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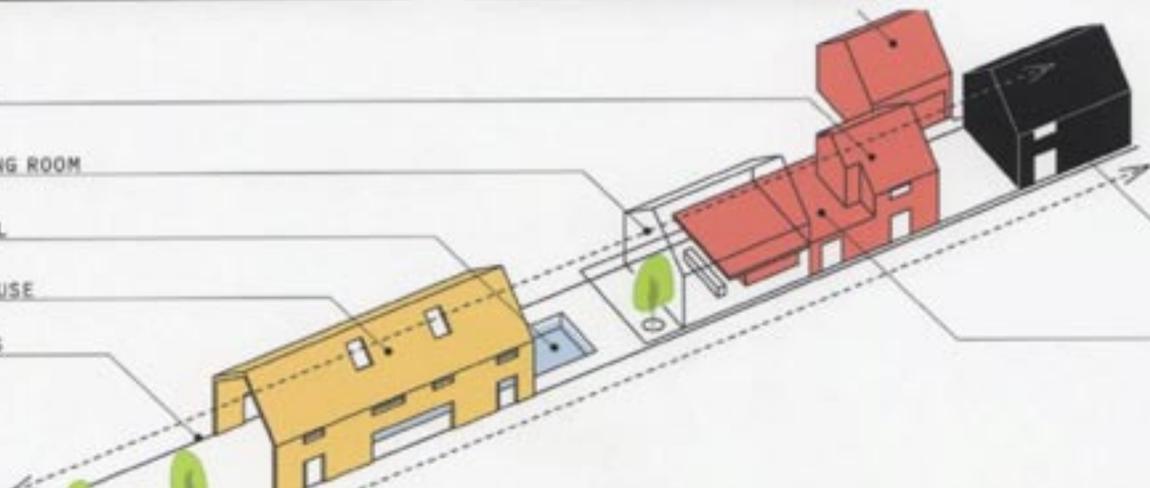
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LIN YAN - "The force drawing me to art is like gravity"

Translated from her interview in

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Translation by Annysa Ng

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Q1 : Do you think artists in general need "Solitude"?

Lin : Those artists who physically make their work at their studio spend most of the time alone. It may seem lonely; however, alone doesn't mean lonely. In the process of creating their own free scope, they do not feel lonely. In contrast, they substantially enjoy the sole engagement of the process, even though it may be laborious. When an idea from the artist's imaginary scope is being transformed into a tangible scope, some artists not used to ordinary social contact give the impression that an artist doesn't like to fit in. In fact, most people, including artists, would like to be understood by others. Artists always seek the opportunity to exhibit their work and welcome the chance to exchange with the public. In conclusion, because of the nature of the creative process, an artist needs a lot of alone-time or solitude.

Q2 : Can you describe your condition when you are in the process of creation?

Lin : It is a condition of intense concentration. Generally speaking, when the mood is good, the creative condition is good. No matter what you are going to express in your work, which may involve social criticism, may be filled with sunlight or shade, a good mood will bring out the expression better and more thoroughly. When conditions are not good, you cannot involve yourself completely. You act timidly and hesitatingly. One's creative condition will be reflected honestly in the work. It is more honest and true than words.

Q3 : What attracts you to artistic creation?

Lin : I liked to paint since childhood. The force drawing me to art is like gravity. I never think of why I like to paint, only about how to live better and paint better. Gradually, it became part of my life. My way of thinking, observing the environment and experiencing life are formatted to express myself through artistic form. It is more direct and appropriate than speech and words. Artistic creation unceasingly forces me to face myself, to excavate the core of human nature. Since this has become part of my life, I feel life is not complete, if I do not follow this inner course.

Q4 : Do you agree that "artists need social conscience"?

Lin : A good painting may not necessarily qualify as social; an abstract painting can be a good work, too. Being an individual and a member in the society, I, like other citizens, am concern about other people, the environment, the world and its peace and have curiosity, sympathy, and a sense of justice. Some artists raise their point of view directly and incisively. Some are rather tactful and reserved. Some works give us inspiration, self-confidence and stimulation. Some works, in a way, bring us joy, freedom of spirit, and emotional satisfaction; make us less numb and more imaginative. Some artists are

more sentimental, and some are more insightful. There has no single stereotype. Perhaps, famous artists have more opportunities to utilize their influences and social position to serve society. Our society, especially in this age, needs all type of artists. I feel artists should have a sense of responsibility and they should create sincere works. They should not be disloyal to themselves, making the same work repeatedly. Human beings are frail. Our most valuable asset is our distinctive soul. We can realize warmth and strength when we respect its irreplaceable quality and protect it from any callous system. Thus, we can propel the society.

Q5 : In your work, to which aspects do you pay most attention?

