

## **“Three years on a stone”**

**Niu An**

“Three years on a stone” is a Japanese proverb, meaning that persistence and hard work pay off. From the time I first started to paint the Scholar Stones series until the opening of my Microcosm solo exhibition, exactly three years have passed. To me, it is quite meaningful to depict a journey in life through a theme using the language of art.

Art is my destiny. Starting to learn Chinese calligraphy when I was a child, I went on to study western painting, and then went to Japan to study industrial design, interior design, and crafting. As a student of design, I noticed that the western concept of “less is more” was significantly inspired by the Japanese philosophy of Zen. Naturally, I was deeply fascinated by this. During my eighth year in Japan, I went to Kyoto and spent a year there, which unexpectedly determined my artistic direction. In Kyoto, I was enchanted by the dry landscapes in the Japanese Zen gardens. I used to ride to Daitoku-ji Temple almost every other day, order a cup of tea, and then just sit quietly beside the corridor of the tea house, contemplating upon the sea and the islands made by stones and sands, upon everything there.

At that time, I had started to paint the Men/Women/Self series, in search of an answer to the philosophical question “who am I?” Nevertheless, hidden deeply within myself was the pursuit of Kyoto’s Zen spirit.

After going back to my hometown, Shanghai, I was eager to gain a deeper understanding of traditional Chinese culture. Because of this idea, I thought about becoming one of the “Beijing drifters”, which is the dream of all young Chinese artists. This plan was eventually discouraged by the heavy smog in Beijing. I started to ask

myself a question: the reason I came back to China from America was that I wanted to be a Chinese artist, but why would I want to leave Shanghai for Beijing? Is it because I was looking for my roots? But Jiangnan\* is my hometown, the land where I was born and raised. Perhaps what I had been searching for all those years lies in this: there are many remarkable Chinese artists, but could any one of them be considered as a remarkable Jiangnan artist? Is it possible for me to put more Jiangnan spirit in my work?

So I started to take action and worked really hard. Although I was someone who had spent only six days getting a driver's license, whenever I had time, I would drive to Suzhou for the gardens or to Huizhou to look at the old houses, at how rainwater ran around them and into the courtyard. I could not help but begin to paint. Gradually, I came to realize that I was trying to answer another question, which is "where am I from?"

I've been very interested in stones since I was young. I used to pick up a stone on every trip. It seems to me that stones in a garden are playing a symphony. If you step inside the garden, you would be touched, for the stones are alive. But I do not like artificial stones. To me, they are like acrobats doing car stunts. The charm of the stone comes from the natural process of its creation, which holds the philosophy of "less is more."

While painting a stone, I did not wish to only admire it, depicting it as the ancients did; nor did I want to conquer it, creating something completely unrecognizable. I was trying to feel it, to paint what I understood about it. It is kind of interesting to depict a stone as "thin," "open," "perforated," and "wrinkled," as well as "ugly," "majestic," "strange," and "clumsy." Nonetheless, the stone's happiness and sadness should also be depicted. How to capture the beauty of the stone? The only way is to let it be free.

I hope to learn the language of the stones and turn it into my own. Every stone has a different expression. For instance, there could be 30% pleasure, 10% anger, and 50% happiness, which is something difficult to describe. I believe the hardest part of painting is trying to express the artist's own changing emotions with a paintbrush. I used different techniques and strokes from Chinese calligraphy, creating not a character, but a painting. Although the structures of these paintings seem very spontaneous, not one stroke was carelessly placed, and all the details were made comfortable to look at for the audience.

The Scholar Stones series is about the Jiangnan people's sentiment for their homeland. As a Jiangnan artist, I believe this sentiment will always be a source of inspiration for me. As they say, if you keep sitting on a stone for three years, eventually, it will be warmed by you.

\* Jiangnan is a region which encloses most of the area of Zhejiang and Jiangsu Provinces in China.

