

Sanguine Splendor **A dialogue between Wang Qingsong and Li Xianting**

Li Xianting: The first work of yours I saw was that figure series while searching for artists on behalf of the German Kunstmuseum Bonn at the end of 2006. This series was consequently featured in the Kunstmuseum Bonn's "CHINA!" exhibition in 2006. That early work was very expressionist, the bodies appeared twisted and oppressed - it seemed like an emotional vent. This was followed in May 1996 by your participation in one of the first Gaudy Art group exhibitions, "Gaudy Life". It was because of your gaudy artworks that people first knew of you but in fact you had previously been painting oppressed, twisted human figures before turning to those gaudy pictures on velvet where you began looking at society's aesthetic taste. You had gone from introspection to looking at the outside world; these were two entirely different styles and artistic positions. Please tell me about how this shift came about.

Wang Qingsong: Before I came to Beijing in 1993 I was wondering whether or not I should keep going with art. I wanted to paint something really good, to take part in national exhibitions, and get into mainstream art circles. I had 1200 yuan in my pocket and came up to Beijing with another artist friend from back home. I thought the money would last me six months, but after only two I had spent it all. Winter came and I went to my friend's sister who was working at the School of International Relations. I asked her for a padded mattress but she wouldn't give me one. That winter I only had a sheet to sleep on, and didn't dare to buy anything.

When I first came to Beijing I wasn't living in the Old Summer Palace area - I lived in a village quite a long way from there. I was the only artist there. Life was tough and I suffered psychologically. I felt that our society was too competitive, and so in that period I painted people wrestling or fighting. But as I went on painting, I started to feel that something wasn't quite right. Society had changed and it wasn't as simple as just bloody violence.

Starting in 1993, society began changing extremely fast. People totally changed too. Reality demanded that I couldn't just go on expressing my own feelings. I needed to think about why society was like this. That was how I went from painting diary-style oil paintings to more gaudy artistic creations in the style of reportage, thereby tackling the changes in society in a much broader way.

Li: I discussed this when I first spoke about gaudiness - that gaudiness concerns society's aesthetic taste.

Wang: Yes. In painting, or in art, gaudy things look very contradictory. In the Old Summer Palace area, there was a whole year when I didn't produce any work. The paintings I had done before were propped up in corners facing the wall. No one knew what I had painted, and I didn't want to look at the paintings either. Most of that time I was socializing with Xu Yihui and that lot. Everyone had the same feeling - that they couldn't go on painting. The pressures created by changes in society were far greater than the kind of melancholy that we felt. Everyone slowly started to change. It looks like it happened suddenly, but in fact it was a slow process, which took place over that year in which I didn't paint anything.

Li: In May of 1996 I organised the "Model for the Masses" exhibition with Xu Yihui, Wang Jinsong and Qi Zhilong. At the time there was a whole group of Old Summer Palace artists painting gaudy art but it wasn't yet as mature as the work of those three. But very soon after, Yang Wei's group organised an exhibition of some of their work and asked me to come up with the name: "Gaudy Life". That was the first time you made it onto the scene, that everyone finally saw your work. At first you were using velvet, which I mentioned when I wrote about 'Gaudy Art'. There were lots of artists at the time who began to use folk related objects like cabbages and radishes, images of the most mundane common objects. The link with folk art was further emphasized with both the material used and method of production. For example Chang Xugong was using embroidery and many others were doing work which concerned fashion and everyday life, you chose to use velvet. Painting on velvet was an extremely rustic form of production. It resembles things of the change we see in the USA between the sixties and the eighties, from Pop Art through to Jeff Koons. Jeff Koons' work uses a great deal of folk craftsmanship. Please speak about the ideas behind this early painting.

Wang: Originally I painted it onto canvas but found that canvas was slightly restrictive. In those days I couldn't paint as easily I'd liked to have, there was something changing inside, I didn't know what to paint or what surface to paint on. At first I didn't want to paint on canvas, but I had to search for something else that I could do.

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Cynical Realism and Political Pop had already been firmly established by then. All of the classic pieces had been pretty much finished by then. If I wanted to survive as a painter, I had to let go of oil painting, and that meant giving up canvas first and foremost.

