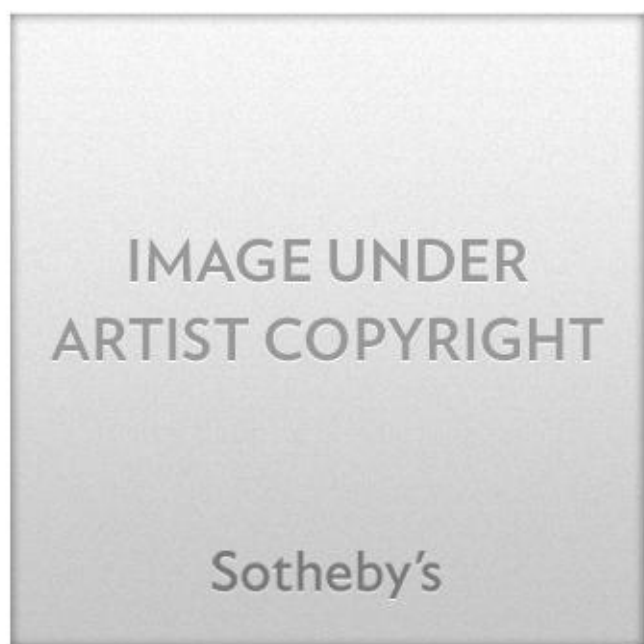


Sotheby's

Contemporary Asian Art

香港 | 03 十月 2011, 06:00 下午 | HK0353



LOT 919

SONG LING

PEOPLE: PIPELINES NO. 2

signed in Chinese on the reverse and executed in 1985, framed
watercolour on paper

103 by 90.5 cm.; 40 1/2 by 35 5/8 in.

ESTIMATE 300,000-400,000 HKD

Lot Sold: 980,000 HKD

PROVENANCE

From the artist

EXHIBITED

China, Hangzhou, Exhibition Hall of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, New Space '85, 1985

CATALOGUE NOTE

The new wave of thinking in art that appeared in mainland China in the 1980's more or less established the general field of Chinese contemporary art today; of the variously large and small collectives, activities, and exhibitions that sprang up throughout the country during that decade, it is the Pond Society that arose in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province—a significant representative of the trend toward the rational—that never fails to appear in essays on the '85 New Wave movement.

Song Ling, born in 1961 in Hangzhou, was a founding member of the Pond Society, a role that assigned a dual meaning to the trajectory of his practice throughout the 1980's: it was not only the development of an individual artist, but also represented the narrative of the Pond Society as a whole from start to finish. Such an historical process lies not merely in visible style or the superficial transformations of work, but also contains profound introspective changes in concept.

According to Song Ling's own description, he chose to study Chinese painting upon his entry into the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1980 due to the influence of his family situation; later, he decided not to follow the traditional modes of thinking of Chinese painting but rather became interested in Surrealism and Pop Art. After graduation he was assigned to the Zhejiang Institute of Chinese Painting as a professional painter, during which period he made monthly visits to chemical factories and shipyards in Shanghai. The effects of these experiences on his transforming interests—particularly in terms of the observation of industrial facilities—are obviously made manifest in the artist's 1985 series *People: Pipelines*. Song Ling continued to use ink wash as a method in his work, but the viewer is unable to locate the language

of traditional Chinese painting, and traditional critical standards like "brushwork" and "charm" are not applicable here. In *People: Pipelines No. 1* (Lot 918), the artist employs surrealist techniques to position a set of symbolic human figures without any facial features within the round mouth of a pipe, while rigid clouds float through the gloomy space outside of the pipes; one foot of the figure walking at the front of the group has already stepped out through the mouth of the pipe. At first glance, it resembles the style and format of the propaganda posters found in industrial areas throughout the 1980's: in the case of the latter workers brimming with passion walk across the bright boulevard signifying modernism, thus proving the social benefits and sense of prosperity of industry. In *People: Pipelines*, however, what Song Ling

attempts to express is clearly not this feeling. Instead, he reveals the callous side of industrialization: cold machinery and rigid industrial production models alienate those people who, in the process of industrialization, are reduced to tools on an assembly line. In *People: Pipelines No. 2* (Lot 919) such aspects appear undisguised, as the human bodies therein are so alienated that they become components of the pipe world. From the body of the central figure there extends an industrial pipe blueprint, while the welding torch in his hand is linked to another pipe in a transmigration of sorts. The emptiness of the figure and the surreal scene in which he is positioned remind us of Dalí's

Premonition of Civil War (1936), but, in comparison with the enmeshed bodies and contorted expressions produced by the alienation and pain of war in Dalí, the alienated figures of Song Ling's work remain cold and unmoved. In this light, we might say that Dalí depicts the awakening from alienation, while Song brings to light the realist state of unknowing alienation.

Prior to the '85 New Wave movement artists like Shu Qun and Wang

Guangyi of the Northern Artists Group believed in the humanitarian ideal, in individual value, and that the superman could construct a new history. After the mid-1980's, however, artists began to gradually abandon this humanitarian construction, instead attempting to produce the self as a subject—ultimately, this implies a symbolic and graphic understanding of the individual that could also be read as self awareness. Perplexed by the future and anxious about humanity due to the processes of industrialization and urbanization, this existentialist attitude is expressed in their work: because alienation produces apprehension, confusion, and pessimistic disappointment in society, "coldness" became a major symbol of existential alienation.

