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Wang Lan's Art A LYRICAL LANGUAGE

牧歌

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Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture
Building EA.G.03, Parramatta South Campus, Western Sydney University
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WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



Institute for
Australian and Chinese
Arts and Culture

澳新艺术文化研究院

About Artist

Wang Lan was born in Beijing in 1953. At the age of sixteen, she was sent down to the countryside in Northeast of China for re-education. In 1977 when the entrance examinations into universities were re-opened to the public, she was admitted into the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts and received a Bachelor in Fine Arts. In 1982 she started teaching as a lecturer at the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts. In 1989 she received a Master of Fine Arts. Wang Lan won the Silver prize and Bronze prize in the National Art Exhibition in China in 1989 and 1984 respectively. Four of her works are in the collection of the National Art Museum of China.

In 1991, Wang Lan moved to Sydney to join her husband Shen Jiawei, also an artist who came to Australia three years earlier and later on has become one of the most successful portrait artists in Australia. After her migration to Australia, Wang Lan has continued her artistic creations. She has held solo exhibitions at Coventry Gallery and Art Atrium Gallery in Sydney. Since 2001, she has been a member of the Bundeena and Maianbar Art Trail and opens her studio to the public on the first Sunday each month. In 2006-08, Wang Lan together with Jiawei Shen and Xu Wang created an epic painting of Malaysian history Merdeka.



Our Sun
Shen Jiawei
1988
oil on canvas

Artist Statement



I am not someone destined with a mission to accomplish. One can tell that from my paintings. I am sorry that I do not have a sense of mission but this is who I am.

I love painting, because I find painting interesting. Painting to me is like a language, a language that we speak in daily life. I would like to use this lyrical language of painting to sing a song, expressing my experiences of and my hope for this world, presenting a vision that lasts longer and goes further than material interest.

Painting to me is also like a companion, a companion who is more intelligent and persistent than I am. For the last several decades, we have been chasing each other, having had so much fun, as well as a lot of fights. What has been going on between us is hard to put into words. I feel very fortunate for having had art as my companion who keeps loneliness away from my life. In this world, my existence is transient, but art is eternal. Art is what my life relies on, but to art, I am like a grain of dust. That is why I say that I need art but art can ignore me. However, art changes our viewing and our thinking, so any ordinary sights or objects or phenomena can enlighten and excite us. That is the gift to us all from art.

