

John Tancock

## The Etchings of Yan Shanchun



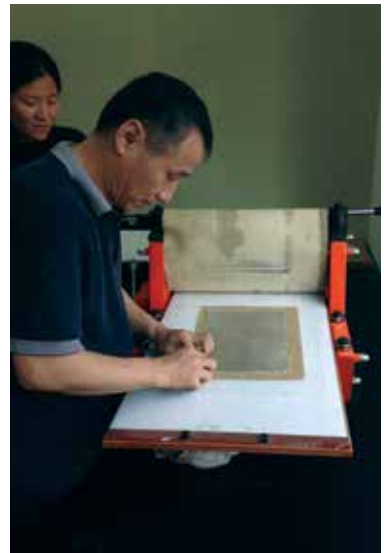
Earlier this year I visited with Yan Shanchun in his office at the Shenzhen Fine Art Institute, with which he has been associated since 1993.<sup>1</sup> While I was there we had a wide-ranging discussion about printmaking, and I was able to watch him go through the process of making several prints, a rare opportunity for me. Yan Shanchun is a well-respected painter and academic who has written extensively on many aspects of classical and contemporary Chinese art but whose all-consuming interest for the last few years has been printmaking. In fact, he says that in his prints he has been able to achieve levels of expressiveness that he has only glimpsed in his earlier work.

Yan Shanchun, *Ruangong Islet #6*, 2008, acrylic on canvas and mixed media, 100 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, Beijing and New York.

Certainly he has reached a level of refinement in his prodigious output of etchings that is impossible to achieve in the more robust ink-and-acrylic medium he uses for his paintings, but, begging to differ with the artist, the prints reflect ways of approaching his subject matter that were already latent in the paintings. His large canvases, which verge on abstraction, retain partially visible beneath the surface in their multiple layers of pigment references not only to the appearance of West Lake, in Hangzhou, with which he has been familiar all his life, but to the long history of representation of this site in ink painting and poetry. This

Left: Yan Shanchun, *West Lake–Yanggong Causeway 01*, 2014, copper plate etching, 48 x 35 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, Beijing and New York.

Right: Yan Shanchun working at a printing press in his office, Shenzhen Fine Art Institute, 2015. Photo: John Tancock.



accounts for the powerful effect these subtle canvases have on the perceptive viewer. In contrast, the prints are small enough to be held in one's hand, traditionally the preferred way for viewing these intimate works of art, and are characterized by an infinite variety of marks and surface effects, all coalescing to give just a glimpse of the atmosphere of the lake.

Yan Shanchun's office at the Institute is small and simply furnished, lined with bookshelves and numerous earlier works that are stacked against the walls. A small tabletop press, stacks of copper plates, and *gampi* (Japanese tissue paper) indicate that we are visiting the premises of a print maker. With the exception of a container of sulfur, the bottles of olive oil, soy sauce, and Brasso sitting on the shelves would be equally at home in a well-stocked kitchen or supply closet. Yet it is with these simple materials that Yan Shanchun creates his poetic etchings, as intense and multi-referential as the briefest of Chinese poems. How did he arrive at the point in which printmaking resembles alchemy?

Yan Shanchun, *West Lake in My Dream #1*, 2009, acrylic on canvas and mixed media, 212 x 152 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, Beijing and New York.



Yan Shanchun graduated from the Print Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou, in 1982, the same year as Huang Yongping, who was about to adopt a radical approach to art making through his association with Xiamen Dada, a group of young artists whose anti-art stance owed much to European Dadaism. Yan Shanchun followed a more conservative path and chose to investigate new approaches to ink painting, but around 1987

he began to concentrate on scholarly and theoretical studies, ranging from *The Literati and Painting: Painters in Official History and Fiction* to

commentaries on the work of Huang Yongping and Wang Guangyi. He remarked that while his preference is for art that is related to traditional Chinese values, however modified they might be, he still feels the need to understand types of art that he does not really appreciate. During a twenty-year period he traveled widely in France, Germany, and Italy, studying the works of European Old Masters, Western contemporary art, and the great printmakers from Albrecht Durer, Rembrandt van Rijn, and Francisco de Goya to Pablo Picasso. By 2007, when he returned to painting, he was fifty years old, an artist with a well-stocked mind but only a small body of actual works, one who was closer in kind to Chinese literati of the Ming and Qing dynasties than the successful contemporary artists whose work was already achieving record prices at auction.

