

Q&A with Artist Fan Dongwang

The interview was conducted by Prof Jing Han - Director, Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts & Culture:

You were a well-established artist in Shanghai before you migrated to Australia in 1990. What attracted you to come to Australia? Can you list one or two culture shocks when you first arrived?

I was a well-established Shanghai artist in the 80's, having works exhibited at the Shanghai Art Gallery and in its collection. I originally chose to immigrate to Australia because Australia is the only country close to Asia that has a dominant Western culture. Close to Asia means easier access, and my main purpose of going overseas was to study Western culture. In 1990 I chose to come to Australia to further pursue my artistic career in two steps: step 1, to first study Western art at university; step 2, to establish myself as a practicing artist in a Western country. After I arrived, I visited a local artist and was advised that studying at university would be the quickest way to integrate into the Australian art scene and get closer to the art community.

I found the Australian art scene was not what I expected: it is more relaxed and comfortable compared with British or American and even Chinese cultures. But I like Sydney's art world; it's more versatile, multicultural and interesting than other parts of the country. However, the first few years living and studying arts at universities in Australia was a culture shock due to the different political, economic, ideological and artistic systems.

In 1990, I was fresh out of China. China was a very different society at that time, even more so compared with the Australia of the day. The initial culture shocks I felt were immense, such as the economic pressure new migrants suffer, and the new political freedom I experienced. It was the first time I had to struggle to survive on my own in a foreign country.

How difficult and challenging did you find the transition from your artistic practice in China to your art creation in Australia? Were there any major differences between the two?

A few years later, after I was better integrated into the society, I applied and got offers from five Australian universities and hence commenced my Master of Art studies at the University of NSW in 1995. The culture shocks I felt were again different at university, and namely the feminist and homosexual art movements. Overwhelming numbers of female students in the art classes and openly gay and lesbian lecturers were culture shocks to a Chinese student like me. But I have embraced them. Perhaps that was my endeavour to assimilate. This influenced my work greatly at the time: sexual ambiguity became one of the themes of my paintings.

In Australia, the other biggest influence on my work was the fine weather and bright sunlight and colours. I love the Australian glorious sunshine and blue sky. My work became very bright compared to the grey pictures I had created in China (often with fog and grey sky).

What did you need to do to establish the connection between your previous achievements in China and your new exploration in Australia? Or did you have to go through a process of disintegration, then re-integration?

My aim was to disintegrate: to get rid of my Chinese identity and acquire an Australian one. But that process was not straightforward. My studies at university stopped me doing so.

At that time, postmodernism and multiculturalism were equally dominant, and there was also of course feminism and the gay movement which I came to embrace wholeheartedly and completely. I was told that truth is relative and that I needed to look back into my own culture for artistic inspiration. This shocked me at first as I thought why did I come to Australia just to look back into my Chinese culture? Then I realised that this is what new art is about — postmodernism and multiculturalism didn't exist in China back then.

But after a year of hard work the results were evident: gender politics and body art, the main focus of the 90's in Australia, were among the biggest influences on my work at that time. I produced many big canvases of fragmented bodies with ambiguous gender identities for my Master of Art studies at UNSW.

You completed your higher education in Australia, receiving a Master's degree at the UNSW School of Art and Design in 1995, and a PhD at Wollongong University in 2000. How did your academic studies and research inform and influence your own artistic creation?

During my years of studying, working and living in Australia, I have experienced a constant change in social environment, and this has provided me with a complex, ambiguous and different perspective of life and art. In my doctoral study at UOW I formulated a theory of shifting perspective and employ it in my new artwork.

My doctoral thesis was titled *Dancing Shadows - Shifting Perspectives and Body*. It was a study of different bodies through their different shadows caused by our shifting viewpoints.

Shifting perspectives from a method point of view in visual art are the systems of space rendering, which differ considerably in many cultures and traditions. Shifting perspectives from a metaphor viewpoint have philosophical, social, political, and sexual significance. It is a multiple worldview of today's societies and arts.

Socialism and capitalism are also one of the many themes in my work. It is not as simple as the notion of Left vs. Right. They are more intertwined to represent different ideologies, way of life, and cultural differences. It is apparent in my major work *Shifting Perspectives and Body*.

You are now an award-winning and successful artist in Australia. When and how did the breakthrough happen if there was one?

My solo show at Wollongong City Gallery in 2000 right after graduation was a breakthrough moment. It showed my five years Master and Doctoral study results: among many others, a large 9 metre long painting *Shifting Perspectives and the Body* #1-5. Its concept, based on a visual system called "shifting perspective", was explained in my thesis and it was quite complex. For composition and colour, it is a balance between contrast and harmony. The colour is influenced by Western pop art. Overall it mimics the effect of Chinese traditional low relief carvings.

In the work *Shifting Perspectives and Body* I am using surrealism techniques to find meaningful associations and common connections between seemingly different people, things or events.

There are many existing logics I can keep or change when applying them to the images. Some are familiar and some are surprising to the viewer, forcing them to question their logic and to think creatively.

It took many years to research and to paint this large work, because I wanted it to be intellectually challenging as well as visually stimulating. That is, to reach my limits in each work.

