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INTERVIEW

LIU Yan, YANG Ermin[1]

Toward the Modern Age Moving beyond Media, Borders, and Self-Limitation—An Interview with Contemporary Chinese Artist Yang Ermin

LIU Yan: In 2014 at the invitation of our institute, you delivered a lecture on contemporary Chinese art and your artistic practice, which evoked enthusiasm among our postgraduates and me. To be honest, that was my first contact with innovative ink wash painting, but I was attracted immediately. My academic interest focuses on comparative literature and transcultural studies, and I am very familiar with Western modern arts. So I became amazed at the sight of your works created with Chinese ink wash but presenting the effect of Western oil painting (light, shadow, and colors) as well as the intellectual state of Chinese art. It seemed to me that Chinese ink wash could also create the colors in works by Monet, Renoir, Matisse, and Chagall. Your ink wash paintings, such as *Dr. Andrew* 安德鲁博士 (2001), *Ms. Andrew* 安德鲁夫人 (2001), *Still Life after Cézanne's Works* 以塞尚作品为蓝本的静物 (1993), and *Plum Vase* 梅瓶 (2015), have the same colors, composition, and interest as those found in Western oil paintings. This brings a quite

[1] Yang Ermin 杨佴旻 was born in Quyang County, Hebei Province, P.R. China, and graduated from Nanjing University of the Arts with a doctor's degree in aesthetics. He is presently working as a researcher at Chinese National Academy of Arts, as the Editor in Chief at ArtsBj.com, as the director of the Chinese Innovative Ink and Wash Painting Institute at Nanjing University of the Arts, as Chief Researcher at Tokyo Institute of Art and Design, in Tokyo, Japan, as a visiting research fellow at Saint Said Art Center in the US, and as a visiting professor at Hebei University in Baoding, China, etc. I have interviewed Dr. Yang several times during 2014 to 2016. The topics we discussed include Yang's artistic development, the nostalgic feeling in his innovative ink wash paintings, cross-media writing, cross-border travels, self-transcendence, and modern retrospection of modern Chinese art.

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different experience to the beholder. I think you have found an interesting and proper approach to blending Chinese and Western arts. Could you talk about how you explored your own style of innovative ink wash painting? How do we understand "the modernity" of the innovative ink wash painting style you initiated? What is the difference between innovative ink wash and traditional ink wash?

YANG Ermin: In my eyes, colorfulness has become a significant feature of modern life. Historically, the fact that painting was called *danqing* 丹青 (red and green) before the Tang dynasty shows the importance of red. It was not until the Song dynasty that red was replaced by ink wash and Chinese painting fell into a single closed system of black and white. That means the language of painting was restricted. The Chinese *danqing* would not be revived unless we break through this restriction. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries are an age of globalization in which various civilizations and artistic traditions are communicating and exchanging ideas with each other. Modern Chinese art preferred an innovative road different from that of its neighbor Japan. In the face of modern aesthetic thoughts, the Chinese failed to propose a unified modern view toward new culture and art. For Chinese painting, they used to confuse its traditional aspect with the modern aspect, leaving no definite border between them. I believe that only modernized Chinese painting can draw worldwide attraction and earn its own position in the art world.

In the attempt to modernize ink wash painting, I often take into consideration three comprehensive traditions, namely the Chinese classical tradition, the Western modern tradition, and my present personal situation. On the one hand, I insist on using the traditional materials of Chinese painting, such as rice paper, writing brush, ink, and dyestuff; on the other hand, I do not cling to ancient painting techniques in the hope of making ink wash painting colorful and exploring its essence. Ink wash painting is colorful all the time; unfortunately, people did not notice this fact. Besides absorbing the elements of modern painting (composition, scenery, and experience), as a Chinese artist, I never forget to present my concerns and thinking regarding all fields of life experience, homeland, compatriots, country, mankind, urban life, and the global environment. As a contemporary Chinese artist, I always

emphasize that we should not cling to the tradition, but should assimilate various intellectual resources within the modern horizon and find their best combination in order to go beyond the border of nation, culture, and ourselves. Never forget that WE ARE MODERN RATHER THAN ANCIENT PEOPLE.

