



LAM
TUNG
PANG

Past Continuous Tense

A Tree and A Forest: *Past Continuous Tense* by Lam Tung Pang

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Lam Tung Pang's *Past Continuous Tense* (2011), when installed, appears much like the panels of painted screens in ancient halls and chambers throughout East Asia. Immersive in size with fifty-two panels, each eight feet tall, together spanning more than fifty feet, it features a multitude of antiquarian and monochromatic tree images (fig. 1). The yellowish tone of the panels reminds viewers of the luxurious shimmer of a gilded screen, as if intended to reflect candlelight in a lord's castle, or the aged rice paper on which ink landscapes were painted, collected, and treasured by elegant literati scholar officials. However, on closer examination, one quickly realizes that Lam's work is a far cry from a reverent homage to the past. It is anything but a traditional ink painting. The "luster" of luxurious gold or elegant silk is but an illusion, as the panels are in fact made of plywood. The trees are not painted with ink and brush but are photocopies of old paintings by past ink painting masters in China, Korea, and Japan, which Lam selected from printed books and catalogues and transferred onto the plywood with a series of mechanical reproduction processes (fig. 2). Lam also worked scuff marks, traces of burning, and residues of ashes across the panels (fig. 3). In other words, though the work presents a forest of "ink trees," it also presents an illusion of tradition, engaging in a complex set of gestures of re-appropriation and detraction.



Fig. 1: *Past Continuous Tense* on view at Tang Contemporary Art, Hong Kong. Courtesy of Lam Tung Pang.



Fig. 2: Detail of *Past Continuous Tense*, showing photocopied titles. Courtesy of Lam Tung Pang.



Fig. 3: Detail of *Past Continuous Tense*, showing burn marks. Courtesy of Lam Tung Pang.

Lam describes the making of this piece as a “layering” process, a painterly word denoting an additive approach. He picked these images of trees from printed sources. He photocopied them, enlarged them to almost life size, then printed them on large sheets of paper. Then he traced these paper copies onto the plywood panels with charcoal, while the panels were mounted on the wall. Once the tree images were transferred to the plywood, Lam added elements, creating scuff marks, scraping, smudging, and manipulating the tones to create distances. After this process Lam laid the panels on the floor and sprayed a mixture of glue, color powder, and transparency to fix the images. He then proceeded with the burning process, using a gas torch to directly burn unto the plywood panel. Finally, he burned some paper and laid the ashes on top of the panels, blowing the ash across the surface in a spontaneous fashion (fig. 4). Lam’s creative process involves both the vertical and the horizontal—the panels were both hung on the wall vertically and laid horizontally on the ground as Lam worked. Indeed, the finished work is a synthesis of many pairs: printing and painting, high and low, old and new, reverence and iconoclasm, original and copy, addition and subtraction, schema and spontaneity, creation

and destruction. Yet, the power of Lam’s synthesis lies in the way that these often combatant pairs do not compete with each other. Lam has created a “forest” where these otherwise oppositional elements grow together. Lam’s forest does not mitigate or neglect the inherent conflict between these dialectic pairs, but instead embraces and transforms it.

To better understand Lam’s synthetic layering approach, it is helpful to trace his art education, some of the first “layers” of his artistic journey. Lam attended the Department of Fine Arts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), an institution that he would readily acknowledge as steeped in liberal arts traditions, as well as boasting an eclectic curriculum that focused on literature, history, and philosophy. CUHK offered an education that embraced all artistic traditions.¹ While Lam studied paintings in the Western tradition there, he also had to study some Chinese traditional painting. Upon graduating from CUHK, Lam left Hong Kong for Great Britain for further study at St. Martin’s. If his education in Hong Kong had prepared him for an open-minded perspective on creativity, his British experience, among many other things, afforded him personal encounters with original artworks. His time at St. Martin’s

¹ The author’s interview with Lam, September 31, 2021.

became an important transitional point in his career. Lam remembers the power that overcame him when in the physical presence of so many great artworks in London's halls of exhibition—works by old masters or modern icons that he had only previously seen as images in books or lecture slides.

