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Pan Gongkai: Reflections on Beginnings, Opposites, Changes Re: Contemporary Chinese Art

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I. Beginnings

Pan Gongkai, born in Ninghai in the Ningbo region in 1947, carries the weight of both tradition and contemporary forces of Chinese culture in equal measure. As the son of Pan Tianshou (1897-1971), who is considered one of the four great masters of brush (pi) and ink (mo) painting of the Twentieth Century, Pan Gongkai belongs to a rich tradition of Chinese art historical figures. His birth in 1947 near the beginning of the Cultural Revolution places him in the midst of untold changes in Chinese society. Today, Pan Gongkai is acknowledged both in China and internationally for his contributions as artist, theorist, and leader in art education. In his own art, Pan Gongkai continues his exploration of Chinese ink and brush painting, while also experimenting with new forms of installation and architectural design. As a theorist, he offers a critical view on contemporary art practices and attempts to redefine the relation of Western and Chinese art as separate distinct approaches to art. In his role as educator he builds upon the tradition of excellence achieved by Chinese and Western and attempts to set the course for future developments with an open spirit, while insisting on grounding current practice in talent and technical mastery.

Among the challenges for artists in China from the beginning of the Twentieth Century on is the question of the relation of Western art practices to Chinese art. Although western pictorial means were known in China among professional commercial artists as early as the Seventeenth century, these developments had little effect on other aspects of Chinese art. More recent Western influences in art likely began with Chinese artists studying in Japan at the beginning of the Twentieth century, and with the importation of Japanese teachers into China to introduce Western art techniques as interpreted through Japanese eyes to Chinese students and artists. The success of Japanese artists in adapting western art to Asian culture, attracted many Chinese painters to study in Japan as well as with Japanese teachers imported to teach art in China. Chinese artists also traveled to Paris and elsewhere in the West where they were introduced to modern styles of painting from Realism and Impressionism to the School of Paris including modern artists such as Manet, Monet, Cézanne, Van Gogh and others. The Chinese artist and educator Gao Jianfu (1889-1933), along with others, attempted to create a New National Painting style based on merging of Western ideas concerning painting with Chinese traditional painting,

Pan Tianshou, the father of Pan Gongkai, viewed Western and Chinese painting as two opposed approaches to painting. He argued that Western and Chinese painting should remain separate and deepen their respective traditions rather than attempt to merge the two. As will become evident below, Pan Gongkai also favors keeping separate the paths of Western and Chinese traditional art in his life as artist and educator. As with other Chinese artists who preferred to practice traditional Chinese art during the Revolution after 1949, Pan Tianshou's views became unpopular and subject to censure, especially during the period when Socialist Realist painting was introduced in China during the Cultural Revolution. Pan Gongkai also was placed under house arrest and sent to the countryside to work in

the rice fields during the period between late 1966 and 1970.

II. Opposites

The problem of how to address the relation of Western and Chinese approaches to painting has not disappeared. Indeed, it is at the core of decisions in both art education and art practices in China today. Pan Gongkai, who is educated in both, views Chinese and Western art as complementary approaches to art, each analogous to an "oval shaped blended zone with Chinese traditions at one end and Western modernity at the other." [2] His views on this topic follow closely the earlier thinking of Pan Tianshou. The thinking of Pan Gongkai on the respective approaches of Western and Chinese art is reflected in his recent writings such as the essay, "Zanoxing," published in the exhibition catalog of at the CAFA School of Fine Arts. [3] In this essay written in 2010, Pan Gongkai acknowledges the achievements of both Chinese and Western artists within their respective mediums. (Having studied both in China and at the San Francisco Art Institute in the USA, Pan Gongkai is well grounded in a knowledge of both Chinese and Western art.) He finds that the need for a balance between freedom and discipline in producing art has been compromised in the shift in Western art from realism to conceptually based art practices. In essence, the proliferation of artistic pluralisms in search of new directions for the visual arts, when driven solely by "a blind search for novelty and innovation" without the benefit of the principles on which traditional arts have been based has resulted in a weakening of the foundations.

