

. i n f o r m a l i t y

Chen Ping

Garden

10th September until 13th October 2020

Informality, 11 Market Place, Henley on Thames, RG9 2AA

Uncertainty and fear

It is difficult to measure just how much the world has transformed since we entered 2020: from coronavirus that has changed the way we interact with our friends and neighbours, the continued rise of populist leaders that are dismantling once taken for granted social rights, to the Black Lives Matters protest movement demanding mass changes to the way urban centres around the world are policed. Amongst all this are the all too forgotten crises of displaced people and refugees, war and conflict and human-induced climate change as witnessed through the wildfires that have engulfed both the northern and southern hemispheres.

In such tumultuous and unsettling moments, it is easy for divisions to emerge. We can lose our sense of shared humanity as we seek to build walls and barriers in efforts to protect ourselves and our loved ones.

We seek security, confidence and certainty. We strip back priorities to the bare essentials of economic and physical survival, ignoring what seem like second order concerns.

We should not forget, however, that the world has been through innumerable crises previously. The 20th century alone saw global wars and depressions, viruses and leaders that led their people to destruction and annihilation.

The search for perpetual peace

It is within these times that we also see humanity at its best: from the philosophers who draw road maps to peace, volunteers offering support and leaders who inspire us to look for what we share in common and demand more from us.

One such philosopher was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant lived at a time of brutality and upheaval which prompted him to look for ways in which nations could find better ways to work and live together.

One of his best-known and most influential essays is, 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch' (published in 1795). This is Kant's pathway to peace and prosperity. He draws on a shared sense of humanity and a logic of cosmopolitan interactions that encourages nations to assist each other while respecting their sovereignty.

In his essay, Kant discusses universal hospitality towards strangers, stating we should be able to visit a foreign land under the presumption that we will be treated without hostility if presenting without malintent: "the nation may send [the visitor] away again, if this can be done without causing his death". These rights being necessary to accomplish the ultimate goal of intercommunication and peaceful relations between nations.

Looking back at this work, we can see the visionary and optimistic nature of Kant's philosophical work.

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Art and humanity

There are threads throughout Ping Chen's art that are reflective of both this hopeful optimism and shared humanity.

From his earliest works to more recent pieces, Ping highlights the symbiotic relationship between humans and the environment around us. This is not an individualised relationship between one single person and their specific relationship with nature, but one that seeks to represent how we are all connected to this relationship.

This shared experience is of a cosmopolitan nature – a mutualism that we must embrace if we are to overcome the crises that confront us.

Ping's flows of colour have no sharp lines. The images are intertwined. The people, mountains and trees blur into each other and often difficult to distinguish.

This is not only expressive of Ping's distinctive style, but reflective of his philosophy. Inspired Ancient Chinese proverbs and maxims, Ping draws out these intricacies. He does not see a separation between people and nature, but endless contours that overlap and influence each other

Here, the wild animal is the human, the human the mountain and the tree, and the tree the wild animal. It is a circular relationship that challenges our desire for linearity.

In today's atmosphere it is simple to ask, 'does art matter?' Do the aesthetics we witness on a canvas placed on a wall or sculptured in a garden mean anything?

Viewing the world through the lens that Ping provides confirms that art has never been more important for it confirms to us that we are all interlinked. We are connected and as such, reliant on each other.

When viewing Ping's work, one often does not know where to stand: up close to see the layers or from a distance to observe the patterns. This is reflective of our interactions with the world around us – and it is why Ping provides us with a gateway across these worlds.

This is the being of art.

By Dr James Arvanitakis, August 2020