

MAGICIAN SPACE 魔金石空间

GETTING TO KNOW YOU AGAIN

和你再认识一次



THE EXHIBITION OF QIN JIN

秦晋作品展

2009.9.12—2009.11.11

魔金石空间
MAGICIAN SPACE

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Qin Jin: Getting to Know You Again

Curator: Karen Smith

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"The most violent act humans can do to anything is to destroy it so completely it disappears forever. Fire does this. We rarely see flames today in the course of our daily existence, outside of the kitchen. Fire is danger, it is cleansing. It is pure violence. I found it to be very in synch with my emotions."

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Installation View

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Can I Stay With You a While Longer?
2009
Performance & Installation
Dimensions variable

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29 Years Plus 8 Months and 9 Days
2006-2009
Performance & Installation and Video
Dimensions variable











Article

Getting to Know You Again

"...the destruction of the world is the last, almost desperate attempt to save myself from being crushed by it."¹

Few people, if any, are entirely familiar with all of Qin Jin's works: it is not exactly possible to be so since much of her work is created beyond the public realm. One might assume that most artists create in the privacy of their studios, but most artists produce works that can be taken out of the studios and put into public spaces, galleries, museums and such like, for public consumption and appraisal. Qin Jin's work differs in that it is frequently akin to a private act, and being comprised of an action that requires a time and a physical condition such that an art space (museum or gallery alike) cannot easily accommodate—for reasons of practicality as well as public safety—it is rarely 'seen' in its entirety. The actual artwork, the piece that ought really to be witnessed by an audience, remains hidden from them. The reasons for this are entirely practical. To date, in a career that dates from roughly 2003, Qin Jin's most significant works have involved various degrees of arson, enacted upon a small group of specific objects that both before and after they are consumed by fire, invoke human nature as much as human experience in a broad inclusive sense, whilst simultaneously becoming the embodiment of an intense emotional trauma that belongs to the artist alone. Similar to effigies that were once consigned to the funeral pyre along with a departed soul, Qin Jin chooses certain items for the role of sacrificial object, and burn them if the desired cleansing of the soul is to be achieved. It is for this reason that Qin Jin necessarily denies a public presence whilst the ritual is enacted—assistants can vouch for the intensity of the blazes, and the danger of standing too close. But as a result, it is usually only blackened remnants, or traces in the form of photographs, that remain to stand evidence for the work. For the public, this may be read as simply a process by which objects and materials are reduced to mere ashes, the thrill of 'playing with fire', but for Qin Jin it is the very substance of her art.

Qin Jin graduated from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art in 2003, and continues to teach in the high school affiliated to the academy which was where her own training began. She followed a route that is still privileged today: from affiliated high school through the academy's oil painting department, before completing post-graduate studies in the same department. Curiously for all these years spent painting, there is little evidence of canvas works either in the handful of catalogues that include, or are dedicated to, her work, or in her studio. Interestingly Qin Jin claims a violent aversion to the life model, which seems to have impacted her interest in painting in her student years, and perhaps explains her fascination with the work of American painter Edward Hopper (the subject of an extensive dissertation she produced in 2003), whose scenes of the American urban environment are rendered with the merest hints of human presence or activity. With no feeling for the anatomical challenges of the human body, and an abhorrence of the aura of the life room, instead she read. The studio contains a number of canvases stacked up in a corner, large ones too, but they are so laden with dust as to suggest years of neglect. Others are simply blank. Evidence of activity is provided instead by a small number of delicate watercolour sketches on paper, most of them half finished; these are remnants from earlier experimental series produced using watercolour or gouache, or a combination of utterly minimalist pencil marks, and of a mood which has latterly evaporated. It is a shame, perhaps, for these unfinished pieces possess a tantalising tension that hints at a breakthrough just ahead; yet neither the inclination, nor the time came right to take them to the next level. Qin Jin's will to experiment as a student was given little direction or encouragement at the academy—that being the system it was and largely remains within academies nationwide. Experiment then was undertaken—alone—within conventional parameters such as scale: she produced drawings of a monumental size being almost four meters high and over two meters wide purely to amuse herself, or invoked the same motif—usually an unusual human posture—but from a variety of angles and using various media. The result a clinical form devoid of

1. Erich Fromm, 1941, as quoted on Wikipedia

emotion beneath a deceptively alluring veil of marvellous washes, drips and pools of transparent pigment.

