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## Art Without Cultural Borders: Reflections on Qin Feng's Art

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# 藝術無文化疆界

## ——秦風藝術映照

文／Curtis Carter

秦風的藝術不僅在市場上是成功的，也是具有實質上的價值的。其中具體的因素何在？原因之一是他強烈地渴望將生命中的靈感明白地轉化在他的作品裏。如同莊子寓言“鯤化鵬徙”所述：鯢（千裏長的魚）轉化為鵬（大鳥），才能飛得遠看得高，秦風選擇用變化及冒險來尋找更高的理想境界。他的作品充滿了大膽和謎樣的意象，就像舞者般一幅接着一幅地跳躍。他并不滿足于獨享自由，而且還引導者其它的藝術家和觀眾，共同超越文化的束縛。他從古瑪雅文化、古中華文化、古玻裏尼西亞文化和古埃及文化的語言境中尋找靈感來創造他自己的語言。這點顯示在他的《文明景觀》作品系列中。以同樣的精神，他居住在歐美地區親身體驗異國文化。秦風的作品顯示出，他對各種文化之間的溝通非常關心。

秦風尊敬中國歷代傳統藝術大師，也認同二十世紀的藝術家們。中國大師之中，他最崇拜八大山人（公元1626～1705）。八大山人與歐洲巴洛克畫家Johannes Vermeer同時代。正如Vermeer的畫、八大山人的作品有極高的美感，并且有卓越的繪畫技巧。八大山人忠于明朝，借着他的畫表達對社會的抗議，他的畫用色大膽，謎樣的意象來描寫善良百姓。比如他有一幅珍藏在美國紐約大都會博物館的畫：花園的池塘邊圍着兩塊漂亮的石頭，一群小魚在池裏毫無方向地游着。

秦風似乎非常喜歡戰后西方的抽象主義畫風。但是，他的畫比較接近觀念藝術。他對抽象的感覺，比較接近美國畫家Frank Kline、Robert Mothecwell，以及Wilhelm DeKooning。他與Jackson Pollock比較不同。Pollock的出發點來自內在的衝擊，而不是來自外面社會的啓發。把秦風的藝術與抽象表現藝術相比時，二者都受到中國水墨畫影響，但是他們實質上是不一樣的。近幾年來，秦風在他的西風東水系列（2003～2007）中，大膽使用大紅色、金黃色、粉紅色與抽象表現主義挑戰。而在其它作品中，他用溫和的自然色彩，古文化文字元號，似乎企圖創造他自己的一套私人語言。

如同其它杰出當代中國藝術家谷文達、王天德、徐冰，秦風的藝術也是以中國書法藝術為基礎，再伸展到西方藝術的領域。這些藝術家們從不同的角度來轉化書法藝術一淡化、抽象化。將它用在其它非中文系統上或是自創文字上，甚至將它寫成樂譜。紐約時報記者Holland Cotter針對目前在紐約大都會博物館的《中國書法藝術特展》（秦風的作品是此展之一）提出了一個難題：他們這樣地轉化傳統書法藝術，是榮耀它還是貶低它呢？是擴充它還是掏空了它呢？這個問題引起傳統文化尊崇者與非尊崇者的爭議。傳統派人士尊崇歷代書法大師，而非傳統派人士認為傳統藝術必須要加上新的時代詮釋才能擁有新生命。

那秦風的藝術在當代藝術發展上占有什麼樣的地位？這個答案并不簡單。我在此的討論是針對着他的二度空間作品。他的畫沒有教條的場面：工廠勤奮的工人，農村景象，也沒有快樂的兒童們圍繞着毛主席。所以他與中國社會主義現實派不同。他的畫，也不像1980年初興起的模仿西方流行文化。他的畫是由中國傳統書法藝術哲理和繪畫技藝中演變而來，如同八大山人。傳統對於秦風的影響力與傳統對大部分藝術家及觀眾的影響力是類似的（前衛藝術家除外）。但是，他了解，藝術也跟着當代工業、科技和各種文化改變而轉化。秦風在這些變化中嘗試着發出一位中國當代藝術家真實的聲音。如同Wassily Kandinsky在20世紀初期“看准了觀念藝術”。這并表示為了形式而減低藝術價值。兩位藝術家都同意靈感主宰着創造方向。這就是為什麼秦風比較喜歡抽象或是禪畫。但是他的作品并不是響應着一些中國畫中的沈思，他的藝術充滿着與當代社會同步的熱情、刺激我們的視覺感官。

