

Beijing Calling: China Contemporary Art Vermilion Art Inaugural Exhibition

By Tianli Zu

The things of this world come from something
Something comes from nothing
Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*¹

At the beginning of 2015, I met Chinese-Australian doctor and public health physician, Ye qin Zuo. She was undertaking a master's degree in museum management at UNSW Art and Design.

Dr Zuo invited me to visit her newly purchased art space. Through our conversation, I discovered that she had more than a mere on-going interest in art: she had her own views on both classical and contemporary art. She talked passionately about her perspective on how to construct her gallery.

7 months later, I interviewed Vermilion Art founder and director Ye qin Zuo.

I asked Ye qin what her motive was in setting up an art gallery, having been a successful doctor. "Because everyone will benefit from good art", she replied. It makes perfect sense to me: public health is not only the territory of doctors, but also a phenomenon that concerns the whole of society. To improve the environment is reliant upon an individual's attitude towards the world. Art is an effective way to facilitate this.

Located in Walsh Bay, near The Rocks, surrounded by Sydney's historical sites, art museums and performing arts institutions, Vermilion Art is an independent commercial gallery that primarily focuses on contemporary Chinese art. It intends to build a visual language platform in order to bridge cultural understanding. In this way, Australians can experience contemporary China and its culture without travelling to China. Vermilion, a Chinese mythical bird, was originally portrayed in a poem, 'Black Gown Alley' by Tang Dynasty poet Liu Yuxi (772-842). It suggests perhaps that Chinese migrants use a nostalgic ancient chant to express their longing for and melancholy towards their motherland.

Dr Zuo applied a methodology well-known – evidence-based medical research – to her gallery management. The Vermilion team investigated all facets of management thoroughly, including marketing research, services and price evaluations. They visited artists' studios in Beijing to obtain first-hand information, such as their art making process, techniques and their conceptual ideas. After all this, Vermilion Art is opening its inaugural exhibition on Friday 30 October 2015.



Ye qin Zuo, founder and director, Vermilion Art

1 Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Red Pine (Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2009). Chapter 41.

Beijing Calling is a curated group exhibition showcasing 9 artists and 35 works. These artists mostly practice in Beijing. The exhibition comprises oil painting, acrylic, ceramic, digital imaging, photography and printmaking. Guest curator, renowned artist Guan Wei, has been invited to participate in the show with his ceramic *Back to the Origin Series* works. He co-curated along with Vermilion Art director and assisted with exhibition themes and selecting works.

Although the exhibiting artists come from different experiences and times, there are common threads within the differences. Each of them is an individual, yet together, they serve a collective means. The exhibition intentionally mixes different generations, professional and emerging artists. From a first glance, these contemporary works have no obvious region – they could be the product of anywhere in the world. However, if one experiences and contemplates the works, he or she will notice that each narrative reflects the “transformation of Chinese society. The disturbance made the works interesting.” Ye Qin further commented that the “artists embed their Chinese-ness in their vein”. They make marks, albeit subtle, on their works. Ye Qin also emphasised that the strong fine arts foundations of these artists make the exhibition unique. “*Beijing Calling* hopes to open a window for Australian audiences to understand Chinese contemporary living and humanity through contemporary art,” Ye Qin said.

‘Shaanxi Series I’ is a work from Ye Qin’s early personal collection. Photographer Zhang Xiao’s hometown Shaanxi is adjacent to Ye Qin’s home, Shanxi. Collectively, the places are the birthplace of China’s Yellow River culture. Zhang captures candid glimpses of people’s gestures and facial expressions. The subjects in his photo have just finished a performance; they are in ordinary civilian clothes while painted with theatrical makeup. A heavily polluted village scene is depicted in the background. Zhang exclaimed: “These people are dream-like to me. I quietly take their pictures, because I do not want to disturb their dreams...”. Ye Qin chooses art on the basis of instinct; that is, the art has to move people, and audience must feel that they can respond to it. Such a scene could be seen in villages and remote rural areas at the time Ye Qin left China. However, the authentic play is now a rare occurrence. As a consequence of fast industrial development, Chinese traditions such as folk art, drama and theatre face the threat of extinction.

Directly taught and influenced by the German Expressionists, Li Di’s bold paint strokes not only demonstrate his mastery of Western painting techniques, but also resonates with Chinese ink painting and calligraphy. Multimedia artist Li Tianyuan’s ‘My Cell’ comments on the phenomenon: the Beijing haze. His use of high-tech photographic processes is innovative. Early performance artist Cang Xin (Manchu) participated in the 2002 Sydney Biennale. In this show, his surrealist abstract paintings express his contemplation of the unconsciousness and nothingness.

By pushing the boundaries to explore concepts, techniques and new media, printmaker Peng Yong’s paper plates etching series, ‘Blues’, and filmmaker Emer Yang’s colour inkjet work ‘Red Portrait’ will attract the attention of audiences immediately. Female artist Wang Yunyun is a graduate from the Central Academy of Fine Arts (Beijing) and demonstrates new ways of painting with Chinese ink. For these artists, it is their first time exhibiting in Sydney.

Han Qing came and joined our conversation at the end of the interview. In order to assist him to paint without distraction, Ye Qin provided him with a studio space at her home. Qing completed the ‘Night Trip’ series during this three-month residency. I asked him whether he feels different making work in Sydney and Beijing. “No, the same,” he replied without hesitation. “Although I painted Beijing Chang’an Avenue, it can be anywhere in the world.” He said, “This series are a psychological narrative. In our modern society, we are familiar, but strangers to each other. People sit in the car, invisible, but they exist! And they are eager to talk to each other, even through car lights.” After time away from the bustling metropolis that is Beijing, Qing revealed unconsciously a stereotypical characteristic of a Chinese intellectual: melancholy.

Beijing Calling

Vermilion Art

30 October – 12 December 2015

Gallery Hours: 11am to 7pm Tuesday to Saturday

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