

COLORFUL DIARY

Nanfei Wang, B.A.

Problem-In-Lieu of Thesis Prepared for the Degree of
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APPROVED:

Robert Jessup, Major Professor
Richard Davis, Minor Professor
Rob Erdle, Committee Member
Jerry Lynn Austin, Chair fo the Division of
Studio Arts

D. Jack Davis, Dean of the
School of Visual Arts

Sandra L. Terrell, Interim Dean of the
Robert B. Toulouse School of
Graduate Studies

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Chapter I describes how my works are grounded in a Chinese point of view, based on sociological and anthropological approaches as defined in my work. The questions in my Statement of Problem deal with how I use “imbalance” in my works, yet still find a way to make acceptable compositions to better tell my stories. I relate how my work constitutes a positive act or event in an evolving world culture.

Chapter II discusses the work I focused around the questions posed in Chapter I.

Chapter III expresses my conclusion about my work and my goals for the future.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

My artwork is guided by my interest in everyday human relationships and human reactions. It's about my self, my center. It's about the environment I find around me, and who I am. I think constantly about the events in my life, places I have been to and the people I have known. Images of beautiful and ugly things play over and over again in my mind just like a movie or pages from a diary.

My works are grounded in a perspective of my individual being as it is affected by my relationships to the environments I find myself in and the people I find myself among. This includes my being a female Chinese artist in China and the United States of America. My works are based on sociological and anthropological approaches as revealed in my work. Basic myths and stories are found everywhere in all cultures, and I have found them in the Chinese and U.S. cultures I have experienced. But I also believe people have individual identities, essential cores of personality, and I try to reveal these in my paintings. I often capture aspects of relationships of which my subjects may not be aware. In my work I combine my analyses of their interactions with a broad acceptance of the subjects' depths of human emotions. I paint others as distinct individuals, in poses that are natural to them. This involves their social standing, what has happened in their lives, and aspects of their character.

My work is often autobiographical, and in it you can see my personal growth. I began using human subjects in my work as a teenager, because our school didn't have any teaching aids. My fellow students and I painted or drew portraits of each other. Sometimes I painted self-portraits when models weren't available. Back then I had little awareness of what it meant to paint or draw humans, but after I began to mature and gain more life experience, I refocused on human subjects. I am intrigued by the happiness, sadness, pressures, fears and sense of aloneness¹ in my life. I always observe people passing me on the street, and I wonder what these people do as a matter of routine. Even strangers catch my attention, and I wonder why they do what they do? I have and I will continue to chronicle my experiences as a Chinese woman who has experienced both rural and highly urbanized Chinese society, and now, life in the West. I have been affected very much by the difficulties and the rewards of my life as an artist. I use my painting to expend pent-up energy and to express my happiness and anger.

As with Frida Kahlo, who did more than 200 fantastical "self-portraits," I have subordinated my personal life to my work. Like her, "I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best." She painted her own reality -- whatever came to mind -- fearlessly. My artistic feeling is also influenced by the works of Alice Neel and Lucian Freud. Neel gave us human portraits that revealed the trials and tribulations affecting her subject's personalities. I am intrigued by Freud's works because he was a master realist

devoted to telling a story. His palette is somber; the subjects are not joyful. It is his virtuosity and artistry that are uplifting. These artists taught me that my paintings must capture the truth emanating from each individual if I am to gain access to my own truth.

I used a lot of imagery in my paintings when I was in China, because there were many things happening to me and to others around me day and night. I tried to shine a light on my subject's philosophical thinking, perseverance and social standing in my narrative.

Since my arrival in the United States, my work has deepened and widened. Surprisingly, to me at least, I find myself using traditional Chinese line-drawing techniques combined with Western materials to create images, and I am using fewer elements in my paintings. My "traditional" training seems to be reasserting itself and pointing me towards a new way of expression. I am using simple one-color backgrounds, and I leave a lot of open space as compositions require. In Chinese traditional painting, retaining and using "space" are very important considerations in evaluations of artistic accomplishment, because leaving empty space intentionally provides room for the viewers' imaginations to roam.

It is necessary for me to see and try some of the many new things available to me in the West. But I am here seeking a new ground for a long-held and consistent idea.