秦風與這個時代的藝術家共同的爭執是，他們的藝術與中國傳統藝術的關係。核心問題在于他們如何能够以傳統為基礎來建立新的面貌，如何不與中國文化脫節并在東西距離拉近的前題之下創造新的藝術風貌。這并不是說中西文化是對立的，而是當代藝術家必須能够取用異

國文化的思想、形式來創造，利用前輩累積的經驗，創造出多元文化的藝術語言。這也不表示他們應該以從歐洲演變出來的藝術創造一種國際風格。而是繼續以自己的文化背影為主，但是包容外界的影響力。

藝術家的工作是創造征兆符號來詮釋過去，現在及假想未來。

秦風的墨迹代表着中國的過去，這些浮游在畫紙上的意象，連接起他作畫的技巧背景及其它多層的文化影響。他的符號，讓我們幻想着未來經過多元文化影響的新藝術語言。

但是，像秦風這樣為中華遺產與東西當代藝術搭橋梁的工作是很冒險的。有些人（包括莊子在內），懷疑人們對文明進化的理解能力。秦風本人也經歷過童年時在新疆的惡劣環境。畫中出現的絕美的大自然力量，同時也能無情的破壞，帶來苦難。大鵬鳥成功的航程和一個人的命運，最后仍然取決于風與水的結合。秦風2004年的《西風東水》作品試着詮釋大自然及文化的力量。

在目前這個脆弱的自然和社會環境，全球一體化的世界，藝術家的挑戰是要將這些影響人類生活的自然社會因素，由裏到外徹底的了解。盡管科學能控制自然和人為環境，人們仍然為着個人關係苦惱，文化衝突導致戰爭暴力，自然災害。藝術家能如何減輕這些狀況？或許，同為他們特有的敏感視覺，能够清晰表達概念，他們能了解，傳達這些被忽略的事實。也許，在把這些事實轉化為不尋常的意象，詩歌或視覺藝術后才能引人注意。我們藉從他們創造的意象，符號中體驗他們的經驗。

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# “Art Without Cultural Borders: Reflections on Qin Feng’s Art”

Written by Curtis L. Carter

Qin Feng's art is filled with substance and is not just about success in the art market, though he seems to do well there too. What is the basis for the substantial elements in the art? One certain element is strong determination manifesting a spirit in his life that enables transformation of good aspirations into positive manifestations. Like the metamorphosis in Chinese mythological fables of Kun (small fish) into the Peng (great bird) who chooses to fly high and cover far distances, Qin Feng has chosen change and adventure in search of better conditions.<sup>b</sup> As a creative person, Qin Feng assumes the life style of an artist who actualizes freedom along a constructive path of self-emancipation. Often his art is filled with bold, sometimes enigmatic images that leap like dancing figures from panel to panel. He is not content to realize freedom for himself alone. Rather he seeks for others including fellow artists the liberating power that comes from transcending the limits of particular cultures and institutions. This interest has led him to reflect on the linguistic script of ancient civilizations in Mayan, Chinese, Polynesian, and Egyptian cultures with a view to inventing a new language as suggested in his Civilization Landscapes.<sup>c</sup> This same inquiring spirit has led him to explore not only Chinese culture but also to live in Europe and America. Qin Feng's paintings show him to be an artist deeply concerned with using art to expand intercultural dialogue.

With respect to art, Qin Feng pays homage to the highest achievements of traditional masters in China's art history and also welcomes the inventions the Twentieth Century masters. Among the Chinese masters, Qin Feng particularly honors Bada Shanren (1626-1705), a Chinese calligrapher/painter also known as Chu Ta (Zhu Da, working during the time of the Dutch Baroque master Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675). Like Vermeer's paintings, Bada Shanren's works exemplify exceptional aesthetic sensibility and technical excellence. A loyalist of the fallen Ming dynasty, who renounced his royal status to work as an artist, Bada Shanren is said to have used his paintings as a means of social protest. When viewed in their social context, his paintings portray “bold and enigmatic images...of seemingly innocuous subjects”

such as a garden pond framed by two ornamental rocks and tiny fishes arranged in an unsettling manner as in the painting, “Fish and Rocks.” (Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.).<sup>d</sup>

