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李真北京798新作首展《神魄》
震古鑠今 新東方雕塑語彙
Li Chen - Soul Guardians
In an Age of Disasters and Calamities

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Beyond Description
International Curators' Dialogue with Artist Li Chen

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Beyond Description

International Curators' Dialogue with Artist Li Chen

Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker (Former Director of Villa Stuck Museum, Munich) & Li Chen

JBD: I was wondering if we could begin today by talking about what it is like to make spiritual art for a secular society in which most people do not share your religious beliefs, or even have knowledge of them. How do you imagine that the public can respond to your art?

LC: If we look at the situation from a broad perspective, with the present materialism in our society, and its changing expectations, I believe that there is an even greater need for the spiritual in our lives, a greater need for spiritual belief. At the moment, I feel that my work needs to embody a certain simplicity, needs to be almost naïve in nature. And this goes beyond national boundaries.

JBD: When you employ a figure such as a Bodhisattva in your work, but your audience has little knowledge of the function of a Bodhisattva, what role do you expect this artwork might play if your audience may not be able to "read" it?

LC: Whether the audience is from the West, or from Mainland China, whether they have an understanding of the function of a Bodhisattva or not, they can be moved whether they are Catholics, Buddhists or Christians, because of the universal nature of love, harmony and peace. They can feel it is not about frustration or anger. What I am trying to do, is to express religious belief, and its processes, through art works, both emotionally and spiritually. One can admire the work, whether one is coming from North America, from Europe or from Asia. One will feel harmony, peace and a sense of completeness. This creative process can have a spiritual effect, just as religion can. Somebody who does not really understand what a Bodhisattva is can look at a work about Avalokitesvara and be moved, perhaps feel as if the Virgin Mary has opened up her arms to welcome them.

JBD: This may be true for earlier series you have made, but is that true of your present series of work, *Soul Guardians*? If your public from Mainland China, or from the West, could feel harmony in your earlier series, does this mean that they will feel anxiety in your present series?

LC: It is part of an experiment! I am attempting to express an energy which is beyond human, which has the strength of God. I am attempting to express it through the forces of nature, by means of fire, of wind. This is why I created the *Lord of Fire* and the *Lord of Wind* - to have some kind of impact, to create a collision with the audience. As a normal human being with limited power, I can only use the visual power of my sculptures, like fire and wind, and materials like charcoal. For example, the sand I placed under the *Lord of Wind* is meant to evoke the sand storms in Beijing. If I were to produce this work in America, I would make a whirlwind!

JBD: But one of things you have done, particularly with the present series, is to move quite far from Buddhist iconography and from traditional folklore, for example *Thousand-Mile Eye* or *Wind-Accompanying Ear*. In your earlier work from the 1990s, you remained true to Buddhist iconography. As a practicing Buddhist, do you feel that you are taking risks, or liberties, or moving away too far away from the core of your own beliefs?

LC: In the past ten years, my work has been about self-healing, about finding inner peace, and sharing it with audiences. I am part of the world we live in; I am not able to close down my inner world. I have the desires, and all the emotions, of any normal human being. Ten years ago I wanted to work on this present body of work but my father passed away. I retreated to an inner world of self-healing. It is only one and a half years ago that I could start to work on this series. But even during this past ten years, even though I was in this healing process, I was still interested in social issues. You can see this in earlier works, for example, *Butterfly Kingdom*, which uses the iconography of Mahakala but is actually about social issues. This is a work about people following a leader blindly. Another series was called *Collective Consciousness*.

JBD: In other words, in your earlier series, you were already proposing a form of artistic practice which opposes blind commitment to an iconography which would not change? You were already addressing social issues, and insisting on a multiplicity of voices in society?

LC: Pure religious iconography has a function, for example, Jesus on a cross. The function is designed to serve the follower. In this case I hijacked the iconography to serve my healing process.

JB: Your work is often interpreted in the West as being traditional, as being strongly situated within traditional culture, and within Chinese Buddhism. But what you are saying now suggests that, in fact, your artistic attitudes are much closer to those of Western artists who also “hijack” iconographies for personal expression, and for personal communication, with his or her audience.