Statement of Problem

I have begun to think more about how my work fits into a broader, more global context, bringing fragments of time, place, environments, human images and cultures together in my work. But who will be my audience? Who will hear what I have to say? I want people to view my work as transregional and transnational art in an evolving world culture. I want to communicate with people from different cultures in a way that will allow them to understand what I have to say. I don't want to be remembered as "just" a Chinese or Texas artist or to be confined by some other narrow definition. I want to make art involving characters whom can help me develop narratives, express humor, and provide unexpected and surprising feelings to viewers. I want to "speak" less and "say" more, which means using fewer images to tell better stories, where the paintings speak for themselves.

The questions that I address are open-ended.

1. How can I make my work more captivating by intentionally concealing and revealing the "balance" or lack of balance in my compositions, narratives and images of common people by using lines, color and materials?
2. How can I infuse my artistic forms with Eastern and Western materials and techniques to achieve a better understanding of the lives of my subjects and the range of their emotions?
3. How can I enable a viewer to regard my work as an act or event in an evolving world culture?

Methodology

I mounted an exhibition containing twenty-nine narrative paintings or drawings and five sculptures, one of painted wood, four of painted bronze. The paintings and drawings were grounded in eastern and western thinking, using primarily pencil-on-paper, mixed media on paper or oil-on-canvas techniques. I used simple, one-color backgrounds in most of the drawings or paintings and retained a lot of space in the works, as in traditional Chinese paintings. In others I used typical western compositional techniques. The sculptures were expected to convey the same concepts found in my paintings and drawings in their approach to “aloneness,” including a joy for life. All the works explored the nature of my personal life within the context of my exposure to eastern and western cultures. They represent a “diary” of my thoughts as my work progressed. This thesis discusses some of the works included in the show *Colorful Diary* and why they were included.

CHAPTER II

Description of the Work and Analysis

My show held at the Cora Stafford Gallery gave me an opportunity to explore and develop my ideas and skills. The works in the show represented a culmination of my three years in the United States and in graduate school. All except one of the paintings, *Self Touch* (1998), were new works that built upon ideas that came to me in China. *Self Touch* was included as in the show to “anchor” the work in China and to aid in the viewers’ understanding of the transition that has taken place in my work and thinking. The new works were expected to indicate an enhanced understanding of how I expect to approach a multi-cultural, global art world as a post-modern artist born and raised in China.

I included sculptures, along with drawings and paintings in my show, because they evolved directly from my two-dimensional work. They involved the same ideas, the same sense of space and sometimes colors that are used in my two-dimensional work, and they helped me present my work as a unified body and unified conception at the gallery.

I cannot remember when I began to realize that the colors I was using in my paintings were affecting my feelings about my work, but gradually, over time, I realized that my range of emotions could be affected by the colors in the environment around me, including the colors used in my works. Sometimes color gives people a strong feeling; sometimes color may numb people, but color

always gives me positive or excited feelings, just like a sunny day, a color photograph, or even beautiful cake in a supermarket.

In my artworks, I use colors and things around me to record exciting, sad, helpless, happy, puzzled moments in my everyday life, just as someone might make an entry into a daily personal diary. When people view my paintings, perhaps they will recall a day or a time when a similar thing happened or occurred to them.

With reference to the first question raised in my Statement of Problem, I began addressing this problem in my drawings for the show. I chose some stories from my life or fragments of my memory that interested me. I wanted to use colors and materials in my compositions that would yield a strong feeling and to help me tell these stories in a better way.

In some of my drawings I used “unbalanced” compositions in a non-traditional way to challenge viewers’ expectations. My purpose was to create something unexpected and surprising with simple elements and materials. The drawing *Big Fish* shows a guy holding a big fish. This was inspired by a fishing trip I took to Follett’s Island on the Texas Gulf Coast near San Luis Pass. The water there sometimes looks dirty and unclear so I choose a dark, gray-colored paper to explore that environment. The use of strong acrylic colors on the fish reveals the life force of the fish and causes the figure holding the fish, rendered in graphite and diluted India ink, to recede into the background. At first, people may see the colorful fish only and not notice the male figure. As viewers get

closer to the drawing, the full composition comes into focus. I placed the figure of the man and head of the fish to the far left of the composition, and retained lots of space to the right, which gives viewers a feeling that the fish was so large I could hardly make it fit on the paper. This appears to be an unbalanced composition, but the figure's dark glasses and the fish's eye drag the viewers back into the painting rather than away from it. These two details provide balance to the composition and serve this drawing well. Had I made the fish's eye or the figure's glasses lead a viewer elsewhere, the composition would have been unbalanced. So I believe I achieved success with this piece, but I still wonder how far I might be able to "push" this idea before it becomes unacceptable as a composition or uncomfortable or unbearable to view.