Selected Image :



Niu An (b.1968), *Humbly Scholar Stone-G*, 2016, Ink on paper, 17 x 16 inches (43 x 40 cm)

# “石上三年”

牛安

“石上三年”是一個日本俚語，意思是經歷磨難。從開始創作《石在系列》到即將以個展的形式與大家見面，正好是三年。通過一個主題來闡述一段人生歷程，用藝術創作來表達也是非常有意義的事。

學藝術是我的宿命。自幼從書法入門，後學西畫，又留學日本學工業、工藝、室內建築設計。在學習設計中，發現日本人的禪意對西方設計的“less is more”（少則多）理念產生巨大的影響。自然，我也深深陶醉其中。在日本的第八個年頭，我去京都住了一年，在京都的經歷不經意間決定了我的藝術拓展方向。在京都，我被日式茶院裏的枯山水深深吸引，幾乎每隔兩天就會騎著單車去住所附近的大德寺轉轉，要一碗茶，靜靜地坐在茶院長廊邊，感受著用石頭和沙子營造出的大海、島嶼，感受著其中的一切……

雖然當時開始創作以人 / 女人 / 自身為主題的作品是為了回答一個“我是誰”的哲學問題，但心靈深處，還癡藏著那份對幽幽京都禪意的追求。

剛回到故鄉上海時，開始想對中國傳統文化做一點深入了解。這個想法曾激起去“北漂”的想法，那是所有文藝小青年的夢想，但最終被北京的霧霾攔下。之後，我開始反思：我從美國回中國的理由是想做一個中國藝術家，現在又要從上海到北京，這究竟是為什麼？是要尋根嗎？但我自己的故鄉是在江南，我在這裏生，在這裏成長。或許這就是我尋找多年的答案：在中國有很多優秀的藝術家，但有沒有一個可以稱得上是優秀的江南藝術家？是否讓自己的作品裏多透露出一些江南的情結呢？

於是我開始行動起來，加緊磨練自己。首先憑借在美國六天考出駕照的車技，一有空就開車去蘇州看園林，去徽州看四水歸一的老宅子……情不自禁地開始動筆了。漸漸地我明白了，我在回答另一個問題，那就是：“我從哪裏來？”。

