

## **Interview with Meng Huang by Nataline Colonnello**

N = Nataline Colonnello

M = Meng Huang

N: “Paradise Lost” is quite a lengthy series that you began in 1994 and finally completed in 2001. All of these works seem to be filled with kind of pain and suffering, a sense of fear. The title of the work is the same as Milton’s epic poem. Is there a connection?

M: In my eyes, “Paradise Lost” doesn’t refer to something specific; it’s more of a symbol than anything. At the time, I was sleeping during the day and doing most of my work at night. I remember thinking how the world seemed almost unreal. When I woke up I saw nothing but darkness and shadows; my world was literally filled with blackness. It didn’t seem to be a matter of choice – my world was black. Later on, I discovered that as a color, black holds a great amount of depth and mystery. The world in the daytime is a world of color but as night approaches everything is engulfed in darkness, becomes one color. Around this time, when the sun sets, I always feel a little more at ease.

N: In the series “Paradise Lost” there are scenes of nature, but there tend to be more focusing on industrial elements. I think the most important symbol from these works is the chimney sticking up amidst a wasteland, spitting out a cloud of smoke. It seems to represent both death and rebirth.

M: When I created this series of paintings I had only just graduated from school. I didn’t really need to think too much or get bogged down with all kinds of considerations toward who or what I should paint. I didn’t have any real pressure to speak of, but mentally or spiritually, it was a difficult and often confusing stage. I’ve always liked wondering aimlessly. My school was located right on the edge of the city and the countryside and I used to ride all over on my bike. At that time, I remember being filled with anger and I was obsessed with painting dead animals. But in time I realized that that wasn’t the kind of subject matter I wanted to explore in my art. If life seemed dull or slow paced, I’d simply hop on a train and go traveling to the northwest region of China. I enjoyed standing between the carriages, peering outside at the changing landscape. In the northwest there aren’t many people, so I could really just stand there and soak it all up. I remember at one point passing through the Gobi desert and seeing a factory chimney way off in the distance. For some reason that scene really stuck me and at that moment I knew what I wanted to express in my works. That scene somehow resonated with what I was feeling inside. So I’ve never really viewed the factories in my painting merely as factories: they’re more like churches because they touch on something deep.

N: In 2002 you completed the “Paradise Lost” series and began a new set of paintings entitled “International Face” which is still ongoing. The series takes as its subject those with Down Syndrome. Behind the faces of the subjects in these paintings there seems to be a poignant symbol – something international that in turn is connected with globalization and the bridging of East and West.

M: Well said. “International Face,” in terms of all of my works, could be categorized as thematic. Right now in cultural circles in China everyone is engaged in talking about how to find a bridge between divergent cultures. I can’t say it’s a concept I really understand or accept. But what I do understand is that the faces in my recent paintings, regardless of nation, race or what have you, have a certain likeness. “International Face” is a colloquial term used in China. Everything about those suffering from Down Syndrome, whether they’re laughing or crying, seems so real. I’m sure no one would want to trade places with the people in my paintings, to actually become an “International Face”, but at the same time we’re probably all incapable of their freedom, their sincerity.

N: From the series “International Face” there is one painting, “Ultimate Bliss” (2002), which is a particularly important work. In that work you take a totally different approach and seek to represent something very clearly and directly.

M: Of course, starting with “Ultimate Bliss” I sought a more conceptual approach with my work. After working under a similar approach on a few other pieces I began to think, “maybe I should experiment a bit more”.

N: In that work, the person is standing in front a decorative, carved rock, typical of Chinese gardens or parks. In the background is a grayish colored Paris. The man is standing, facing the viewer and showing the middle finger. Previously, in the “Paradise Lost” series, you were seeking to represent some kind of inner despair. In “Ultimate Bliss” it seems as though through this man giving the finger you are trying to make some kind of statement.

M: It’s like this. Before, I had paid a lot of attention to mood, but as time went by I began to doubt this approach, as mood is something that is changing all the time. Feeling and emotion also change. Later, I thought something thematic or concept based was better and produced some works along those lines. But in time this approach also seemed limited, susceptible to change, because I’m not really the kind of person who is intent on exploring a particular theme forever. So, I was left looking for something that was neither too emotional nor thematic as a subject. It was then that I discovered painting from nature or things from real life. Every time was like a new experience because such an approach actually requires the artist to experience the subject. It’s like I develop with my works – the whole process is an organic one.

N: I was wondering if we could discuss your series of works painted ‘en plein air’. Did the concept develop after your years of painting natural scenery?

