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Shuffle between two nations

By Wang Jie (Shanghai Daily)
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Classically trained artist Su Xiaobai moved to Germany in the mid-1980s and re-examined the nature of art. He broke away from old thinking and style. Now he paints big bold abstracts in earth colors.

When artist Su Xiaobai furthered his studies in Germany in 1986, he felt at first that he "fell into an abyss" without any hope or future.

"I could hardly understand or speak German at that time," recalls the 58-year-old abstract painter whose solo exhibition is underway at the Shanghai Art Museum. "I was totally 'blind,' 'deaf' and 'dumb' in that foreign land."

However, Su is now based in Germany where the classically trained painter broke away from Chinese tradition and realism, studying at one of Europe's greatest modern art academies.



A piece of work by Su Xiaobai.

Today, Su is an acknowledged master, returning every year to Shanghai where he keeps a 1,000-square-meter studio in an old warehouse in Gubei area. His 70 large canvases on display are mostly lacquers in earth tones, with textures of jute, flax and bits of leather.

But many years ago back in Germany Su was desolate, though he had sought the new experience and lived for a time in a village. He almost wanted to fly home immediately, but he persisted and tried hard to learn the new language and way of life. At last he found his way out of that "abyss," and opportunity followed.

"Those darkest days in Germany lasted about a year and a half," he continues. "Every day, isolation and self-denial was torturing my heart."

At that time Su's name was hardly known to the German art community, yet his paintings featuring a lonely soul - such as a man wandering beside a tree against a gray backdrop - touched a chord.

His paintings sold well, though he was still studying at an art academy. Thus Su did not have to wash dishes, as did many of his peers, at local Chinese restaurants.

Su was born in 1949 in Wuhan, Hunan Province, and graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Even today he mentions that one of his paintings won an award at a national art competition.

"I could clearly remember each brushstroke of that painting," he says. "It depicted the overwhelming face of a wounded female soldier. But it wasn't created in the realistic way that prevailed at that time. The painting could be called impressionistic, so it stood out from other paintings."

However, Su changed his style after he entered Kunstakademie Dusseldorf with the support of a German Culture and Art Scholarship.

The move from a Chinese fine arts institute to a renowned academy of modern art in Europe changed Su's painting methods and techniques. He calls his re-examination and re-orientation in art his "breaking away" from narrative and expositive elements and the old structure of knowledge.

"I came to realize in Germany that the painting language itself is the very thing that matters most in art," says Su. "I do not rely upon the description of nature any longer, nor am I restrained by the natural world.

"Instead, I begin to concentrate on the construction on the canvas, to strive for the clarity, simplicity and unity of composition, and for the purity, subtlety and dramatic sense of color."

For example, canvases at the exhibition largely use lacquer whose base color is brown red. Textures are created with a mixture of coarse fibers such as flax, bits of leather and jute.

Su creates shapes, some assembled geometrically. There are no mountains, streams, lawns or trees, but viewers may get the impression of a volcano with boiling lava or a mysterious occult collapse of the earth.

Su created all these paintings in Shanghai over the past year.

Back in Germany, Su owns a spacious studio and a house renovated from a primary school abandoned during World War II in the countryside. The setting is peaceful. "I planted willows in its garden, trying to imagine that I am an ancient Chinese intellectual living an undisturbed life," he says.

Su tries different media, including sculpture and pottery. He admits that sometimes "an undisturbed life" can be boring.

"Frankly speaking, I do enjoy the simplicity of a pure life in Germany," Su says, "but the days can't be too long. Otherwise it will be 'ennui' (boredom) if you have no phone call, no guest visiting and no entertainment at all."

That might explain Su's shuttling between Germany and China.

"No place in the world is perfect," says Su. "So I am adjusting myself all the time. But I know one day I will return to China, because this is the place where I was born and grew up. My roots belong here."