The Spirit of Collaboration

This year The Open Book exhibition has been on a truly International tour, something that we could never have expected at the outset, but even at its inaugural showing at the National Library of Wales it was something we knew should be seen wider afield. Being invited to be part of an International traditional celebration of Ink-based Chinese Art as part of ‘Decanter Ink’ by Joe Zhu and Professor Chen, through vital links made by Professor Frank Vigneron, was a wonderful opportunity for us as artists, as art lecturers and educators, to see the folding book in its true cultural and artistic context. It was fascinating, and we could see that we would have a lot to learn about its place in the traditional Chinese cultural sense, as well as being able to gain a huge insight into where art in China currently resides in relation to contemporary perspectives.

Through consultation with Joe, we knew there would be some great examples of both traditional practice and some major names on the contemporary scene that we would be showing alongside. Having the opportunity to meet contemporary working artists, educators, and curators, and to work alongside students, visiting studios, seeing how all their work stemmed from a long rich disciplined tradition, revealed more and more about the success of a cultural idiom that is faced, like the rest of the world, with a speeding change of pace to life, to society, to technology, to culture and to art.

Shaking up one’s idea of how things really are forces us to question the place and role of the artist within it, both close to home and globally. Having had the experience of art-based collaboration with other countries before, in Rajasthan in India, in the US, Mexico City, and recently in Africa, I have seen that to collaborate, like we have done, driven by our commonality as artists, with a host of ideas to express visually, whether political, witty, brutal in its honesty or more quietly reflective, allows us an enormous insight into understanding our global situation.

All artists do well to be challenged and this new sequential format of the Chinese folding book provided us with that. Methods of approach in both conception and application were to become even more apparent when our books were seen placed alongside those of our fellow Chinese artists; how appropriate the tradition of ink is to the working of these pages, how subtle and enigmatic they seem: how many hundreds of years have passed in the evolving of these skills and ideas of harmonious poetic combinations of word and image?

The close link in Chinese art between discipline, observation and a strong spiritual, meditative understanding of the world is also something in this fast moving digital age to be respected and nurtured. We have learnt much more about the extremely close relationship between calligraphy and painting, something that, having been to many exhibitions in Shanghai and Hong Kong, now seems obvious, but which was a revelation to us as to the extent that it is the case, and that the beauty and discipline of the practice is highly prized and continues to garner accolades.

It is of interest that western art embraces text-based work as a comparatively recent conceptual way of looking at the world, that seems so very new in comparison to the role that it has always played in China. Running alongside this deep parallel appreciation of the written-painted word is the ‘signature’ itself, the ‘seal’ or chop mark: the craft and aesthetic of these intricate, personal notations is a critical part of the composition of the paintings.

In visiting the two campuses of the Chinese Art Academy in Hangzhou, we saw examples of traditions we knew of, but had never seen taught before; these included the painstaking craft of lacquer work, being reinvented as a means of contemporary appreciation.

We noted drawing, using ink-based materials, traditional rice paper and brushes, is alive and well: it is highly revered and as such is prized. Refreshingly, this is executed, by staff and students, with an extreme dedication and skill that would be the envy of many western art colleges.
I had the opportunity to visit students in large airy studios where recognisably similar, but subtly different (from in the West) printmaking techniques were employed, in terms of method, paper, and materials. An exhibition of leading art schools from around China which was taking place in the Academy of Art in Hangzhou during our stay demonstrated an astute awareness of the future: from some very highly realised lithographic pieces, to works that raised and questioned with confidence key issues of social and cultural change, it was an impressive demonstration of what we will see coming from China in the future.

What was clearly evident in the Chinese students we met was a keen alertness to what was new and contemporary, coming from a quiet strength and sound confidence of skills learnt, and discipline of subject mastered: it was refreshing to witness.

The student body we met in Hangzhou who worked with us curatorially were extremely dedicated: they were willing and eager to help, working tirelessly, and spoke of noticing the way we had ‘played’ and experimented with the layout and the work, trying out many different permutations in search of what would work best visually for all.

It was of course very rewarding to feel that we played a role in this respect. In the West, looking at current contemporary Fine Art courses, there is great stress placed on the necessity of finding the individual artist; all education should have the aspiration to enable students to develop their own individuality. We were employing a freedom that maybe we took for granted.

Collaboration for this exhibition was ‘key’; we all stood to glean much from each other. We learnt that the low perspex exhibition cases that were specifically designed for the exhibition showed off the scrolls and Chinese folding books perfectly, in a flat, opened-out format, something that we hadn’t until that time considered, as we had previously used the concertina books to stand upright on their edges with the potential to unravel, hide and reveal different aspects of themselves (sometimes the front and the backs simultaneously).

Overall we have managed to achieve our original objectives: to exhibit this, by its very nature, transportable exhibition; but we have also found a continuous way of adding to its rich and growing diversity as it travels, by including work from the countries the exhibition travels to, and stimulating interest in much more potential for future collaborations.

All artists are extremely interested in getting their work exhibited outside their own country, and we were equally impressed with the potential of reaching an audience within China as well as beyond, in two galleries in Australia this year, and in the future destinations for this exhibition coming up in the next couple of years.

From an outsider’s perspective, being an artist in China has a certain weight of respect and prestige attached to it, and the artists we met in Hangzhou were recognised as needing proper working conditions for this to happen. During this first trip we have together begun to open many new pathways for thoughts, ideas and discourse, that will hopefully be expanded on in the near future in both a personal and collaborative way. There was an enthusiasm and very positive response to our meetings and discussions with artists, arts curators and art lecturers, a multi-level and mutual interest and keenness to embrace and build on our new contacts with each other. We shared many similarities as artists.

We are hoping for a returning major exhibition to be based in Wales at some stage over the next two years, which can showcase all the international elements that this exhibition is endevouring to open up for collaboration, and towards which we can build and promote for an ongoing contemporary visual debate long into the future.

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