

Interview with Contemporary Chinese Artist Yang Kai

By Fan Junyi
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Yang Kai is an active contemporary artist in Northwest China. His works focus on nature, dialogues between Eastern and Western art, and fusion of different themes. As an artist who spent many years in France, Yang Kai considers nature as his spiritual foundation. He explores how traditional art mediums like oil painting can manifest his unique understanding of art and Eastern and Western cultures within the context of the 21st century society. Reflecting on his over forty years of artistic career and the sources of his creative inspiration, he also shares his unique perspectives on the current state of contemporary art.

In preparation for Yang Kai's solo exhibition at the Changzhou Art Gallery, Fan Junyi, the curatorial assistant from W Ming Art, conducted an online interview with the artist. They discussed the significance and importance of the works displayed in this exhibition, as well as the impact of the artist's personal experiences on his creative process.

Fan Junyi: Welcome and thank you for accepting the interview from W Ming Art. Can you first talk about how your experience studying in France has influenced your entire artistic career? Also, how did your mentor Pierre Carron at the Paris Fine Arts School impact your artistic creation?

Yang Kai: My teacher's painting style is highly abstract, but he didn't demand students to imitate his style. Instead, he encouraged us to create based on our feelings, guiding us to follow our inner selves in painting. Regarding oil painting, I strongly agree with Zao Wou-Ki's statement

that "it takes 20 years to master this technique." The education I received at the Paris Fine Arts School effectively taught me oil painting techniques, helping me solve difficulties in creative methods. It now allows me to explore Eastern aesthetics and techniques with the matured oil painting skills I've acquired, integrating different artistic expressions from East and West into my creations.

Fan Junyi: Your landscape painting style and brushwork bear a resemblance to artists from Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, such as Cézanne. Even your previous book, "Cézanne - Yang Kai," compared your works. Can you talk about the inspiration you drew from this father of modern art?

Yang Kai: I've always considered Cézanne as my big brother. During my 20 years in Paris, I almost saw his works every day in various art galleries. His landscape paintings amalgamate trees, mountains, and various objects into a particular form. I absorbed the structure of his paintings and the composition of objects in his strokes, making my images more robust. Simultaneously, I learned from Claude Monet the play of light and shadow, from Camille Pissarro the sense of haziness, and from Camille Corot the realism in his paintings. This kind of realism evokes a feeling of "vrai" in French, a sense of truthfulness in feelings, not merely visual truth like in photographic works, similar to the emotional authenticity in works by Wu Guanzhong and Liu Haisu.

Fan Junyi: Most of your recent works in recent years have been landscape paintings. Could you discuss the influence of these natural landscapes on your creations? What new developments do you think landscape paintings have in this era?

Yang Kai: When creating these landscape paintings, I not only depict the scenes before my eyes but also incorporate my imagination and inner feelings into the sketches. I believe brushstrokes resonate with one's pulse and heartbeat; each stroke is an expression of emotion and spirit, requiring solid technical skills and painting abilities to convey. I find that many contemporary artists lack the ability to paint; they haven't received systematic training and lack the necessary skills and ability to express their thoughts through the traditional medium of oil painting.

Meanwhile, I don't think oil painting is outdated in this era; it still possesses artistic value. Just like the paintings I saw in the Louvre by Francisco Goya, they transcend time and space, establishing resonance and communication with the audience. This isn't just communication between the artist and the audience but also communication between the models in the painting and the audience.

Fan Junyi: In your writings, you mentioned an interesting point about Pierre Carron mentioning mosaics on the wall and on the floor in the Louvre, one being an artistic creation and the other being a functional practical item. Can you talk more about your views on art itself?

Yang Kai: I categorize things into three levels. The most basic is items that fulfill functional needs, then come crafts that refine ordinary items, and finally, there are art pieces that cater to people's spiritual needs. In my view, many contemporary arts are more like crafts; those artists

haven't systematically studied oil painting, lack sufficient skill and ability to master this art form, and also lack an artistic legacy. Artworks are not ordinary material but spiritual products, something very noble!

Fan Junyi: You have often mentioned the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures. Could you elaborate more on how you perceive the differences between Eastern and Western cultures and art and how you merge these two different styles in your artworks?

