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## PORTRAITS OF POWER MAO XUHUI

PROFILES: INTERVIEW BY ANDREW COHEN FROM MAR/APR 2011

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Mao Xuhui, the idealistic leader of the mid-1980s Southwest Art Group, which included Zhang Xiaogang and Pan Dehai, has never strayed far from Kunming and Gui Mountain in Yunnan province, the wellspring of his creativity. *ArtAsiaPacific* contributor Andrew Cohen spoke with the artist about his life and work in a series of conversations that took place in Mao's studio in Kunming's Chuang Ku ("creative loft") quarter and also over dinner at the Yuan Sheng Studio's café, which is run by Mao's wife, Liu Xiaojin.

### ***How do you choose the subjects for your paintings?***

I paint primarily from my daily life—my feelings are my source of creativity. Painting from emotions and sentiment as opposed to concepts is something that is particularly applicable to painters and artists from the southwestern region, including Yunnan and Sichuan provinces.

### ***Over your career your style has moved from the tormented brushstrokes in your earlier paintings to the thinner layers and more serene renderings in your later canvases. What is the correlation between this stylistic change and your personal emotions?***

I think of myself as a fragmented person with many styles. As a younger man I was more extroverted, but recently I've become more introverted. Also, from 1982 to 1993 I drank a lot. I had health problems, so I stopped. As my lifestyle changed, my painting style changed as well. This is the price we all paid for the dynamic and passionate 1980s. [He smiles as he pours a round of Pu-erh tea.] If we had met in the 1980s, I would definitely have offered you alcohol instead of tea!

### ***What were you like in the dynamic and passionate 1980s?***

I had long hair, wore jeans, drank a lot and was a rebellious youth who debated philosophical issues. I read a lot of Western philosophy and literature because it was a period when China was opening up, making a lot of translations available. I read various Hermann Hesse novels, Proust, Kafka and Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926)—books about existentialism, the search for the self. I was listening to a lot of Stravinsky. We couldn't access most rock. We got a lot of folk music, like the Carpenters. And for some reason we got to listen to Pink Floyd—my favorite album of theirs was *The Wall* (1979).

Zhang Xiaogang and I often hung out listening to the same music. We first met in 1976 [at the end of the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76], when I was "sent down" to do labor in the countryside. Zhang had also been sent down to the same village. We clicked intellectually.

### ***What art were you exposed to in the 1980s?***

In 1982 a German Expressionist exhibit was held at the Cultural Palace of Nationalities in Beijing. My classmates and I took a train to Beijing for three days and three nights. We were such eager



MAO XUHUI sitting in front of his paintings at his studio in Songshuying, China, in 1993. All images courtesy the artist.



IMITATION OF THE DEATH OF MARAT BY JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID, 1989, oil on canvas, 134 × 95 cm.



**GREAT YELLOW BELL**, from the “Parent” series, 1991, oil on canvas, 137 × 112 cm.

students that we noted down the colors of each painting in the margins of the black-and-white catalog.

I consider myself a student of German Expressionism. That exhibition liberated me. In the academy we were always taught to paint technically, and in particular styles. When I saw the garish use of thick paint and heavy shapes in that work, I realized that I could paint how I felt. In 1983 there was also an Edvard Munch exhibition that came to Kunming—this also had a big effect on me.

***Did your exposure to these movements and artists influence your “Private Space” series (1986–89), which is notable for its depictions of male and female nudes?***

I felt I was taking a risk with this expression of emotion. Very few people painted such intimate portraits because it went against the grain of Chinese culture and society at the time. These paintings came shortly after the Cultural Revolution, when art was still viewed from a highly politicized, nonartistic perspective. It was very stressful to paint these during that era. Most people would have found these works ugly—anything sexual was taboo. Painting these works felt like committing a crime. There was always the fear that someone would come knocking on the door.

***Around the same time that you were making these expressionistic paintings about the alienation of city life, you also developed a naïve style in your “Gui Mountain” series (1984–87), which depicts an idyllic countryside. Can you discuss the different approaches between the two series?***

They show two different lifestyles. In the “Gui Mountain” series I used a primitive style, like Henri Rousseau’s, because I thought it had a naïveté and a purity that suited a utopian ideal such as a return to nature. At that time I was looking at the work of Latin American painters, such as Diego Rivera, and reading Latin American literature, such as Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). I liked the magical realist elements.

