

## Q&A with Artist Dapeng Liu

Welcome to Q&A with artist Dapeng Liu. I'm Professor Jing Han, Director of the Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture at Western Sydney University. I'd like to acknowledge that this conversation is conducted on the land of the Darug people of the Darug nation and pay our respect to the First Nations elders past, present and emerging.

Dapeng Liu was born in Beijing in 1982. To many, Dapeng seems to have achieved sudden success as an artist. He came to settle in Australia in 2007 and enrolled in a Master's degree in art history at the University of Sydney. He did so well that he achieved the Australian Postgraduate Awards (APA) to continue with his PhD studies in 2012. His research interest was in Chinese art history. The APA is a scholarship from the Australian government awarded to students of exceptional research potential. His PhD research went very well. But three years later in 2014 at the age of 32, he decided to discontinue his PhD studies to become a full-time artist after he was shortlisted as one of the top six finalists for the Archibald Prize. He went on to become a finalist of the Sulman Prize in 2015, a finalist of the Mosman Art Prize in 2017 and a finalist of the Archibald Prize again in 2021. To his and our greatest delight, his entry into Archibald 2022 made the list of finalists yet again! Our heartfelt congratulations to Dapeng! These prestigious awards have clearly recognised Dapeng's outstanding artistic talent and creativity.

Even if you may not know who Dapeng Liu is, if and once you see his paintings, you won't be able to forget them, as his style is very unique and distinctive. His colours, compositions, shapes and forms, and his imagination and perception are both striking and nuanced. While his artworks are often surprising, they also speak to and readily resonate with many viewers. His artistic probe into reinventing traditional Chinese landscape painting, infused with his own storytelling, is marked by his deep thinking, precision and his subtle sense of humour.

You may be wondering how this artist Dapeng Liu seemingly emerged from the middle of nowhere to create amazing works of talent. How did he transit from an art scholar to a fully-fledged artist? Where does he draw his inspiration for his art? What are his artistic pursuits? And what is he like as an artist and individual? We hope to answer of all these questions in my Q&A with Dapeng Liu.

*Dapeng, welcome to our Q&A. Firstly, your name Dapeng. Da Peng 大鹏 in Chinese refers to a giant mythical bird whose wings when stretched out are like clouds covering the sky and it can fly as high as over and above the clouds. Did your parents name you Dapeng with these great expectations?*

**Dapeng:** Actually, my grandpa named me Dapeng. Exactly like you said, it carries great hopes from my grandparents and parents that I can fly high and make good achievements in my life. It was the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi who first named this mythical creature "dapeng" over 2,000 years ago. He described it as a giant bird transformed from a giant fish and it had an incredible ability to fly. But interestingly, what many people have missed is Zhuangzi went on to discuss a cicada and a pigeon. The contrast is to suggest that no matter how big or how small one is, there are always limitations to oneself. Only when we start caring less about the physical and material world, can we

find peace in our heart, know where we belong, and eventually, find our freedom. I started to like my name more after I realised this other aspect to “dapeng”.

*You were born in Beijing in the early 1980s. What was it like growing up in Beijing in the 80s and 90s?*

**Dapeng:** I was among the earliest born under the One Child Policy. The 1980s was the first decade after China opened up to the world. Most of my memories of the 1980s and 1990s were routines of my school and family life. But two things stood out and had a great impact on my life back then. One was the access to the Internet, the other the influx of western commodities and culture. Those two things led to the increased information, and opened up my eyes and mind. I still remember the dial-up sound to connect the internet from my old computer and how I and my friends shared website addresses. I also remember going to the black market to look for rock-n-roll CDs that were confiscated at the customs.

*Who had the biggest impact or influence on you in your adolescent years?*

**Dapeng:** There was a mixed group of impacting factors. For instance, my father started teaching me drawing from life when I was four years old. My father himself was not an artist but had a deep passion for painting, drawing, calligraphy, seal engraving and playing music instruments. When he was a young boy, he was taught how to draw by his neighbour who was a well-established artist, Sun Zhijun. Sun graduated in the 1920s from the National Peking School of Art and was among the first generation of Chinese artists trained in western art. What I find fascinating is that Sun opened doors to my father to the world of art and many decades later my father passed that that influence to me.

Looking back at my childhood, I can see that some of the visual experiences have left lasting memories in my mind. I had visited the National Art Museum and Palace Museum many times. I don't remember any particular artworks but I do remember the exhibitions halls were so dark for a child like me. But the pictures and images I saw in my father's collection of art books perhaps influenced me more. I remember a book on the 1985 New Art Movement in China. I still remember the dramatic light and shadow and the vividness of human skin when I first saw a picture of a painting by Rubens. I was also amazed when I saw pictures of Le Corbusier's architectures.

