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Qin Chong - A Quest for Ars Veritas

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秦冲作品

Artworks by Qin Chong



秦冲——艺术真理的探索者

柯蒂斯·L·卡特

“当我们体验并‘活出’属于艺术家领域的色彩、形式、空间、结构以及节奏的各种关系时，我们遭遇到的便是一种理解、体验这个世界并对其作出反应的崭新方式，并且由此诞生出各种人与世界的新关系和新的现实。”

正如许多在过去四十年间出生的中国艺术家，秦冲（1968-）经历了文革结束后的一系列社会剧变，包括从国际资本主义艺术市场的引入到当代中国艺术家的出现。中国艺术家所面临的各种可能性已发生了巨大改变。在文革期间，由毛泽东引导的意识形态鼓励艺术家采用前苏联的社会现实主义手法进行创作，通过让艺术贴近老百姓的日常生活，实现对人民的意识形态和情感教化目的，并把艺术实践改造成符合国家的政治和教育需要。

随着意识形态的转变，可能更重要的是基本原则的放弃，为艺术带来了转机。首先，在风景画中放弃了必须反映“天人合一”这一传统理想的重要原则；其次，文革末期放弃了毛泽东时代的基本原则，使艺术家获得了越来越多的独立探索艺术手法的自由。而中国艺术家对西方现代及后现代艺术越来越多的了解更加速了这一转变。所有这些变化都发生在相对于中国5000年的漫长历史而言非常短暂的一段时期。

这些变化为艺术家们带来了众多选择。他们可

以选择呆在官方机构如中央或地方艺术家协会，也可以在非官方艺术获得的许可日渐增多的情况下，选择一条独立的道路，这包括采取先锋主义的对抗姿态，或者仅仅安静地创作、追求艺术家的个人理想。对有些人来说，移民国外的机会更有吸引力，或者一边继续在中国创作，一边把纽约或柏林纳入自己的创作基地。

而在秦冲的艺术生涯里，他对上述选择作了个混搭的安排。他避开对官方艺术的依附，选择作一名独立艺术家，把创作基地设在北京和柏林。他来自新疆，在那里他的家人曾在文革中遭到迫害。1990年从北京工艺美术学校（北京艺术设计学院）毕业后，他成立了北京阿芒拿画廊，并于1993至1998年间在中国和海外举办了一系列当代艺术展。1993年至1999年他参加了数次联展。他在北京举办了首次个展，在过去十年里作为独立艺术家兼画廊代理，在柏林、纽约、上海、北京等地独立承办多个展览。

也许今天的艺术家面临的最根本选择，用冯梦波的话来说就是：“你想成为一个艺术家，还是想卖作品，又或是想出名？”秦冲的选择是要成为艺术家，这意味着从根本上投身于艺术，并把它当作一种观念和情感的创造性探索，支持人文社会行动。这还意味着找到发自内心的声音并忠实于自己独特的艺术理

想。这一选择不能马上带来名利，而且名利亦须服从成为艺术家这一前提。

第二项选择关乎如何在全球性的艺术环境里为自己的作品定位，涉及到在中西艺术交流的大背景下吸取丰富艺术知识的机会。秦冲再次选择利用他在北京和柏林的国际平台关系大展身手。在柏林生活和作品带来亲身把握另一个世界性艺术大都会的脉搏的机会，同时他亦没有让他个人艺术理想的精髓受到强势的西方艺术压制或作出妥协。

第三项选择对当今中国艺术家来说日益迫切，那就是如何与他们的中国传统文化产生共鸣。必须问的问题是，今天的中国艺术家怎样才能从古到今丰富的中国文化和艺术生活吸取精粹，并把它清晰而有力地展示给海内外的观众。一种可能是令艺术为民族主义服务，但这将可能带来狭隘甚至畸形的社会影响。在历史上以狭隘的民族主义为目标的艺术会在某种文化内部造成分裂，并常常阻碍其对外与他国的正面交流，迅速沦为空洞的宣传说教工具。这个问题无法找到答案，在艺术市场被粗鲁地商业化的剥削性框架内亦如此，艺术家们的作品仅仅被视为商品和推动经济的工具。

