

LEISURE & ARTS

Don't Stop,
Just Paint

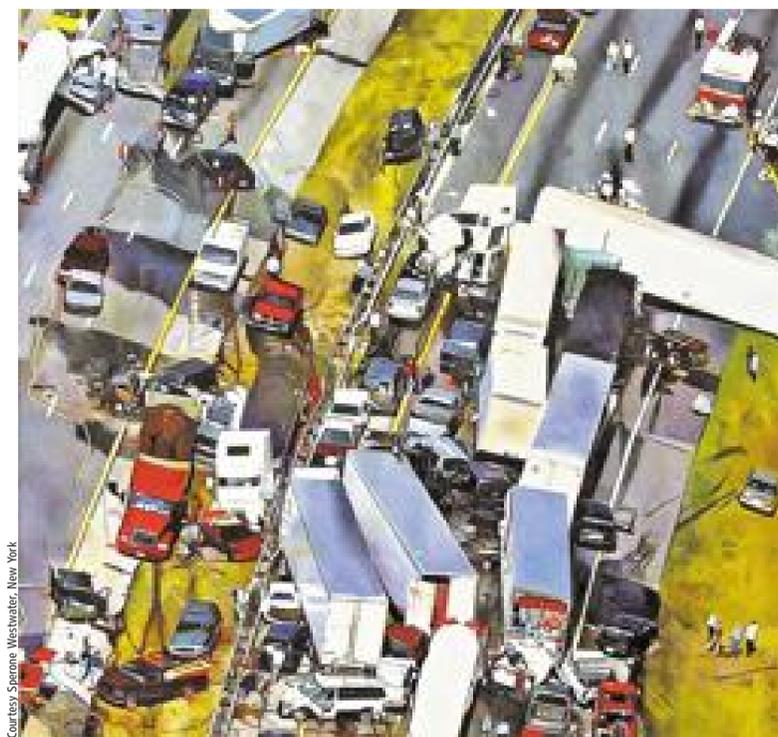
**Malcolm Morley
In a Nutshell:
The Fine Art
Of Painting 1954-2012**
Edgewood Avenue Gallery
Yale University School of Art
Through March 31

BY PETER PLAGENS

The Theory of Catastrophe" (2004)—a big overhead view of a freeway pileup painted by Malcolm Morley in a deliberately offhand, close-enough-for-government-work version of Photo Realism—could well be painting's riposte to the reason the photographer Garry Winogrand gave for photographing something: to see what it would look like photographed. Mr. Morley wanted to see what such a chaotic scene would look like painted. Of course, the obvious objection to this comparison is photography's supposed machine-made "objectivity"—even in this digital age of Photoshop. Mr. Morley, though, is himself something of a painting machine. That's a compliment, meant in the same way you might call Rafael Nadal or Roger Federer tennis "machines."

Mr. Morley was born in 1931 in London. His family's house was blown up by a German bomb during the Blitz; homeless for a time, he led a rough-and-tumble youth. Serving a three-year sentence in the Dickensian-sounding Wormwood Scrubs prison for breaking and entering, the young Mr. Morley read "Lust for Life," the novel about Vincent van Gogh and, he later told a critic, he figured that being an artist was something he could do. After attending art school in London, he moved to New York in the late 1950s. There he met Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, and was set on a course combining Warhol's acceptance of practically any subject that passed in front of his face as suitable for painting with Lichtenstein's surgical irony toward the paradox of the painted image—is it just a bunch of borrowed colored shapes, or is anything meaningful fully there?

For more than half a century, Mr. Morley has attacked that paradox by painting and painting and painting. He's taken his brushes and palette on a wild ride from dreary English postwar realism ("Richmond Hill Below the Wick," 1954) to hard-core Photo Realism (the ocean liner "Cristoforo Colombo," 1965), varieties of neo-expressionism



usually used for graduate-thesis exhibitions. "Malcolm Morley in a Nutshell" was curated by Robert Storr, the school's director, and it's an art education all by itself. An awful lot of expertly improvisational painting moves—oddball compositions, deft brushstrokes, snappy colors, risky gimmicks such as miniature 3-D barrels hanging by wires in "Depth Mine with Sharks"

(2011)—are in action at a break-neck pace. While a few artists might be better at paint-handling than Mr. Morley, he does keep his colors separate and crisp, and he can make you shiver at the dark, cold wetness of Atlantic Ocean water. A certain visual garrulousness is part of his charm.

