

Lam Man-Kit, Dominic: An Appreciation

What is a “Renaissance Man”? Of course the term comes from the time of the Renaissance period, when the great masters of art were also scientific inventors. Since the 19th century, however, science and art seemed to have parted ways - so much so that in the early 20th century the English critic C.P. Snow saw fit to talk about the “Two Cultures” which, to rephrase Kipling’s famous saying, means essentially that “art is art and science is science and never the twain shall meet”. That is until we meet the inimitable Dr. Dominic Lam Man-Kit! In him the two cultures collide into a form of artistic combustion that is in ample display in his paintings. He is indeed a rare phenomenon in today’s Hong Kong and to meet such an extraordinary man and become his instant friend is, for me, both a great privilege and a pleasure.

Lam Man-Kit – I shall call him Dominic – is not only an exceptionally accomplished scientist. Having first studied physics and biomedicine, he then distinguished himself in teaching (at Harvard and other universities), research (having published over 100 articles and 5 books, including over 17 in distinguished journals like Nature) and scientific invention (he holds 17 patents in medicine). He is also, at the sametime, a truly outstanding artist. What seems even more remarkable to me is the fact that, after decades of staying in America, he chose in 1997 to return and moved his life as well as his biotech business, to the place where he grew up: Hong Kong, and it’s here that his career in art, science, business and philanthropy has continued to prosper. As a philanthropist and businessman in Hong Kong he has also created a unique style in his art. Such a feat is no easy task, but Dominic has made it appear so easy and effortless. Science meets art in his creative horizon as a matter of course, as he plies between both with equal dexterity. Given the pressures of Hong Kong’s hurly-burly lifestyle, I often wonder how he can ever find the time to do so many things on several fronts at the same time. But he does, and seems to have more time to spare for pursuing the “good life”, for Dominic is also a bon-vivant who has a knack for

all the pleasures that life can afford him. One of his mottos, which I have adopted as my own, is: “Be the first to enjoy and the last to worry” (先天下之樂而樂，後天下之憂而憂). Perhaps the epithet “play-boy” would fit him even better – not in the usual sense of a womanizer, which is already a worn-out cliché, but more in the postmodern vein of aesthetic play and pleasure. For I believe that Dominic has derived a great deal of personal pleasure from his various fields of “play”: he has played with science and medicine, which challenged his intellect and imagination; he has played with business and industry, from which he has accumulated enough wealth not only to be financially independent but also to be a philanthropist (having brought Project Orbis, the flying eye hospital to China in 1982, and established the non-profit World Eye Organization in 1999). Above all he has played with his art, which has always inspired him and given him an unending source of pleasure and meaning. All these “plays”, especially the last, have culminated in his latest invention - a new technique of painting, which was named “Chromoskedasic” by Bryant Rossiter, a former Kodak director (see *Scientific American*, November 1991).

“Chromoskedasic painting” (also known as NanoArt, since the paintings are based on light scattering of nanometer size particles) can be considered a by-product of his scientific practice, for he first accidentally discovered it in 1980, while developing black and white photographs of the retina. The story of how he came about this new invention has been told many times by other people, especially in the news media. I call this an instance of serendipity, of finding something unusual when one least expects it. This can also be applied to scientific inventions, such as Isaac Newton’s discovery of gravity (when, as legend would have it, one day he was watching apples falling from a tree) or James Watson’s discovery of the “double helix” (when he was lying on the banks of the River Cam in Cambridge, England). The principle and technique of Chromoskedasic painting and Dominic’s artistic achievement in this new medium hold secondary importance to me when compared to that initial moment of wonder, when accidentally a new world was unfolded in front of his very eyes (pun intended). I would have given anything to be on that spot

with him and observe the process of his amazing finding! I can also imagine what a pleasure it must be as he prepares such “science stuff” in his dark-room by overlaying different strengths of photographic solutions such as developer, activator, stabilizer, fixer, etc. on black and white photographic paper under various lighting conditions and then takes the paintings out for further touching-up in his art studio or living room to achieve their multi-hued and often colored effects. When I first walked into his living room during a visit, I almost stepped on one of his paintings!