然而，每个艺术家应该找到根植于个人艺术理想，同时对丰富的中国艺术文化生活反应敏锐的真正表达方式。秦冲在上述这些方面表现如何呢？他的个人理想是什么？他的作品又如何与中国文化艺术传统的联系起来？要回答这个问题，我们需要仔细研究一下他的艺术创作。他的艺术作品主要包括纸上画作和三维雕塑装置，其中“黑白联合国”2003进入了公共艺术领域。秦冲以各种媒介展示的所有作品都采用实验性的视角而非追随任何现成的艺术常规。他的绘画是抽象的，始于方形，有的富于质感和形态，黑白为主，偶尔隐约可见其它柔和色调。另一系列绘画以褐色的螺旋、三角和方形以及各种形状的热烈色调作实验，有一幅以艺术家本人的照片为中心。有时其作品的纸平面上似乎为纵横交错的白色条纹所覆盖，白色条纹之上横贯黑色墨迹似的刚劲刷痕。还有一些作品

中墨迹以线圈或绳圈的形态出现，有一次红色被置于三个互相缠绕的线圈的顶部。此外，其画作所采用的形状相对简单，因其运用了中国书法的毛笔手法，当然并非真的用毛笔，但属于中国艺术家对传统书法的创新实验。

关于其雕塑装置，首先我将谈谈他的“过去与未来”2005该作品曾在上海多伦现代美术馆的“黑白灰”展览以及香港和柏林展出，以及“今年中国文化产量或世界第一”2007。“过去与未来”由众多高度不一的白色纸筒组成，高高低低的三维柱体顶部均被烧过，染上墨迹似的灰印。一眼望去，一大片顶部被烧焦的白色柱体构成一幅异常美丽的图画，让人在视觉被冲击之余浮想联翩。的确，这样一幅图景可能让人联想到一座城市被焚烧后留下的残垣断壁，或者荣光不再、国力衰亡的没落文明。

“今年中国文化产量或世界第一”是个用99块19.9x9.9x3.9厘米的“金”条组成的金属装置，由秦冲锻造的这些金属条上刻有文字并署上了他的签名，并以金字塔的形状摆放，除了加强视觉冲击力外可能还有某种观念上的含义。正如作品题目所暗示，这是否代表对中国经济成功带来的物质力量的看法呢？抑或是对中国文化生产正逐步走向商业化的看法？不管怎样，这件作品可以仅就其美学价值而言被看作是抽象派的三维空间艺术品。无论哪种情况下，该作品都因其形式的简洁和读解的多种可能性而成功引起关注。

另一项有趣的雕塑装置“极限”2000展示了艺术家创造性的一个更深的维度。这件作品由九个展示纯水的金属座组成（意指中国五行中的“金”与“水”）。按照各种形状和图案排列的水珠被艺术家置于金属表面，这一过程不仅需要艺术想象力，还需要科学般的精确只有全神贯注、眼明手稳才能做到。每个基座展示了概念的某个侧面，并随着水汽在在展示过程中的挥发而消失。作品观念的纯粹性和形式美已足以令人赞赏。在这个层面上，极度光滑的金属表面、以优美形式铺陈的大小形状不一的水珠以及灯光之间的交相应给人带来丰富的视觉享受，对光与空

间元素的充分利用,以及金属表面的反光完全弥补了色彩的缺失。该作品还体现了“对立两极之间的张力”禅宗的阴与阳分别由坚固的金属和流动的水珠代表。作为一个涵盖意义宽广的比喻,作品还引发人们思索自然(水)与人造物(金属造型)和谐共处的可能性,与中国传统艺术中的一个重要主题“天人合一”产生共鸣。

我们最后要讨论的是“黑白联合国”2003和“传递”2008,这两件作品标志着秦冲的艺术开始进入公共艺术领域。“黑白联合国”参加了2009年8月在北京当代美术馆举办的一个户内-户外展。作品包括一个永久性的户外国旗(带旗杆)装置,陈列了1945年10月联合国成立时51个创始国的国旗,颜色全都精简为黑白两色,与艺术家简化其视觉语言的意图一致。简单的色调还象征性地体现了作为联合国基石的理想通过世界各国的共同合作实现“和平、权利平等和公平”。这一户外装置与在馆内展出的联合国周年纪念装置作品遥相呼应。

