

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE OLD
OR
A LIFE AS UNHURRIED AS IT IS QUIET
A CONVERSATION WITH SHAO FAN
By Heinz-Norbert Jocks

H.-N.J.: What pushed you towards art, and what do you recall concerning your childhood and the relationship with your parents and grandparents?

S.F.: Insofar as I follow in the footsteps of my parents, who were both artists, it's no wonder that I also work artistically. As the saying goes, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. You ask about my memories. There, I think of the 70s above all, when I was just six or seven years old. At the time, an extreme shortage of goods prevailed in China. There was a lack of everything. In my mind's eye, I also see the beautiful dresses of my maternal grandmother. My grandparents belonged to the Manchurian ethnic group, that is, the second-largest minority, which had founded the last dynasty. The classical Chinese furniture in which my father was interested also left a great impression on me, while I found the new ones ugly. In my eyes, everything old was evidence of great beauty and everything new of bad taste. Consequently, old and new stood in stark contrast to each other. Surely at the time there were also things which were by all means beautiful among the new, but I had no eyes for them. My parents, who were both professors at the academy of art, were sent to do physical labor in the countryside during Mao's time. Since they spent several years there, we couldn't see each other. Due to this, I grew up with the grandmother I already mentioned. She was also the one who showed me many traditional things and introduced me to the richness of the old culture. Those were the seeds that were sown. When I was ten years old, my parents returned. Having been rehabilitated in the meantime, they were able to pursue their professions again. When I was twenty they taught me the oil painting which originated in the West and which was very modern with us and taught at the academies at the time. That was my world. I and my peers could benefit from this boom. Finally, at the age of thirty, I experienced how the old seed gradually bore fruit. My source was traditional culture, merged with the Western one.

H.-N.J.: You were surely also introduced to the art of calligraphy.

S.F.: Yes, of course, it is the spirit of Chinese painting. I was already introduced to the art of calligraphy by my grandmother before I started school. Even though I practiced it again and again in her presence, it would still be very presumptuous of me to describe myself as a master in it. Yet without a doubt, calligraphy has strongly influenced my work. Calligraphic elements can be discovered in many of my pieces. If we just take a general although close look at the ink works there, and especially at the eyelids of the rabbit, the calligraphic aspect is unmistakable. As you know, in China calligraphy and ink painting are closely interwoven with each other. It was precisely in this spirit that I depicted the rabbit using ink painting. Upon closer observation of the lines, you can recognise the ever narrowing brushwork. The motif of the rabbit consists of an immense number of wider and narrower lines, like in classical ink painting.

H.-N.J.: Why did you choose the rabbit as your subject?

S.F.: That was a complete coincidence, and happened during the visit of a friend, who kept rabbits in a space that was far too small. One day, when he was at my place, he asked me whether I wouldn't like to have a rabbit, and I accepted. To make the rabbit happy, I additionally bought a female. The two mated with each other, and so there was an entire family of rabbits in my yard. No doubt because I spent hours, indeed days, observing their animated goings-on, the idea of painting them occurred to me. The fact that I chose the rabbit as a motif has to do with this coincidence, but the subject that I want to express - the equal status of humans and animals - doesn't. That is also why I adapted the size of the animal to that of a person, so that as a viewer we find ourselves at eye level. In this way, the rabbit imparts the impression that it is not an unimportant creature. We can learn something from its characteristics, in view of the fact that animals only want to have as much as they need to live and survive, while we humans have an affinity, indeed avarice to want more than we need.

H.-N.J.: The title in the exhibition “Face to Face” prompts philosophical associations. There, two views and with them two perspectives bump into each other.

S.F.: Yes, because not only do I see the rabbits, they also see me. We look at each other. My experience tells me, when two beings - one of which is strong and the other one weak - look at each other, then the rule is that the weaker one withdraws or turns its gaze somewhere else.

H.-N.J.: A mental leap. What role does concentration play in the brushstrokes of your ink painting?