Lam recalls that after his return to Hong Kong, he realized that these powerful experiences of encounters with original works by great artists could be replicated in Hong Kong too; but in Hong Kong the encounters would mostly be with Chinese traditional masters, as it is a city where collections of traditional Chinese arts are numerous. To be sure, intimate encounters with original artworks are an indispensable part of Chinese painting traditions. The handscroll format, compared to easel painting, lends itself to an intimate and tactile experience with the viewers. Many celebrated painters in the past were connoisseurs and collectors with access

to original works, but these intimate encounters with art were and remain the privilege of the few. Museums in the twentieth century have made some progress in opening up opportunities to the public to see these paintings behind glass cases. But by and large art students still have to be content with studying them in printed images. While the access to original artwork for art students is perhaps universally unsatisfactory, and one can complain similarly in London or Rome, what marks the difference for Lam in the case of his Chinese painting education is that for one reason or another, Chinese painting pedagogy seems to be more content with the studies of copies in printed images, rather than the intimate encounter with the original.² Lam's point is that his education in England opened a window for him and instilled in him an urge to directly engage with art of the past, which fundamentally drew attention to the difference between the original and a reproduction.

The difference for Lam was quite striking. Lam remembers that his Chinese traditional painting class at college was uninspiring. In general, Chinese painting remains a category of special training, standing on a specially cordoned-off turf outside the general art education in higher education institutions. Today in China or Hong Kong if a student claims she studies art (*yishu*) she is most likely NOT a student of Chinese painting, otherwise she would specify herself as studying *guohua* (national painting).³ Lam remembers that the Chinese



Fig. 4: The artist at work creating *Past Continuous Tense*.
Courtesy of Lam Tung Pang.

² For detailed study on the photocopied images in modern Chinese painting education, see Yujen Liu, "Second Only to the Original: Rhetoric and Practice in the Photographic Reproduction of Art in Early Twentieth Century China," *Art History* 37:1 (February 2014): 69–95.

³ For detailed discussions on these bifurcations of art education and the history of Chinese painting as national painting in the twentieth century, see Pedith Chan, *The Making of a Modern Art World: Institutionalization and Legitimization of Guohua in Republican Shanghai* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017) and Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

painting instructors tended to adhere to the old ways, limiting the learning to faithfully copying the past masters and perfecting the brushworks. At a juvenile moment, Lam and his friends tried to play a prank for their final project: instead of using brush and ink on paper to copy as required, they would use mechanical printing techniques to reproduce facsimiles on paper. The instructor passed them without muss because the judging criteria was based on how close to the original the copy was, and it was so cursory with the works hung and seen from afar. This juvenile trickery, ironically, turned out to be one of the inspirations for *Past Continuous Tense*. Having come a long way from its flippancy original intention, *Past Continuous Tense* still carries its critical memory as a commentary on the culture of mechanical reproduction within the pedagogy and historiography of ink painting tradition.

For those familiar with traditions of Chinese painting, *Past Continuous Tense* immediately recalls the format found in painting manuals, exemplified by the *Manual of the Mustard Seeds Garden*, printed in the seventeenth century, that remained a staple among Chinese painting students for centuries. These manuals break down the compositional elements within what is considered a prototype of a traditional Chinese painting, be it landscape, figure, or flower and birds, and compile many different styles or methods of depicting each element, as well as the signature styles of renowned masters. For example, the *Manual of the Mustard Seeds*

Garden includes volumes and sections on hills, water, trees, or rocks, and devotes its very first volume to the painting of trees (fig. 5). In the tree section, it provides a variety of methods and brushstrokes and explains how to render different foliage and groves, offering a compendium on how past masters painted their trees. It is interesting to note that they are corralled together not by the botanical variety of trees, but by the painterly schemas of brushstrokes, shapes, and techniques. It is also important to point out that these manuals are printed books, products of a series of copying processes: in the case of the *Manual of the Mustard Seeds Garden*, it was based on the teaching material compiled by a painting teacher Li Liufang, and the manuscript was essentially painted by artist Wang Gai (active seventeenth century), who produced this encyclopedic copy of many past masterpieces of paintings. The book was therefore often in reduced and reappropriated form. And on top of that, the contents had been



Fig. 5: *Manual of the Mustard Seeds Garden* (Japanese reprint), approx. 1753, by Wang Gai (Chinese, 1645–1710). Edo period (1615–1868). Set of five woodblock-printed books; ink and color on paper. Image © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

transferred from Wang's paintings to book form, carved and printed by master bookmakers in the seventeenth century.

