

EXTEND AND RETURN

Zhao Yi Qian in conversation with Elisabeth Condon



Zhao Yi Qian, Scenery (from At.Not.Space), 2014, oil on canvas, 110 x 200 cm

ZHAO YI QIAN. August 2, 2014, Hongquiao, Beijing Studio. On a hot summer afternoon, Zhao Yi Qian met us outside the Beijing Film Institute in a brown BMW and drove us back to his studio. Although we did not speak each other's language, he expressed friendliness, enthusiasm and passion. Zhao is active on Weching, a Chinese social media platform similar to Instagram, updating his feed with images of paintings, his piano, and travel destinations. He was very curious and interested about American art residencies.

Elisabeth Condon: In the autobiographical essay on your [website](#) ["Read Me," 2013.11.18 written in Beijing], you describe growing up in the early eighties in Shenyang, describing it as "an old industrial city in Northeast China (where)...there used to be a lot of factories. Crowd of people pushing bicycles surged out from schools and factories, laughing happily and talking cheerfully, after work or school... (on) small streets everywhere in the city and very few vehicles. People had much spare time to visit and chat with each other. They went to a friend's house directly by knocking on the door and often wrote letters to each other as well. Their life was very simple then, their thoughts and material conditions were almost the same." In this environment, what was your first encounter with art?

Zhao Yi Qian: When I was a kid, China wasn't as developed as it is now. My first encounters with art weren't necessarily fine art but cartoons, television, magazines and music performances from television and popular music. Popular culture differs a little from art, but there's something related in their visual aesthetic. Actually, popular culture has as many or more similarities than it does differences. In any case, popular culture would be what I consider my first relationship to art.



Zhao Yi Qian, Déjà vu (from At.Not.Space), 2014, oil on canvas, 180 x 135 cm

You can see that in the color. It has the feeling of childhood.

Graffiti was an influence as well. I saw graffiti and at first would copy it, then started making some of my own—scribbles, not necessarily what we think of in traditional terms of graffiti such as painting with a spray can or creating a highly resolved image. I also made my own copies of Transformer toys out of paper to play with, since buying a Transformer was too expensive. So a hands-on, craft-oriented interaction with art developed early on.

You write about your love of painting, “I was wondering why I was like this; there wasn’t any artist in the family history. So I regarded art as a hobby.” How did this perception change to that of professional artist?

In China’s education system, the *Gaokao*, or high school exit exam, offers a variety of career paths. The three major choices are Liberal Art, Fine Art, and the traditional disciplines of Math, Science and Technology. Though the traditional disciplines are hugely competitive, they didn’t hold a lot of meaning for me. Even the Liberal Arts provide too general a focus. The Fine Art exit exam was divided into theatre, dance and visual art exit categories. The latter set my course to become a fine artist, because although I hadn’t thought about it much before that time—art was more of a hobby, something I just did—when I had to make a choice moving forward, that’s the choice I made.

The Gaokao is a big deal in China, because it’s the first serious choice that you make in your life about your future, not the last or only important one, but the first.

In the website essay, you talk about passing the exit exam for visual arts, and becoming aware of CAFA. “The next year I had some conceit, shortly after that, I had doubts and fears, worrying if I couldn’t make it, what about the future, so I moved to Beijing with those concerns. I only read about Central Academy of Fine Arts from books before then, it was an unknown land where a nineteen-year-old boy arrived for the first time. I even did not participate in the pre-exam classes in Beijing, but god of fortune came upon me, I got the offer from CAFA. At that time, it was a lifetime victory for a teenager, achieving a life goal, but that was just a start. I enrolled (in the) the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 2002. It was a whole new city and a new environment to me.”

The exit exam not only determines what college you can go to but also where, which is very important. Location is equal to or even more important as which college. If I didn’t come to Beijing to study, it might be harder to integrate in the art scene here. Even when I attended an art high school, I hadn’t thought of art as ‘something I can go to college for,’ so there was a sense of mystery surrounding the idea of an art college.

What did you learn at CAFA? You have spoken of it in the past as challenging, competitive, thorough.

Part of the reason I wanted to go to CAFA is that I wanted to come to Beijing. It’s a large city, there’s a lot here, and as an 18 year old I could learn a lot from this particular environment interacting with new situations. I never really fit into the traditional Chinese education system anyway. The art environment was more inclusive, one that I could grow in.

