

(ASPIRING TO) THE GREAT WIDE OPEN

NOTES FROM CHINA

by Liz Coats

PART 1: YANG GANG

In 1998 I had the opportunity to work for four months at the Beijing Art Academy in China on an Asialink-sponsored residency. The painter Yang Gang chose to be my tutor during the residency and his studio was near mine. We had no language in common, but as time passed there was some empathy between us around the work we were both separately doing.

The Beijing Art Academy was established in the 1950s to support prominent Chinese painters in their full-time studio practice and, from the Government's point of view, to protect and influence continuity in Chinese culture. The artists have a studio and apartment in the compound and a pension for life. While the Academy supports professional artists, scholarship students from all over China are given tuition in traditional painting methods on a one-to-one basis.

During the Cultural Revolution period, successful Academy artists were making idealised figure paintings on paper of politicians, workers and soldiers. Now many of these artists are experimenting with techniques and subject matter with ink, acrylic and oil painting and made quite plain to me on meeting that they were able to express their inner feelings through their art. I noticed fresh images of naked women in swirling colour and galloping horses with exaggerated extremities on studio walls.

In the 1990s Academy artists are often perceived by the larger community of artists and particularly younger artists who have had contact with other cultures, as conservative and unresponsive to contemporary events.

My tutor, Yang Gang, was deeply affected by an experience of living and working with nomadic people in Inner Mongolia during the political upheavals of the 1970s, when his initial painting studies were interrupted by the Cultural Revolution. The notebooks of sketches he made at that time are now a source for many of his paintings and he calls himself a 'Grasslands' artist. He also experiments with 'western' influences in paintings on paper and oils on canvas, but with his own bold independence.

Talking about his approach he has said:

'I was brought up in my motherland, yet I am now a member of our modern society. I therefore see the



future as a combination of the traditional and the contemporary. If everyone paints from within themselves, this will be achieved.' (*The long and winding road: paintings by Yang Gang*, catalogue published by Zee Stone Gallery, Hong Kong, 1996)

While he is resistant to interference, his work spoke with an open and generous intent. He was sharply observant without being obvious, always keeping a sketchbook or camera at hand away from the studio. His directness in communication showed naturally in the sketches and during painting activity and this was also a logical way for us to communicate.

Yang Gang has written that, while the literary and technical accomplishments of Chinese literati painting have prospered since the Song dynasty, he prefers the realistic confidence of Qin, Han and Tang dynasty painting. He tries to assimilate the archaic and naturalistic rhythms of these earlier periods to achieve an 'archaic but new' quality of 'modern realism' in Chinese painting. ('Message from the painter', Yang Gang, 1990 in *The works of Yang Gang*, Tai Yip Company, Hong Kong, 1990.)

Making paintings and drawings of people in everyday life with subtle attention to character necessitates a technical facility without loss of empathy in self-conscious embellishment. In this genre Yang Gang does not need history references or stylistic additions to convey what he means, knowing that a good painting has to have internal coherence which is more than literal. At the same time, traditional materials are entirely adequate. The 'archaic' reference equates with observations in real time and image construction that does not preclude the rough edges and gaps that are often a result of immediate responses.

ABOVE: YANG GANG, *IN THE DISTANCE*, 68 X 137 CM
PHOTO COURTESY ZEE STONE GALLERY, HONG KONG

One way Yang Gang avoided contrived marks was to lay down two or three large sheets of paper on top of each other on the concrete floor. Bleeding through, ink marks on each layer captured a different quality and character from the threads of movement above. Often the top sheet would be thrown away, while impressions underneath were modified with direct additions to sharpen and clarify detail. In addition, I saw evidence of images on paper being turned back to front and reworked to retain the suggestive marks that enliven these impressions; always with a disciplined footing in underlying structure.

The 'natural' materials of ink, paper and brushes are still considered by Yang Gang to be the most reliable and long-lasting and while relatively uncomplicated, their effects can be extremely subtle. Outcomes are never fully under control, so that at best there is an on-going balance between uncertainty, prediction and a desire to make positive and assertive statements.

Reflecting on the extent and subtlety of expression developed in Chinese ink painting method through management of these simple materials, the link for me as an artist is with liquidity. The brushes are constructed to hold liquid in reserve, so that ink flows with degrees of control. I watched Yang Gang hold brushes in a way that followed the angle of his arm in a firmly directed fashion. I also played ten-pin bowls with him and other artists and realised then just how well he followed through the momentum in body/arm co-ordination.

Yang Gang often worked on the floor, carefully positioning a sheet of paper so that his body movements in the cramped space of the studio followed the intended momentum of the image. I watched him make a densely-minimal and almost calligraphic painting of Mongolian herdsmen rounding up horses. I saw how intangible elements in light could be made visible in the shifting configurations of black ink and water bleeding into light-toned, absorbent paper. What you saw were images within images, coming close to natural chaos at one minute, then re-forming into composite forms with a few more carefully placed marks. These paintings can be added to but can't be corrected. Tough and delicate: there is a beginning, a middle and an end to it. Lively images, essentialised out of complex forms need transparency; an unbalanced brush-load and the whole thing would end up in a pile of crumpled paper in the corner.