For centuries these manuals played an important part in transmitting knowledge and techniques, and in effect affirmed and perpetuated the "canons" of style and transformed Chinese painting as well. Above all, they solidified the practice of copying and reproduction as an essential practice and cemented the discourse on the composition of Chinese ink painting. The trees in Lam's *Past Continuous Tense*, just like those fragments of trees in the manuals, are represented as vocabulary entries in a dictionary, learned, compiled, and taxonomized (digitally in Lam's case.) But by "printing" trees on panels in a style reminiscent of the painting manual layout, Lam also deftly comments on the construction and transmission of canons taken for granted in Chinese painting to this day. In this work he introduces layers of mediation: the natural world mediated through past masters of ink painting, then re-mediated into the apparatus of painting manuals and other forms of print culture, which encompass institutional discourses such as art education, canon construction, and historiography. By using the modern technology of reproduction, Lam adds other dimensions. In spite of the schematic aspect in the teaching and practice of Chinese painting, many traditional painters remained reluctant to embrace modern technologies. Lam not only challenges dogmatic views on ancient ideals, but also sheds light on the irony within the same ideals: that

mechanical reproduction is already inherent within the ideal, even though it somehow obstinately eschews non-manual interventions polemically. Lam took on this irony in this project and turned it on itself, by taking these printed images of canonical works out of textbooks, "re-printing" them, and projecting them onto panels made of plywood.

The choice of plywood is also intriguing. Despite the fact that it looks like luxurious painted panels in a great antiquarian edifice, technically plywood is actually a rather sensible material to use: its surface is smooth, therefore facilitating the painting and printing process; it is also easily burnable, appropriate for Lam's purpose. Lam has been using plywood for a long time. According to him, as a material plywood is much more durable than rice paper, while it also bends and is, therefore, more flexible than other more rigid panels, such as panels of hardwood. Compared to hardwood, plywood also seems to operate with a very different set of cultural associations and significance. A hardwood panel would appear both more artisanal and more refined, carrying with it the spirit of, for example, the Arts and Crafts movement, highlighting the panel itself as an object, either precious, beautiful, or showcasing fine craftsmanship. But these are all distractions from what Lam has in mind. Instead, he carefully and adamantly avoids the aestheticization and reverence of the object. Plywood is valued and chosen precisely because it is an unassuming, if not cheap, and industrial material. It is commonly used in construction,

readily available, readily applied, and just as readily thrown away. To use it as the carrier for these revered images of trees, originally painted by masters and transmitted through books, is yet another interesting mediation. If tradition is venerated so much that it is a mandate to faithfully transmit them through copy and reproduction, it is the notion of permanence that is at the core of the ink painting institution. However, to substitute the vessels for these icons with plywood, which is “cheap,” temporary, fragile, and throwaway, calls into question the notion of permanence and the question of value in Chinese painting. Equally important to Lam is the fact that plywood is a readily accessible material for him as well as for the public. It is everywhere in the city—right outside of his studio, at every street corner, on the sidewalks, plywood is indeed the surface of the great metropolitan city that is Hong Kong, onto which advertisements are casually printed or written, graffiti images are scribbled, sometimes burned with a torch. It is plywood that is the veneer of everyday life. When Lam uses plywood as the foundational primer for this work, he also discreetly asserts the presence of the Hong Kong streets and local people. Plywood therefore evokes the breath and pulse of Hong Kong as a local and living site, its use a gesture against the otherwise elitist canonical images printed on it. These canons have been constructed as timeless art standing beyond historical or geographical specificity, but in effect they continue to serve a vague national aesthetic that is erected as homogeneously and monolithically “Chinese.”



Fig. 6: *Toyama Plain*, from the series *Twelve Scenes of Tokyo*, 1920, by Kawase Hasui. *Art Institute of Chicago*. Gift of Hermon Dunlop Smith in memory of John V. Farwell.



Fig. 7: Lam's photocopy of Hasui's work. Courtesy of Lam Tung Pang.

The inclusion of Japanese and Korean sources among Lam's selection of ink trees in this work is also an important gesture to counter against this monolithic, nationalist, and essentialist construction. Lam includes fragments of trees by Korean painters such as Yi Ching (b. 1581), and Japanese artists such as Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), and Kawase Hasui (1883–1957) (figs. 6–7). In fact, Lam's panels of trees recall the celebrated *byobu* folding screen by Hasegawa Tōhaku (1539–1610), *The Pine Trees Screen*, deemed to be the first of its scale depicting only pine trees, now designated as a national treasure of Japan (fig. 8). Interestingly, Hasegawa's screen was painted with Chinese ink, combining Chinese landscape painting ideals with the Japanese *yamato-e* landscape traditions, as well as incorporating the techniques and

influences of the “splash ink” work of zen painters such as Sesshu. In other words, Hasegawa's pine trees on a screen were also a product of multidirectional confluences, instead of a single directional “influence” that has long been used to illustrate an artistic hierarchy of heritages or to construct a nationalist essentialism. Lam's trees overtly celebrate the differences. They are fragments taken out of their particular contexts, not just the context of the painted landscape they belong to, but also each out of their haughty pedestals as national treasures in national museums, and in turn, in the grand narrative of histories of art. Yet, these trees, though by artists of different nationalities, blend with each other and challenge the illusion of homogeneity.



