

CHINESE CONTEMPORARY REALISM

OIL PAINTING

In 2004, Beijing Realism Oil Painting was initiated and established by three Chinese artists. With the development of this school, these artists changed its former name to Chinese Realism Oil Painting, published their realist Declaration and decided to organize a yearly works exhibition since 2005. Until now, they have successfully organized nine exhibitions. Their realist works were warmly received by the public. Being somewhat exotic, oil painting not only occupies an important position in the genre of the West but is also flourishing in China. The establishment of the Chinese Realism Oil Painting marks a new development in realist oil painting in the 21st century in China.¹⁾

Although the major medium of Western painting and with oils being used in painting in China for more than two hundred years, the Chinese have only really become seriously involved in oil painting since the 20th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, a group of students who were interested in developing Western painting introduced Western classical realist painting skills to China. By founding the Academy of Fine Arts, they have trained many oil painting professionals. The school of Realism in oil painting took its name after Courbet organized an exhibition called “realism exhibition” alone in a house near the world famous paintings exhibition in Paris and published the “Realism Declaration” in 1855 to take the responsibility to objectively describe real life and reveal the darker side of society. Realist oil paintings became dominant in literary and artistic creation in Europe. Since the founding of New China, due to the country’s strong leadership, Chinese artists employed the realism method to create a variety of works loved by Chinese people. These works

¹⁾ Featured set (2007); Chinese Realism (2008).

recorded the revolution, history, war and real life. Oil painting spread rapidly and became a powerful weapon in the construction period of New China to propagate national politics, ideology and culture. Particularly since China's reform and opening up, it can be seen that artists and visitors have paid close attention to oil painting at art exhibitions around the country. Oil painting not only had the same influence as Chinese traditional ink painting but also had a tendency to go beyond it. Therefore we can say that as an exotic medium, the fact that oil painting rooted, germinated and bloomed in the land of China is one of the most significant phenomenon in Chinese art in the 20th century. Since the 1980s, with the reform and opening up of Chinese society, all kinds of Western art genres have flocked into China, realist painting having made a huge impact in this diverse cultural pattern. Although it no longer occupies a dominant position, realist oil painting coexists alongside a diverse spectrum of painting and seems set to grow and develop among the competition. In 2004, Beijing Realism Oil Painting was initiated and established by three Chinese artists living in Beijing. In 2005, they accepted artists from Shanghai, Guangzhou and other areas outside of Beijing to come along and join and changed its former name to Chinese Realism Oil Painting, after which the team of oil painters has expanded. They published a declaration and decided to have one exhibition each year to show their personal creations as a group. By now, they have successfully organized nine exhibitions. The number of artist is increasing, which has gained the public's close attention. The establishment of Chinese Realism Oil Painting marks a new development in realist oil painting in the 21st century in China.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CHINESE REALISM OIL PAINTING

In the spring of 2004, Ai Xuan, Yang Feiyun and Wang Yidong initiated and established Beijing Realism Oil Painting. On October 11, they organized their first art exhibition at the National Art Museum of China; the exhibition lasted for one week. A total of 13 artists participated in the exhibition: Ai Xuan, Yang Feiyun, Wang Yidong, Liu Kongxi, Long Liyou, Ligui Jun, Wong Wei, Xia Xing Yuan Zhengyang, Zhang Li, Zheng Yi, Zhang Yibo, Zhu Chunlin. All the exhibited works were created in a realistic style and, crafted over a period of several months, these works showcased their superb realist skills and artistic standard, representing the highest level of China's realism oil painting. Although each of them has their own style, these thirteen artists share the same artistic ideas, that

is to advocate a rational spirit, adhering to the “source” language of oil painting, insisting on traditional culture, promoting human civilization through their unique works, as they stated in the Declaration of the Establishment:

With every novelty art form constantly emerging, fashion has become an important language in contemporary life; When tradition is neglected and forgotten, when today people prefer a more immediate or indulgent approach towards life and art, there is still a group of people who have adhered to their own ideals for many years, using their preferred medium of realist painting to express their own poetic feelings. Their input to the production process and insistence on the perfection of their works are almost harsh, their pursuit of a rational spirit and cultural tradition being persistent in the extreme.