Li: You gave up using canvas and oil painting techniques, such as the brushwork, all at the same time, right?

Wang: Yes. This was the first step. When I used to work in Jiangnan Oil Field, I used to paint small folk images of cats and dogs on golden velvet to give to my bosses and friends. They all really liked them. But even though painting on velvet was really good, stretching it onto a frame meant the results would always be kind of similar to oil paintings so I searched for another exhibiting format. That's when I decided to use screens; they were a bit more family-like, folk-like, not like art. Later on I saw in books that artists in the USA in the eighties had been using velvet but we didn't know that over here. Back then we couldn't get hold of that kind of reading material. Of course painting on velvet in China was not a revelation in the 80's, it had been around for ages, so there was no question of who I was following or studying from. The appearance of oil painting on velvet created a gleaming effect, there was an incredibly phoney real feeling to it. That's when I decided that this was to be my future direction. At my first exhibition in Beijing in 1996, it was that screen painting that I presented. On the edges of the screen's frame I attached lots of those pictures of superstars that primary school children play with and then covered it all in varnish. Although the screen was very traditional, it was covered in objects of modernity. I was conscious of trying to challenge customary materials and forms of presentation at the time, whilst still choosing common, popular objects.

Li: Once you'd finished this you moved onto photographs, right?

Wang: In between I went back to painting some of those oil paintings of people wrapped up in plastic sheeting. Because it was a military base, in around 1995 I had to move away from the Old Summer Palace area to Xiangshan. Moving back and forth so much sent me back into a trough. Society and gaudiness once more became very distant from me. I felt that art wasn't important anymore; it was life that was more important. The reason I painted people wrapped up in plastic at the time was because I felt oppressed. Plastic sheeting was transparent; you could see everything of the outside world but were still shut off from it, unconnected to any of its goods or its bads. It was really difficult to deal with and I found myself caught up in psychological strife once more. I knew it wasn't the kind of art I wanted to produce but it was intuitive. It was like there was someone intentionally interfering with my life so that I couldn't do the things I wanted to do. I moved house five times that year, being hassled by landlords everywhere I went and so that's how during this period I went back to painting people wrapped in plastic again.

Li: Where did you start painting those figures wrapped in plastic sheet?

Wang: I started just after I left the Old Summer Palace in 1995 in fact, and carried on until the end of 1996.

Li: That's a long period of time. From the Old Summer Palace to Xiangshan (Fragrant Hills), to Songzhuang and finally Dongbahe.

Wang: In fact I'd already finished painting people wrapped up in plastic by the time I moved to Dongbahe in 1997 and felt things were getting better. Once I had somewhere to live I felt secure again, and I also had a girlfriend.

Li: Viewpoints constantly shifting and hesitating between the inner and the outside world.

Wang: Yes, conflict was eternally churning within. But I was always still thinking over problems, including technical ones. I kept moving back and forth between the screens and painting the figures in plastic sheeting but I think they're both related, they're both extremely troubled. Those were the most difficult years, both artistically and in terms of living. The very last move from Songzhuang was New Year 1997. There was heavy snow and I was blocked in my house hiding as I'd been told to move out. They told me that if I didn't move they'd take me down to the police station, or put me in a mental asylum. Hearing this was really tough at the time. I moved to Dongbahe at the beginning of 1997 where I first made contact with the life of city dwellers, and got back into that gaudy state of mind. I felt safe being back in the city and there were lots of opportunities for conversation often going out to bars and having friends over. That was when I first starting making pictures, printing them out on A4 paper at the time.

Li: What was the first piece you produced?

Wang: It was what was popular in shopping centres at the time - to cut and paste a picture of your head, putting it on the body of a superstar. My earliest pictures were "Three Sisters" and "Chinese Heroes".

Li: So that still had a strong folk style. It was still related to the screen work.

