

First of all, my thanks to everybody for coming here today. In particular, I would like to thank Cheryll, Barbara Jirsa and the Sammamish Arts Commission who made great efforts to make this exhibition/presentation possible.

My sister just talked about our experiences during the Cultural Revolution (CR). It is a pity that few materials, especially in image form, survived the last few decades. All we can rely on is our fading memory. However, one could still find the stories about the salon in our home during the CR in books written by some authors who recorded and interpreted that piece of history based on their own experiences and feelings.

The CR was a big disaster in the modern history of China, which brought tremendous pain, suffering, and even death, to millions of Chinese. But even during the darkest phase, we continued to struggle, while sharing, dreams and romantic stories. Hardship makes people mature, and provokes thinking. The legacy of the CR is still affecting us today, in both positive and negative ways.

At the beginning of the CR, my parents were persecuted, and we kids had little formal education, as all schools were closed. On the other hand, because of the CR, we had our literary salon, which allowed us to interact with many friends with similar social and family backgrounds and value systems, and engage in various cultural activities. Due to the special background of the members of this small group, we had the opportunity to access books, art albums, and music records, which were not accessible to the general public. We were also able to get books from internal bookstores and view foreign movies in internal theaters. Such opportunities enriched our experience and knowledge. Given the situation, we attempted to express our anger, disagreements and hopes through our literature and art. Together, we read and discussed, painted, wrote poems, and sang foreign songs. In short, these were the methods we used to provide our own enlightenment education. Nonetheless, we were in constant fear of political oppression. However, that fear taught us how to think, doubt, rebel, and view the world with a critical eye.

My interest in art started in that time. Many of my friends were from intellectual or artist families. Although all such families suffered in the CR, we kids had the opportunity to access various resources in art. We often got together to learn painting, and we were lucky to be able to receive instruction from painters and artists of the older generation, such as Li Zongjin and Zhang Ting. Moreover, we sought to express our volition and rebelliousness in ways different from those based on the orthodox and official ideology. However, due to the lack of education and the limitation of the then popular artistic paradigm of the Soviets, our artistic language was childish and meager. While we might get some inspiration from the “yellow covered books” (to be explained) in our search for new styles and language in poetry, we had little to learn from or emulate where painting was concerned. This was primarily due to China’s long isolation from the West. We knew nothing about western art. For example, most of our paintings were exercises in realism, even

though our themes were different from orthodox art. The only exception was Peng Gang. Unfortunately, few of our works survived over the decades, due mostly to the poor quality of the materials we used. Some of them were burned to avoid possible political trouble.

In the early 1980's, China finally broke free from the cultural oppression characteristic of the CR era, and in a relatively short period of time all aspects of the Western culture flooded into China. Various theories and schools of thought from the West also impacted Chinese art. Many Chinese artists tried to learn from the West in a rapid fashion. As the authorities relaxed their ideological and cultural controls, wave after wave of new cultural tides appeared. We followed the classical steps of mimic, modify, and create in the typical process for China to absorb and accept foreign cultures, and competed in modernizing our artistic methods. Much of what we produced at the time was crude, as we were eager to achieve quick success. Nonetheless, our paintings honestly presented our desire to be free after suffering such a long period of repression. Every effort in mimicking was an experience, a learning process, and a choice, from which we gradually accumulated knowledge and skills. Through this arduous process, we gradually formed our own value system and judgments, and laid the foundation of artistic creation for future development.

Through my studies, both amateur and formal, I got admitted into the graduate program of the Central Academy of Fine Art in 1988, and started to learn from well known oil painters I was greatly influenced by the environment of scholarly research and the value system at the academy. I did intensive reading in art theory. In my graduation thesis, I tried to address the question of what modernism is by studying the history of the development of modernism in art in the West. This effort also established the direction for my future as an artist. My education at the Academy also laid the foundation for my painting skills and art theory, and allowed me to merge into the tide of artistic exploration. In the 1980's, Chinese art was hijacked by the radical trend of avant garde thinking, many artists competed in mimicking various Western schools in modern art. Although I was not totally outside this trend, I made my own observation and judgment, and kept some distance from the trendy thinking, due to my critical thinking habit formed during the CR, and my formal training at the Academy. What I was interested in was my own choice, based on my understanding of art and my value system. That was probably the time when I decided to follow the path of eclecticism.

