

## LU Song's Japanese Garden and Friday's Desert Island

by SHEN Qilan

LU Song slowly slides into a chair in his workshop, gazing at a painting on his wall as if he's watching a group of faraway islands.

As he's gazing, his fingertips move across the distant canvas. He shakes his head, it seems the painting he imagines is not the one he sees in his mind's eye.

**What's the next step? Where to next?** These are the questions that most excite and frustrate LU at this stage of his process.

Like Robinson Crusoe's Friday, once he steps off that desert island, he's thinking: what's the next step? Where to next? Perhaps he's not thinking about anything, perhaps he's putting himself into the hands of Fate, ready to be swept away.

### ONE

Robinson Crusoe is adrift on the Pacific. He happens upon an island. Drawing upon his experiences and will power, Crusoe rebuilds a civilization of one. This is what happens in William Defoe's 1719 novel, *Robinson Crusoe*. By chance, Crusoe rescues one of the island's natives, and names him "Friday." Crusoe and Friday gradually become the best of friends, and Friday accompanies Crusoe when he returns to Civilization. This tale of one man's conquest of Nature through will and civilization has been popular for three centuries. When Manifest Destiny was in vogue, Crusoe was the persevering conqueror - - lauded as and memorialized as a hero.

But it was Michel Tournier's retelling of Robinson Crusoe that moved LU. The 20th century French writer disagreed with Defoe's premise of man's triumph over Nature, penning the novel, *Friday, or, The Other Island*, in response. The new novel later gained renown in its own right. In Tournier's version, Robinson Crusoe arrives at the desert island, but Manifest Destiny is no longer on his side. His attempts to create order are toppled again and again. The protagonist constantly interrogates and questions himself -- this Crusoe is a modern man. He attempts to convert Friday, but Friday has his own beliefs and ways of dealing with the world. Unexpectedly, Crusoe is influenced by Friday, and comes to terms with Nature and Destiny. Just as the tumult of the 20th century moved individuals to re-examine reality, questions about human existence and significance lie at the core of this new story. The novel concludes interestingly, when the ship -- a symbol of civilization -- arrives at last, Crusoe chooses to remain on the desert island, and it is Friday who sets out for "Civilization." The two characters' identities and lives have been swapped.

Why was it Friday who left the island, and not Crusoe? Let's imagine what Friday is thinking about as he stands on the ship's deck. It is a bright, clear day. The sea is calm and endlessly blue. He turns to gaze upon the desert island whereupon he was dubbed "Friday." He is sailing towards the unknown. At that moment, is he Friday, or Crusoe? Did Friday ever truly exist? Or was he an alternate personality constructed in Crusoe's imagination?

LU Song is fascinated by these ambiguities. On the canvas, he seeks the unknown. In last year's *Almost a Portrait*, his *Shadow Portrait* and *Shadows* series both revolved around depicting the same scene over and over to attain a dark, inexplicable space. His brushstrokes were imbued with the qualities of "memory, psychology, and experience." In the current *Japanese Garden* series, he continues to skillfully lead the eye and the spirit towards the depths of the canvas. However, there are some differences pertaining to space. The mysterious atmosphere remains, but LU's creative core -- that initial impulse that drives the artist to pick up the paintbrush again and again -- lies at the center of *Japanese Garden*.

Every creative individual must come to understand what drives them. When working, the artist is spurred onward by this impulse to create. LU knows what triggers his sensitive nerve endings and what sparks ephemeral inspiration. He knows how his hands will move the brush across the canvas, and when he will encounter that mysterious energy deep within the canvas. His body, in and of itself, is one source of that mysterious energy.

*Japanese Garden* is a series of mysterious maps.

## TWO

Like Crusoe attempted to do on that desert island, LU also strives to create an orderly cosmology within his work -- an omnipotent theoretical scaffolding. His vocabulary borrows from architecture, music, and Roland Barthes, including terms such as "lead," "leitmotif," and "punctum." He is like a builder who, after building a house with his bare hands, attempts to explain the mechanics and structural relationship between each brick and wall. To LU, each word containing the power of elucidation is to be treasured.

LU analyzes Turner's paintings. In Turner's slave ships, "flags, masts, or figures are all described as secondary, but because they are relative to the abstract sky and waves, they are often the first to be observed. Furthermore, without the concreteness of these objects and figures as reference, the viewer would not even recognize the terror of the waves. Therefore, the 'lead' provides a clue, a reference, or a guide."

This is how he describes his creative process when it comes to his own paintings. A certain block of color is the "lead," as the composition transforms, it becomes the subject. As the subject transforms, it gradually develops a relationship with other components, and this conglomerate becomes a "lead" as well. The composition is constantly changing and developing. As he pursues the "lead," LU ultimately creates a new painting.

That's right, pursuit. What's interesting is LU's pursuit. He chases, seeks, and builds on the canvas. He lures the viewer's gaze, he seeks it. He builds the "lead" in his mind's eye -- the component that captures the viewer's eyes at once. Every painting leads the viewer's eye down a different path. Though every painting in the *Japanese Garden* series is based on the same blurred and wrinkled photograph, every time LU paints that photograph, he constructs a wholly new "Japanese garden."