S.F.: As I already indicated before, the painting consists of a myriad of lines. In some places, it appears laminary. There, where it elides more into black, I coated over the strokes through which the whole thing appears more spatial. Not only did this take up a lot of time, it also requires great concentration. Standing closely in front of it, one recognises how the picture is structured. The process of painting has to do with meditation, and this has its origins in the Buddhism that comes from India. After its introduction to China it merged with Taoism and the latter’s cosmological ideas of heaven and earth. The difference between Eastern and Western art lies in the West’s striving for innovation and change. That means one makes a break with the old world in order to create a new one. In China, it doesn’t have to do with this, but rather with the natural law, the Tao. Thereby, heaven is something unalterable and painters attempt, each according to their singularities, to approach this. In Chinese culture, the concept of Tao has the meaning of a principle that underpins the entire world and penetrates everything. Unfortunately, the majority of contemporary artists in China follow Western ideas and the ideal of individualism. As an artist, I step behind my works with my thoughts, ideas and associations, so that the viewer is forced to unravel what lies beneath it.

H.-N.J.: There seems to be something innately spiritual about your art.

S.F.: You took the words out of my mouth. While working on the series of animal paintings, I avoided painting the rabbits from nature. Instead I created them from my interior my heart. What I produce has its source in my own subjectivity. There are basically two levels: on the one hand my own intellectual world and my views about equality between people and animals. I argue for a harmonious connection between the two, and more respect towards the world in which we live. On the other hand there is the painting, that is, the art itself; as long as a picture remains in my studio, it is meaningless. It only achieves meaning then, when it is in the public eye, and becomes freely accessible. Ultimately, humanity gives the work its meaning.

H.-N.J.: Apropos spiritual, does your understanding of art have to do with Buddhism?

S.F.: It is an undeniable aspect of our culture. With its clear belief in the position of a person within the world and the cosmos, it plays no insignificant role in my life as well as in my art, but not the only one. The classical Chinese world-view and philosophy of life are also near and dear to me. According to it, all things are equal and everything is one. However, in the present time the division between the self and the other is increasing. There, confrontation matures and grows according to the motto: either me or someone else.

H.-N.J.: Maybe also a word about your technique and about why you switch between oil and ink painting?

S.F.: In the case of ink painting the picture is written with the brush, in the other case it is painted. In the West one speaks of creating an artwork. We in China don’t paint a picture, we write it. Insofar, the tip of our brush is rounded, while those which are used in the West are flat and long. You ask about the reasons for switching between the different techniques. This has to do with two different feelings. Writing with the brush represents a form of turning oneself into air. Insofar as one expresses one’s inner feelings, one feels relieved. One frees oneself from the enormous burden of one’s own feelings. Perhaps the inner feeling which arises while painting in oil is less spiritual. I just spoke of becoming lighter, which I already

feel while I am working. For contemporary Western artists creating itself is now not seldom an ordeal which one has to get through in order to experience a moment of gratification and release at the end. For me, painting, that is the path to the completed painting, is the deciding thing and a release already.

H.-N.J.: Yet another formal question about the color palette of your paintings: it is much reduced and ranges from subtle brown tones through white to black; now and then accents of color can be found in the painting. Why no other colors?

S.F.: In this context I will return again to the idea of the beauty of the old. As I already said at the outset, the old and the beautiful are almost synonymous for me. The color comes from light, that is from outside. Almost all my paintings are without light sources, and the axis around which compositions are constructed runs through the middle. This symmetry is an expression of nature. Whether you look at leaves or our planet earth, the axis is always located in the middle.

H.-N.J.: What is different when you approach the motif of the rabbit in oil one time and in ink another time?

S.F.: Here as well as there it has to do with the same feelings and thoughts, only the style, the technique, the medium and the material are different. Even in ancient times, the classical Chinese artists did not just limit themselves to one area or one medium. So in addition to painting I also make sculptures out of wood and metal. Besides being a garden artist I work as an architect and build furniture as well. In response to the question about the why of my interdisciplinary work my answer is that what I do has nothing to do with interdisciplinarity. Rather with different ways that lead to the same goal. In doing so, I decide on the medium spontaneously.

