

Qu Leilei: Echoes

Currently on at 3812 Gallery in St James's, London, is *Echoes*, an exhibition of new and recent works by Qu Leilei, the contemporary ink artist. Blending traditional Chinese artistic practices with Western aesthetics, Qu Leilei's works reflect his early life in China and his later life in England, as well as demonstrate his technical mastery.

Born in China in 1951, Qu Leilei studied calligraphy and traditional painting techniques in his early years but endured the social upheavals of the Cultural Revolution as a teenager. Qu Leilei even spent time in a forced labour camp when his parents were denounced as capitalists. However, in the late 1970's as China began to move away from Maoism, Qu Leilei was able to resume his education and attended Beijing Medical University to study anatomy. He also became part of the avant-garde Stars Group, the first contemporary art movement in China, and campaigned for greater artistic freedom.

In 1985, Qu Leilei took the difficult decision to immigrate to England, and he has lived and worked here ever since. His arrival in London brought Qu Leilei into contact with Western art for the first time, especially classical sculpture and Italian Renaissance painting, and over the last thirty years, he has blended these influences with his Chinese inheritance to develop a unique artistic vision.



Qu Leilei *Hope Remains in Our Hands* (2018) Courtesy of 3812 Gallery

The challenge Qu Leilei has set himself is to use light and shade to capture the physical presence of his subjects. But working with brush and ink on xuan paper is an unforgiving medium. Each brushstroke is rapidly absorbed by the fine-textured paper, which becomes increasingly fragile and prone to tearing

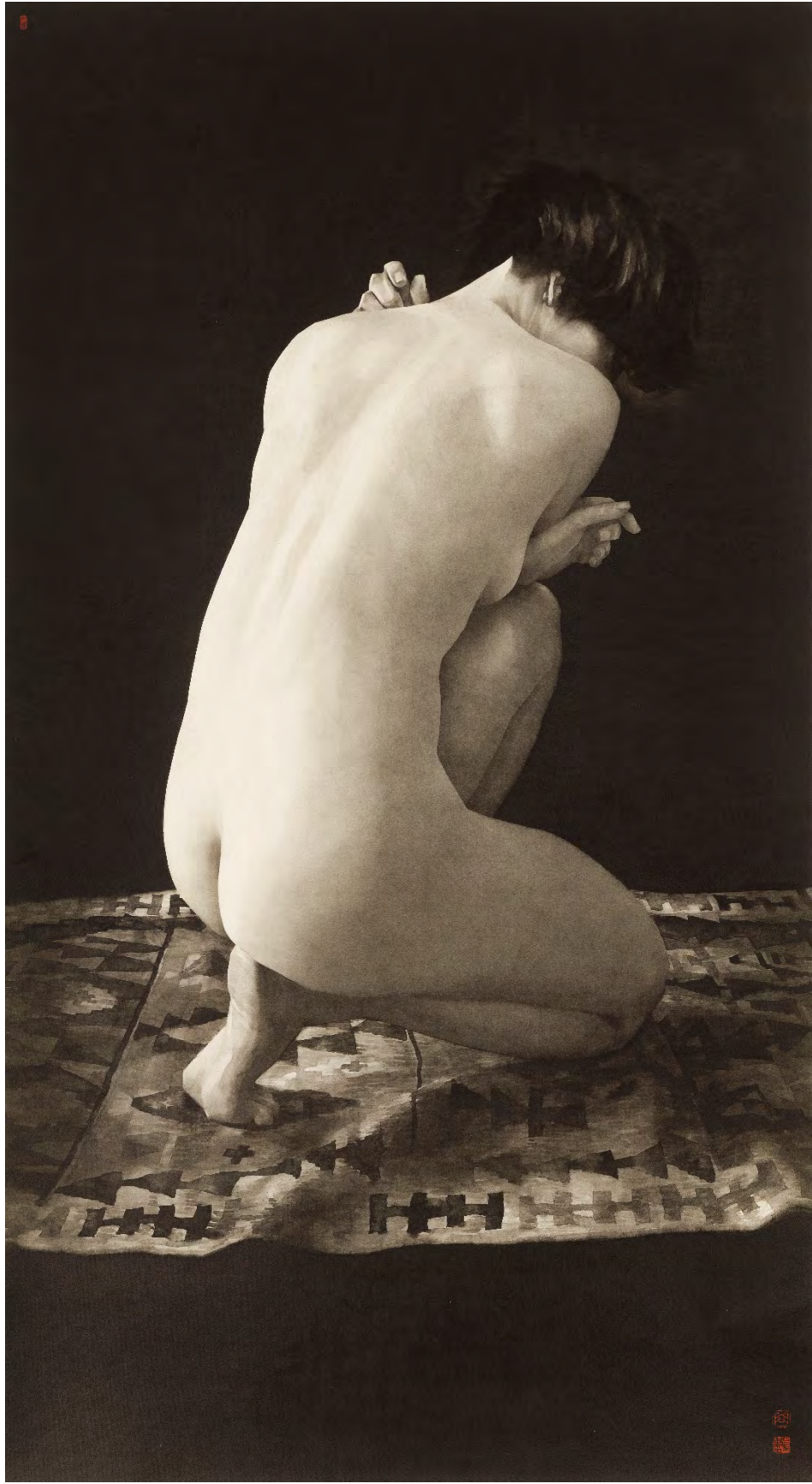
when wet from the ink washes. Qu Leilei must balance confidence in his brushstrokes with the patience to build up his images slowly.

