabs meet the thousand-year old Chinese ink art technique; and together, they present the audience something worldly and extraordinary.

Chinese ink art values "Xieyi (写意)", the approach of capturing the spirit of an object by minimal freehand strokes. James Delaney's art, adopts this philosophy, using simple lines and colors showing not only the image of baobabs, but also the spirit of this rare species. One of the most relevant examples in this series that uses Chinese ink art technique is the “Baobab Sunrise”.

Here, the baobab is contoured by minimal black lines. More space in this painting is left hollow, where imagination extend. The two vertical lines close to the center of the image effortlessly show the three dimensional space of the tree as well as the texture of the surface of the trunk. The yellow circle hidden behind the baobab trunk serves as a reference of the size of the trunk and the distance from it to the sun and at the same time brings out a sense of movement - the slow rise of the sun. This “less is more” method converts the uncanny size of the baobab into a Zen and elegant existence.

Baobabs connect with humankind in various ways. For people living in the regions where baobab trees exist, baobabs connect with them culturally and spiritually.

In traditional Chinese culture, trees and flowers often are endowed with humanly virtues: plum blossom represents the innate spirit, bamboo is a symbol of integrity and lotus is a symbol of purity. The rhetoric is often used in literature, poem and art.

For Delaney, baobab tree is magic. Baobabs represent his roots and deep love for his homeland, South Africa. Baobabs also carry the artist's memory of his grandfather and the nostalgia of the old days. Delaney's grandfather traveled to see baobabs and even grew baobabs. He left precious photographs of baobabs that Delaney uses as reference for his paintings. The love to the mother nature also serve as a strong link between the artist and the baobabs.

The artist has spent a long period of time to study baobabs. He traveled to north of South Africa and Zimbabwe, camping out to observe baobabs. His dedication to understanding baobabs and showing them to the world through art parallels to the Chinese ink art masters who devoted their career into drawing one or a few kind of plants.

While today's contemporary art tends to be cloaked in irony and sometimes artists ask questions and address issues just for the sake of being critical. Delaney goes back to the most primitive question of the relationship between human and nature. Only someone with such enthusiasm and wisdom would care enough to discuss such issues that the contemporariests almost forget about.