The other breakthroughs were the 2001 Shanghai Star and 2006 Mosman Art Prize.

In 2013, your painting *Dragon in Water* was a finalist in the Sulman Prize. It is a very striking-looking dragon, powerful and distinctive. A traditional Chinese icon has been turned into a new kind of postmodern dragon. Chinese dragons have been painted by so many artists, to a point of being over-painted. What approach did you take that made you confident that your creative dragon would be different and stand out?

I started working on images of dragons from 2001 and have continued to this day, like I have with my body images. The changes happened when I first returned to China in 1997 which had a huge impact on my new work *Dragon in Water*.

The dragon images often evoke different ambiguous meanings in many cultures. In this painting, by submerging the dragon in different layers of air, water and soil, I have adopted a Western postmodern mode of fragmentation. This is different to the Chinese approach that emphasises the wholeness of the image.

Dragons are aquatic creatures living in water with fluid and hybrid identities, using their wisdom to navigate the terrain of ongoing change. Here the water is the environment, the agent for changes. Water dissolves and transforms the old into the new. The horizontal lines represent complex layers as though the dragon is coming through many different realms. Therefore, the traditional Chinese icon has been developed into a new kind of postmodern dragon: one that is disintegrated and reintegrating. The dragon has not diminished but re-emerged onto an unprecedented new level.

To me the dragon represents the emerging Chinese cultural identity. My continuing movement between China and Australia enables me to develop a constantly shifting perspective; it also gives me the ability to develop a unique visual language that reflects my ambivalence towards my identity.

In 2014, your work *Gum tree triptych* was selected as a finalist in the Wynne Prize. It is very interesting to see that in this work you used an Australian icon, the gum tree, and gave your creation a Chinese art perspective. Tell us what prompted and motivated you in creating this work?

My large canvas paintings titled *Gum tree triptych* in the Wynne prize was part of a series of gumtree paintings to explore the notion of painting Australian landscape through the techniques of Chinese painting, carving and calligraphy.

Humble, resilient and iconic, the Australian gum tree has been drowned in floods, consumed in flames, cut down by humans. Yet each year it endures. The trees spread back across the land, from scorching deserts to desolate mountains. In the twilight their majestic trunks soar towards

the sky in joyous salutation, their branches becoming narrow roads winding towards a heavenly and spiritual destination.

If you look closely, they become living things akin to human beings: their solemn trunks dance in the wind, their magnificent bodies transforming into awe-inspiring male and female torsos. Gum trees are painterly subjects too, with the strokes breaking free and the colours both subtle and vivid.

The gum tree is developed from my knowledge of Chinese relief carving. The paintbrush becomes my chisel, 'carving' out the trees' body shape, applying strong upward perspectives to manipulate the canvas surface to create powerful visual illusions. I also use "the art of line" from Chinese calligraphy combined with Western pop art colour arrangement to paint the free flowing and gracious trunks and branches.

Being an artist, and in particular a Chinese Australian artist, what major challenges have you encountered in making your works recognised in Australia?

The main challenge is to apply the traditions but also break away from them: to employ Western cultural ideas and contemporary artistic approaches to make new art that also has roots in one's own cultural background.

I am using a new visual language to reach Australian audiences. By revitalising old traditions, I provide Australians with a fresh perspective of their trees and country. The great 'Australian landscape' tradition, once emblematic of the Eurocentric vision of Australia, has now embraced indigenous views of the landscape. It will be further strengthened when Asian artistic perspectives join in. My gum tree and dragon paintings might help Asians and Australians understand both the cultural differences and the universal experiences embodied in the representation of our environment and art.

How did you develop your very own unique artistic style? What are the main elements that have contributed to your style?

While at university in Australia, I started to incorporate the ideas of Chinese carvings, traditional fabric patterns and Western pop culture colours into my paintings. My past art practices have thus all come together in my new work. I am not the young Chinese art student rebelling against Chinese traditions but instead I am applying them in my new work in Australia. They all become a natural part of me. I started to incorporate ideas of jade/ivory/lacquer carvings, traditional fabric patterns and Western colours into my paintings.

I employ a new method of 'painting as relief sculpture' to produce my new painting the same way as ivory carving — to use the brush to 'carve (paint) out' the painting's surface, as if carving an ivory relief or low relief sculpture. Thus, I bring out a sense of 3D volume on the 2D surface, a visual illusionism expressed in traditional Chinese art, which is also very different from Western linear perspective that's like looking into a space through a window.

What do traditions and transformation mean to you and to your artistic career?

For years I have worked with lots of universities in Australia and the experience has been rigorous and thought-provoking. This time I am very honoured to be working with IAC at

Western Sydney University, an Institute that specialises in bridging different cultures in Australia.

This show is like a mini survey exhibition that enables me and audiences to examine the progress of my 30 years of living and working in Australia as a visual artist. It focuses on the way that my past traditional learning has played a major role in the transformation of my art from old to new, from China to Australia. Through this exhibition I feel more confident that my art can be further transformed: applying this new visual language of sculptural painting to depicting Australian land, its people and their cultures in a unique style that will appeal to wider Australian audiences. I am pleased to work with fellow artist Susan Chan in this dual show. And thanks very much to Professor Han for helping me achieve my goal.