The inclusiveness was more about Beijing than the university. Beijing is only about half Beijingers – the other half are from outside. It’s cosmopolitan. You have people from the South, or the North like me, who come with different lifestyle choices, behaviors and lives based on where they’re from. Back where I’m from, Shenyang, everyone eats the same thing and lives similarly, but then I come here and the Southerners say, “Why do you talk so loud?” Every group has their advantages and disadvantages; in Beijing they must adapt and become Beijingers or they won’t last here. In that way they learn from each other, because of the inclusiveness of so many people from different places.



Zhao Yi Qian’s Studio, August 2, 2014, with A Classroom, Which Doesn’t Look So New (from At.Not/Space) 2013, oil on canvas, 120 x 300 cm (E. Condon’s iPhone photos)

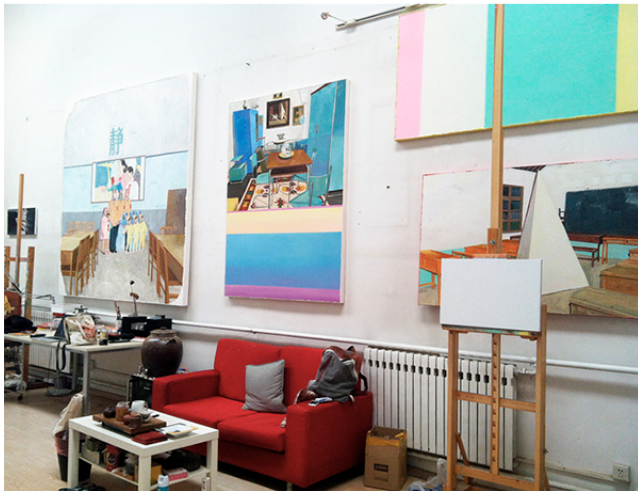
Shenyang is a factory town and your father a clockmaker, but when you arrived in Beijing you transformed your name (Zhao Yi Qian very roughly translates to “formerly Zhao”). In a 2011 interview with Chen Wenji you said, “Yi Qian is a name that I can identify with, stable and at home, but it also brings a sense of initiation. It was a completely new stage in my life, and I wanted to define a new beginning, renewal, recreation of self, so the new name was a yardstick as well as a reminder, an expectation of myself, be modest, be real, and from there I seek to improve.” [Zhao Yi Qian x Chen Wenji, 2011.] What inspires you to paint and how do you see your relationship to the past now?

This is a bit complicated. China is technically a country without a belief system, so that's what art is for me. There are two types of lives: the eternal life that people talk about, and the present life, from when you're born to when you die. The eternal life has two contexts, religious, and artistic. In the religious context there's the concept of afterlife. Whether it is Buddhism or Christianity most religions subscribe to a before and after, a continuation of the soul. In the art context, immortality exists within the art itself, so for Picasso or Matisse, what makes them eternal is not religious belief but the work they create.

I wanted to make the distinction that immortality doesn't lie in the object. The object is a physical representation of that immortality, whereas the immortality itself is more like a spirit.

Qi?

It's a bit like Qi, yes. The attraction of painting relates to Qi. In China, obviously calligraphy is an important part of art and art history. The process of painting is a lot like meditating, almost like a monk meditating, and even to this day I can't really use, very effectively, something with a hard point to write characters with. I can use a pencil, but I can't really write with pens. I prefer brushes, because there's a difference in using the soft material and the kind of power I get from it, versus a hard point. With a soft brush every stroke has its own life, spirit, and feeling of existence, which is individual and unique, which harder materials don't yield.



Zhao's Red Couch

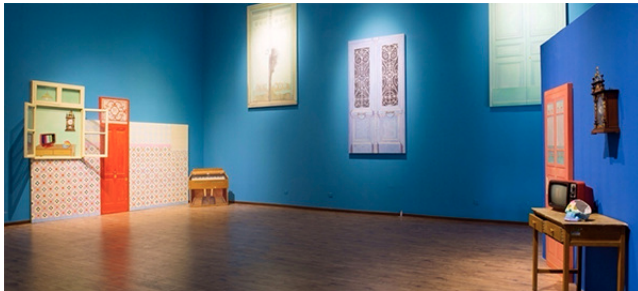
How do you find your images?

I use a lot of images from my life and experiences, sometimes the objects that exist around me. At times, these objects affect others, though that's not the point. (Gesturing to the red couch in his studio). A lot of people have come and sat on this couch and had good conversations, and the couch doesn't have anything to do with those conversations, but looking at the couch is a

point of departure and everything radiates from that. By painting I return to this point of departure. It's a very Chinese way of looking at things, circular, looking at the object and what the object is, extending then coming back to itself, like the *taiqi* (yinyang).



