

Dreaming In Another Place

Yang Qi is one of the most important painters of the Chinese diaspora in Germany. While his paintings, prints, and ceramics are deeply thoughtful, they are enlivened by his impish sense of humor. There is a Zen-like calmness at the heart of his singular vision.

By Ian Findlay



Yang Qi, Rain Man, 2017, Chinese ink on rice paper, 79 x 69 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Alisan Fine Arts, Hong Kong.

To travel through the art of the German-Chinese painter Yang Qi is to discover a world in which joy and melancholy, darkness and light, oppression and freedom are not in conflict with each other but are improbable partners in the liberation of humanity's secret soul. Yang Qi has known his fair share of conflicts and restrictive environments but the experiences of these have shaped him and his art in surprising ways.

"In the 1990s, I had a dark period. But I didn't think it was negative because the darkness to me was, on the one hand, absurd, and, on the other hand, funny and quite free. I was swimming in the darkness and no one could see me, so I could do everything as I liked and I could see clearly."¹

With such clarity Yang Qi makes art that, regardless of the *ism* or *ist* one uses to interpret it, seeks a human essence, a balance of forces that speaks to his Zen-like philosophy. These challenges, since Yang Qi's earliest days in Germany as an immigrant art student, have inspired him to embrace the strange but welcoming world in which acceptance and success were not givens.

His struggles have been chan-



Yang Qi, *Silk Road*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 120 cm.

neled into a singular artistic vision, one that, as has been noted by a number of observers of his *oeuvre*, embraces his Chinese cultural past with his concept of "Zen with German Expression" that speaks to a broad social and cultural base. A variety of his works in different media and styles speak to this base in a number of ways, not the least of which is social, cultural, and individual identity. As Professor Beate Reinfenscheid has written, in Yang's search for the new he "... realized that Chinese ink painting, which, even in historical works, always explored the maximum abstraction from

nature. It is because traditional ink painting provides the potential for abstraction, that it contains the potential of continuously being contemporary and of allowing further development while simultaneously preserving the innermost values of painting."²

Such things underpin much of the work in *Yang Qi: A Profound Life*, his first exhibition in Hong Kong. The paintings, works-on-paper, drawings, and ceramics here address wide-ranging subjects and themes, including surrealism and abstract figuration, landscapes and portraits, eroticism and social alienation, politics and identity, as well as a pleasing narrative vein of realism and humor, all of which have combined to make him one of the most important contemporary German artists, the road to which has been subjected to a number of detours.

Born in Wuhu, Anhui province in 1952, Yang Qi, like countless others of his generation in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), was 'sent down' to the countryside. He worked in a brickyard in a commune between 1968 and 1978. Of this time, he notes that the people in the commune were very kind. After life in the commune, he studied art at Anhui



Yang Qi, *The Door and the Man I*, 2006, wax and acrylic on canvas, 50 x 50 cm.



Yang Qi, *The Door and the Man II*, 2006, wax and acrylic on canvas, 50 x 50 cm.



Yang Qi, *The Romantic Way*, 2017, Chinese ink and mineral color on rice paper, 79 x 68.5 cm.



Yang Qi, *The Young Man and His Shadow*, 2017, Chinese ink and mineral color on rice paper, 79 x 68.5 cm.

National Normal University in Wuhu between 1978 and 1982, after which he was a lecturer in art in Shanghai University until 1987 when he left for Germany and Berlin's University of the Arts.

Looking back on this time, without rancor, Yang Qi says: "After the countryside I rediscovered freedom, the individual, and silence. I found my voice in Shanghai and then in Berlin and Heidelberg, where I studied for my Ph.D. In Shanghai I was frustrated by routine. I wanted to travel,

to find a new life for my art. I thought of the United States but I was uncertain what I would do there. Then I got a scholarship from West Germany, where I lived as a free painter. Germany was a challenge but I found the situation funny because people liked my work. I was surprised because I wasn't trying to do anything special. I was told then that what I was doing was like 'Art Informel.' Each place was a step in gaining my new voice."