What is striking about the small number of works one can see is that absolute sense of pace—slow—necessary. There is no urgency in her work, and clearly no desire for volume. Although Qin Jin is obsessive in many of the ways she fixates on an idea and wrestles it out into the form of 'art'; she has no affinity with artists like Giacometti or Frances Bacon, or even Jia Aili, to use a more immediate example; artists who approach the same issue, using the same formal methodology again and again, destroying what does not work in order to take what was learned and discovered to the next attempt; nor those artists who approach art as a day job and who can sit down and work like clockwork. Qin Jin waits on an urge that needs to be overwhelming, all-consuming if it is to push her to action. This methodology pivots on the intensity of her personal experience; a Proust-like awakening of the senses as memories are pricked as the owner is confronted by a sudden *déjà-vu* in later life. The conundrum in her work then is that it is at once experimental and well thought through process. For having been moved to act, she is not careless in execution, nor random in her methods. The urge dictates the form, the process—which is why the work is well thought through. It requires only that she find the perfect combination of elements that will combust in the desired manner—literally and metaphorically—wherein lies the need for experimentation.

If one were to seek the point at which a breakthrough occurred in Qin Jin's brief career, then it would be traced back to her reading of philosophy and, in particular, psychology and the work of Erich Fromm which she discovered whilst at the academy.

Fromm's most well-known work, *Escape from Freedom*, attempts to unravel the human urge to pursue freedom as the driving impulse of each individual, but that having attained it, or something approaching it, is supplanted by an urge to surrender to a source of authority or control. In seeking to analyse such conundrums within the modern political order and the capitalist system, Fromm looked to medieval feudalism as a point of comparison, which was characterised by a lack of individual freedom, a rigid structure, and obligations required of members of its society. This led him to conclude that "...a person was not free in the modern sense, [but] neither was he alone and isolated. In having a distinct, unchangeable, and unquestionable place in the social world from the moment of birth, man was rooted in a structuralized whole, and thus life had a meaning which left no place, and no need for doubt...There was comparatively little competition. One was born into a certain economic position which guaranteed a livelihood determined by tradition, just as it carried economic obligations to those higher in the social hierarchy."²

This description of medieval society sounds remarkably like China under communism at its most idealised: "...man rooted in a structuralised whole" where "life had a meaning which left no place, and no need for doubt". For a Chinese reader this certainly made Fromm, beyond the distance of time and evolution of psychoanalysis, easier to identify with than say Freud. Especially since the reform period, which has seen the slow insipid rise of western-style capitalism, albeit with Chinese characteristics, has opened up a yawning cavern for doubt to move in and take root. The subsequent loss of 'meaning' to life, beyond consumption or survival, is now pervasive. For Qin Jin, that aspect of Fromm's theory that would have greatest influence upon her approach to art was his idea of human nature, as espoused in the quotation at the beginning of this article. Qin Jin realised that "destruction of the world" was a means of preventing herself from being "crushed by it".