M: I began painting natural scenes in 2004 – well, actually I began much earlier – when I was younger. Previously, the kind of scenes I had painted, like those factories, were a kind of realistic sketch of my life and its surroundings at that time. My life changed considerably after I arrived in Beijing. My thoughts and even the way I think have changed considerably as a result of a change in environments. In 2004 I suddenly realized that I didn’t want to be the kind of person to sit around, trapped at home. You know, I saw a lot of people buying houses, building offices or studios – it struck me that I should try and somehow buck the trend.

N: For quite some time you’ve been an avid traveler – you like to get out there and see as much as you can and then portray it through your art. This process not only involves painting, but it comes down to one’s character and other factors, doesn’t it?

M: Going against the grain has always been my way. Sometimes when I find myself in a position where I’m not sure what to do, I simply look at what’s popular, what’s the norm, and then do the opposite.

N: How theme-heavy were your previous works?

M: The importance of having an explicit theme or concept in my earlier work was minimal – that changed after I came to Beijing. “International Face”, for example, is quite thematically based. But with time, I realized that I prefer works that are neither too conceptualized nor emotional. Instead, I tend to like work that is based on some kind personal experience, something that stays true to life and that tries to explore the unknown.

N: So these works ‘en plein air’ are the product of some kind of personal experience?

M: That’s right – you could call it that (laughs). The idea is rather amusing.

N: You mentioned that the series, “Paradise Lost” was somewhat of a diary, a journal.

M: Yes. In the kinds of painting I do now I'm trying to break away from the whole pattern of working out of a fixed indoor studio. Artists who work in that kind of environment tend to be too conservative.

N: Painting outdoors can lead to the same can't it?

M: When I'm working outdoors I'm not so concerned with the painting per se. Because my works tend to be quite large, the process is different from say the previous generation of artists. Typically, such an artist might be able to churn out more than one painting on any given day, pack things up and then head back. But some of my works take over a week to complete. If I don't finish a work I can't just pick up and leave. In some cases it's literally impossible given the weight and size of the painting. So, I have to stand guard, as it were, over the painting, fearing that the wind or some passer by might damage it. In a way, I force myself to stay and by doing so I achieve my purpose, which is to let my art affect and even change my life in a very tangible way. It gets me out my studio and lets me experience nature.

N: These paintings certainly possess a kind of energy or force. In the process of creating works like these what do you think you get out of it – how are you affected?

M: How this type of life will affect me and change me – this is what I'm interested in. If I remained in my studio and went about my work, I know what the outcome would be - it's predictable. It's just like we were talking about earlier: if I have a car and choose to drive out and explore the world around me, my life is bound to be different than if I just stay at home.

N: When you're painting outdoors and someone walks by and looks at your painting – how important is that to you?

M: It's an incredibly important part of the overall process. From my point of view, the moment I pick up my easel and start painting, my exhibition begins and the onlookers passing by are as if people coming to a gallery. I remember the first time painting under such circumstances. There was this old man who woke up early every morning and walked some three kilometers with his dog just to watch me painting. On the final day, he arrived late and I had already folded up my easel and the painting had been taken away. Not being able to see the finished piece, he felt a little upset. I really kind of trust the motives of people like that – the people who came to watch me work because they come out of pure interest. It was such a different feeling from say the opening of show at a gallery where it's more like a party. This wasn't about artistic circles but it had everything to do with art.

N: What would you talk about with such people?

M: They'd ask me things like: "Why are you painting this road? What's this painting for?"

N: And how would you respond?

M: I'd answer back with my own questions: "How's your dog? I see you're out walking with your dog - what do you think about this road? Do you like it?"

N: There was one time when you were on Phoenix Peak and you were literally blown over by the wind weren't you? Would you mind relating the details of that event?

M: On that particular day I had found a local farmer to help look over my painting while I went back to his house for dinner. When I returned, I went into the tent next to my work to get some sleep. An hour or so later the wind started to pick up. This was my first time to spend the night outdoors in the mountains, to truly feel nature's embrace. As the night wore on, the wind continued to blow harder and harder and I couldn't get any sleep at all. I felt as though I were in accordion or

something, blown back and forth. At the time I couldn't help but think I was a fool to come out to such a place. I began to question if such an ordeal was really worth it, to go to such trouble for one painting – I mean, I could have really been hurt if the wind had blown over my scaffolding or something. At that moment, I felt so insignificant and powerless in the face of nature and was overcome with the realization that one must respect and even have a healthy amount of fear for the natural elements. After all, what was man in the face of nature's overwhelming power? The next morning when I woke up and saw the sun shining it was as if the whole thing never happened. I decided to carry on with my painting no matter what, even if it was a little foolhardy. (Breaks into a laugh)

N: The "Paradise Lost" series has quite a different feel from your more recent paintings. It's as if they emanated from somewhere deep down inside you; they're deeply personal.