LC: I am not familiar with the West and how an artist there would work, but basically I enjoy the freedom of creating my art works. And I am willing to bring religious iconography with which I am familiar into another context, to bring a thousand year old tradition into the contemporary world, to transform something that you *think* you know. Someone commented once that I am an artist and a Buddhist at the same time. And that my character is such that I would never be satisfied with the same language or iconography, so I will always be creating new forms, and new languages.

JBD: In the West, they use the term “sampling”. That comes from Hip Hop. That is what a Hip Hop DJ does; he samples from different kinds of music and creates something new by putting them together in a new way. In the West, particularly since the beginning of modernism, artists have “sampled” the forms and ideas of other cultures such as Japan, or Africa. In the West, artists move between cultures and ideas, believing that they have right to sample, to take, and to transform at will. In fact much of so-called Western innovation has resulted from what we may call creative misunderstanding because what the artists have sampled has not necessarily been understood!

LC: Creative misunderstanding! It is interesting, because Cai Guo-Qiang also mentioned that in an interview. But what are you asking me?

JBD: What are you creatively misunderstanding?

LC: I want to introduce the Daoist concept of *Qi* (life force, *spiritus* or *elán vital*) into my works with its incredible energy. I want to use the color black because the material nature of black is

heavy but when I meditate, when I close my eyes, I feel that black is light. I found this very interesting, even amusing! There is a very interesting process of transformation which I want to explore, for example, when I am preparing ink. The water in the center is shiny while the outside is cloudy. I adopt these visual effects - from the aesthetics of the different translations of ink- in my work. My understanding of black has been reached through meditation. So the idea of bringing both heaviness and lightness together came from the quality of black. It is a lightness which comes from *Qi* which has no weight. The contrast creates an interesting, visual impact.

JBD: One of the key strategies of Western modernism is transgression – something you violate, rules you don't obey. It seems to me that the materials you use, and the procedures in which you engage, espouse transgression. So, I would like to ask you: What transgressions do you commit? What rules do you violate?

LC: I have had a rebellious streak since I was a boy. I still have a long way to go but if I look at my work, at my personality and my education, then sixty percent of what I do comes from using certain techniques, and from a desire to learn. Twenty percent comes from adventurism and rebellion. Even as a child I liked to plunge from a very high rock into the water, to see how the water flows. I liked to challenge my teachers, I still like to experiment and find out what aspects of my materials might suit my purpose.

JBD: What rules have you broken?

LC: Many! Many Buddhist rules! Some people think that I have abandoned Buddhist iconography. But I am looking for something which meets my own spiritual needs.

JBD: What function does art have for you?

LC: Art is perfect, I can forget about time, I can forget about my worries and just immerse myself in art. It is a kind of self-hypnotism. When I create something, energy pours into me. Once when I was making sculptures, my whole body became dirty, sweaty, tired and I didn't want to bathe any more. So, I lay down to sleep and turned off the light. But I couldn't leave my work so I turned the light on and off. Art is an exaggerated expression of human needs and human desires. When you are completing a work you have no desire beyond that. Art for me is a passion, an obsession. It is like a romance, you are passionately in love. Art is my life's passion, something I am romancing all my life. You yearn for the person, you want to pursue them, you want to create this art work. This is artistic creation. It is the desire to make love; it is the desire to make art.

JBD: If this is the function of making art for you, of being an artist, then what is the function of art for your viewer, for the public?

LC: If we look at *The Five Elements* it was intentional that I put the head of the beast in the position of the genital organs. In China, traditionally, the concept of the *Five Elements* is associated with politics, and competition, and ...

JBD: mapping territory ...

LC: so I violated the figure by placing the head of the beast where the genital organs should be.

JBD: What interests me in this work is the fusion of body and spirit – and your transformation of the “carrier mount” of the god. In Hinduism the Vahana is an animal mount that the gods ride. But in your work, it is no longer possible to separate the god from the carrier mount. The bodies of the god and the carrier mount have melded together; the carrier entwines itself around the body of the god.

