

YANG Ermin: for a humanist Sino-centrism

Chinese polychromic painting, the renewal of a traditional art form poised to establish a new aesthetic on the international art market [Christophe Comentale, *La peinture au lavis en Chine, essence et interactions* (2015). Original title: YANG Ermin, tenant d'un sinocentrisme humaniste] **By Christophe Comentale**

Chinese polychromic painting, the renewal of a traditional art form poised to establish a new aesthetic on the international art market. Written by Christophe Comentale [Christophe Comentale is a sinologist, he has a habilitation in art history and archeology of China. Christophe Comentale is chief curator and scientific advisor in the Musée de l'Homme, and research associate at the China Ethnic Museum in Beijing. He is a professor and exhibition curator, with among these exhibitions *Cent ans d'art chinois* (2009, Paris), *L'art chinois contemporain* (2007, Pékin), *Le livre d'artiste, de Matisse à l'art contemporain* (Taipei, 2007), *La Chine sur papiers, 1960-2000*, *Les peintures à la colle de poisson de Taiwan* (1995). He has lived in China seven years, and has authored articles and books on Chinese art.]

Next Spring, Paris will welcome Yang Ermin, the Chinese painter, sculptor and poet [Yang Ermin's paintings and sculptures will be exposed in three different art galleries in Paris in May 2016, with a bilingual French-Chinese Catalogue. The exhibitions will be supported through a promotional campaign in the city's communication networks.] Yang Ermin's art is in phase with the taste of contemporary Chinese art enthusiasts. His manifesto for a renewal of ink and color wash painting inside the New Literati movement was recently published, and it provides an explanation for the impact, and the important rise in prices, of the work of his predecessors. Zhang Daqian, in particular, has already moved ahead of Picasso in international art sales. A few pointers to understand better how this situation came to be.

From Ren Xiong's triumphant modernity to China's accession to the WTO

The last Chinese imperial dynasty (the Qing dynasty) saw a lot of activity from an art movement called the Shanghai School. The Shanghai school was a gathering of artists that each had their own distinct profile, but who all understood the taste of the art enthusiasts of the time, and what was driving the art market: they painted landscapes, flowers, birds and human figures. Among them, Ren Xiong (1823-1857) deserves to be singled out for his originality. His talent is most obvious in his paintings of people, landscapes, flowers and birds. His full-length self-portrait (ill. circa 1850) is still the subject of heated debate among artists and critics... In it he appears as an energetic, gaunt and nervous figure, demonstrating a strong sensuality. His choice of a very loose, simple piece of clothing at the same time hides part of the body under an indistinct flurry of fabric and seems to blur all colors together, except for the cold colors that receive a special treatment. The painting reveals the artist as an exhibitionist, and no modern creator has dared to imitate Ren's blunt and refined realism, the painstaking care with which he represented the different fabrics of the clothes and the shoes.

It is only after the instauration of the Chinese Republic in 1912 that exchanges between China and Europe, especially France, allow Chinese painters to show their work during important exhibitions, such as in the Louvre or the Orangerie in the Tuileries Garden in the 1930's (ill.). It is at this time that the west discovered two important painters. Xu Beihong

[Xu Beihong (1895-1953) was born in a family of painters from the city of Yixing, Jiangsu. From a very young age, he started to copy the works of ancient masters, but he also liked to reproduce the western-style drawings of animals that he saw on the packaging of the cigarette packets made in Shanghai by foreign-owned factories; this is one of the sources of his lifelong interest for realism. Taking advantage of some favorable circumstances, he was able to make a number of trips abroad: to Japan in 1917, to France and Germany from 1919 to 1927, to India from 1939 to 1941... From these trips he brought back a large number of drawings of animals, as well as full-length portrait studies, all influenced by his love for realism. At the same time, he discovers Renoir, Cézanne, and Matisse... From 1946 to 1953, Xu Beihong is director of the Peiping National College of Arts, which will later become the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts. During his stay in Paris, Xu Beihong worked as curator for an exposition of Chinese painters at the Orangerie; a catalogue was published for the event. At this occasion, he presented a beautiful double portrait dedicated to his father, and fellow painter, Xu Daqian, showing the two of them together. At the time he also produced a number of wash paintings of horses, with a characteristic "wet" look, obtained by strictly controlling the penetration of the ink inside the paper.]

(ills) as well as Lin Fengmian (ill.) Xu is the one that gave French audiences a taste for ink wash paintings of horses. During the 1960's, his horses were reproduced and sold in every art store, and the originals were already kept in a few European museums.