Wang: Yes. It was a continuation of a theme but I hoped to present it with different means. For the first exhibition at the Taipei Biennale in 1998 it was sprayed onto velvet. But because colour would run after spraying and the nozzles would get damaged very quickly, no one was willing to do it. I had to find another method. Soon after I found another way involving spraying the image onto a mirror-like metallic surface. I used this method when taking part in the Gwangju Biennale in 2000, mounting them on two-ended ink painting scrolls. But problems arose after presenting this work in Korea. I was still searching for other ways of exhibiting the work. At the end of 2000 when I asked you to write a short piece for the exhibition at Beijing's Wan Fung Art Gallery, it was already clear to me: form was not important. Why should I need the effect of screens or ink painting scrolls? Those were all superficial. Perhaps the solution lay rather within the pictures themselves, their greatest charm was after all having an original style.

Li: The relatively large-scale standard of work must have started with the "Night Revels of Lao Li"?

Wang: Yes. I think that was a bit of a gamble. If it hadn't worked out how I'd planned at the final shoot, I definitely wouldn't have had the ability to carry on with them. Between 1999 and 2000 I made six trips between Beijing and home. I sold almost all my plastic sheeting paintings in order to pay the medical expenses for my mother's treatment. Before the end, my mother left me all her back pay and pension. So it was my mother's money along with the grant from Zhang Fang that paid for the Night Revels picture. Before we did the shoot I actually always wanted Lao Guo (Yi Ling) to play the part but felt in the end he was a bit of a bandit, not quite like an intellectual. Afterwards I thought of asking Xiao Feng but decided he didn't have enough feeling, his beard wasn't quite right and didn't give that feeling of having lived through the vicissitudes of life. Then Liao Wen suggested asking Lao Li and as soon as he said it, I knew it was perfect. The whole of the domestic art scene was just starting to move into a new period in 2000. I could sense in your eyes the melancholy; the state you were in really resembled that of Han Xizai.

Li: I was also very familiar with Gu Hongzhong's painting and the character of Han Xizai. I knew his background and state of mind at the time and that the reason he purposefully immersed himself in a life of debauchery was related to his own anxiety.

Wang: Yes. You asked me, "Do you understand the "Night Revels of Han Xizai?" You said that you'd written an article for Ren Xiaolin, which had mentioned the "Night Revels of Han Xizai" but I'd never read it. I had read a lot of books about the "Night Revels of Han Xizai" to prepare for the shoot and hoped I could express the shabbiness of intellectuals whilst reflecting the debauchery of society. I hoped it would be double-sided.

Li: Han Xizai wanted to confuse Emperor Li Yu with this life of debauchery to show that he didn't have any wild ambitions. In fact he was already extremely anxious about the survival of the Kingdom.

Wang: Yes. The heroes of the story all have a tragic ending, including Li Yu's pathetic suicide. I'd wanted to tell you how I'd like to have completed the piece but didn't dare. We were about to do it in a week, everything was bought, it could have been a real hassle if you'd ever refused to do it. After we did the shoot I was left with only 300 yuan to my name. I don't know if you remember that the film had been put in upside down? The photographer said that he could just rinse it with fixer and it would be fine; luckily I did not follow his advice. Otherwise we'd have been left with nothing as there wasn't any emulsion on the reverse side. When I realised there was a problem, I discussed it immediately with Xiao Feng and we decided to shoot again straight away.

Li: Did you end up shooting it again?

Wang: Yes, we did. That afternoon Xiao Yu and Wang Yin were having an exhibition opening at Lao Qiao's space that you had to attend. There was no time for another shoot, I thought I was done for, that God was going to lay me to ruin.

Li: In the end you did two shoots, right? Because I remember I got up really early that day.

Wang: Yes. You hadn't sleep that night. The day before had been Ren Xiaolin's birthday and lots of artists had celebrated it at Huajiadi Xili. I was so nervous the night before the shoot. You told me, "Qingsong, relax, don't worry. Nothing's going to go wrong..." I told myself, "Everything is fine, everything is fine", but it was already after 3am when I was ready to go home. You told me, "Sleep, Qingsong. I'm just going to do some reading tonight." So that's how it was - you didn't sleep at all, and I slept on the sofa in case you wanted to go to bed to rest. You asked me what time I'd like to be woken up and I told you 7am as we were to start at 8. We shot from 8 in the morning through until 3 or 4 in the afternoon when the picture of the last scene jammed. We couldn't get it out and that was when we realised the film had been in back-to-front. We re-shot it but didn't have time to get changed between scenes. That's why the clothes are the same in all five of the scenes, whereas they'd been different in the originals. The effect was better in the original with the people being suitably dressed for a performance, being suitably dressed for dining etc.