This is a collective with the same aspiration – Chinese Realist Oil Painting. We love realistic painting and firmly believe that this approach has lasting value and vitality. We continually improve our artistic language, promote each other and create a high standard of Chinese contemporary realist oil painting.

We respect traditional culture with an emphasis on the humanities and rational spirit, and firmly believe: no tradition, no civilization!

We advocate a serious attitude and rigorous artistic methods of expression, with an honest approach to life and art, an advocacy of boutique culture and a pursuit of perfect expression!

We never agree with the mediocre, random and irresponsible attitude shown in modern cultural life which we believe to be dismissively shallow, vulgar and anti-civilization! We look forward to promoting culture and civilization of society as a whole.

When concerned about the emotional life of mankind, advocating the real and natural with a collective to pursue the spiritual and ideal, artistic works can be paeans to human civilization.²⁾

In 2005, Chen Yifei, and others joined them and suggested changing the former name Beijing Realism Oil Painting to China Realism Oil Painting. In March 2005, Beijing Realism Oil Painting accepted Chen Yifei’s recommendation and officially named this school China Realism Oil Painting, with membership also

²⁾ http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=N3suMi-39HJ3URBvd_R4uOtsTiNGQZu15vzmdqM-0VNRGhYnf86THnHzmTiWRT2fsg9U01z8fCTBmDH-YYlcGHq.

expanding from the original 13 to 30. Newcomers were: Chen Yanning, Xu Mangyao, He Duoling, Shang Ding, Guo Runwen, Wang Hongjian, Chao Ge, Li Shijin, Wang Yuqi, Xu Weixin, Xin Dongwang, Pang Maokun, Leng Jun, Yin Xiong, Shi Liang, Wang Shaolun and Zhang Yibo.

THE REPRESENTATIVES OF CHINESE REALISM OIL PAINTING AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THEIR ARTWORK

As the promoters of Chinese Realism Oil Painting, Ai Xuan, Yang Feiyun and Wang Yidong can be described as the leaders of this painting school. They not only played a positive role in the process of the establishment and development of this painting genre, but have also contributed real personality and character in terms of promoting and exploring the language of contemporary realist painting, in the style of performance, in content, in the creative field as well as in theoretical research. Just as Ai Xuan depicted solitude and calm in his works, Yang Feiyun showed simplicity and quiet; Wang Yidong's focused on weight and beauty while Liu Kongxi celebrated harmony and purity and Long Liyou concentrated on showing vast expanse in his artwork. These powerful artists in the field of oil painting have been persistent in pursuing their own perfection on the road of realist painting; although everyone's style is different, their individual differences are a reflection of their explorations.

Ai Xuan³⁾ was born in 1947 in Jinhua Zhejiang into an artistic family; his father Ai Qing is a famous poet and his mother a novelist and he made his first contact with art when he was a little boy. He was admitted to the high school of Fine Arts of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1963 where he received formal art training. He graduated from his high school in 1967. The Cultural Revolution interrupted the continuation of his studies after graduation and he was forced to work on a military farm for four years. Her parents divorced; his father was classified as a "rightist", the scourge of the "Cultural Revolution" plus the family's misfortune left a shadow in his young mind. All these external circumstances brought him trauma, so when he looked at this world, it was always tinged with some slight melancholy and desolation, we can see this from the solitude and resignation present in his works. When Ai Xuan was at high school, he accepted professional training by the Soviet Pavel Petrovich Chistyakov (Павел Петрович Чистяков, 1832–1919) and later in the army

³⁾ Ai (2010).

he was influenced by a style represented by the painter He Kongde: that is, to emphasize gray as contrast and use square lines to shape the body. In the early 1980s, the American painter Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009) was introduced to China. Ai Xuan integrated Wyeth's drawing skills with his own and gradually forged his own style.