Professor Chu-Tsing Li, one of the world’s leading authorities in Chinese art, wrote a special article on Dominic’s paintings in which he said that the process is most suitable for abstract or semi-abstract expressions and that Dominic’s endeavor has injected a new life into traditional Chinese art. As a layman I can only marvel at the imaginative landscapes that Dominic has created. They remind me of a group of celebrated photographs I once saw on the front corridors of MIT : they were created by an MIT scientist (whose name I have forgotten), whose original purpose in taking these scientific photographs was to capture the image of extreme speed, such as when a bullet pierces an apple at initial impact. That scientific discovery is now displayed proudly for everyone to see, as a beautiful work of art. But I think Dominic has gone further than that. He has turned the Chromoskedasic process into a subjective art form to begin with, from which he has also created a unique universe that is both artistic and spiritual. I can only use the Chinese term “yijing” (which can be vaguely translated as artistic world or “inscape”) to describe it, for I believe its inspiration stems from the Chinese artistic tradition. The rest — the technical details of shading and color, the unusual effects created by light and chiaroscuro, or as another leading authority in art, Tsong-Zung Chang has so elegantly called it: the alchemy of light — will leave to the specialists to comment. But then, Dominic has already received all the accolades from them.

Allow me to add one more anecdote. Dominic and I first met at a public lecture which paired us as joint speakers to an audience of high school teachers. We were supposed to embody the “two cultures” of science and humanities respectively, but I immediately knew that my role was redundant, as he could speak on both subjects with equal ease — and more. To the amazement of everyone except himself, at the urging of the moderator and our dear friend Yau Lop-Poon, Dominic ended his talk with an instantaneous recitation of several classical Chinese poems from memory. Friends later told me that he had a mental “repository” of several hundreds of classical poems, long or short, which he memorized from childhood. According to him, this kind of “rote learning” proved very helpful later on when he was studying human anatomy and had to memorize all these Greek or Latin sounding medical terms.

Somehow I felt then, as I listened to his recitation and looked at his painting being projected on the screen, that there must have been some connection between poetry and painting somewhere in the depths of his creative consciousness. Perhaps the words of poetry had been transformed into images in his mind, which were then refracted onto his black and white photographic paper and turned into Chromoskedasic landscapes of mountains, oceans and clouds. A good illustration of such a transformation is his famous painting *Promises to Keep* (Figure 1)¹, which was his imagistic interpretation of Robert Frost’s even more famous poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”. Here one immediately sees the obvious link and interaction, and a most striking one at that.

In short, Lam’s creativity has clearly come from a unique combination of his genetic composition, life experience and personal memory. My intuition was further confirmed when Dominic told me that indeed he likes to watch clouds from the window of his living room, especially the rapidly changing colors at sunrise and sunset. What an enviable idyll: Dominic lives in perfect harmony with his art, even amid the hustle and bustle of Hong Kong.

I have used the word “play-boy” to describe Dominic. I should also underscore the “boy” part of this epithet, for he seems forever young at heart and extremely energetic. Perhaps the word “energy” is also central to our understanding of his art as well. Unlike the typical traditional Chinese paintings, there is tremendous energy in his Chromoskedasic strokes and in his other works using more traditional media such as ink, acrylic or enamel. Every time my wife and I visited his studioresidence together with other friends, we felt energized, as if his paintings had miraculously cast their glow onto our hearts and illuminated our souls right on the spot. For anyone who knows Dominic well, such is as it should be, he would not have settled for anything else when it comes to his art and his life.

Professor Leo Ou-Fan Lee
Chinese University of Hong Kong
Professor Emeritus of Chinese Literature at Harvard University