Pan Gongkai's interpretation acknowledges the achievements of Western modernists in their efforts to contribute to reform and the emergence of new directions. Yet, as he views the current state of art for China, a readjustment in the direction of artist's training is warranted. Accordingly, under Pan Gongkai's leadership as President, the curriculum of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing divides its curriculum into three divisions: a school of Fine Arts providing training with a foundation in Realism and emphasizing skills, techniques, and experience; a School of Traditional Chinese Painting, featuring traditional Chinese mediums such as ink and brush painting and calligraphy, and a department of Experimental art to explore newer developments located in the School of Fine Arts. Guiding each of these three divisions, is a presumption that the artists in each division will evolve rules and means of evaluation, while maintaining a respect for openness and tolerance of new concepts, and engage in disciplined training guided by the values of artistry, culture, and transcendence.

Artistry provides the aesthetic foundation for creating art. Culture provides the framework in which art is to be understood and linked to life. Transcendence takes place as art ascends from its foundations in craftsmanship and materiality and actually contributes to the spiritual dimension of human existence evoking such qualities as delight, surprise, and understanding. In essence, Pan Gongkai's essay on "Zaoxing," literally referring to modeling, also encompasses his understanding of the concept of Zhuannian which embraces "changing ideas, changing attitude, rethinking..." [4] of the state of art in China today.

III. Changes

As an artist, Pan Gongkai is proficient in a variety of art media: brush and ink painting, installation art, architectural design, and, he would say, in the art of living, where the artist chooses to create life itself as a work of art. [5] He does not follow in the direction of contemporary Chinese Political Pop or Cynical Realist artists familiar to Western audiences. Nor does he choose conceptual art as did contemporary artists, Xu Bing and Gu Wenda, who in their principal contributions both focused on deconstructing traditional Chinese characters and poetry in their respective explorations of Conceptual art.

Pan Gongkai is well known in China as a leading advocate of the National Painting movement known as guohua. [6] In his art, he has essentially maintained the separation between Chinese and Western approaches to art that he espouses as a theorist and educator. He is best known

both in China and in the West, where he has exhibited extensively, as a Chinese painter of ink and brush paintings. His art has been shown in exhibitions in Europe and the United States, as well as in China and other parts of Asia. His ink and brush paintings cover a wide range of scale and themes, ranging from easel sized works such as those in the collection of the San Francisco Asian Art Museum, to wall length works found in his recent exhibitions.

Among the nature subjects found in Pan Gongkai's brush and ink paintings is a series of paintings interpreting the Lotus flower. The Lotus flower is an especially treasured motif in Chinese art and culture. Beginning from a lowly place in the mud, the Lotus progresses to full bloom as a beautiful flower of aesthetic purity, and then disintegrates. In the spring, new growth follows, and the cycle of its life continues. The Lotus Flower is thus a fitting metaphor for the changing stages of human life from birth to the end of mortal existence and the ongoing re-mergence of life.

"Lotus Medallion," 2007, 47x38 in., one of a set of four ink and brush Lotus paintings of Pan Gongkai in the San Francisco collection, is rendered with "thick strokes of black ink and the edges of the leaves emphasize the structure of the lotus roundels--shrunk due to the chill of early winter." "Drizzling Rain Over Western Lake," 2007, 47x 38 in., another in the series, is cast in softer grayish ink tones to catch the feeling of a misty, hazy atmosphere. "Morning Delight," 2007, 47x38 in., also in the Asian Museum features a single flower, hanging from a fragile stem as if suspended in space. "Autumn Frost," 2008, 21x72 in., also in the same collection, continues the lyrical, expressive use of black ink this time extending the black ink horizontally across the flat picture plane. The artist's talent for imaginative transformation of the natural elements into abstract painterly forms is particularly evident in these works.

In his recent art Pan Gongkai continues with ink and brush, but the scale of the paintings has increased substantially, and are well beyond what can be considered easel paintings. Some of these new works extend the length of a wall, for example "Snow Melt," which was shown in 2010 at the CAFA art museum in Beijing. "Snow Melt" is composed of clusters of abstract black ink marks, perhaps again referencing the Lotus flower, interspersed with white ink marks simulating the action of melting snow. (A text accompanying the ink markings forms an amalgam with the painterly elements.) In other of the artist's large scale constructions, he uses a brush to apply ink directly to large paper sheets situated on the floor. (A photograph of the artist engaged in creating one of his larger ink and brush paintings is perhaps reminiscent of a photograph of the American Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock's technique used in creating his action paintings of the 1950s.) In these experiments with contemporary ink painting, Pan Gongkai joins a host of other contemporary Chinese artists who wish to expand and keep alive an important tradition in the art and culture of contemporary China. [8]