H.-N.J.: Does one see no other things in the process?

S.F.: At the most the differences in the language which one uses, and the otherness of the media which are used there. The similarities predominate.

H.-N.J.: Let us come to the delicate sculptural work out of wood which, if, what with all the abstraction, has the looks of beard hair.

S.F.: Yes, this is true. Ming Beard (2006), a nail-less, slim, wooden construction, which can be taken apart and built back together, again ties in with the style of the Ming dynasty in its shape, which is reminiscent of the arm-rest of a chair. Seeing the furniture from this time period, one notices the beauty of their form, which is so stunning in its simplicity. As you know, I also produce furniture. Even it reflects something of the spirit of calligraphy. In this way, the appearance of a chair borrows the shape of a brushstroke.

H.-N.J.: That means your furniture also has something to do with writing?

S.F.: That's how it is. The brushstrokes as well as the writing are the root of the art of Chinese painting until this day, although further ingenious techniques were developed later. Yet there too writing is the basis or the starting point of everything. In a time when modern technology apparently has the only say, the reflection on writing is a kind of return to the roots of our culture. Do you see the copy of a picture von Li Tang there on the wall? It is one of my favourite paintings from the Song dynasty. The original can be found in the imperial palace in Taipei.

H.-N.J.: Listening to you, it occurs to me you would rather have been born during the Song dynasty.

S.F.: Yes, you hit the nail on the head there. What separates us from our ancestors is the internationality, the globalization and the constant striving for material things. In studying history we can learn how much one considered quality of life during the Song dynasty. At the time poetry and performing arts like

theatre experienced their golden age and painting and theatre were also more important for the rulers than an increase in productivity. This is why the history books portray them as sensitive weaklings or corrupt. That may be the case, but compared to us the people then were significantly closer to life. They weren't concerned with the development of technology to drive on productivity, but rather with the wonderful propagation of quality of life. That was their be all and end all. Their politics were so bad that in the year 1276 the rule of the Song in the south was ended through the conquest of Hangzhou by the Mongolians. In terms of quality of life, the Song dynasty is exemplary.

H.-N.J.: How did one live back then?

S.F.: I basically try to live like people back then. During the day I paint, in the evening I invite friends over. We drink tea and smoke together. Instead of striving for more, I lead a life as comfortable as it is leisurely and quiet. Since I am fascinated by the Song dynasty, I have read books about it. Though there are no depictions of daily life. Yet there are books about literature, painting and music. I have read a few of the traditional literary works. I can also demonstrate an instrument from the Song Dynasty for you, it is called zhu. One had a great fondness for playing it.

H.-N.J.: I would like to know more about the cultural differences which you have already touched upon.

S.F.: The Western media differ very strongly from the Chinese ones; I already suggested this. Let us take the music of Johann Sebastian Bach as an example: his symphonies can only be understood as a whole, once one has heard them from beginning to end. The Chinese musical instrument is different. When, for example, I play on the zhu, then with one breath, and this forms one movement, which has nothing to do with the other. Each of them stands for itself. There is no story being told, but rather scenes which are made audible through the wind blowing through the bamboo. The following ones refer to other things. From here one can draw a parallel to the painting of the rabbit, insofar as it consists of multiple brush-strokes. While, in contrast to the Chinese, Western art places the individual in the center, the Chinese one focuses more on the union between man and nature. With me too, it has to do with how a person opens up in nature. This subject, neither chance nor a sudden idea, has to do with my experiences and my perspective on life and the world. The old Chinese art is a source from which I draw ideas just as much as from the Western one. It works like a mirror, in which our traditional art can be more closely observed and differently understood. One art complements the other, as it were. The clash of Chinese and Western culture is seen as fortunate by the one and unfortunate by the other. Such a situation has never existed in history, neither here nor there. The Chinese artists who live today under the shelter of two cultures must choose between two alternatives. The same is true for medicine. For when someone in China wants to consult a doctor, they have to decide how they want to be treated, traditionally or according to Western ways.