Curator's Statement

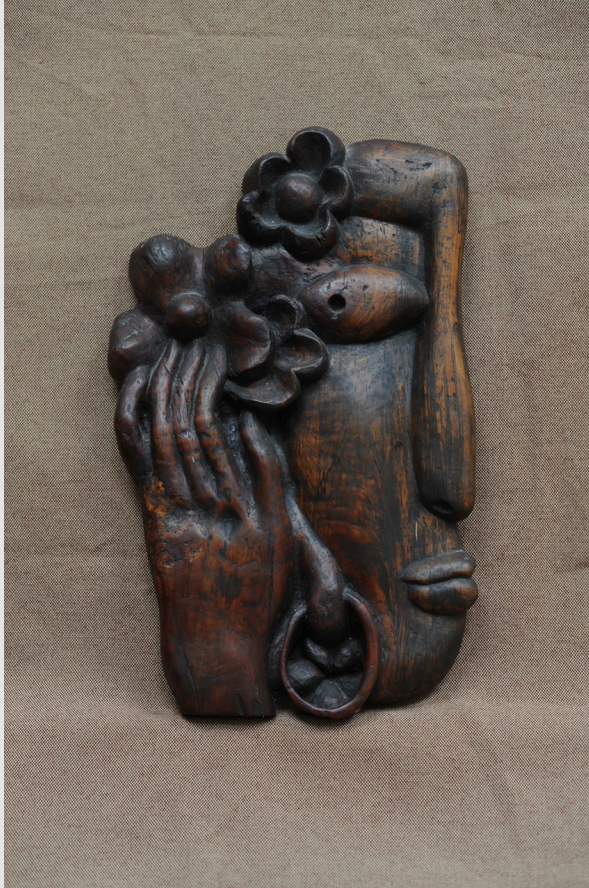
Shen Jaiwei

Wang Lan has been invited to have a solo exhibition at the Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture at Western Sydney University. The exhibition will show Wang Lan's artworks of the last five decades, mostly from her own collection. In that sense, it is a retrospective of her artworks on a small scale. As a member of the Bundeena and Maianbar Art Trail, Wang Lan opens her studio, showing and selling her artworks to the public on a monthly basis. But this exhibition is more of an academic and educational nature, opening to university students and staff on campus as well as general public. Having watched closely the development and achievements of Wang Lan's art over all these years, I am delighted and privileged to be the guest curator of this special exhibition.

It has been over 30 years since Wang Lan moved to Australia in 1991. Like many first-generation migrants, Wang Lan's life can be divided into two parts, the first part being lived in China and second part in Australia. However, her artworks in this exhibition are divided into three groups. The first group shows some of her representative works created when she lived in China. The second group, consisting of her paintings created in the first decade of her living in Australia, is most interesting and surprising, because in the paintings of this group you will see a different Wang Lan. During the first ten years after her move to Australia, although she was physically in the new country, her mind had been deeply absorbed in the world of traditional Chinese culture. The focus of her paintings in this second group is on her fascinating depiction of the scenes and historical figures from Peking Opera. The Chinese characters in the Song calligraphy style were perfectly integrated into her two-dimensional space; and with the exaggerated human figures and colours in sharp contrasts, the whole picture presents a very special aesthetic view. The third group includes her paintings created after we moved to Bundeena, a paradise for artists, twenty year ago. Living in the naturally beautiful place of Bundeena, Wang Lan has reflected the idyllic world in her artistic creation. Her mind and nature are united in harmony. In the paintings of this last group, black-haired village girls were replaced by girls with blond hair; thundering drums and cymbals were taken over by far-reaching flute music. Rainbow, birds and bunches of flowers falling from sky all become a part of the song to nature. In the meantime, her paintings have expressed her approach to the world and her choice and philosophy of life.

If one looks closely, one can see the three groups of Wang Lan's paintings are innately connected by her possession of child-like purity which drives her approach to her artistic creation. Her artistic language and style are distinctive and unique but also immediate and close to nature and to our hearts. Wang Lan's art speaks to many of us.

1978 – 1991



Flowers in the Hair

1987

wood carving

47.5 x 29 x 4cm

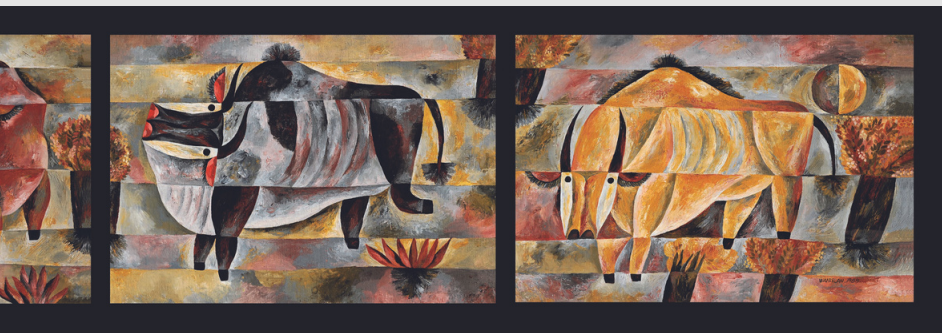


Homeland
1987
acrylic on paper
54 x 59cm



Country Road
1988
copper etching
25.5 x 26.7cm





Five Oxen
1988
acrylic on canvas
60 x 387cm

Words on Wang Lan's Art

Mabel Lee

Wang Lan's brush strokes are bold and incisive. Her colours at times are reminiscent of the bright primary colours found in painters such as Chagall and Matisse, yet at other times they are the muted hues found in the Buddhist murals of Dunhuang, or the vermilion and ochre of ancient rock drawings that are to be found all over the world. There is evidence of light and shadow in her paintings, as well as the influence of Picasso as she flattens what is normal three-dimensional reality to make it suit the two-dimensionality of her canvas. These, I believe, are salient features of her art, and a cursory viewing of her work will confirm this.