If the move to large scale brush and ink painting signals a desire on the part of Pan Gongkai to advance beyond the scope of traditional, or even contemporary Chinese brush and ink paintings, the next phase of his artistic explorations moves substantially beyond his earlier work. As revealed in the exhibition "Displacement: Flashes of Thought—Traversing Duchamp," presented at the CAFA art museum in 2010, Pan Gongkai's new work represents a bold move into conceptual installation art. What does this mean? Does it imply a concession to, or paying homage to Western art after all? Or is it simply a search for new means to fulfill aspects of the artist's creative spirit not yet realized in his previous artistic endeavors? Or perhaps it is a way of contributing to the "New transformations, new explorations, new creativity, and new concepts" that he foresees in the future transformation of art in China.

The English title to the exhibition, referencing Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), may offer some clues to understanding this new work of Pan Gongkai. The precise phrase used in the exhibition title (as translated) is "traversing Duchamp." However, the English word 'traverse' has many nuances: for example, it can mean to pass over, to contemplate, to navigate, to connect with, to disavow, or to rebut, to mention a few of these nuances. Hence, the exact intention and scope of meaning of Pan Gongkai's reference to Duchamp must remain open.

At the beginning of the Twentieth century, Duchamp was already an established modern painter, famous especially for his painting "Nude Descending a Staircase," 1912, which created a scandal

when shown at the New York Armory Show in 1913. Subsequently, he presented manufactured objects from every day life, which he named Ready-mades: "The Bicycle Wheel," 1913; "Bottle Wrack," 1914, "In Advance of a Broken Shovel," 1915, "Fountain," 1917. These works of Duchamp subsequently became signature items of Western conceptual art. By the 1920s Duchamp turned his creative interest to the game of Chess and proposed that the activity of Chess be considered a component of his artistic expression. In doing so he distanced his art from conventional understanding of art, moving closer to seeing his own life as art.

Perhaps one connection between Duchamp and Pan Gongkai's art is their mutual desire to diminish the separation of art from everyday life. Based on his turning to Ready-mades to express his ideas concerning art, and his views on the connections between chess and art, it seems that Duchamp might share Pan Gongkai's understanding of life as a form of art. However, there is one important difference in their approaches to art as it is represented in the Ready-mades. The main structural and visual elements of Pan Gongkai's installation are not ready-mades, but designed and constructed elements. Of course, the interior part of "Displacement: Flashes of Thought—Traversing Duchamp," includes a desk with computer, stacks of paper, stapler, phone and other items of a work space, which might arguably qualify as appropriated ready-mades in their function in this work.

To strengthen the connection between Pan Gongkai's installation and Duchamp, one might reference another work by Duchamp, "The Large Glass," otherwise known as "The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even," 1915 -1923. In this work, Duchamp employed two panes of glass using various materials such as lead, foil, fuse wire and dust, in conjunction with chance procedures, perspective studies, and his own craftsmanship. [9] Here, the works in question by Duchamp and Pan Gongkai respectively are both abstract constructions referencing life situations. They are both conceptual in aim and execution where the ideas prevail over the perceptual. Both are highly original endeavors aiming to challenge in their respective ways any separation between art and life.

Still there are important differences. Duchamp's work is essentially accessible only through the mind. One cannot enter physically into the space of the "Large Glass" in the way that it is possible to enter the spaces, both external and internal, of "Displacement: Flashes of Thought—Traversing Duchamp." The exterior space of Pan Gongkai's installation is divided into a virtual galaxy of spherical shapes, perhaps a metaphor of the universe cast in blue light of the sky. Among the spherical shapes is one large dome shaped space grounded on the floor of the gallery, with an extended entry way allowing passage into the interior. A photograph of the exterior configuration brings to mind the architecture of an Eskimo igloo. The interior resembles what one might imagine the interior of a spaceship to be, with high tech instruments and a desk equipped with the tools of a contemporary office work space. The scale of both interior and exterior allows for people to enter both spaces. On the other hand, physical entry into the spaces of Pan Gongkai's installation is not sufficient to enjoy it as a prod to the imagination and a beacon of conceptual understanding of future possibilities for art.