On another occasion, from an upside-down position to the image, I watched a painting of rocky cliffs growing across two large sheets of paper. Yang Gang moved around the image in his socks, mapping out the major compositional weights and shapes. Relationships kept changing as he balanced and re-balanced tonal contrasts and modulations in dilute and partial overlays, as if climbing and gazing on cliffs that might become real again. Where and how many additions were made to a particular area seemed to be qualified by the pattern of body movements across the paper as well as through visual assessment. Because the workspace was so contained, he appeared to be relying on experience and prediction for the building of shapes until the whole could be pinned up for viewing.



There was a sense of contained drama for the duration of a sessions, through to the addition of seal, signature and date. The gathering and slow release it takes to make strong and vigorous paintings like these, demands an ability to hold concentration, both mentally and actively. The brushmarks were all abstract in one sense: many fragments leading to essentially figurative outcomes, while observation and method held to balance and adjustment at every moment. Restraint is also a condition and necessity of working with the simple delicacy of this medium, while the nature of the activity alludes to the grace of qualities ungraspable.

I was told Yang Gang is a simple man, but my observation encouraged a different view. He reflected for me a resistance to self-consciousness which could also set up a challenge on approaching him. Responses were direct rather than contrived, which didn't always suit the demands of the occasion. It is a way of life that can leave one lonely or incomprehensible to many people. Concentration is slow to access and needs to be sustained, where one finds points of view at a tangent to conventional ways of seeing.

Experiencing the differences and correspondences between ink and oil painting methods,

Yang Gang has acquired further insights into image formation. He showed a selection of ink on paper and oil paintings at Creation Gallery in Beijing in June 1998. Many of these paintings were experimental portraits with psychological intent and he called the exhibition, *My island of resurrection*. In his exhibition statement he wrote:

'Face' is a cultural symbol. It was well known in ancient times. For instance, the ancient bronze totem, taotie (a mystical, ferocious animal); nuo (exorcise); and different kinds of masks including all types of facial make-up in Beijing Opera. These faces are the beast face, the wry face and the god face of the creators. All the faces have been created out of fear, admiration, search, chase or maybe humour. So, the face totem symbol appeared in my artwork. In the beginning I drew faces without any deep meaning, later I drew more and more carefully. Finally my drawing achieved a deep emotional meaning.

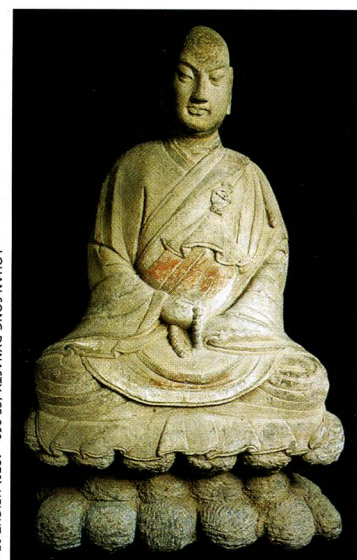
Yang Gang's sensitivity to flexible ways of seeing was a great encouragement to me. In my opinion an artist needs to consider issues of connectivity and relations between 'me and you' again and again and without retreat in verbal definition or acceptance of ready-made conclusions.

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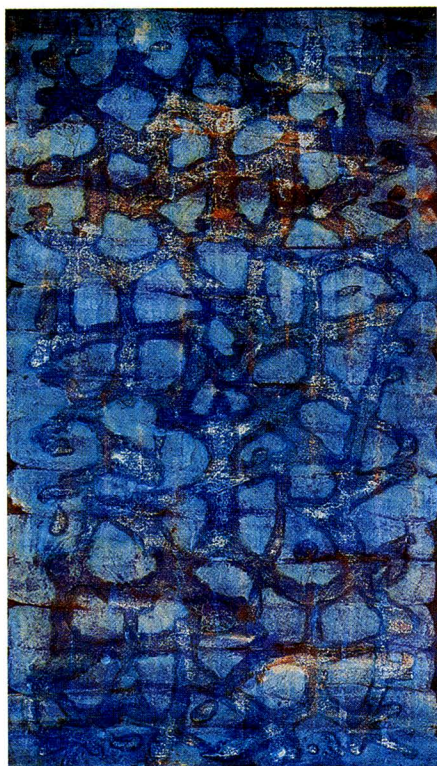
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LOHAN SONG DYNASTY (CE 960 - 1279) HEIGHT 97CM

PHOTOGRAPHY - MARIAN ARBON



LEFT: DETAIL. LIZ COATS NET #1 1998; INK, GESSO PIGMENTS ON CHINESE PAPER 95 X 55 CM

becoming animate. I have also described this as playing with formality and coincidence. I explained in a talk to students at the Beijing Art Academy that, while I don't have the drawing skills of a Chinese artist, I do, however, look for the pivot and the balance in things through other means, like working from the inside out. So the surface – the skin – becomes the result of what happens underneath.

