

邬建安

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中国民族摄影艺术出版社

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五百笔 #25 500 Brushstrokes #25, 2017
纸上水墨水彩拼贴
Ink, watercolor, paper-cut and collage on Xuan paper
250 × 200 cm



五百笔 #26 500 Brushstrokes #26, 2017
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In Conversation - Wu Jian'an and John Tancock

John Tancock (“JT”): Rather than write an essay on your development as an artist, I am going to ask you a series of questions so that you can speak for yourself. I hope we can clarify what you believe are the defining characteristics of your growth as an artist over the last decade. From looking at your biography, I know that you were born in Beijing in 1980 and graduated with a B.A. from the Beijing Institute of Broadcasting in 2002. I would like to know what happened in the first twenty-two years of your life to make you the artist that you are today. Would you please fill in that very large gap in our knowledge? Firstly, would you please tell me something about your family background and your interests as a child and teenager?

Wu Jian'an (“WJA”): Thank you, John. My parents are from a scientific background; they are both mechanical engineers, my father was outstanding in his own field. They are both very clear thinkers and have a sincere belief in science. Even today, they still discuss mechanical engineering problems, many of which involve theoretical physics that I've never understood. Nevertheless, it always fascinated me. Each time my father discusses these topics, he starts from simple phenomena that lead to abstract theory. I was always fascinated by simple things, precisely because I never thought such simple things could be queried. When the discussion moved on to abstract theory, I was usually lost.

Looking back, I was interested in a lot of things when I was young, but animals were always a major interest. In summer, we often went out on expeditions to catch water snakes and frogs in small streams. Big frogs are often brilliantly colored so we were always excited when we saw them but they can jump very far, which made them difficult to catch. Whenever I was lucky enough to catch one, I used to keep it in a large glass jar. Catching ants and mantis was a lot of fun too. Sometimes we even fed mantis to the ants, but the ants refused to eat them.

The concept of “art” only began to intrigue me when I started studying for my master's degree at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing. Until then I had a vague idea that art was simply “drawing.” I have done a great deal of drawing, ever since I was a child, it was just like playing games. I would draw all kinds of animals, monsters and ghosts, which made me happy. When

I started elementary school, I was often requested by my classmates to draw *The Transformers*. I used to get a lot of envious looks for the way in which I was able to satisfy everybody's needs, that pleased me a lot also.

JT: Looking back, is there anything you can point to that looks forward to your current preoccupations as an artist? Did you gain anything from the three years you spent at the Broadcasting Institute?

WJA:It seems to me now that most of my work derives from books I've read, things I have seen and experienced as a child. My passion for mythology is the most obvious. As a child I was shocked when I read about Xingtian and Chiyou but at the same time I was excited.

I majored in Advertising at the Broadcasting Institute. The main thing that I learned there is how to understand and evaluate other people's thought processes which can be seen most clearly in market analysis and media studies. It is a unique approach, using data analysis to reveal unconscious desires, sometimes this can even be applied to analyzing the desires of a mass audience. When hidden desires are displayed as data charts, it feels really good, just like performing a highly skilled anatomical procedure.

Another important thing the Broadcasting Institute offered me was free time. As long as I passed all my examinations, I had total control over my time. I could do anything I liked as long as it was within the regulations, and no one cared what you were doing. That turned out to be very significant for me as at that time I was not sure what I wanted to do. I spent most of my time working out or painting, which I enjoyed a lot. Still I didn't have a clear goal, and I simply painted and enjoyed my freedom.

JT: In 2002 you entered the graduate school at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing and studied under paper-cut artist Lu Shengzhong. As I understand it, the Folk Art Program and the Art History Department were merging. Your research topic for which you made four field trips was the continuation and transformation of *piyingxi* (Chinese shadow puppets) since the founding of New China. This is a two-part question. Firstly, for a Western audience would you please comment on the status of folk

art in twentieth century China and the role it plays in art schools? Secondly, as a young man born in Beijing whose life-style was entirely urban, why did you decide to focus on folk art?

WJA: I think there are three important facts to consider in understanding the role of folk art in 20th century China.