In most of his works, Ai Xuan described the desolate and remote area of Tibet. With the wilderness of the Tibetan Plateau, he used the brush to express the loneliness of the character's inner world, lyrically and poetically at one with the awesome natural mystery in order to capture a real life moment, revealing the tranquility and sadness of the character portrayed in his works. Even the title of the work was also desolate, as *The Song of Strange From Far Away* (Fig. 1), *Sadly Beautiful Sound of Wind* (Fig. 2), *Falling Snow at the Edge of Dream*, *Perhaps the sky is also blue*, etc., these titles are just like poems, appropriately conveying what the picture aims to express. However, we can not tell whether it is the voice of the artist or of his characters that is being expressed.

Ai Xuan said in an interview: "What I draw is a feeling of life, influenced by Yuan Dynasty painter Ni Yunlin. The so-called solitary and ethereal, that is to think deeply about life: when I see Tibetans I always have this kind of feeling, that people are small and vulnerable, pessimistically reincarnated over and over again, a pretty 7 or 8 year-old girl soon to be weathered and twisted into old-age, then another one. You can that feel the cold horizon is always a natural ruler that subdues people lamentably under its yoke".⁴⁾ In many of Ai Xuan's works, a Tibetan girl is depicted, quietly standing or sitting or relying on something or lying in the desolation and silence of the snow-covered plateau, staring or thinking or listening or expecting or waiting for the unknown world, her clear eyes revealing some frustration, some fear, some unease. In *lonely Wasteland*, *Winter Solitude*, *The Song of the Strange from Far Away*, *The Child from Wolf Valley*, *Breeze Teases the Hair*, *Snow Melting March*, there is only one Tibetan girl in the picture, in the center of the canvas, only her upper body showing against a simple background sometimes of snow, sometimes of the grassy plateau. The cold blue and yellow on her woolen clothing and the white of snow in the background along with the yellow of the grass in the plateau constitute a harmonious and peaceful picture. The little girl staring directly at you with her widened eyes revealing her simple suffering, desolation and loneliness cannot fail to touch your soul and provoke you to think. The eye contact between the characters in the picture and the viewer is more like a deep spiritual collision.

⁴⁾ Liu & Zhang (2000: 69).

The artist not only wants to convey his attention to the natural environment and the survival of the state by the characters in the painting but also express his understanding of the universe and the fate of mankind. The shock to the audience from Ai Xuan's work comes from his sincere belief in the deeply-felt spirit of human care for one another. His profound and superb skills in realist, the timeless and beautiful poetry, elegant language of painting, the finest techniques of expression, the solitude and quiet sentimental feelings have won the affection of art collectors for his works and subsequently they command a high price at auction.

Alongside Ai Xuan's quiet and solitude of cold colors, there is another realism artist named Wang Yidong. Born in 1955 in Shandong Linyi, he enjoyed the beauty of his hometown during his childhood; his happy summer vacation time was accompanied by every creek, every path, every wood near his home, so he has a deep attachment to the beautiful mountains and rustic folk of his hometown. He has loved art since his childhood and with a good score was admitted to the Shandong Institute of Arts in 1972 and so began his systematic studies. In 1975, he graduated from this school and became a teacher there. In 1978, the Central Academy of Fine Arts restarted admissions and he created an old stone-carved image of a man which stood out among two thousand five hundred candidates to be successfully accepted by the Oil Painting Department of Central Academy of Fine Arts. Through his hard working and consistent creative output he had a more profound understanding of oil painting. After graduation in 1982, he stayed on to become a teacher at Central Academy of Fine Arts.