"It was a time when I began to grasp the mechanism and structure as well as the reality of the society of which I was a part; in particular, its contradictions."³ The course of self-awareness and knowledge created a period that was intense and alienating; previously buried emotions began to surface, in great part related to the death of her mother which would forever be associated with the vulnerability of youth, childhood, and the trauma that it imposed on one at so young an age. Having to raise oneself, as it were, is not without its own especial burden. Thus as a young woman facing her future and wondering where

2. Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, New York: Rinehart & Co., 1941, p. 41 – 42

3. Interview with the artist in Guangzhou, August 17, 2009

it would lead, Qin Jin found a measure of comfort in the words of such experts on the human condition as Fromm. At least, they proved that she was not alone, even if: "Nothing I could do could resolve my problems. And I did feel like I had a lot of issues to struggle with."⁴ She demonstrated a good deal of maturity and confidence in opening herself up to new experiences, unconventional ideas that had not been taught in the art school: "My reading of psychology showed me how to channel these issues through art."⁵ The reading was instructive then, for it encouraged Qin Jin to use the framework of contemporary art practice, and all that it permits in its name, to resolve issues that arise from the conflict of being human; for art was now also understood in the widest possible sense as pure human expression.

"And harnessing my art practice to my issues went a long way to helping me understand my own nature."⁶ Qin Jin's art is thus best described as the expression of inner self wrestling with the Id; conscious awareness battling with the very private individual experience of her own human nature that lay buried in the subconscious. This process produces works, few in number but of powerfully expressive magnitude, with which most people readily identify for we are all in conflict with ourselves to some degree, and we each understand the objects that come to symbolise our battles, however abstract they may be. For Qin Jin, it is exactly that simple: that impulsive. Her work begins from 'must'; what must be expressed and the means and form through which it must be invoked, be that a humble plastic comb, an item of clothing, or a wooden closet as in *I Want to be Your Companion for a Longer Time...*, 2005.

Qin Jin's skills are impressive; her control of the materials she elects to use, and the basic skills with which art schools equip their progeny are read at a glance in the drawings and paintings that have been produced since 2003. But what we see in Qin Jin's approach since she discovered fire in 2005, and other less conventional methods of making art, is a constant and conscious effort to break free of these conventions. She does not make artworks to win praise for herself, nor to make others—viewers, the audience—feel good. It is a cleansing process and, as such, just 'is', requiring neither the validation of critical acclaim nor a theoretical framework to award it legitimacy.

Of course, that is not strictly true either or Qin Jin would have no need to making any aspect of her art public at all. She achieves a fine balance between serving herself in the same measure she serves the needs of the individual works. The resulting pieces, though small in number, make up for what they lack in volume with a manifest intensity. As previously mentioned, a significant number of her works are produced by consigning objects to flames; comb, garment.... But not all are destroyed entirely. The destruction of the seminal work *I Want to be Your Companion for a Longer Time...* 2005, for which Qin Jin torched a wooden clothing cabinet containing a number of garments inside, is the most complete; the most violent. To the point that any attempt to take that process to another work, would not only end in disappointment, but threaten to repeat an experience merely for the thrill of it. The impulse that led to *I Want to be Your Companion...* was born of a need to put someone to rest (her mother) to achieve, in current vernacular 'closure'. The cabinet and all it contained can be construed as a funeral pyre, a repository of one person's earthy possessions, no longer needed on this mortal plane but where the act of burning, similar to the Chinese practice of using paper money to 'send' to ancestors for use in the after world, transports those items to 'another place', hopefully that place in which the departed spirit is residing. Where Chinese people habitually burn paper—joss—to worship of the dead, fire has a direct link to Qin Jin's personal experience as, following her mother's early death, she had to do this from such a young and impressionable age. Little wonder it left a lasting impression of loss; of the profound nature of that absence since what is lost is irretrievable; gone forever. Thus, introducing fire into art made it a means of purifying her thoughts, her experiences and emotions.

