

RIGHT: *Memento (The Tree of Life and Death)* (2008), 72" x 96", oil on canvas.
BELOW: *Aviary* (2008), 72" x 48", oil on canvas.



Rick Leong

The Montreal painter revamps Chinese painting traditions with bold colour and imagination.

Text by BETTY ANN JORDAN



Montreal painter Rick Leong's challenge has been to take on what he describes as the "rainbow conundrum." "Every time we see a rainbow or a sunset, we stop; it's so special. I'm trying to recreate or retrigger that phenomenal experience without being cheesy. I'm aiming at a condensation of feeling, like poetry, though my language is visual," explains the 36-year-old artist. "I am Nature" was the unironic title of his recent solo show at Montreal's Parisian Laundry gallery. His new pictures are set in beautiful but dangerous woods, peopled by anthropomorphic flora and fauna. Verging on the psychedelic, his style is more than a nod to the enchanting sensibility of Japanese anime, and films such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* or *Avatar*. Playful and innocent, nature is populated by stones with faces, spirits of the forest, and sometimes words hidden in the landscape. Others include animal forms, such as an owl made from lichen, or a bush in the likeness of a fox. His new works are heavily inflected by time he spent surrounded by the coniferous forests at The Banff Centre, where he did a six-week artist residency last fall.



“Leong’s contour outlines are rhythmic yin-yang expressions of tension and release, spiralling energy, feng shui metaphysics”



FAR LEFT: *Fall* (2006), 72" x 60", oil on canvas.
LEFT: *Hush* (2010), 72" x 78", oil on canvas.
BELOW: *Midnight Zip* (2007), 24" x 24", oil on canvas.

BACKGROUND A third-generation Canadian of Chinese heritage, Leong was born in Burnaby, B.C., and raised on the lower mainland near Kootenay and Nelson, where he grew up in what he describes as a “hippie household” — a home always geared toward creativity. His mom, an artistic jack-of-all-trades, draws and plays several instruments. His older brother taught him to draw, and his older sister used to perform with a variety of bands. Leong finished his bachelor of fine arts degree in Victoria, where he loved being surrounded by water and mountains. Then, he continued his training in the master of fine arts program at Concordia University in Montreal, where he now lives with his wife, Trinity, and their 11-year-old son, Kai. His studio, with ample space to accommodate his many 6-by-10-foot paintings, is in the eclectic neighbourhood of St. Henri, in a five-storey industrial building rife with artists.

INSPIRATION As Leong has matured as an artist, he has found himself strongly attracted to traditional Chinese painting styles similar to those in ancient scrolls. He was initially hesitant to explore that aesthetic source, mainly because he had not undergone classical art training in that field. And, there were so many artists coming out of China who were already well-versed. With encouragement from his professor, painter Eleanor Bond, he overcame his reservations to bring a fresh, exciting perspective to centuries-old prototypes.

STYLE Leong’s operatically scaled fantasias play with traditional Chinese landscape painting styles, subjects and techniques, but he goes in deep and gets up close. His is a transcendent yet playful vision of the unity of all living things, with animal forms and hidden texts providing the underlying structure.

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