

Black Jade: “That Surface and That Shadow” in Kien Situ’s ‘Umbra’

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In 1933 Jun’ichirō Tanizaki first published ‘In Praise of Shadows’, a work which would subsequently become perhaps one of the central texts in understanding Eastern aesthetics and its appreciation of darkness. To illustrate his point, Tanizaki compares the Western appreciation of the brilliantly shining diamond to the Chinese appreciation of the softly gleaming jade with its hidden layers of swirling mist. Writing about jade he says:

“When we see that shadowy surface, we think how Chinese it is, we seem to find in its cloudiness the accumulation of the long Chinese past, we think how appropriate it is that the Chinese should admire that surface and that shadow.”

A key to unlocking the work of Kien Situ 司徒建 in his latest exhibition ‘Umbra’ lies in this appreciation for darkness. Letting our eyes get used to the dark, we gaze into the surface of his works as though we are masters of divination. We peer into the endless layers of shadow contained within them as though looking into a piece of black jade.

Shadows are not simply black, rather they consist of layers or gradients of darkness. The shadow itself can be divided into three distinct parts: the umbra, penumbra, and the antumbra. Taken directly from the Latin word meaning shadow, the exhibition title ‘Umbra’ is used to describe the innermost, or darkest part of a shadow. This fascination for shadows can be traced to Situ’s architectural practice in which he must constantly chase the shadows cast by the structures he designs. Toeing the line between architect and artist, Situ casts both forms and shadows within his pieces.

To emulate such darkness as the title ‘Umbra’ suggests, Situ infuses his works with Chinese Mò ink. His practice hearkens back to the long tradition of Chinese Shānshuǐ huā 山水花, otherwise known as Mountain Water painting. This tradition is permeated by Daoist philosophy and the attempt to illustrate the interplay between Yin and Yang. Artists were encouraged to depict not the reality they saw with their eyes, but rather an inner landscape seen through the artist’s mind. It is a notion reflected within the alien, mountainous terrain of Situ’s works which are not intended to be strictly realistic. Instead, they resemble an imagined landscape perhaps floating in another galaxy.

Mastering the art of ink and brush means mastering the five shades contained within the ink itself: dark, light, dry, wet, and charred. Young painters are taught to make black from white, and white from black, speaking to the balance between positive and negative space. Situ harmonises these polarities and brings these shades to life. Within his abstract landscapes made of smooth slabs of petrified ink, one can distinguish patterns swirling like clouds or crashing like waves. His three-dimensional forms cannot be fixed to one state – hovering somewhere between mountains and waves, hard and soft, darkness and light.

Encompassing wall plates, sculptural works, and a central pillar, we enter a space that is meditative and shrine-like. Evocative of the Rothko Chapel, the atmosphere is heavy with the weight and density of the works. Each piece is carefully placed as though guided by ancient Chinese practices of geomancy. A magnetism fills the empty spaces, vibrating with the flow of Qi or energy. The works themselves exude a physical presence that calls to mind the following lines from Ursula K. Le Guin’s version of Chapter Twenty-Six in Lao Tzu’s ‘Tao Te Ching’:

*“Heavy is the root of light.
Still is the master of moving.”*

In the footnote to the text Le Guin connects this phrase to the practice of Tai Chi, and here in reference to ‘Umbra’ it highlights the physicality of Situ’s works. Requiring an enormous amount of physical strength, Situ’s own body plays a large part in the creation of these works through the mixing, pouring, moulding, and even transporting of his sculptures. Likewise, our own bodies respond to their sense of gravity as we traverse and fill the negative space surrounding his work.

The terms umbra, penumbra, and antumbra were originally used to describe the shadows cast by celestial bodies. In the same vein, our bodies orbit the central pillar of 'Umbra' casting their own shadows.

The waves we see upon the surface of his works echo the waves moved by the planetary pull of the moon. There is a connection here that Situ's work touches upon – between body and spirit, weight and magnetism, substance and emptiness. They resemble contemporary Gongshi 供石, otherwise known as scholar's rocks that Chinese literati once pondered over in the privacy of their studios or gardens. These rocks were shaped by the elemental forces of wind and water, revealing the power of softness over hardness. Each crevice, wave, or cloud we recognise along the surface of Situ's work reveals a microcosm of an imagined landscape flickering with the shadows of immortal beings. And like those ancient scholars, we are led to contemplate how the softness of the human body was able to form the hard pieces we see before us in 'Umbra'.

Those dualities are further investigated in Situ's choice of medium. From the use of modern-day industrial materials such as concrete and plaster, the artist unearths primordial shapes that possess an ancient quality. Again, this speaks to Tanizaki's description of the jade, "with its faintly muddy light, like the crystallized air of the centuries." Each piece contains a yearning for a long-forgotten past that speaks to Situ's own experience of diaspora. His works are like shadows of a history, culture, and ancestry that is largely unknown to the artist himself. Furthermore, the word 'Umbra' connotes the mythological 'shade' used to describe a spirit, ghost, or phantom. In this sense, the works reflect the obscure aspects of the artist's personal history and identity. Like a black mirror they capture the spectral traces of a past that continues to haunt him.