I said to Wang Lan that I unavoidably sensed Chagall both in her bird motif and in the stained glass technique that she often uses. Picasso must also have inspired her to fragment her equally prominent stallion and bull motifs that, as mentioned above, are found in many of her paintings. And Matisse must have informed her use of colour. But whereas the bright sunlight of the Mediterranean had influenced Matisse's use of colour, the bright sunlight of Australia must have influenced hers. Some of Wang Lan's colours are not present in Matisse, but are colours that are distinctly characteristic of those found in the Dunhuang Buddhist murals of China. I also said that I detected the influence of Fauvism, naïve art, ancient rock carvings, Van Gogh and even Australian artist Arthur Boyd's works.

Wang Lan ranked the German logic and rationality of Paul Klee as the foremost influence on her aesthetics. Chagall and Picasso she ranked second and third as artists who have influenced her work. Of Australian artists she said she admired John Perceval, Arthur Boyd and Brett Whitely. Wang Lan said succinctly: "My artworks are not complicated, and are direct and honest reflections of my attitude to life."

Her use of fragmentation was a style that she used to create a new reality, and was related to construction and engineering. In her analysis, while most artists seek to reproduce a three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional flat surface, she seeks to do the exact opposite. Her intention is to recreate the three-dimensional world as a two-dimensional aesthetic reality.

She stressed that she respects the two-dimensional painting surface, whereas most modern artists tend to forget that paintings are usually for hanging on a wall, or are murals directly painted onto walls.

Wang Lan sees her painting as akin to folk art, in that during the process of painting "memories are activated". Her painting is not tied to reality, so she enjoys great freedom in painting and she has no need for models.

1991 – 2001



Opera Scene:
Story of Pipa
1995
acrylic on board
60 x 60cm



Opera Scene:
Capturing Gao Deng
1995
acrylic on paper
49.5 x 57cm



Opera Scene: Yang Zongbao, 1996, acrylic on paper, 28.7 x 33cms



Opera Scene: Mu Guiying, 1996, acrylic on paper, 28.7 x 33cms



Opera Scene:
Di Qing Choosing a Son-in-law
1996
acrylic on paper
40 x 52cm



Opera Scene: Double-lock Mountain, 1996, acrylic on paper, 43 x 44.5cms



Opera Scene: Picking up the Jade Bracelet, 1995, acrylic on paper, 43 x 45cms



Opera Scene: Matching Dragon and Phoenix, 1997, acrylic on paper, 40 x 40cm



Opera Scene: Three Heroes Fight Lubu at Holao Pass, 2000, acrylic on paper, 66 x 87cm



Opera Scene: Yellow Crane Terrace, 2000, acrylic on paper, 43 x 44cm



Spring Ox, 1996, acrylic on paper, 50 x 58cm



Spring Ox No.3, 1997, acrylic on paper, 29 x 28cm

Q&A with Artist

The following Q&A was conducted between the artist, Wang Lan and Professor Jing Han, Director of IAC, on 5 October 2022.

Q: As we know, things often happen by chance but also with an element of inevitability. How did you become an artist?

A: I had been obsessed with drawing since I was a little child. So, I suppose that was the element of inevitability of my eventually becoming an artist. But it was also because I loved drawing so much that the obsession led to my stroke of luck to study art at university. People may face a few possibilities for their career development, but if you are obsessed with a particular pursuit and if you also happen to be a very stubborn person, you will be able to push aside all kinds of obstacles and disruptions along your path to get to where you want to be. Those who are pigheaded and persistent enough will eventually be able to be themselves.

Q: In your view, what is the relationship between art and life? That is, is art a reflection of life? Or art is another world created by artists?

A: Perhaps I can answer this question with an analogue. Life is like ingredients; art is culinary skills; and artworks are the dishes for diners to taste. To create a dish, you need ingredients. As an old Chinese saying goes, even the cleverest housewife could not cook a rice meal without rice. However, the term “ingredients” involves a wide range of materials and sources, including not only concrete images, but also the exploitation of human illusions caused by the application of different colours and different tones. So, as an artist, you need to closely observe the world around you so that you are able to capture the moment of epiphany in your thinking and reflect that moment of epiphany in your artistic creation.