Here are a few of my works produced during my education at the Academy of Fine Art. It is apparent that I was mimicking the symbolism and surrealism popular at the time. During this period, I gradually developed my own language of expression and personal style. The painting entitled "Slaughter" was created out of my anger after the June 4th killing in Tian'an-men Square, which occurred while I was still a student at the Academy of Fine Art. I participated in the movement all the way through its tragic end.

Since 1992, I have been teaching at the University for Nationalities of China. Teaching is most suitable to painters like myself, who are not good at social interaction or art marketing. In the academic environment, I can stay away from the crowds engaged in rapid social transformation, and concentrate on my study and exploration of art. Here are a few of my later works, through which one can see my experimenting with various

themes and methods. My style was not yet finalized, as I was still curious regarding many different ideas, and I was following my interest, wherever it might take me. Even now when my themes are most fixed, I still like to explore different things every time I paint. I produced many art works during my 20 years of teaching. Some of these were exercises needed for my teaching; some others reflected the life of different nationalities in China, due to the nature of the university of nationalities. However, most of my important works embody my exploration and experimentation in color, form, line, and structure.

I enjoy reading books in humanities and social sciences, especially the “new history,” which has been discussed among Chinese intellectuals in recent years. We have gradually abandoned the old myths based on political propaganda, and are trying to re-interpret Chinese history, especially the modern part. The present time is a continuation of the long history of China. Even after the torture of various revolutions over the last century, the history is not interrupted. The modernization underway in China today is the product of the combination of traditional and Western cultures, both dissimilated and modified. Actually, this is the classical process by which different cultures were absorbed, mixed, and fused together throughout Chinese history.

Although the classical cultural tradition of China has been significantly broken, it is not dead. We easily see the ugly side of it, which has stubbornly survived. In the three decades since the open-door policy was established in the early 1980’s, China has made tremendous economic progress. The cultural arena has also been significantly expanded. We should be able, and also willing, to rethink that which has been acquired and lost as a result of this process. This is, of course, an on-going topic of discussion among Chinese intellectuals. While westernization and marketization have been the driving force necessary for the modernization of China, they are also responsible for significant damage. We should reject the elements in our traditional culture that no longer fit the need of modernization. Nonetheless, we should also recover and re-appreciate the valuable legacy and heritage of cultural traditions accumulated over thousands of years, which may have been lost during the modernization process. While we acknowledge the positive role played by western culture during the modernization process, we should avoid the tendency to accord supremacy to all things western. Certain aspects of western culture may not fit our society, and, therefore, may need to be altered when introduced to China. Such issues make the modernization of China interesting and thought provoking. We need to think deeply and thoroughly regarding such issues in order to understand the current situation of China. Only if we take initiative to find the proper approach to promote a multicultural environment, can we also truly find our own cultural identity, and rediscover its value and significance.

I have experienced every single period of the evolution of Chinese modern art. I have been inspired to explore various artistic styles and languages based on different understandings of art in different historic periods, including the radical and rebellious mentality in the early stage, which was the main source of our rebellion and creativity. I have always been learning and benefitting from western culture. However, after all, I live in the environment of Chinese culture, many components of which have seeped into my genes. My art is Chinese, created by my Chinese

mind based on my Chinese tastes. In the time of change, artistic views and methods coming from the West can no longer satisfy our needs today. While pondering various doubts, we turn back to our history, glorious in the past. We realize that we have actually never deviated too far from this history. Many aspects of Chinese culture, which are embedded deeply into our genes, still strongly influence how we make our choices. Although we are inspired by Western culture, we eventually return to the intrinsic path of cultural development of China. Of course, it is impossible to simply replicate traditional culture. We will be able to create new and lively Chinese art if we properly absorb and learn from Western culture. Many Western artists who experiment and adopt certain components in oriental art have also provided us good examples and inspiration, as they have shown that integration of West and East is the tangible and viable approach to follow.

