

Art for Happiness

Li Shuang

I have always believed that the process of artistic creation, when used for happiness, is not a waste of one's energy. Not even a single drop of energy should be wasted in the mire of worldly delusions: in the struggle to differentiate good and bad, superior and inferior, or in the effort to gain profit and fame. All of the self-deceiving myths (and sometimes even the justified wars) that we human beings create as interpretations and solutions for problems between us — intellect and instinct, dogma and philosophy, nationality and ethnicity — are no more than efforts to resolve the illusions projected by our own minds since the very beginning of life-force; what we have been doing all this time is nothing but an attempt to amend a self whose nature is intrinsically perfect and supreme.

Since childhood, I have regarded myself as a laboratory rat for art. Isn't art the science of the human soul? Until today, I have been putting my lab-rat-self through trials for almost 40 years.

Immediately before this New York exhibition, I exerted myself to step out of my shell. I discovered that happiness for me is to contribute and explore, to engage with creativity and adventure; that I do not need a goal of success, a sense of gain, or a specific purpose, other than the fulfillment of happiness and gratitude. From now on, I will reclaim all the energies I have deployed, so that I am no longer depleted by reasoning and logic, for the sole taste of one visceral gift: happiness.

My family suffered a dramatic change of class, from the 'ruling' to the 'ruled', during the period of the Cultural Revolution. However, this tragic turning point actually awakened my innate passion for art. In the year of 1971, at the age of 13, I picked up the paintbrush, and have not put it down for the last 40 years.

In 1980, as a naive 22-year-old girl driven by intuition, I took part in the reform and opening-up of China, in the democratic movement, and became the only female founding member of the Stars Group (Xing Xing). My voyage of art and my first taste of love set sail in that turbulent era, which brought me two years of imprisonment. When President Mitterrand of France visited China, he raised my case to Deng Xiaoping, who immediately gave his pardon for my release. Inspired by this incident, the Civil Affairs Bureau revised the constitution to soften the policy on exogamous marriages with foreigners. I thus turned out to be the heroine of the first modern interracial marriage, a revolutionary figure for both avant-garde art and the right for marital freedom in China.

With art and the pursuit of love, which radiates the most tender of all energies, I opened the door onto the world stage.

In 1984 a New York Times journalist wrote that the vanguard artist Li Shuang performed the 'art' of the first Chinese transnational marriage. People praised me as some kind of first mover. Those who still remembered the history of that period offered their thumbs up. Yet in retrospect, the real backing force in the 'Li Shuang Incident' was the power of the Chinese people's natural appetite for the free expression of beauty and love. As an individual, I only happened to be 'the one' standing at the top of the tides and waves of this collective aspiration for freedom.

I am truly delighted to have my new series of works exhibited in New York this time. These are my 'heart works' derived from the echo of my innate self.

In the year 2000 I had a near-death experience that forcibly overturned my life outlook and values. I can never fully recount it, but each time I recall it, the vivid flashbacks are more real than reality. However, I have not been able to represent that celestial realm of ineffable beauty through painting — it is as if there are no materials in this three-dimensional world that can be used to match that stunning impression. As I have not found a way out with external assistance, I have therefore retreated and started the journey into inner space.

There is an ancient Eastern instruction on the three stages of the spiritual path, from "viewing a mountain as a mountain" to "no longer viewing a mountain as a mountain" to eventually "re-viewing a mountain as it is". 18 years have now passed, and I finally can liberate myself from the shackles of searching and grasping. There is no such thing as 'must-do' — there is only 'wish-to-do', I told myself. The heavy past is merely a moment that was once experienced, but is now gone, and this moment can only exist in the form of wisdom and gratitude in one's heart.

If you hold onto dark memories, you will have the tendency to create more dark moments. If you long for happiness, if you retroactively realize that life itself has always been pure joy, then you will paint your next moment with that very joy.

To all those who are willing to find joy and happiness, please allow me to present to you this exhibition as the first gift of my re-engagement with this beloved world.

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