LIU: According to my understanding, you have brought some innovations and breakthroughs to traditional ink wash painting, establishing your own artistic style of uncovering colorfulness in ink and ink in colorfulness. What you stress is not "ink," but "colorfulness." That is to say, by substituting colorfulness for ink, you created a new form of Chinese painting. You have made critical statements, such as, "There is a neglected problem in contemporary Chinese art: Many people still appreciate ink wash painting in an outmoded way; they don't think that colorfulness could be presented by the materials of ink wash painting." Liu Xiaochun 刘骁纯, a researcher from the Chinese National Academy of Arts and an art critic, points out that traditional artists since the age of Wang Wei 王维, Su Dongpo 苏东坡, and Mi Fu 米芾 have paid much attention to developing the potential of the brush. They borrowed a lot from calligraphy. However, after the 1980s, a few contemporary artists such as Zhou Jingxin 周京新, Nie Weigu 聂危谷, Li Jin 李津, Liu Qinghe 刘庆和, and Gu Dawen 谷达文 began to develop the potentials of water, and I believe you are one of them. For Liu Xiaochun, your contribution lies in solving the relationship between ink and colorfulness, especially in realizing appropriate color coordination and transitions: "Yang does not stick to or even abandon the way of brush writing. Unlike other artists, he insists that painting and writing have different rules. . ." So how do you deal with the relationship between ink and colorfulness in your artistic practice?

YANG: As Professor Liu Xiaochun says, many Chinese ink wash painters in the twentieth century, like Lin Fengmian 林风眠, Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿, Liu Haisu 刘海粟, and Wu Guanzhong 吴冠中, made valuable contributions to exploring the ideal proportion of ink to color. For instance, in going beyond the traditional rules in ink wash painting, Lin Fengmian introduced colors into his ink wash creation and managed to achieve a harmony with thick ink and heavy colors, though there is still room for perfection in his trial. Wu Guanzhong preferred a simple and elegant style. With large-scale light ink wash as the background, most of his paintings imply his pursuit of the rhythm

of dots, the melody of lines, and the distribution of images, and produce a spiritual beauty via different combinations and arrangements of forms. Such a formal language, in my opinion, is universally understandable. In contemporary China, gorgeous innovative ink wash practice has increased in popularity among insightful Chinese artists who are devoted to the modernization of Chinese painting. I believe colorful ink wash painting will be the principal form of ink wash painting as well as the mainstream of Chinese painting since it corresponds to modern aesthetic requirements. We live in a colorful modernized society. How could we always retreat into the ancient world of black-and-white ink wash painting? How could we always repeat what the ancients had done rather than create something belonging to ourselves? Is it because the form was named "ink wash" by the ancients? The success of innovative ink wash painting indicates that what matters in practice is not the material being used, but the artist's mettle. I insist that the particularity of twenty-first century art depends on modernity, and there is a trend common to modern artists at home and abroad—creating an art that conforms to modern aesthetic interests and visual effects.

LIU: Professor Shao Dazhen 邵大箴, a critic at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, comments that your innovative ink wash painting "makes a brilliant contribution to the innovation of traditional painting," and "to the inspiration of carrying forward the tradition of Chinese painting." Professor Nie Weigu, a painter at Nanjing University, comments that your exploration of ink wash painting not only consummated but also developed the color-oriented style initiated by Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian, and Wu Guanzhong. He even regards you as "the prophet and pioneer of colorful ink wash painting." I like the sharp color contrasts and the complementary colors in your works. The hue in which you harmonize ink with colors produces a brilliant and soft effect; the images are simple and pure, often composed with light ink and color, but sometimes highlighted with thick ink and color. Countless crisscrossed strokes and combinations of dots and lines lead the beholder to an infinite world. You create a void state characteristic of Chinese painting with ink wash in a way inspired by modern Western artists such as Monet, Cézanne, van Gogh, Matisse, and Picasso. I think the ancient Chinese would be surprised if they saw your works.

YANG: I was indeed influenced by modern Western painting while researching French Impressionism and Expressionism, including Vuillard's *Intimisme* and Japanese Ukiyo-e. In my opinion, a real painter should absorb nutrients from his or her cultural tradition. Brush, rice paper, and ink are mine. My ink wash painting is "innovative" because it takes a step further than the ancients did rather than adhering to their collective ink wash conventions. Contemporary artists, in my eyes, should not blindly admire tradition and stick to conventions. The artist's task is not to renovate with prejudice what has become outmoded and been far removed from life. With regard to ink wash painting, if a painter does not make any innovation but focuses only on imitating so-called classical works, he will cease to progress or will even lag behind. Traditional styles were formed under specific circumstances in the past. As we all know, a new artistic style will not come into being simply by denying tradition. If that were feasible, how should we explain the heritage we received from history and culture? We Chinese artists should truthfully express the vision and experience of modern China with the traditional essences of the Chinese nation.