Perhaps another approach to the new direction in Pan Gongkai's art as represented in "Displacement: Flashes of Thought—Traversing Duchamp," is that this latter construction reflects another dimension of the artist's interest and talent. This is architectural design. He is an award winning designer, whose recent works have included participation as Chief Designer for the interior display plan of the national hall of the China Pavillion at the International Exposition, held in Shanghai during the summer of 2010. [10] This project is known for its "green and cutting edge technologies." A further testimony to the architectural design accomplishments of Pan Gongkai is manifest in the President's award for 2009 which he received from the International Council of Graphic Design Association for helping to re-define the direction of art and design education in China.

IV. Endings

With a commitment to the idea that life itself is currently the central theme in his art, it is

appropriate to acknowledge briefly what this aspect of his art might entail. As is evident in the preceding commentary, much of Pan Gongkai's life revolves around his art. Apart from a distinguished career as painter, designer, and now conceptual artist, Pan Gongkai's life is already filled with an impressive array of related actions. In China, and across the art world, he is recognized as a leading figure in the education of artists in China and a well-known theorist in art history. Currently he holds the position of President of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, the leading school for training artists in China, and before that held the office of President of the Chinese Academy of Art, Chief Editor of the Bulletin of Zhejiang Institute of International Cultural Exchange, and many other positions of leadership in China, including serving as a member of the People's Consultative Conference. In international art circles he is a frequent delegate to such prestigious gatherings such as The Asian Art Council of the Guggenheim Museum as well as academic conferences across the world. His theoretical writings are widely published and include the books *Limits and Expansion*, *A Critical Biography of Pan Tianshou*, *Analyzing Pan Tianshou's Painting Techniques*, and an Edited History of Chinese Painting. And, it is certain, the roads not taken are still ahead to explore. 【11】

【1】 See reference to Pan Tianshou in the exhibition catalogue, "Tracing the Past, Drawing the Future: Master Ink Painters in Twentieth Century China," Cantor Art Center, Stanford University, February 17-July 4, 2010. Pan Tianshou is listed as one of the four principal masters cited in the exhibition, along with Wu Chang Shuo (1874-1927), Qi Baishi (1864-1967), and Huang Binhong (1865-1965). The family name Pan also appears in the Eighteenth Century in the art of Pan Gongshou (Pan Kung-shou), 1741-1794, although it is not known if there is a family connection. Harvard University Collection, "Distant Peaks Floating," 1771, 36 1/2 x 13 3/8 in.

【2】 "Pan Gongkai Painting Show," WWW.newsgd.com/art/2007 News Guangdong. The article references an exhibition of 40 paintings by Pan Gongkai held in Guangzhou, China in 2007. The view that Western and Chinese art reference two ends of art is proposed as both a cultural strategy and a methodology for art education.

【3】 Pan Gongkai, "Zaoxing," essay for the catalog of the exhibition, ZANOXING, at the CAFA School of Fine Arts. Sinopop Blog. ArchiveArchivhttp://sinopop.org/2010/09/09/25.

【4】 Noted in Peng Feng, "Art as a Way of Life: A Philosophical Interpretation of Pan Gongkai's Art."

【5】 Noted in Peng Feng, "Art as a Way of Life: A Philosophical Interpretation of Pan Gongkai's Art."

【6】 Gohua is a form of Chinese ink and brush painting that aims to capture the character of what is being depicted through entering into the flow of life that the subject emits. It typically involves the use of feelings to discover the mood and other qualities of what is being depicted.

【7】 Courtesy of the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco.

【8】 Curtis L. Carter, "Contemporary Ink Paintings," in Ping Jie, editor. *Contemporary Ink Art Evolution*, Beijing Museum of Contemporary Art, Fairbank Center of Chinese Studies, Harvard University, Raab Galerie, Berlin, et al, 2009-2010. See additional essays on contemporary ink art in this volume.

【9】 Marcel Duchamp, Wikipedia, 2010. The "Large Glass," "The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelor, Even" is displayed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Duchamp's notes on this work were published as *The Green Box* in 1934.

【10】 Wang Hairong, "China's New Portal, The China Pavillion, a landmark building of the Shanghai World Exp," *Beijing Review*, No. 9, March 4, 2010.

【11】 Thanks to Professors Peng Feng and Liu Yuedi for providing research information for this essay. Their assistance is much appreciated.