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Xiao Fan. Portrait by Li Jin

Xiao Fan

By OLIVIA SAND

The Chinese painter Xiao Fan (b. in 1954 in Nanjing) is still part of a generation of artists who had to follow a difficult path in order to get to their chosen profession. As opposed to the emerging artists who presently have a wide selection of academic studies from which to choose, and often get support from Western galleries at the initial stages of their career, Xiao Fan had to cope with the political situation of the 1970s and early 1980s in China, before ultimately leaving the country for France in 1983.

Within the realm of Chinese contemporary artists, Xiao Fan stands out – his pieces only rarely overtly point to his Chinese origins, or to the imagery that is typically found in the work of artists from the Mainland. This does not mean that he has left his heritage behind; he simply tends to refer to it in a subtle way, for example, when criticising the lifestyle of many wealthy Chinese who are driven by abundance, consumption, and money. Based in Paris, Xiao Fan travels back to China on a regular basis, and continues to follow his own path regardless of trends or changes in the market. Here, he discusses his journey and his approach with the Asian Art Newspaper.

Asian Art Newspaper: Were there any artists in your family?

Xiao Fan: I became interested in art early on, but I had not planned on becoming an artist. There were architects in my family, and two of my uncles were artists – painters actually – one who was more a Western-style painter, whilst the other was a traditional Chinese painter.

AAN: You opted to be an artist at a time when (considering the political events) such a choice was not that easy.

XF: Indeed. During the Cultural Revolution I was twelve or thirteen

years old, and it affected my life drastically. Like millions of other youngsters, I could not go to school anymore, I had to travel to Beijing to participate in rallies demonstrating my support for Mao. I then realised how China had changed, and how all the speeches by the state were nothing other than a great lie. While the schools were closed, we were either sent to the countryside or to a factory. I stayed in Nanjing and was sent to a garment factory. During that time, I completed some propaganda posters for my working

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news in brief

Saturday 8 October at The Art Workers Guild, 6 Queen Square, London WC1. Tickets £60. For more information: events@victoriansociety.org.uk. Full conference programme on www.courtstudies.org.

LECTURE SERIES, LONDON

Devi: The Goddess and the Modern Indian Woman, sponsored by the Bagri Foundation, is a series of four lectures taking place from 6-31 October. Topics are: *The Indian Goddess: Sacred and Seductive, Sex, Death and the Goddess, Warrior Women and Androgynous Goddess* and *Domestic Goddess: Private and Public*. Free admission at the Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre, SOAS, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1. For more information on the lectures, events@katrillahazell.com, www.katrillahazell.com.

PERSIAN FUND, PARIS

American Friends of the Louvre announced that it has received a US\$3 million grant through the generosity of Pierre Omidyar, a member of Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute's Board of Directors and the founder and Chairman of eBay Inc. The grant will be used to create an endowment fund that will support educational and scholarly programmes on Persian art and culture. The fund will be named after founder, Chair and President of Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute, Dr Elahé Mir-Djalali Omidyar.

Income from the Elahé Mir-Djalali Omidyar Fund will support

educational programs dedicated to Persian art and culture from antiquity to today, presented at or in collaboration with the Louvre, including special exhibitions, installations, conferences, and publications. The Louvre will also draw upon the Fund to create 'Elahé Mir-Djalali Omidyar Fellowships' for outstanding scholars engaged in research and publications on Persian art and culture.

Founded by Dr Elahé Mir-Djalali Omidyar in 2000, Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute is a leader in education and research on Persian art and culture. Under Dr Elahé Mir-Djalali Omidyar's stewardship, the Institute has made numerous major grants to establish and/or strengthen Persian studies programmes at several prominent universities, awarded fellowships and scholarships to outstanding scholars and students in Persian studies, and has supported major programmes relating to Persian arts and culture by museums and arts centres in the United States, Europe and elsewhere.

TEXTILE MUSEUM, WASHINGTON DC

The Textile Museum is moving to GW's Foggy Bottom Campus as part of a new, world-class museum – the George Washington University and Textile Museum, scheduled to open in mid 2014. The Textile Museum was established in 1925 by collector George Hewitt Myers. The Textile Museum is dedicated to expanding public awareness and appreciation – locally, nationally and

internationally – of the artistic merit and cultural importance of the world's textiles. More information on www.textilemuseum.org.

GWANGJU BIENNALE 2012, KOREA

For the first time, the Biennale foundation has appointed a group of six young Asian women curators to co-direct the exhibitions and programmes. Sunjung Kim is a Seoul-based independent curator and Professor at the Korea National University of Arts. Mami Kataoka is a curator and writer and has been the Chief Curator of the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan, since 2003. Carol Yinghua Lu is a curator and writer who lives and works in Beijing. Nancy Adajania is a cultural theorist, art critic and independent curator, based in Bombay. Wassan Al-Khudhairi is the director of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, since 2010, responsible for developing the newly established institution and managing the development of its new building. Alia Swasticka is a curator, project manager, and writer based in Jakarta.

