

Captivated by One's Thoughts
K.C. Low (Singapore)
Writer, Art Critic

On March 3rd, 2001, Dr. Sesin Jong will hold an exhibition of his works at Taipei's National Dr. Sun Yatsen Memorial Hall. On New Year's Day, I had the privilege to see for myself, at Sesin's New York residence, some of the paintings that will be displayed at that exhibition. It was a moving experience, one that I will not forget for a long time. It has also become clear to me at this point that his works show a considerable degree of artistic power.

Sesin and I were fellow students in Japan during the 1960s. Even then, in addition to studying medicine at Chiba University, Sesin dedicated most of his free time to the art of painting and calligraphy. He often went to Tokyo's cultural district, Shuidobashi, in search of treasures to add to his collection. After graduation, Sesin and his wife, Yei-Hwei, practiced medicine in New York, and during this time, Sesin continued to "dabble" in the arts in his spare time. Moreover, being the person that he is, Sesin enjoyed meeting people from all over the world. There was nothing he liked better than to gather with like-minded friends over a drink or two to exchange thoughts over the arts.

When I was in New York in the autumn of 1987 and had the pleasure of visiting Sesin's personal library, I was surprised by the sheer amount of calligraphy works, works that were executed by non other than Sesin himself. It was only then that I realized that Sesin was not just a mere collector of the arts, but that he might even have harbored some secret ambition as an artist. There was no attempt from Sesin to deny this, but he simply replied in his characteristically modest way, 'There is no such thing as a shortcut in the arts.'

Who could have ever guessed that after I left Tokyo in 1988, that with the arrival of the 90s, Sesin would begin to be known in art circles? When I chanced upon some of his works, what hit me the most was the path that Sesin had chosen to take in order for him to achieve his status.

The Link Between Calligraphy and Painting

It is often said that 'practice makes perfect'; but practice coupled with abundant talent is all the more remarkable.

Sesin is a talented artist. That is why, when he emerged onto the artistic scene, albeit through 'dabbling' in the arts, his works were immediately well-received by collectors from all over the world. Flicking through his collection of works published in three volumes during the 90s (Sesin Jong 1993, Sesin Jong 1996, and Sesin Jong 1999), I realized that the creative works of a talented and diligent artist that I had known for years had evolved to reach a higher level, one that was captivating. It was no wonder that his works were highly regarded by collectors.

The artist Tong Chi-Chang first learned calligraphy, then painting. Sesein, like the celebrated master before him, also learned calligraphy before painting. He understands, in an intrinsic way, that the brush strokes for both calligraphy and ink painting are related. A study of Sesein's landscape paintings will reveal the secret of his success. Sesein's paintings are never calculated; but are spontaneous. However, owing to his deep foundation in the art of calligraphy, the ripples in his ink strokes naturally make a considerable transformation. In traditional Chinese landscape paintings, the ink stroke that is commonly known as 'wire line' is generally applied to highlight rock profiles and undulating landscapes. As such, the ink strokes should be composed and restrained, with uniformity in strength. At the same time, there is generally little difference between the width and coverage of the lines, so as to give the landscape an impression of being natural and unbroken. Sesein has achieved this subtly in his landscape paintings.

What is unique about Sesein is that his landscape paintings have gone beyond portraying natural formations. As he wholly understands that the profiling of objects through mere strokes is unable to efficiently express his inner emotions, Sesein employs the use of color diffusion-shading in such a way as to create layers of shades in his paintings, each displaying varying degrees of dryness and moisture. As the ink strokes interweave, so do the dark and light shades. Such is the affect of this masterly execution that Sesein's landscape paintings appear glossed with vibrant and bright colors.

Ink and Colors in Perfect Unity

Besides his unique ink strokes, Sesein had also developed an original approach when it comes to applying colors. He applies colors boldly and meticulously. The brilliant colors in his paintings do not in any way alter their overall texture. On the other hand, his plain ink strokes are neither tacky nor conventional. To understand Sesein's brilliance, one needs only to see the 'Sundown and Water-course' (Jason Kuo Collection, Taipei), which is one of the centerpieces of the exhibition.

Needless to say, Sesein's unique style is not limited to landscape paintings. Under his masterful strokes, Chung K'uei, the ghost catcher, appears aloof and charismatic, amply reflecting the painter's vision.

Nonetheless, Sesein's landscape paintings do not strictly adhere to a formula of mimicking nature.

Well-disposed as he is, Sesein understands that the painter should be well-read and well-traveled. It is all the more critical for the landscape painter to have witnessed firsthand, breathtaking peaks and gorgeous rivers. Not surprisingly, Sesein has in recent years spent much time visiting the famous landscapes of mainland China. However, it must also be pointed out that the essence of his landscape paintings is not always derived from nature.

In fact, Sesein does not simply devour books and log mileage. He is also a connoisseur of paintings, but without being weighed down by the twin baggage of

'nature' and his predecessors.' When I saw his paintings, I felt that he was unrestrained by tradition, whether in the use of ink, strokes, or even colors, to the extent that he was simply, in his own carefree manner, expressing his inner vision.

A painter can only scale to the highest level of creativity once he can effortlessly capture the essence of the landscape through mere shapes. Sesin's landscape paintings precisely embody the sense of magnificence of the scenery before him. The painter's innermost artistic values leap from his hands, uncurbed by the burden of ancient painters or even nature, presenting a unique and original perception.

Mere words cannot truly express how I felt when viewing Sesin's landscape paintings. In this sense, I am compelled to quote Poet Li Qingshao's words and say that I am truly 'captivated by my thoughts.' 'Only when it is before my eyes does it begin to stir my heart.'