

From Odyssey to Oasis, the Viewpoint of 0

Abby Chen

“I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried. Perhaps I paint to break out”

– Merleau Ponty¹

Born to a family of artists in Beijing in 1965, Stella Zhang started to learn painting at age of 7. She received art training at the local youth center and was enrolled into the High School of Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), which pretty much guaranteed her entry into the Academy upon her graduation. Excelled in a highly competitive art education system at the time, Zhang said she was very well behaved, being a good daughter in Chinese sense. By 1985 at age of 20, Zhang was admitted into CAFA and followed masters in traditional ink painting. It was also around this time, Zhang started to grow a sense of self and became rebellious. She was anxious to find new expression but felt she was confined in a “box.” If it is safe to say that Zhang’s upbringing to this point was complacency under a parental safeguard, she was about to form the first perception of her own in a convergence of personal quandary and a historical era.

The Chinese art scene in the eighties was the most active since the inception of People’s Republic of China. Almost ten years after the culture revolution, many, particular the young people, including artists, poets, and scholars were perplexed by China’s past and future, with a consensus that something drastic was about to take place. 1985 is now marked as a critical year for “85 movement” or “85 new wave,” led by a groups of pioneering artists and critics, many of whom are some of the most prominent figures in Chinese contemporary art field today. Following the country’s aphasia of

¹ Andre Marchand, cited in Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 129

decades, it was an era that was full of hope and desperation, with a strong willingness to speak up. Without exception, artists bearing ideas were eager to invigorate the wave visually and critically, by breaking shackles circumscribed on centralized control of authority, as well as rigid tradition. This movement, along with many other movements going on in the country at the time, eventually faded out in the night of June 4th 1989, the Tiananmen crackdown.

It was certainly chaos for Stella Zhang. Trained as a traditional ink painter, Zhang became aware of her interest in contemporary art expression and works created by other artists. Robert Rauschenberg, Louise Bourgeois, Käthe Schmidt Kollwitz, and Eva Hesse, were just a few names of many that struck and inspired her. The intrinsic power of an individual's personality conveyed in these works seems to be what was lacking in artworks by Chinese artists. Zhang tried a few ways to innovate traditional painting but remained unsuccessful. She was not alone. Whether it was deformed ink stroke, abstract pattern, or application of new materials attempted by her or others, she found the outcome unsatisfying. She soon realized that the four elements, brush, ink, paper and ink-slab that constitute traditional ink painting, have become the obstacles that trammled her to break free. She was finding traditional painting too big of a framework with too little of possibilities. She cited the story of *Journey to the West* as analogy to describe this stalemate of hers: I was like the *monkey king*, regardless how far you go, you can't jump out of *Buddha's* palm.²

When Zhang was asked about her sense of self and environment during those four years, she recalled:

I was very confused at the time dealing with growing pain, treacherous relationship, artistic expression, and what was going on in China. For those of us admitted into CAFA, we were privileged and therefore all somewhat conceited. We seemed to know everything but we actually didn't. In 20/20 hindsight, I had a vision like a frog in the well at that time, clueless about the world beyond school. That was the era with no such thing like Internet and direct access to outside of China. However, the school strived to bring us visiting scholars and catalogs. We were

² In conversation with the author, 2009

lucky to be exposed to more new practices and thoughts than the general public. Consequently many of us sensed the big gap between artworks in China and those in the west, but none of us can decipher the reason behind it. Moreover, I was baffled and disappointed by what happened in 1989, I felt stuck and lost. I was perceiving the world and the self without a perception of my own.³

The notion of “perceiving without a perception” was Zhang’s subjective assessment of the dichotomy formed by this certainty of unknown and the plight with her existing aesthesia. Zhang needed an answer, but not from the safe haven she has been sheltered; she wanted to ask questions, but was suspicious and doubtful of what the questions were. Just as the eye sees the world, and it sees what the world lacks in order to be a painting, and what the picture lacks in order to be itself... the same thing is both out there in the heart of the world and here in the heart of vision⁴. This dual predicament of artistry and self was an effective impetus for Zhang to seek change. In 1990 at age of 25, Zhang left China for Japan, a country she expected to be similar to China, and only to find out it was significantly different.

For Zhang, the experience living and studying in Japan from 1990 to 2000 was a process of metamorphosis in both of her artistry and her sense of self. The training received in renowned Tama Fine Art Institute and Tokyo Art University provided new direction and possibilities of her artwork, especially the application and manipulation of material and mediums. She benefited from the free-style teaching following her professor Uneo Yasuo, who encouraged her to try new approaches. What Zhang once found restrictive of traditional ink painting took on a new life with different media, such as the colorful Iwa-enogu (a Japanese pigment color from rock and plant) and Nikawa (glue), the form and the texture could be easily perceived as oil painting when the process was not explained (the colorless dream II, 2002). Zhang described the overwhelming variety and technique of material she was exposed to was like “a girl who likes sweets in a candy

³ Ibid.