相比之下,“传递”更进一步地走进各种街头场景,使秦冲的艺术直接与普罗大众接触。这是在城市各个地方展开的表演艺术,从北京当代美术馆外的广场上开始。其内容是邀请志愿者传递燃烧的火炬,并把提交他们自己拍摄的有关这一活动的照片。也许这是模仿2008北京奥运的火炬传递。在不同的街景中男女老少们手举白色纸筒做的火炬,大都身穿白色T恤,有时是艺术家或学生们等等,成群结队地仿佛在搞庆祝活动,有时是一个骑摩托车的年轻人,有时是一名工人。这个活动带来了增强集体感的积极影响,告诉我们艺术能发挥把来自不同文化背景和信仰的人们凝聚在一起为世界和平而共同努力的重要作用。

仅从审美角度看,秦冲的作品无疑给人带来积极正面的美感,展现了精湛的技艺、敏锐的艺术眼光和深思熟虑的头脑。如果说秦冲的艺术平静而内敛,而非表现精神中狂野的一面,它们却并不缺乏好奇心和探索其选用创作媒介的各种可能性的意愿。其作品自始至终都贯穿着艺术家清晰的艺术理想,即以个人美

学追求而非商业化为目的。

尽管没必要把秦冲的艺术与某个艺术运动或艺术风格挂上钩,他的画给人的第一印象也许是与上个世纪60年代发源于德国威斯巴登并波及欧美等世界其他地区的激浪派(Fluxus)运动有某种精神上,如果不是实质性的关联。他与这一运动的共同之处在于都表现出对全球主义、实验性、简约主义甚至极简主义装置的兴趣。此外,秦冲似乎还在他的某些作品的实验性的元素排列中运用了偶然性因素(若非嬉戏性质)。尤其是他的某些画作让人联想到约翰·凯吉(John Cage 1912-1992)绘画和版画中的图像记谱。有趣的是约翰凯吉的主要艺术灵感正巧来源于东方文化。他的雕塑作品也让人想起詹姆斯·李·拜亚(James Lee Byars 1932-1997)的雕塑,例如拜亚的“金塔,镀金柱”1974。然而与经常通过众多艺术家之间的积极对话来创作的激浪派艺术家不同的是,秦冲选择了独自创作的道路。

那么中国文化艺术影响在秦冲的艺术中又占据了什么位置?从目前中国当代艺术的发展趋势来看,例如水墨画和书法的重新诠释,他的创作似乎和其他同道颇为合拍,即试图把当代艺术探索(无论是否受到西方全球性艺术的影响)与当今中国不断变化的文化生活联系起来。他的雕塑装置超越了传统艺术形式,引领中国艺术走向明显关注当代生活的未来。如果我把他的艺术与西方激浪派运动联系在一起没错的话,值得注意的是这些西方艺术家也正是从东方获取他们的灵感。从广义上说,秦冲的作品中表现出的任何中国艺术和文化痕迹都是以典型的象征符号形式出现(这些符号通过根植于图画及雕塑形态中的节奏与韵律的比喻来传达意义),而非艺术作品以外的任何外部世界的再现形式。

2009年7月20日 纽约

Qin Chong - A Quest for Ars Veritas

Curtis L. Carter

New York, 20 July 2009

When we experience, when we live the relationships of colors, forms, space, structures, the rhythms that are the artist's domain, we encounter a new way of reacting to the world, of experiencing it and understanding it, and thus new relationships between man and the world, a new reality, appear.¹

Like many Chinese artists born within the past forty-some years, Qin Chong (1968-) has lived through a period of radical changes following the end of the Cultural Revolution and extending through the introduction of the international capitalist art market to contemporary Chinese artists. A great deal has changed with respect to the possibilities for Chinese artists. During the Cultural Revolution, artists had been encouraged by the ideological guidance espoused by Mao Zedong to adapt a form of Socialist Realism borrowed from Russia. The aim was to bring art closer to the everyday life of the people as a means of shaping emotional and ideological views, and to alter the practices of art to fit the political and educational needs of the regime.

