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INTERVIEW WITH LI CHEVALIER – ARTVIATIC

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by AGATHE MOLEY | Dec 3, 2017 |

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Li Chevalier © Dr Li Chevalier

‘An uprising above and beyond oneself, above and beyond everything, a miraculous uprising that is at the same time acquiescence, an acquiescence without limits, soothing and exciting, a torrent and a release, a contemplation, a craving for more than release’ – Henri Michaux, L’Infini turbulent (1957)

When you push open the door to Li Chevalier’s studio, the enthusiasm of these lines taken from the great French poet can’t fail to resonate with the same intensity.

An artist born in Beijing and imbued with the culture of her native country, she has constantly embraced other cultures, from Paris to London, from Florence to Dubai, diluting them in order to extract their quintessence. And *‘to embrace life’*, as she says, in the direction of other horizons...

Science Po in Paris and philosophy at the Sorbonne, art schools in Florence and Paris and then a degree from Central Saint Martins in London, have given her a cosmopolitan outlook and – from her numerous exhibitions – international recognition: at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rome, National Art Museum of China, the Today Art Museum in Beijing, the China Art Museum in Shanghai, the China National Opera and finally in the

context of the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Franco-Chinese relationship. Two major paintings by the artist have featured in the French Embassy collection in China since 2011, alongside works by Zao Wou-ki and Chu Tequn. Her work is part of the permanent collection of, among others, the National Museum of China, the China National Opera, the Bernard Magrez Institute...

NEWS OF THE ART WORLD: Starting with the two words 'link' and 'ink', which seem to be key words for you, could you explain your work in terms of East and West, of figurative work and abstraction?

LI CHEVALIER: I must immediately pay tribute to François Julien, the famous sinologist who devoted a huge number of books to Chinese pictorial art. In the course of an interview about the emergence of contemporary ink painting in which I presented my own work, it was he who used the words 'link and ink': this title that he gave me for a potential exhibition perfectly fits my situation, my search and also myself as an artist.

Link because I was born in Beijing and came to France in the 1980s. I have lived since then not only between China and France but also between Asia and Europe. I've lived in Indonesia, Japan, Qatar, then back to China, followed by 2 years in England for my studies and finally multiple trips to Italy. Having grown up in an aesthetic environment based on the art of calligraphy and traditional ink painting, I discovered Japan when I was an adult following a long stay in Europe and this encounter with Japanese culture aroused a very strong feeling of nostalgia in me. I had the impression that I was in the setting of a classic Chinese novel, a place where my ancestors had lived. It was as though an ancient culture was reappearing that had been lost underneath ideological destruction. Japan most certainly enjoys the influence of Confucian culture on a pictorial level, on a calligraphic, poetic level...

The landscapes of the great deserts and infinite space also seem to inspire you...

Yes, the Middle East is my second place for inspiration. When I stayed in Qatar, I introduced the sands into my painting on a massive scale. When you go into the desert there is the sea flowing alongside the dunes, both flawless, spread out before you, a sort of expanse, of dispersal, of infinity... These numerous journeys and extended 'intercontinental' stays give me the opportunity to live between cultures... I constantly return to Italy because Italy is a sanctuary of beauty. There, the beautiful is sacred. During my last stay in Rome and then Tuscany in 2017, I saw 3 or 4 exhibitions which had beauty in the title. I think it is regrettable that in certain countries, including France, the word 'Beauty' seems to be a term if not forbidden then at least incongruous when you use it in the context of art. Championing beauty in art is almost synonymous with a reactionary act refusing all change. As though art could only change by heading towards ugliness. The cult of conceptual art forces us to reject aesthetic emotion, the poetic, considering them to be antiquated and insipid.

And ink is connected to this idea of 'link'?

Absolutely, traditional ink painting combines with water. It can't manifest its beauty and all its subtleties without being diluted. What counts most in this art form is not only the contrast between the two extremes of the blackness of the ink and the clearness of the water, but above all the interpenetration of these two poles that gives rise to a thousand shades of grey. The subtlety of the grey places it perfectly within the idea of 'Link'.

Calligraphy and ink painting are the most characteristic art forms, the most typical of Chinese pictorial art, practised in every family. Within it, one can distinguish several schools, including the academic school and the school for scholars.

Do you consider yourself a scholar?

I don't know that I am worthy of the term scholar, which according to Chinese tradition is a master of poetry, music, calligraphy and pictorial art, but my paintings fall within the tradition of scholars' paintings on several levels. A particular example would be the philosophical and spiritual tendencies of this type of painting, which is summed up by the dialogue between man and nature. I am thinking also of its proximity to poetry.

Is it the search for a lost ideal, like in idealist German philosophy, and more particularly in Romanticism, in the quest for an essential organic unity?

