

I'm very intuitive. My starting point is the heart.

Jennifer Wen MA discusses Taipei solo exhibition “Inked” at ESLITE GALLERY

Interview and compilation by CHIN Ya-chun

CHIN Ya-chun: Your first solo exhibition in Taiwan is called “Inked.” From the English title we can sense particularly clearly that this is a verb. In your exhibition concept you have pointed out the important role of ink in the Asian artistic paradigm, and that the color black simultaneously signifies “all” and “nothing,” two opposite concepts. This being the case, what is the significance of your choice of name for this exhibition?

Jennifer Wen MA: Actually, the art works came to me first, and then gradually a vision of a cohesive exhibition formed. For some time now, I have been exploring the possible role of ink in contemporary art, especially as a driving force. Hence, all the works in this exhibition are developed with ink as the departure point, moving in different trajectories.

Being educated in the West from a young age, I didn't study ink and wash painting until returning to mainland China when I was 21. I found it fascinating, and later, thought about using it in my creative process, but never systematically investigated into the subject matter. It wasn't until two or three years ago when I started to make ink wash videos that I became aware of the significance of ink as a thematic language. And in doing so, I realized the temporal nature of traditional Chinese art was very different from that of the West. Particularly interesting was that when we read a scroll painting, for example, time is already embodied in the work. Also, there's a strong performative element and emphasis on movement in the ink painting process. I felt that Chinese contemporary art has not truly delved into this language, and became particularly vested in this aspect.

So, ink is the main thread in this exhibition, probing into various attributes and characters of ink through different works.

CHIN: When you say that the contemporary art of the Chinese has not truly developed this language, what aspect do you mean? Contemporary art works that make use of ink and wash, calligraphy or the other elements of Asian art seem quite common.

MA: I should explain clearer. I find the most interesting thing about contemporary art is its attempt to get to the essence of things. Whatever the subject, what is its nature? What in fact is it saying? How does it intersect with contemporary life and contemporary art? In the Chinese art world, ink painting is indeed ubiquitous. But fully using a specific contemporary artistic vocabulary to make works that concern current society and its discourse, rather than superficially using the form of ink, not that nobody has done it, just that we've not done enough.

CHIN: Can you give an example from any of the works from this exhibition to discuss how you respond to or experience this matter?

MA: In installation *Inked Plants*, I chose five plants that are musts for the literati painter: plum, orchid, bamboo, chrysanthemums and cypress. The surface of each plant is covered in ink, making it completely black, and they are styled and arranged after traditional ink compositions. At a glance, the audience may think they are paintings. With a closer look, one becomes aware that these are actually living plants, evolving with time. These inked plants will continue to grow during the exhibition period, gradually sprouting tender leaves from their blackened bodies. For me, this series is a meditation about life's power to renew. It might be nature and man, and it might be the psyche and emotions....

Other works in this series have been shown in Sydney and in Japan. But in Taiwan, I feel that the connections to traditional Chinese culture are particularly profound, and I wanted to play with plants and compositions from very classical literati paintings. From the moment one looks upon it, it looks a little like a large-scale Chinese painting. Ink painting is often transformed into very large-scale work in contemporary art. In my piece, this large-scale "ink painting" is also alive and evolves as time passes, sometimes withering, sometimes sprouting soft buds anew. Just like the temporal nature of reading painting scrolls that I mentioned earlier. So I extend this quality in the exhibition.

Also, in Chinese painting, everything is painted in ink, and ink is used to express all colors. Both the tender new and the weathered old bamboo, for example, can be vividly portrayed with this medium. In the past, these bamboos or chrysanthemums were painted on paper, whereas in this instance the ink is applied directly onto the plant, turning an originally flat painting into a three-dimensional space, and adding a fourth dimension: time. At the same time, the plants shift and change in silence, embodying the duality of black. These are some of the explorations I am making.

CHIN: Can you talk about the ink and wash animations that will also be exhibited on this occasion? As far as chronological order is concerned, were these video works conceived before installations such as *Inked Plants*? I have seen one of the videos, *Brain Storm*. I'm curious about how it was made.

MA: Actually it's simple: I painted on glass. Painting on paper, the natural running and movement—the dynamism—of the ink, could only go so far before being stopped by the paper fiber. When I paint on glass, that process and fluidity is extended. It took more than a year to paint the work *Brain Storm*, during which perhaps only ten or so hours of source material were captured. Then I looked for segments that I can put together to construct a complete video. This work is in fact very similar to traditional landscape painting. To me it is the journey of human life, a spiritual landscape. I feel that the external world ultimately exists in the way we look at and interpret it, which also influences our subsequent actions and thoughts, so the landscape here is a more abstract and more psychological landscape.

CHIN: The visual content of this work is primarily a man and a horse advancing together through those landscapes. It is understandable that you would draw a man, but why a horse as well?

MA: People need companions when traveling, but this work presents a state of silence, that is not communicated by means of language. Historically, people and horses have often traveled together, and there is an understanding between them that is beyond words. Because this work occupies an intrinsically psychological, spiritual and emotional space, I wanted the two to be intimate companions in quiet rhythm, not speech.

