

My Art Story

Presentation at Art Institute of Chicago

Sept. 15th, 2016

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Hello everyone! Thank you for attending this lecture! First of all, please allow me to express my sincere thanks to Prof. Jiang Qigu and Dr. Wang Tao, for their joint effort, which enables me to share my story with you.

I am sure you all have some understanding and appreciation of traditional ink painting which is a crucial part of Chinese art history over the centuries. Major art museums in America, such as the Art Institute of Chicago, present masterpieces of ink painting and calligraphy on a regularly basis, either as thematic exhibitions or part of permanent collections. But what I want to talk about is, as a Chinese artist nowadays, how to transfer the old art medium into modern and contemporary one, how to express new consciousness, and how to make it more accessible to a global audience. These questions have been haunting in my mind for many years.

Five Decades ago, I was born into a military family right before the beginning of The Cultural Revolution, and grew up in a troop compound surrounded by imperial gardens built in the Qing Dynasty, such as the Summer Palace. Due to my inborn fondness for drawing, I learnt and practiced ink painting with several generals in the compound. About hundred years ago they had been nurtured in intellectual families. Practicing ink painting and calligraphy was considered to be basic education, just like playing piano for the children in the traditional European upper class family. During the Cultural Revolution, the old generals continued to practice calligraphy and ink painting privately, I thus had the rare opportunity to learn from them when I was a kid.

One of my pleasures was to visit the Summer Palace for fun. There were numerous artifacts and art works displayed in the palace, such as porcelain, Jade ware, bronze, furniture, calligraphy, and ink paintings, as well as the scenic view in the garden. Also, located near the troop compound was the memorial of famous writer Cao Xueqin,

considered the Asian counterpart of Shakespeare. The surroundings there were typical of the literati places for retreat or contemplation.

Therefore I grew up in such a culture intense environment and atmosphere, by enjoying and immersing myself in this Ivory Tower. I was hoping to become a literati painter and poet. So my childhood experience was exceptional in my generation. Most others were suffering during the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution.

Due to my indulgence in classical art and culture, I chose the Museum program at Nankai University as the beginning of my study. This program conducts a comprehensive training based on the collection of museums at that time. You know, China has a long history, and more than 30 years ago, governmental museums in China only presented cultural relics and ancient arts for ideological education purpose. This 4-year program enhanced and deepened my understanding of classical Chinese art, and history, as well as the esthetic sensibility and cultural awareness, thanks to the open-up and reform social milieu in mid 1980s.

Moreover, during this period, in my campus, I organized many art events, including lectures, presentations, and exhibitions. Meanwhile, the New Wave Art movement across China was ignited by Rauschenberg's large scale solo show in 1985 in the National Art Museum Beijing. The Movement culminated with the grand Avant-Garde show in 1989, staged at the same venue. Inevitably, influenced by the new wave, I had generated more and more interest in the modern Western modern art.

It seemed to me, my art career had been determined in advance when I got a position at the National Museum of Art, upon graduation in 1988. As a young assistant curator with English capability I was involved in many overseas art exhibition programs, such as solo shows of Jilbert and Gorge, Sonlages, Tapias. I received valuable experience through working with the foreign art institutions, curators, and artists themselves.

The experience opened a window to the brilliant and diversified art world outside China for me. I wanted to know more about the global art, especially the logic and genealogy of modern/contemporary global art. I was also wondering what China's new art would be? Are they like the ideologically charged Political Pop so popular since the beginning

of 1990s? I felt there should be more options. After several years working in China's top art Museum, I decided to quit the position, going to New York, to learn more and understand better contemporary art theory and practice.

I have to mention, I never stopped practicing ink painting in my spare time during the 7 years working in the National Museum of Art, and I maintained close connections with many ink art explorers. I always believe the ink art would play a bigger role for the new art in China, in the future.

In 1995, I was granted the fellowship from the Asian Cultural Council, which enabled me to get involved in the curatorial program of contemporary art at Bard College, in up-state New York. The two years of intensive training program that followed was a watershed for my art career. It provided me with a global vision of contemporary art, including the modernity from Europe to America and its extension to Japan and Asia.

In particular, the Art trajectory and story of Isamu Naguchi, Nan June Paik, and Lee Yufan interested me a lot. My graduate thesis focus on Xu Bing and Cai Guoqiang's arts, and concluded my MA degree with their two person show in 1998, at the art Museum of the Curatorial Study Center.

In the meantime, Minimalist art held a great attraction for me. My favorite artists included Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, Carl Andrew, Agnis Martin, etc. I think many minimalist works show similarities to the spirit of Daoism. Object-hood shares a certain common ground with the meaning of Nature in Chinese context, and Theatricality can be understood in the Daoist terms of the harmonious integrity of the world.

Studying contemporary art in New York was inspiring. I came to realize that Asian contemporary artists owed their success quite a lot to Euro-American art concept and methods, and traditional Asian philosophy, such as Zen Buddhism and Daoism, play an important role for many American artists. In the accelerating global era, cultural interpenetration is very obvious. Accordingly, I started to think about schema of ink art, from global art perspective.

In 1996, 20 years ago, when I was working as an Intern at the Asia Society Gallery, working on the Inside/out show, guest curator Gao Minglu insisted on including four ink artists. But the joint curator expressed a different opinion. She thought ink painting appeared not strong compare with the political pop works, not to mention the Japanese modern calligraphy work. She asked my idea. I told her, over the history ink art has kept changing. It is making its own reaction to the global trend and conducting self-transformation. I could feel the momentum and potential of it, although the ink art works curator Gao Minglu wanted to be included. I felt, the ink art had not yet realized the full power of their potential.

This dialogue inspired me to find my own direction. In year 1999 I returned to Beijing, and proceeded to conduct my own ink art explorations. After many years of in depth research in ink art, I gradually feel that a transition of traditional ink art into contemporary art medium is taking place, and that perhaps, it will play a critical role for contemporary Chinese artists, requiring them to re-shape their cultural identity.

So this is my story of ink art, a four-decade journey into uncharted territory. I will show you images of my works to further illustrate the story.

Thank you very much!