HARUD: THE AUTUMN LITERATURE FESTIVAL, KASHMIR

This month, the Valley of Kashmir will resonate with the sound of poetry, literary dialogue, debate, discussions, and readings, as Srinagar is hosting Jammu & Kashmir's first-ever national literature festival from 24 to 26 September. On 26 September, a special symposium and

a series of discussions will be held at the Kashmir University.

Harud: The Autumn Literature Festival is free to the public and will highlight local writings from Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh, including a special focus on folk and oral traditions. The event will also host significant writers from across India. For more information visit www.harudlitfest.org.

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Edmund Capon AM OBE will retire as director of the Art Gallery of NSW at the end of this year after 33 years in the role. The Trustees are in the process of selecting Mr Capon's successor, including a global search to identify suitable candidates.

ORIENTAL AUCTION, ITALY

The Italian auction house, Casa d'Aste San Giorgio's, first sale of the autumn is Oriental Art on 1 October, which includes Chinese ivories, objets d'art, as well as a selection of bronzes and ceramics from a variety of periods. Images of all lots can be downloaded from the auction house's website before the start of the auction. Viewing is from 24-30 September with the auction on 1 October. The print catalogue for the Asian art sale can be purchased on the auction house's website. Casa d'Aste San Giorgio, Palazzo Boggiano-Gavotti, via San Lorenzo 5, Genoa, Italy, tel +39 010 869 3500, info@sangiorgioaste.com, www.sangiorgioaste.com.

unit, as well as for the neighbourhood. My wish, nevertheless, remained the same: to continue my academic studies and to go to university. Once the political situation began to change after Mao passed away in 1976, I could finally apply to sit the admissions exam for the teacher's college in Nanjing. I chose the fine arts department, where I learned many different things ranging from calligraphy and Chinese painting to Western painting techniques. At the time, Nanjing was a medium-sized city, and the art school – as well as the university – had a long tradition. I was taught by two different types of professor: ones who had studied in Europe and others who had studied in the former Soviet Union. A few of them had also studied in Japan. I graduated in the spring of 1983, and by October of the same year, I had left China for France.

AAN: Did you not consider staying in China in 1983, as the country was beginning to change?

XF: In my opinion, at that time (and for me as an artist), it had not changed that much. When I graduated, I had acquired good techniques in painting. However, I did not get the best possible grades, because I was already starting to experiment with abstract painting which was a great influence on my work. Yet, in 1983, it was not well-received to venture into modern art. From the beginning, however, I remained faithful to the medium of painting, even if there were times when installations seemed much more popular.

AAN: What made you choose France?

XF: Initially, the US was the destination of choice, but things began to change, and more and more artists chose to settle in France rather than the US. Personally, I opted for France because I had met French students at the University of Nanjing, and they played an important role encouraging me to go to France. Originally, I was supposed to remain at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris for one year, but ultimately, I decided to stay because, at the same time, there were not that many possibilities in Beijing. I had an offer in China for a position as an art professor in a newly built university in Suzhou, but I wanted to continue painting. Consequently, and although this proposition was actually interesting, I decided to stay in Paris.

AAN: You had graduated from art school in Nanjing before coming to Paris. What did going through another art curriculum at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts add to your practice?

XF: Staying at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts was based on practical reasons. In order to stay in France legitimately, I changed my status from being a student to being an artist. Recently, there have been many changes affecting the school in a very positive way. As much as in the 1980s the school was rather limited on many levels; from 1984, it began to reinvent itself. Daniel Buren, for example, created an institute choosing some artists to study one year under his guidance. I thought that was very interesting, but this new curriculum only started once I had already left the school. Today, the schools' strategy is much better defined, aiming at showing distinctly how to become an artist, and what it means to be an artist.

AAN: As opposed to many of your contemporaries from China, your



No.1 (2011), oil on canvas, 100 x 82 cm



Bubble Game No 18

work is not immediately recognisable as 'being Chinese'.

XF: In the beginning of the 1980s, my work had a Chinese touch (Chinese ink, Chinese calligraphy, etc.), but eventually that all disappeared. I guess that using imagery that immediately suggests that the artist is from China is also a strategy to get attention. I have thought about that, and not only in the context of China. I greatly enjoyed the book written by François Cheng – *Empty and Full: the Language of Chinese Painting*. I try to adapt this idea beyond the canvas, to the practical side of life. If one does everything white with just a small coloured dot, it is empty and at the same time full which I find nice, but a little bit too easy. When I paint, I want to think how and why I am filling the canvas the way I do. In that sense, I want to find another way to explain the depth of the void. You can never clearly define it. It helps when you look at a painting. For me, painting needs to be read on a long-term basis. It should not be like love at first sight, where nothing more substantial develops after the initial sparkle. I want people to keep discovering new things and new meanings in my paintings.