The Pond Society was initiated through the exhibition " '85 New Space,"

which took place in the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts exhibition hall during 2-15 December 1985 after almost a year of preparations. Participating artists included later core Pond Society members Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, and Bao Jianfei, in addition to Song Ling's *People: Pipelines Series*. Differing from the feverish human interest of the pastoral subject matter of the mainstream of the time, " '85 New Space" emphasized coldness and the denial of any human touch

while advocating for the rational, separating the viewer both from reality and from a deluge of emotions. Shi Jiu, a participant in the exhibition, writes in the essay "On 'New Space' and the Pond Society" an explanation of the sensation of cold indifference manifested in the show, noting frankly that they were influenced by Western modernist philosophy even as they were attempting to understand and practice the language of Cubist painting. Namely, "at that time Sartre's existentialism was the most influential current of Western philosophy, a consideration of the modes of existence of the self." [1] The exhibition raised the question of "the coldness of reality or the coldness with which one must face reality," reflecting the imminent universal psychological contradictions of industrial development that were made especially obvious in *People: Pipelines*. Song Ling maintains that painting is subject to its own laws: "Only by casting aside the tinted lenses through which we view things can we discover its profound mystery. ... My painting wants to help you remove that heavy lens and allow you to see the light again." [2] This might explain why *People: Pipelines* appeared more attractive than other works dealing with the same material in the "85 New Space" exhibition.

After " '85 New Space," on 27 May 1987, Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Song Ling, and others confirmed, through debate and discussion, their intent to establish a new collective. Later, an artistic group called the Pond Society announced its formation, emphasizing in its statement the "purity" and "dignity" of art while also stressing the meaning of "immersion": the significance of "pond was intended to evoke such a state of immersion or soaking." The Pond Society refuses to take the mastery of technique as an objective. Easel painting, which we often see as a sacred endeavor, is not the only medium for the transmission of concept. We seek to break down the barriers of language and advocate for an indistinct form, a form of "art activity" able to excite.

Here, painting, performance, photography, and environment (which is the form taken by our concept of forms) all use the markers of visual language to establish organic and total connections." [3] After the establishment of the Pond Society, it executed four collective performance art productions, of which Song Ling participated in all four, believing it to be a "method to return art to the people, to meld art with life." Zhu Qingsheng raised a similar point in his essay "Return Art to the People," published the same year: "In such work aside from those who participate in production viewers are also participants. The audience engages in dialogue with the work within its environment, intervenes in the creative intent of the work through their own evaluations and theories, and experiences the arousal of an eager creative desire. I received photographs, and was thus invited to participate in this 'art activity.' For this I am grateful." [4]

While participating in such collective performance art, Song Ling also produced a group of ink wash paintings, entitled *Meaningless Choice?* (1987), in which the consideration for the relationship between industrialization and natural life revealed in the works of *People: Pipelines* was further refined. As he describes, "I used cows and sheep as my subject matter because I felt, in the 1980s, that man was the same as an animal deprived of its freedom, branded by politics and following the allotments of the government without its own consciousness." *Examining Meaningless Choice? No. 1* (Lot 920),

Song Ling has absorbed and merged the forms of expression and markers of language native to photography: using a process resembling that by which a photographic image is transformed into a negative, the artist continually reproduces through printing the same portrait of a sheep. The technique, obviously, is influenced by Andy Warhol. Repetition and reproduction are themselves symbols of industrialization, and the action of mechanically reproducing the head of a sheep further strengthens the significance of this industrial process. In this way, Song Ling's work is related to pop art, as was noted in a review when the work was first published in *Fine Arts in China*: "Song Ling's *Meaningless Choice?* is not, in fact, meaningless, but rather dissatisfied with too definite a title. Feelings in life are often ambiguous and do not lend themselves to clear verbalization. As such, the sheep lined up on the face of the work may make the viewer think of a form of violent partition and domination, or perhaps these unrelated sheep in close proximity to one another may make the viewer think of the loneliness of the

crowd." [5] Alienated life in the midst of the will of the state and industrialization achieves, here in the work of Song Ling, sustained and profound expression.

After 1987 the Pond Society dissolved and the vigour of the '85 New Wave movement began to make its existence. In 1988, when critics, artists, and publications from across the country came together to plan and organize a national modern art exhibition, Song Ling chose, on the contrary, to leave China and move to Australia, where he has resided since. As a result, his identity within the increasingly dazzling situations of Chinese contemporary art has been one of withdrawal, but we cannot ignore his works produced throughout the 1980's. His practice follows a trajectory from the " '85 New Space" exhibition to the Pond Society, manifesting the transformation of artistic thinking that took place in the late 1980's. Song Ling's work retains a certain suspicion of industrialization that cannot be answered with any certainty

even today. Now, however, as contemporary art is increasingly bought out to capital and loses its will to fight and capacity for doubt, we can experience, in Song Ling's work, a purity that belongs only to the 1980's.

[1] Shi Jiu, "On 'New Space' and the Pond Society," *Art Trends*, 1987 issue 1, p. 16.

[2] Song Ling, "A Brief Point," quoted in Gao Minglu, ed., *The '85 Movement*, Guangxi Normal University Press, 2007, p. 193.

[3] Shi Jiu, "On 'New Space' and the Pond Society," *Art Trends*, 1987 issue 1, p. 19.

[4] Zhu Qingsheng, "Return Art to the People," *Art*, 1986 issue 11, p. 56.

[5] *Fine Arts in China*, 9 November 1987, issue 45.