*For high school, you went to New Zealand on your own. Why? You then attended Northumbria University, Newcastle. What did you study?*

**Dapeng:** I went to New Zealand only for the last one and half years of high school. I went overseas to study because my biggest dream at the time was to go on an aeroplane. It sounds funny now but that was my true reason. I am always a curious person. I want to see, experience and understand new things. To be honest, my initial dream was to study art in Paris, but an opportunity came up to attend high school in New Zealand, so I just grabbed it. I then got into Northumbria University and I studied Visual Communication, because it is closely associated with multimedia art and design including graphic design and 3D digital art. I also did a series of art history courses, which I picked up again after I moved to Sydney.

*After you received your BA with honours, you went back to Beijing and started your career, not as an artist. What did you do, and did you find your dream job?*

In 2006 I got a job to teach multimedia design in an international college in Beijing. I also started doing commercial design projects for corporations and private sectors such as branding design, animation, and graphic design. I loved teaching but had mixed feelings for commercial design work. There was too much repetitive work, and I didn't have total freedom to express my own ideas.

*You came to Australia in 2007 to live and to study. Why did you choose to study Chinese art history in Australia? Can you tell us one or two most enlightening things you've learnt about Chinese art history?*

**Dapeng:** I realised through reading that many leading scholars of Chinese art history were not from China but from countries like USA, UK, and Australia. Their research and studies often offer insights and ideas that I have never thought of. It was then that I had an idea about doing art history at university in Australia. When I did my master's in Chinese art history at Sydney University, I was so enlightened by the level of communication between the east and the west during the Middle Ages. For example, Buddhist art across Asia and between Europe and Asia; Roman glassware excavated from a Han dynasty tomb; depictions of ancient Greek columns and Persian floral patterns found in Datong Buddhist Caves. Those historical discoveries fascinated me. I also find how a generation of young Chinese artists who introduced modern art to China from Europe, America and Japan in the early twentieth century fascinating. That was the subject of my PhD studies.

*In 2014, why did you all of a sudden quit your PhD studies and decide to become a full-time artist? What made you so convinced that you could make it as an artist?*

**Dapeng:** I was not convinced at all that I could make it as an artist. I just wanted to give it a try. Not long after I moved to Australia in late 2007, I discovered the Archibald Prize competition and I submitted my entries a couple of times but did not succeed until in 2014 my portrait of Yin Cao, curator of Chinese art at Art Gallery of NSW, was shortlisted as finalist and in the top six paintings. After the achievement I made in the Archibald Prize, art dealers started approaching me and people wanted to work with me for my art. I felt I was at a crossroad between completing my PhD studies and becoming a full-time artist and I chose art.

*In your landscape paintings, at first glance, they are just landscapes, but at a closer look, one can notice many little but precisely painted details, such as Australian native trees, little people, houses, buses etc. Those paintings seem to say that nature is big, individual lives are small. What is the reason behind that?*

The reason comes from a traditional thought embedded in Chinese landscape painting and other forms of Chinese art as well as Chinese culture. It's a philosophical concept that explains the connection and the unified relationships between heaven and mankind. I remember the strong reaction I had when I saw a large original Ming dynasty scroll of landscape painting in a museum. Standing afar, I saw the mountains and mountain peaks in full view. Getting closer, I kept discovering those little houses, bridges and human figures and animals living their lives in different parts of the painting. It felt that the artist had created a world on paper. Those lives together with the landscape presents a realm of timeless eternity. In my paintings, especially my earlier works, I benefited a lot from that concept. I've added more elements in my own paintings, elements that represent east or west, new or old, including native Australian eucalyptus trees. When I first arrived in Australia, I found eucalyptus trees looked so different to the trees in the northern hemisphere. Then I became so interested in eucalyptus trees. I have realised those curly shapes and the fact that the trees leaves are not so dense are very applicable in my landscape painting because viewers are able to see through the tree and have a glimpse into the backdrop landscape.

I also draw a lot of inspiration from what I see in Sydney such as Sydney coastlines and sandstones. Modern and old architectures, even furniture and lighting have inspired me. I tried to break atemporal and spatial boundaries in my painting to create a dialogue between different things.

*You're obviously a very gifted portrait painter and each of your portraits has a very unique style. But the figures all tend to be elongated. Is that intentional?*

**Dapeng:** It was intentional when I created Yin's portrait. The elongated form reminded me of the elegant shapes of Song porcelain wares, especially the flower on the vase and it also suited the inner quality of the sitter. The painting got a lot of attention and I carried on using elongated forms in my other portraits for some time. But in my most recent portrait paintings, I have started moving away from that.

*One of the striking features about your paintings is the colour. How do you work out your own colours and why are the colours so important to you?*

In my most recent series of works, colours play a very important role. I usually make a lot of small drafts to test different combinations of colours that I think are going to work. However, when I moved my colours on to canvases, my ideas sometimes changed. So premeditation and randomness both play their parts in my practice. I see my current exploration in colour, or colour arrangement, as a challenge to myself. I used to limit myself to certain palette but I'm not satisfied with that any more. I've been reading books on the history, theory and practice of colour. There are almost endless possibilities in colour to experiment, in particular oil colour. The complexity of colour extends the potential, so I will keep exploring colour.