But he isn't perfect—and he probably wouldn't want to be. A couple of titles ("Aero-naughty-cal

Manuever" from 2009, for instance) are too cute. A painting called "Split Level" (2011) is an expedient top-and-bottom reprise of two previous paintings, and one of the pub installations, "Biggles" (2011), is too sentimental for real translation into a work of art, yet too garish to convey genuine affection. "Rat Tat Tat" (2001), a 17-foot-wide triptych depicting cardboard punch-out models of World War I aircraft—and the least successful work in the show—is installed directly above the gallery entrance, as if to encourage you to miss it.

In the end, though, Mr. Morley is great at representation, not just verisimilitude. He paints whatever wows him at the moment, and manages most times to find the superficial essence (a deliberate oxymoron here) of his enthusiastically varied subjects. Mr. Morley's emphasis on finding his artistic inspiration outside of himself is what keeps his art from succumbing—as so much contemporary work does these days—to overintellectualizing and bottomless self-reference. "The idea," Mr. Morley has said, "is to have no idea. Get lost. Get lost in the landscape." By landscape, he means the hurly-burly of the world at large—ships, airplanes, naval battles, exotic animals, pubs and the occasional catastrophe. The exhibition is a kind of tribute to the good, old-fashioned, lusty painter's life, and—although Mr. Morley is in his ninth decade—an artistic spirit that's still as young as they come.

'The Theory of Catastrophe' (2004).

Mr. Plagens is a New York-based painter and writer.

ART



In the foreground, the scholars' rock 'The Honorable Old Man'; in the background, 'Ten Differentiated Views of the Honorable Old Man' by Liu Dan.

The Dawn of a Rock Renaissance

BY OLIVIA WANG

Chatting over tea in his penthouse studio here, the artist Cai Xiaosong looks like a hipster, with rectangular bamboo-framed glasses and a black-and-white polka-dot scarf. One would not expect that the charismatic 47-year-old finds inspiration in his favorite Song dynasty (960-1279) painters. Yet "they tell me what they think of my paintings, and I also tell them what I think of theirs," Mr. Cai says. He began as a traditional landscape artist, but now focuses on portraits of rocks. To him, rocks are the essence of the Chinese landscape.

He is not alone. In the Chinese art world today, many artists are taking Chinese antiquity as their inspiration and reinterpreting it. And one focus of their attention is Chinese scholars' rocks: complex and often bizarre natural formations, collected and admired for more than a thousand years.

Ranked among the world's earliest abstract sculptures, scholars' rocks are also collected in the West. In London last autumn, Damien Hirst's private trove served as the basis for the inaugural exhibition of White Cube's Bermondsey gallery. A show encapsulating the "scholar's spirit" through scholars' rocks will open at the Musée

Guimet in Paris this spring. During the Song dynasty, rocks were considered among the most esteemed items of the emperors and leading painters of the day. First, huge specimens were gathered for display in gardens; later, smaller ones made up home or studio collections. They brought the natural world inside, providing "imaginary travel" to magical peaks and cave paradises. The most prominent petrophile was the Northern Song emperor Huizong, whose passion for collecting rocks from all over China for his gardens drained the Empire of its resources. In that same period, the painter Mi Fu is said to have been so taken by the power and beauty of a rock that he bowed to it.

By the 17th century, artists used portraits of rocks as vehicles for self-expression, through nuances of brushwork and composition. Today, artists of varied backgrounds and approaches have rediscovered this aesthetic and are gaining wider international recognition.

Mr. Cai writes in his personal statement that he is "tracing tradition with fresh eyes." An aficionado of such European Old Masters as Rembrandt and Michelangelo, he likens painting rocks to the complexities of portraiture in Western classical painting. His use of brush and ink captures the crevices and contours of the rock's surface, heightening a sense of vertigo in the viewer. He places some of his rock portraits between two panels of glass that are then mounted on a plinth, creating a remarkable illusory effect. The rocks appear fragile and transparent, yet command an arresting presence. It's no wonder that his works shone at the 2011 Venice Biennale and are set to be exhibited in Miami and New York this spring.

