

A CAUSAL INNOCENCE

**Yi Shiuhan, New York
Writer, Chinese Art Critic**

It is rare to find, in a foreign land, someone who enjoys life and is both highly educated and down to earth; Sesin Jong is one such person.

Sesin Jong moved his entire family to Shanghai two years ago. While continuing his work as a gynecologist, Sesin also developed his interest in landscape painting vigorously with ink brushes. The vibrant colors he uses are a testament to the wonderful ease he has found in his new life.

One city's gain is another city's loss, and without Sesin, the Chinese art community in New York has lost its imaginative chatter. There are now remarkably fewer calligraphy and painting exhibitions. Even the annual Spring Couplet Festival has stopped.

Have we lost a fervent drinking companion? Or was it a scholar who enjoyed nature? Are we missing a wistful poet? Perhaps someone who would argue with us till his face turned red, or even laid a friendly wager with us, over some bit of "rhyme or reason"? The mere mention of Sesin among those of us left behind inevitably draws some melancholic comments. Indeed, memories are made of these: the good doctor's backyard, filled with the scents of robust wine and roast meat, provided a convenient hotbed where spontaneous artistic activities took place.

What is left, thankfully enough is our common passion for the arts, such that Sesin and I remain in constant contact.

I have always thought that art is the highest undertaking: that it is a delightful, that it is innocent. The one thing that art fears is vulgarity. Artistic creations, especially of the Chinese strain, become inexorably inferior once tainted by vulgarity. What then, is vulgarity? It is so-called "ideology", particularly painting or calligraphy that so painstakingly attempts, however, awkwardly, to explain or demonstrate ideas. However noble the motive, such 'art' is deplorable.

Sesin's paintings are innocent and natural. It might even be said that there is a sprinkling of child-like innocence, just as we find in the painter himself. Art in its nascent form was meant to be fun. By the Tang and Song Dynasties, it evolved into a hobby for scholars, with visual pleasure as its main pursuit. There is hardly any point in forcibly pretending that it can be a conduit for utopian ideals or morals. What is equally despicable is the trend in recent years of artists discussing market potential and fame and fortune. Sesin's art is a stirring antithesis to such gross behaviors. Yet it is not through any conscious thought or effort on his part; it is, to put it simply, just him being true to himself. That he has returned art to its basic tenet-pursuit of

child-like pleasure is even more commendable

After seeing Sesein's paintings, Mr. Dong Xinbin bestowed on Sesein an extraordinary 'nickname': "The Untutored One." To me, it was a positive affirmation of Sesein's paintings; the greatest tutor of all is nature itself, a sentiment amply supported by ancient sayings.

In my opinion, Sesein's landscape paintings have brought out the best in him. This is most prominent in those full-bodied, brightly colored pieces. He does not appear to carry any of the baggage that we call tradition. Hence, with inspiration as his only guide, he adheres to no strict format or style. The mountains and the sky in his paintings are neither plain nor elusive. Instead the daring use of flat, heavy crimson, orange, or deep-sea blue, sometimes occupying two-thirds of the pictures, have heightened the artistic impact. At first sight they appear rash and bizarre; only on further reflection does their full flavor come through

The most wonderful things are the little figurines he has inserted, sometimes barely discernibly, in the landscape. They are either purposefully engaging in some activity or lounging casually, whether from over-indulgence or otherwise. Perhaps it was indeed an expression of the painter's desire to seek friends to do likewise.

Sesein's character paintings or poems are, in equal measure, bold and naïve. Under his ink brush, the Eight Immortals do not have their legendary prowess. Instead they appear more like ordinary people with considerable disdain for the niceties of life. Likewise, Chung K'uei, the ghost-catcher, at once becomes both spirit and man and full of heroic character.

The following is a poem for a painting. Modeled after a famous poet, this poem provides a hint, amid the ostensibly wild tone of a man accustomed to alcohol, of an upright moral stature:

"Renowned at a tender age for scholarly achievement,
I became disdainful and impetuous;
Allow me to borrow the master's sword,
To bring light to this murky world.

The figure of the ghost-catcher looms over its viewers with raging eyes. The poem occupies almost half of the painting, and is written in a wild cursive hand with an unrestrained manner. Like Chung K'uei's sword, it is both aggressive and threatening. The link between the painter and Chung K'uei is bringing "light to this murky world." Only after much introspection did the viewer understand and respect the painter's subtle intentions.

This much is certain: with the many talents flourishing in the Chinese art community, it would have been close to impossible for Sesein to find a place of his own, were it not for his own considerable talent.

Sesin has established an inimitable style. Add to it his insights and talent, and it is no surprise that he is able to bloom in China. Moreover, insight is always more important than techniques or craftsmanship. With Sesin's abundant experience overseas, it would be hard for his paintings not to find acceptance, however 'casual' they may appear to be.

The painting is a culmination of unrestrained spirit and unbridled joy. The most beautiful paintings are those that exhibit the emotions and the spirit in their intoxicated state. Only when the mind is free and open can the brushstrokes appear smooth and unencumbered. Sesin's paintings are just that; his rich spirit has allowed him to create a 'playful' tone in them. This 'playful' element is what sets him apart from mere mortals.

It is no mean task for someone with so much exceptional taste to be able to create such exceptional paintings.

In my desire to provoke the nitpicking artist into a long-distance argument over its structure, I have here a bit of doggerel that may best describe Sesin:

“The Untutored One seeks nothing else but fun.

Belonging to no school, he brings much joy with his tools.

The sea stirs the turtle's passion, but I must confess a lack in rhyme or reason.

Alas, when will our beer bellies meet, with the Lotus at our feet?”

(Refers to the Lotus Peak, Huangshan)

Sesin's Biography

Dr. Sesin Jong was born in Indonesia and studied medicine at Chiba University, Japan. He published the collections of his works in 1993, 1996, and 2005.

He has held exhibitions in New York, and at the Moscow Museum of Oriental Art, Shanghai Art Museum, Liu Haisu Art Museum, Nanjing Museum and Taipei's National Dr. Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall. Other joint exhibitions are too numerous to be mentioned here.

[Picture: Recent photograph of Sesin Jong]