Wang Yidong's works have distinctive geographical features, strong colors, a strong sense of form, a folk flavor. Born in the Yimeng mountain region, Wang Yidong has a deep affection for the land which raised him and the industrious rustic folk who live there; therefore, the eternal theme of his paintings are depictions of his hometown with beautiful mountains and rivers as well as the honest locals. *The Old village, Have a Rest in the Morning, Go to the Marek, The Mother and the Daught, Wang Yuzhen* are his works which described the life of Yimeng mountain farmers. In these works, Wang Yidong applied realism, simple distinctive artistic expression and an exquisitely strict painting language to show a fresh and simple image of mountain farm life to the art world by portraying the fate of local characters. In addition to the subject matter of geographical features, Wang Yidong also expresses his personality in the application of color. The traditional "Red" is glorified in his works. In *Dating with the spring* (Fig. 3), the painter depicted a braided girl who is dressed in a traditional red cotton jacket and red trousers sitting on a trunk, wearing a red hairband and plaid

scarf over her chest, plus one pair of black cloth shoes that perfectly depict the festive atmosphere in the picture. The white snow in the background, the clear sky and the black winter tree trunks, simply and cleanly blend the whole picture into a black, white and red combination. The innocence of the girl is revealed in her eyes: this athletic, generous, lovely girl of Shandong literally leaps off the paper, inviting the public to admire the painter's subtle observation of life and his ability to control color. Wang Yidong's creation of *Playing in Bridal Chamber – auspicious smoke* (Fig. 4) describes a northern rural wedding as a theme, with the bride wearing a red coat and holding a red candle in her hand to light smoke for the young men who came to celebrate their wedding on that night, the bride's shyness and tension fully reflected through her cautious eyes and her nervous hands. The groom is holding a white bowl as a toast for everyone. A dozen young men gaze at the bride, waiting for her to light their cigarettes. This work fully reflects northern customs with a powerful Yimeng mountain ambience.

After studying Western classical oil painting, Wang Yidong was able to add distinctive Chinese characteristics into his pictures. He also found his own unique expression and painting discourse in creativity, concisely summarizing Chinese folk painting with its bright colors, simple and generous shapes. Other styles are also evident in his works, particularly the oriental charm which stood out among domestic and international realists and made a great contribution to the development of local Chinese oil painting.

Yang Feiyun⁵⁾ is an artist who is great at live model and portrait painting in the realist school of painting. He was born in 1954 in the suburb of Baotou City, Inner Mongolia, China. His parents worked at a local middle school. He loved drawing when he was very young and often copied old picture albums which had been bought by his father. In 1974, he met several teachers who worked at the Inner Mongolia Normal School and graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts. He gleaned some basic knowledge of the fine arts from them. In 1978, he was admitted to the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Here in one of the country's most prestigious universities of art, he spent a great deal of time in reflection and tried his best to absorb the nutrition of art everyday. He eagerly made up for the shortcomings in his work to create a solid drawing foundation by constant practice on drawings and sketches, a persistence which pushed his drawing techniques forward leaps and bounds.

⁵⁾ Yang (2009).

His four-year college stint laid a solid foundation for his creativity both practically and theoretically. In 1982, he graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Due to his outstanding results, he was allocated work at the Central Academy of Drama and then went back to teach at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1984. Since then, he has dedicated himself to studying the works of the classical masters. He combined the basics of the classical style with his own feelings to produce works such as *Little actor*, *Xiao Yao* which boast complex compositions, accurate images, rigorous modeling, elegant color, exquisite technique, his skill being reflected in every corner of his works. So his output reached new heights in the artistic exploration of Chinese oil painting.

In 1989, Yang Feiyun traveled to the United States and also visited the major art museums and galleries of France, Italy and UK. The classical masters' painting boutique made a profound impression on him in terms of the sincere emotion and courage in the face of life shown by the works of the Post-Impressionist artists. After returning to China, his works not only focused on the accurate modeling of the painted characters but also matured in the description of their emotions and lives. Until that time, Yang Feiyun's classical realist style in depicting the characters' spiritual world and inner feelings had been inherited and learned from the masters of ancient and modern painting.

Yang Feiyun's works emphasize balance, celebrating love and life through his solid foundation in realism and the perfect harmony of color. Rather than painting beautiful models, he is more willing to draw his people familiar to him which lends his work a more intimate quality. He often uses his wife as his model in works such as *Northern girl*, *The Song Recalls Memory*, *The Girl with the Toy*, *Sudden*, *Thinking about Return*, *Three Friends* (Fig. 5), *Beautiful Red* etc. The lady in his paintings either stands or sits, sometimes smiling, sometimes thinking, sometimes calm, sometimes waiting, her glance or breath of sadness fully illustrated as soft, quiet and sensual. We can see the artist's careful observation of women and his appreciation of the beautiful moments of women in our lives; it actually constitutes a superbly deep perception and understanding of the female collective, so we cannot but admire his powers of observation and perception.

