

Interview with Lin Yan (artist in New York)  
by Liu Libin (art historian in Beijing)  
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L: (Liu Libin) Having seen the works you drew during your studies at Central Academy of Fine Arts, I know that you received strict training in realism and color.

Y: (Lin Yan): Thanks. It's like conducting a symphony orchestra when painting in colors. I enjoyed sensing and adjusting each color's tone in a painting, making them work together. I wish you had seen the small abstract paintings I did in 1980, during my first year at Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA).

L: When did you start drawing?

Y: I didn't paint until the summer when I was 12. Then I painted two still life watercolors which were surprisingly good. They started to teach me drawing and oil painting when I was 16 and practiced intensively in 1979-80, a year before college.

L: You are from a well known family in art. Before that, what was the relationship between you and art?

Y: I painted for fun when I was very little before my school years. To sketch what I did or what I saw and what I imagined.

L: Did your parents demand much from you? Or did you draw mainly for fun?

Y: It's a natural thing to paint or discuss a painting in my family. Even now, it is hard for me to realize that I am an artist and that my work is a real endeavor that needs to be managed.

L: Very interesting answer. It seems that "Artist" defies definition.

Y: Making art is a daily life activity and being artist is a life style. I only stopped painting completely when CAFA was closed. My parents and other professors were sent to the countryside.

L: It must have been lonely for you during that time.

Y: Not really. I stayed with different families and had many opportunities to play with different kids.

L: You mainly created realistic works at that time.

Y: I loved Rembrandt and Vermeer and painted mostly flowers and still life in the classical style. I had never heard of abstract paintings until 1980 when China opened her door to the world.

L: I saw the still lifes you created in 1978. They were lively works. But you eventually discarded colors.

Y: I knew what I could do with colors. The still life you saw in was my first try in oil in 1978. In the beginning, I could paint patiently what I saw from life for long

hours. After some time, I guess I needed to challenge my mind to experience different things. I did when I got into CAFA. Then I tried to use fewer elements to express more, to explore uncertain things.

L: Less is more.

Y: Yes. Although my works are black and blank, I never feel that they are only one color. There is sufficient vocabulary with blacks and Chinese xuan paper.

L: It was easy for you to finish classwork in Central Academy of Fine Arts, right?

Y: Sometimes, if I liked the color setting of the class assignment. But it was hard to meet school's standards. At school I often thought to myself that creating meaning was like making the impossible possible. It was also my response to some "No, Nos" that came from teachers.

L: CAFA has standard criteria which they believe correct.

Y: I learned a lot in the system, especially how to persist in the exploration of one subject. With my solid foundation, I was able to stretch and accept new things on my own pace. At the same time I was lucky to preserve myself during those strict four years in an overwhelming, intense environment.

L: It is important for an artist to return to his true self. What is the "self"? Unique art feeling? Or unique self-individuality?

Y: I was trying very hard to have my own space in my mind. To grow freely.

L: Self-preservation. Is this always in your mind?

Y: Maybe it was easier for me in school at that time in early 80's because I had known the teachers as uncles and aunts since I was little. So I was more relax with them than most students. But it was also tough for me as an independent artist because I was always surrounded by CAFA staff, even at home.

L: You created some abstract works in the 1980s. What was the root of that creative impulse? "Form Beauty" was emphasized at that time. Your parents also began experimenting with abstract works. Your entire surrounding, your family, the city and your individual preferences simulated your creativity in some degree?

Y: First of all, the more relax atmosphere in China then was the key to opening up artists' minds. Second, I did realistic painting pretty well before the college. In CAFA, my life changed and I wanted to express myself. Third, my mom borrowed some books about Germany expressionism from CAFA teachers' library. Students were not allowed to access to books about non-realistic art in early 80's. I read Kandinsky and realized the close relationship between abstract painting and music. So I started doing my own stuff passionately and secretly.

L: When you are creating abstract work, do you feel more freedom to express yourself? You mentioned music, do you like it very much?

Y: I am not that crazy about it.

L: You can feel some freedom from music. What is your parents' attitude about your abstract work?

Y: I tried abstract painting much earlier than my parents did. They worried about me then. They liked it, but worried about finding a job for me. My father began his abstract works after I left China. He is still creating abstract paintings.

L: Did you find a job when you graduated from school?

Y: Of course. I taught at CAFA High School for a year.

L: As a teacher, how did you teach your students?

Y: I tried to teach them individually. It is much more work that way. I tried to help them to be themselves as much as I could. I think high school is more important and needs the best teachers.

L: A year later, you went to Paris. Was this a turning point for you?

Y: Yes. It was the most important year in my life. To be away from home, to enjoy art and to meet interesting people were exciting. Paris offered me more freedom to find myself. In Beaux-Art, nobody cared who was the best or better like Chinese students did. I took Art medium and Techniques classes in Paris.

L: Digging up the characteristics of materials may have led you to abstraction?

Y: You meant in concept? Basically. I just wanted to explore the possibilities of each element. How each material is able to speak? It's also very detailed work.

L: Is there some relationship between your choice of material and of pigment when you painted before, and of daily goods such as tea or silk?