In 2001, China joins the WTO, and artworks are assimilated to other luxury products used to demonstrate the wealth or privileged social status of their owner. At the time members of the ruling class in China had a classical education, they were attached to esthetic principles emphasizing technical ability, calligraphy and a calligraphic drawing style, and paintings representing landscapes, flowers and birds, still lifes, people... But in the same era, an understanding of western art had created new potential for technical innovation for Chinese artists, and new avenues to explore their desires. They started to channel these new impulses into all sorts of artworks, despite frequent self-censorship in the face of uncompromising authorities, especially in relation to nude art.

Still, some artists managed to visit the west, either through official exchanges or through personal opportunities. Chinese artworks from that era, already rare in the west at the time, have become even rarer today they show the creative genius of this generation of artists. But for the last twenty years approximately, China has taken a decision to bring back as much of its cultural heritage as possible to China, with a particular interest for artwork of this era. The situation is a bit similar to the post-WW2 era,

when Americans decided to buy back a lot of their own artistic heritage, especially artworks that were thought to bring prestige to the country. With one important difference however: today's China is only willing to view these artworks as products of its own artistic traditions. We've already entered an era of triumphant Sino-centrism! This new global concept is particularly well exemplified by the enduring success of Yue Minjun, indefatigably painting and engraving his own self-portrait, his own overly optimistic smile.

A few technical and esthetical notes on the work of the great wash painting masters of the late 19th century.

Qi Baishi (1864-1957), Feng Zikai

[Director of the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, Feng Zikai (ill.) (1898-1975) was also an activist. Besides his paintings, his drawings and his illustrations, he was also a writer and often worked as an illustrator for the same publications that carried his writings. He used to analyze all sorts of situation with a bitterness and a sense of humor that reminiscent of Daumier. He often worked with ink, and his calligraphy was tidy, slowly and painstakingly formed. His landscapes are enriched with color, and filled with human figures, often children. He draws them with great care, with a concern and benevolence not common in a literati painter.]

(1898-1975), Zhang Daqian (1899-1983), Lin Fengmian (ill.) (1900-1991), Ding Yanyong

[Ding Yanyong (ill.) (1902-1978) studied in Japan in the 1920's, having entered the Tokyo Academy of Fine Arts in 1921. There he studied drawing and oil painting and assimilated the innovations of western painting, especially fauvisme. Back in China, he taught western painting in Shanghai, then in Hong Kong where he finds refuge in 1949. He is close to the sensibilities of an artist like Guan Liang in the way he depicts human figures, but his use of a calligraphic style to draw insects and batrachians with humor and gravitas is more similar to Qi Baishi. The world of theater and comedians is also one of his favorite subjects. His ink paintings are enriched with light touches of color, underlining an intention or expressing an emotion with a grace as discrete as it is striking. Two of his friends and fellow painters, Chang Shuhong and Lü Sibai also made the trip to the west during the 1930 's.] (1902-1978).

The social and political situation in continental China led to the coexistence of two different institutional realities. On one side most of continental China is under a socialist system in which art is created for the masses. A concept such as "art for art's sake" is completely foreign in this type of exclusive and constraining ideology. On the other side the British influence in Hong Kong allows for more open and westernized creative forms. Finally Taiwan, supported during its economic reconstruction by American funds, strikes a sharp contrast, and thanks to its unique situation has even become a symbol of the West in Asia! Furthermore, some artists who left for the West, often because of personal political positions, have created creative processes that are still very popular in the art market of the second decade of the 21st century.

For Asian art enthusiasts and collectors, buying artworks directly from the artist or his or her legal representative is still the most popular way to ensure that an art collection possesses *cachet* and authenticity, and still today there are incomparably active in pursuing these purchases. There are countless examples: besides wanting to buy their artworks, collectors even often asks artists to reproduce for them a copy of one of their paintings that they've seen in a museum or foundation... For example Chen Jianghong (born in 1963 in Tianjin) created his "Impression with cherries" in 1988, but painted it once again in 1993, with the hand-written comment "New painting on an old theme"! (ill.) This phenomenon of copying artworks is linked to an esthetic sense and a cultural context that now appear foreign to the western art world, but has its roots in the 6 essential principles of painting

[this particular context is already present in the first few centuries of our era, in particular in the Record of the Classification of Old Painters – written in 500 AD by the calligrapher and literary scholar Xie He]

as defined in ancient China. The sixth principle, the transmission of art through reproductions, is still very important is the diffusion of artworks in China.

The western embrace of the Chinese diaspora: the great masters of ink painting during the first half of the 20th century.

Artists from mainland China, artists in Taiwan or from the Chinese diaspora have been able to explore their artistic impulses freely.