The works on show demonstrate both this unique blend of Chinese and Western influences and the remarkable control Qu Leilei has developed over his brush and ink medium. Take the works that feature hands in the ground floor gallery. The human hand is one of the most difficult things to draw but Qu Leilei's exact and self-assured brush strokes create such contrasts of texture and line that the images in these works are both physically accurate and dynamic. Resembling white marble against black backgrounds, there is a monumental quality to them akin to Renaissance sculptures that adds to their significance. Hands also transcend barriers and the absence of colour forces us to focus on the universal gestures in the images that express sentiments like hope, determination and unity: important messages in dark times.



Qu Leilei *Mastering our Own Fate* (2018) Courtesy of 3812 Gallery

In the lower gallery are a series of nudes, located downstairs for reasons of space I was told, not because of excessive propriety. These again display the many influences on Qu Leilei's work. Nudes have never been a feature of mainstream Chinese art, but Qu Leilei has found a way to use a Chinese medium to capture bodily beauty through subtle variations of light and shade. The precision of his depiction of the body clearly shows the deep understanding of form acquired from his study of anatomy, while his debt to Hellenistic sculpture is evident in the composition of these works. In *Standing Figure* (2016), he poses his model contrapposto with her weight on one leg to give the work a sense of movement. In another, *Squatting Figure* (2018), he has borrowed the serpentine S-curve of Renaissance art to capture the viewer's gaze and emphasise the sensuousness of the figure.



Qu Leilei *Squatting Figure* (2018) Courtesy of 3812 Gallery

But to my eye, these nudes are less successful than the works in the first gallery. The absence of colour in the images of hands ensures we focus on the meaning conveyed by the gestures, but there is no equivalent symbolism to be found in the nudes. Instead the use of black and white, while allowing Qu Leilei to depict the bodily form accurately, makes them appear anaemic. They seem more like studies of statues than real life human beings.

Back upstairs though, Qu Leilei returns to form with *Invincible* (2015). Drawing on his interest in Chinese history, Qu Leilei portrays a contemporary soldier flanked by warriors from the terracotta army of the First Empire. Caught up in the momentum of a military parade, the soldier is turned eyes right to pledge his allegiance and selfless devotion to the party and the country. Through the work's ironic title, Qu Leilei is though asking us to look beyond the image to reflect on the temporary and vainglorious nature of military power. Unless we learn from history, we are doomed to make the same mistakes, Qu Leilei seems to be saying.



Qu Leilei *Invincible* (2015) Courtesy of 3812 Gallery

Qu Leilei's works combine a rare blend of influences. His mastery of traditional Chinese artistic practices is informed by Western aesthetics which are both in turn unified by the deep concern for humanity found in his choice of subjects. As Qu Leilei himself comments, his art is 'a search for a more profound understanding of life's value, the meaning it holds, and the essential freedom and dignity of humanity'.

Echoes: An exhibition of work by Qu Leilei is on at 3812 Gallery, 21 Ryder Street, St. James's, London SW1Y 6PX from 28th January – 9th March 2019

Published: Qu Leilei at 3812 Gallery review, London Student

Date published: 19th March 2019

URL: <http://londonstudent.coop/qu-leilei-at-3812-gallery/>