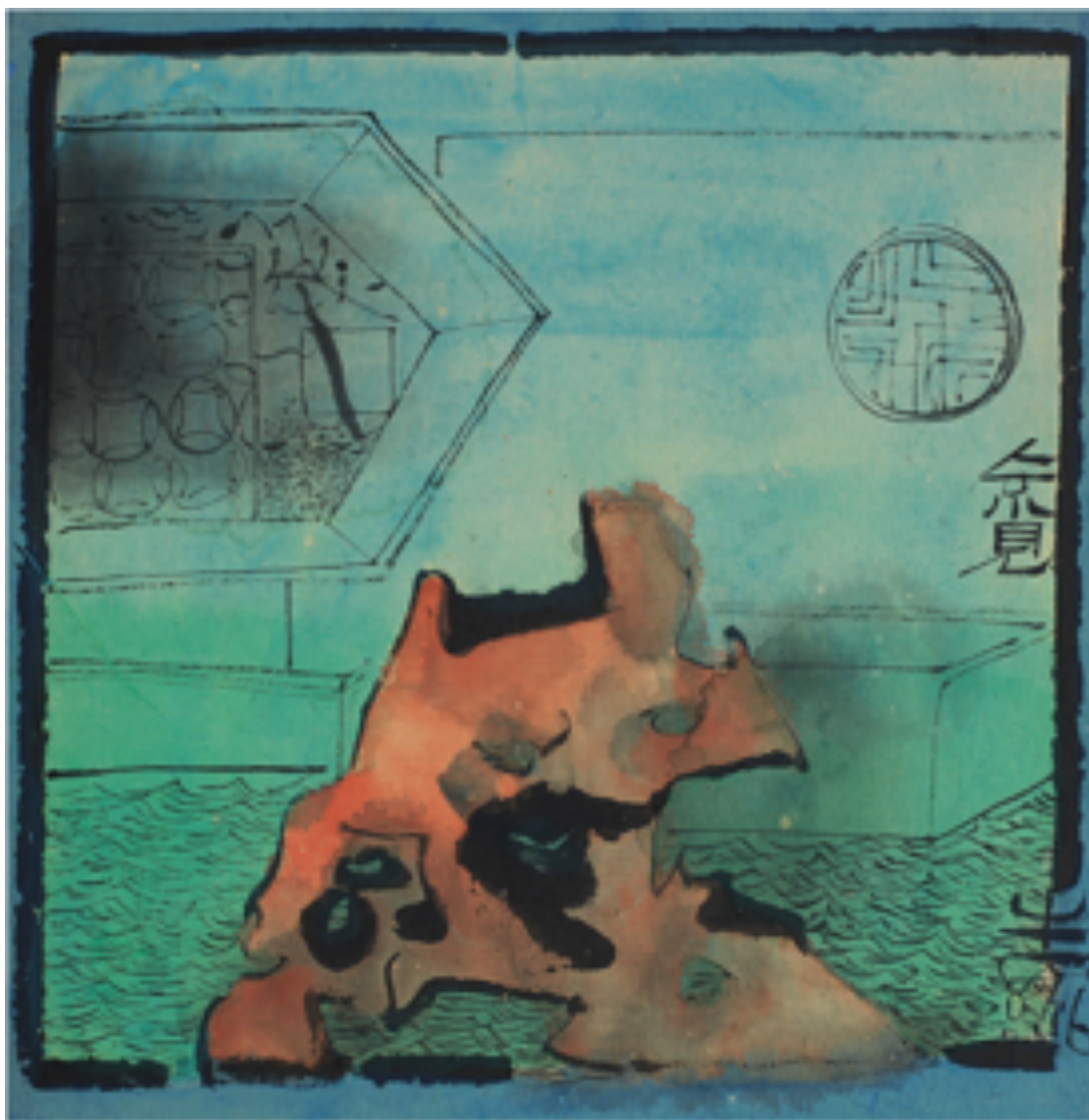
我從小就喜歡石頭，出遊時總愛撿塊石頭回來。我覺得園林裏的石頭是在演繹一部交響樂，一進去就可能會被感動，那裏的石頭就是一個個生命。但是我不喜歡假山石，總覺得他們是在表演車技的雜技演員。石頭之所以有魅力，是因為它自己有造化，是less is more的境界。

我畫石頭的時候，不準備只是欣賞它，像古人一樣地描繪它；也不想征服它，搞出面目全非的作品。我是在感受著石頭，把理解的石頭畫出來。畫太湖石的“瘦、漏、透、皺”，還有“醜、雄、奇、拙”，都是很令人激動的事。同時，我還要畫出它的喜、怒、哀、樂。怎麼才能把它畫得美呢？唯一的辦法就是讓它獲得更大的自由。

領略石頭的精神，然後化成自己的語言。每塊石頭的表情都不一樣的，比方說，一副作品中有30%的喜，10%的怒，50%的樂。儘管一下子很難表達清楚，就像在繪畫中，最難的是如何用畫筆表達畫家自身抑揚頓挫的情感一樣。我將書法裏的一撇一捺，側鋒、中鋒等筆法用進畫裏，最後塑造出來的不是一個字，而是一張畫。這張畫雖然構圖很自由，可是沒有一筆是草率的，同時在細節上處理到能讓人看得很舒服。

《石在系列》是中國江南人的一份鄉愁，作為一位江南藝術家，這份鄉愁將永遠是我的藝術靈感的源泉。石上三年，應生青苔。

作品節選：



牛安 (b.1968)，寒石-G，2016，設色紙本，17 x 16 英尺 (43 x 40 釐米)