

Interview: Feng Mengbo From Pixels to Paints

by Wang Yiquan

Published: June 7, 2013



Portrait of Feng Mengbo, courtesy Feng Mengbo, photographer: Thomas Fuesser, 2011

BEIJING — The Beijing art studio of Feng Mengbo is nothing like a regular studio space. It is part Chinese literati den and part technologically advanced digital studio.

“Humans are very complex beings,” states Feng. “I grew up during the Cultural Revolution, and later received a traditional arts education, moved on to contemporary arts, and have had a long obsession with video games.”

Regardless of time period or the latest artistic trends, Feng has always found a comfortable place for himself amidst strong competition from other contemporary artists. From large interactive installations to paintings and even to his most recent works of calligraphy, Feng’s creations are always exciting.

Born in 1966, Feng remembers the vicissitudes of domestic political movements, the ever-changing relationship between China and the Soviet Union, and the propaganda surrounding the power of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). These elements are manifested ironically in

Feng's later works, including an acrylic painting from 1994 featuring a portrait of Mao attempting to hail a taxi, as well as a 2008 large-scale installation entitled "The Long March: Restart," which used soldiers from the PLA as characters in a platform shooting game.

Feng's works exhibit Western pop art influences, but it was his Chinese education and personal experiences that provide his inspiration.

As a child, Feng dreamt of enlisting in the PLA, just as every kid at that time did, but he also had a love of painting. Growing up in Beijing's Dongcheng District, he would walk past the old location of the Central Academy of Fine Arts near Wangfujing, and often wondered to himself what attending art school would be like.

In the 1980s, Feng received one of the earliest video game consoles on the market in China as a gift from his father. For the last 30 years Feng has had a fevered obsession with video games, evidenced by the fact that numerous gaming consoles still litter his Beijing office, from a Microsoft Xbox to famous Japanese video game brand SNK's Neo Geo MVS. However, this obsession has waned somewhat in the last two years.

"Today's video games are more and more in tune with what I've always dreamt about," states Feng. "With these dreams coming to fruition, it all seems just a bit boring. I mean, look at all the different types of video games. It's either boring, or, I'm just getting old."

Regardless of the humor Feng tries to inject into our conversation, his sentiments are very real, and people will look back at this time period as the explosion of the internet age. The internet, what once felt like a mysterious launching pad for the future, has now become a fully integrated part of daily life, and Feng is bored with it all.

Back in 1987, Feng entered the Central Academy of Fine Arts. "I am personally very sensitive to materials and technology, and I loved the printmaking department because of the great wealth of different art materials, mediums, tools, and research projects."

Feng's first trip abroad was in 1993 at the age of 27 for the Venice Biennale. He traveled to many cities throughout Italy, saw some of the world's most famous works of art, and often spent time chatting with Korean-American artist Nam June Paik.

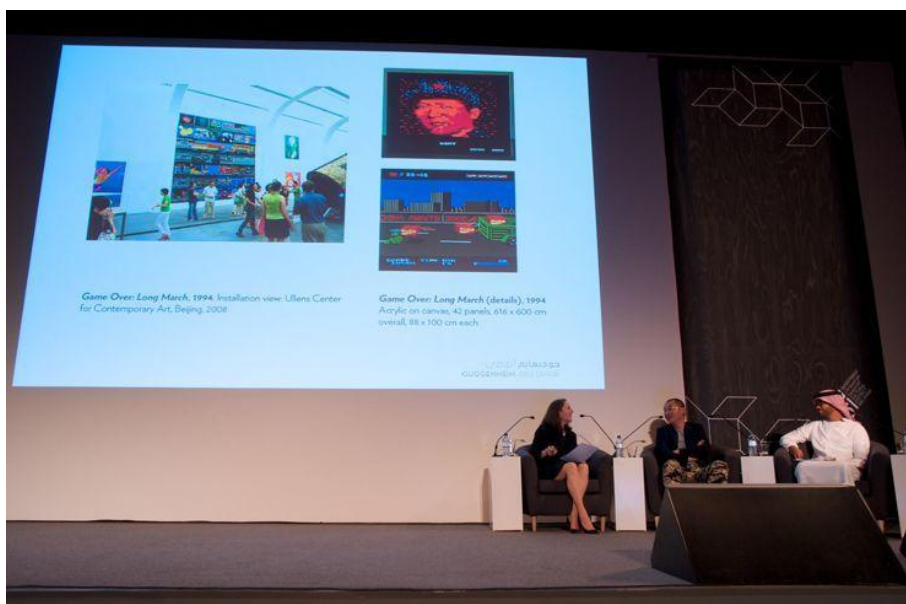
After the Venice Biennale, Feng continued to explore the field of computer technology and virtual worlds. He blended these techniques with his love of history to form a personal artistic language. The groundbreaking methods and techniques in Feng's art led to him being selected twice to participate in Kassel Documenta, in 1997 for his multimedia work "My Private Album" and in 2002 for his internet project "Q4U." These prestigious exhibition experiences continued to push Feng and led to his developing a strong reputation in the international arena of contemporary arts. The latest accomplishment in Feng's career is the Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi adding his 1994 work "Game Over: Long March" to its permanent collection.

Recently Feng has distanced himself from new media art. “Earlier this year I began to put all my effort into Chinese ink painting and calligraphy,” he says. “I am now more inclined to use my pen instead of a computer.”

This trajectory from a futuristic avant-garde style to more traditional media does not represent Feng becoming more conservative. If one looks carefully at the ink works that Feng is now creating, it is obvious that his artistic spirit still resides in an unrestrained and uncompromising land of its own.



Feng Mengbo demoing one of his interactive works at the Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi, 2013, courtesy Feng Mengbo



Discussion with Feng Mengbo at the Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi, 2013, courtesy Feng Mengbo