*In the relatively short period of eight years since you became a full-time artist in 2014, you have gone through a very visible transformation from stunning and heart-warming landscape paintings, mountains and waters or seas that are loved by many people, to more and more abstract paintings with a focus on shapes, lines, overlapping parts and colours. Can you elaborate on your artistic pursuits?*

**Dapeng:** There are apparent changes in the style of my paintings, but I know clearly that the core or essence of my practice has not changed at all. That is the use of *sandian*, 散点, meaning scattered perspective technique which is different from the single focus point perspective developed in Italy in the Renaissance period. I use scattered perspective to try to enable dialogues between different dimensions. It looks a bit surreal, which I believe can create more space and room for imagination.

Following this direction, I have explored different styles during the past eight years. I have tried both the premeditated and more spontaneous ways of painting. I have made adjustments between representational and less representational depictions. I failed a lot of times and wasted a lot of paint which is the heartbreaking, but I have also achieved satisfactory moments. I have given more attention to composition and colour arrangement. In my most recent artistic pursuit is that, I try to withdraw from manipulating what stories my paintings should be telling and what sort of atmosphere audiences should be looking at. Instead, I focus on colour and composition, and I want to leave the rest to viewers. So I sometimes repeat the same composition of landscape on different panels and just change the geometrical shapes and colours. Interestingly, they end up with completely different viewing results.

*Where do you draw your inspiration?*

**Dapeng:** I draw my inspiration from books, movies, and sometimes music I listen to. Viewing other artists' works is the most important part for my inspiration. Also, the light and colour that I see in daily life also inspire me. I think the changing light in the day is the most amazing part of life, as it changes the view of the same scenery or landscape. For example, I sometimes see the light coming

through a gap in the window of my house, and it then drops a shape of reflection on my furniture, or on the carpet or on the wall. Those quite abstract shapes have inspired my new series of artworks.

*Whatever profession we are in, we all have our fear. What is your biggest fear as an artist?*

**Dapeng:** One part of my fear is not being able to feed my family as that is the reality of life. Working as a full-time artist, there is quite a bit of financial pressure although I have been doing okay for the past few years. Still the fear of not selling my paintings and having bills to pay recurs in my dreams. The other part of the fear is related to the creation itself. I want to, and need to keep reinventing my art. I don't mean to be just successful from the sales point of view but to satisfy my own ideas of what my art should be. That is always something that I worry about, because I am usually quite critical of my own works.

*Now we have a few questions of multiple choices. First one, what matters to you?*

*A) To be true to yourself. B) To be successful. C) To make a difference. D) To be happy. E) All of the above.*

**Dapeng:** Very interesting multiple choices. I think my choice will be A) true to myself, and C) to make a difference, especially in my works, and D) to be happy, as I struggle a lot in the exploration.

*Who do you think you are? A) determined. B) interesting. C) idealistic. D) focused. E) easygoing*

**Dapeng:** I think I will go with A) determined, especially thinking about my painting, the process of creating different styles, I think I am quite determined. My early style went down quite well. Then after a few years, I decided to make a change and explore and take an adventure on new styles and new ideas, but some people told me not to change the style that worked well, as that would risk my art. I listened to all the advice but decided to take on the new direction. I'm always quite determined, especially in my artistic practice. And I'd also like to choose B) interesting, because I think I am a curious person. I like to read and am interested in documentaries on different topics, not just art related but also science, philosophy and other things.

**Jing:** We should add 'courageous' and 'inspiring'. You are very courageous and I think your story is very inspiring to many people and especially the younger generation.

*What is the constant challenge you face in your artistic creation? A) fear of failure. B) lack of financial support. C) too much fun. D) not enough time. E) constant disruptions.*

**Dapeng:** I will choose (B) lack of financial support, although I'm still surviving now. I will also choose (D) not enough time. We only have 24 hours a day and that is not really enough for artistic creations, especially when you need to have enough sleep to support daytime work and also I have two kids and I have family responsibilities to share. I am really happy to spend time with my children but in reality it is a sacrifice to the work, but I think for everyone it is important to find the balance between family and career. Then I will choose E) constant disruptions that come from the reality that I work from home. So I have a studio attached to my house. I have learnt to live with that now.

*Last question. Do you have any plan or set your goals for the next five years?*

**Dapeng:** No specific goals. I agree with some of the arguments I read before that if artists have very clear goals about where they go, you would have eliminated a lot of possibilities that may come along the way. So no I don't really have specific goals but I do have a vague goal in my practice which is to be more satisfied with my own artworks, as I am quite judgemental about my own works. I want to be more satisfied with my own works, so that I can get into the next stage of my creation.

**Jing:** I am not surprised by your answer of having no goals because that fits in with your love for Chinese philosophy, especially Taoism, which suggests that when you have no ambition, you are not limited by any particular ambition, or effort to achieve that ambition, so that you are able to achieve anything and everything. You should not be too harsh on yourself. Great people are often very critical of themselves or their work. Thank you so much, Dapeng, for your frank, insightful and enlightening answers. You are an inspiration to many people.

**Dapeng:** Thanks Professor Han, for having me.

\*The full interview can be accessed on IAC website. Link:...