Li: I also changed one detail. Han Xizai was having his hands washed; I suggested we change it to having my feet washed.

Wang: Yes. I was wanting to resolve that problem as washing hands meant the figures in the background would be blocked out. When you suggested washing your feet instead, the figures in the foreground were all crouched down, solving the problem. But you didn't really wash your feet, you didn't even take your socks off. After developing the negatives I picked one up and saw it was blank, picked another up and it was blank too, all of the first few were blank. I closed my eyes and randomly picked another; it had an image! I turned it over straight away, but it was still a real pity; every negative was missing the edges, they weren't complete. Originally I'd rented out three screens but only one appeared in each shot, the other two were missing.

Li: You were a little reserved in those days. If you'd waited a couple more days I could have brought along Zhang Xiaogang, Wang Guangyi and Fang Lijun to take part in the shoot together.

Wang: Yes. You talked about doing that at the time but in my heart I was hoping to leave behind the things of the past, I wanted change! The reason for taking a photograph was that I didn't want to paint anymore. Of course your idea was great too but it was difficult for me to invite them, I would have at least had to invite them for dinner too. Most importantly I hoped to show the debauchery and licentiousness of this society, I wanted to emphasise these things.

Li: Those ugly models of yours worked well.

Wang: Yes. Even the cook and the props man from the studio took part. Those people were all so inelegant, it was very easy to visualise; the visual impact was very strong. You being the symbol of traditional Chinese literati created a stark contrast with all this profanity. If everyone had been of a similar ilk, those models wouldn't have had the same effect. After we'd done it I remember looking at the result on the computer and seeing how great your expression was: melancholic and yet exhausted from not having slept the night before. Fortunately I didn't use Lao Guo, he really does have an air of banditry about him. And Xiao Feng plays another role, he has a very studious air about him. Even though the photos had been slightly cut, I was still really satisfied with the final result. Then I grew confident realising that I could now continue doing it. I realised that there was no way I could have let the film go to waste, I'd been using a dead person's money, the ghosts wouldn't have left me alone. I couldn't fail, I had to succeed with it. Amazingly, on the very day that my mother passed away I received the invitation to the Gwangju Biennale 2000, it was so strange.

Li: Because they'd seen your work at the Taipei Biennale in 1998.

Wang: Yes.

Li: People would ask me, "Lao Li, do you really live like that?" I would reply, "What do you think?"

Wang: The success of "Night Revels of Lao Li" also came with a lot of criticism. It's not for me to say but I really like that picture. Even without you being a famous person, if you had been a common man, the emotion was still so extremely moving. As this work became more publicized someone who had previously criticised me said to

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me, "Qingsong, this picture really is good. Even if I didn't know Lao Li, if it hadn't been him, it would still have been a great picture." This was regarded as a fairly large print for photography at the time, quite complete. I think the greatest thing this work brought me was confidence; it told me that I could continue working.

Li: After finishing this you started working on the photos of you and the girls in the bath house and the group of people looking up at the Coke in the sky.

Wang: That's right. I could do as I pleased, I could relax and continue.

Li: These things were all related to consumerism and fashion but then out of the blue you shot the "Another Battle" series. There seems to have been a change here. It's no longer just humorous irony about an excessive lifestyle but a look at the psychological battle going on in Chinese people's minds since the arrival of consumer culture in China. This is at least how I would explain the battle scenes we see. The Chinese have a love-hate relationship with western consumer culture, there is an internal battle taking place. As well as the confrontation and battle between China's traditional culture and consumer culture, there's also one going on in every Chinese person's mind.

Wang: Yes, you're right. That's what I was getting at. In fact the commander in the battle scene is injured at the same time as he's attacking. Being wounded was to express this conflict of love and hate. Many Chinese people like a lot the Western fast food or they at least appreciate how clean it is on the surface. Especially in the North China where we don't have much breakfast food or snacks or if we do they're very dirty. Western consumer culture really has changed many things, destroyed many vestiges of traditional culture but we seem unable to part with it. Because I had come into a lot of criticism for "Night Revels of Lao Li", claiming I had used Lao Li, I felt I should have to change, use another method - but on no smaller a scale. That's how I came to shoot the "Past, Present and Future" sculpture photos and "Another Battle" series.