CHIN: I feel that in this exhibition there is a grand macro theme, whether it is to extend the essence of traditional Chinese art in contemporary art, or your own ultimate concerns with creativity. At the same time, however, there is another aspect, a

concern which is micro and of the inner mind, and includes, for example, the work, *Inked Friendship*, which you created for a friend who had passed away, or the video, *Dreamscape*, which portrays dreams from your past, and even the installation, *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*, all of which are apparently to do with your own life experiences.

MA: I am very intuitive. My starting point is from the heart. It's the same with art making. What spark my interests are often tiny things that make my heart skip a beat, and inspire many fantasies, and sometimes they turn into artworks. Like the inked plants series, it came from a time when I was depressed. Everyday as I got out of bed I felt as though I was shrouded in black, unable to breathe. That year was particularly difficult. I couldn't escape this shadow. That work rose out of that period. Although I often discuss art history and so on, in fact the starting point of many of my works is in the inner mind. It's just the final presentation is not necessarily a personal narrative.

The work *Inked Friendship* is very important to me. It is also my attempt to infuse my emotions in the inked plants series. The work is made for a good friend of mine, a Taiwanese artist. We studied art at the same graduate school in New York. A few years ago he died of cancer, and it happened so suddenly that we had no opportunity to say goodbye.

He was pro-Taiwan independence. At the time I didn't know many Taiwanese. I knew a few, but they identified strongly with the Mainland. He was the first to say to my face, "I am not Chinese, I am Taiwanese." I was utterly shocked. At the time we met, I hadn't been to Taiwan, so my knowledge of Taiwan actually started with him. Later I'd come to Taiwan, we often hang out together, riding around on a motorbike, visiting his studio, looking at his art. Last year, however, when I came to work on The Republic of China Centennial Grand Countdown¹ project, he had already passed away and my heart was filled with a great sense of lost and grief. I thought of him often, and wanted to make a work for him.

When I decided to use ink as the main framework of this exhibition, I conceived the ideas behind *Inked Friendship*. Because my friend was from Kaohsiung and his grave is in Kaohsiung, I wanted to paint a tree near his grave black, using ink, and then transmit live video of the tree to the exhibition venue. I am certain we would see green leaves growing anew. Through the transmission of this image, I want to send my thoughts to him, transcending actual time and distance.

CHIN: In the introduction to the works, you mention that the installation *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien* is a map outlining your life's journey, and particularly indicating experiences of failure.

MA: They are indeed experiences of failure. When people think and talk about themselves, most of the time it's about one's greatness. This work, however, presents a look back on failures in the traditional sense. It's an alternative way to look at oneself. It's a minor summary at this stage in my life, in the meantime, saying, the title is very important here, "No, I regret nothing." Actually, as far as I'm concerned, these "failures" in the sense of traditional values are not what I believe to be failures. I look at them as a few important chapters in the course of one's life. Paradoxically, it's from these so-called failures that you can conclude what is important to you and what is not important. To be aware of the unimportant is just as essential. So this work is very personal. It took a lot of courage for me to make it. Also, including in its presentation, there is the question of how blatantly narrative I should be and how much to reveal. This is not about privacy but an issue of artistic language: how you grasp your work and make it resonate with the audience, rather than one of simply setting out your diary for others to read.

CHIN: Reading your description, you intend to spread black sand² on the gallery floor, using it to draw a map. What is the thinking behind using black sand as material?

MA: This work is a continuation of my explorations into Chinese ink painting. But I wanted it to be less direct and obvious in discussing those elements. The spirit of this work comes from ancient Chinese map paintings. Where the Chinese are very different from Westerners in the painting of maps is that we are not so much concerned about visual precision. You see maps by Westerners from several hundred years ago, and, although there are inaccuracies compared with those of the present, the general form is there. But what our maps showed was mainly names of cities, ports and mountains, who the people were that lived there. It was more concerned about social relations. So, when you look at those maps, you can't quite see what the place is unless you read its name, and you have to know the ancient place names in order to know their corresponding contemporary places. But through visual accuracy, you won't be able to read it out. It's very abstract, while also containing many techniques and aesthetics of Chinese painting. It's a combination of an imaginary space and a formal space.

There is considerable commonality between this practice and this installation. It's a personal map of my history, my life, while at the same time it's a combination of an imaginary space and formal space. The use of black sand to make the backdrop of this landscape has a few angles. On the one hand, black conformed with the overall aesthetic of this exhibition. Secondly, generally, if you make a map on a sand board, it's usually made of light-colored sand. Then, on top, including for roads and rivers, and so on, dark colors are used as symbols. Here I reverse it, like a negative, and signifying that what is being narrated here is an anomaly in general historical standpoints. What it is laid out is not something great or successful, rather each one an experience of failure.

The name of this work comes from a French song, *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*, that is, "No, I regret nothing," and I will be singing this song. To tell the truth, I'm mortified to singing for the public, because I don't have a good voice and am always seriously off-key. I never sing in front of others, though when I'm alone I love to sing and do so often. However I feel strongly that this work requires my own voice, that I need to do the singing personally, so I'm now mustering the courage to prepare to go to the recording studio to sing this song. This will be a huge challenge for me.