Lin : The process of using visual language to create is very intimate and personal. Some may think each procedure in art-making is aim-oriented. That is, the meaning of the content is the same from the beginning - point A, to the end - point B. In fact, this is not true. Honestly speaking, I cannot articulate the process clearly. Even though I can put it in words, it will not be complete. We like nature; we like animals. This is because existence is not aim-oriented. We have a sense of empathy. Our emotions can be stimulated by scenery or the environment. We display imagination freely and love sincerely. The process of art-making is similar. When the artist works with self-consciousness, bringing out true humanity, it will be perceived by the viewer. The artist is at point A and the viewer is at point B. The perception of point B is completed by the viewer. What I think is different from what you think. After the work is started, I walk with it. During the creating process, the content of point A will be altered by the work itself. When the work gets to the viewer, point B, it is completed and fulfilled. Therefore, I would like to say that do not interpret my work only through my ideas and input. No worldly explanation can completely represent what is in the work. I pay attention to different aspects during different periods. Other than painting, I like architecture the most. My work is always related to the architectural environment around me. In the 80s, I focused on the relationship between drawing and how it takes the role in representing space. I started looking at a painting as an object in space, seeking balance in painting with the concept of Tai Chi. In the 90s, I advocated seeking the genesis of modern construction in Beijing from the old and demolished houses. At the same time, I pondered the color spectrum of ink in a black painting. I was concerned with the conflict between the role of women in daily life and human culture. I think about how to comprise a painting surface in a three-dimensional work. I also care about the self-esteem crisis of Chinese culture; the relationship between sentiment and minimalism. In the 21st century, I consider how to utilize traditional Chinese art material in contemporary art. I consummate the implementation of the Yin and Yang concept in my work. Straddling the zones, I find equilibrium in contradictions.

Q6 : What is the reason for using Xuan paper as the medium in your work?

Lin : The changes, from painting oil on canvas to painting on paper and from paper to Xuan paper, are based on the nature of work. It is not flung about according to some concept. When I work in my studio, I think about color - black or white, texture - paste more layer of paper or less, and composition - paste a long strip of paper or a shorter one. Gradually, the latest ideas and work take shape and are consolidated. When I changed from using oil to traditional Chinese art materials, I had the feeling of picking up a pair of chopsticks after a long use of knife and fork. Last week, I saw the works of my favorite artists, Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese. In the 16th century, they started to use oil on canvas instead of the Tempera on board. The new medium gave the effect of brush stroke

and new texture. Since then this medium greatly developed and unfolded new esthetic possibilities. By bringing the Xuan paper and ink, the traditional art materials that have profound Chinese cultural significance, to contemporary art I expose a new horizon for both Western and Eastern art. The historical value, cultural background, expressive ability and philosophical basis of these traditional media have surpassed the limitation of simply media for painting. In contemporary art, their potential to play a new role is waiting to develop.

Q7 : How do you view the phenomenon of artists who unceasingly and redundantly repeat their symbolic marks?

Lin : The symbolic mark you mention possibly has two kinds of meanings. One kind is like the commercial logo or trademark; its effect is like a poster. It is good for advertisements and propaganda. It is also good for mass production. MacDonal'd's is a good example. MacDonal'd's had a simple menu, which did not have more than eight choices, when it was established. When it became a brand that was available everywhere, it added new items to the menu. Each new item generated huge profits. I appreciate this commercial symbolic mark. The symbolic mark that bears this commercial characteristic in fine art, however, will mislead viewers. Viewers focus on reading and guessing the meaning of the symbolic marks. They are confined to the answer given by the artist. Once they discover the meaning of the symbolic mark, they think they know the entire painting and stop reading the work any further. This problem does not surface much in a group show; however, when it comes to a solo exhibition, it will not be easy to hang a group of paintings that look alike. To solve this problem, dealers make an art show in the style of party, speeding up the rhythm of viewing paintings. Many artists adapted to this and enjoy the commercial effect. Other artists are interested in pondering the execution of their symbolic mark. They transform the basic symbolic mark into unlimited variations; some even surmount the original meaning of the mark. Developing a simple factor into a rich visual language is a display of artists' expressive ability and the aptitude to perfect their own visual language. From the same painting, an audience can see something more than what they saw last time. This, then, is a worthy painting and the audience can communicate with the work. We should put aside the so-called guide to viewing a painting, and view the work with an open mind. Each person has a different background and experience, so his or her perception of the same painting will necessarily be different. Perception is beyond words. Some multi-media artists will repeat their symbolic mark in their installations, photography and prints. Each medium has its own property. The same basic symbol can be executed differently according to each medium's property, and the artist can achieve a body of individual work that shares the same concept. On the other hand, some artists just confine themselves to the same concept and symbol, which is simply being copied and repeated in each work. The photography work is just a photo of their installation, and the print is its black-and-white version. Honestly, I do not appreciate this practice. From my point of view, it is very hard to set a definition for good art, which is not a manifesto. It is like a stimulant to encourage imagination, emotion and thought. In contrast, a bad work can be described by a line or a mark.

Q8 : What is your idea of how Chinese contemporary art can enter the international market successfully?