In the Purple is a self-portrait. It shows me standing behind spring blossoms at a Buddhist temple outside Beijing. I painted the flowers in acrylics and other lines and figures in graphite. The acrylic colors are readily apparent on the dark, purple-colored paper and the graphite marks almost disappear on it. The viewer first sees the composition of the acrylic-colored part -- it looks disorganized and even unbalanced looking -- but after viewers get closer to the work, the figures in graphite appear and the composition, as a whole, comes into view; the composition becomes complete. I wanted this composition to include two drawings while at the same time creating an abstract expression by using a stylized technique. This is how I approached this problem.

My second problem involved my use of materials and artistic forms. It also involved the concept of aloneness. The *Ecstasy* is based on a somewhat unusual photograph of a young man smelling flowers in China on a warm spring day. He appears to be intoxicated by the sweet scent of the flowers, but the photograph reveals an unusual and unguarded moment, because many Chinese would regard a man holding a flower and smelling it like this as effeminate. If he knew someone was watching -- not to mention photographing -- him doing this, he might expect them to make fun of him. He might lose "face." This painting reveals my reaction to an impulsive and short-lived event. It's the distillation of this scene, and it's the distillation of life. It is like a writer writing an unforgettable sentence. It leaves people with a lingering aftertaste.

In this painting, I responded romantically, but at the same time I deny this romanticism by placing acne all over the young man's face. This could be a reflection of the contradictory nature of my psychological makeup. Many people try to experience new things and ideas in China, and they try to learn about and keep up with things going on the wider world, but the country's five thousand-year-old culture still limits people's thinking. There are many things they can only think or do when they are alone.

In my early art activities, I explored reactions of myself and others to being alone within a complex and well-ordered society. It appeared to me, as a discovery, that when people seemed to feel they were alone in a crowd, and were comfortable that no one was looking, that they could and would do things to

please themselves, whether scratching themselves, picking their noses, or their teeth. When they're alone at home or in some other private place, people will do things that they would never do in public, without the fear of being shamed or humiliated. These things done when alone seemed to me to be true expressions of human nature. I realized that when other people were looking, and when people suspected they were being watched, that they would try to fit into society, to go along with the prevailing flow of events, emotions, ideas, systems.

For the structural organization of *Ecstasy*, I created a balanced composition with a single black line drawn in oil for the whole painting, and I used color only when and where I thought it was needed to tell the story. The result of the finished painting leads a viewer to wonder if the painting is finished. It causes the viewer to scan from one point to another on the surface of the painting in search of the riddle of the illusion.

In a traditional Chinese composition, reserving space is considered very important. Space allows the imaginations of viewers to roam across a composition. The arrangement of trees and the young man in *Ecstasy* are carefully considered. The choice to render a part of the tree in a very thin, "weak," black line of oil in the painting represents, at the same time, a traditional Chinese idea conveying a distant memory, in this case my memory. But it also conveys a western idea of something "unfinished" in the composition, and, as in the Chinese technique, it also evokes a sense of distant memory. The choice of a dull, flat, smooth blue color for the background to represent a sunny sky is a

predominantly western idea of the function of color. In Chinese painting, blue might be used to render a sky, but never using a dull, flat presentation as I used in this painting. I chose bright, natural acrylic colors squeezed directly from the white paint tube to paint the flowers, and to reflect the real aspects of the scene. Oil colors were applied as thickly as I could to build or “sculpt” the surface, and to add a touch of perspective. This emphasized the importance of the choice of materials used in this work, a very western consideration that constitutes an alternative to Chinese techniques. This combination of the weak and the strong, the flat and perspectival makes this painting unusual, and it represents a combination of traditional eastern ideas with the functionality of traditionally western materials. Giving the boy a case of acne was the last issue I decided in the painting. It injected a dose of western reality into an idealized eastern scene.

We have a fusion of two cultures.

Some people, after they view *Ecstasy*, ask me: “Are you finished with it yet?”