⁴ Stella Zhang, Monograph, 2003

store.”⁵ From Zhang’s first monograph “Stella”, it was evident that her technique was refined, confidently shifting to wood, flax-paper and numerous materials from Chinese Xuan paper and ink, mixing with all kinds of ordinary material from daily life. The exuberance of color from Iwa-enogu and the rhythm of mixed media furthered her understanding of properties of the medium, which allowed her to make a qualitative leap from the traditional ink form to an abstract expression.

While Zhang was greeted with Japan’s industrialized modernity as well as the countries obstinacy of etiquette and tradition, she also got a taste of xenophobia and gender bigotry being a sojourner and woman in this extremely male dominated society. The submissive role Japanese culture requires the women to play was a sharp contrast from that privileged, conceited and respected artist in China. Besides, China as a socialist nation, women enjoy higher degree of equality than many other countries. As a result, Zhang must realign and reposition herself to survive and start anew. In addition to retreating to her “good daughter” persona with clear knowledge that she was not, she also had to work many side jobs as clerk, waitress and tutor to make a living. This immediate and inevitable dislocation and displacement, for the first time in Zhang’s experience, forced her to look at herself through a different lens.

She has become a foreigner of her own life.

Her studio became the oasis of peace, providing equilibrium and outlet so that she could be at ease and listen to her true voice through art. To say Zhang’s perception was formed prior to her arrival to Japan, her conflict was no longer between not-knowing and known. Her encounter with the aesthetic, methodology, hierarchy, emotion, and gender simultaneously confronted her to galvanize self-awakening and enlightening. The environment she must succumb to edified a reflexivity of what she was not, which took her beyond herself in order to return, just as how Homi Bhabha described in his *Location of Culture*. The malleability of Zhang’s perception started to form from the crude not-

⁵ Conversation with the author

knowing/known, which has then become a reference point for her new departure of artistry.

In 1994, Zhang got married and gave birth to her daughter in 1997, which led to a three-year break from art making. It was much needed as Zhang recalled. Having excelled the technique of the material, the form became a routine and boredom. She soon got tired of it. However, while assuming new roles of being a wife and a mother, Zhang found new interest in the intertwining relationships of life and body, wholesome and imperfection, and even time and space. Unlike feeling puzzled when she left China, Zhang was no longer equivocal about the world and herself. She started to form a new outlook in clarity of *what is not that*. The three-year break allowed Zhang to recuperate physically and mentally, let everything sediment as well as accumulate. This, as Zhang described herself, was like getting ready to exuviate, and to transform.

In 2000, Stella Zhang obtained residency in the U.S. and began to travel frequently between Japan and the U.S, and eventually settled down in 2003. When she visited New York, it was an immediate realization about the problem of her work: there was a lack of core in her work. A strong sense of dislocation or anachronism emerged again. Her previously formed perception of aesthetics and obsession with style and material were subverted. What she once eluded, resented and even rejected started to make sense. The absent side of the equation to that *what-is-not* finally became a visible *what-is*. The uncanny force behind all the impetus was demystified. It's all about timing, or it is fate? It seemed that the stimulus arrived just as Zhang was in need of it. Yet, it is important to note that "*to bring a vision that is not our own into account, it is to be sure inevitably, it is always from the unique treasury of our own vision that we drew, and experience therefore can teach us nothing that would not be outlined in our vision.*"⁶

The works Zhang created while she was living in Japan were the heap of her learning and experiments. These works demonstrated her solid ability of color, material,

⁶ The Merleau Ponty reader, The Intertwining – The Chiasm

and genuine attempt of abstraction (see Monograph 2003), yet they were monotonous and vacuous in substance and lack of originality. In 2004 and 2007, Zhang published new bodies of work after visiting New York and settling down in Los Angeles, demarcating a lapsing-away from the previous patency. These new works marked Zhang's significant break through as not only she simplified her visual language and form, she also embarked on the perception she formed within the past few years – the notion of “0.”

