

Artist Statement



MELTING HUMAN

“A small country has fewer people. Though there are machines that can work ten to hundred times faster than man, they are not needed. The people take death seriously and do not travel far. Though they have boats and carriages, no one uses them. Though they have armour and weapons, no one displays them. Men return to the knotting of rope in place of writing. Their food is plain and good, their clothes fine but simple, their homes secure; they are happy in their ways. Though they live within sight of their neighbours, and crowing roosters and barking dogs are heard across the way, yet they never visit each other till death.” This quotation is from ancient “Tao Te Ching” of Lao Tzu. Its anti-technology idea seems incomprehensible in our modern time, but in my opinion, the Taoist master profoundly understood the weakness of the competitive nature of humankind.

However, modern science has triumphed over mysticism. For example, in the 19th Century, the Chinese agricultural society with their simple and self-sufficient ways of life based on the Taoist concept, “man and nature are one”, were affected by foreign invasion and the Industrial Revolution. Now, China has become the world’s biggest producer of commodities. The two thousand year tradition of mystically contemplating the relationship between man and nature has brought Chinese people to understand this interdependent relationship at a very high level without relying on scientific

evidence. In contrast, the West has studied the universe through deep scientific research which has resulted in highly developed technology. These technologies have sent us to space, allowed us to travel by aeroplane, and saved lives through complex medical equipment. The advantage of technologies is undeniable, but everyday we still learn more truth about nature.

How can we dare to claim that our life would be better without technologies? The question is, which has been closer to the truth of nature, the Chinese mystical contemplation or the Western scientific research? My answer is the Chinese mysticism, for a simple reason. The universe will never be understood completely. Although scientific discoveries have achieved much, in comparison with the universe itself, we still know very little. Therefore understanding the universe at the highest level can not be achieved simply through scientific means, instead it requires complex dialogue and meditation between humankind and the universe. In fact, our survival has never been so much under threat because of technologies. They have brought nations closer than ever, both stimulating competition and conflicts on a global scale. Modern competitive pursuit of wealth has overly exhausted resources and polluted the environment. Wars have prompted us to build weapons powerful enough to destroy the world. Lao Tsu knew this about human nature 2000 years ago. He predicted human ambition and greed would be the cause of our own destruction. We have only come so far as to realise this warning.

In my most recent work, I use emotive individual photographs from newspapers as a starting point for my paintings. Through the depiction of specific human structures melting in vast space, I try to generalise the subject of human struggle. The freedom of using empty space in composition is derived from Chinese traditional ink painting which I have inherited. This allows me to freely place partial human structures on empty canvas. This has not just visualised tension between mankind and their environment, but also has further explored possibilities in oil painting.

Chen Ping