H.-N.J.: What are the reasons for your return to tradition?

S.F.: Even though I could neither relate to nor understand what my maternal grandmother told me about traditional culture, it nevertheless sowed the seeds which later bore fruit. Western culture can be compared with pervasive rain which one cannot escape from. As soon as you step outside the door, you are unavoidably exposed to it. You have no choice. On the other hand, for me, traditional Chinese culture is like groundwater. It exists below us, and only becomes visible through digging. For, as you know, during the decade-long Cultural Revolution everything traditional was destroyed.

H.-N.J.: You speak so much about your grandmother that I ask myself what kind of woman she must have been?

S.F.: As the well-educated daughter of an aristocratic Manchurian mandarin born at the end of the 90s of the century before last, she lived through the Qing dynasty as well as the era of Mao. When her father experienced great difficulties she was the only one who stood by him. Her husband died of a mysterious illness upon his return to China from studying in Japan. After that, my grandmother – from whom my

mother also learned to paint - moved to Peking with her three siblings. During the Cultural Revolution, she burned a biography she had written out of fear. Having enjoyed anything but an easy life she expressed the desire – based on her negative experiences – that none of her children should enter into politics or the military and also not work in business. In doing so, she erected three taboos in the hope that her children would learn trades. Insofar as, in my view, artists are above all craftsmen, we have fulfilled her dream.

H.-N.J.: Since you have just mentioned craftsmanship, I have a question related to making furniture: who taught you how to do that?

S.F.: In this matter I am an autodidact, I acquired the knowledge and the practical details myself, partially by means of books. Yet also with the help of an assistant, who is a carpenter by trade. Together with him I took apart furniture. On the one hand to study their construction, on the other hand to see how they are interlocked. Consequently, the old furniture pieces are our models.

H.-N.J.: For all intents and purposes, your grandmother was a passionate custodian of the old culture. Does it have a greater richness than the new one?

S.F.: Far be it from me to judge whether it is richer or better. Yet its over two-thousand year old history has expanded so much that it possesses an incomprehensible complexity.

H.-N.J.: Do you understand yourself as an artist who translate the old culture into the contemporary one and therefore saves it?

S.F.: Without a doubt as a contemporary artist, insofar as I work within a contemporary framework. At the same time I don't want to be misunderstood as an artist without any connection to tradition. Incidentally, contemporary Western art can be read as a continuation of European tradition. I work with a combination of contemporary elements and traditional ones. In my opinion, with the breakthrough of photography traditional art in Europe lost its function. That is why one opposed the apparently overtaken art with Hegel's tenet of its end. Art was brought into relation with this philosophy.

H.-N.J.: Perhaps, at this point, you could give me an overview of your exhibited works.

S.F.: "Project No.1 of the Year 2004" (2008) represents a chair dismantled into its constituent parts, which I packed into a glass case. All its parts are exhibited at a distance of twenty centimetres. The whole thing looks as if a bomb had torn the chair to pieces. The individual parts into which it has disintegrated refer, as it were, to the time after the explosion. Years earlier I disassembled furniture from the Ming dynasty in order to combine them with new pieces. At the beginning I liked the furniture from the Ming dynasty because of the beauty of their forms. When I took them apart I suddenly discovered, to my surprise, the beauty of their inner structure, which touched me even more than their outer shape. According to the Chinese understanding, the construction of a piece of furniture is a miniaturised architecture and the latter in turn an enlarged piece of furniture. I took apart a piece of furniture in order to bring to light this inner structure. Later, I reduced the complexity of the inner structure to the shape of an eyebrow or a whisker. By the way, most of my paintings are frontal views.

H.-N.J.: In order to complete the survey, I would like to hear a few sentences about the paintings "Medicine" (2012) and perhaps also "Portrait" (2013). What can one say about their form and content?