I often go to Gui Mountain with Zhang Xiaogang, and I always take my students there for painting retreats. Many more kids today grow up in cities and it’s hard for them to focus. Some students can’t complete classroom assignments. I find they improve quickly when they get out into the countryside. They are freer when surrounded by nature.

***Did becoming a father influence your “Parent” series (1988–93), which shows your daughter, He Jing?***

There probably is a relationship, but it’s a combination of things. As well as showing my daughter, I think I was originally trying to depict myself, because some of the portraits have high cheekbones like me. Or, perhaps I was painting the Chinese family from my memories—a traditional Chinese-style portrait. In fact, I used the term “family portrait” to describe these works even before Zhang Xiaogang. In February 1989 I exhibited these first pieces from the series in the 1989 “China Avant-Garde” exhibition at the China Art Gallery [now the National Art Gallery] in Beijing.

***How did the subsequent June crackdown in Tiananmen Square influence your work?***

I was working at a film company in Kunming as a movie-poster designer. When the crackdown happened local youth protests that had been staged every night suddenly stopped. Everyone was very anxious and thought that this would be the start of another Cultural Revolution. This anxiety lasted for over a month. For the next two months, I was unable to paint. I was just too nervous.

***Do you remember the first paintings you made after the incident?***

Once I started again, I painted a lot—over 40 works that August. Within a few months I used up every paint surface, every canvas, in my home. These works came from a profound sense of failure. It was a tragic, pessimistic and hopeless time. Through painting works such as *Imitation of the Death of Marat* (1989), which is based on David's 18th-century painting of the French revolutionary dying in a bathtub after being stabbed, I was able to express my fear and anxiety.

***Was the State now the parent figure?***

In a sense, yes, but more specifically it represented this idea of central authority. After Tiananmen I thought more about the issue of centralized authority in Chinese culture, which has a history that spans thousands of years. We were continuously hearing about detentions and interrogations, so I decided to paint people in an interrogation chair, in a very tormented state of mind. Then I felt there was a shift in the nature of the person in the seat. Instead of being the person under interrogation, he became the interrogator—someone with power.

If you compare *A Man Sitting in the Black Chair* (1989) with *Parent in the Black Chair* (1989), one man is in a passive position, looked down on from above—he is being tortured or interrogated. Then in the later work the man is now in a position of power, being looked up at. I never went back to painting the frightened, passive figures. They became progressively more intimidating and powerful.

***Your "Parent" series can be read as an historical epic: from portraying a traditional family portrait to members being interrogated, who are then transformed into the interrogators. So, basically, we are being tortured by each other, our family, our own children—almost like in a Kafka novel, no?***

Yes, that's a very important link. Years later I read a line from one of Kafka's letters to his father about the father sitting up high in a chair. I was amazed to have had such a similar thought. That period was about two main issues: one was death and the other was power.

***Later, the series takes us through a stretched and abstracted tunnel. Is this a variation of the man in the chair?***

This is a projection of how I feel whenever I have to deal with the authorities, whether I'm applying for a permit or going to a government office. It's such a long process and feels like going through a tunnel. You feel uncertain—like in Kafka's world. Also, I was incorporating ancient underground burial sites into these works. This is when I started to portray my thoughts and views on Chinese culture and history, to analyze and reflect on what had happened in '89.

***As the "Parent" series moves to its last phase, the person and the surroundings seem to merge into a single volcanic abstraction.***

Yes, first it was a chair and a person where you can still discern one from the other. Then in later works they are fused into one powerful monster that you can no longer separate. It goes up and never ends—the power and the person.