Walasse Ting

[Ding Xiongquan (1929 - 2010), western name Walasse Ting, was a self-taught painter, sculptor, lithographer and poet. He left China in 1949 to settle in the United States, where he was granted citizenship in 1974. His trips all over the world, especially in Paris, remind us of the way artists like Karen Appel, Asger Jorn and Pierre Alechinsky from the CoBrA movement used to travel the world. Acrylic painting represents a very important part of his work, depicting women (often nude), flowers, or animals such as horses, cats and parrots.]

(Ding Xiongquan) (ill.), Zao Wou-ki

[Zao Wouji (1921 – 2013) was born in Beijing in a family of scholars. He studied calligraphy, then Chinese and Western painting at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, where he later became a teacher. In 1948, he leaves China to settle in Paris in the Montparnasse neighborhood, where he listens to Othon Friesz' classes at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, and frequents the Parisian artistic circles. In 1950, the discovery of Paul Klee's art in Bern leads Zao Wou-ki to a radical evolution toward atmospheric abstraction. He becomes one of the most important representatives of lyrical abstraction in France, with original artworks combining some of the most avant-garde tendencies of European art with traditional Chinese painting. His relation with Henri Michaux leads him to reconnect with Chinese ink drawing techniques, and to develop abstract themes influenced by traditional painting. He has also worked as an illustrator during his life, creating engravings and lithographs for the works of Henri Michaux, René Char and André Malraux,]

Hsiao Chin (1920 - 2013), [Xiao Qin (Hsiao Chin) (ill.) was born in 1935 in Shanghai in a family of musicians, and left mainland China for Taiwan in 1949. He studied art, and worked as a professor as well as a painter. He is one of the founder of the Ton-Fan (Orient) art movement, the first Chinese abstract painting movement. In 1956 he leaves for Spain, then departs for Italy in 1958 where he discovers the Venice Biennale, before finally settling in Milan where he still lives, when he is not in Tainan (Taiwan). His artworks are inspired by Taoism and the contrast between void and fullness, giving life to blots of color and geometric figures. His inspirations are multiple: Chinese New Year prints and their bold and striking colors, or religious artworks where minimalism creates a concentration of power. These inspirations all ways way for him to release his own energy.]

(Xiao Qin (born in 1935) and Fan Zeng

[born in Jiangsu province, Fan Zeng (ill.) received a traditional education in his family home. After the great success of his first trip to Japan in 1979, a permanent gallery was built in the city of Okoyama in 1984 to expose his artworks. Two years later, he made a personal donation to help create the school of Oriental Art in Nankai University. He visits Paris for the first time in 1990, before settling there and creating a workshop; he has donated manuscripts and autograph documents to the French National Library. He is a symbol of the artist as a strategist, involved in the artistic life as well as in political action. He was named research supervisor at the Chinese National Academy of Art in 2003.]

(ill.) (born in 1938) are important examples. In the 1960's, their arrival in the West and especially in France takes place at a time of great openness, and in an economic and social environment favorable to the art market. Critics, very influential at the time, are able to work with numerous galleries and heritage institutions to act as diffusion mechanisms for the work of these artists, a lot of whom have assimilated the values of their host societies, still very influenced by a global cultural humanism. But the next generation of artist is very different...

From the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to the march toward globalization: Zhu Xinjian, Tian Liming, Li Jin

The work of some artists can reveal a lot about global geopolitical changes and their impact on the art scene. Zhu Xinjian (ill.) (1953 – 2014), recently deceased, is a perfect illustration. His work combining classicism and eroticism is rooted in his study of ancient paintings and texts. He has travelled around the world, and in particular made the unavoidable trip to France, visiting the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris where he was able to witness the radical freedom artists enjoy there. His representations of elusive beauties, in his sharp calligraphic drawing style presenting a sort of staccato effect, demonstrate that nude art is possible in many different contexts. Thanks to his status as an independent artist, Zhu has been able to indulge in some rather risqué projects, such as his series of etchings illustrating the Jin Ping Mei, an erotic novel from the Ming dynasty. More recently, his themes have steered closer to modern life, with moments of contemplation or wander. His characters sometimes even leave their traditional clothing behind, for a jean or a loose sweater...