M: That's right.

N: With your more recent works do you spend more time thinking them through, planning them out?

M: Yes. I definitely pay attention to the weather, for one thing. As well, the scaffold I use has three rungs for my feet, which constantly need replacing. Because I'm not tall enough you see, so I need to keep changing my viewpoint, my angle. I have to keep stretching and stretching to paint the whole canvas.

N: Your painting style has also changed. Before your strokes were slow and deliberate – you would start from a certain point and work your way outward until the canvas was full. Now it's totally different.

M: When I'm painting I have no preconceived approach; it varies based on the particularities of the situation. The last few times, for example, have each been different experiences and involved different approaches. Actually, it's not the works themselves that are most important to me so much as it is the process. The harrowing experience on Phoenix Peak left my assistants feeling a little down and out - they really felt bad about the whole thing. They went on about how it was their fault that the painting was blown to shreds by the wind. I told them that as long as they set up the scaffold and I can stand up and do my job, then the rest is easy.

N: While your themes and technique have changed over time, your choice of colors has remained consistently dark.

M: A friend of mine once commented on the same thing. I told him that if I used brighter colors people would be asking why I didn't use darker colors, so it's really a non – issue the way I see it. Black is kind of convenient; it reflects an attitude. Unless deep down I had no doubts about myself or the world around me, no perplexities, I wouldn't change from black.

N: So what does the color black mean to you; what's the attraction?

M: It's intuition, and intuition is the most important thing to me. At times it feels like I live amidst a series of contradictions and hesitation – painting is no exception. From the first stroke of the paintbrush I can't help but feel that it's not quite right. I paint another stroke to try and modify the one before it, but still it's not what I want. Stroke by stroke, bit by bit, it's like a constant dialogue with myself. Right up until the end it's like this – a slow, uncertain process. The whole thing seems something like a game, a riddle, something I don't know the answer to, something attracts me and ultimately reveals itself to me. Not until the end do I really know what it is I'm creating.

N: I'd like to discuss for a moment the connection between your use of black and traditional Chinese ink-and-wash paintings. In traditional Chinese landscape painting there is a sense of balance that doesn't seem present in your works. In your paintings there is much more black than white - the opposite really of what we see in more traditional works.

M: It looks as though you have some understanding of traditional Chinese ink-and-wash paintings. I guess you could say that traditional Chinese landscape painting left its mark on me. In the tradition of such works, black was used to accentuate the white space around it. The concept was to express meaning through the playful contrast of black and white. But I don't think you can make any direct comparisons between my work and the ink-and-wash tradition of painting in China. I believe there's something vast and penetrating about the color black, something that's makes it not easy to see through. I feel that it has more depth than other colors; it lets you feel pain or sadness while at the same time gives a sense of magnificence.

N: I know you're an avid reader and enjoy literature. You were heavily influenced by Goethe's poem, "Abendlied". Perhaps after reading it you began to contemplate new ideas and then began work on your series "Paradise Lost".

M: Goethe's poem goes:

*When on thy pillow lying,  
Half listen, I implore,  
And at my lute's soft sighing,  
Sleep on! what wouldst thou more?  
For at my lute's soft sighing  
The stars their blessings pour  
On feelings never-dying;  
Sleep on! what wouldst thou more?*

When I read it I couldn't help but feel that it was describing a beautiful landscape. Only later did I find out that he was actually talking about death. Thinking back on it, it's hard to say exactly how this particular poem shaped my works at the time, but certainly it provoked certain thoughts.

N: Painting is something visual whereas reading is textual. What's your attitude towards literature?

M: One of its functions certainly is entertainment; it's something you can do to pass the time. But another role is that it serves as a medium for communication. By reading we have the potential to modify our behavior. You know, I'm always wondering what kind of person I am, questioning who I am.

N: Are there any other works you've read that influenced you in the way Goethe did?

M: It's not so easy to stumble across a book that can really have an impact on me. It's the same with people: you have to be patient and wait. In the past couple of years I haven't really read anything that's been able to stir me, as did Goethe's work earlier.

N: Any thoughts towards your future works?

M: All I hope is that they're better able to express what I feel within me.

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Translation from Chinese: Kirk Kenny