

# The Metaphysics of Hong Lei

洪磊 - 其实他在这儿

By Maggie Ma

**I**n the photograph, a dead bloody bird entwisted with pearls lies on the ground. Behind the bird, one can see outlines of the palace in Beijing's Forbidden City, the seat of Chinese imperial power.

The picture, created and embellished with red paint by the 46 year-old conceptual artist Hong Lei, is titled "Autumn in The Forbidden City." And last October, it sold for nearly \$30,000 at a Sotheby's auction in Hong Kong, making it one of the most expensive Chinese contemporary art photographs ever sold.

Suddenly, the work of Hong Lei, who makes use of computers, photography and painting to create colorful portraits of a classical world in decay, are being praised by leading art experts. Wu Liang, the distinguished art critic, calls Hong Lei, "One of the most unique conceptual photographers."

But long before Sotheby's auction, Hong Lei's works was gaining notice. His photographs were exhibited at leading international museums and galleries, such as the Pompidou Centre in Paris and the International Center of Photography in New York. And much of his work had been sold to collectors in Europe, Japan and the United States.

Among the first to acquire Hong's work was Uli Sigg, the former Swiss ambassador to China and one of the leading collectors of Chinese contemporary art.



Autumn in The Forbidden City 紫禁城的秋天

"I think these are significant works," says Mr. Sigg, who bought two of Hong's works for about \$600 a piece in 1998, as he looked at "Autumn in Forbidden City." "At first, you look and you think it's a beautiful image. And then you look closer and you see something deeper. It's about mannerism and decay in Chinese civilization." Indeed, a central feature of Hong's work is duplicating classical Chinese paintings, by adding what he calls a "death complex" to them.

In his works, all kinds of uncomfortable and disharmonious elements are fused together, creating a disconcerting interpretation of Chinese culture. What at first appears to be a work of beauty, is instead a scene of darkness. This is the philosophy behind Hong Lei's works. They are existential takes on the modern age in China.

In an interview several years ago, Hong Lei said: "Facing modern

society, I chose a pattern of those times, the structure of pictures of the Song Dynasty. But the birds that were alive in those pictures are dead in mine. A dead bird, being a kind of conceptual symbol, is actually a continuation of my ideas when I made oil paintings." Then, he added: "That dead bird may be me."

Hong Lei was born in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province. His father served in the military and had a keen interest in literature. His ancestors, he says, were wealthy tea merchants. But when Hong Lei grew up, there was no trace of wealth or opulence in his family life, only a longing for ages past.

"But I love old things", Hong said, "When I saw the rice paper, I always want to cry."

Early on, he says he was fascinated by splendid and elegant things from the past, things he discovered in his family history and local Jiangnan customs. That is one reason his photographs often use traditional images, like pine trees, bamboo, plum blossoms, orchids and Jiangnan gardens, which were once filled with luxurious jewels and carpentry work.

Hong, however, got a late start as an artist. He says his life was set back by the Cultural Revolution. And then he worked for a time before studying oil painting attending the Nanjing Art College, which he graduated from in 1987.

After college, he studied print making at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing and by 1993 had some of his expressionistic oil paintings exhibited in the Guangzhou Biennale of Modern Art.

He held a solo exhibition of his paintings in 1993, titled "Metaphysical Poetics." But his paintings never really took off, and by 1995, he was troubled. "I couldn't sleep well at night for a long time, I was thinking, "What should I do next?" he recalled. "And finally I discovered that Chinese traditional art was my favorite, especially the imperial court paintings of Song Dynasty."

On the other hand, he says he recognized that modern Chinese painting could never match those masterpieces of the past.

Meanwhile, conceptual art was beginning to emerge in China, allowing artists to use a range of materials and technique to produce modern art. Artists began using everyday objects, create installations or performance art, and using photography or video in their art works.



Imitation of the Painting by Ma Lin of Song Dynasty 晴香疏影



Imitation of the Painting by Li Anzhong of Song Dynasty 秋菊朝朝图



Imitation of the Painting by Liang Kai of Song Dynasty 出山释道图



Speak, Memory 五针松

In 1996, Hong says he took a photograph of his installation work, "Chinese box," by chance. The photograph, of a dead bird with a pearl necklace in a red wood traditional jewelry box won him praise from friends and critics.

And from that moment, Hong says he switched to photography. He created, "The Imperial court of the Song Dynasty Copy" series and "China Landscape" (Suzhou Gardens) series, as well as "Landscapes in Black and White."

In these duplications of famous Chinese art works, the viewer can see that under Hong's shell of classical images, what he really wants to express is his anxiety about the conflicts between reality and tradition, good things as well as bad things. "This is how I understand Chinese ancient civilization. I can't say I criticize it or appreciate it. I just reveal the traditional Chinese culture that exists in my heart, and the way I understand it. It's like in the saying of one poet: 'I love deeply and also hate the land under my feet.' This is kind of contradiction."