At home since the 1990s with Western modern and contemporary art, Qin Feng seems most attracted to the post war Abstract Expressionist stage in the evolving styles of Western art. However his work assumes elements of later conceptual art that would not be characteristic of the work of the classical Abstract Expressionists. His approach to abstraction is closer in spirit to the Americans Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, and perhaps Wilhelm DeKooning, whom he is said to have admired. . Perhaps he has less in common with Jackson Pollock who is working from a different aesthetic driven more by his own inner turmoil than by external cultural considerations. When Qin Feng is viewed in the context of the Abstract Expressionists, we are reminded that both are indebted to the influences of Chinese ink paintings. Hence, it is not a surprise that Qin Feng would find common ground with these artists. However, there are important differences. Qin Feng's use of bold colors in recent works, for example, the series, “Civilization Landscape,” 2003-2007 introduces vibrant reds, yellows, and pinks that test the boundaries of his predecessors among the Abstract Expressionists. In other recent works the muted natural tones of the painting surfaces are populated with marks borrowed from archaic language systems, or perhaps represent his own attempts toward inventing a private language.

Like the work of other prominent contemporary Chinese artists, Gu Wende, Wang Tiande, and Xu Bing, whose work extends into western culture, Qin Feng's art is also grounded in part in the tradition of Chinese calligraphy. All of these artists “come at calligraphy from a variety of angles “obscuring it, further abstracting it, applying it to non-Chinese languages, to fictional languages., making it emulate the language of music.” But as the New York Times critic Holland Cotter asks, in a review of the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition, “Brush and Ink: the Chinese Art of Writing,” which included work by Qin Feng, “In doing so, are they honoring or undermining a tradition? Expanding it

or emptying it? Such questions evoke passionate debates among traditionalists who value the forms of the great master calligrapher and non-traditionalists who see the tradition best honored by giving it a new life in the context of contemporary culture.

Where then does Qin Feng's art fit into the wider field of contemporary artistic developments? The answer is not so simple as it might at first appear. The discussion here refers mainly to his two dimensional paintings. However, his work extends to include painted porcelain vessels and to experimental performance such as “Zero space Ink Performance,” presented at the Asia Society galleries in New York, 2003. In this work, a live nude female body serves as the artist's canvas as he uses black ink and brush to paint. The absence of didactic or other narrative themes depicting industrial factories with dedicated workers or scenes of rural village life, or children with Chairman Mao, distinguishes his art from Socialist Realist art in China of the mid-twentieth century. Similarly, his work does not entertain the excesses of some of the early 1980s Chinese Pop artists who, too literally assimilated images of western popular culture and Pop art style. Unlike these narrative and fantasy based attempts at modern Chinese art, his painting are concerned with philosophical foundations and artistic means arising from within traditional Chinese painting as exemplified in the work of Bada Shanren and others. The influence of tradition thus has a role in Qin Feng's art, as it typically does to some degree in all artists and their audiences, except possibly for radical avant-garde moments. Yet he understands that philosophy and the practice of art, too, must evolve in concert with industrial, technological and other cultural changes of modern and contemporary society. Indeed it is fair to say that Qin Feng seeks to develop an authentic voice as a *contemporary* Chinese artist in the midst of such changes. Qin Feng, like Wassily Kandinsky at the beginning of the twentieth century, “has eyes for the abstract in art.” But this does not mean for either artist a reduction of art to formalism. Both would agree that it is the spirit that rules over form in the creation of art.<sup>e</sup> In this respect he prefers abstract, Zen inspired work over narrative or representational

forms. His voice, however, does not merely echo the call to quiet poetic moods of contemplation evoked by some traditional Chinese calligraphy or landscapes. Rather, Qin Feng's art often expresses excitement and visual stimulation in tempo with the currents of contemporary society and intended to motivate people to experience and actualize utopian dreams.