With his long white beard and traditional robe, the 67-year-old Luo Jianwu could be mistaken for an eccentric 17th-century painter. First inspired by the pine trees of Central Park when he lived for more than a decade in New York, Mr. Luo is known for his dramatic depictions of unique trees, gnarled tree roots and rocks. He moved back to Beijing a few years ago so he could behold the moun-

tains of China, seeking inspiration from nature. Mr. Luo calls rocks "the bones of mountains," because they are the foundation of Chinese landscape paintings.

At his studio-cum-flat, which was being redecorated on the advice of his feng shui master, Mr. Luo was asked which aspects draw him to rocks. "It is like looking at a beautiful woman," he replies—you don't know what draws you in, but something does. His work reflects a modern interpretation that transports the viewer to a different realm. Mr.

Many Chinese artists
today are turning to
scholars' rocks
for inspiration.

Luo's "Rock Like a Cloud," shown recently at Kaikodo Gallery in New York, stands nearly 10 feet tall and shows a rock shrouded in mist, its amorphous form ethereal and devoid of weight.

The works of Liu Dan, a modern-day doyen of rock and landscape paintings, are in private and museum collections world-wide. The Musée Guimet and the British Museum will be exhibiting his work this spring. The 58-year-old Mr. Liu, with his long hair tied in a neat ponytail, is an intellectual as well-versed in the Chinese classics as the Western Old Masters. In his loft apartment, he shows me the exquisite objects he has collected over the past 20 years, which range from Indian sculpture to imperial paintings.

Mr. Liu has often described rocks as the stem cells of landscape painting. To him, rocks also "serve as a key to liberate the mind and heighten the imagination to create." For his "Ten Differentiated Views of the Honorable Old Man" at the "Fresh Ink" show at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, last year, he painted portraits of a prized Ming period rock in the museum's collection from nine different angles, which hung on a curved wall that wrapped around the rock in a semicircle. The 10th view was a nearly 30-foot-long landscape

scroll painting inspired by his interpretation of the rock.

When asked where he has found inspiration, Mr. Liu says, "I look into a candle light, but instead of the flame, I am observing the phenomenon of light and its many patterns and layers caused by the dancing flame. That's the moment I realize I have found what I was looking for." Perhaps that is how he can create the complexities and richness of his paintings that are far beyond the imagination of the viewer.

With Mr. Liu as his teacher and mentor, Tai Xiangzhou is reinterpreting traditional Chinese aesthetics in his own way. The 43-year-old Mr. Tai is an erudite scholar with a serious interest in science and astronomy, subjects that serve as inspiration for his paintings. He favors the works of Stephen Hawking and Roger Penrose, scientists he likens to Confucius and Laozi. His favorite piece in his collection is an iron meteorite that he bought recently at a SoHo gallery in New York. He says he was immediately taken in by the object's shape and resemblance to a scholar's rock, but also by its unique history and the natural processes involved in its creation. Mr. Tai chose to paint this piece in his work "No. 4 of Big Dipper," which is accompanied by a 2,000-year-old Chinese text on astronomy. He made his U.S. debut last spring at the Chinese Porcelain Company in New York, and will have his first solo show there March 16-24. For 2013, he is preparing an exhibition featuring paintings of about 20 favorite rocks that he has encountered in China.

These artists have revived the spirit of the rock while, as Mr. Liu puts it, "pursuing human artistic tradition, not traditional art." And with the younger generation of artists increasingly following their lead, we can expect more formidable artworks to come. As the 30-year-old oil painter Yang Xun summarizes, when asked why he looks to rocks for inspiration, "rocks have no starting point and no ending—they are timeless."

Ms. Wang is a postgraduate student of modern Chinese art at Oxford University.

MUSIC

The Irish Tales
Of 'Shadows
And Light'

BY EARLE HITCHNER

In 2009 John Doyle, a former member of the acclaimed Irish-American band Solas, appeared on no fewer than eight albums. These included "Double Play," a collaboration with Chicago fiddler Liz Carroll that received a Grammy nomination for best traditional world-music recording. "It was highly unexpected," Mr. Doyle said by phone from the Asheville, N.C., home he shares with his wife, Cathy, and 7-year-old daughter, Rossagh. "I'm very proud of the fact that an Irish fiddler and guitarist could get this kind of industry recognition. I think that's something pretty special."