Fig. 8: *The Pine Trees Screen*, approx. 1595. Six-panel screen, ink on paper. Tokyo National Museum.

While the material of plywood inserts a note of everyday, plebeian, or local voice to unsettle the dominant motif of elitism, and the inclusion of artists of other nationalities counters an implicit cultural hegemony, the images of trees also bring different cultural and sociopolitical meanings. Trees are often the subject with which individual artists working in ink painting show off their signature styles, as they are where a painter can demonstrate their calligraphic talent and ability to render with lines. But trees are also crucial elements in our natural world, not just painted images that became markers of painterly styles and forms. If the trees in *Past Continuous Tense* have been previously abstracted and decontextualized as the vocabulary of the Chinese painting canon, here Lam restores them to a rich and complex signifying field. Trees are the most telling signs of the cyclical nature of our world. They are unassuming, transient, and easily destroyed. In *Past Continuous Tense* Lam also has forest fires in mind. The traces of fire in this work remind us of the fragility of traditions, which often perish by fire. Throughout Chinese history, there is no lack of episodes of burning books and art, either by tyrants such as the First Emperor Qin Shihuang or by fervent art collectors who intended to bring their beloved artwork to the netherworld with them upon their death. (The saga surrounding Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in Fuchun Mountains* is an example.) A viewer from mainland China might quickly recall more recent episodes in the years of the Cultural Revolution, when artworks and books, including artworks by

the very same old masters cited in Lam's work, were thrown into a fire and destroyed by Mao's zealots. Besides these historical references, fire is also a raging symbol in the contemporary world. At the time Lam was making this piece in 2011, self-immolation in Tibet as a political protest was on the rise. Wildfires in California and other places around the world are in the news, reminding us of the wrath of nature. Lam is thinking about the devastating effects of fire on communities large and small. The forests of ink trees and the burnt marks on this piece are not just art historical exercises but also referents to the violence in our history and our social realities.

While forest fires burn and destroy, they also give new life. Trees and fire are together in cycles of life. The forests have been there before us and will likely exist long after we perish as a species. One is reminded of the poem by Tang poet Po Chu-i (772–846),

So tender, so tender, the grasses on the plain,
in one year, to wither, then flourish.
Wildfire cannot burn them away.
Spring breezes' breath, they spring again.⁴

The dual force within the forest and fire that *Past Continuous Tense* represents, as the title suggests, is a vision for an ecosystem of art, culture, and politics that embraces these seemingly oppositional yet complementary and mutually sustaining forces. But in order for this ecosystem to materialize, in a clear-eyed

⁴ Po Chu-i, "Grass on the Ancient Plain," translated by J.P. Seaton.

optimism, there needs to be a “soil,” a space of freedom and respect to allow such experiments. The metaphoric allusion to forest fires in Lam’s piece is apt, precisely because in the natural world fires often add another layer of fertilizing soil, and the cycle continues.

In a sense, plywood, which Lam sees outside of his studio in Hong Kong, can be understood as the local and common soil on which these otherwise abstracted signs of trees can “grow.” Indeed, trees all grow out of a particular soil. When past masters such as Huang Gongwang, Ni Zan, or Xiang Shengmo painted them, they were the objects of ardent observation by an artist, who might have planted them, or who visited them every day on their daily rounds⁵ (fig. 9). They were also the terra and the symbols of home and country. Lam passionately states that Hong Kong used to be a fertile ground for the magical synthesis of all different cultures and a free space for mixing of different experiments with ideologies, political ideals, and personal identities.⁶ Instead of adopting a reductionist view that treats cultural mixing as an aberration of the essentialist “authentic” or “original,” Lam embraces an approach that celebrates postcolonial spaces such as Hong Kong as the site where the blending of cultures is creational, regenerating, and productive.