LIU: I notice that you prefer ink wash as the expressive medium of portraits or of still life paintings, such as of a cup, fruit, flower, vegetable, chair, path, building, beach, woman, garden, and kitchen. It seems that the objects you choose are close to daily life. Your simple and steady style and taste remind the beholder of French painters like Cézanne and André Brasilier. You are good at creating a poetic atmosphere with abstract models and bright colors, making your still life paintings lively. For instance, though based on a theme generally used in Western oil painting, *Still Life after Cézanne's Works* 以塞尚作品为蓝本的静物 (1993) and *The Solitary Sky* 寂静的天 (1997) imply the calmness, beauty, and simplicity that feature in Western painting. You illustrate a distinctive technique of mixing colors and arranging lines that succeeds in retaining the abstract and lyrical character of Chinese painting. Meanwhile, you have created some experimental works, too. In *The Winter Palace* 圆明园 (1987), several sets of geometric solids are thought-thronged as the relics standing abruptly in a combination of red, green, and black. In *A Summer Day in Uliastai* 乌利雅斯泰夏日的一天 (1988), the simple composition

makes blackness and whiteness, emptiness and fullness, and a place where horror and beauty harmonize with each other. In *Debeisitai and I* 德陪斯苔·我 (1988), we find an intangible crescent moon and unrecognizable human shadows. In *Bell Rings* 钟声 (1991), bulky logs and disordered geometric figures leave a both dynamic and static impression. In *Holiday* 假日 (2002), the use of extensive yellow produces a relaxing and cozy effect. So how did you introduce the color, light, shadow, and/ or cubic sense into ink wash painting while infusing it with the feeling, thinking, and life-experiences of modern people?

YANG: The formation of style means the maturity and perfection of a technique. No new art could be created with old techniques. In practice, I never went astray from my target—to treat every style, no matter whether it is Chinese, Japanese, or Western art, with a surpassing attitude. In the early 1980s, I was an imitative painter who learned everything by strictly following the rules. In the late 1980s, however, I began to explore new creative ideas and techniques, and tried to form a style of my own. In order to create works corresponding to modern aesthetic tastes, I invented through my experiments with colorful ink wash a new technique that is suitable for presenting a picture or a state of mind. I know exotic landscapes can easily catch popular attention, but that is not my pursuit. The apple Cézanne drew is not different from the one we draw. The Summer Palace that many Chinese artists have painted is not different from the one I paint. That which urges the artist to explore new forms and means of expression on their predecessors' shoulders is the development of techniques and ideas rather than the difference in themes or objects. Having studied Western culture and art from the background of traditional Chinese culture, I learned to explore ink wash painting from a Sino-occidental perspective. From a practical standpoint, I have always attempted to have my painting presented in an atmosphere characteristic of the East, with traditional Chinese artistic materials like brush, pigment, ink, and paper. I have created a line-based modeling approach that prevents ink and pigment from un-blending or from blending unexpectedly, which is done by using cinnabar to brighten ink or by splashing pigment onto inked parts to bring forth a specific color. Thus, ink wash painting is endowed with much inclusivity and vitality.

LIU: Among your works, I prefer the landscape series of the *Taihang Mountains* 太行山 to portraits or still lifes. The former displays the advantage of ink wash by playing up the characteristics of the water and mountains, particularly in delineating colors and atmosphere. Recently, I made a trip to the Taihang Mountains, and was astounded by their wildness, magnificence, and majesty. Your paintings are distinct from traditional ink wash paintings (especially those created in black and white) on the same theme because yours present the mountains with gorgeous lumps of color and intercrossing wavy lines. Though they show an Expressionist influence, they do express an atmosphere reminiscent of Chinese landscape painting. For instance, *The Taihang Mountains* 太行山 (2003) depicts a mountain range in tones of increasing or decreasing tones of red and blue-gray. In *Seven-colored Taihang Mountains* 七色太行 (2012), the mountain range consists of different colored mounds and shapes, from which emerge white rays of light; the whole image presents a beauty in emptiness that is usually seen in traditional Chinese painting. In *The Taihang Mountains in Spring* 春在太行 (2014), an upright forest looks splendid against the mountains; the balance between horizontal and vertical, and far and near is orderly and rhythmic. In *Autumn of the Taihang Mountains* 太行秋色 (2014), the Buddhist temple hidden in the maple-covered mountains reveals the beauty of the Zen spirit. In works such as *A Morning of Taihang Mountians* 太行的早晨 (2012) and *In the Deep of Taihang Mountains* 太行深处 (2013), you daringly employed dark blue to draw the mountain forest, a trial more surrealistic than realistic. In my opinion, the qualities of nativeness and homesickness in your works develop from your Taihang series. You even wrote a set of mythological poems entitled "Taihang Mountains and Soul Mountain" ("Taihang Lingshan" 太行灵山), which conveys these feelings:

> All memories
> The clan recorded by the pet name is my hidden place
> Every pore and rill
> Are linking my heart
> Yellow-flowered vines near the waterwheel

And the reservoir on top of the western hill.
. . .
In the dream, I went back to the Taihang Mountains where I got inspiration
The mountain lover piled earth to make a mountain.