The first hint of an affinity with fire does not, in fact, begin here but can be found in that handful of oil paintings completed for her graduation and in the period immediately following. These comprise almost abstract compositions that sit very much in the surface of

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid

6. Ibid

the canvas due to the nature of their substance. Here Qin Jin 'paints' with strands of wild grass, which are individually attached to the picture plane and which are seared to or fused with the canvas by the transformative magic of a flame. The alchemical nature of fire, simplicity itself, achieved an expressive result that is without peer, although as she discovered, not all means of making fire are the same. "For I Want to be Your Companion... I realised I needed to use petrol / gasoline rather than the flame from the gun; that was too focused and intense in spots, whereas petrol produced a slower more even burn rate."⁷

"The most violent act humans can do to anything is to destroy it so completely it disappears forever. Fire does this. We rarely see flames today in the course of our daily existence, outside of the kitchen. Fire is danger, it is cleansing. It is pure violence. I found it to be very in synch with my emotions." It finally made her feel alive.

Thus Qin Jin began to learn to listen to her own instinct, and to exercise her own senses. In the artist's words "The use of fire helped me to understand how to use a simple process to make a clear—and powerful—statement."⁸ Once discovered, there was no going back. By comparison, all previous works seemed to want to convey too much.

There are other examples of Qin Jin's work that are not so radical in their 'birth'—which do not own a baptism by fire. Here her video/photography work *Last Supper* (2006), the monster 'fish', with its scaly skin of oyster shells (2007) which speaks of a different kind of human destruction—life in the ocean due to ever greater demand for the delicacies it nurtures, and more recent pieces like the installation *Balcony* (2009), with its distinctive minimalist air, and absolute, refined simplicity. *Balcony* is a good example of the neutered end of Qin Jin's emotions; those points were she realises some avenues of exploration are dead-ends and must be abandoned. So she presents her audience the ultimate enigma: the balcony that can never be attained; romance, legend, fairytale all denied in this castrated form cut adrift from the architectural structure to which it ought to provide release.

In many ways, Qin Jin's approach to art is all about exerting control: control over what exists and what is extinguished, over what has life and that which is denied it. We see this most clearly in the example of (ironed clothes). This work is a group of garments at once both random and specific, for they are articles of daily usage but such that have been worn, or could be worn by the artist herself. In order to complement her work, to achieve the desired degree of expression, they must be either pale in colour—white is usually reliable—and / or of a silken fabric. Although eternally durable, the softness and pliability of silk is perfectly at the mercy of a hot iron. The process of producing the work involves running a hot iron continuously over the surface of each of the garments until they are burned, browned like a well flamed Sunday roast. Flatten beyond all imagining and discoloured beyond all recognition, they are at once destroyed and enshrined; made useless and yet preserved. The act of ironing—for hours and hours that add up to a lifetime of household labour—which threatens to burn them to ashes actually transforms them into an impossibly flat, thin, fine and smooth travesty of their functional original, complete with a shining, burnished surface. They are an example of extreme control on the part of the artist as she takes them to the brink of total destruction, but exercises control in holding them back by only a proverbial thread: the artist, high priestess of her chosen realm.

Qin Jin sees no extremist tendencies in her impulses, either to destruction or to control. To her are in synch with Daoist concepts, which see opposites as existing within one another; opposites as being eternally linked therefore inseparable. Where her goal is to find (inner) peace through the process of expression, the only possible method of arriving at this state is to journey through its violent polar extreme; like forcing oneself to smile through pain, or what happens when one sheds tears of joy. This, too, explains that slow pace of production, and the relatively narrow focus of her content and forms: if for Qin Jin making art is about working through 'self' then that self has to erupt before the next process of resolution unfolds. Ultimately, if Qin Jin were to feel herself 'resolved', she would effectively have no further use for art. "The very process of making art for me will eventually destroy any need for art in my life."⁹