A House Painting Installation (from At Not/City), 2013



Gallery View. A House Painting Installation (from At Not/City), 2013

[Responding] Wu Ling's catalog essay for *Colored Skull* says, "Zhao Yiqian's... observation of the world is stationary objects. He observes the characteristics in different regions and the people's status from daily life everywhere. The (approximately) one-hundred-year old doors Zhao Yiqian painted don't look old and broken. They are clean and the color is still bright, like a gentleman wearing old but very clean and neat clothes. Time traces are easily acceptable." [Wu Ling]



Zhao Yi Qian, *Lonely Loneliness* (from the series *At.Not. Space*), 2014, oil on canvas, 220 x 180 cm

[Shifting attention to wall] In these three paintings on the wall, there is a house on stilts. The same image cycles through different contexts in the paintings. The recycling of images from painting to painting is related to what you just said about the red couch. Do the new paintings interrelate as a system like in your earlier series *AT.NOT.SPACE*, *AT.NOT/ROOM*, *AT.NOT/TIME+OBJECT*, and *AT.NOT/CITY*?

I painted the small one first, then the big one, and then *Three Penguins*, 2014. To me the object is a lot like a problem. In life we face different problems every day, which we solve in different ways. Using the penguin is a bit like solving a problem – sometimes you develop methods, or solutions, that repeat. For me the content here is similar. There's not necessarily a specific relationship between these paintings just because I painted the same object, but on some level there is a connection as a result. It's not necessarily direct or intentional. I also think about painting in terms of installation.



Zhao Yi Qian, *Three Penguins*, 2014, oil on canvas (iPhoto studio image)

Which goes back to the earlier work.

In the past I thought of paintings as discrete, but now consider the context of an entire space. Each painting can stand alone, but the paintings also exist within a context together.

I believe you've mentioned color as rupture before, the depressing quality of bright colors despite happy and innocent connotations. What does the color mean?

Color is something I'm very good with. Largely because of a strong foundation in painting, I find colors very important. Beijing is a grey city. After the communist revolution, color stopped. Everyone wore the same clothing; no one pursued an interest in or cared about color. But in rural areas, and nature, there is a positive emotional response to color, something severely lacking here.

Even now?

Even now. Chinese people aren't really used to color anymore; even a convention such as school uniforms doesn't allow for it. The colors in my paintings are not necessarily colors I think are beautiful, but are colors I feel are missing in the world around me. Of course I do find them beautiful. Often it's the beautiful things that are wicked.



World (from At.Not.Space), 2014, oil on linen, dimensions unlisted

Why English letters in the painting *World*?

Writing is simultaneously specific and abstract, embodying the relationship between that which exists and doesn't. English is a language almost all Chinese people recognize but don't necessarily understand. Words are very powerful and hold a lot of meaning, but don't necessarily have anything to do with my painting. Similarly to how words are not necessarily understandable in the world of the painting is the Chinese relationship to English language. They recognize the words but won't necessarily understand the meaning or what it is they're looking at.



Black Solo Concerto, 2015, oil on canvas, 95 x 120 cm (studio photo).

Talk about the thickly applied, colorful edges of each painting as a framing device.

I care very much about the different aspects of the object itself because I think about the paintings in the context of installation. For me the edges draw attention to an element in the painting that is important, but usually neglected.

Do you identify as a Chinese artist, a global artist, a local artist?

I haven't put much thought into what I specifically am, but no matter where I happen to be, I'll always have my background. I could go to America for ten years and still be a Chinese artist. People are in a constant state of reinventing or becoming themselves but in reality will never completely leave behind how or what they grew up with. When someone looks at a work of art, if they see it as international maybe it's an international work, if they see it as a Chinese piece then maybe it's a Chinese work, but otherwise it's not something I've put a lot of thought into.

Do you travel, and have your travels influenced your work?

Moving to Beijing was definitely breaking out of a mold to experience new things. New doesn't necessarily mean good or better, just different. But that's a process everyone needs to experience: judging new things, deciding whether they have merit or not. Travel and experiencing new things is very important to my work.

Who are the artists who have inspired you?

My influences and tastes are always changing in the same way that people are constantly evolving. Durer influenced me when I was younger; Ingres was a big influence in college. After college I became more interested in more contemporary work, as well as artists like Matisse. I don't feel particularly influenced by contemporary artists around me. Especially in today's world,

when everyone can get information on just about anything, for me it's quite the opposite, where instead of expanding outward my art influences become much more personal. I'll go someplace, have an experience, won't even necessarily see art, but then I'll think about and reflect on that experience, feel it again. That's my artistic process, so whether it's related to anyone else's work or not is a bit of a moot point.