Yang Kai: The West focuses on linear perspective, like the works of the Renaissance, where each painting has a focal point. In contrast, the East focuses on scattered perspective, which opens up the field of view, more suitable for painting large scenes. In depicting these natural landscapes, I will select and depict things I see during the painting process while incorporating secondary creations. At the same time, my brushstrokes employ Chinese painting techniques such as cun, ca, dian, ran, and sometimes I use a Chinese brush to paint in oils.

Fan Junyi: Have your recent life experiences and the experiences of sketching in various places influenced each other regarding the subject of your rural landscapes in your creations?

Yang Kai: Because I have experienced a lot, I used to paint urban landscapes in Paris, and at every stage, I choose to explore different things. Now, I am more inclined towards the feeling of art; creating in nature can bring more joy to my body and mind.

Fan Junyi: I personally love your paintings of bamboo, they look very different from your other works and appear very vibrant. Is there anything special about bamboo plants in your artwork?

Yang Kai: Wu Guanzhong said, "Painting starts from concrete, semi-abstract, and finally develops into abstract." I think my current paintings have reached a partial abstract state. The bamboo I paint is abstracted from concrete reality, a work that has undergone secondary creation. Like calligraphy, my paintings during my time in Paris were regular script, and now they are cursive script. This is not only the development in form, color, and space but also a path that has been walked in my artistic career step by step.

Yang Kai was born in 1956 in Lanzhou, Gansu Province, China. Currently, he works and lives in both Beijing and Paris. In 1977, Yang Kai graduated from the Department of Fine Arts at Northwest Normal University. From 1987 to 1992, Yang Kai studied at the National Higher School of Fine Arts in Paris (Fine Arts Academy) and worked under the guidance of Pierre Carron. In 2006, he held his first solo exhibition at the National Art Museum of China. His works have also been exhibited in galleries and museums in cities like Paris, Beijing, and Hong Kong.

Fan Junyi specializes in 19th-century French art. He holds a M.A degree in Art History from the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, and serves as the Curatorial Assistant at W Ming Art.

采访中国当代艺术家杨凯

范君逸

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杨凯是一位活跃在中国西北当代艺术家，他的作品关注自然、东西方艺术的对话以及融合等议题。作为一名旅法多年的艺术家，杨凯将自然作为他的精神依托，探讨油画这一传统的艺术媒介如何在二十一世纪的社会语境之下呈现出他对于艺术和东西方文化的独特理解。他深入地回顾四十多年的艺术生涯以及创作灵感的来源，也谈到了他对当代艺术现状的独特见解。

为了准备杨凯在常州美术馆的个人展览，莲艺国际的策展助理范君逸与艺术家进行了线上采访，探讨了他在此次展览中所展出作品的意义和重要性以及艺术家的个人经历对他创作的影响。

范君逸: 欢迎您愿意接受莲艺国际的采访，您可以首先谈一下您在法国留学的经历对您整个的艺术生涯产生了怎样的影响吗？同时您在巴黎美院的导师 Pierre Carron 对您的艺术创作产生了怎样的影响？

杨凯：我的老师的绘画风格是非常抽象的，但他并不要求学生去模仿他的风格，而是会鼓励学生根据自己的感受来进行创作，让我们遵从自己的内心来绘画。在油画这种艺术方式上，我是很赞同赵无极先生说的“油画需要 20 年来掌握这项技术。”我在巴黎高美所接受到的教育很好的教会了我油画的技巧，帮助我解决了创作技法上的难题。让我现在可以用我所学到的成熟的油画技巧来探索东方的审美和技法，并将东西方的不同的艺术表达方式融合在我的创作当中。

范君逸: 您的风景绘画风格和笔触与印象派以及后印象派的艺术家们很相近，比如塞尚。就连您之前的书《塞尚--杨凯》也将你们的作品进行了对比，您可以谈一下这位现代艺术之父对您的启发吗？

杨凯：我一直认为塞尚是我的老大哥。在巴黎 20 多年，我几乎天天都会在各个美术馆看到他的作品。他的风景画将树，山，以及各种物体都归纳成一种形态。我吸收了他绘画中的结构以及他笔下的物体的构成方式，让画面更加结实。与此同时，我也学习了 Claude Monet 的光影，Camille Pissarro 画作里的朦胧感，还有 Camille Corot 的画面里的实在，真实感。这种真实感可以产生法语中“vrai”的感觉，是感受上的真实感，而不仅仅是类似于摄影作品中的视觉上的真实感，就像吴冠中和刘海粟他们画作里的情感上的真切感。