My response to the question is similar to that of Sylvia Plimack Mangold. For Mangold the creation of art involves a process. The process sometimes involves the use of materials such as masking tape, reworking of taped outlines, erasures, painting over, but more importantly each step of the artistic process requires decisions, including a decision about when the process should be brought to a halt and a work declared finished. For Mangold, decisions about

what will remain unmarked, untaped, unpainted are as much a part of her creative process as marking, bordering and painting. I feel the same way.

Something left “undone” may say as much about a painting as what is done. This is why I chose this painting as the exemplar of my thesis.

One part of my response to the third problem listed above involves my sculpture.

In these pieces I sometimes paint a part of a figure’s clothes, some flowers, or a pillow to highlight a feature or a color I thought about when I conceived of the piece. My sculptures involve single people acting out their aloneness in their own environment.

Many happy things happen everyday in our lives, and if you take time to really observe these things, you will sometimes see the details of life play out in a moment that is penetrating and unforgettable. Both fear and happiness can provoke people to perform feats they might otherwise never imagine, but I have chosen to focus on happiness in my sculptures. In the throes of happiness people’s emotions reach a peak that allows them to ignore everything else going on around them, to forget the self, and to do miraculous things they might not otherwise do.

The sculpture *Two Fingers Zen*² shows a little girl acrobatically inverted atop the seat of a chair with the weight of her body supported by two fingers only. The little girl was so happy she didn’t realize that what she was doing might be impossible. In the ecstasy of her aloneness, like the figure in my painting the

young man portrayed in the painting *Ecstasy*, everything seems possible. Cast in bronze, the girl's moment of happiness will be remembered as long as the bronze figure exists.

But there were some technical issues to deal with in the creation of *Two Fingers Zen*. At first I wanted to use a mirrored surface as the base of the sculpture, but I could not figure out how to accomplish this without obvious external support. I considered creating a bigger base to support this heavy body, but it would have weakened the presentation, and her fingers would have disappeared into the big base (which would have rested on the mirror) destroying the effect. So I substituted a chair for the mirror idea and welded her fingers to the chair which worked well.

I got the idea for this piece after I stumbled across a story on the Internet about a monk, who was a martial arts expert from the Shaolin Temple on Song Shan (Song Mountain) in China's Henan Province. I knew he was renowned as a creator of "two-fingered Zen", and he even appeared on the national Spring Festival television show³ once as an elderly man. The show is viewed in almost every Chinese home during China's most important annual holiday, the Spring Festival. His appearance on the show ensured the monk's fame, and many young people were so impressed by his stunts that they wanted to quit school and go study kungfu at the Shaolin Temple. Then, suddenly, this popular "god" disappeared from the TV screen and our lives, without an explanation.

I didn't find out why he disappeared from public view until I came to the United States and began surfing the global Internet. Here I read his story and discovered some old pictures showing him balanced on two fingers, with one foot touching a wall. It seems the monk had been denounced as a "big liar," and had been sent to prison. His life ended in tragedy.

But the old images of the monk, as a young man standing on two fingers, left me with a feeling of someone doing something fulfilling that made them happy. This idea stuck with me and I wanted to portray it in my sculptures.

Discovering stories and pictures on the Internet, like that of the monk and others, add to a wider understanding on my part. Because the United States is a country of immigrants, people come here from everywhere, and they bring bits of their cultures with them. Hence, we see Americans practicing *kongfu*, *taiji*⁴, *qigong*⁵, and even *yujia*⁶. With modern computer, digital, and telecommunications technologies, Americans and others in the West can sample and embrace cultures from around the world. China is only now awakening to these kinds of possibilities, and we are all becoming more interdependent as a result.

So I used the image of the monk, but transformed it to use it as a statement of aloneness. But it is a story of aloneness that includes a statement about happiness that I wanted to give to the world. So this sculpture and its origins address another aspect of the third problem posed above.

The process of making these sculptures helped me better understand that information helps make new things possible. Online museums, galleries,

telecommunications, and e-mail are making the world a smaller place. As a post-modern artist, the way I react to these organizations and systems has become a very important issue. I feel that the ready availability of technology in America makes everything I can imagine “possible,” but this possibility also raises new questions. How is an artist supposed to respond to a world without borders, where old myths are being modified or broken down, and where art may be incapable of representing or testing Truth because Truth, as stated by Baudrillard⁷, is no longer considered a possible or a sustainable proposition? How should I view my work, even though it is true to me and is an expression of who I am, when it is destined to become little more than a commodity in an impersonal market, one object among others?