7. Interview with the artist in Guangzhou August 17, 2009

8. Ibid

9. Ibid

The exhibition Getting to Know You Again, Qin Jin's debut in Beijing, contains a small number of recent works. Two to be exact. The first, *I Want to be Your Companion for a Longer Time...*, is particularly special. The now farther disintegrated remains are included in the show since this is Qin Jin's first exposure in the capital, and the 'baptism by fire' of this most significant of her works needs to be seen if one is to truly experience her art. In addition, for the second piece, she presents a selection from *29 years Plus 8 months and 9 days*, examples of the ironed-to-death, ritualised clothing, which are visually so extraordinarily mesmerising, together with a video that illustrates the endless hours of laborious labour involved in their production. This latter element points to burgeoning interests in still and moving images that might be developed in the future. But what comes next we can only wait to see. As Qin Jin concludes: "My creative process begins with personal memories that in turn begin from the time I consciously began to absorb various external influences. These emerged in the oil paintings I produced in 2003, were carried through to my drawings and action works and the installations that followed, and most recently to the photography works. I have consistently pursued the particular nuances of things, trying to capture the traces that they leave. I see myself as a detective following up 'evidence' to shed light on the impulses that drive my art, in order to convince myself to continue using this as a *raison d'être* for living and creating."¹⁰

In actuality, Qin Jin's work has a quiet, reflective nature. Viewers will not be moved by it in the first instance as much as intrigued by its nature and forms. But the sense of violent emotion that underlies the works is an emotion that viewers unwittingly carry away with them. Qin Jin's work is like a physical embodiment of the saying 'still waters run deep', with all the complex and at times menacing emotions that this phrase evokes.

By Karen Smith

Artist's Notes

Notes:

Many years before, when I was a high school student, there was cracked CD for sale at many places in Guangzhou. Electric Appliances Mall was one of those places, where roomfuls of foreign audio-visual products were on display. I would go to those shops whenever I had time, staying there & gold-panning for hours' time until my money was spent over unless a few bucks reserved for the bus home. The first thing when I got home was to carefully listen to them each & all. I would be tremendously fascinated & listen again & again if I found a favourite one. Such process would turn again again when I had money later. I remember how I crouched to flip through a sea of CDs despite the sweltering, my hungriness, and no matter who were nearby & whether I still had plenty of money.

"Why do you have to iron your clothing to such a degree?"
This question is no surprise to me, but I do not have an answer.
I impulsively say:
"Why can't I iron my clothing to such a degree?"

"Hammer a table with highly regular manual skill while doing nothing. The phrasing cannot be changed to 'Hammering is void to him'. It should be: 'To him, hammering is authentic hammering, meanwhile it is null'. The hammering will be carried on more aggressively, more persistent, more real & crazier if you like, after such explanation." (from The Complete Works of Kafka)

The external world was hard to seen through out of its fast-changing & sophisticated nature. We have to accept & adapt ourselves to something brutal & irrational.

"If null is essential."
I said, "I can only look at it in this way."
There is dynamics around at least. I can walk a few steps, and sometimes I feel there is nothing to worry about.
I said: "You may see it as a withering man. It may be me. To me, thus a feeling of safety is achieved."

By Qin Jin

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About the Artist

Qin Jin was born in Guangzhou, China in 1976. In 2003, Qin received her MA degree from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts (Guangzhou, China). Currently, Qin is based in Guangzhou and teaches at the Fifth Studio of the Oil Painting Department of the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts (Guangzhou, China). Qin Jin's recent solo exhibitions have been presented at Galleria Continua (Beijing, China), Canton Gallery (Guangzhou, China), Capsule Shanghai (Shanghai, China), OCAT Xi'an/Shenzhen (Xi'an/Shenzhen, China), Guangdong Museum of Art (Guangzhou, China), Magician Space, (Beijing, China), and SOME/THINGS Gallery (Paris, France). Qin has also exhibited at Times Museum (Guangzhou China), Capsule Shanghai (Shanghai, China), The 6th Chinese Visual Festival (London, UK), Minsheng Art Museum (Beijing, China) and He Xiangning Art Museum (Shenzhen, China). In 2016, Qin Jin was a nominee of The 10th Award of Art China (Beijing, China); in 2014, Qin's *When I am Dead* (2014) was selected as one of the Top 10 Videos of the 10th China Independent Film Festival (Xiamen, China).

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