范君逸：您在近几年的创作大部分都是风景画，您可以谈一下您这些自然景观对您创作的影响吗？包括您认为风景画在这个时代有什么新的发展吗？

杨凯：我在创作这些风景画时，不光会将眼前所见的风景纳入画中，也会将自己的想象在写生中画出来，更多会根据自己内心感受来创作。我认为笔触和人的脉搏以及心脏是一起跳动的，每一笔都是情感和精神的表达，当然这种表达也需要通过扎实的技术和绘画能力来承载。我觉得很多当代艺术家不会画画，他们并没受到系统的训练，还不具备可以用油画这种传统的媒介来表达自己的思想。同时我并不觉得油画在现在这个时代是过时的，它仍然是有艺术性的。就像我在卢浮宫看到的 Francisco Goya 的绘画，它们是可以超越时空的，可以和观众产生共鸣和沟通的。这不光是艺术家与观众之间的沟通，同时画中的模特与观众间的沟通。

范君逸：我在您的文章里看到有一点很有意思，就是你提到 Pierre Carron 在卢浮宫里指导您的时候曾经提到了挂在墙上的马赛克和铺在地上的马赛克，一个是具有艺术性的作品，一个是功能性的实用物品。您可以谈一下您对艺术本身的看法吗？

杨凯：我会将事物分为三个层级，最基础的是物品，满足人的功能性需求，在上一层的是工艺品，在普通物品的基础上做工更加精细，而最高级的就是艺术品了，是可以满足人在精神上的需求的。很多当代艺术，在我看来他们就是工艺品，那些艺术家他们既没有系统性的学习过油画，没有足够的技巧和能力来驾驭这种艺术形式，同时他们也没有艺术传承。艺术作品不是普通的物质而是精神产品，很崇高！

范君逸: 您一直提到的中西融合，可以更深入的谈一下您怎么看待东西方文化和艺术的差异以及您是如何将这两种不同的风格在您的画作里融合的？

杨凯: 西方是焦点透视，就像文艺复兴的那些作品，每幅画都是有焦点的。而东方是散点透视，这种技巧可以将视野打开，更适合大场面的绘画，我的那些大尺幅的风景画就是运用到了这种技巧。同时在描绘这些自然风景的时候，我会在作画的过程中对于所见的事物做出取舍，同时进行二次创作。同时我的笔触运用了中国画里的皴、擦、点、染，也会用到毛笔来画油画。

范君逸: 您近些年的生活经历以及在各地采风的经历对于您的乡村风景的题材的创作有什么相互影响吗？

杨凯: 因为我经历了特别多，之前在巴黎也画城市风景，每一个阶段我都会选择探索不同的事物。现在的我更倾向于艺术的感觉，在大自然中创作可以更让我身心愉悦。

范君逸: 我个人非常喜欢您画的竹子，他和您起他的作品看起来很不一样，看起来非常的富有生命力。竹子这种植物在您的创作中有什么的特之处吗？

杨凯: 吴冠中说，绘画是从具象到半抽象最后发展为抽象。我觉得我现在的绘画走到了一个局部抽象性的画。我画的竹子就是从具体的现实中所抽象出来的，被进行过二次创作的作品。就像书法，我在巴黎的时期的绘画是行楷，现在是行草。这既是造型，色彩，空间上的发展，也是我艺术生涯一步一步走来的心路。

杨凯于 1956 年出生于中国甘肃省兰州市。目前，他在北京和巴黎工作生活。1977 年，杨凯毕业于西北师范大学美术专业。从 1987 年到 1992 年，杨凯进入巴黎国立高等美术学院（美术学院）学习，并在皮埃尔·卡隆的指导下工作。2006 年，他在中国国家美术馆举办了他的第一个个展。他还在巴黎、北京、香港等城市的画廊和博物馆展出过作品。

范君逸，专注于研究十九世纪法国艺术。他拥有纽约大学艺术研究所艺术史学位，并在莲艺国际担任策展助理。