I now consciously work from the underside to make an image. I call it building structures. As those structures grow and connect, a cohesive image may emerge. I do not start with a complete image, a picture that I can see, but an interest in the way things become alive; how shapes and lines can connect with transparent colours to make a painting come alive.

Originally I had no intention of developing a full body of work in Beijing in such a short period of four months. I hoped that by being responsive to daily events and leaving myself open to chance, I might meet in an uncontrived fashion with something of the flavour of that environment. I was not prepared to be an obedient student, attempting to gain a facility with ink and brush painting in the Chinese manner, so I worked at a tangent, seeking an empathy with local materials and some of my own ingredients.

I decided it would be sensible to work on paper and it was natural to work with water as this is the most characteristic element of traditional Chinese painting. I was impressed by the sensitivity and strength of Chinese papers, and naturally did not want to override this. After six weeks' experimenting with various media, a result was there quite clearly and I was pleased when Yang Gang came into the studio with his thumbs up. I had chosen a geometric format from a lattice window in a Chinese private garden compound, empathising immediately with that over and under, hexagonal conformation and the purpose of this structure as a divider and mixer of light in between.

I watched the pigments brought from Australia and black Chinese ink spread through the gessoed paper. By brushing aqueous colour stains onto the back of a painting, bleeds, cracks and hard edges of colour showed against and through an applied resist drying into stable forms. These lattice geometries, embedded in the gesso ground, were inherently formal, yet visually highly active on the top side.

Through the agency of liquid colours and ink and against an invariant lattice, the images morphed into an open mesh of figures: dancing, leaping, bridging, diving. Each painting had its own character, while bound by structural likeness to the others; a formal yet suggestive flow and resist. I value this quality highly – it speaks to me of the inherent flexibility in geometry.

I had been reading a Chinese anthology of poetry, the *Book of Songs*, where I first encountered reference to star constellations connecting with social conditions on earth. In the first week in Beijing I was reading a two thousand year old poem referring to times when the Sieve stars open wide their mouths, words can be deceptive and some individuals are obliged to leave the centres of power. The 'Sieve' stars can also be translated as the 'Winnowing Fan' – a bamboo basket which women sift to separate husks from the grain. Somehow this naming of a group of stars, 'The Sieve' touched me. Again, I found reference to a group of 'Net' stars, which catch wild beasts or fish, but can also protect. These concepts still have an everyday life in China after thousands of years.

On a walking trip in the mountains with Academy artists, I noticed a tiny mesh shape hanging in a tree. An artist beckoned me not to touch it. Back at the studio, she gave me a miniature domestic tea strainer. This was a similar, home-made wire and cotton-net utensil, but I also understood the former had a more private meaning. Somehow that tea strainer hanging in the peach tree was taboo to anyone but the catcher and any invisible presence attracted to it.

I discovered that much of the old Imperial architecture in Beijing and elsewhere was informed by linkages between heaven and earth, if you like. That the emperor was conceived as a conductor and transformer of the energies which keep our world upright and alive by the currents that passed through him. The Tiantan (Temple of Heaven) compound contains circular temples with crenellated, umbrella-like blue roofs. Their beautiful shape also describes a traditional, circular fishing-net with drawstring at the centre to pull tight.

For me, understanding the subject of the work comes from within and without the work, and continues to grow after it is finished. 🍵

Liz Coats is a painter researching geometric structures and dimensional colour. She lives in Australia.

In my short time in China, I found that in everyday living connective meaning has deep significance in an environment where acute social and political contradictions are held within living memory. Where for individuals there can be an experience of real danger. Where knowledge of the closeness of death is so apparent and political contexts are so compromised. In such places there is a powerful vitality and recognition of likeness across cultural boundaries is possible, transcending nationality.

PART 2: THE SIEVE, NETS AND EVERYTHING

In the catalogue statement for my exhibition of paintings, *The sieve, nets and everything* at Creation Gallery in Beijing in June 1998, I responded to cross-cultural meetings as follows:

'I understand for artists, making room for our ancestors to speak to us through the work, does not necessarily mean our own family, because we all belong to a larger framework. I think you learn a lot by observing natural phenomena everywhere, for instance in nature, where living patterns are not disturbed. You can apply this knowledge to painting. This is really a very simple idea. So that style is not an issue and you do not need to work hard to challenge tradition; you are already in the tradition of 'seeing'. You have to keep working, not only because you want to keep learning, but because you should not let go of the net that you are creating.'

My area of concern in painting is an objectified/reconfigured space in-between, which I pose as structures of geometry