After tentative beginnings, Yan Shanchun's paintings soon increased in scale, as the lessons he had learned from Mark Rothko and Cy Twombly were fully absorbed. His largely monochromatic canvases conceal evidence of facts he has observed and memories of countless works of art that have lodged in his mind. In this respect, among the twentieth-century artists he admires, he appears closest to Twombly, for whom the art and literature of ancient Greece and Rome were primary sources of inspiration. To many observers, Yan Shanchun had fully succeeded in achieving his goal of capturing the Chinese spirit in acrylic and ink painting, yet still he was not satisfied. It was at this point, around 2010, that he returned to printmaking.



Yan Shanchun remarked to me that when he graduated, many of the materials used in printmaking were toxic, the sulfuric acid used in poorly ventilated studios being very bad for the health. In 2010, he discovered a solution to this problem. Wang Gongyi, a printmaker who had graduated from Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts two years before Yan Shanchun, returned to China after spending two decades in Europe and the United States and recommended that he try a technique she had first

Oil/sulfur mixture placed on copper plate during Yan Shanchun's printing process. Photo: John Tancock.

used in 1992 when she was working at the ALMA Printmaking Studio, in Lyon, France. This explains the current presence of the containers of sulfur and olive oil in Yan Shanchun's studio. Instead of corrosive acid, he uses a mixture of these two substances to etch the copper plates. I watched while dabs of the olive oil/sulfur mixture slowly corroded the surface, turning black as the process began. In a text written in 2014, Yan Shanchun noted that this technique "gives more freedom than the traditional sulfuric acid, and it is also more direct than the mezzotint or sugar-lift methods. It mainly



Yan Shanchun, *West Lake–Yanggong Causeway 02*, copper plate etching, 29 x 20 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, Beijing and New York.

uses the reaction between sulfur and the copper plate to produce recesses for the ink. It can convey the effect of brush strokes, and the layers are also more subtle. The drawback is that the reactions are unpredictable and not stable, the residue is weak after corrosion, and not suitable for making multiple prints.”<sup>2</sup>

In his paintings inspired by West Lake, Yan Shanchun suggests the expansiveness of the lake receding into the distance through veils of mist; he is as concerned to preserve the integrity of the painted surface as the most committed modernist. In the prints he changes his focus. Although the spatial treatment of landscape in some of his earlier prints owes more to the Western landscape tradition than it does to Chinese painting, he now focuses on details—leaves, a tree trunk, a reed—and ambiguous forms to suggest the poetic atmosphere that has always been associated with West Lake, even today, when it is located at the centre of a thriving city, Hangzhou, and is always crowded with tourists. Much depends on chance effects as the artist waits to see how the copper plate reacts to the olive oil/sulfur combination. As already noted, this can never be predicted. Inspired by these abstract forms, Yan Shanchun then reaches back into his memory bank of images derived equally from nature and art and continues the process, etching each plate five or six times if necessary, until he senses that no more needs to be done.



Yan Shanchun working on copper etchings. Photos: John Tancock.

Intuition is paramount in his creative process, as it is in the preparation of the copper plates for printing. For cleaning them, he prefers soy sauce to all other traditional materials used for this process. Disliking strong contrasts in the final print, he uses only a small amount of ink, just enough to sink into the crevices. He then polishes the plate with his hand until a very thin layer of ink is left over the

entire plate. This is a very sensitive process, requiring all the technical skills and versatility that he has gained through ceaseless exploration of the print medium. The final step is to run the sheets of damp *gampi* paper through the hand press in order to mount them on a more durable sheet of paper. His involvement with this final aspect is crucial, because the application of too much or too little Japanese glue to the reverse of the *gampi* paper before going through the press can have disastrous consequences.

