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Head in the clouds



Photo: Oliver Tsang

Shao Yinong's sky studies celebrate the passage of time, the artist tells **Kristina Perez**

Shao Yinong made his name in photography; these days he prefers to paint in the clouds. The Qingdao-born lecturer in oils at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts has moved on to a more traditional theme than the haunting Assembly Hall photographs of former Red Guard congregation spaces that made him and his wife Muchen famous. From Thursday, Shao highlights the passage of time and the rotation of the seasons in his solo exhibition, *Between Earth and Sky - White Dew*, at 10 Chancery Lane Gallery in Central.

The *White Dew* of the title is taken from the 24 Solar Terms in the traditional lunar calendar that has been used by Chinese farmers since the Warring States Period (475BC-221BC). And while *White Dew* alerts farmers to the time of year when the water droplets gather on the ground as the summer's heat fades, the calendar's 24 Solar Terms

highlight other periods such as the Summer Solstice, the End of Heat, the Frost's Descent and the Great Cold.

The five-week *White Dew* show is the second in a series that will

comprise all 24 Solar Terms and their social significance, divided into seasonal sequences with colourful clouds, lucky clouds and dark clouds, Shao says. Having opened with the *Beginning of Summer* in

Beijing earlier this year, the series celebrates the significance of the weather and land in Chinese culture, the artist says.

"Because of the immediate relations between the weather and the agriculture, our ancestors had accumulated abundant experience in farming in accordance with the weather changes shown in the 24 Solar Terms," Shao says.

"The elements, for instance, the colourful clouds, the lucky clouds and the dark clouds are found and extracted from Chinese traditions, but with new explanations of the ideology from the heavens to the earth and the *chi* philosophy."

These terms are still relevant to modern society since the Chinese people are mostly still reliant on the land, he says, adding that their sense of being is strongly connected to its changes in moods, personalities and life cycles.

Shao has literally used the gallery as his canvas for *White Dew*,

Our ancestors accumulated abundant experience in farming in accordance with the weather changes

painting his lucky clouds in a continuum across the walls, ceilings and passageways.

He says: "The illusion to be created with a huge space covered with elaborate-style painting of colourful clouds on silk will lead the visitors into an elusive world where one shall touch the ideal Eastern Heavens; a mysterious world where he might meet Chang-e flying to the moon, or catch the moon from the sky; or be the kung fu master himself among the clouds."

Shao says he observed clouds for a long time in order to grasp their form. Now he sees them with his mind instead of his eyes. More importantly, he says, are the clouds as an understanding of being that Shao associates with his own practice of the Buddhist principles of calm, quiet and ordinary. The Chinese also experience time and space as a simultaneous unity, Shao says, adding that the blank space in a painting also has energy and contains something for people to feel.

"People from the east have a very different sensation than people from the west," he says. "Our logic, mode of thinking and rules are all different. The geoculture has further complicated this difference."

Shao agrees that his study of clouds is far removed from his many years in photography.

"A photographic image is a virtual space constructed from a real setting, a person's power,

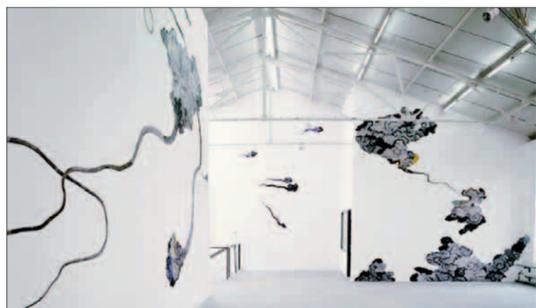
charisma is being captured in an instant," he says.

"Painting and installations, on the other hand, [are] constructed from within, built upon a virtual, abstract sense to deliver something real and tangible. The process is complicated; a person's strength may easily be carried away."

Photography, painting or installations are merely mediums for the representation of an individual's art concept, he says.

"They are the tools to present an inner feeling or thought," he says. "We may say each tool serves a different purpose and each is unique in their sense, but the essence of the rules [and] concepts is the same. Thus, there's no moving away from photography nor returning to painting."

Between Sky and Earth - White Dew, from Thursday-Oct 11, 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Central, Tue-Fri, 11am-7pm, Sat, 11.30am-6pm



Mainland photographer-painter Shao Yinong (top) began his celestial studies in Beijing earlier this year with the exhibition entitled *Between Earth and Sky - Beginning of Summer*. Photo courtesy of the artist

Ahead of his time, but of his day

Holland Cotter

Contemporary Indian art is becoming a sensation and exhibitions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art attempt to explain why this is so.

The exhibitions *Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose (1882-1966)* and *Multiple Modernities: India, 1905-2005* follow the history and development of contemporary art in the country. They suggest that modernism was a phenomenon that unfolded everywhere, in different forms, at different speeds, for different reasons, under different pressures, but always under pressure. As cool and above-it-all as modern may sound, it was a response to emergencies.

In India it took the shape of a bruising colonialism. From the official British perspective, India had no living art. Western classicism was the only classicism; European oil painting was the only worthy medium. Indian artists had to learn it if they wanted careers, but even then their options were limited.

Naturally some people, British and Indian alike, saw things differently. Ernest Binfield Havell, a British teacher and art historian, recognised Indian art as the grand, ancient, still-vibrant phenomenon it

was. And as director of the Government School of Art in Calcutta, he encouraged Indian students to bring their own past, transformed, into the present.