It has long been the belief among Chinese artists that calligraphy and painting share the same origin. This conviction is similar to the emphasis on artistic language in the modern art theory of the West. This is also one of the psychological reasons why Chinese artists have easily accepted Western theories. Of course, some original meanings of the theories may have been modified by the Chinese tradition. The “school of language” in the West emphasizes the variability of language, by which new artistic space is created and expanded. In China, the tradition was to extract from images some abstract language elements, which have long become essential components of artistic taste, training, and ultimately, the norm of the value system. In this value system, the importance of learning from ancient scholars and artists is always emphasized, because they are believed to represent the ultimate and supreme state of all arts. Due to this conviction, traditional art in China has also become stylized and conventional. As a result, Chinese art has experienced little change over thousands of years. All efforts of ancient Chinese artists seemed to have dedicated to making the conventionalized language more exquisite, instead of creating new language forms. The modernization of Chinese art, in essence, is to break through the limit of this conventionalization with the help of the modernism of the West, so that art can become a vehicle and language for expression in the new age.

Continuous efforts have been made to break through the traditional Chinese culture, from the May 4th movement that challenged the traditions, to the revolution and politicization in the Mao age, up to the Avant-garde movement of total Westernization in the 1980's. Unfortunately, most of such efforts are more destructive than constructive. In particular, the art transformation in Mao's time was a total failure, a cultural tragedy, which ended up with more shackles imposed on Chinese art. All such failures are due cultural inertia, and the fact that the reform of art requires various pre-conditions. Destruction of the old is required in order to make room for constructing the new, which takes a long time to happen. Only if reform grows out of the cultural soil of China and suits the needs of Chinese people, will it have the vitality to survive and to further develop. The wave of modernism from the West has helped us get rid of Mao's shackles, and widen our views. It finally becomes possible for us to break through rigid tradition, while still keeping and further developing the good parts therein at the same time, so that Chinese art can revive with its new characteristics and become creative again.

Among Chinese artists who have made various efforts to reform Chinese art, I choose to take the middle road approach, inspired by Confucius'

idea of the “golden mean,” which I consider the highest form of wisdom. I accept all art forms as they all have their own reasons and values, but at the same time I am also vigilant regarding all forms of hegemony. I hold on my own ideals in art, and believe if all artists do the same, there will be a healthy ecology for diversity and coexistence in China.

Since the beginning of this century, my middle road methodology has become more mature, and my individual artistic style has evolved. More frequently I adopt the traditional artistic means and tastes in my art works. The themes of my recent art works are mostly flowers and landscapes, which are also important themes in traditional Chinese painting. Chinese artists are familiar with expressing their imaginations and ideals by such themes with their own materials and methods. I find this approach highly suitable to me as well. I am interested in colors that are bright and rich, but also tender and harmonious, of which the traditional themes of flowers and landscapes are most suitable carriers. Such themes allow me to extract various elements of painting, such as color, line, pattern configuration, and material characteristics, to be re-processed subjectively.

I appreciate the idea in the traditional theory of Chinese painting that brush and ink take priority over images and shapes, which are only the representation that inspires artists’ imagination. There have been many artists in new Chinese painting who are exploring and experimenting with brush and ink so that they can become a modern language that is more expressive. Their achievements have greatly influenced me. I have always been curious about certain aspects in Chinese painting, such as configuration, modeling, spatial arrangement, and the understanding of points, lines, and surfaces, as well as the complex and variable visual effect created by brush and ink. I try to understand and appreciate such issues and seek inspiration from them from an oil painter’s perspective. This has been my artistic and aesthetic pursuit, and I am trying to use such artistic elements in my own works.

In my paintings, images are only a framework, the carrier of the rich plasticity and expressiveness of the oil paint. In shape and form, my flowers are realistic; but in color, they represent my own understanding and feelings. I want the colors to be stronger than nature, and more stimulating visually, thereby promoting aesthetic charm and appeal familiar to Chinese people. On the other hand, my landscapes are semi abstract. The variety and complexity of the natural scenery help me configure my painting in a more orderly fashion, and express my imagination in color more freely, so that the beauty of material and texture, the intrinsic characteristics in oil painting, can be better expressed.

The paintings in this exhibition are the result of my experiments. I hope you understand my effort, and enjoy my works. Thanks again for everybody coming here today.