***Why the sudden change from abstraction to figuration—images of keys, bicycles and hands held up in victory/peace signs—in your "Glossary of Power" series***

**(1993)?**

This period marked a very important turning point in Chinese art. I was still working on “Parent” when Political Pop and Cynical Realism started to emerge. “Glossary of Power” was a response to the popularization of those movements. Zhang Xiaogang, Zhou Chunya and I had many discussions about how best to make art more accessible. The catchphrase back then was “How can we relate to the greater world under the banner of internationalization?” Pop was more direct than abstract art. Figuration was more accessible.

The key can either give access to things or prohibit it; keys can open or lock doors. This image is also related to “Parent.” Parents often have a lot of keys. As do prison wardens. The image of the hand holding up two fingers is both a sign of support and victory for the students at the time. The victory sign was the most prevalent symbol used in Tiananmen Square. It was also a symbol of power. To me, in my paintings, it represents failure and tragedy. I wanted to document this because everyone was holding up the victory sign. Looking back, it was very naïve.

Kunming is changing. There are more scooters and fewer bikes now. I like bikes better; scooters scare me. The authorities are moving trees to widen the boulevard and accommodate more traffic. There is a lot of forced demolition—the current mayor is very insistent about implementing these changes. There have been protests against the destruction of Qing-dynasty homes. People here are conscious, but helpless.

***We first see the defined scissors among other figurative objects in your “Daily Epic” series (1994). Why, out of all the other objects—the pills, the bottles, the pens, the paint brushes—did you fixate on scissors?***

I’m not sure why I chose scissors over all the others. I know that when I painted them, it just felt right. Over time, the scissors grew in size until they took over the entire canvas.

***Why did artists such as yourself, Zhang Xiaogang and Zeng Fanzhi suddenly change styles from a thick, expressionistic use of paint to smoother surfaces where the brushstrokes almost disappear?***

Most of these paintings were made after the mid-1990s. I think the flatness of the aesthetic is directly related to the opening up and commercialization of China. We were exposed to more advertisements. It was a time of rapid development and urbanization. For people like me, the sense of social isolation and distance that grew in developing cities was very hard to accept.

During that time I realized society didn’t need passion. People didn’t want to talk about ideals, poetry or music—they seemed like laughable topics. It was all about efficiency, production and effectiveness. None of the advertising slogans had anything to do with passion; they were about mass production. Ads for major luxury brands were beautiful but alienating. At the time, it seemed like the market was just vaguely linked to us as artists—nothing like the art bubble of 2007. I found it scary but seductive.

***Is that why you were seduced into relocating to Beijing in 1994?***

I saw all these other artists making headlines and I wanted to find out why. I took my earliest scissor works to Beijing, but no one was interested.

***How did that make you feel? Everyone else was getting all this attention and you weren’t.***

I felt destitute for several years. I decided to come back to Kunming because I had no inspiration from the city. I was there for half a

year and didn't paint a single thing.

***Were the 2000s much different from the 1990s—in society, in your work—or were they a continuation?***

The 1980s and early 1990s were more drastic and violent. I spent much of the 1990s coping with changes. Now I'm calmer, resigned to the fact that this is how society is—increasingly commercial, dominated by a few major brands. More and more, I see the importance of branding in artwork—symbols. Even so, it bothers me on a conceptual and intellectual level. But as it comes from outside influences, it can't really be helped.

***Many artists are accused, especially Chinese artists, of repeating themselves for money. You, on the other hand, repeat yourself—with variations of course—but not for monetary gain.***

I'm fully aware of this criticism. I'm glad you noticed my use of repetition is different. For me it's more about the importance of having a trademark, something you know is yours. In reality my scissor paintings are not as successful as my other series and don't sell for more.

I make them to have an identity. Certainly, in contemporary China there is a fear of one's works being indistinguishable from others'. I felt that way from 1999 to 2008, but no longer. Giorgio Morandi's paintings mattered so much to me because in spite of all this criticism I can still persist on this track. By painting bottles he found God. Similarly, I hope to attain spiritual understanding through painting scissors. But it's very hard.

***Is this repetition like meditation for you?***

I feel that artworks don't really have a spiritual life until they interact with people, and not just when presented in museums; it's through the dialogue established when people look at them that they come to life. For example, my works are alive to you. Even though I'm from Kunming and you're from New York, this spiritual exchange is alive and I feel good about it.

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