

Rebekka Steiger: Between the Tamable and the Untamable

—A Brief Discussion on “Nature” and the Cross-Cultural Journey in the Work of Rebekka Steiger

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In Rebekka Steiger’s free and unrestrained creations, “nature” is a persistent and important theme. This is not only because some of her landscape paintings depict various scenes from places such as the Tengger Desert or the Alps, but also because blooming flowers and intertwining branches often occupy an essential place in her compositions, poetically framing galloping riders or glancing foxes. In the exhibition *Nightly Encounter*, this remains largely true; “nature” always appears as a vast whole, enveloping humans and other creatures, seemingly shattering the many “conqueror” illusions generated by our accelerated modern life. The whip-wielding rider charges towards us from the canvas, while the fox flees in the opposite direction into its depths. One might say these two paths also represent a confrontation between the tamable horse and the untamable fox. They are deliberately chosen by the artist as the two main motifs of the exhibition, repeatedly depicted to reinforce the complex, shifting currents of energy between humanity and nature.

Through the connection she builds with animals, Steiger believes humans can become more harmoniously part of nature. What I find particularly compelling is her sensitivity in capturing situations and dynamic details that authentically reflect such relationships. As seen in the *Nightly Encounter* series, in the deep of night, humans and the untamable foxes momentarily meet. Through their glowing, backward glances and swift, retreating postures, the artist successfully sustains a sense of appropriate, mutually respectful distance between human beings and other creatures. Simultaneously, by maintaining this distance, she aesthetically preserves the mysterious allure of the fox, alluding subtly to ancient legends that magnify its charm and destructiveness. For Steiger today, the newly embraced motif of the “fox” offers vast space for further exploration, while the “rider”, already one of her signature images, remains a central motif to which she continually returns.

She was first drawn to this image of the rider after seeing a photograph of horsemen on the Mongolian grasslands. She was fascinated by how riders control their horses through subtle shifts in their own body weight; the horse and the human forming an S-shape, merging into a single entity. In her depictions, humanity, as a child of nature, engages with it in dynamic cooperation rather than domination. Historically, the domestication and selective breeding of horses for transport evolved into a specialized technology, and cavalry—once an elite conquering force in the age of cold weapons—swept across Eurasia. Yet Steiger consciously avoids these historical imprints. She often presents only a solitary rider and horse within a natural setting and intentionally distances herself from the typical rider imagery of Western art history, such as portraits used to display noble lineage, in which hounds, horses, and distant forests merely serve as symbols of status. What she seeks to express is precisely the opposite: a profound unity between humanity and nature. Thus, in composing the rider, she deliberately uses the same brushstrokes and tones to link the human and the horse into a single continuum. For this young artist, the idea of domestication does not necessarily imply an objectifying control or transformation of nature. On the contrary, it deepens the inherent kinship between humanity and the natural world. In other words, whether she depicts images of tamable or untamable, Steiger’s ultimate aim is to suggest the intimacy and oneness of humanity and nature, a relationship akin to an original, undivided whole. Moreover, through her diverse techniques, sometimes paired with narrative texts, she intentionally seeks to evoke a sense of “the unity of heaven and humanity” on a more abstract level.

Steiger describes painting as the revelation of her state of mind, encapsulating the improvisational elements of her practice, which can also be interpreted as “Projective Tests” within the field of psychology. The image of an artwork could be gradually constructed throughout the process, serving as a verification of the artist’s inner world. Steiger conducts experiments with different pigments to ensure that their fluidity and permeability interact harmoniously when she applies colors to wet painting surfaces. At times, she tilts the canvas to allow the pigment to spread freely or transfers the surface onto another sheet, creating a monotype which later becomes the background of a new work. Conversely, a wet sheet would be applied to the artwork’s surface as part of the composition. Fascinated by Chinese classical ink drawing, Steiger consciously integrates the interlacing of forms and the blending of pigments as a fresh aesthetic in her practice. Meanwhile, her painterly preferences reflect her view of the relationship between nature and humankind. Each painting is a

negotiation between the artist and the medium—one that balances chance and control according to the physical feature of the material, and that mirrors the tension between untamable and tamable forces of nature.

Moreover, at the core of this series of natural imagery lies a humanistic spirit that offers a fresh, multicultural perspective in Steiger's artworks. As a curious observer and traveler migrating between Asian and European classical cultures, she refines and reinterprets symbols rich with cultural meaning. For instance, transitioning from the highly stable society in Switzerland to the rapidly changing society in China, Steiger has been inspired by the fluctuating environment and has discovered various aesthetic principles across different cultures. Reflecting on her previous exhibition in China, *Octopus Mountain* at TANK Shanghai, she notes that the title derives from her observations of how Chinese people name mountains, which they usually do based on concrete features of the world. She loves such an imaginative act, reminiscent of how children perceive shapes of clouds. She also has a deep interest in the appreciation of stone culture in East Asia. From the stones in Nikko National Park in Japan to myths of fox spirits and feminine energy, she traces underlying morphological and psychological correspondences that resonate across regions. Steiger has encountered similar legends of fox spirits in China, Japan, and Vietnam—foxes transform into women with supernatural powers who disturb human society and overturn the established hierarchy. As a woman living in the contemporary age, she is aware of the stigmatization of women embedded in those stories, while her foxes on the canvas serve as a critique, allowing the reinterpretation of female images. Sometimes Steiger uses writing as a pathway to elaborate on the complex cultural information embedded in her expressive paintings. These texts not only serve as a record of her travels and a refined sensitivity shaped by multilingual studies, but also to rediscover symbolic motifs that can transcend superficial cultural differences and bridge diverse thoughts and ways of expression, such as foxes and riders. In Rebekka Steiger's artistic journey, we are reminded that the cultural distance, when approached with openness and curiosity, has turned out to be a generative force of creation.

It is precisely this broad curiosity and her willingness to cross geographical and cultural boundaries that impart a distinctive abstract quality to Steiger's landscapes. Sunsets, rivers, and deserts all dissolve into flowing fields of color, traversed by riders. Sometimes these figures do not charge forward but linger within the scenery, like the small figures dotting a traditional Chinese landscape. It is difficult to locate these landscapes precisely, just as the blooming flowers and curling vines could belong to countless corners of the world. Often, they seem to emerge from the earth itself, unfolding gradually through calligraphic, repetitive short brushstrokes. The eyes of the fox glimmer in the darkness, as do the illuminated edges of delicate petals. Night, the time when the outline of most objects vanishes, becomes a threshold moment. If we, standing in front of the canvas, also dissolve into it, our eyes would glow as well. In the mysterious night, within the artist's anticipation, lies the hope that humanity and the natural world would meet again in a state of primordial unity, as if they had never been apart. Perhaps this is the meaning of "encounter": to form meaningful and imaginative connections through openness, and to recognize from a higher, cross-cultural perspective, the unity of all living things. From a narrowly human viewpoint, the distinction between tamable horses and untamable foxes seems a rigid categorization based on utility—necessary, perhaps, in the development of human civilization. Yet through the postures and details Steiger chooses to depict, this gaze toward nature gradually dissolves, transforming instead into a quiet philosophy of appropriate distance and dynamic balance.