When viewing all of these "Japanese Gardens" together, I am reminded of the immersive theatrical experience, *Sleep No More*. When one steps into *Sleep No More*, one can choose to follow any character's path, to complete the entirety of a single storyline. Audience members may witness painful murder and an agony of regret. If they follow supporting cast members, they might run and leap joyfully or fall in love. Each decision presents a completely unique story, but it's all part of the same play.

Audience members will never see the whole play in its entirety, just as LU Song will never be able to capture all perspectives in *Japanese Garden*. Each time, his depiction, his lead, his construction -- they all originate from singular moments in which his mental state, mood, and the way the canvas is responding determine his next steps and the steps after that.

**LU chases the paintbrush, the paintbrush constructs the storyline. Every image is an invitation, every *Japanese Garden* is a jaunt through the garden. The gaze follows the mood, just as the audience follows the actor.** Yet in the immersive experience of *Sleep No More*, actors have scripts and characters have storylines. To the audience, the play is a thrilling adventure, but the play as a whole is a stable and safe construction. But LU had no script in the creation of *Japanese Garden*. Each new painting was a brand new chase, and a brand new storyline -- a most exhausting labyrinth. This is what excites him -- the unknown conclusion.

The “lead” that LU pursues so ardently often disappears in the midst of these extended pursuits. At great risk, he often disassembles the planks beneath his feet in order to build another step downward. When a painting seems nearly complete, LU will often say, “5% left. But to obtain 5%, I might add 50% and take away 45%.” **The climax might be around every corner, but every climax might be erased.**

LU understands the effect his brushstrokes create. In Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*, the titular Rebecca never appears, but this never impacts the audience’s perception of the character. Instead, the character is all the more mysterious and open to interpretation. Though painting is not confined to the limits of linear progression, human vision seeks focus and imaginary focus, just as paintings contain reality and the imaginary, warm and cold, and black, white, and gray contrast. It is often the case that the artist’s personality and style is found outside points of focus, in areas that seem empty and are often overlooked. Careful artists pay special attention to these areas, and the instinctive, sensual, and illogical brush strokes placed here are what constitute the painting’s innate charm. This is an artist who is conscious of his tools.

What’s the next step? Where to next? This is a journey without a destination, a script without a conclusion. A film that is written as it is filmed, and filmed as it is written. LU takes great pleasure in this process, as Rothko said, **“A painting is not a picture of an experience. It is the experience.”**

### THREE

Tournier’s Friday captivates LU. But he also enjoys the conclusion of another story about Crusoe.

It is a very short tale. After Crusoe is saved from shipwreck and restored to civilization, he becomes famous. His life is beautiful -- a home, a wife, peace and happiness. But something is missing. Crusoe’s wife asks if he longs for life on the island, but he emphatically denies it. When his wife passes away, Crusoe begins searching. With memory as his only guide, he seeks the island again. For years and years, he wanders the seas on various fishing boats, but he never finds it.

He seeks until he is too old and grey to set out to sea. Then, Crusoe spends each day at the pub, drinking and telling his tale to all who will listen, but no one believes him. Until one day, someone says to him, “it’s not that you can’t find the island. You’ve passed by it countless times, but you didn’t recognize it. And that island, it didn’t recognize you either.” The story ends here, in a moment pregnant with epiphany and regret.

What is the desert island to Crusoe that it should so ensnare his memories and haunt his dreams? This tale of “mutual un-recognition” elicits a sigh. The island Crusoe can never return to drives him to embark again and again. As he passes by each island, he feels a vague sense of familiarity and examines it carefully, but concludes that he was never stranded on this particular island. The island sees a familiar looking man passing by, full of hope, it yearns for him to come to shore. But the man inevitably leaves, disappointed, and the island does not recognize him either.

Yet the island is Crusoe’s impetus, just as the Japanese garden is LU’s impetus. Again and again, LU steps into the garden via his paintbrush, but he never sees a familiar scene. Every garden is new. He must seek, again and again, he must pursue. All of the paths, one after another, become mysterious maps.

Balthus said, “To paint is not to represent, but to penetrate, to go to the heart of the secret, to work in a way to reflect the interior image. The painter is also a mirror. He reflects the mind, the line of interior light and projects himself towards the dark

unbreakable core to draw from it the true identity of the person portrayed.”

LU Song’s Japanese garden is an endless adventure on a desert isle, an unreachable open space, and a breakthrough into an unknown world. Thus, in the *Japanese Garden* series, imagery emerges from the depths of paintings to greet the audience. Although the subject LU paints is an intricate and civilized “Japanese garden,” his brush does not seek intricacy, nor does it pursue order. He seeks that which is indescribable, which exists beneath shadows and leaves intertwined.

LU’s process is the process by which Crusoe attempted to tame Friday. He pursued him, he named him. Civilization set out to conquer the desert island, but in reality, the island belongs to Friday and Crusoe cannot find it again. The time and space within the depths of each painting determine LU’s brushstrokes.

**The desert island avoids civilization, and some things in this world will never be tamed.** LU repeatedly seeks the invisible desert island, which only exists in Crusoe’s memories and dreams. **The intricate Japanese garden is the breach through which LU pursues the ferocious undercurrents that lie beneath civilization’s surface. He purposely elicits this tense undercurrent. Manifold invisible narratives are hidden behind each exquisitely tamed scene and between the flickering of time and space.**

As long as there are objects that cannot be tamed, new imagery will always emerge.

As long as he never finds that island, there will always be an excuse to set out.

He is waiting for the island to awaken.

He is waiting to wake up.