

INTERVIEW WITH CHINESE ARTIST ZHANG WEI

BY ELENA BURGER-SAMONOVA, MSC FOR VIENNA ART REVIEW

“Abstract painting makes you think and sometimes you need just one moment to open your mind and to reach something you could not reach for many years”



Zhang Wei, Z-AC 1602, 2016. Oil on Canvas

Elena Burger-Samonova: Mr. Zhang Wei, thank you for joining us for this interview. Yesterday there was the opening of your solo exhibition at Galerie Krinzinger in Vienna. Have you created the works, that are exhibited there, specially for this exhibition?

Zhang Wei: No, I had been creating these paintings during a couple of years and each year I can make many works, so, for the exhibition we had to choose from all my paintings that have been already created.

Elena: What is the concept behind the series of these works, what inspired you to create them?

Zhang Wei: Actually I don't make any kind of series, paintings just continually come from my whole creative life. At first, starting from 1970, I was a landscape artist. It was the time of the cultural revolution in China. At the end of 1970s I started making some abstract paintings. Then, in 1980, I put all my creative energy into abstract painting. It changed, because my job changed. When I was a landscape painter, I worked as a loader. Travelling by truck to pick up stuff and standing in its open bodywork on the way gave me a chance to see different parts of China, its beautiful views and landscapes. And also I could learn a lot of things from my colleagues just talking about life.

Elena: How did it happen, that you became an abstract painter?

Zhang Wei: My job changed — I became a stage designer in the traditional Queen Opera. In 1976 there

was a cultural revolution and then all the traditional things came back to the society. A new company, Queen Opera in Beijing, was created.

Elena: What is the general concept behind your works?

Zhang Wei: You could see at the exhibition that so many people like my works, the paintings are attractive to them and they are easy for people to come close to them. When you go to a museum, you may feel a kind of distance and some people like to keep this distance with the paintings: 'Oh, what a masterpiece!'. When you have this feeling, you cannot really understand, what an artist is trying to show and to explain to the audience. My paintings do not have this kind of attitude, they'd rather be with people, welcome everyone, who is interested.

Elena: When you create your abstract paintings, can you explain what is on the canvas, why you chose this or that color, etc.? Does everything on the canvas have a certain meaning?

Zhang Wei: There is no exact meaning of each part or color on the canvas. Generally, color is my specialty, I have been using color for more than 40 years and I still keep my style and keep learning. In my paintings I try to combine a busy area and a lot of empty places. As I reader, I prefer short stories. Long novels can tell you a big story about someone, who was born, grew up, got married and divorced, how he felt and so on. That is not really interesting for me, because it is just people's life, something that almost everyone goes through. I prefer writers, who describe just a small part of something, for example, watching a flower under the rain. The writers, who create short things, really know, how to use the words. That is how I try to describe my feelings.

Elena: Can we say that you paintings are multi-dimensional?

Zhang Wei: There can be many dimensions in the meaning. But I prefer the presentation to be flat and clear. When you are writing, you may use just a few sentences and you get the point. For me to use a pen is to use a color. Landscape is what you can see, but abstract painting makes you think and sometimes you need just one moment to open your mind and to reach something you could not reach for many years.

Elena: When you start painting, do you look at the canvas and you already see, what you are going to paint, or do you have an idea and then you come to paint?

Zhang Wei: If I have, what is on my mind already, if I already know, what I'm going to paint, I lose the interest to the painting. I'd rather give my paintings and myself a chance to work together, as if the painting was growing, like a person.

Elena: When do you realize that a painting is finished?

Zhang Wei: It is my feeling. Sometimes I walk around the painting and, when I look at it from one side, I keep making changes. But then, I come to it from another side and it looks perfect. The relationship with the painting may be changing.

Elena: How many days or hours do you work?

Zhang Wei: I paint quite quickly. But I don't know, what moment is considered to be a start. For example, my studio is 40 km away from my apartment, and every day I have to take a highway to get there and back home. To make it faster and to avoid traffic jams, I prefer to ride my motorcycle instead of driving a car. And it gives me a different feeling: the wind blows into my face, I change the lanes and overtake really expensive cars, and I feel so strong and powerful sometimes. And when I come to my studio these strong feelings are still in my heart and I use them, when I paint. So, just the way I get to the studio already gives me something and I use my brush to express these feelings. It turns out that I start creating my paintings the moment I leave my apartment.



Zhang Wei 2019. Exhibition view. Krinzinger Galerie

Elena: Will you, please, continue the phrase "Painting for me is..."

Zhang Wei: Painting for me is my life. It is hard to separate me and my painting.

Elena: What is the difference between an artist and non-artist?

Zhang Wei: I have a lot of friends who are not artists and what they usually say, when they see my works,

doesn't sound very good. But for me it's good, I like what they say, because it is the way they see my art. I can use what they say and it leads me to my final result in painting.

Elena: Do the artists understand and see life better than non-artists?

Zhang Wei: No, I think, they are equal. There are so many people, who are good artists, but they are really bad personalities and they do bad and stupid things, concerning their relations with their family and people, who love them. Like Picasso, I like his works so much, but as a person I wouldn't like to be close to him. And there are so many people, who are not artists, and who think, that art is not for them. But they treat other people so nicely and they really know, what love is.