Even if one may say that “art is a reflection of life”, it is definitely not a mirror reflection, but a special form of reflection imbued with an individual’s interpretation of life. It is also not entirely wrong if we say, “art is another world created by artists”, so long as we believe that braised pork and raw pork are two different concepts.

Q: When you moved to Australia in 1991, you were already an award-winning artist and a lecturer of fine art at university in China. Coming to this new and foreign country meant that you would have to start all over again from scratch and be confronted with all kinds of difficulties in daily life to boot. What made you believe or what kind of opportunities you had that led you to believe that you could continue to create art?

A: That's true. When you came to a new country, everything seemed to be different and you had to start from the beginning. But as far as I was concerned, life was a continuous path. Some people commented that I must feel a terrible sense of loss that now I had to do manual work in Australia whilst I was a university lecturer in China. In fact, I wasn't impacted much by that sense of loss. Making a living by working is what should happen no matter where you are. It had never occurred to me that I should get anything without paying a price. If you want an ice pop, you will need to pay a dollar. Because my inner world remained unchanged, my perception or cognition of the so-called loss was rather low. I just focused my energy and attention on overcoming difficulties I encountered. Besides, those difficulties were not that hard compared with the hardships I had experienced at certain phases in my early life. So I went out to work in the morning and evening, and spent the afternoon creating my art. Of course, having a strong body was critical. I don't think I could do that at my current age.

Q: You developed your artistic style early on. What are those determining factors on your style?

A: To me, it was not a complicated process. When I first started learning to draw, drawing a three-dimensional object on a piece of paper felt like magic. I was amazed. So in the first period of my artistic journey, three-dimension was everything. But later I came to understand that a canvas was a two-dimensional space and all images, or colours or tones would need to service this two-dimensional space. During the second period of my artistic creation, two-dimensional space became more important. So the next thing was to know how to work the best in this two-dimensional space to make the artistic creation interesting, thrilling but also sense-making. The number of variations thus became countless and no one could exhaust the possibilities offered by this two-dimensional space. So, if I can claim that I have developed my artistic style, that is attributed to the fact that I understood the ultimate importance of two-dimensional space. In fact, all artists need to face issues related to two-dimensional space. Some artists have tackled those issues in a very conscious manner, others have done that without a lot of awareness.

Q: You once said that the German artist Paul Klee had had the biggest influence on the way you created your art. How did you get to know Klee's works in the first place? What is it in his art that moved you deeply?

A: My answer to this question is closely related to my response to the previous one. My first contact of Paul Klee was through art books that I found in our university's library. Back then it was not long after the Cultural Revolution came to an end, so those art books could only be found in the libraries of academies of fine art. And I was at the transition period of shifting my thoughts from the three-dimensional space to the two-dimensional space. So my discovery of Paul Klee happened at the right time. His works told me in very clear terms what artworks looked like in the two-dimensional space. Of course later I learnt similar things from other artists, but Paul Klee appeared at the very critical moment of my artistic journey, so his influence on my creative thinking is most significant. His two-dimensional renderings amazed and inspired me. No wonder he is one of the most important figures in the world art history.

Q: In your works, there are some recurrent images of animals such as bull, horse, bird and fish. Why do you single them out and what do they symbolise?

A: Because of my personality and life experience, I have an "escapist" inclination. This keeps me away from "narrative" paintings and leads me to find a poetic language in my paintings. Poetic language by nature is ambiguous, symbolic and expressive of emotions.

Bulls are stubborn and horses are wild. They both are beautiful and strong, representing masculinity of nature. Birds are free. Watching them flying in the sky, I assume a bird's-eye view, looking down from the above so that I can see things more clearly. I am fascinated with fish, not only because fish has unlimited varieties and their colours are beyond imagination, but also because fish is so ancient, reminding me of ancient times.

Q: Looking back, how do you think living in Australia and its environment have impacted on your artistic creation?