So what inspiration did you get from Taihang? How do you explain the effect of the mysterious and ancient Taihang scenery and culture on your artistic practice, spirit, and soul?

YANG: I was born in a small town near Quyang County in Hebei Province. Quyang County lies 60 km east of Baoding City, 70 km south of Shijiazhuang City, and 200 km north of Beijing, the capital. It is located in the west of the North China Plain. The Taihang Mountains extend along its western edge. In ancient books, the mountains were reputed to be "the backbone of the world." There are alternative names for Taihang, such as Daxing (Big Form) in *Liezi* 列子, Wuxing Shan (Five-Element Mountain), Pan Gu Shan (Mountain of Pangu, the Creator of All) (in *Huainanzi* 淮南子 and *Shanhaijing* 山海经), Mu Shan (Mother Mountain) (in *Suishu* 隋书), Huangmu Shan (Heavenly Empress Mountain), or Nü Wa Shan (Mountain of Nü Wa the Sky Repairer) (in *Taiping Huanyu Ji* 太平寰宇记). *Kuodi Zhi* 括地志 says that "the Taihang Mountains start from Huaizhou and end at Youzhou, extending thousands of miles, like the backbone of the world." I feel lucky to be the son of the Taihang. Deep homesickness never ceased to nourish my soul. The town where I was born has a sweet name, "Soul Mountain." The distinctive scenery there in each of the four seasons kept inspiring me visually and acoustically. Traveling over land and water, visiting the North Peak Temple or ancient brick kilns, I began to realize the historical significance of this place. This childhood memory remained strong even though I later worked abroad year in and year out. The Taihang is my goddess, who bestowed on me dream-pursuing wings, and inexhaustible inspiration and consolation. As I wrote in the set of poems you mentioned, "the Taihang Mountains, the Soul Mountain / I am a flying fish / Though far away, I will be back—To drink sweet spring running in the ravines." In Chinese mythology, there is a figure called Kua Fu 夸父 who wished to capture the sun, but eventually died of

thirst. I'm capturing my sun, but I don't suffer from thirst because I have the sweet spring of the Taihang. Unfortunately, due to modernization and urbanization, the environment of the Taihang is deteriorating; its peaceful and picturesque scenery is vanishing. I feel tortured whenever I return home. This experience urged me to be concerned for the environment; now I try to raise public awareness through the arts for ecological protection in the course of modernization.

LIU: You have often mentioned that your father was a carpenter. That's why you were first exposed to folk arts like handicraft, painting, and stamp cutting from childhood, and chose serious professional training. How did you benefit from this experience? Did your mother and family exert considerable influence on you?

YANG: I gained a lot from my hometown. In fact, it was my hometown that made me tenacious and persistent; it is her artistic fruits of which I am proud. As one of five official historical porcelain workshops, my hometown is also the cradle of Chinese stone carving, where over a hundred thousand people take up carver as their occupation. The famous North Peak Temple lies in Quyang County. In the past half-century, a large number of Han dynasty white jade statues of Buddha were unearthed there. "Quyang Smiling Buddha" has become an archaeological phrase. All these facts testify to the depth of local art and culture.

Virtuous and thrifty, my mother is the harbour of my life as well as the supporter of my artistic practice. I'm also indebted to my brothers and sisters. Without their care for my parents, I couldn't throw myself heart and soul into the pursuit of art. In my childhood, my father was a famous craftsman in the county. He taught me clay sculpture and carving. Under his influence, I learned ink wash painting, calligraphy, and graffiti, and became interested in folk handicrafts. Later, I was apprenticed to the artist Zhang Yizeng 张义增, who asked me to copy again and again the *Jieziyuan huapu* 芥子园画谱 (Manual of the mustard seed garden) till I could reproduce every page of the landscape section in the manual without watching the original. This apprenticeship familiarized me with the classical works of antiquity and the usage of painting materials such as wood, rice paper, brush, and ink. I

feel lucky to have grown up steeped in such a profound traditional culture. What I gained from it will benefit me for life.