I notice a similarity between the European Romantic aesthetic and the poetic and pictorial art of the east. The great themes of European Romanticism, notably its proximity to nature, desire for isolation, exhilaration of solitude, nostalgia, reverie etc... all these themes are very present in oriental poetic and pictorial art. The difference is that in the east, these themes are treated with restraint and modesty whereas in the west they take on their full magnitude. As for my own painting, the search for a lost or forbidden ideal, as well as the violent feeling of schism generated by this quest, overruns the entirety of my work.

Speaking of philosophy, I have never understood why I was so attracted by speculative philosophical thinking. It is undoubtedly linked to this sort of nameless violence that I experienced when I was young and the desire for rebellion. I am looking for an answer to this 'why'! And this 'why' led me to collect all books on philosophy that could give me an answer. I should also say that during the Cultural Revolution, a child of 6 could already talk to you about the 'dialectic' of negation and the negation of the negation because it was one of the words buzzing around their ears from dawn till dusk. People talked to you about the dialectic materialism of Karl Marx, then of Hegel, Feuerbach etc..

Beyond philosophical heritage, European techniques also make their way into your work.

As you know, the Chinese contemporary art that is known in the west falls within the pure plastic tradition of European or American art, I'm thinking in particular of surrealism and pop art, and other forms of more contemporary art like conceptual art. The question is what will we do with Chinese traditional ink painting? Do we want to leave it rooted in tradition or can we also extract something from it? The idea is not to defend a cultural identity but to enrich this typically eastern artistic language in a fertile process of encounters; encounters and crossover. Faced with cultural standardisation, my path lies in trying to find singularity again.

Conversely, are you concerned with updating this technique in the contemporary world?

Born in the west, aesthetics as a systematic – or even scientific – study of beauty has never been a great Chinese preoccupation. If we compare the meanings of beauty, the thing that strikes me most is the absence of the concept of the sublime in Chinese philosophy. The principal aim of eastern art, whether pictorial or musical, is to celebrate harmony in order to nourish life and the feeling of peace. That is all very different from this aesthetic exaltation

in joy and in pain that transports western artists.

Does the notion of 'ravish' have meaning in your work, in its double sense?

The sublime is completely absent in the Chinese aesthetic, which looks for harmony, appeasement. Whereas with the sublime one finds the concept of pain, a type of ravishing! But many institutions don't want it, thinking that it isn't sufficiently provocative. 'You aren't making people angry enough!' But I am angry about that. We artists who bring an aesthetic message don't have a platform. Galleries of modern art only do impressionism, they only exhibit the work of dead people, and contemporary art will tell you you aren't provocative enough. Where are we going?

To your next exhibition?

I am going to exhibit at the Sienna art gallery, Santa Maria della Scala, from May to July. And in fact at the moment, the gallery is showing Ambrogio Lorenzetti, a painter from the Sienese school who was active between 1317 and 1348. It seems to me that Italian galleries are less sectarian in matters of style, trend or era, often showing a more universal calling. Politics separates but art unites. On this point I think France has things to improve on. Between the old and the new, between those who care about beauty and those would like to subvert it, interesting dialogues can take place. My last exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rome was on at the same time as an Anish Kapoor exhibition.

Following Italy, we can only think about this relationship between sanctification and de-sanctification...

I don't claim any allegiance to any religion: this is linked to my own experience, as I lived in a context where all religions were forbidden. But that didn't prevent Mao from deifying himself, this son of Heaven. The concept of the sacred is after all a product of this thing that is almost untouchable, for which one can lay down one's life. Whether it is in Italy or elsewhere, whether it is within religion or outside religion, the sacred is very present. What fascinates me is this sort of fervour towards a type of transcendence.

Would the recurrence of music, particularly in your visual symphonies, aim for this craving for the absolute, as Wagner was wanting in his total work of art?

I am a great lover of music from the Romantic and Post-Romantic era. It is in these works that I understand the word 'sublime'. Listen to the opening of a piece by Wagner and you will understand what brings art to life. My work in paint has gone from a more peaceful period to a darker expression. I had devoted one of my dissertations in London to the subject of Nihilism and the Zen aesthetic. Today I am on the verge of abandoning reference to the concept of Zen because art is this thirst for the absolute. Without this complete fusion between the world and the artist which gives rise to vibrations, there wouldn't be art. The trajectory of the artist is more like the *via dolorosa* of Jesus than the solitary path of a Buddhist monk.

Until you reach Dionysian art?

In my opinion the artist as a person, particularly as far as I'm concerned, is closer to Dionysus, this god of intoxication, than to Apollo; one day I am certainly going to do a work on intoxication and art, by the way.

But Apollo is definitely present in your work...

Apollo, god of harmony, comes into play in the area of lyricism. In the creation of art, in order to achieve something of beauty, I am loyal to the invariability of harmony in composition, and the contrast between light and dark.

Do you position yourself within the rupture with regard to the revolution post Duchamp?

I am on the opposite side from Duchamp and in relation to artistic legacy from the west or the east. I am on a course that evolves without rupture. I am waging a revolution without weapons, without guns, without knives, a humanist revolution, without abandoning all that has been inherited.