



***THE YI SCHOOL:
THIRTY YEARS OF CHINESE ABSTRACT ART***

Press Dossier

CaixaForum Madrid – Obra Social "la Caixa"

From 14 November 2008 to 16 February 2009

"la Caixa" Social and Cultural Outreach Projects presents at CaixaForum the first major exhibition of the *Yi School* outside China, with 82 works by 48 artists

The Yi School: Thirty Years of Chinese Abstract Art

The extraordinary development of the People's Republic of China in recent years and the opening of new pathways of communication and business with the West have stimulated the world's interest in Chinese culture. A series of major international exhibitions, music and film festivals, dance and theatre shows, books and literary publications have increased knowledge about this country's contemporary creativity. Over and above the treasures of its very ancient traditions, China now appears as the setting for a change in sensibility that affects our relationship with our surroundings and tradition, time and customs. Because of isolation lasting centuries, Chinese artists have developed their own world of images, without connections to what is produced in Europe and the United States. The case of the *Yi School* is highly significant. Although it was born at the margin of the abstract art and conceptual art that have dominated the Western art world in recent decades, it maintains points of contact with these two. It is art lived as an experience of retreat and meditation that explores contemplation, unity and harmony. After its presentation in Barcelona, "la Caixa" Social and Cultural Outreach Projects is taking to CaixaForum Madrid the first major exhibition of the *Yi School* outside China, organised jointly with the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture and the Beijing Culture & Art Foundation. The exhibition introduces eighty-two works by forty-eight Chinese artists of the last thirty years, divided into three periods. *Yi* art from the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) until the 1980s is characterised by an idealised humanism in opposition to the revolutionary slogans (*Yi xiang*, "mental image"). The second period is when art at a time of urban and cosmopolitan expansion recovers private spaces and incorporates Eastern symbols and writing (*Yi li*, "mental principle"). The third period, *Maximalism (Yi chang*, "mental environment"), arose at the end of the 1990s and devotes its main attention to the process and the context of the art work.

The Yi School: Thirty Years of Chinese Abstract Art, curated by Gao Minglu, can be visited at CaixaForum Madrid (Pº del Prado, 36) from 14 November 2008 until 16 February 2009.

"la Caixa" Social and Cultural Outreach Projects has devoted several exhibitions to Chinese culture. One of the most recent, "Confucius and the Birth of Humanism in China", introduced the thought and work of Confucius and how this was reflected in art over more than a thousand years. A few months ago, to coincide with the opening of a Representative Office of "la Caixa" in Beijing, an exhibition of fifteen works by international artists from the "la Caixa" Foundation's Collection of Contemporary Art was put on at the Beijing Art Museum of Imperial City. The *Yi School: Thirty Years of Chinese Abstract Art* represents its counterpart. It is designed to bring the general public in our country closer to an artistic school that has had decisive weight in Chinese plastic art from the 1970s until now and to make the work of some of today's leading Chinese creative artists better known.

The *Yi School* is defined as an artistic tendency in China, based for the last three decades on the aesthetic essence of *Yi*. It is distinct both from contemporary literature and conceptual art and from Eastern abstract art. In Chinese aesthetics, *Yi* does not mean just subjective thought, even though it is a fruit of our mind. It is not precisely equivalent to the terms *concept*, *idea* or *significance*, but represents a state of contemplation and meditation by creative artists, the way that artists or poets think about their surroundings or observe them. In this respect, the *Yi School* is the artistic style best suited to expressing meditation.

If we think that *Yi* is related not just to the thought of the artists, but also to the real environment and the objectives of meditation, the *Yi School* cannot be defined by any modern Western concept such as realist art, conceptual art or abstract art, even though it may look like all these tendencies, especially abstract art. In reality, the *Yi School* brings together almost all the characteristics of these three tendencies without restricting itself to any one of them in particular. This responds to a norm that has always governed traditional Chinese aesthetics, to stop art becoming excessively diverted towards the extremes.