LIU: After graduation, you didn't stop the pursuit of art. In 1993 you went for further education in Japan, and visited museums and galleries in Europe and the United States in the hope of absorbing artistic excellence from various origins. In 2011 you earned a PhD at the Nanjing University of the Arts. In your dissertation, "Comparison and Criticism of the Innovations in Twentieth Century Chinese and Japanese Painting," you recapitulated and compared the history of arts in China and Japan. So why did you pursue further study abroad and spend so much time outside China? How did you benefit from the innovation of modern Japanese painting, which influenced the characteristics of Chinese painting? In what way did these cross-border and transcultural experiences convince you of your identity as an artist?

YANG: I decided to pursue further study or work abroad simply for experiencing exotic cultures and acquiring other perspectives and international horizons. My interest in Japan comes from the fact that as neighboring countries, China and Japan have a very close cultural relationship. In the course of modernization at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, the two countries had much in common, such as their cultural background, the urgency of self-identity, and the challenges of modern painting. Japanese painting had been affected by its Chinese counterpart for a long time. In modern times, it has absorbed a lot of resources from modern Western painting, shrugging off the Chinese influence and opening up a unique way for development. The innovation in twentieth-century Chinese painting, however, was no more than a recycling (such as "traditional Chinese painting," which reverts to the classic style) that neither unified the modernized art form as its target nor provided a clear and powerful intellectual guide. As a result, individual artistic creation was restricted, and was at the whim of fashion. Comparatively, Japanese painting chose a quite different road—establishing distinct folk characters and an art form of highly unified modern aesthetic style. It is through a completely modernized form that its natural exquisite sensibility and aesthetic qualities were fully expressed. Modernized Japanese painting was

closely linked with the birth of new techniques. In the course of modernization, it shrugged off traditional expression but presented a constant internal elegance, a perfect state appearing in minuteness, refinement, tenderness, and delicacy.

I could create without being disturbed in a beautiful studio. I would often communicate with contemporary Japanese artists and discuss the successful innovative experience of modern Japanese painting. According to my observations, Japanese painters were very active and thorough in learning the plastic language and perceptive features of modern Western painting. Therefore, their works stress visual effects with straightforward and strong colors. Having the rich experience of living and working abroad, and making various international art exchanges provided me an unusual way of thinking and a wider global horizon. I was taught to go beyond the border between the East and the West to express common things in human nature like love and beauty, kindness and truth, calmness and peace.

LIU: Did Japanese painting inspire and influence your thought and creativity? Looking at your painting, we find that you stress the detail of technique and the decorative effect of images, that you illustrate daily scenes in urban life, that you create a tranquil and austere spirit of Zen. What you present is of a special quality in an Oriental artist. The usual image of an artist seems to be unbridled, detached, or distinctive. However, you display a quite different aspect—peaceful in mind, graceful in disposition, and elegant in behavior. Of course, it was just my initial impression. Having read your *Shi 77 shou* 诗 77 首 (2013), I realize that the style of your painting is almost opposite that of your poetry. The painting looks tranquil, harmonious, and animate. The poetry reads like a wild and unconscious dream, the diction being queer and discordant, and most images are hard to understand. In my opinion, your poetry is an annotation or supplement to your painting and sculpture, expressing another dimension of life experience. Is it right to say that your poetry and painting are two different ways of understanding the world, or two sides of a coin? How do you understand the tension between poetic language and painting language?

YANG: Most people seem to believe that my innovative ink wash painting was created during my overseas period and influenced by modern Japanese painting. This, however, is *not* the truth. My first work of innovative ink wash, *White Chrysanthemum* 白菊花, was finished in 1992 when I was still working in a studio in Baoding, Hebei Province. Actually, my style had already come into being at that time. The experience in Japan widened my horizon and brought me an occasion to recognize myself and stand firm in the exploration of colorful ink wash painting. I can't tolerate mixing up different forms. For me, painting is painting, poetry is poetry; there is a border that clearly separates them. Therefore, the difference in the style of my poetry and painting speaks to the variety of my personality. For what painting fails to express, I would try in other art forms. Poetry is another expression of my ideas and emotions. It is a thread I use to link the fragments of memory that are disordered, amazing, or incredible. My poetry stores a lot of personal emotions and memories, and processes complicated feelings, life experience, and meaningful events that are inexpressible in painting. I had never consciously prepared to be a poet but something unbelievable changed my destiny. It happened on the Mid-Autumn night in 2010, the day of a traditional reunion festival in China and many ancient Oriental countries, and, coincidently, it was also my birthday. My friend Liu Weidong 刘伟东 and I went to the Jietai Temple 戒台寺 to celebrate the festival. The moon was shining in the sky. We were sitting under a thousand-year-old tree. Suddenly I felt overwhelmed with inspiration. The bulge on the top of my head seemed to become an aerial, receiving heavenly wisdom that taught me the way of writing poetry. A poem then sprang to mind. This was really mysterious and totally unbelievable.

