

China talks

Clouds as Waves, Petals as Rain, an exhibition of contemporary Chinese calligraphy, painting and prints at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) represents the first phase of a developing exchange program between faculty members from York Fine Arts and faculty from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, People's Republic of China. The Zhejiang Academy is located in the city of Hangzhou, the scenic beauty of which has made it the centre of Chinese art for over 1000 years. The work exhibited in the AGYU was all created specifically for this exhibit. Excalibur's Janice Goldberg, with the aid of interpreter Li Paper and Gary Blakely, spoke with the three Zhejiang faculty members visiting York: Shansi Quan, Dean of the Academy; Kanghua Lin, Head of the Printmaking (Graphics) Department; and Yinren Zhu, instructor of calligraphy and bird and flower painting. Of the three, only Zhu's work is featured in the exhibit.



From Hangzhou to Toronto, these men are crossing not only geographic borders but culture and art as well. Their enthusiasm is reflected in *Clouds as Waves, Petals as Rain* at AGYU. From l. to r.: Yinren Zhu, Shansi Quan and Kanghua Lin.

By JANICE GOLDBERG

Q. How did you find out about the York Fine Arts Program?

A. (Quan) I've known about York University for a long time but I have never had the opportunity to come and visit. Professor Jordan Paper visited us a couple of years ago, and it was from him that I found out that you have a Faculty of Arts as well as a Faculty of Fine Arts. Our school is an institute of Fine Arts so I thought the idea of an exchange program would be good opportunity.

Q. We're all very excited about the arrival of your faculty's work. What are the attitudes of students and faculty at the Zhejiang Academy with respect to the upcoming arrival of work by York Visual Arts Faculty?

A. (Quan) I look forward to having not only faculty work exhibited but also student work. We do not know too much about Canadian Art and this will provide us with an opportunity to learn about it. School exchange exhibitions are the best opportunity to start a cultural exchange.

Q. Has there been a change in regard to the Chinese art world's interest in Western art over the last 15 years?

A. (Quan) Yes, attitudes have changed. There is a change in the government policy. Right now the government is opening up to other countries. Its policy is to give more freedom to the individual schools and institutions. They will have complete freedom to administer their business but under one condition: that whatever they do has to be for the purpose of serving the people, the general population.

Q. What is the role of art in China right now and the role of the artist?

express my personal character, my own ways of thinking, but also I take into consideration my audience's understanding of my painting. In this way I think my heart and the heart of my audiences will be one and I believe I am serving the people.

(Lin) Although the three of us have different specialties, we work under the same premise; to transmit beauty to the audience and I think in this way we serve the people and the society. I'll give you an example. In our states you have different schools of thought which are beneficial because those different opinions will help to build the country. We take that as our lesson now and we hope that the government gives freedom to the artist.

Q. Right now you have your traditional art courses, but how much emphasis is put on non-traditional forms or experimental works?

A. (Quan) Based on traditional ways we create a new way.

Q. So, how much is Western thought and art influencing contemporary Chinese art?

A. (Lin) China has a long history but we do not know too much about what is currently going on outside China, especially in regard to Western art. Referring back to your first question of what motivated us, we are using this opportunity to learn about the modern, contemporary Western art situation. We wanted to come here and learn. Recently we have made more contact with Western world nations such as France and America. This is very good for us because we really learn a lot from the West.

(Quan) In regard to art there are two problems here. One problem is that because we are traditionalist, conservative as artists, we refuse to accept anything outside of China. But this is not the case, because we are always willing to learn from new experiences. Another problem is that our Western friends advise and warn us against forgetting our traditions when learning Western ways. We are acutely aware of this problem as well—we do not want to completely absorb Western ideas and then forget about Chinese tradition. That is one of the reasons the three of us are here right now. We want to find out about Western ways and then somehow create something that is still Chinese.



Spring Morning on Su Causeway by Lu Fang

(Zhu) That is why during the during revolution, even though I was attacked I still insisted on painting my birds and flowers. I feel that during the Cultural Revolution the Gang of Four were not really anti-art. They had political reasons for their control of art, but they were not



Squirrels by Zhu Zinren

anti-art per se. I knew in my heart that the situation would be changed in the future. I followed my instincts and created my own art.

Q. Was the function of art during the cultural revolution still to serve the people but according to the ruling ideology?

A. (Quan) The government decided exactly what would serve the people whereas now the decision is up to the individual artist.

Q. Most of the art on display depicts pastoral, rural settings of traditional Chinese life, but the academy is in a large industrial city. How does this work relate to the everyday experiences of the people?

A. (Lin) The city of Hangzhou is industrialized, but it is also practically covered with gardens. So not only do we have industry, which is raising the standard of living, we also have beautiful scenery. Compared to other cities in China there is a minimal amount of industrialization in Hangzhou. We are located on the scenic West Lake; as well there is an agricultural industry. Most of the paintings in the exhibition reflect the major scenes of the area.

Q. For most people in China then there is a deep appreciation for the beauty of nature?


A. (Quan) Yes, the Chinese people love things that are natural as opposed to artificial.

Q. What is your Academy's particular philosophy regarding art education?

A. (Quan) We provide not only the practical aspects of art making but also the theory. A student specializing in one particular area has to take courses in Marxism as well as aesthetics. Our students must learn both Marxist and non-Marxist theories of art in addition to both Chinese and Western art history.

(Lin) We are training our students to help build the country with confidence. So, our young students must have the spirit of self-sacrifice.

We would like to say hello to all the students and faculty of York. As well we would like to thank all the people involved in the organization of the exhibition.



**CLOUDS AS WAVES
PETALS AS RAIN**
contemporary Chinese calligraphy,
painting and prints

Featuring 17 Faculty artists
from the Zhejiang Academy
in Hangzhou, P.R.C.

OPENS NOV. 22
UNTIL DEC. 20

Art Gallery of York University, Ross Building, N145
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