Qin Feng, like other artists of his generation, must struggle with the question of how their work relates to tradition, as they experiment with and modify Chinese art and culture of the past. The central problem Chinese contemporary artists face is how to build upon their Chinese cultural heritage and also connect to new developments of contemporary life in China and throughout the world. In some form, the question of how to remain connected to their Chinese roots and also create art that is appreciated in a changing world where East and West are drawn ever closer, is on the mind of every serious contemporary Chinese artist. Addressing these changes is not a question of Chinese art versus western art. Rather, the practice of art in a global context has become a matter of enabling individual artists to create, using the ideas and visual forms irrespective of their particular cultural origin. This means that the artist has available an evolving universal vocabulary of artistic means contributed over time from the practices of artists working in many cultures throughout the world. Creating art today requires considering exactly such a universal visual language. The outcome does not lie in creating a new "International Style" reminiscent of the Euro centered International Style grounded in formalism and proposed as the norm for western architecture of the modernist era. Rather, the situation invites artists to continue to develop new ideas for art incorporating their cultural histories and that of others. Qin Feng understands very well the challenge. His own vision involves transcending the limits of stylistic and national boundaries in search of a new cultural synthesis.

In general, it is the main task of an artist to create signs and symbols to interpret past and present, sometimes portending the future. As signs, the ink drawings and paintings of Qin Feng point us to the existence of the past of Chinese art and culture. In this respect, the flowing gestural marks in his works provide a link to the calligraphic traditions of the Chinese master painters and to the layers of culture imbedded in the art. As symbols, his paintings and drawings help us to imagine a future for new art based

on the expanded multi-cultural vocabulary possible by multiple sources, past and contemporary, drawn from across the world. The symbols generated in the paintings of Qin Feng and other artists of his generation point to the future.

And yet, the effort to create a bridge through art between Chinese heritage and the culture of the contemporary worlds of East and West, as represented in Qin Feng's art, cannot be undertaken without risk. There are some (the Daoist Zhauangzi, c. 369-286 B.C., for example, who maintain a skeptical attitude toward the role of human knowledge and civilization. Qin Feng himself is not a stranger to the harsh realities of the social environment encountered during his childhood in Xinjiang. Even the forces of nature depicted so beautifully in a painting can be merciless in their sometimes unequal dispersing of beauty and suffering. Both the successful flight of the Peng bird and the fate of mankind ultimately depend on the cooperation of wind and water. Qin Feng refers metaphorically to the interplay of both natural and cultural forces in his 2004 series of paintings "West Wind, East Win." And West Wind, East Water,"

The challenge of the artist today in a fragile world of globally linked natural and societal environments is to expand and deepen our understanding of the realities, both internal and external, natural and social, that shape life for human beings. Despite the progress of science in increasing human control over the natural and behavioral environments, human beings continue to be challenged in the face of dysfunctional personal relations, the clashes of culture leading to war and other forms of social violence, and natural disasters resulting in human suffering. What can artists contribute toward alleviating these conditions? Perhaps, with their special visual sensitivities and conceptual articulateness, artists are able to perceive and communicate aspects of these realities that have escaped notice, or were deemed unimportant until brought to attention in a striking visual image, a poem, a song, or a moment in the theater. From their perceptions artists create signs and symbols that allow us to organize and to conceptualize such experiences. Perhaps the evolution of art freed of national boundaries and informed by diverse cultures will better serve to communicate values that all persons irrespective of their particular culture can share.

Curtis L. Carter, Ph. D., formerly founding director and chief curator of the Haggerty Museum of Art, Mar-

quette University, Milwaukee, USA; currently professor of aesthetics, Department of Philosophy, Marquette University; president of Carter Fine Arts Consulting International Fine Arts Network; first vice president International Association for Aesthetics. Dr. Carter has authored many essays on contemporary art and aesthetics and has curated over 200 exhibitions of modern and contemporary including Cuban artist Wifredo Lam (2008) and French artist Jean Fautrier (2002), and Chinese artists Gao Zingian (2003) and Feng Mengbo (1998). He is a frequent international lecturer on contemporary arts and aesthetics and has recently lectured in China at the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts, Peiking University, China Academy of the Social Sciences, and Beijing International University. Please use what you think is appropriate to the occasion

(Endnotes)

a Wang Keping, *Ethos of Chinese Culture* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2007), pp. 164-174.

b Priya Malhotra, "'Power From; Turmoil,'" *Asian Art News* November-December, 2003 : 67.

c 3.Bada Shanren, "Fish and rocks," painting, ink on paper, 134.6x 60 cm, Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), dated 169-. Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art,

d Wassily Kandinsky, "Text Artista," *Wasily Kandinsky Memorial* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1945), p. 65. Also published as *Rückblicke in Der Sturm* in Bermin. 1945.

e 4.. Zhuangzi, The Book of Zhuangzi, cited in Wang Keping, *Ethos of Chinese Culture*., pp.159-186.





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