In the public eye, my painting is aesthetic, straightforward, and enthusiastic, while my poetry is wild, irrational, obscure, and unconstrained. I think the language and imagery of poetry could express the moments that color and line fail to capture. They are private, and not so direct as pictures. Sometimes, my poetry is a cultural interpretation of my painting. For instance, the series of poems *Taihang Mountains and Soul Mountain* are intertextual and relate to the painting *Taihang Mountains*. It was impossible for me to express the soul of the Taihang Mountains in both painting and poetry without a welling of my deep sensibility toward them. In his comment

on this relationship, an old friend of mine, the poet Tian Zhuang 田庄, says that "it is not a simple homeland complex, but a spiritual affinity with the place where he was born and grew up. It is like the affiliation between stones and hill, between potatoes and earth." What an exact description! Both my paintings and poetry are grounded in my homeland—the peaceful Soul Mountain among the Taihang Mountains.

LIU: It is well known that you're a versatile artist. Besides painting and poetry, you have tried other art forms. In 2012 you finished the sculptures *Forbidden Fruit* 禁果 and *Hand of E.T.* ET 之手. In 2001 the participation artwork *Faces* 脸 you created for the Second Nagoya Art Festival was featured in many cities, such as Yangzhou, Tokyo, and Seattle. With over ten thousand participants, it was called the most participated of participation artworks, and regarded as one of "the most disputed cold-blooded artworks in the world" in a special column by Artron.net. Plus, you're acting as the president of artsbj.com, [Moved to first mention] which established the International Chinese Poetry Award in 2012. Now it has become an important award for the field of contemporary Chinese poetry. Not only does it promote the development of contemporary Chinese poetry, but also supports non-mainstream poets like migrant workers Guo Jinniu 郭金牛 and Wu Niaoniao 乌鸟鸟 by recognizing and publishing their works. Your concern and responsibility for society are impressive, especially given that the relationship between art and social ideology or politics is so complex in China. So how do you deal with the relationship between an artist and his or her country or fellows (the other)?

YANG: No artist exists in absolute isolation. He or she has a close linkage with his or her times and fellows. Even in a disordered and confused age, anyone, no matter whether an artist or an everyman, could express the essence of the human being with a sincere creation or participation so as to resist the disorder and confusion. No pain, no gain. This is suitable for the farmer as well as the artist. All my works—painting, poetry, installation artwork, participation artwork, or community service—were finished with my heart and soul. I hope that what I did will promote the progress of this age and social modernization, be good for my country and fellows, and make

contributions to human nature and social justice. The artist who only hunts for profit and fame regardless of conscience is no more than a sham.

LIU: In May 2015, you initiated *Natural Combustion and Its Environment*, a ten-year art project for environmental protection and human destiny. It appeals for "low-carbon development and green living." After registration, every participating driver would receive various bumper stickers made by your organization. Why did you initiate such a project? What is the goal you expect to reach?

YANG: From city to village, from mountains to desert, from the Eastern Hemisphere to the Western Hemisphere, the car has become the most popular mode of transport. It is a convenient and continuously circulating medium. So I asked myself, "Why not create an artwork with it?" I had been considering using the car as a vehicle for my art. The natural environment of Beijing is continually devastated nowadays. As one of its inhabitants who witnessed the spontaneous combustion of a coal mound at the foot of Mount Hengshan in Shanxi Province twenty years ago, it occurred to me that I should do something to help mitigate global warming. Then came the borderless art project *Nature & Environment*. I did not want to make it a pure or boring sermon, so I brought fashionable factors into the theme of environmental pollution. As Dr. Yang Xiaobin 杨小滨 comments, "Yang Ermin's artistic practice is post-modernity. It adds different, even multiple connotations into tradition while appropriating classical elements. The global art project *Nature & Environment* did not end with forming a definite and dual moralized image. It inquires of the human destiny, which is unpredictable and heartrending, by interweaving and transforming beauty and disaster." Art was being used to express the appeal of protecting the environment. I had hopes of causing serious concern among drivers and concerned citizens throughout the world.

LIU: Many contemporary Chinese are interested in discussing the possibility of a return to tradition. However, you repeatedly point out that it is a false conjecture. Isn't it a movement? Isn't it like the appeal "return to Greece"

uttered by Renaissance campaigners? How should the artist deal with the complicated relationship between tradition and modernity?

