

GAGOSIAN



How Contemporary is Contemporary Ink? Hao Liang & Gagosian Answered

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Hao Liang, Streams and Mountains without End, 2017 (detail), ink and color on silk, 16 11/16 × 395 1/4 inches (42.4 × 1,004 cm) © Hao Liang

It's difficult to figure out why Hao Liang, a contemporary practitioner of ink painting, is showing at Gagosian Gallery. Taking up two floors of the gallery's Madison Avenue location, the works seem strangely out of place when compared with the spots of Damien Hirst showing at the gallery's Chelsea location. While visitors couldn't help but be deeply impressed by the artist's technique – a flawless display of guohua – it seems likely that many would scratch their heads in confusion, unable to see why such work would be shown in a contemporary art gallery.



Hao Liang: Portraits and Wonders, installation view at Gagosian Madison Avenue, New York. Artworks © Hao Liang. Photo by Rob McKeever



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This sense of disjuncture is caused, however, by the average U.S. visitor's complete lack of knowledge of the history of Chinese painting which is a fundamental requirement to understanding the subtlety of Hao Liang's innovations. Hao Liang is an artist who has spent years dedicated to copying, researching and assimilating everything he could find out about Chinese painting, going well beyond the parameters of instruction of the Sichuan Fine Arts Academy where he graduated in 2009. He has mastered not only the sensitive application of ink but the multiple perspectives that reside simultaneously in many scroll paintings. Going still further, he seeks to instill in the modern viewer the sublime sensations that masterpieces of Chinese painting are capable of evoking.

The centerpiece of this exhibition is *Streams and Mountains without End*, 2017, a silk scroll measuring more than thirty-two feet long. Taking inspiration from Ming dynasty artist Dong Qichang as well as Russian modernist Wassily Kandinsky, Hao Liang circulates a variety of forms – circles, triangles, mountains and rocks – taking us in and out of his narrative by leading us around this landscape. Moving from the microscopic to the cosmic, there are patterns in evidence familiar from the capillary system and orbs reminiscent of a solar system. At one point, in the center, a man in a red robe peers down from a circular window, perhaps the only one who can take in all that this panoramic scene encompasses.



Hao Liang, Streams and Mountains without End, 2017 (detail), ink and color on silk, 16 11/16 × 395 1/4 inches (42.4 × 1,004 cm) © Hao Liang

On another floor, there were a suite of paintings that could be equally challenging to western eyes, while undeniably breathtakingly beautiful. *Red Nose*, 2017, is a triptych of portraits of an aging man, his wrinkled face and balding brow expertly captured. More complicated to decipher is the work, *A Thousand, Thousand Churning Waves*, 2018, a depiction of a man holding a bamboo rod in front of a seascape of wavelike patterns. Those who are in the know will spot that the portrait is a homage to Yuan dynasty artist Zhao Mengfu's painting of the Song dynasty poet Su Shi. Others will merely have to marvel at Hao Liang's skill, noting that he is equally adept at depictions of people and landscapes.



Hao Liang, Red Nose, 2017 (part I), ink and color on silk, in 3 parts, 10 3/4 × 7 inches (27.4 × 17.7 cm) © Hao Liang

Conflating time and place, Hao Liang's final contribution are a pair of paintings, titled *Day and Night*, 2017-18. Depicting the same landscape in two different sizes, he captures day on a monumental colorful canvas and night on a bleak, black on black composition at a more modest size. Mountains, clouds and sea churn together in this composition, with stalks of bamboo bifurcating the space. Again, it was an experience to take in the talent on view with these works, but it would be better yet to spot the affinity to the ink stone tablets and rubbings of Qing dynasty literati painter Wang Zirun. This is a reference that Hao Liang knows well and helps situate his own experiments in shadow and light.



Hao Liang, Day and Night, 2017-18 (panel II), ink and color on silk, in 2 parts, 68 1/8 × 173 5/8 inches (173 × 441 cm) © Hao Liang

It is probably too much to expect that everybody encountering this work for the first time will get the many historical references embedded in the work. But Hao Liang would not be the first contemporary artist to require a bit of research from his audience. Those who choose to engage will be rewarded but even the casual viewer can see that this is an artist of formidable talent.