“0-Viewpoint” series is Stella Zhang's perception of the mundane world and her inner self. In *Monograph 2004*, “cultural identity,” “err,” “resentment,” “suspicious,” and “alienation” made their first appearance in Zhang's statement, which ostensibly deviated from her previous hopeful, innocuous and complacent assertion. According to Zhang, “0” is both a form and substance, endlessly referenced by Daoism and Zen. “0” carries the omni-bearing significance that “one” comes from “0,” then “two”, then “three” and all beings. As this series continued to develop in 2007, Zhang consciously sought “0” through shape, color, and materials, which in turn convey her perception of “0” as a state of unconsciousness, somewhat natural, free, and spontaneous. From silver, green or blue translucent water droplet, to textures and layers of whiteness, “0” at this stage resembles Zhang's worldly vision with random touch of something internal, uncanny, and lyrical. Something compelling but hidden emerged in Zhang's execution of the work: succinct, transcendent and serene.

Just as Merleau Ponty pointed in “Eye and Mind:” *“We must take literally what vision teaches us: that through it we touch the sun and stars, that we are everywhere at once, and that even our powers to imagine ourselves elsewhere.”*⁷ Notion of abstraction interested Zhang, she is ever conscious of the potential of abstraction to heighten the sense of image and object, to intensify the suggestion of individual emotional response to actual scene. Zhang's ability of creating the vivid but surreal visual was effective and pleasing, as an obvious result of solid technique and refined handling of details. This

⁷ The Merleau Ponty reader, Eye and Mind

body of works mirrors the foundation of Zhang's perception when she began the series. They provide a sense of origin hinting a starting point as it progresses and evolves.

In 2010, Zhang debuted the new phase of her "0-Viewpoint," making an outward and visible shift again from her previous two-dimensional mixed media works to three-dimensional sculptures, video and site-specific installations. This time, the message got more complicated and conflicted. A field of soft and suggestive pillow-like forms lies on the ground inviting touch, but bristles with sharp points. Gentle smoke drifts lazily on a video screen surrounded by nails that anchor tautly stretched fabric, pulling in conflicting directions. These new works, alluring organic forms hint at tenderness and vulnerability while unexpected creases, spikes and smears of sand allude to a more complex and agitated landscape of feelings beneath the surface. With five dramatic all-white installation works, Zhang continued her deeply personal and often provocative exploration of identity – as an immigrant, a sexual being and artist. In her aching, sensitive sculptures, audience gets a sense of pain and struggle immediately, and it is the very essence of her new body of art.

"What appears in my work is the result of a real individual being shaped time and again by cultural forces and reaching for new equilibrium," she said, "In a new place, I must learn again about grief and loss, law and power, estrangement and acceptance, and all kinds of realities that exist in my new situation. Living at the intersection of cultures agitates my work." Her days in Japan were a phase of change, search and discovery, as Zhang found and worked out the structure of a new art. With it, she emerged from the unenlightened young girl as an artist reborn. To speak of this experience as an odyssey seems entirely appropriate. Revealing to us in their relatively unmediated directness is the operation of her mind, and often suggests the sources and techniques of her art.

Perhaps there is no important demarcation between any of the paintings and installations except what one might artificially draw, as the artist's actual experience was more likely a seamless and impenetrable ongoing process of observation, reflection,

exploration, self-awakening, and achievement. Similar to how Wu Guanzhong's work was analyzed by Michael Sullivan, that "*in a way, it is almost otiose to talk about foreign influence as artists draw upon the art of the whole world to take what they can use.*"⁸ In the meantime, it is clear that she was moving towards a new vision, one less closely bound to observed reality, more akin to abstraction. Abstraction has become one of the central issues of Zhang's art, and is one means by which she has tried to reconcile the heritage of China with what she had come to admire in the art outside of china.

The predicament Zhang faces is not merely a matter of form versus content, but the hard fact that the concept of feminism and its artistic expression and the whole development of the feminist movement are of western origin. It could be out-of-date for the west, while from the Chinese it will evoke no response, and the artists will become outsiders. In *0-viewpoint 2010*, Zhang created a sophisticated interplay between the three-dimensional depth of her inner material landscape. "*0 includes everything, but I need to bring the 0 into my life, my creation is connected with 0 now, it's finally making sense, I am confident.*"⁹

It took three countries, two continent and more than forty years for Zhang's style to grow and transform. Although she still has much more to say, her work already manifests tranquility that is indicative of maturity. Where will she go from here? Towards the more abstract and self-indulging obscurity? To continue the pursuit of modernism or to enter the realm of postmodernism? It is impossible to say. It seems that she desires to forge ahead, let the artworks take their own course, only to surprise her audience with yet another new look.

⁸ Wu Guanzhong, *A contemporary Chinese Artist*, Michael Sullivan, 1989

⁹ Conversation with author, 2010

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