YANG: I insist that the call to return to tradition is a false conjecture because it is impossible to go back to the past. What we can do is create the future. Plus, it's unnecessary for us modern people to go back to the past. I lived in Japan for many years and have visited a lot of countries in Europe and North America. I observed that the way their people treated the relationship between tradition and modernity was quite different from us. For them, what is traditional belongs to the past, while what is creational shapes the present. However, there is a special phenomenon in China. Let me give an example. We all know Confucius. Some venerate him as a sage; some attack him, curse him because he is considered to be an impediment to Chinese cultural development. In Japan, it is unthinkable to curse an influential ancient like Confucius. The difference in these two attitudes is actually the evil consequence of unclearly distinguishing tradition from modernity. Sometimes we appeal to tradition just because we haven't shown respect to tradition and still benefit from it. In fact, to pretend that everything is going well is, to some extent, a sort of profanity to the past. How can you count on a society that has no courage to confront the fact? In my opinion, there is no tradition either good or bad. For modern people, tradition is the past; even the most glorious tradition is not our achievement. What is important for us is how we handle present and future affairs. To be honest, China hasn't reached the level of modernization that we are expecting. Most of our internationally influential artists have not moved on from ideological criticism and exoticism. Japan is our mirror, as we have geographical and historical features plus progress in modern development in common. Yayoi Kusama is a world-famous contemporary Japanese artist. From the form of her expression, can you tell how much she was influenced by Japanese tradition? I think none. What she presents is an artist's individuality rather than Japanese nationality.

LIU: Your colorful ink wash painting has earned an international reputation and recognition. And in 2014 you were ranked in *Hurun's Most Successful*

Chinese Artists Alive Today. The French critic Christophe Comentale praises you for crossing the cultural gap between the East and the West. "Yang Ermin est un magicien qui sait faire naître la forme du bois, dégager la couleur du pinceau et rendre au lavis une polychromie où l'intensité ne le cède en rien à la force du regard." [Yang Ermin is a magician who knows how to create the shape of wood, to clear the color of the brush, and to render a multicolored wash with an intensity that does not give way to the force of the gaze.] From December 1 to 14 in 2014, the Manet Club in Beijing hosted the exhibit of your ink wash painting *Towards the Future*. After visiting, Professor Asunción López from the Complutense University in Spain told me excitedly that your painting "is an engaging fusion of the East and the West." I had the same feeling. She liked in particular *Weekend* 周末 (2002). In this work, you portray a naked woman whose amazing beauty is accentuated against a purely dark background. She seems to float on water at times, and descend from on high like the Goddess of Light at other times. This is an atmosphere difficult to establish in an oil painting. It embodies a spirit of Zen 禅: the void is the world of sensation and vice versa. For me it is a transformation of state that could be realized by Oriental artists only. What the Western beholder appreciates most is obviously the modern Oriental aesthetic revealed in your painting. So how do you understand the relationship between the East and the West, modernity and nativeness in the field of art?

YANG: In the past one hundred years, China experienced the course of nearly 500 years of Western art history. Especially in the past thirty years, China has borrowed all kinds of modern Western thought. Bombed by too much information, Chinese people have become confused and at a loss. Many contemporary artists are exploring modernity. Technically and ideologically speaking, some of their works are mature enough, having post-modern characteristics. Ink wash creations are constantly emerging that stress the traits of ink wash and Chinese elements. However, I do not think it is a necessity, as artworks belong to the world instead of to the East or the West. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese artists such as Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian, and Liu Haisu have proposed to renovate traditional ink wash painting, which is now widely accepted. While exploring,

generations of artists circled a problem: Should traditional Chinese art serve the modern age, the West, and even the world? Can Western art serve traditional Chinese art? This concern is cosmopolitan. The criteria of art should be universal in modern times. Modernity is trying to annihilate the backwardness. Let us consider an example: For China, Africa, or other underdeveloped areas of thirty years ago, such a place's "difference" is the premise of being unaware of modernization. Such a "difference" is backwardness. Art and culture cannot lose their individuality. In fact, to find your own path in modernization is to show your individuality at an advanced, modernized level. For ink wash painting, it means communicating with the world from a modern perspective while retaining the medium's special characteristics.