AAN: You said earlier that you were also trained in traditional calligraphy. Is that something you could imagine going back to?

XF: No, I do not think I will get back to calligraphy. If time allows, I like to practise it, but to me,

calligraphy is almost like a meditating process.

AAN: Besides your paintings, you have also completed a small series of sculptures. How did you get to develop sculpture?

XF: I have completed a series of paintings involving flowers, in reference to the Hundred Flowers Campaign. After working on many, I realised that I wanted to complete some flowers that would be more powerful than the ones in my paintings, something more real and authentic. Sculpture therefore became the natural choice. However, as I had never studied sculpture, I needed to rely on the help of some students in Nanjing helped me with the process. I have completed 12, some small, and would like to do some more in the future. The size of sculpture does not really matter to me, for example, I enjoy the work of Giuseppe Penone (b. 1947 in Italy),



Enjoy No 17 (2007), 250 x 200 cm

I have remained faithful to the medium of painting, even if there were times when installations seemed much more popular

who has also done some small things, yet they are still very powerful. Our approach is very similar, and I guess one could almost talk about a Buddhist or an Oriental approach. The dimensions of a sculpture do not affect its weight and meaning. I have a clear preference for sculpture, as opposed to installation.

AAN: Many artists from China have recently been criticised as their work seems to have more to do with a factory production than with a solitary artist completing his pieces. Do you rely a great deal on the help of assistants?

XF: For paintings, I do not like to work with assistants, except if it were for a very important public commission where one depends on help. To me, painting is like the work of a writer, and there is more to it than keeping a group of assistants busy. Painting is a dialogue between the canvas and the artist. For me, painting is a long journey, and I want to continue it, even if that implies advancing slowly.

AAN: You had two museum exhibitions in China. How did the Chinese react to your pieces that are sometimes - even if not overtly - quite critical of the present Chinese lifestyle?

XF: In 2004 and 2005, I met a few overseas Chinese collectors. They kept pointing out that there were not any Chinese elements in my paintings! They could not understand how, as a Chinese painter, I could complete paintings without adding certain items that made the painting identifiable as coming from a Chinese artist. To me, that does not mean that I have forgotten about Chinese civilisation. On the contrary!

AAN: Why did you create the Mao

series? In all your other work there is no overt reference to any specifically Chinese imagery.

XF: In 2006, it was the 30th anniversary of Mao's death. Understandably, and like millions of other Chinese people, I was directly concerned by the consequences of the Cultural Revolution. My father, and my family, all endured a lot of hardship, even during the Hundred Flowers Campaign. Once the communists came to power, my grandfather was arrested in 1954 or 1955, and sentenced to 25 years in prison. He came out of prison in 1976, or 1977, and passed away one year later. We all suffered a lot, and during my childhood as well as my studies, many things were refused to me for the simple reason that after assessing my family, the conclusion was inevitably the same: that I came from a bad (from a 'black' family). Personally, it was a long struggle until 1976, as during that time I had to work in a small factory, and was not allowed to change jobs.

Regarding my series based on the imagery of Mao, I knew many artists would be working on something similar, but I nevertheless wanted to create something with him as centrepiece. I would not say that the work is about him. It is mainly about authority. Although we presently have more freedom in China, I do not think things will ever completely change. Up to now, we could never openly discuss everything we have been through under the Mao era. Even today, if one wants to publish a catalogue involving many images of Mao – even if they are positive – one needs to have authorisation. Today, why can we not have a political opening in China? Because we cannot openly discuss history, or what has happened over the past decades. It is the entire system that cannot be touched. This is a prerequisite for changing any other area of Chinese society. Deng Xiaoping said that everything would be so different for us. That is not the case! Coming back to my work on Mao, I put a condom over him, which is a way to show that he is preserved. One can certainly touch him, but one cannot really touch him.

AAN: Looking at your latest work, is the human figure becoming more important?

XF: Yes, definitely. I do not want to submit myself to the trends of contemporary art, especially to the trends of Chinese contemporary art. I want to find simple things to paint, that I find always have more meaning in order to have a conversation about our society.

AAN: What message should your paintings convey?

XF: I find that a lot of art today is similar to somebody wearing an oversized garment, which consequently seems a little empty. I would like to have something more profound upon people can reflect. Art is not propaganda. I would like people, when they see the pieces, to find a message for everyday life. To me, art is something quite philosophical, and quite poetic.

I like to keep my voice even if it goes against the stream. I would like people to keep seeing things in my paintings, new things or things they had forgotten that they now see under a different angle. Which leads me to underline that nothing is ever completely new: there are simply things that we have forgotten or things that are now presented in a different way.