CHIN: From observing your previous works, as well as the content you're exhibiting on this occasion, it seems there are a wide range of art forms in your practice. Is this a conscious or unconscious development? The reason I ask is that, in fact, to artists, technique is still very important, so most artists still study a certain kind of form meticulously and then let their own technique mature to the point at which they can wield it in their expressions with ease. Looking at this aspect from the outside, it will often be the way people learn to identify your works. To me it seems that your works are developing as....

MA: Too scattered? (Laughter)

CHIN: Is this a conscious or unconscious development?

MA: I think it's both. On one level, it is unconscious in that I have a wide-range of interests. I'm interested in many things, and want to say a few words about everything, so, if I have inspiration after seeing something I'd set out and try turning it into a work. It's a natural inclination. A conscious aspect is perhaps connected to my background in the study of advertising and

design. In regards to artistic means and forms, I don't believe there are hierarchies. In the field of advertising, in order to achieve the expected effect you must use any means possible. I am perhaps influenced by this earlier training.

But I can now sense a bit of urgency and pressure, as though by not being focused enough or have a clearly recognizable language people may not know where to place my work. But life is long, and this is as true of artistic life. I still have time to reveal myself. I believe that some things can only be seen clearly after the fact, so although I am aware that a recognizable style or art form may be necessary, in essence I don't believe this is a problem, so I have not deliberately reined myself in.

CHIN: This nonspecific tendency can be looked at from two aspects. One is, as you say, whether the viewer can, by continuing to view these works, grasp the artist and his/her work, but I also feel that it's not necessary to have a relatively high level of recognizability or to enable people to categorize the artist or his/her work, because interest and amusement are both alluring elements in art creation.

The other aspect that I want to understand is whether adopting different approaches or, let's say, art form, can present an obstacle for your creative process. In fact, currently, many artists work in the same way as you; that is to say that they have chosen an approach that they feel best suited to express a certain concept, but not necessarily a technique with which they are familiar or in which they are proficient, because ultimately the technical part could be (or partially) commissioned to other specialists. So how do you, through the hands of someone else, fully realize an abstract concept you have in mind?

MA: What I see is not obstacles, but an opportunity. I truly believe this. I make videos, for example, but I don't know much about the techniques. I think that the fascination of art is how, through your hand and brush, you refine your materials into your own unique language. When I filmed *Dodo with One Hundred Meeps Walking in the Desert*, my video editor reminded me of many things to which I needed to pay attention to in advance, but I didn't heed to any of them because I already knew exactly what the work should look like in my mind. I just went ahead with my camera and shot it, but the end result indeed had many problems. I filmed my seven-year-old niece, Dodo, following her with my camera. I was in love with the way she walked, adorable and real. But the video turned out unwatchable because the image was constantly moving. When I added my flowing ink and wash paintings, the whole thing was moving and what's worse, the elements seem completely unrelated. It was simply unwatchable.

Later I selected a video segment of her walk that I liked the best. Isolated the still frames, and cropped out her figure frame by frame, rearranged, retouched and finally composed a new clip from these screen shots.

CHIN: That is to say you made these screen shots.

MA: Yes. I felt that this was my hand filtering the details of the whole work. Of course it took a lot of time, and I made numerous tries, but I quite enjoyed it. My editor had said, "You should set up a blue background with good lighting and film the work in a studio." But if I had done it like that Dodo would not have been as natural. A little girl pretending to walk against a blue background: do you think she would have been as cute as she would have in a natural setting? She had to be in a desert, walking like this and that, sometimes jumping, sometimes placing one leg across the other and so on; it's in these details we have the charm and character of the artwork. Actually, going through the whole process ultimately gave this work a different artistic expression.

CHIN: So the work integrates a film of your niece and the ink and wash paintings you painted on glass?

MA: Yes. The background music is played by her. It's a piano tune that she wrote herself. Very sweet. To come back to your point, no, I don't think one needs to view it as an obstacle.

CHIN: But in reality, this pressure for works to have a level of recognizability will always exist.

MA: I think that nowadays we are all rather lazy, including myself when I look at other artists' work. I too hope to understand in an instant what the artist is doing. But I feel that, as far as I'm concerned, the most interesting artists are those who keep me guessing. The less I understand, the more I want to see the artist's work. Of course the premise is that the work is good. I think there has to be a balance; that is to say that there continues to be things to be explored, while maintaining a continuous thematic language.

Notes

1: The Republic of China Centennial Grand Countdown, organized by the Council for Cultural Affairs and held by the river at Dajia Riverside Park, with LIN Hwai-min serving as general advisor, and the program planned by the creative team of LIN Ke Hua, CAI Guo-Qiang, Jennifer Wen MA, Leo CHEUNG and WANG Chia-ming. The first large-scale evening event to integrate water, land and sky.

2: Black sand used for the installation lightened in color as the moisture evaporated during the course of the installation.