First, folk art was deployed as a government propaganda tactic when the nation was established, which led to a tremendous increase in its production and public awareness of it. The most iconic manifestation is the poster propaganda movement in the 1950s. To the leadership of the Communist government and cultural officials, art exists primarily to serve the workers, farmers and soldiers. Most of them are not interested in the Humanities or Western art, perhaps they simply do not understand it. As a result this kind of art lacks an audience base in China. Yet many political concepts and ideologies need to be conveyed to those people in the form of art. From the beginning folk art has been popular with the general public, this is natural. This is precisely the reason that many well-known ink artists have participated in creating revolution themed posters during this period.

Second, some parts of the political and cultural elite have made use of folk art as a means to establish cultural identity and confidence. In the 20th century, China has undergone many defeats and endured much suffering. During the in-depth encounter with modern Western civilization, a considerable number of Chinese intellectuals lost faith in traditional Chinese culture. They blamed it for the series of disastrous events that occurred in modern China. During the process of blaming and searching for a scapegoat, China stood in the way of its own modernization.

In society the *old* and the *new* don't evolve in a linear form. New developments can encounter bottlenecks; this creates an opportunity for a renaissance of old things. In China folk art has deeper roots and a much wider audience than the audience for traditional literati art. When the enthusiasm for Western culture endangered Chinese self-identity, some intellectuals were alarmed. They started searching for a means to avoid such a loss. Folk art came to their attention during this time, and become important for Chinese cultural identity. In the Republican era, Lu Xun and Cai Yuanpei encouraged the archiving of folk songs, which is a similar concept.

Third, using folk art as a language to be incorporated with western contemporary art concepts. This is an important approach in Chinese contemporary art since the 1990s as seen in the works of Chen Zhen, Lu Shengzhong, and Huang Yongping. In today's fine art academies, folk art is still part of the curriculum.

Personally, my initial interaction with folk art was not proactive. Until I went to college, I was very involved in Western culture, I liked Rock n' Roll, admired Western masters, and had very limited experience of Chinese traditional art and was not that interest-

ed in it. Because of my interest in Western culture, I liked making foreign friends, listening to their stories. The more I encountered foreigners, the more I realized that the principal reason they came to China was their interest in Chinese culture. It made me feel embarrassed that part of my initial awareness and appreciation of Chinese traditional culture came from foreigners. However, it was through experiences such as these that I started paying attention to folk culture and became more and more interested.

JT: What caused the apparent switch from your academic pursuits to being an artist?

WJA: I was never an admirer of “academic disciplines,” yet being an academic is not something you can abandon. In many long academic essays, the main thesis consists of a few sentences, then why spend so much time saying other things, instead of getting to the point. That is the major limitation of academic disciplines. In order to support such small discoveries, you have to pad it with lots of useless information, I think it is a total waste of time.