In the field of photography, however, Hong is neither the only nor the earliest artist to duplicate Chinese classical elements. Lang Jingshan (1892-1995), a pioneering photographer in China, combined Chinese painting and photography in his works in 1930s. Lang Jingshan tried to inherit and continue Chinese classical culture, but Hong tries to

question and criticize it.

"Lang Jingshan's photographs are just what they are, but Hong Lei's images are not actually what they seem," said Gu Zhenqing, executive editor of Zhu Qizhan Art Museum, the curator of "Right Here, Ain't Here", Lang Jingshan and Hong Lei's photography exhibition last March in Shanghai. "Hong is more like contemporary artist. He uses a modern viewpoint to arrange materials. It's brilliant."



China Scenery 中国风景(苏州留园)

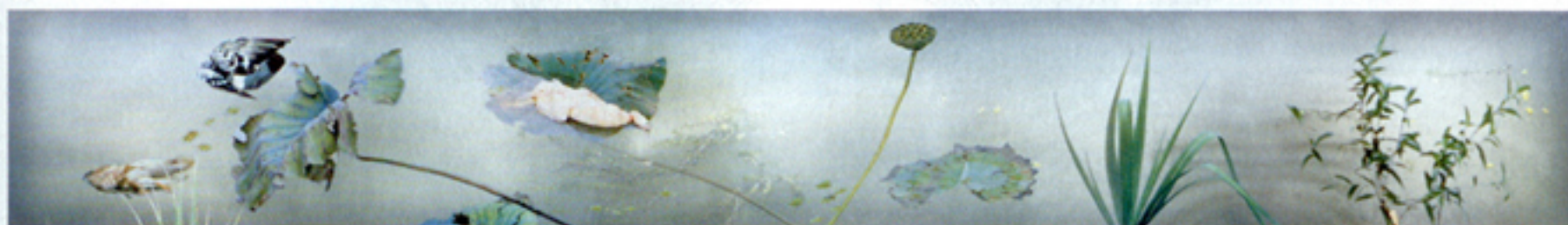
Hong's works are not only using classical aesthetics, but also symbols. In "China Landscapes," for example, the elegant gardens, the blood and the setting sun shape an enormous visual contrast. Hong intentionally places subversive elements of modernity into his copies of traditional Chinese paintings: a UFO, for example, or a transvestite.

In these works, the downfallen, decadent but beautiful characteristics are fit with his lost and desperate mood about modern society. Hong Lei says his inspiration was derived partly from literature, especially classical literature.

"I love classic novels such as 'The Dream of the Red Mansions,' 'The Gold Plum Vase,' and also some poetry from Li Yu, the last king of the South Song Dynasty, and Qing Dynasty genius Nalan Xingde," he said during an interview in his huge workshop. "Literature always stands on the top of art."

In his studio, Hong shows off some of his own short story writings from the 1990s, which were later used as scripts for some of his photographs.

But for all his fame as a photographer, Hong insists he's really not that good at using a camera. Taking a photo, he says, is only the first step for



I dreamed about the late autumn in the pond in Song Dynasty 我梦见徽京时代的池塘晚秋

his pieces. He usually re-creates or touches up his photo with paint or a computer. It is not properly traditional photography, he says.

"Photography is just means to Hong Lei." Wu Liang says. "The camera itself is replication technique. Once you press the shutter, there is only replication, no matter what you photograph. Whether it is born out of the nature or an artwork. It's just a myth of originality."

Hong's second solo photography exhibition, "Transmitting the Ancient," opened last spring at the Chambers Fine Art Gallery, 4/F, 210 Eleventh Ave, Manhattan. It included three series of photos: "Speak, Memory" (2004-2005), "Tai Lake Stone" (2005), and "Physics" (2002).

Translated by Wei Ying



Tai Lake 太湖

一只身绕珍珠的死鸟，躺在紫禁城的石阶上。天空一片湛蓝，金碧辉煌的紫禁城看起来像是模糊在黄色的沙尘之中。画面正中是三根红色殿柱，威严而压抑。这是艺术家洪磊1997年创作的一副彩色摄影作品，名为《紫禁城的秋天》。“洪磊是当代中国最具特殊性的观念摄影艺术家之一”艺术批评家吴亮说，“他的作品风格独特而震撼，因此非常容易辨认。”洪磊最具特色的艺术风格就是在仿造的中国古画意境中展示他的“死亡情结”：艳丽和阴沉、宁静与诡异等等各种“不舒服、不和谐”的因素经常在画面中并置在一起，传达出对中国文化的一种现代解读。