In terms of expression of *Yi*, the artists have focused in different periods on different aspects of *Yi*. For example, at the end of the 1970s, during the Cultural Revolution, a series of non-official artists sought individual freedom in opposition to Mao's propagandistic art. In this context, the *Yi School* focused on the search for individual expression and for "pure art" against "conceptualised" political art. The *Yi School* was expressed in the aesthetic form of *Yi xiang* or "mental image". Artists sought unity and harmony between concepts and objects of nature, during the process of thinking about and observing the external world. Then the representatives of the *Yi School* at the end of the 1980s paid greater attention to expressing their ideas about the way to reform reality and cultural modernity through cultural signs. In this period, the *Yi School* defended

symbolic concepts, the essence and start of an ideal culture and society. As such, the *Yi* School during this period is called *Yi li* or “mental principle”. From the 1990s on, decade in which individuals are overwhelmed by rapid urban development, personal meditation becomes a way that allows the artists of the *Yi* School to isolate themselves from society. In this period, the *Yi* School focuses on the personal experience of thinking about the materials and surroundings during the process of creating art works that involve an effort of daily and intense repetition. Thus the *Yi* School of this epoch represents *Yi Chiang* or “mental environment”. Creating works of art is equivalent to meditating in a private space.

First setting: *Yi xiang*, mental image

Yi xiang or “mental image” is the idealisation of landscapes and natural objects and is one of the categories of the *Yi* School. During the first half of the twentieth century, Liu Haisu, Lin Fengmian and Zhao Wuji, among others, set themselves the task of analysing modern Chinese art on the basis of the *Yi xiang* method, which became a major motive of aesthetic concern in China’s first “contemporaneity”. Thanks to the *Yi xiang* method, Chinese artists began to delve again into modern art, from the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to the 1980s.

Among the artists who focused on landscape and objects, Shang Yang, Zhao Wenliang, Ding Fang, Chao Ge, Qiu Shihua and Wu Jian produced for years landscape paintings, although the landscape shown in their works, over and above natural scenery, is a vehicle for expressing the feelings and emotions of the artists. In this respect, the landscape we see in their works is not just landscape; in their landscapes based on *Yi xiang*, a realist scene can become an abstract symbol and *vice versa*. Individual subjective experiences and the knowledge of external landscapes are interpreted as archaeological landscapes by Shang Yang, impressionist landscapes by Zhao Wenliang, traditional landscapes by Ding Fang, sublime landscapes by Chao Ge, landscapes of meditation by Qiu Shihua and landscapes of ruins by Wu Jian. The scene is characterised by personal feelings, distancing itself however from purely abstract symbols.

During the many years that they have devoted to studying the way to represent certain “objects”, Su Xiaobai, Qin Yufen and Liu Xuguang have striven not only to transmit the objects’ impression of beauty, but also to endow them with Eastern humanism and aesthetic taste. Going even further, He Yunchang and He Chengyao see their own bodies as bearers of individual senses. Unlike the mentioned artists, Bing Yi reinforces the narrative sense with stories that are only the fruit of his imagination. These are ideal tales, a long way away from fictional plots.

Among the artists who began to produce “abstract” art after the Cultural Revolution, we find Zhou Maiyou, Zhu Jinshi, Wang Luyan, Ma Kelu, Zhang Wei, Tang Pinggang and Zhao Gang. They all expressed their aspirations to individual freedom by using a traditionally Chinese free-hand brush-strokes. The images of their paintings are mental images.

Most of the works in this setting were produced at the end of the 1970s and in the first half of the 1980s.

Second setting: *Yi li*, mental principle

The main interest of the artists in this setting focuses on representing experiences of learning about the universe, culture and even individual life, by using Eastern symbols. Many of their works are representative of the “rationalist paintings” of the 1980s.

Although these symbols look like Western abstract geometrical figures, with an abundance of circles and squares, they differ from these in three main characteristics. First, these circles and squares do not stem from Western geometry, but from Eastern spatial philosophy. They are dynamic figures that transmit a sensation of depth and expansion towards infinity. Second, just like living natural objects, these symbols appear to have been placed harmoniously in “mountains and rivers”, with the emphasis on confluences, extensions and infinity. Finally, these symbols are based on Eastern pictorial effects, regardless of the materials used, through which they are endowed with both spiritual and material life. In other words, they are “personalised symbols”. This feature can be seen in the work of Yu Youhan, Li Shan, Ren Jian, Zhang Jianjun, Yan Binghui, Yang Zhilin, Huang Yali, Wang Chuan, Meng Luding, Tan Ping, Man Fung-yi and Lei Hong, among others.

In another current, artists such as Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, Qiu Zhenzhong, Wang Tiande, Zhang Hao, Luo Mingjun and Wang Nanming attempt to transmit their experiences on contemporary art, society and the individual by using symbols of traditional Chinese writing.

Third setting: *Yi chang*, mental environment

These artists represent a new category of the *Yi* School, “Maximalism”, which arose at the end of the 1990s.