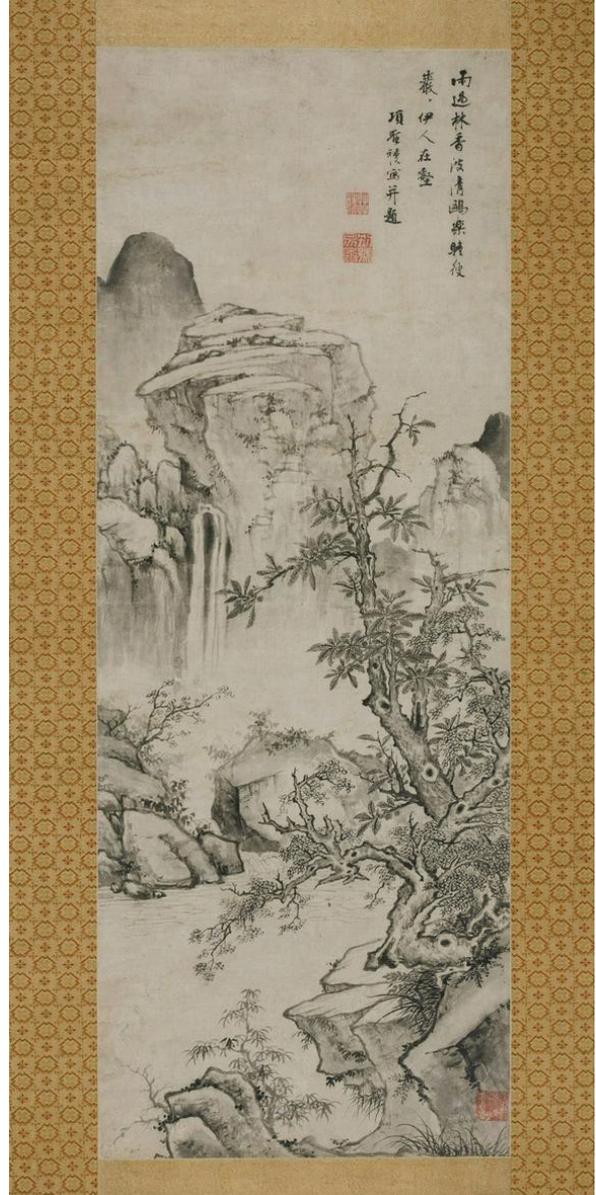


Fig. 9: *Fresh Forest After the Rain*, by Xiang Shengmo (1597–1658). Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B72D37.

However, Lang does not stop at simply affirming Hong Kong as one of these cultural “in-between” spaces, as the term “in-between” suggests two-dimensionality, as if these spaces are sites without complex histories. Therefore, Lam searches for “layers,” which allows for the depths of time and permits co-existences of conflicting pasts. These layers, for Lam, are the

⁵ Huang Gongwang urged painters to always carry a pen in the sack as he did, so that they could study and copy any interesting trees they encountered in their daily rounds; see his *Principles of Landscape Painting* (*Hua shan shui jue*). Ni Zan famously washed the trees in his garden every day, while Xiang Shengmo (1597–1658), famous for his expressive yet naturalistic depiction of trees, especially pine trees, treated trees as portraiture with meticulous observations. See Xiang Shengmo’s painting *Fresh Forest After the Rain* (fig. 9).

⁶ The author’s interview with Lam, *ibid*.

compositions of fertile soil indispensable for any future to thrive. In his painterly language, Lam describes his art precisely as a layering process. His educational experience includes multiple layers of different traditions, different approaches, and different stages of exposure, critical awareness, and revisitation. His artwork *Past Continuous Tense* is also made through a process of layering. On the plywood, metaphorically understood as the soil of Hong Kong, this free-mixed cultural forest faces the menace of “deforestation” given the current political climate, but Lam is also optimistic. The layering metaphor gives him much hope: wildfires destroy a forest, they also create another layer of soil, and new life shall spring forward once the spring breezes in again (fig. 10). Lam therefore encourages us to look at this piece with both an open mind and a flexible perspective: that each tree, with its details and signature styles of masterpieces, are from a hand, and arranged with distance and dynamic between each other, but together, they are also the forest that reminds us of a sense of temporal-spatial depth and scale. They all survived, one way or another, at one stage or in another era. There is a Chinese saying, “One tends to see only the leaf in front of his eyes, not the entire forest.” Lam suggests that we see both the tree and the entire forest at the same time.



Fig. 10: Detail from *Past Continuous Tense*, new tree springing out of the ashes of a fallen forest. Courtesy of Lam Tung Pang.



Above: *Past Continuous Tense*, 2011, by Lam Tung Pang (Chinese, b. 1978, active Hong Kong & Vancouver) Charcoal, image-transfer, and acrylic on plywood. Acquisition made possible by the Kao/Williams Family Foundation, 2020.20a-zz.

Cover: Detail, *Past Continuous Tense*, 2011, by Lam Tung Pang (Chinese, b. 1978, active Hong Kong & Vancouver) Charcoal, image-transfer, and acrylic on plywood. Acquisition made possible by the Kao/Williams Family Foundation, 2020.20a-zz.



Works in the exhibition

Past Continuous Tense, 2011

By Lam Tung Pang (Chinese, b. 1978, active Hong Kong & Vancouver) Charcoal, image-transfer, and acrylic on plywood

Acquisition made possible by the Kao/Williams Family Foundation, 2020.20a-zz



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