To the artist Chen Yifei⁶⁾ who joined the Chinese Realism Oil Painting school in 2005, it is entirely appropriate that the American magazine "Art News" defined him as "a romantic realist whose works reveal a strong nostalgia, with a pervasive atmosphere of quiet and silence" in 1984. Born in 1946, Chen Yifei's

⁶⁾ Chen (2008).

learning curve has not been easy and in that relatively closed period of art, anything related to art entered his field of study. At the age of fifteen, he was admitted to Shanghai Art College Preparatory and, in order to lay a solid foundation for future artistic creation, he learned some comprehensive basic skills of fine arts such as art history, sketching, drawing and molding. He graduated from the preparatory classes with honors and was promoted to this University's Oil Painting Department. In 1968, two years ahead of schedule to graduate, he was assigned to the Sculpture Studio of Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy Academy. During that time, he created revolutionary historical paintings such as *Eulogy of the Yellow River*, *Red Flag* and *Seizing the Presidential Palace* in cooperation with Wei Jingshan. These works created in the techniques of realism demonstrated his solid basic skills and the capacity to create large oil paintings; the heroism and idealism within his works proved to be highly influential at that time.

In 1980, Chen went to Hunter College located in New York, United States for an MFA. He had the opportunity to study a large number of works by Western oil painting masters and spent two months visiting the museums in Spain, Italy, the Netherlands and more than another dozen countries. Having admired the numerous masterpieces of European painting, he had a better understanding of the production of Western oil painting. After returning from abroad, the main theme of Chen Yifei's creative output concerned the southern part of China's water village scenery, musicians, traditional ladies as well as his Tibetan series. His works *The memory of hometown – The Twin Bridges*, *Bridge, Where I Played As a Child*, *February* and others depicted the beautiful and ancient water village scenery in the southern part of China. The painter managed to lend an extraordinary beauty and poetry to the bridges, water, people and even the unremarkable lanes. *The Flutist*, *Duet*, *Young cellist* depicts female stick figures playing music who virtually entice the viewer into the world of music with their serious countenance, slightly moving lips and slender supple hands. Their interpretation of the music is so vivid that it seems the melodious tunes might burst through the canvas at any moment. In his works *Lingering Melodies from the Xunyang River* (Fig. 6), *Poppy*, he presented ladies dressed in classical costumes and he used lines, beautiful figures, authentic traditional costumes, rich and varied color to reflect the oriental female's implicit beauty and gentle charm. Compared with the fragility and warmth of his previous series of works, his serious Tibetan works are roughly passionate with stronger color. Like the man walking with an indomitable spirit in *Wind of the Mountain*, the swaying strokes in *Mother*

and the weather-beaten faces in *Father and Son, Tibet*), they all reflected the distinct regional characteristics of the Tibetan region. There is always the sense that European realist painting methodology provides a means of interpreting the oriental spirit of China when looking at Chen Yifei's works. He is a bridge between the Eastern and Western cultures, we Chinese people can see through his oil painting an international influence, and people from abroad may understand the national spirit of Chinese oil paintings.

THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF CHINESE REALISM OIL PAINTING