Although Maximalism looks externally like Western Minimalism, its conceptual premises are different. It is not concerned so much with the meaning the works might express, but rather devotes attention to the process of production of the art works as experiences in contextualisation. Each artist employs a concrete shape and goes on repeating it, as a daily routine. Thus, Li Huasheng draws lines of ink on rice paper; Ding Yi introduces the symbol † repeatedly on his fabrics; Zhang Yu stamps his finger-prints on rice paper; Liang Quan sticks ink-soaked paper on wooden plates; Zhu Xiaohe interprets an ancient work of art by using repeated short lines, in the manner of “words”, which gives rise to a completely different painting. Liu Xuguang, Zhou Yangming, Zhang Fan and Xu Hongming repeat various simple marks in their paintings. However, instead of flat shapes, they are especially concerned with achieving the invisible “depth” that is the fruit of “meditating on contextualisation”.

In this respect, the squares and fringes that appear in these paintings are considered the context or representation of a “mental environment”, which acts as a dialogue between the artists and their materials or between the artists and the environment in which they live. It's about experience and understanding at the same time. The philosophy based on the simple expression of everyday experiences and thoughts is rooted in traditional Chinese aesthetics. Maximalism in itself is a form of resistance against many years of Chinese art ideology and of rules established in terms of the international market and art institutions. We can affirm that the Maximalism of the late 1990s was a “mirror” of silent individual meditation, immersed in the circumstances of the outbreak of globalisation in China.

PARALLEL ACTIVITIES

Opening lecture

Thursday, 13 November (6 pm). *Modernity displaced: contemporary Chinese art in the world context*. To be given by **Gao Minghu**, curator of the exhibition.

Admission free

Film cycle. Landscapes in passage. Sixth-generation Chinese cinema

Between the demolition of the past and the sketching of a still undefined future, China has been the stage for the emergence of a new generation of film-makers, ready to question its present with strategies close to Italian neorealist cinema, but without renouncing its highly specific marks of identity. With these three settings that we posed in the cycle, we want to approach the sixth year of film-makers who graduated from Beijing's Film Academy. It is a generation that has marked a rupture from its predecessors, questioning directly and combatively the reality of a country that, in its passage to modernity, is not paying attention to the human factor.

Coordination of the cycle and presentations by Jordi Costa, journalist and film critic.

Limited space available.

Jia Zhangke, the poet of disconnection

Monday, 24 November

7.30 pm Presentation

8 pm Film

Still Life

Jia Zhang-ke, 2006, China, 108 min. Original version with sub-titles in Spanish.

Two stories of discovery and falling out of love concerning the landscape of a village condemned to disappear. Winner of the Golden Lion, Venice 2006.

The sixth generation: new forms of realism

Monday, 1 December

7. 30 pm Presentation

8 pm Film

Beijing Bicycle

Wang Xiaoshuai, 2001, China –Taiwan –France, 115 min. Original version with sub-titles in Spanish.

The particular “bicycle thief” of the current generation of Chinese films: two stories of isolation and material precariousness cross paths in the urban labyrinths of Beijing.

Monday, 8 December

7. 30 pm Presentation

8 pm Film

Sunflower

Zhang Yang, 2005, China, 131 min. Original version with sub-titles in Spanish.

The tensions between parents and children make up a story in which family and society function as speculative reflections and where art and life act as communicating vessels.

The steppe as a parallel universe

Monday, 15 December

7. 30 pm Presentation

8 pm Film

Tuya's Wedding

Wang Quanan, 2006, China, 95 min. Original version with sub-titles in Spanish.

Love triangles are not what they seem when seen from other cultural coordinates. Winner of the Golden Bear at the 2007 Berlinale, the picture expands the registers of humanist cinema with a moving story that avoids cliché.

Admission: €2.00 (LKXA, Club Estrella, Carnet Joven and Carnet +25: 1.00 €)

The Yi School: Thirty Years of Chinese Abstract Art

From 14 November 2008 to 16 February 2009

CaixaForum Madrid

Pº del Prado, 36, 28014 Madrid

Opening hours

Every day, from 10 am to 8 pm

Information service

www.laCaixa.es/ObraSocial

Tel.: 913 307 300

Free admission to the exhibition

Further information and graphic material:

Juan A. García. Tel. 913 307 317 / 608 213 095 / jagarcia@fundacionlacaixa.es

Josué García. Tel. 934 046 151 / jgarcial@fundacionlacaixa.es

Jésus N. Arroyo. Tel. 914 845 273 / 629 791 296 / jnarroyo@fundacionlacaixa.es

Publicity Department of Social and Cultural Outreach Projects – "la Caixa" Foundation.