At that time women painters become fashionable: Yang Chunhua

[Yang Chunhua was born in 1953 in Wenzhou, Zhejiang, and graduated from the etching department of the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts. She enjoys working with all kinds of different papers, experimenting with paper grain and with harsher or warmer shades of color. Her art is a quest in search of an objective form, but she always introduces a personal interpretation with a baroque style that delights in its own clumsiness. In her calligraphy, often realized with the left hand, the fundamental incompleteness of art creation is even more apparent. Her artworks are inspired as much by Buddhism as by the natural environment from where she draws her energy, creating a delicate and voluptuous microcosm.]

and Xu Lele, both born in 1953, are motivated by different pursuits. They paint characters, flowers and birds in a style that is purposefully clumsy, recreating a refined and aristocratic environment as old-fashioned as it is popular with a new generation of art collectors. With Ji Lin (ill.), born in 1958 in Tianjin, art performance becomes a way to experiment with self-portraits, by capturing events of the private as well as personal life: his endless self-representations show him in the most incongruous or intimate of places, where nudity is often not a taboo.

Yang Ermin's manifesto: polychromatic wash painting as a substitute for oil and acrylic techniques

For some years now, Yang Ermin (ill.) has been one of the leaders of the neo-literati movement, defending an intense, polychromatic form of wash painting. Yang was born in 1966 in Quyang county of Hebei province, the province that surrounds Beijing. From a very young age, his interests have been extremely diverse, spanning Chinese wash painting, ceramic art, engraving and sculpture. This is why he decided to try to find his own way as an artist.

His interest for both painting and engraving is nourished by his study of art manuals, such as the Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden [The Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden contains five "juan" or fascicles: the first deals with esthetic sense, the second is the "Tree manual", comprised of drawings of plants, the third is about hills and stones. The fourth fascicle examines peoples and architectural elements, landscapes, birds and animals, with is a treatise on orchids, bamboo, plum trees and chrysanthemums. The fifth and last "juan" contains all sorts of compositions, horizontal, vertical, circular, or set up like a fan; famous painters are also introduced through reproductions of their works. The creation of the first fascicle dates back to 1679, it appears in Li Yu's [李渔] "introduction". Li Yu's personal name is Liwong [笠翁]; after the fall of the Ming Dynasty, he decides to become a recluse, and as an old man builds himself a residence in Nanjing, the "Mustard Seed Garden". It's there that the fascicle was put together, and the manual then took the name of that garden.]

It is one of the most commonly used and most celebrated manual for budding painters in China, thanks to its encyclopedic precision. Yang Ermin used it as a way to bring color engraving and painting closer in his work, rather than to specialize in engraving techniques.

[Comments made during an interview with the artist in Beijing in November 2013]

Already at the time he seems to show a preference for three particular subjects: still lifes, landscapes and people. As a young artist he studies role models from antiquity as well as contemporary Chinese art. In a recent interview he presents his vision of contemporary art, defending the idea that artistic norms and the norms of the world are one and the same, because they all come from the people. During the last century, men like Xu Beihong or Lin Fengmian have claimed that Chinese wash painting needed to be reformed, and today people agree. But they had to fit inside the norms of their world.

[Comments made during an interview with the artist in Beijing in October 2012]

Yang Ermin is a graduate of Nanjing Arts Institute, and also has a PhD in esthetics. His poetic texts are a constant source of enrichment for his art as a painter and engraver, and his interest for esthetics as well gives his work another dimension.

Spanning decades, the sustained rhythm with which Yang Ermin has published catalogs and created expositions denotes an impressive energy. He has a strong physical presence, radiating with emotions and desires. Chinese art critics have noted that very early, Yang has painted still lifes that were inspired by the work of Monet or Cézanne, the great western predecessors offered as models to budding painters all over the world. Yang Ermin is rightly considered a great innovator in the world of ink and color wash painting. Thanks in part to this activism, he was appointed director of Nanjing Arts Institute's research institute on wash painting.

His seminars are spaces for open discussions, for example on the question of personal originality in the world of modern wash painting. This is a recurring question that torments theoreticians as well as practitioners. Such problems have existed for almost 25 years, and conferences after conferences have proposed answers that have attracted the attention of researchers as well as collectors, art enthusiasts and many other people. He argues that one of the most overlooked problems in modern art is the use of color in wash painting: it has traditionally been constrained by outdated concepts that leave no place for intense colors. Already in the last century, Chinese artists have fought against these restrictions, trying to emphasize color rather than ink. Lin Fengmian was able to strike the right balance between dark ink and vivid colors, but his approach was not broadly imitated during his time, even though a new form of ink painting is becoming more and more prevalent today.

In today's China, the movement toward a form of painting that uses ink wash techniques in tandem with strong and intense colors is becoming more powerful, and is about to become one of the principal currents in Chinese art. Yang Ermin believes that we have entered a world of color, and that it makes no sense for wash painting to limit itself to the use of ink. "Is it linked to the name itself, ink wash painting? If traditional wash painting artists do not dare to use color, it is a personal issue and has nothing to do with the material itself (...). My dear colleagues, when you are experimenting with rice paper, you should add more color to your artworks, this way you will be able to create amazing effects!"