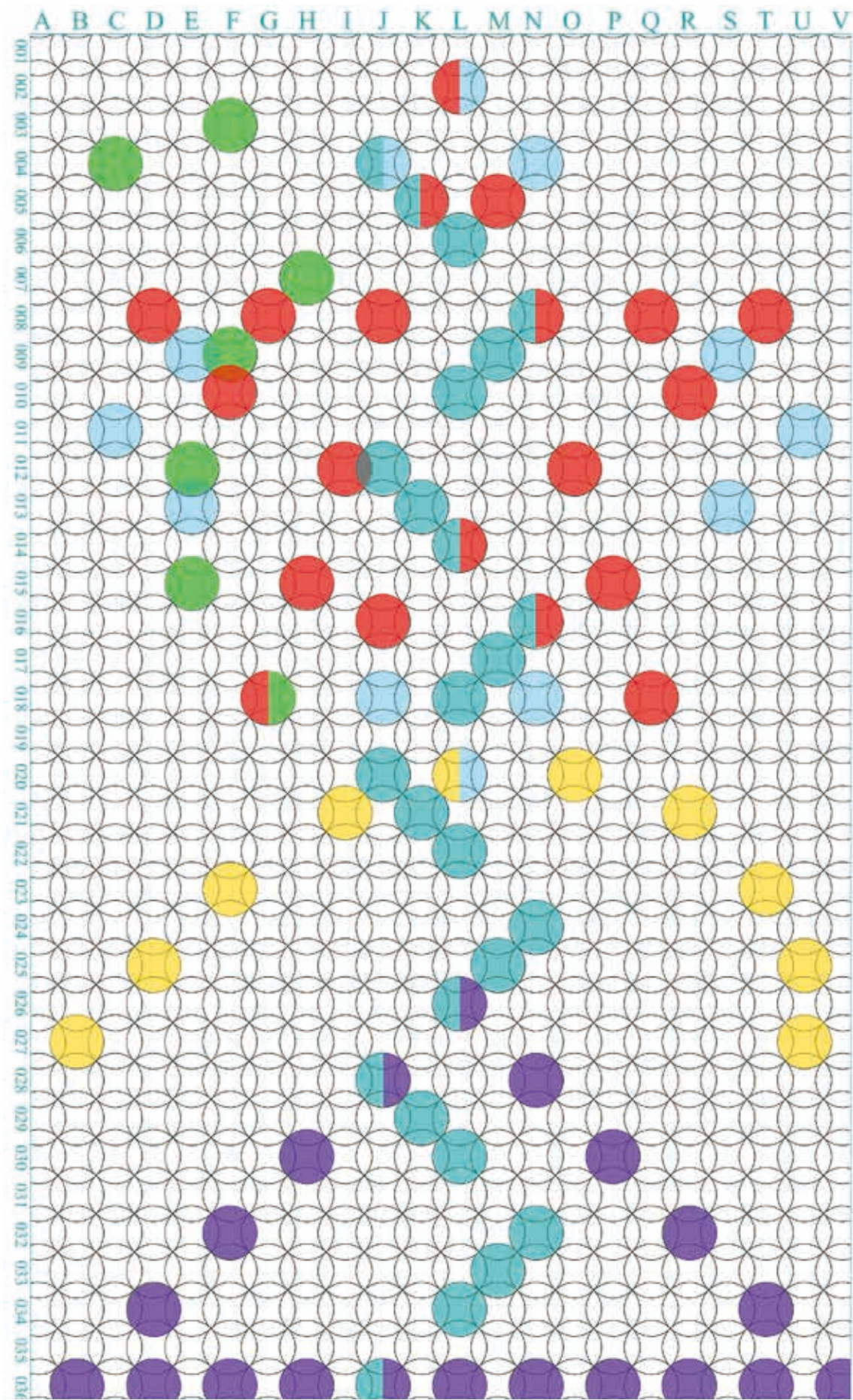
JT: The paper cuts exhibited as *Daydreams* seem to have been the breakthrough for you. Would you please tell me more about your state of mind at the time?

WJA: Although the worst of the SARS crisis was over by then, I was still very afraid. During SARS, I hid by myself in my apartment most of the time. I did not dare to leave home. Whenever I had to, I wore multiple masks, I was so afraid of being infected. Everyday there were ambulances rushing by my door, there was hardly anyone on the street. Even now, we still don't know what caused SARS. Some say that it was a virus from the masked palm civet, which can be transmitted through the air, it can even penetrate the blood system through the eyes. Every infected person had to be isolated, as well as their families and neighbors. It was very frightening, and I was afraid of being quarantined along with other infected patients.

I had started experimenting with paper-cut right before SARS, and was especially interested in witchcraft. People always need some spiritual sustenance during a time of fear. That is why I created a lot of paper-cut figures to keep me company when I was hiding out in my apartment. That way, I was not alone and didn't fear anything. And so one by one I cut out many paper figures. A few days later, I assembled them in a circle and I sat in the center, which made me feel safe.

Later, when the weather became warmer, SARS seemed to have disappeared as if by miracle. When I returned to school, I showed the paper-cut figures to my advisor. He recommended that I should make some bigger paper -cuts. The process was very thrilling. I had turned all my fears, excitement and hopes generated during SARS into characters and gave form to them in the lan-





《792 个有重叠的彩色圆球》
 隐匿图形的图纸
 Study for 792 Overlapping Color Balls



792 个有重叠的彩色圆球
 792 Overlapping Color Balls
 2014
 纸本水彩
 Watercolor on paper
 150 × 250 cm



欲化大鹏金翅鸟，现鱼、人、鸟混相

Herring Attempts to transform into Garuda, Revealing a Mix of Human, Fish and Bird Forms
2015

手工着色和浸蜡镂空剪纸，棉线，纸
Hand dyed and waxed paper-cut, cotton thread, paper
194 × 245 cm



大鹏显金身，噬杀青鱼，是日，鹏口衔巨蛇遁逸

Snake Escapes from the Mouth of Garuda Who is Biting to Kill Herring
2015

手工着色和浸蜡镂空剪纸，棉线，纸
Hand dyed and waxed paper-cut, cotton thread, paper
310 × 300 cm