This mission took fire in a social circle gathered around the Tagore family in Calcutta. One of its members, Abanindranath Tagore, taught at the Government School and developed a type of painting based on Indian rather than western models. His uncle, writer Rabindranath Tagore, opened an experimental university at Santiniketan in what is now West Bengal. Devoted to the study, preservation and regeneration of Indian culture, it would be a modernist seedbed.

Into this venturesome environment came Nandalal Bose, first as one of Abanindranath's prize students, later as a teacher and director of art at Rabindranath's school. From the start Bose understood the concepts behind the school: the idea that an aesthetic was also an ethos, that art's role was more than life-enhancing, it was world-shaping.

He observed and emulated Abanindranath's style, which was based on Mughal and Rajput miniatures, and made a success of it. Bose's watercolor and tempura *Sati* (1907), an image of a goddess

who set herself on fire to prove her devotion to her husband, Shiva, was adopted as an emblem of a resurgent, self-sacrificial Indian nationalism.

In 1909 Bose spent months copying fifth-century murals in the Buddhist caves at Ajanta. Everywhere he travelled he paid close attention to popular forms, urban and rural, Hindu and Muslim. He went to China and Japan to study ink-and-brush painting, and kept an eye on trends in the west.

Steadily he forged an art that was both cosmopolitan and Indian. It was also a body of work that refused to settle on a style, which is why Bose continues to be an elusive presence in the history books and in the rare museum surveys of Indian modernism.

The Philadelphia show, organised by Sonya Rhie Quintanilla of the San Diego Museum of Art, in collaboration with the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, retains the eclectic texture of Bose's career while laying it out within something like a time-line format.

In 1930 he designed a series of lino-cut illustrations for Rabindranath Tagore's children's book teaching Bengali, and he made a print to commemorate Mahatma Gandhi's march to the sea that year protesting the British tax on salt. The

print, a portrait of Gandhi, was an instant hit. Cheap to reproduce, it became the most widely circulated image of the leader of the Indian freedom movement.

The two men, who had met at Santiniketan, became friends, political collaborators and spiritual allies, with Bose creating hand-coloured posters of Indian village life for three of the Indian National Congress' annual sessions that led up to independence in 1947.

After Gandhi's death Bose continued to teach at Santiniketan; Indira Gandhi and filmmaker Satyajit Ray were two of his many pupils. In 1951 he retired but kept producing art, mostly Japanese-inspired, ink nature studies that moved towards abstraction, and postcard-size sketches - of friends and students, street scenes and coastal fishing communities, farm animals and flowers - of a kind he had been turning out by the thousands throughout his life.

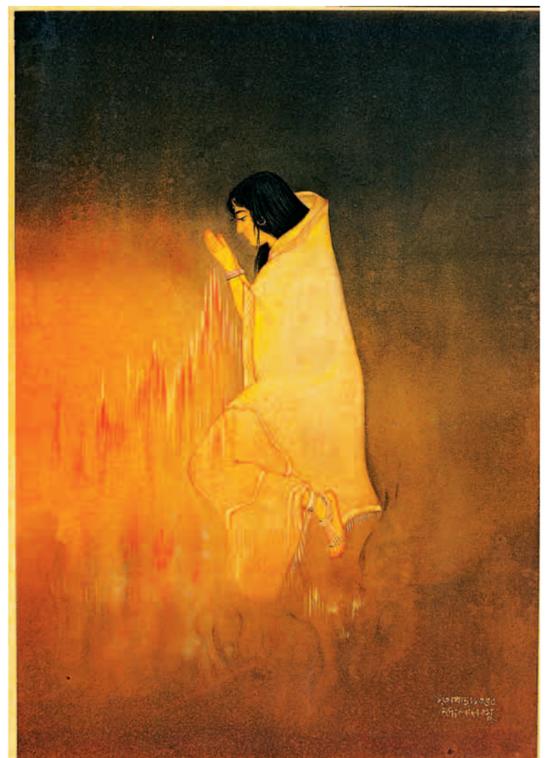
While the almost self-effacing scope of Bose's art can make his career hard to grasp, its effect on 20th-century Indian art has been important, as demonstrated in a small satellite show called *Multiple Modernities: India, 1905-2005*, organised by art historian Michael W. Meister and the museum's curator of Indian art, Darielle

Mason, to accompany the Bose survey. It ranges from drawings by Rabindranath Tagore, through work by Bose's fellow modernists in Calcutta and Mumbai, to pieces by current artists such as Atul Dodiya. Dodiya, who has set auction records for prints of scenes from the epic *Ramayana* inspired by Bose.

If Bose was ahead of his day, he was also very much of it. Some of his work is now dated. His image of the self-immolating *Sati* as an ideal of Indian womanhood obviously doesn't work today. Arpita Singh's politically ambiguous 1993 oil painting of a pistol-wielding goddess Durga, or Bhupen Khakhar's watercolor "goddesses" of uncertain gender, are more like it.

But as an example of a polymath artist and teacher who through consistent and diligent generosity put his talent to the service of the life of his time, he is worthy of prolonged and intensive notice.

The Philadelphia show, which will travel to India, reminds us that every museum of modern art in the US and Europe should be required, in the spirit of truth in advertising, to change its name to Museum of Western Modernism until it has earned the right to do otherwise.



Nandalal Bose's *Sati* (1907) became the emblem of Indian nationalism. Photo: Philadelphia Museum of Art