Li: Were these both shot in the same year?

Wang: Yes, all in one year. Actually "Another Battle Series" were shot in the winter.

Li: In fact these two works were another turning point for you. They are both quite heavyweight.

Wang: Yes. I knew I didn't want to use famous people and I didn't want them to be garish, I wanted a change. Originally I was going to wait another few years before shooting "Past, Present and Future" and "Another Battle", carry on with the gaudy work for another year or two but in the end I had to stop it there and then and make the change. Shooting the battle scenes didn't go quite as I would have liked. Originally I'd planned on it being bigger and a bit more interesting but because the Falun Gong followers set fire to themselves that year, all sales of pyrotechnics were prohibited, it was almost impossible to get hold of any. I'd chosen to shoot it in Beijing suburban area, Yanjiao, on a road that North-eastern Falun Gong followers pass through and if there had been a lot of smoke there could have been problems. A police car did turn up on the day we were shooting and the policemen watched from the slope. I'd purposefully placed the box of pyrotechnics from Beijing Film Studios at the entrance and made sure the public bus we'd rented was in an obvious location. They presumed we were shooting a film and left. The idea behind these two works was to express something closer to reality, connected with real life, a less adorned side to society.

Li: I'd like to explain "Past, Present and Future", this is even more important; I've discussed this with Western critics. The style of this sculpture fits the classic model of all socialist camps. It's a standing symbol of the cold war period. It's ideological, it's the collective consciousness but you've managed to approach it from the perspective of modern fashion. You're saying that today's fashion and economic liberation is not in truth a real economic liberation, nor is it true commercial culture. In fact it's the same old ideology dished up in a new form.

Wang: Yes, when I shot that picture I had an overall idea of what I wanted but which form, which method to use to achieve it I wasn't quite sure of. After Hong Kong was returned in 1997, I began to keep an eye on the changes to Tian'anmen. I would photograph the many changes there every year around National Day as there was more opportunity to go to Tian'anmen at that time. I'd often see people laughing and joking in Tian'anmen Square or in front of the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall imitating the movements of heroes. There would be both Chinese and foreigners doing it. Collective and unit representatives in Beijing for meetings would all do it during their visits to Tian'anmen Square. I began to ask myself how it was that government officials didn't have any sense of respect

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for these heroes any longer. These heroic sculptures had become nothing more than a place to take holiday snaps. Has this society really changed, has it lost all sense of worth?

Li: There are factors pushing for both change and the status quo.

Wang: So that's why I thought of making this piece. I wasn't sure how exactly I should go about it but I hoped to express the process of this change from the past, to the present and on to the future. I studied a number of catalogues of Soviet city sculptures. From an artistic perspective, the Soviet Union's sculptures were the strongest, followed by the Chinese then by the North Korean's. But in terms of form, those of the Chinese were more complete than those of the Soviet Union's but those of the North Korean's were even more detailed, even crazier. Other than Tian'anmen Square, there is also another in Shenyang.

Li: That's the earliest of them, from the start of the 1970s.

Wang: Yes, that sculpture is more succinct and more lifelike. That of Tian'anmen feels more 'arty', slightly more conceptual.

Li: The group of sculptures in Red Flag Square in Shenyang is crazier, there's a figure bursting out suddenly from beneath a pile; he appears to be charging towards the spectator.

Wang: It's a real oil pipe that they're carrying.

Li: It looks like they're calling out Long Live Mao Zedong Thought?

Wang: I didn't go myself at the time. I had a friend there take lots of research photos for me and send them back so I could get some inspiration. Some of the photos were quite amusing; by the side of the sculptures there were lots of huge advertisements, which I found fascinating - the contrast between the ideal and the reality; this inspired the idea to highlight the loss of ideals. By that point I'd already started using photography so nothing restricted me anymore.

Li: What did you do after finishing this?