Nowadays we should know who we are. The priority is to realize the fact that we are a part of the world, that we are human beings. Our creations should be based on and aimed at human nature. Plus, it's meaningless to distinguish Chinese artists from their foreign peers. Artistic creation requires open-mindedness and universalism. I definitely agree with Feng Youlan's 冯友兰 opinion that the difference between the East and the West is actually the difference between the classical and the modern. How great it is! In spite of differences in complexion and cultural background, people all over the world have human nature in common. We should ponder modern culture on the basis of this fact. In the twenty-first century, China is the world, the world is China.

LIU: In summarizing your artistic achievement, Yang Lian 杨炼 says with a poet's acute sensibility and insight, "Your works display the optimal combinational relationship between originality and intellectual resources." He believes that "you can ride many galloping horses at the same time, driving or stopping them at will. All kinds of intellectual elements (a cognitive unit more fundamental than words) are manipulated by your hands. Like genes, they are hybridized into a unique species." His words remind me of the bulge on the top of your head. And you often emphasize that "art is nothing but creating new staff in play. What is created may become a sample." Is the "art in play" what you have called a "free game"? Will you stick to your unique style of ink wash painting, which has earned a great reputation and might even forge a new path?

YANG: I once attended a music lecture when I was a doctoral candidate. The lecturer mentioned a popular singer who, in his opinion, was nothing due to violating the conventions of singing. But I thought, after hearing this, perhaps he was creating a new norm. My apprenticeship as an ink wash painter started with copying classical works. After a while, what I painted became gradually very different from traditional ink wash painting. Is it interesting? Why must modern art stick to the rules? There's no standard in art. The task of the artist is to create rather than to repeat. The so-called norms are no more than formulae, and I have no interest in formulae. Over the past decades I have been walking my own road. Constant self-duplication has made me antipathetic. What I want to do for the rest of my life is to love, to write poetry, to indulge in artistic creation.

The road of art is endless. I'm willing to reclaim wasteland and challenge my limits. My creation is a journey from strange to familiar. In artistic practice, I do not like ready-made and too-familiar things. They have lost their attraction for me. My friends said the bulge on the top of my head is an aerial that receives information from outer space. It is unique, inborn—I will never cease to use it to receive beliefs, thoughts, wisdom, and to explore all possible avenues. Having accumulated so much practical and overseas living experience, I feel as if all my senses have become acute. I realize what I did and know what I want to do—that is, to modernize Chinese art, to bring it to the world and have it be enjoyed by all mankind.

LIU: You mention that you're willing to challenge your limits and surpass yourself. In the poem "Ideal is a Flying Fish" 理想是一只飞翔的鱼 (2011), you wrote these lines: "Ideal is a flying fish / the rain in the sky / The fish swimming in the river which . . . has overflowed the banks, / Ideal is an unspeakable fish in the sea." Another poem, "The Feeling of Freedom," 自由的滋味 says, "How nice to be a dolphin, / unrestrained, / it can swim with eyes closed." But how can a flying fish fly from an overflowing river? Is this an expression of your desire and determination for freedom that echoes the story of Icarus or of Kua Fu?

YANG: Freedom is one of my favorite themes in artistic practice. For me, freedom means to go beyond—beyond where I live, beyond the ancient, beyond national borders, beyond self-limitation. In aesthetic experience, it is

possible to realize certain surrealistic freedoms or to change restricted situations in reality in an artistic way. A "flying fish" might die of thirst in reality, but in art, in poetry, it could break through the restraints of natural power, flying on high or swimming with eyes closed. This is the so-called void state in *Zhuangzi* 庄子 and Buddhism. For me, artistic creation is a happy, weird, even unbelievable, mysterious experience, just like the mid-autumn moon over the Jietai Temple of Beijing, which was impregnated with a healthy spirit. In a world where art is corrupted by money, justice and beauty will disappear. So I hope my artistic creation, no matter whether it is painting or poetry, participation art or community service, could bring forth justice and a healthy spirit, love, and beauty. I expect to create works of art that have no border of nation, of race, or of class in the interest of humankind's mutual communication, understanding, and prosperity. This is my ideal, for which I live. In *Taihang Mountains and Soul Mountain* I wrote down my motto: "I travel on the crane / Between my lips / Runs water of the Taihang Mountain / I'm chasing the sun."

LIU: You're the offspring of Kua Fu, the son of the Taihang Mountain. We hope you make great progress in your future artistic explorations.

YANG: I will not be Icarus who drowned after falling into the sea because he did not believe his father Daedalus; he was obstinate. As the offspring of Kua Fu, however, I have the inexhaustible water of the Taihang Mountains, the boundless sea, the crane's wings. I wish I could go to places as remote as possible on my road of art. Even though I may become too exhausted to continue someday, I would turn into the shining blue forest on the Taihang Mountains I painted.

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