S.F.: For me motifs like eagles or also rabbits are excuses. What matters to me is to find something which subtly offers a reference to what I want to say. If something can be expressed or illustrated through something else which is completely different to it, then it indicates the distinctiveness of the aesthetics. In most cases, I find the excuses more appealing.

H.-N.J.: The work "Ming Turd" from 2006 is illuminating when it comes to delving into your concept of

beauty, even if it is not being shown in this exhibition. A piece which consists of many parts which one can also disassemble again.

S.F.: Yes, you are correct about this. Nowadays, many Chinese artists use dung or shit as a provocation or out of protest against the government. That is far from my intention. For me, everything, even this waste, has its own special beauty. Basically, my concept of beauty is derived from nature as the actual inventor of beauty. Everything it brings forth is beautiful, even shit, waste or dung. Nevertheless, I don't paint and I also don't make any sculptures after nature. Were I to do that, to directly copy from reality, there would be a danger that I would let myself be too influenced by what is concrete, to be enthralled by it. Then everything would remain external. Yet what is dear to me is to conceive things from my own inner life. What is especially beautiful about a piece of shit, the perfection of its form I dedicated myself to as a sculptor in the work "Ming Turd" is its sausage ends. In the West there is the concept of an aesthetic of ugliness. In contrast, it is understood that the dirty spot on an object is also beautiful, because it is furnished with the coating of the old. This has to do with something that is preserved in history and to our surprise still exists. Now and then I paint the pictures in such a way that they impart to us something of the aesthetic beauty of the old. There, I am careful that what one sees looks old, and with my brushstrokes I pay attention that the things appear so indistinct as if they were disappearing behind a wall of fog. I basically paint my interior images or inner perceptions. At the same time, asking myself whether we come closer to the truth of a thing through photographing it. To illustrate this let us take the image from the Song dynasty which has already been mentioned several times: I am of the opinion it would look completely different had it been taken with a camera. Of course that which it captures contains an aspect of the truth. Our ancestors were also of the opinion that through ink painting they were approaching the truth, understood as an expression of their inner feelings and thoughts. If the camera had been invented in China a hundred years ago then the tenet which originated in the West about the end of painting would definitely not exist among us, because the world captured in our inner thoughts presents a completely different picture than that of it immortalised on film.

H.-N.J.: Infinity or the infinite appear important to you.

S.F.: At this point I would like to cite Nietzsche. He says: humanity spends ten percent of their lives suffering, a further ten percent happy and eighty percent in boredom. Within this they complete their work. The meaning of their life consists in the reduction of boredom. In order to achieve the ten percent of happiness the Europeans invent tools. In contrast, the people in ancient China affirm boredom. They draw their pleasure from it and because of this they don't even want to abolish boredom. That is the reason for China's past backwardness and their collective disinterest in the development of technology and tools.

H.-N.J.: Perhaps one last word about the discourse between the West and the East!

S.F.: As contemporary Western culture and art are naturally interwoven with the cultural space, I ask myself whether they even can or should be transplanted to China, whether they will be accepted by the Chinese in the long run. Of course, Chinese culture is capable of absorbing foreign elements. Today, the situation in China is such that many contemporary Chinese artists adopt Western art with too little consideration. Based on the fact that they copy it, I ask myself whether this is even possible without knowledge of the European tradition. Does it make sense that the Chinese culture allows the others to merge into its own? An example which can illustrate what I mean is classical ballet. While it is beautiful it is not necessarily suited to Chinese with short statures. No question: I'm absolutely not opposed to it and I also desire that some people who are enthusiastic about ballet can demonstrate their skill on stage. However, I am not sure whether it is a debasement, a repression, a broadening or an improvement of our culture when now everyone who has an affinity for dance goes into ballet. This question may well sound unfashionable, but it involuntarily comes to me. I would like to speak about this with you another time. For today what has already been said should suffice.

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