

Conceptualfinearts: 'This is my truth about Chinese art: an interview with Zhu Jinshi (with a three-years delay)', by Syefano Pirovano, 19th February 2016

This is my truth about Chinese art: an interview with Zhu Jinshi (with a three-years delay)

by Stefano Pirovano - February 19, 2016

In Summer of 2012 we travelled around China trying to get a firsthand experience of what at that time was a wide art world phenomenon called Chinese contemporary art. The donation of Uli Sigg's art collection to the M+ Museum and the brutal selling at auction of the Ullens' collection were the two main news that drove us to China, along with a growing curiosity for what we had been told was its vibrant emerging art scene. Among the many extraordinary art places we visited in Hong Kong, Beijing and Shanghai – not to mention small historical pearls like Tunxi and Hungcun (Huangshan), or the Terracotta Army – artist Zhu Jinshi's flat, located in the outskirts of Beijing, was with no doubt the most instructive experience. And the reason why we still think so lies in Mr. Zhu's sensitivity and bright talent as an artist, the only one we met during our stay who has lived for an extended period of time in Europe – mid-1980s, West Berlin. Three years later, and a day before the closure of Mr. Zhu solo exhibition at Blum and Poe in New York, here is the unpublished interview we had with him on 18th August 2012, at the presence of his wife and some of the works currently on show in New York.

How would you describe the art system in China?

There are three elements in the system: the national culture of China, collectors and galleries, artists and curators. It's quite different from the West, where the art system is mostly driven by museums.

And how is that in China? Are museums not independent?

In China, art museums are controlled by the ideology of the country.

What does contemporary art mean in China?

In China the term "avant-garde" is not as popular as in Western countries. When common people in China use this term they don't really understand the meaning of it. They don't know what contemporary art is. Only traditional art is acknowledged.

But this is different in the Chinese art world. Those in this world, including artists, have developed their own views on contemporary art, by looking at the West, albeit from a Chinese perspective. Unlike artists from Japan and Korea, the Chinese ones don't like to obey art rules written by the Western countries. They want to do something totally different. This was more common during the 1990s. Contrary to Japanese artists, the Chinese artists do not tend to instil the traditional oriental way of thinking into contemporary art. For example, during the "Mono-ha" movement, that took place in Japan in the 1980s, Japanese artists followed Arte Povera and Minimalism, while preserving the Eastern thinking and aesthetics. On the hand, Chinese artists love conflicts, with the Western contemporary art, with the traditional culture, with their own living environment, with the reality. You will be able to pinpoint the characteristics of Chinese artists if you follow this logic.

What is the main difference between working in Berlin and in Beijing?

In the 1990s, when I was working in Berlin, I tried to combine the understanding of contemporary art of the West together with the Chinese traditional aesthetics. That was my aim. In Beijing my approach is more casual, no rules to follow. It's also more personalised, and somehow stronger. I don't consider contemporary art in the West anymore. For instance, I've never painted outdoor in Berlin. I used to work in my studio, because I felt that in the West there were rules to follow. Even if the rules were set by the artist himself.

Would you say that in China contemporary art is all about business and money?

I think so, but I try to reject such a mainstream. I remember that in Berlin, in the 1990s, a German art critic asked me the same question. I answered no, because our art wasn't making money at that time. But this became true after 2000. And when it happened, Chinese artists did not know what they were supposed to do. Western artists have gone through this same evolution, but they knew how to handle this situation. Look, this painting was made in the 1970s, that was the period when I still didn't know art was about making money. It was hung on the fence outside the National Art Museum in occasion of the Xingxing exhibition, in 1979. Today, if I want to hold my own exhibition in a museum, I could just pay for it– but of course I am not going to do.

Do you believe in abstraction?

No, I don't. The term "abstract" comes from the West, it represents the Western philosophy and aesthetics. But Westerners think my works are abstract.

Which is the most inspiring place for you?

Inspiration is everywhere. There is a Tibetan saying: every object has its spirit, but to extract feelings from the object is a very difficult task.

What are the qualities that you look in an art dealer?

Those I can make friends with. The collaboration is very risky if you cannot become friend with your art dealer, and I wouldn't produce good works. Many Chinese artists are still not aware that becoming friend with your art dealer is important, and that is why they may not know what to do, and they may get lost. They know about capitalism, but they don't know much about Western culture.

What are the qualities that you look in a collector?

Collector Mr. Rubell, for example, is almost 80 years old. He once came to Beijing. It was on a very hot summer day when I met him. He was looking at my paintings carefully, as if having a dialogue with the works. While some Chinese collectors who bought my paintings claimed they didn't understand them, yet they trusted me anyway...

Is there a colour or a shape that you dislike?

I don't like when the forms or figures in the painting are too definite. I can accept if this is done by someone else, but not in my own work. My favourite colour is yellow, but I don't know which is the colour I dislike the most. I do like ugly colours. Once you find them in your palette, you know your work is going to be different from the others.

What would you have done, if you had not become an artist?

Chef. I love to cook very much. But I hope never as a profession. Sometimes I cook in exhibitions as performance art. I once cooked for 200 people in Prague.