Elena: What was the biggest challenge during your artistic career?

Zhang Wei: It is greed. Everywhere people have something inside that makes them try to get more and more. But if you can get rid of greed you become really quiet and happy and you enjoy life.

Elena: What is the enjoyment of life for you?

Zhang Wei: Each moment is different to me. Last year I had a heart disease. Before that, I always thought, I was a strong man, different from other people of my age. I was too proud, but I was not happy then. After the heart disease I realized, that people's life is so short. People try to get money, name and respect and work really hard, but no one can take all that with them to another world. Now I became more peaceful, became like water, which has no color.

Elena: What advice would you give to young people, who do not know life yet?

Zhang Wei: It is hard to give anyone advice. If I had children, I would just tell them: 'Try to be a nice person, nice to everyone, because there is no more important thing in the world'. I would tell them: 'Be nice, peaceful, love and be loved.'

Elena: What is the role of an artist in the society?

Zhang Wei: It is very important for an artist to be honest with the audience, not to pretend and to show the real you.

Elena: What are the other things that you like?

Zhang Wei: Women, they are the most beautiful in the world.

INTERVIEW WITH CHINESE ARTIST CHEN LI

BY KATRINE LEVIN, WWW.KATRINELEVIN.COM

“I paint to finish my idea, my hope. I paint what I feel in my heart...”

Chen Li is a prize-winning artist who lives and works in Kunming. Born into an artistic family in 1971, he grew up surrounded by the avant-garde artists of the post-Cultural Revolution, equally inspired by the works of Bruegel and de Kooning as of Guan Xiu and Zhao Wu-ji. Chen Li's prize-winning woodblock print, "Human Buddha" will be on display at the Asian Galleries in the British Museum starting June 2019. This work was acquired by the Museum after the first solo exhibition of his woodblocks in London 2018. His work is in the British Museum and in significant private collections in the United Kingdom, Italy and the United States.



Chinese Artist Chen Li

Chen Li works with both oil on canvas and woodblock prints. His lyrical oil paintings meld the philosophies and techniques of Eastern and Western art to create a mesmerising new visual language. "Just like writing a love letter, content is the key; what pen you use is not important. The characteristic forms of the mountains and landscapes of Yunnan drive me to paint. My compositions are inspired by the spirit of traditional Chinese culture and the Buddhist philosophy. Chinese art and Western art have different views about reality. But when I paint, I ignore both man-made and natural rules to create living artistic images." (Chen Li)

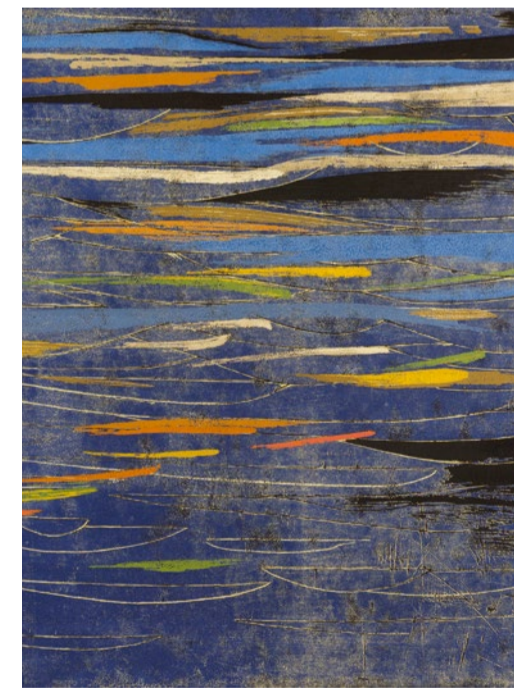
In his woodblock prints, Chen Li uses Yunnan's rare "waste-block" or "suicide" technique that leaves no room for error. All colours are printed from a single woodblock, each step carving over the previous one

until the block is destroyed. Only a single edition is possible. Chen Li's woodblock prints have won numerous national awards in China. The Artist defines his practice as a constant transformation, a living art. The freedom of Chen Li's thoughts is echoed in the freedom of his strokes and the originality of his compositions. Chen Li's works convey a deep and often dynamic harmony. His flying strokes render wind, clouds, the universe — transporting the viewer into the experience.

Chen Li developed his style in conscious isolation from the influences of academia. Defying categorisation, he says "I paint to finish my idea, my hope. What



Chen Li, "The Well of Longchuan" 2016. Oil on Canvas, 100 * 130 cm



Chen Li, "Reflecons in a Blue Lake", 2010 Reduction woodblock print. Edition 8/12

I care most about is whether I'm saying what I want clearly, and if there are ways to say it better." Pursuing his own concepts and ideas are a key aspect of Chen Li's work and personality. Amazingly, despite winning many prizes at the mandatory national art exhibitions in China, Chen Li felt he was not ready to exhibit internationally until he was 46. Since his first solo show with us in London in 2017, he has been attracting significant attention from public and private collectors alike.



Chen Li, "Dongchuan Mountains with a Horse", 2016. Oil on Canvas, 100 * 130 cm