Do you paint full time? How do you manage your life as an artist on a practical level?

I am a full time painter. I usually wake up a little after 10 then paint all day until it gets dark. I eat and go home. I love movies, so I'll watch a movie or two a day. Recently I've been studying piano I'll take time away from the studio to play piano and travel, because that's very important to me. It's important to take time to do things that aren't art-related because a lot of important influences aren't necessarily about art.

Your quote from the interview with [Chen Wenji](#), "Think about the invention of the modern camera, instead of killing modern art it intensified its expression." In the west, nostalgia is often considered atrophic. But in your work, nostalgia appears generative.

It's directed to how people internalize when they reflect upon things. Memory allows a certain continuation, but I think about what people seek to get out of life. In the city it's a new apartment, a new car. It's very easy to build a skyscraper today; all it takes is money. Actually, reverting to a more natural, more original state of life is a positive and beautiful way of living as well. It's not that there's any specific answer but my interest is in thought process, the state we live in, what's important and what's not, where things have been and where they are headed.

A skyscraper can be built, values can be externalized but meaning lies within how we internalize and carry concepts forward. Is that right?

Yes. There's a lot of pressure and depressive elements in today's society. So many people go to work, get off work, have a drink without taking the time to think about or internalize the things around them, similar to how the film *Fight Club* [A ticking-time-bomb insomniac and a slippery soap salesman channel primal male aggression into a shocking new form of therapy. Their concept catches on, with underground "fight clubs" forming in every town, until a sensuous eccentric gets in the way and ignites an out-of control spiral toward oblivion. Released October 15, 1999 (USA). Directed by David Fincher, Story by Chuck Palahniuk.] discusses peoples' relationship to the things around them and the way they understand what happens in their world compared with reality. [Fincher said *Fight Club* was a coming of age film, like the 1967 film *The Graduate* but for people in their 30s. Fincher described the narrator as an "everyman"; the character is identified in the script as "Jack", but left unnamed in the film. Fincher outlined the narrator's background: "He's tried to do everything he was taught to do, tried to fit into the world by becoming the thing he isn't." The narrator cannot find happiness, so he travels on a path to enlightenment in which he must "kill" his parents, his god, and his teacher. At the start of the film, he has killed his parents. With Tyler Durden, he kills his god by doing things they are not supposed to do. To complete the process of maturing, the narrator has to kill his teacher, [Tyler Durden](#).]

Returning to the 2013 website essay *Read Me*, Zhao Yi Qian wrote, "great changes have taken place in recent decades in China from a traditional agricultural society to an industrial society and then to market economy, "High tech industry,"and multimedia internet era, our rhythm is getting faster and faster. In a financial system form of society, everything's standard has turned into abstract numbers, and the number is just a virtual abstract concept. And the abstract concept under the financial system has been enlarged by leverage infinitely. We have become slaves of the numbers. Sometimes, I rethink whether we have to slow down, or go back, or even completely destroy the present mode."



Zhao's studio with views of Scenery and World, 2014 (left) and Zhao in his studio (right)

Zhao Yi Qian was born in Shenyang, Liao Ning Province in 1982. He graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Art in 2006 and lives and works in Beijing. Zhao's solo exhibitions include Today Art Museum (2015), Joy Space, Beijing and UCCA, Beijing. He has shown his work in prestigious galleries, foundations and museums throughout China, as well as Paris, London and Moscow. See more at www.zhaoyiqian.com.

Following the traveling exhibition My Generation: Young Chinese Artists [Pollack's exhibition selects artists born after 1976. In an [interview with Richard Vine](#) in the August 4, 2014 online edition of Art in America, she summarizes the artists' attitudes as global, individualistic, less interested in traditional motifs or traditions than new media and metaphors that better suit this time.] while based in Shanghai for six months in 2014, I interviewed five artists born after the one-child policy to determine how their thought and aesthetics might determine China's new cultural landscape. A Hanban Confucius Studies China Program's Understanding China Fellowship under the auspices of Dr. Cheng Amien, Ph.D., Dean and Professor, Institute for National Studies, Nanjing University and Shi Kun, Director, Confucius Institute at the University of South Florida Tampa, with assistance from Cherry Zhen Zhu of Artist Pension Trust, made these interviews possible.

- Elisabeth Condon