Early emotional turmoil took a long time to percolate through his mind before emerging creatively in his free

adult self. *The Door and The Man I and II* (2006), he says, comes from this period. When I looked at these two lovely, small, square wax-and-acrylic works—one green and white; one red and white; an anonymous solitary abstract figure within each piece, both of which have the background that reminds me of the hexagonal cells of a honeycomb—I was struck by how sad and alienated each scene is.

At the same time, there is stillness at the heart of these works that captures an incongruous sense of the solitariness of human character and its social uncer-



Yang Qi, *A Painter*, 2017, Chinese ink on rice paper, 62 x 49 cm.



Yang Qi, *Mrs. Sisi*, 2017, Chinese ink on rice paper, 62 x 49 cm.



Yang Qi, *John*, 2017, Chinese ink on rice paper, 62 x 49 cm.

tainty that makes one warm to them. For Yang Qi, the dichotomy of sadness and warmth is part of the pleasure of the paintings. “I like melancholy because it is important for me and my sense of emotion,” says Yang Qi. “I like the sentimental. Melancholy and the sentimental are beyond reality. These are fundamental feeling for artists.”

This sense of melancholy is especially strong in his Chinese-ink-on-rice paper or board works such as *Rain Man* (2017), *A Painter* (2017), *John* (2017), *Mrs. Sisi* (2017), and *Looking for Myself* (2016). The feelings are reinforced by Yang Qi’s beautiful application of Chinese ink wash to the bodies, moving from thin to dense and a line that lends each figure an individual character. One sees this powerfully in the solitary, abstracted, umbrella-less man striding in the street in *Rain Man*, a work that recalls Henri Cartier-Bresson’s (1908–2004) street photography. *Rain Man* is a timeless image of humanity alone; the rain exacerbates human loneliness. “I don’t like umbrellas.



Yang Qi, *Great Attention*, 2012, Chinese ink and mineral color on rice paper, 360 x 144 cm.

I like the feeling of the rain touching me,” says Yang Qi. “In this moment it is our essential emotion. It is a direct contact with nature.” The figures of *A Painter* and *Looking for Myself* both suggest the angst of Edvard Munch (1863–1944), while *John* reminds me of intense figurative art by Frank Auerbach (b.1931), and *Mrs Sisi* speaks to the deeply personal portraits by Egon Schiele (1890–1918). Without Yang Qi’s control of his Chinese ink the character of individual pieces would be much weaker.

Yang Qi deals with the world at large in an utterly human way by quietly embracing the individual at their most vulnerable. This is at the core of his portraits and a work such as *The Romantic Way* (2017) in which a dark solitary figure is halfway across a yellow road or causeway heading toward foreboding cityscape; the lonely, pencil-thin figure in *The Young Man and His Shadow* (2017) whose shadow seems to be holding him up within his minimalist background, for without his shadow he would fall down, disintegrate, and be swallowed by the dark, cold earth, and *Challenge* (2017), where a tiny man seems to be attacking a gigantic figure whose green-trousered legs and red shoes are all that is visible.

The Young Man and His Shadow and *The Romantic Way* suggest sad, banal scenes from plays by authors such as Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) and Eugène Ionesco (1908–1994) whose bleak worlds had a unique urgency running through them. *Challenge* reminds one of the ‘giant’ Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians in *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathan Swift (1667–1745). There is a rough humor here yet there is also something sinister behind both images, which I suggest derives from Yang Qi’s memories of the oppressiveness of the Cultural Revolution.

Through such images one gets a sense of Yang Qi’s quest for identity and survival, essential elements in his narrative. The question of identity runs deep in his *oeuvre*. His 2016 small series of idiosyncratic Chinese ink works, and others of the same time, are informed by the inherent abstraction of calligraphy. The blended cultures in these works suggest that the search for identity is a painful one, yet it is also something to toy with. As Yang Qi says: “Sometimes I play out my identity in my work and I try to translate it into my paintings and drawings, as in the small works *Looking for Myself* (2016) and *Thinking* (2016) where the figure—my thoughts—appears to be escaping from the back of the figure’s head.”

Many artists feel art-making is

about remaking the world, a place in which they are the major protagonists in different guises through which they will reveal all the world’s secrets. The dream consumes them and destroys their talents. Yang Qi does not possess such an ego as his voyage is one of self-discovery, one of spiritual revelation and release. “I discover myself when I work,” he says. “We discover ourselves continually. And we discover our own internal world.”