Pretty special is also an apt description of his latest solo album, "Shadow and Light," for Nashville's Compass Records. The Dublin-born singer, guitarist, bouzouki player and composer wrote both of its instrumental tracks, comprising two tunes each, and wrote or co-wrote eight of its nine songs. Even the lone song that's not his, the traditional "Bound for Botany Bay," contains extra lyrics by Mr. Doyle. It's easily his most ambitious and accomplished solo CD, building confidently on his two previous solo releases, "Evening Comes Early" and "Wayward Son."

"Singer-songwriter is a bit of a misnomer," Mr. Doyle said, resisting a label now widely applied to him. "My latest album is not in the mold of, say, James Taylor or Joni Mitchell. It's just my attempt to put a new slant on Irish traditional music and to write new songs about immigration and other topics found in the Irish experience."

As Mr. Doyle turned 40 last year, he felt it was time to take stock of his career. "I think you start to see what's important and what's not important to you," he said. "I have always gravitated toward historical songs that told stories, and my latest album has a number of songs I've written about moments in history, including those in my own family. I'm now writing music differently and, I hope, better."

No song composed by Mr. Doyle is better than "The Arabic." Its rise-and-fall narrative structure, deft use of both end-line and internal rhymes, vivid imagery, emotion without sentimentality, and spare, searing vocal backed by his acoustic guitar virtually drop the listener into the watery nightmare faced by Martin Lohan on Aug. 19, 1915. Lohan—Mr. Doyle's maternal great-grandfather from Roscommon, Ireland—was traveling on the SS Arabic to join his brother in America when he leaped into the sea after a German U-boat hit the ship with two torpedoes, sinking the vessel in 10 minutes and killing 44 people. The wounded Lohan certainly would have drowned had not a woman in a crowded life raft pulled him out of the water. After three months of recuperation in an infirmary on Cork's Spike Island, Lohan decided to stay in Ireland.

Mr. Doyle first heard about this

family incident four years ago from his mother. "The Lohans are a stoic bunch and not much for talking about themselves," he explained. "So it was up to me to turn the story into song. It took a while to write because I wanted to get it right and make it fit my voice. I sang it for myself and for my family."

Unlike Martin Lohan, Mr. Doyle succeeded in immigrating to the U.S., arriving in 1991 and staying. His propulsive, percussive guitar style, honed in Ireland, gained melodic and rhythmic finesse in the U.S. Mr. Doyle credited his adopted hometown of Asheville, a hotbed of American old-timey music, for also expanding his musical sensibility. Today he is considered one of the world's top acoustic guitarists in traditional music.

His unique guitar style is apparent in "Killoran's Church." Paired with "Swedishish," his upt-

With his latest album,
John Doyle delves into
the Irish experience.

empo, Scandinavian-spiked tune, "Killoran's Church" is a beautiful, delicate waltz he composed for his paternal great-grandfather, also named John Doyle, who is buried in Killoran's Church in Sligo, Ireland. "But I performed it for Jerry Holland," he said, referring to a renowned Cape Breton Island fiddler with whom he recorded the album "Helping Hands" just three weeks before Mr. Holland's death from cancer in 2009. "Jerry loved simple waltzes, so I played it the way he would have played it: first part twice, second part once, first part once, and second part twice." Mr. Doyle's latest solo album is dedicated to both Mr. Holland and Donal Ward, an uncle whose death from cancer last year motivated him to compose the tunes "Tribute to Donal Ward / The Cur-rachman."

A fascination with history is evident in such Doyle songs as "Clear the Way," based on American Civil War battles at Antietam and Fredericksburg, and "Farewell to All That," inspired by Robert Graves's "Good-bye to All That," a classic memoir about World War I. "I see both wars as connected," Mr. Doyle said. "Nobody seemed to learn from either."

A lighthearted take on family surfaces in "Little Sparrow," a bright, buoyant song written for his daughter, while a far more serious and, literally, sobering song, "Bitter Brew," deals with alcoholism. "It's a fresh take on an old subject," Mr. Doyle said. "I gave up drinking 19 years ago." He sings the song with a rueful, American old-timey music inflection in his voice.

Among other album guests are former Solas bandmate John Williams on button accordion and concertina, Alison Brown on banjo, Tim O'Brien on mandolin and backing vocals, and Stuart Duncan on fiddle. But radiating the heat in "Shadow and Light" is Mr. Doyle, whose solo artistry draws impressively from heart and hearth.

Mr. Hitchner writes on Irish and other roots music for the Journal.

Pepper ...
And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"We're top management, Don, we can't stage a coup."