Y: It's related. I use them with my own sensibility, too. The interaction between me and materials or pigment is exciting. The choice of materials is about how to use its common image to speak. Metal has a more industrial, hard look. Paper and ink is more eastern, more cultural. Each has complicated and subtle layers. How to use them is a sensitive issue. I don't play with many materials. One or two is good for me.

L: When did you go after finishing your studies in Paris?

Y: I got an assistantship to graduate school in the US and left Paris for Pennsylvania in 1986. I returned to Beijing for my first visit in 1994.

L: You had opportunities to study materials more deeply when you were in America. Besides that what were your interests during the years you spent in the United States?

Y: I thought about life issues than art issues. Art issues are also related to the society, culture and history. But artist's intuitions are sharply developed and used in art in the United States.

L: Does daily life has an effect on your art?

Y: Life and art is the same thing. Who you are is exposed in your art.

L: The boundaries of art are extending, and painting is not a necessary part of

life. The boundaries of art are becoming blurry. This idea relates to art.

Y: I think I am becoming more like a so called “artist” today. I am talking to you and participate in your group show in Beijing. Well, actually, making art is like giving birth. I can’t hold it. There is nothing much to talk about. Because it’s personal and genuine, people see it and can feel it deeply.

L: You have mentioned that you were influenced by minimalism and that you were interested in “black” during this period.

Y: Yes. I wanted to do something SIMPLE in response to the over-elaborated vulgar paintings I saw in China in mid 90’s. Also the structures around my paintings were heading in a three dimensional, more sculptural direction. For that reason the painting part needed to be simplified. Using black with oil, wax or tempera created different sheds. It made me think how to use ink. I did the first black series “Qi” at the end of 1994 in Beijing. It was a turning point.

L: The way you handle ink problem differs from the way traditional artists do. Chinese ink painters are trapped by ink and they can’t break away from the trap.

Y: I don’t know. I encourage ink painters to innovate traditional materials, making their own xuan paper or something.

L: The traditional of Western art is evident throughout. Though your works have characteristics of Minimalism, your art is more related to your experiences from life.

Y: Yes. New York Times said about my work in 2002: “What’s interesting about her work is not its general post-minimalist “look,” which feels somewhat dated in a New York context now, but the way it uses elements of multiple styles to bring histories, past and present, together. The show’s real dialogue lies in this transaction.”

L: Minimalism mainly affects you visually?

Y: And spiritually.

L: “Handcrafted art” is an interesting field, for instance “paper making”.

Y: I think every part of the artwork is part of artist’s language — medium, frame and way of display. Every part has many possibilities. The exploring process needs both feelings and craftsmanship. I also think a lot about how my works response to the exhibiting space.

L: You used elements from traditional architecture to create works in the 1990’s, - tiles, bricks, rivets. Through these elements, you can show your feelings about contemporary China, right?

Y: In 1994, I was shocked and upset to see the old Beijing’s architecture and culture disappearing and being replaced by new high buildings. I hoped good care would be taken in our city. I didn’t want destroyed! The demolition of the old architecture hurts me. I liked architecture since I was in high School. I did abstract painting of Beijing in college, too. So architectural elements first appeared in my painting was in 1981. I have painted each of the places where I have lived. Architectural elements are important to me. They related to my

home, my culture and express my experiences in different periods.

L: You created some constructing paintings around 1994, for example *Swing, Monkey Bars*.

Y: Those works were created when I spent time in playground with my son. He is 15 now.

L: The four works that you did during 1993 and 1994 are very astounding.

Y: Thanks.

L: Those pieces are combination of painting and found objects. They are somewhat violent. What are you communicating?

Y: I was pretty confused in my personal life then. I struggled to find time to do my own works and to be myself. So I used wedding dress image and x ray film, kid's swing and boxing gloves. I like to use Yin & Yang. So you always see contradictions in my works. Wood structures attracted me a lot then. But at that time my painting seemed too complicated in the new 3D form media, although I couldn't completely give up painting.

L: There is a force between the two.

Y: My black installation done at the end of 1994 in Beijing solved this issue. I realized that painting was close to me. So my work did go back to the wall later on.

L: Then works that you created more recently appeared. You pasted layers of plain xuan paper of different textures onto a large plaster mold that is cast from the metal floor in New York and old wall in Beijing.

Y: Yes.

L: You want to plant memory in your painting?

Y: Maybe you are right. I am not sure. When I have an idea visually, I may not be able to explain exactly why.

L: Even though the surface of paintings is good, you still consider carefully the visual form of the works.

Y: Thanks. Again, I am more interested the contrast of two elements in one work.

L: Black or white, steel, brick?

Y: Black and white, steel / bricks and soft paper. It is like playing TaiChi. Balancing Yin and Yang in art and life as well. I often combine them and twist them too. These new works look abstract and contain realistic details.

L: You shuttle among different media?

Y: Going beyond the boundaries feels great.

L: Things about culture hide in the spaces created by joining different materials.

Y: Sure! I can't ignore it. That's what I like.

L: Talk about your charcoal drawings, elements repeated among them.  
Y: Another experience of blacks.

L: Tasting the delicate variety in black.

Y: The richness of blacks is like ink in Chinese painting. Black is a complex and sensitive color. It's very powerful when you handle it well .