[Aside from comments the artist has made in the course of his interviews, Yang has exposed his vision in an important publication: Nation-wide touring exhibition of Yang Ermin's innovative ink wash painting: his epic, portfolio. Beijing: Ed. Rongbaozhai, 2012.181 p. ill.]

His various comments show that Yang Ermin's slow, in-depth art education has enabled him to consider as a visual artist, in a global and sensible way, the necessity to create new intellectual frameworks for the development of his own practical work.

His favorite subjects: from people to still life

Through the years and his experiences and travels, as well as the evolution of his sensibilities, his favorite subjects have become clearer: interiors and the people living in them, still lifes (often as a part of these interiors), and landscapes, providing a window into our own universe and the visceral connection we have to it. Yang Ermin's work produces sensations and consideration that allow us to understand right from the start the originality of the synthesis he has created. It is perfectly legitimate to talk about a form of "Occidentalism" when discussing his interiors or his other favorite subjects, but the West is only a starting point for him, soon giving way to a China-centered Asian environment familiar to cultivated Chinese elites, and used as an ideal background for his work.

People

His approach is inspired by models running from Japanese artists of the 1930's to Matisse or especially Vuillard. Characters are seemingly subsumed into their own domestic environment, but every object, accessory or tool suddenly receives a particular importance in this context. This is the case in a color wash painting realized in 2002, "Interior" (ill.) in which a young girl appears as a dark blur over the wallpaper, only a pretext to create patterns of colors and motifs, while a large floral composition is visible in front of her over a piece of sky through the window. In "Kitchen", a wash painting from 1999 (120x180,5cm), Yang creates another type of impression, using color tones reminiscent of Brasillier, who was himself inspired by Japan. In another similar example, "Holiday", a wash painting from 2002 (57x45cm), yellow and other secondary colors dominate the composition and naturally create a laid-back atmosphere, evoking a form of hedonism.

Large-scale landscapes

In his landscapes, Yang demonstrates his knowledge of composition, his understanding and even ownership of the techniques of ancient masters, notably from the Tang and Qing dynasties, during which paintings of famous mountains are the subjects of spectacular compositions. For example in his "Wutai Mountain" series of color wash paintings from 2013 (79x112cm), in the color wash painting "Dawn over Taihang" (ill.) from 2012 (143x309cm), or in his artworks depicting the Great Wall. In the 21st century, it is not academic or restrictive in any way for an artist to work on a theme deemed "traditional". An admiration, an evident form of pleasure still permeates his vision of nature, a universe that wraps up around man and humbles him. These emotions are especially appreciable when the artist is able to add a touch of his own originality, in order to attract the eye and invite the viewer toward a journey, a process.

Still lifes

This “light” subject is often considered prone to the reproduction of insipid stereotypes in the west. In French, the very phrase “nature morte” (“dead nature”, meaning still life) is already pretty gloomy; in Chinese it is translated as “still nature”, which is closer to the English term. But under Yang Ermin’s brush, this discipline is still as vibrant and powerful as ever: his choices of subject matters are especially striking. He frames his paintings in order to present smaller scenes, or inserts his still lifes inside a larger environment to create a mechanism of presence/absence. In “Blue sky”, where pink and red snapdragons represent the strength of life under a cerulean sky, the artist uses Xuan paper, which he is able to adapt to his every purpose, to create a texture close to that of oil paint. Similarly, in “Red leaves”, “Pink memories” or “Spring flowers”, magic is born of the harmony between different elements: flowers, the main motif of these artworks, are associated with geometric or abstract motifs. Yang achieves the same freedom and decontraction in his paintings as Lucian Freud in his surrealist artworks. The comparison here doesn’t mean that there is a definite influence, but certainly a tendency toward the same goal, that of delectation...

The infinite diversity of modern Chinese painting is a source of constant amazement. Art performances and elements of abstraction already existed during the Song dynasty and before: as a whole, Chinese artists use their own symbolism and aesthetic sense. The west is only starting to understand that Chinese art is not simply an exotic distraction, but a new civilizational force, supported by thousands of years of culture. This realization is creating shockwaves and a sense of unease in the west, due to an incomprehension of the rapid changes the world is going through. It should not forget however, that western art has also greatly benefitted from other periods of historical transformations. We wish Yang Ermin, a talented artist opening new paths for global art, a successful exhibition!

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