Wang: I was quite tired after finishing these two series. From 2002, I produced some smaller photographs like, "Knickknack Peddler". My child had just turned one. So I wanted to shoot a piece related to children. In fact it was also in preparation for 2003. It wasn't that I had fallen in love with classical paintings in choosing these subject matters. The likes of "Night Revels of Lao Li" tackled the issue of intellectuals, "Can I Cooperate with You?" tackled that of foreign relations and in his times Li Shimin was just like this. "Knickknack Peddler" is designed to highlight issues regarding children. I wanted to express the changes from ancient times up to modernity. I would at times also shoot some small group photographs. And in 2003 I also shot the meat flowers.

Li: Those meat flowers are really quite special. Could you talk a bit more specifically about them?

Wang: Sometimes I do some artwork that isn't entirely for art's sake. Some friends would say, "You're always shooting those large scale photographs of people, can't you take some without people?" I too had always wanted to do some work without people. Society was flourishing so I thought to take a photo of some beautiful flowers. At the time many large hotels were decorated in beautiful peonies, the CTS Hotel was a classic example. I felt that beautiful things also certainly contain a certain amount of sadness. It reminded me of the feeling of meat. At first the meat was fresh and hard but I waited until it was soft, thawed out until there was a pitter-patter of blood before photographing it. This was also to symbolize the erosion of ideals over the course of time.

In China we traditionally say that if plum blossoms are able to get through the cold weather of winter, they will grow even stronger the following year. Peonies also symbolize man's noble ideals, like those of intellectuals. In truth I prefer the feeling of classical painting, with no people at all. Those landscape paintings with only a few tiny figures can be disheartening. I hoped that when you looked at this piece it would be visually very beautiful but be chilling at the same time. I emphasised this coldness on purpose of course. I refroze the meat flowers in order to compare how they were before and afterwards. Perhaps these flowers (which represent ideals) would flourish after passing through a hard winter, or perhaps they would freeze to death. I used dry ice to strengthen the

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illusionary effect but at the same time added a faint glow of sunlight to the backdrop to express that there was still hope.

After finishing these meat peonies, I really liked them. Of course there are still some people who say I photograph people better. I feel this meat peony series brings me back again to what I'm good at, diary-like things. Naturally I'm not that prone to socialising with others, I'm fairly introverted deep down so I really like this work.

Li: It's also my favourite. The other work is all great too, the broader work which focuses on the common problems of society like the demolition of housing, advertising, commercial goods etc.

Wang: Other work perhaps contains an element of what people want to see. Revealing that kind of work helps me communicate with people. These meat flower pieces are straight from my own heart. For example if I wanted to eat Sichuanese food, I would go and eat Sichuanese food, it's not like when inviting guests you need to cater to their desires. To a certain extent, artwork doesn't always have to be telling the truth; sometimes you need to bend it a little. However, when you do tell the truth you feel most at ease. Many people think the meat flower work isn't good, they think society should be like this or like that. I don't think it's all that simple.

Li: Please talk a bit about your work concerning war from 2006. It's a pity we can't see it.

Wang: It's still of course impossible to say if there will be any result from it but after the shoot I was extremely satisfied with how it went. In every country and in every corner there is conflict. Everyone can feel the panic of an approaching world war, I wanted to synthesise a number of cruel battles. In this work I mix together all sorts of battles from across the world; it's both amusing and oppressive. I think that even though on the surface today's society is better - people have more money than before and their houses are larger - we can't know if they truly feel better in their hearts. Perhaps in everyone's heart there are battles raging, one against oneself and one against one's neighbours, so I think war should be treated as a much broader concept. I've always wanted my work to be like learning to read with pictures, as plain-talking as possible - by looking at the title you should already be able to understand half of it. I wanted to give this work the very direct title of "Blood of the World". I hope that it will be released in due course.

Li: Have you ever thought about shooting it again?

Wang: Definitely not. It would be too difficult and the sentiment wouldn't be right anymore. This work has already been completed. Admittedly whether it exists or not is still important but because I've already spoke up what I wanted to say, I can now only wait and see. Many people have told me what a pity it is. What's most important for me is not the work itself but what influence it might have on my future work, will actors still want to work with me? Will others still dare to rent me locations for shoots? This is what worries me most.