

Q&A with Artist

The following Q&A was conducted between the artist, Wang Lan and Professor Jing Han, Director of IAC, on 5 October 2022.

Q: As we know, things often happen by chance but also with an element of inevitability. How did you become an artist?

A: I had been obsessed with drawing since I was a little child. So, I suppose that was the element of inevitability of my eventually becoming an artist. But it was also because I loved drawing so much that the obsession led to my stroke of luck to study art at university. People may face a few possibilities for their career development, but if you are obsessed with a particular pursuit and if you also happen to be a very stubborn person, you will be able to push aside all kinds of obstacles and disruptions along your path to get to where you want to be. Those who are pigheaded and persistent enough will eventually be able to be themselves.

Q: In your view, what is the relationship between art and life? That is, is art a reflection of life? Or art is another world created by artists?

A: Perhaps I can answer this question with an analogue. Life is like ingredients; art is culinary skills; and artworks are the dishes for diners to taste. To create a dish, you need ingredients. As an old Chinese saying goes, even the cleverest housewife could not cook a rice meal without rice. However, the term “ingredients” involves a wide range of materials and sources, including not only concrete images, but also the exploitation of human illusions caused by the application of different colours and different tones. So, as an artist, you need to closely observe the world around you so that you are able to capture the moment of epiphany in your thinking and reflect that moment of epiphany in your artistic creation.

Even if one may say that “art is a reflection of life”, it is definitely not a mirror reflection, but a special form of reflection with the interpretation of a particular human being integrated into it. It is not entirely wrong if we say, “art is another world created by artists”, so long as we believe that braised pork and raw pork are two different concepts.

Q: When you moved to Australia in 1991, you were already an award-winning artist and a lecturer of fine art at university in China. Coming to this new and foreign country meant that you would have to start all over again from scratch and be confronted with all kinds of difficulties in daily life to boot. What made you believe or what kind of opportunities you had that led you to believe that you could continue to create art?

A: That’s true. When you came to a new country, everything seemed to be different and you had to start from the beginning. But as far as I was concerned, life was a continuous path. Some people commented that I must feel a terrible sense of loss that now I had to do manual work in Australia whilst I was a university lecturer in China. In fact, I wasn’t impacted much by that sense of loss. Making a living by working is what should happen no matter where you are. It had never occurred to me that I should get anything without paying a price. If you want an ice pop, you will need to pay a dollar. Because my inner world remained unchanged, my perception or cognition of the so-called loss was rather low. I just focused my energy and attention on overcoming difficulties I encountered. Besides, those difficulties were not that hard compared with the hardships I had experienced at certain phases in my early life. So I went out to work

in the morning and evening, and spent the afternoon creating my art. Of course, having a strong body was critical. I don't think I could do that at my current age.

Q: You developed your artistic style early on. What are those determining factors on your style?

A: To me, it was not a complicated process. When I first started learning to draw, drawing a three-dimensional object on a piece of paper felt like magic. I was amazed. So in the first period of my artistic journey, three dimension was everything. But later I came to understand that a canvas was a two-dimensional space and all images, or colours or tones would need to service this two-dimensional space. During the second period of my artistic creation, two-dimensional space became more important. So the next thing was to know how to work the best in this two-dimensional space to make the artistic creation interesting, thrilling but also sense-making. The number of variations thus became countless and no one could exhaust the possibilities offered by this two-dimensional space. So, if I can claim that I have developed my artistic style, that is attributed to the fact that I understood the ultimate importance of two-dimensional space. In fact, all artists need to face issues related to two-dimensional space. Some artists have tackled those issues in a very conscious manner, others have done that without a lot of awareness.

Q: You once said that the German artist Paul Klee had had the biggest influence on the way you created your art. How did you get to know Klee's works in the first place? What is it in his art that moved you deeply?

A: My answer to this question is closely related to my response to the previous one. My first contact of Paul Klee was through art books that I found in our university's library. Back then it was not long after the Cultural Revolution came to an end, so those art books could only be found in the libraries of the academies of fine art. And I was at the transition period of shifting my thoughts from the three-dimensional space to the two-dimensional space. So my discovery of Paul Klee happened at the right time. His works told me in very clear terms what artworks looked like in the two-dimensional space. Of course later I learnt similar things from other artists, but Paul Klee appeared at the very critical moment of my artistic journey, so his influence on my creative thinking is most significant. His two-dimensional renderings amazed and inspired me. No wonder he is one of the most important figures in the world art history.

Q: In your works, there are some recurrent images of animals such as bull, horse, bird and fish. Why do you single them out and what do they symbolise?

A: Because of my personality and life experience, I have an "escapist" inclination. This keeps me away from "narrative" paintings and leads me to find a poetic language in my paintings. Poetic language by nature is ambiguous, symbolic and expressive of emotions.

Bulls are stubborn and horses are wild. They both are beautiful and strong, representing masculinity of nature. Birds are free. Watching them flying in the sky, I assume a bird's-eye view, looking down from the above so that I can see things more clearly. I am fascinated with fish, not only because fish has unlimited varieties and their colours are beyond imagination, but also because fish is so ancient, reminding me of ancient times.

Q: Looking back, how do you think living in Australia and its environment have impacted on your artistic creation?

A: Overall, I have found a free and harmonious lifestyle here. One can live a relatively simple

and natural life, which is what I had longed for. All this is reflected in my paintings.

Q: Can you tell us your creation process?

A: Before I start a new work, I normally draw a rough draft on a small piece of paper, as big as a playing card. When I transfer the draft onto the canvas, I don't necessarily follow the draft but make spontaneous changes or improvisation as I go. Sometimes I didn't end up with a work that I had in mind but created a different work which I was also happy with. Occasionally a painting simply refused to cooperate and kept wrestling with me. Once I couldn't stand the torment and decided on an impulse to paint over it. Before I finished painting over it, my husband Shen Jiawen saw what I was doing. He rushed over and took the painting from my hands and quickly washed off the top paint and rescued the work. This painting is showing in the exhibition (*The Horse with Bird*, 2015-13)

Q: In the past five decades of artistic creation, what has art brought you?

A: In this bustling world, art has been my lifeline and art has made my life meaningful. Creating art has brought me a feeling of peace and composure. But creating art has not been easy. I have made my greatest effort, but what I have achieved is limited. But that is all right. In front of art, we are like a grain of dust. Art has been a companion to me. It has accompanied me in living an interesting life.