Lin : I am always asked this question in China. In America, the international market includes the China market. They actually would like to enter the China market. The pres-

ent developments in China enable people to hold very high hopes for China's future. Do you prefer to adapt the ready-made western market system or to create ours that suits us? Different markets require different commodities; different commodities develop different markets. I can only concern myself here with questions related to commodities. Questions related to developing markets need to be addressed in another specific article. They are related to the educational method, ideology, market operation systems, art criticism and the degree of understanding of China by the West. They are also affected by what psychological state westerners are in when they look at China, the new order after the economic crisis, and so on. I do not know much about art market. According to my feelings, the 'commodities' of our contemporary art are represented by the MacDonald's mode of business strategy. This art can be seen everywhere, but the variety is limited. This type of presentation makes our art lose its mystery, layers and depth. It also diminishes its indescribable influential power and ability to arouse thoughts. It restricts the free-spirit's ability to raise questions that have no absolute answer. The western market has established an individual category for Chinese art. They actually keep learning and trying to seek a suitable way to view our art phenomenon. Last summer, when I talked to a Chinese art critic about saving our art environment, I mentioned that "a chaotic art environment embraces freedom and infinite possibilities. Artistic creativity needs a free atmosphere to breed. When critics analyze and classify the artistic phenomenon, they should leave developing space for those not in the mainstream, any new kind of art, or any kind that is in between, even that which cannot be classified, so as to maintain the organic and chaotic artistic environment. Do not leave out the non-mainstream art for the rationale of classification for any seminar or for research purposes." Artists do not need flattering and should not be fastened to a stereotype. Eastern Europe is another new contemporary art arena. Last month, I chatted with a director of a new contemporary art museum in Warsaw, Poland. He only has eight people working under him. He looks like a young New Yorker, wearing jacket and jeans. He talks a lot and fast. Supported by the Polish Government, he travelled to New York and went to many established museums, consulting various departments in the institutes during his short stay. He is dedicated to establishing an artist-oriented art system, working with the government, foundations and galleries to bring Polish artists to the international art platform. They do not want to rush to the market. Their priority is to show good Polish art in exhibitions and museums and create opportunities for artists to advance their work. Thereafter, they will enter into the market through participating in art fairs, etc. Such a system will help artistic creation, staying away from the influence of the market in the initial stages and reducing manipulation by outsiders. I have no answer for the question of which management system can avoid the unhealthy cycle of bubble-burst-new bubble pattern? I understand art as a commodity better than I understand the art market.

Q9 : Is your American experience important to your art career development?

Lin : If you are true to yourself, any experience, abroad or local, is important. I am able to see and compare things from many angles. The Eastern and the Western cultures are entirely different. In fact, there were many great works of art during the period when the East and the West were more separate. I know how to connect to my inner self. The experience of living abroad in America gave me a craving to learn more about Chinese traditional art.

Q10 : Shall we talk about the exhibition "Remaking"? Was it a retrospective show or an exhibition showing your latest work?

Lin : “Remaking” was my solo exhibition held at China Square in New York this year. It showed twelve works, which were mainly created during the second half of 2008. Last year was a year filled with big events. I do not watch much television, but last year I watched a lot. First there was the Sichuan earthquake, then the Beijing Olympics, and then the American presidential election. The American presidential election initiated many firsts - the first black candidate and the first woman candidate. Watching news stimulates thoughts, which naturally surface in my work. I made a few small works titled “Way Out” in the beginning. They are different from my old works, which are either all black or all white. This time I brought them together. White paper materializes from the black, while the black embraces the white. There is a sense of action, sexuality and structure. I also added the concept of Tai Chi, which is always present in other works, to this series as well. The impression is loose and tense, solid and void, as well as the thirst for breakthrough and “change”. I was very engrossed in the election. I endured the four years when Bush was in his first term as the president. When he won his second term, I thought of leaving America. His policies, speeches and actions after 9/11 reminded me of the Cultural Revolution in China. There was less freedom in news broadcasting. The phenomenon of exaggeration and phoniness phenomenon was accelerating. Art criticism was compromised by marketing art. Everyone felt as if they were living in a bubble which would burst in one day. The feeling was horrible. And I am not one who usually care enormously about politics. Obama is not playing with individualism. He insists in solving social problems. His attitude is simple and his morality is high. His background is different from the upper-crust of Caucasian American society. American people like him. The younger generation has become concerned with its country, international issues, and the longing for learning about the cultures of other countries. This kind of hope that arises from crisis urged me to give it expression in my works: Remaking, This Nation, That World, Brick by Brick, and In & Out. These works are made with Xuan paper and ink by making rubbings from the old brick walls of Beijing. Among them, three are the American flag. I never thought of using American flag in my work before, and I even do not like to use the postage stamp with the flag. The art that excites me most breaks national boundaries, language barriers and cultural differences. It provides the opportunity to communicate, and eases the boundary between the East and the West. Art also must not be confined to a single form. It can be a painting or a sculpture, realistic or abstract. There is no border between the work and the space outside the frame. There is no line between frail and strong, active and calm, void and solid. All these properties are embraced in the work. The quality and characteristic of the materials contribute to the creation process over which my touch is minimal. At a difficult time, I had a moment of despair. But when the show received a lot of praise, I started to work again. The audience said, “The fluttery paper is a symbol of freedom. The noise of the city faded when looking at your work.” The imagination of the audience always surprises me and also enriches the work. Thank you