LC: This is intentional. It is also my intention that all of the Five Elements are quite different. For example, in the west, civilization came later. Mostly barbarians lived in the west so here the facial expression of the white tiger is more primitive. And the dragon is associated with wood so the dragon’s tail looks like tree branches. These figures are simultaneously very detailed, and yet rough! Depth and no depth coexist as Gao Minglu was explaining to us.

JBD: In other words abstraction and representation also coexist simultaneously.

LC: Because one sees what one seeks, whether it is contemporary or traditional, my work can reach a wide audience. It can be interpreted in many ways.

JBD: One of the aspects of the *Soul Guardian* series which I particularly like is that the body has become the mountain, and the mountain has become the body.

LC: I want to explain why. The base is actually a mountain. I needed something imaginary which had the strength and the energy of a mountain.

JBD: Does that mean that the Soul Guardians started from the mountain base and grew from there? Or did you create a Body-Mountain and then placed it on a base that happens to be a mountain?

LC: I started conceiving of the work from the top first but during the fabrication process, I conceived of both at the same time. But I don’t really care about the little mountain underneath.

JBD: I think that the mountain base underneath is really important. Because without it, I, for one, could admire the form of the Soul Guardian, and I would probably recognize the discourse between abstraction and figuration, because the body itself keeps becoming more and more abstract. But by having the mountain base below, I was able to conceive of the figure as coming out of nature. I could recognize that nature – the mountain - and man / God / the Soul Guardian were being transformed into a new kind of being.

LC: It’s like medicine, you need a different prescription combination to make it effective.

JBD: The combination of the small mountain and the larger Soul Guardian above it also enabled me to see these sculptures as landscape. The Soul Guardians function not only as figures, but also as forms of landscapes.

LC: I want to explain. Can you see wind? No, you can only feel it. There is no color. But you can see the movement of cloud, and you can feel the wind. The relationship of the large mountain-like body on the small mountain is the same as the Lord of Wind stepping on a moving cloud. The movement of the clouds shows the movement of the wind. Under the cloud you have sand. I put just a bit of light on it, like the light at night. Now you can see wind and its mystery through these effects.

JBD: I would like to return to my own tradition of spiritual art and talk about Wassily Kandinsky. In 1910, he wrote a book, a very influential book, called *On the Spiritual in Art*. Kandinsky attempted to describe what the spiritual art could be in a modern society. He argued that it was impossible to separate the arts in the twentieth century, to separate, for example, art and music. He believed that you have to integrate the arts. He gave two examples of artists who were creating a new form of spirituality in the early twentieth century: the composer Arnold Schonberg and the artist Pablo Picasso. He said that what linked them both was that they had renounced the beautiful. In your vision of the spiritual in the twenty-first century do you want to pursue, or do you want to renounce the beautiful?

LC: I never wanted to either pursue or to abandon the beautiful in my work. But I do agree with Kandinsky. I read this book when I was twenty years old and have read it many times since. I think that the book is not bad. One of his main arguments is that music, amongst the eight great arts, evolves faster and that the evolution of music into abstraction is the fastest. Let's explore this! Kandinsky says about painting that it is slower in its revolution, and that architecture is even slower. When I was twenty I didn't disagree with Kandinsky but in the meantime I disagree with him that the evolution of painting and sculpture is slow. And while music can move through space, and break through the boundaries of space, visual and "hearing space" are different. With art, you need to see it, to experience it. In the past, artists were sculpting from their heart. The key issues in art making are not about form but about the five senses which we human beings have.

JBD: If you were to granted one wish today, what would you wish for these art works here? What would you wish that each viewer would understand?

LC: I have come to realize that there are not many people who totally understand my work but for the *appreciation* of a work of art, not everybody has to totally understand what it is. There are different perspectives, different viewers, different understandings. This is fine. I do not want my work to be immediately comprehensible in one glance. Art is subtle, I want people to make discoveries. In this state somewhere between clear and unclear there is a form of beauty.

JBD and LC: There is *yi*.

Beijing, October 18, 2008