The realities of artistic life in China forces many Chinese contemporary artists such as Gu Wenda, Zhang Hongtu, Caijin, Zhang Huan, Cai Guoqiang, Xu Bing and myself to risk walking onto an uncertain world stage if we are to survive as artists and to achieve success in our work.

Yet, as Gu Wenda said, “The core of American culture seems to be WASP culture that is forced upon other people, other races.”⁸

Whether this spread of Americanism is the result of an intentional policy design or simply a result of the “weight” of the United States’s presence in the world, how am I to respond to this state of affairs? And how is the world going to react to me, as a Chinese artist, when China comes to have an even bigger presence on the world stage?

I realize that as a Chinese artist, I am in the same situation that faces some Native American and other indigenous artists who are trying to deal with or discover who they are. Like them, I wonder whether the new global society will accept who we are. I wonder how the media and the art markets will respond to our emergence.

Still, as stated earlier in this piece, I don't want to be known as a Chinese artist or as a Chinese artist who lives in the United States or as a Chinese-American or a Texas artist. I don't want to be catalogued under some title that may reflect only a portion of who I am and what I am about.

Yes, I have become a fragment in being; I have freedom. I am alone in the United States and in the world, just as I came to have freedom and to be alone in China through my art. Now, I just want to be an artist and make art. This show was a big step on that journey.

CHAPTER III

Conclusion

My show, *Colorful Diary*, at Cora Stafford Gallery was an important step for me as an artist. It gave me a chance to reflect upon my career as an artist in China and how I will move forward in my work in the future regardless where I live and work. It gave me a chance to consider how to develop a global vision and idea for my work, and it allowed me to explore concepts and forms new to me. The show forced me to think about creating a new relationship between me and this world and to reconsider my relationships and interactions with other human beings.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ People sometimes seem to think my use of the word “aloneness” is equivalent to the word lonely. This is not the case. People can often be most naturally who they are or want to be when they think no one is observing them in what they do. This may be a person alone in an apartment or anonymous in a crowd on the street, at an event or while visiting a new place. When alone in this sense, people are free from worries of “saving face” and trying to bend themselves to fashion, whether social, political, in their dress or speech and actions.
- ² Two-fingered Zen was first created by a monk named Haideng Fashi who came from the Shaolin Temple on Song Shan (Song Mountain) in China’s Henan Province.
- ³ An important “approved” television variety broadcast nationwide in China via CCTV which is viewed in most Chinese homes on Chinese New Year’s (Spring Festival) Eve. It is shown several more times during the week following the festival. The festival roughly equates to a combination of the West’s Christmas and New Years holidays rolled into one. It is the most important Chinese annual holiday, and almost every Chinese tries to return to their family homes during this time.
- ⁴ *Taiji* (Taichi) a type of Chinese martial arts (shadow boxing) that many people in China use for daily exercise.
- ⁵ *Qigong* is a system of deep breathing exercises.
- ⁶ *Yujia* is known in the West as yoga.
- ⁷ Baudrillard, Jean, “Simulacra and Simulations,” in *Selected Writings*, Mark Poster, ed., Expanded Edition, Stanford University Press, June 2001.
- ⁸ Kee, Joan “An interview with Gu Wenda,” *Asia Society: New Chinese Art*, 15 October 2003, 30 July 1998, Bar 89, New York City, <http://www.asiasociety.org/org/arts/insideout/gu.html>.

APPENDIX

Images



Ecstasy
48" X 36"
oil on canvas
2003



Big Fish
22" X 30"
Mixed Media on Paper
2003



Two Fingers Zen
16.5" X 5" X 4.5"
Painted Bronze
2003



MFA Show
Cora Stafford Gallery
March 2-7, 2004



MFA Show
Cora Stafford Gallery
March 2-7, 2004

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- Baudrillard, Jean, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Selected Writings*, Mark Poster, ed., Expanded Edition, Stanford University Press, June 2001.
- Kee, Joan "An interview with Gu Wenda," *Asia Society: New Chinese Art*, 15 October 2003, 30 July 1998, Bar 89, New York City, <http://www.asiasociety.org/org/arts/insideout/gu.html>.