Oddly enough, the effects that Yan Shanchun aims for in his etchings owe more to collotype—the photographic process that is notable for its fine detail and for the fidelity with which it reproduces gradations in tonal qualities—than to etchings by any of the artists he admires. In 1980, while he was still a student, he discovered the book *Be An Sheng Mo*, a collection





Top: Yan Shanchun working on copper etchings. Photo: John Tancock.

Yan Shanchun, *West Lake–Yanggong Causeway 03*, 2014, copper plate etching, 29 x 20 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, Beijing and New York.



of collotype reproductions of works by Zhao Zhiqian (1829–1884), published between 1918 and 1928, that left an indelible impression on him. He says that he greatly admired the quality of the printing and how it succeeded in conveying the full range of tonal subtlety, and still carries it in the back of his mind when he prints his own etchings. Yan Shanchun has given an eloquent summary of the effect he is trying to achieve: “The effect is very similar to collotype printing which I adore, and the effect is similar to the

West Lake that I remember. Especially by using Japanese *gampi* paper for printing, the image has a luminous quality like that achieved by silver print photography, endowing the image with a heavy metallic feel comparable to my feelings about the West Lake: clear, remote, tempered, and classic.”<sup>3</sup>

Paradoxically, these classical qualities that he admires so much are achieved through a process that is anything but orderly and predictable. Yan Shanchun has produced a tremendous outpouring of prints since he made a definitive return to the medium in 2010—five hundred at least—but since he cannot control completely the reaction between the copper plates and the materials he uses to etch them, only one hundred or so are considered worthy of preservation. What he can control, however, is the printing process itself and here he is unrelenting in his perfectionism. Thoroughly disenchanted with the industrialization and commercialism of most printmaking today—of course, there are exceptions, as he is first to admit—he attends to every step in the production, from the inception of an image somewhere in the back



Yan Shanchun, *West Lake-Ge Hill*, 2013, copper plate etchings, set of 4, 13 x 20 cm each.  
Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, Beijing and New York.

of his mind to its hesitant materialization on the copper plate as the olive oil/sulfur mixture spreads and penetrates the surface to the lightest possible inking and the most precise mounting imaginable.

In today's competitive art world, Yan Shanchun is an anomaly. Modest in demeanor, he has never clamored for attention, preferring instead the quiet cultivation of personal interests, a way of living that for centuries characterized the Chinese literati. He has maintained a certain distance from developments in contemporary Chinese art that have occurred in the last thirty years and is equally detached from the cultivation of ink painting as an end in itself, as well as the multitude of different artistic approaches—from oil painting to performance—that characterize the work of younger generations of Chinese artists. As a result there is nothing forced about the hybrid quality of his oeuvre, which results not from theoretical posturing but from the slow assimilation of influences from both classical Chinese culture and the art of the twentieth century.

Believing that “artists should participate from the beginning to the end as a creator,”<sup>4</sup> Yan Shanchun creates prints that speak to the connoisseur—an endangered species, perhaps, who appreciates the finesse of his technique and the subtlety of his imagery. Involved in every stage of the mysterious technical procedures that have preoccupied some of the greatest artists since the Renaissance, he has adopted a quietly revolutionary approach that is no less powerful for its reticence.

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#### Notes

1. This text is based on a conversation with Yan Shanchun in his studio at the Shenzhen Institute of Fine Arts on April 25, 2015.
2. Yan Shanchun, *About My Copper Plate Etchings “West Lake,”* November 26, 2014.
3. Ibid.
4. Yan Shanchun, *The Character of Things, The Character of Heart,* November 1, 2014.