

Ten questions for Zhu Zhengming

1. Please share with us what you make of tradition. In your personal practice of art, from which perspective do you prefer to learn from and utilize your own cultural traditions?

Zhu: As a graduate from CAFA, I've been systematically influenced by Western art as well as traditional Chinese art. In the first stage, my painting showed more influence from the West, but with growing knowledge of the world, I've been drawn to some ancient elements of Chinese traditional art, i.e. the profound Eastern spirit found in some modeling or images of mine. I don't judge art from the perspective of time, and I'm well aware that artists of today will all be part of art history eventually. And our pursuit of "contemporary" and "avant-garde" art doesn't mean that we are giving up the nutrition in traditional culture, the nutrition we can receive in many ways.

2. Art has no national boundaries. As the common treasures of mankind, cultural traditions of different regions provide numerous possibilities for new forms of art to come about, evolve and to fruit, like what Japanese traditions meant to Vincent Van Gogh and Claude Monet and what African traditions meant to young Pablo Picasso. Could you please share with us what influence you've had from cultural traditions of different regions?

Zhu: About ten years ago, I paid much attention to Japanese painting, Italian medieval painting, European surrealist painting and impressionist painting, etc; five years later, my main attention shifted to traditional art from India, Southeast Asia and West Asia and post-modernist art from the West; in recent years, I'm very fond of photographic works from overseas; and I've never stopped being a fan of fauvist art. So the art I can absorb from isn't confined to a certain region or country.

3. Tradition, never stylized, is the cluster of differentiated traditional forms generated by its interaction with the social cultural backdrops of different historical periods; it's unsettled in tone and not something fixed. For instance, there are very big aesthetic differences between every two Chinese dynasties, like Qin and Han, Wei-Jin and Northern and Southern, Sui and Tang, and Song and Yuan. Artists adopt symbols based on aesthetics and the traditional bloodlines that agree with them.

Zhu: I'm fascinated by both the elegant and artless art from the Wei-Jin period and the broad and all-inclusive art from the Sui and Tang dynasties. Sometimes wandering in a museum, I would be moved by the unreachable aesthetic height of ancient artists or artisans. For us descendants, it takes real efforts to make artworks as excellent as what they made in ancient times.

Painting in the Song dynasty is of a rather delicate literati style. Among the artists from that period, Mu Qi is my favorite one, and the consistent "rough" texture of his paintings is something I can also find in Kun Can's and Tomioka Tessai's works. It's like the purest and most natural taste of a sip of astringent coarse tea. In my painting, I'm trying to neutralize the unwanted exaggeration potential in the "exquisiteness" by employing some seemingly "rough" touches on details.

4. "Humanity" has long been one of your favorite subjects in artistic expression as you've found that the material part of man, such as the tangible form and structure, is inexplicably exquisite. Then, what do you make of the spiritual part of "man" hidden beneath the appearances?

Zhu: Not just man, but also animals and plants. It goes for all living things. And living means inconstancy, which is so mysterious! No life can foresee the future or have full knowledge of its

own destiny and biological structure. “Unknowability” rules every bit of happiness and sadness. Wonderful as the flesh is, the soul is so anxious for not knowing the entire story of the flesh; there is no hierarchical difference between our bodies, but we have noble souls and less noble ones – all these have been inspiring me as to what to express.

5. Apart from “humans”, your painting also involves many sacred animals (such as monkeys, cranes, deer and tortoises) which not only help construct the scenes and images but also seem to imply something mysterious – because, in a painting with a blank background, the non-“human” elements are there either to add to the meaning or to dispel it.

Zhu: There are things beyond description. As I see it, the so-called metaphor has to be accomplished with the help of the “audience”. These animals in my paintings already have rather fixed connotations in Chinese traditional culture, and this is why I chose them, but they are different from each other in spirit, and every single kind of them also delivers different moods in different scenes. The reason why they are metaphors, I think, is that they should be interpreted by the audience themselves but not the artist.

6. Do you have any favorite creators (like writers, musicians, filmmakers, artists, etc.)? Who are they, and in what respective way did they inspire you?

Zhu: Akira Kurosawa, Sanyu, Henri Matisse, Mu Qi, Jin Nong, Shen Zhou, Hong Yi, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Yo-Yo Ma, D. T. Suzuki, He Shaoji, Yan Zhenqing, Klein, Chou Meng-tieh, Georgia O'keeffe, García Márquez, Ferit Orhan Pamuk, etc.

Good films, literature, music and painting can all give me intangible nutrition, so it's hard to make it clear how they do it.

7. Last interview we came across the topic of two female artists, Georgia O'keeffe and Frida Kahlo, and I agree to what you made of them: Frida Kahlo was an introverted artist who focused on individuals while Georgia O'keeffe an extraverted artist who worked on the common destiny of humanity. For outstanding artists, male and female alike, their thinking involves but only their individuality as an artist but also human commonalities, and is not only characteristic of the era they live in but also echoes in all times.

Zhu: Actually I don't like the title “female artist” either. Indeed, artists should not be classified by gender. But some female artists are more sensitive than males and easier to blend their personal feelings into a painting. I'm a big fan of the works O'keeffe made in her twilight years. They present the sights of the vast Grand Canyon in west America in cool and broad atmospheres, and we can find no intense gender awareness in any of them. Indeed, such vastness can really belittle the gender and feelings of an individual. In that period, her art (painting and sculpture) was apparently influenced by early Chinese landscape painting and Chan Buddhism of the East, which is the reason why I can find the same wavelength in her works.

8. No masterpiece is single-sided, as there are always some necessary and explicit contradictions hidden inside. Even if there's any mildness, it's been distilled from the opposite side, carrying a reverse force.

Zhu: Every painting is built on all sorts of balance, such as “dynamic” and “static”, “sparse” and “compact”, “peaceful” and “restless”, and “soft” and “sharp”, and all of these require a very good

state of the artist. Every masterpiece is the result of “God’s will”; we can only try to approach it.

9. It’s like a bold gamble to create without a color draft and just follow the lead of intuition and imagination. This requires the artist to adjust over and over again in the process of creation and to learn to fight himself inside. The very nature of art is that it requires confidence in the making but is also unpredictable.

Zhu: Right, none of my silk paintings have any color drafts; the tones would all be preset in my mind, so most of my works had to be “rescued” by myself, and I would even make use of some mistakes. In the images “rescued”, there would be traces of struggling left, which are surprising at times, like “a flash of the soul”.

10. Art-making is a process of discovering and establishing new orders. As we know, you’ve made a number of works in recent years, mostly with a thread hidden inside; and it has been changing gradually and seems to be bringing about new explorations while deepening your previous thoughts. Your gradual detachment from experiences in secular life is not to create a fantasy world but to surpass or to go beyond the superficial illusions in reality to find out the truths of the world.

Zhu: Surpassing is a tough thing, because you have to surpass yourself, not somebody else. And you have to accumulate your energy first, you can’t push it. What I can do is go ahead on my own, be alert to any fossilization of the world I’ve created, work hard to improve myself and wait for unexpected growth.