To emphasize this Yang Qi points to his 2006 solo show *In Between All Painting*. “The works were a discovery about something new in ourselves, not through the rational but rather the irrational. The rational for me is writing something down. I am not doing this in painting. I am free to let go and there is not the control that I have in writing.”

Yang Qi can let go easily enough and with an impish sense of humor that makes one smile with warm pleasure of humanity’s need for love and the erotic: this enlivens his narrative. He beckons us into his erotic world, which has a Zen-



Yang Qi, *Love in the Park*, 2013, Chinese ink and mineral color on rice paper, 360 x 144 cm.



Yang Qi, **Relation**, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 100 cm.



Yang Qi, **Glance**, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 100 cm.

like stillness at its core, one informed by a keen understanding of humanity.

Great Attention (2012) contains a simple narrative that reminds one of the great public-relations event of 73-year-old Mao Zedong (1893–1976) swimming in the Yangtse River with his bodyguards on July 16, 1966: there are no pictures of Mao entering or leaving the water, only images of him bobbing in the water. Yang Qi's *Great Attention* is full of dream and irony and tongue-in-cheek humor, but there is also an erotic element in the red buttocks rising slightly above the waves: the buttocks could, of course, be rocks, but one doubts it. *Love in the Park* (2013) is a surreal moment of passion observed by a cool bystander and a small cupid with his bow and arrow at the ready as he steadies himself on the back of a turtle. The ink and pastoral mineral colors Yang Qi uses in these paintings adds to the dream-like feeling to each scene and softens the sexual moments.

The most powerful of Yang Qi's erotic images is his large acrylic-on-canvas painting entitled *Relation* (2015). This work, of a giant, anonymous rust-red face with an open mouth, suggests a desire to consume the world and all the people arranged around it. One cannot escape the surreal nature of this work and the naked figures in sexual poses around the head. In a lighter erotic feel is the acrylic *Glance*

(2015) in which a plump, red, naked woman is stretched out, with her back to the viewer, looking into the mirror beside her. This intimate Fauve scene has a gentleness to it that turns all viewers into innocent voyeurs. Of this work, and what it represents, Yang Qi says, "When I paint, I do some things that I know about and other things I don't. *Glance*, I know about. It is of my imagination. I feel as if I am in another place."

There is a lovely spontaneity about Yang Qi's erotic and playful, sensual works. In other pieces there is formal quality as in his multilayered *Silk Road* (2014). For some artists there is careful and detailed preparation, but for others like Yang Qi preparation is more relaxed. As he says: "Normally when I paint on canvas, I do a sketch of the beginning of an idea. I might begin with the outline of people and then the head. Each subject has different starting points. The figure is the outline and in the abstract it is the layers of the work itself. There is both the general and the abstract in all my preparation."

An intriguing inclusion in *Yang Qi: A Profound Life* was a range of the artist's painted ceramics. In these works the imagery has common links with his paintings and drawings, especially his humor. There is also a graceful play of line and color that sits well within each plate. In some of the imagery there is an uneasy drama at the center of the tiny narratives.

The ceramics are not a central development in Yang Qi's art. "It is just a point in my art. It is the craft within my art," he says. "I use it to experiment and to play with new ideas. I use special colors for my ceramics as I try through painting them to give a new life to the medium."

As one looks across his art here, there are many artists whose works come to mind: but there are no dominating artistic relationships. Rather, the influence is more personal and not artistic. So it is no surprise when he says that the greatest influence "was my father. He was my life teacher—intellectually, emotional, and artistically." Such a relationship has helped Yang Qi to overcome the darkness in his life and to enjoy the pleasures and light that have come with making art. It has also helped Yang Qi to place his viewers at the center of his intriguing artistic narratives. Δ

Notes:

1. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are taken from meetings and interviews with the artist on December 6 and 7, 2017, in Hong Kong.
2. Quotation from the essay *Yang Qi – Simplicity* by Professor Dr. Phil Beate Reinfenscheid, in the catalogue for the exhibition *Yang Qi: A Profound Life*, published by Alisan Fine Arts, 2017, p.8.