前瑞士驻华大使乌里·西克最早收藏洪磊作品，1996年他以单幅600美金的价格从洪磊手中买走仿宋《出水芙蓉》和仿宋李安忠《秋菊鸭鸭图》。此后，蓬皮杜中国当代艺术展、阿尔勒国际摄影节都先后展出过洪磊的作品。2005年香港苏富比秋季拍卖会上《紫禁城的秋天》以近3万美金成交价刷新了洪磊作品的拍卖记录。目前，购买其作品的收藏家大多来自美国、日本以及欧洲，洪磊新作的单价在5000-6000美金左右。西克近日对artzine记者提到：“我很喜欢我收藏的洪磊这两副作品，色彩很美，很期待看到他的新作。”

洪磊1960年出生于江苏常州，父亲是一个颇有文学气质的军人。其祖上经营茶叶生意，不过到了他这一代，已经看不到祖先们留下来的任

何奢华、闲逸的痕迹。家族历史和江南文化的浸染，让洪磊对传统中那些辉煌、优雅但已经逝去的的东西又非常迷恋，这就不难理解，为什么他的摄影作品中总是充满各种传统意象的元素。例如：松竹梅兰、芙蓉、江南园林、皇家禁城还有华美的珠宝以及木器。

1987年洪磊从南京艺术学院毕业，1993年进入中央美院学习版画。实际上洪磊在艺术生涯初期一直从事专业绘画学习和创作，而非摄影。其间参加过广州现代艺术双年展（92年），在北京和南京还举行过名为“形而上诗学”的个人作品展（93年）。然而95年左右，洪磊发现自己陷入创作低潮。“很长一段时间，我几乎整夜失眠，因为不知道接下来应该做些什么。”他说，“最终我发现自己内心深处真正喜欢的还是中国传统古典艺术，尤其是宋代院体画。”但是另一方面，他也觉得中国画正无可避免的走向没落。翻出历史上那些名师的作品，后人的创作在他们面前可以媲美的机会微乎其微。

与此同时，在九十年代中后期利用现成品、艺术制作、现场布置、表演、公共现场、摄影和Video等综合艺术手段的“观念艺术”在中国已经逐渐走向成熟。96年的一次偶然机会，他拍下了自己的装置作品《中国盒子》，没想到出来的效果却非常的震撼，而且得到了圈内专家的好评。从这里开始，洪磊从中发现了影像的力量，接连创作出“仿宋宫廷画系列”、“中国风景(苏州园林)系列”、“黑白山水系列”等作品。在这些作品中，我们可以看到洪磊的古典外壳下，表达的是内心关于现实与传统冲突的焦虑情绪和思考。

在摄影中使用或模拟中国古典元素，洪磊并不是最早也不是唯一的

一个。中国摄影界的先驱郎静山先生(1892-1995)在20世纪30年代的作品就将中国画理融入摄影艺术。如果说郎静山老先生对中国古典传统文化的态度主要是继承、延续，那么洪磊可以称得上是反省和批判。“郎静山的摄影‘文如其人’，而洪磊的摄影其实‘志不在此’。”2006年3月上海朱屺瞻美术馆主办了《在这·不在这一郎静山、洪磊摄影展》，策展人顾振清说：“洪磊是一位更加当代的艺术家。他用现代观点来重新整理艺术元素，所以他的作品有超越性。”

相比较而言，除了古典唯美意境之外，洪磊在作品中加入了更多象征性的元素：例如，《中国风景》中，园林所代表的优雅精致与汨汨蔓延开来的鲜血和残阳之间，形成了巨大的视觉反差。甚至到了后来他直接在传统绘画的模仿中置入现代性的破坏性因素：外星人飞船，男扮女装等等。这些作品中流露出糜烂奢丽又没落荒诞的气质意境，和他内心所感受到的一种在现代社会中被压抑、迷失的情绪非常吻合。

洪磊认为他的艺术灵感和直觉，更多是来源于文学，尤其是古典文学。古代经典作品《红楼梦》、《金瓶梅》以及南唐后主李煜、清代才子纳兰性德的词对他影响深远。“我自己90年代初期也创作过一些短篇小说。”洪磊解释说，“文学永远是最高层次的艺术”。这些小说后来都成为了他摄影作品的构思脚本。

有趣的是，尽管洪磊已经成为中国著名的摄影艺术家，他却还是一再强调自己的摄影技术很差。在他的艺术作品中，摄影只是第一步。照片拍出后通常会通过手绘或者电脑合成进行再创作；最后再翻拍或者数码输出，才成为一张完整的作品。严格意义上来说，这并不是传统意义上的摄影。“摄影技术对洪磊意味着一种手段。”评论家吴亮分析说，“照相机本身就是复制技术，只要按动快门，拍什么都是复制，不管是脱胎于自然，还是艺术品，都不存在‘原创性’的神话。”作为一个观念艺术家，可以说洪磊找到了自己最独特的表达方式。



Chinese Box 中国盒子