A: Overall, I have found a free and harmonious lifestyle here. One can live a relatively simple and natural life, which is what I had longed for. All this is reflected in my paintings.

Q: Can you tell us your creation process?

A: Before I start a new work, I normally draw a rough draft on a small piece of paper, as big as a playing card. When I transfer the draft onto the canvas, I don't necessarily follow the draft but make spontaneous changes or improvisation as I go. Sometimes I didn't end up with a work that I had in mind but created a different work which I was also happy with. Occasionally a painting simply refused to cooperate and kept wrestling with me. At one time I couldn't stand the torment and decided on an impulse to paint over it. Before I finished painting over it, my husband Shen Jiawei saw what I was doing. He rushed over and took the painting from my hands and quickly washed off the top paint and rescued the work. This painting is showing in the exhibition (Horse with Bird, 2005-2013)

Q: During the past five decades of artistic creation, what has art brought you?

A: In this bustling world, art has been my lifeline and art has made my life meaningful. Creating art has brought me a feeling of peace and composure. But creating art has not been easy. I have made my greatest effort, but what I have achieved is limited. But that is all right. In front of art, we are like a grain of dust. Art has been a companion to me. It has accompanied me in living an interesting life.



The Ark
1997
acrylic on canvas
38 x 45cm

2001 – 2022



Lucky when Dropped
2006
acrylic on canvas
121 x 106.5cm



Lost in Paradise
2010
acrylic on canvas
61 x 91.5cm



The Horse with Bird
2005-13
acrylic on canvas
51x66cm



Harmony No.1
2011
acrylic on canvas
65 x 50cm



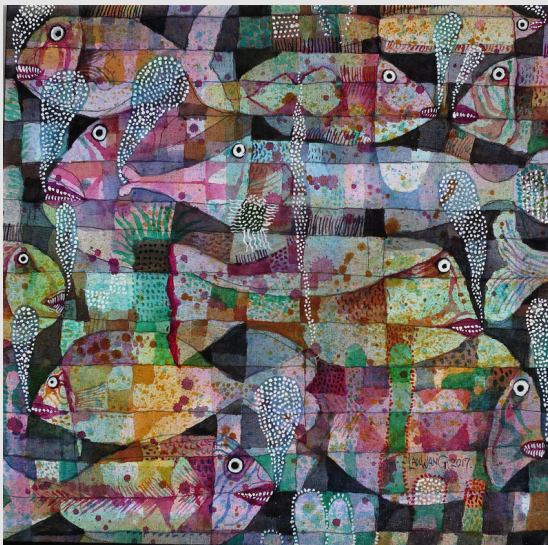
Home, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 150cm



Spring, 2017, Acrylic on canvas, 122 x 183cm



Metaphorically Underwater
2017
watercolour on canvas
40x40cm

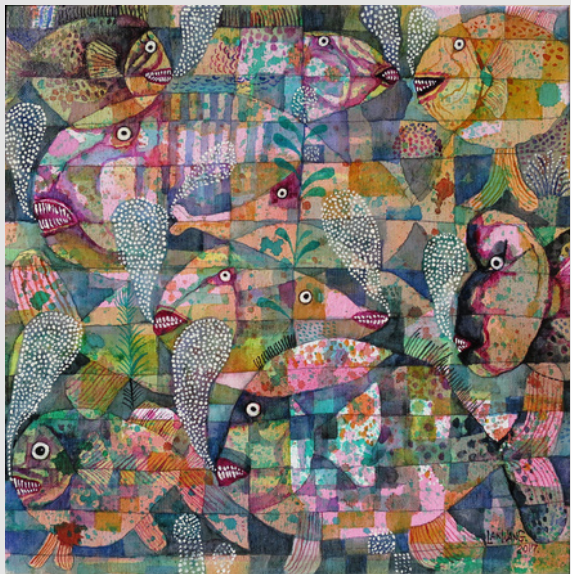


Metaphorically Underwater
2017
watercolour on canvas
40x40cm

Metaphorically Underwater
2017
watercolour on canvas
40x40cm



Metaphorically Underwater
No.23
2018
watercolour on canvas
40x40cm





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