

Capturing the Color of Spring in Rapidly Changing Beijing
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Monique Rollins

Monique Rollins speaks through her colors. Her paintings are made up of bright reds, yellows, greens and blues, and the way she describes her works, particularly those from her time in Beijing, march her vivid style.

Even her face turns red whenever she's asked a question.

"I'm better a painter than a talker," she said, blushing, at the opening of her latest solo exhibition at the Beijing American Center on Aug 28. "With my works, I just want to deliver my picture of moments, my experience of the situation to people, and to present it in my own language."

Her show, Beijing Memory, Nostalgia Paintings, which runs until Nov 30 and is supported by the US embassy, comprises works painted by the American artist during an eight-week stay in the Chinese capital.

Rollins, who is based in Wilmington, Delaware, arrived in Beijing during this year's Spring Festival, the Chinese New year holiday, in February after being invited by the IU Artist Residence, a center for international artists to gather, create and communicate.

"Spring is a time of new beginnings and rebirth. It's warming with more sun. Girls are in their high heels rather than boots," she said, explaining that she wanted to capture the dynamism of spring in Beijing in her printings.

The city was energetic and passionate, she remembered. "What struck me most were the young people. They have so much passion to show the world who Chinese people are and what they can do. They are filled with potential, and that had a really big impression on me."

The 35-year-old artist said the bright colors in her paintings are her fingerprint, explaining: "I don't choose them, they know where to go. I just follow my heart while working."

Shingyuan Tsao, an art historian and deputy director of Qinghai Museum in northwestern China, spoke highly of Rollins' work, remarking that the composition was similar to some Chinese styles.

"Monique leaves the center of her pictures empty, relating the freedom and silence in your heart," she explained, comparing the work to that of Bada Shanren, a Chinese artist of the 17th century. "There must be some kind of link between them, between their philosophies, and that is the relation Monique has in some way with Chinese culture."

Yuan Ting, a visitor at the exhibition, described the blank areas in the paintings as like the artist's still heart at the center of a chaotic world. "It echoes the way she feels living in Beijing," she added.

Rollins said the response to her Beijing paintings back in the United States had been incredible, with people calling them her best work. It was also good to be able to reflect with friends and fans about her brief stay in the city, she said.

“My impression of Beijing was very complicated,” she said, explaining that in many ways the city was very old, such as the traditional courtyard homes and ancient alleyways, but in other ways very new, as the cityscape is constantly changing at such a fast pace.

“It was a lot of opposites,” she added. “A day in Beijing feels like five minutes. It moves at such a pace. But I enjoyed it.”

Yue Xiaofei, a professor at the Beijing Institute of Clothing Technology, pointed out that “nostalgia” was a key word in the title of the exhibition, saying that indeed Beijing had changed rapidly, while in contrast New York looks almost like it did a decade ago.

“The pace of change in Beijing must have inspired Monique when she worked on these paintings. I can feel that in this exhibition,” she said.

Cui Xiuwen, a contemporary Chinese artist and founder of the IU Artist Residence, said the paintings presented positive energy, passing enlightenment and happiness to all who see them.

This year, Rollins will hold further exhibitions, such as in Miami, Bologna in Italy, and in Kiev, and will take her representations of Beijing’s varied landscape and emotional colors around the world.

Tsao said there are no boundaries between countries in the world of art, as people’s souls share the same language of art, and urged more communication between international artists like Rollins.

“It’s our backgrounds that cause the differences in how artists from different countries express their art,” she added.