The artists who belong to Chinese Realist Oil Painting not only pursue their own ideals along the road of realism, but in the face of disaster they have the courage to transfer their social responsibility to the brush and pave a way for hope to people in disaster areas. On May 12, 2008, China's Sichuan province Wenchuan area experienced an earthquake measuring 8 on the Richter scale. The next day, the artists of Chinese Realism Oil Painting offered to create a collective piece of art which could be donated to those affected by the disaster, a proposal which soon met with a positive response. On May 17, Ai Xuan, Yang Feiyun, Wang Yidong, Liu Kongxi, Shang Ding, Yuan Zhengyang, Xia Xing, Zhang Li, Long Liyou, Xu Weixin, Zheng Yi, Wong Wei, Shi Liang, Li Guijun, Zhang Yibo, Chen Yanning, Xu Mangyao, He Duoling, Guo Runwen, Wang Hongjian, Chao Ge, Li Shijin, Leng Jun, Wang Yuqi, Xin Dongwang, Pang Maokun, Yin Xiong, Zhu Chunlin, and Wang Shaolun – 26 famous contemporary oil painters – participated in the collective disaster relief by creating a huge oil painting named *Bloody May 2008*. On May 27, this huge oil painting was sold for 33.5 million by China Guardian auctions and the money was donated to the disaster zone.

The oil painting *Bloody May 2008* is 2 meters high and 20 meters long; 26 painters completed it in 14 days and nights. If they had not considered the painting as the first line of earthquake relief, had not camped down with instant noodles and rollaway beds, had not taken the pain suffered by the people of disaster areas as their own pain, had not imprinted on their mind the smile of one child protected by his mother, had not been moved by the touching scene of the paratroopers, firefighters, angels, volunteers, they could not have completed the painting. The masterpiece of the first large-scale collective cooperation by the realists of oil painting in such a short time fully embodies the collective

spirit and social responsibility when a nation finds itself in a major disaster. As Yang Feiyun said when he mentioned the creation of *Bloody May 2008*:

This large-scale oil paintings work embodies the inner heart that was deeply touched when faced with such a big natural disaster; our love was inspired and human glory and moral power were amplified in artistic expression. As a painter I was nurtured by this society which then encountered such a mega disaster, so it is an excellent opportunity for me to show my gratitude by participating in this compassion with my brush.⁷⁾

Chinese Realism Oil Painting has seen nine years since its establishment with a growing number of artists and deeper influence. They work diligently along their own path in the pursuit of their ideal art. Every time they hold the annual exhibition it is not merely a show, but also a chance to engage with the audience. The artists of Chinese Realism Oil Painting create their works under the same artistic instruction. They embrace the beautiful moments and celebrate the nature of life and the true meaning of art through their creative realist approach. More importantly, they also strengthen their personality and creative spirit with each other's help. When faced with a disaster, they embarked upon a collective creation and organized a form of earthquake relief, which furthers their credentials as a group with a social responsibility and mission. I would like to wish them every success in their future artistic endeavours!

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Fig. 1. Ai Xuan, *The Song of Strange From Far Away*, 110×110 cm, 2005



Fig. 2. Ai Xuan, *Sadly Beautiful Sound of Wind*, 130×110 cm, 2004

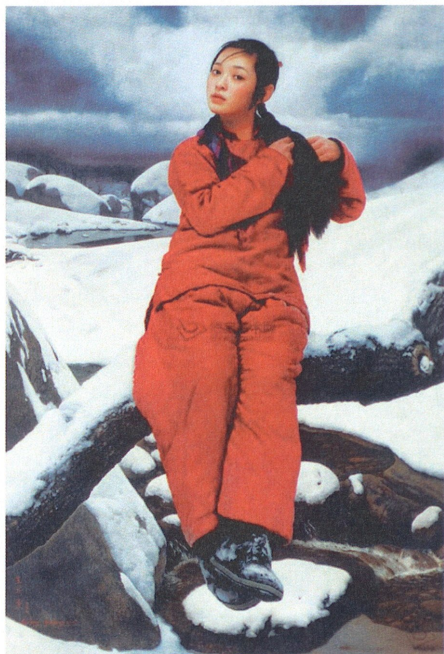


Fig. 3. Wang Yidong, *Dating with the spring*, 92×62.5 cm, 2006



Fig. 5. Yang Feiyun, *Three Friends*, 200×155 cm, 2002



Fig. 4. Wang Yidong, *Playing in Bridal Chamber - auspicious smoke*, 150×250 cm, 2006



Fig. 6. Chen Yifei, *Lingering Melodies from the Xunyang River*, 190×234 cm, 1991