Not only was change pertaining to art brought about by the ideological shifts, but also perhaps more importantly, by the abandonment of core principles. First was the abandonment of key principles of Chinese traditional art such as a reflection of an ideal of harmony

between persons and nature as reflected in landscape paintings. Then at the end of the Cultural Revolution, followed the abandonment of the core principles of the Mao era, with increasing freedom for individual artists to develop their own approaches to art. Add to these monumental changes, the accelerated access to Chinese artists of modern and post-modern developments in the West. All of these changes have occurred within a relatively short time period given the long 5000 years history of China.

With these changes, artists faced many choices. One option was to work within the structures of official art such as the National Association of Chinese Artists, or some regional art association. Another option was to take advantage of increased tolerance of non-official art and pursue an independent course. The range might include adopting an avant-garde confrontational stance, or simply working quietly to realize the artist's independent vision. For some, the opportunities seemed more attractive to relocate abroad, or to combine an international base such as New York or Berlin with continued activity in China.

In the career of Qin Chong, one finds a mix of the above. Eschewing the option of affiliating with official art, he chose to work as an independent artist, with

a base in Berlin and Beijing. From the Xinjiang area of China, where his family had undergone the harsh measures of the Cultural Revolution, Qin Chong graduated from the Beijing Academy of Arts and Crafts (Beijing Academy of Art and Design) in 1990. After graduating, he founded the Beijing Ammonal Gallery from which he launched contemporary art exhibitions both in China and abroad from 1993 to 1998. From 1993 to 1999 he exhibited in various group exhibitions. His first solo exhibition took place in Beijing, and during the past ten years, he has worked as an independent artist with gallery representation and solo exhibitions in Berlin, New York, Shanghai, Beijing, and elsewhere.

Perhaps the most fundamental choice facing a Chinese artist today, or any artist for that matter, in the words of artist Feng Meng Bo, is this: "Do you want to be an artist, or do you want to be selling a product, or do you want fame?" Qin Chong has chosen first to be an artist, which means a fundamental commitment to art as a means of creative exploration of ideas and emotions, or lending support to humane social action. It means finding a voice and being true to one's particular artistic vision. This choice does not immediately preclude economic success or fame, but the latter two must follow the commitment to being an artist.

A second choice concerns how to position one's work in a global artistic context. This choice may involve opportunities to draw upon the broad stream of artistic knowledge available in the interaction between global Western and Eastern art practices. Again, Qin Chong has chosen to explore these connections through his international platforms respectively, in Beijing and in Berlin. Living and working in Berlin has afforded opportunities to experience first hand the pulse of art in another major art world capital. His favorable reception in this international climate attests to his success in transcending local boundaries. At the same time he does not allow the prevailing forces in Western

art to simply over-ride or compromise the essence of his own developing artistic vision.

A third choice, and one that is increasingly pressing for Chinese artists today, is how to relate to their Chinese culture and heritage. The question that must be asked, is how is a Chinese artist today best to connect meaningfully to the rich Chinese cultural and artistic life, both past and recent, and also speak with clarity and force to both Chinese and global audiences. One possibility is to turn toward art in the service of nationalism, but this alternative risks narrow, and even socially dysfunctional outcomes. The history of art with narrowly focused nationalist aims can be divisive within a particular culture, and often hinders positive communication externally among nations, as it soon deteriorates into vacuous propaganda. The answer will not be found, either in the exploitative framework of crass commercialism in the art market where the work of artists is commodified and viewed merely as a means to bolstering the economy.

Alternatively, each artist must find a way to maintain an authentic voice grounded in a personal artistic vision that is also sensitive to the rich artistic and cultural life of Chinese society. How has Qin Chong fared in these respects? What is his personal vision and how does his work connect to the artistic and cultural heritage of China? To answer this question we must take a closer look at his art.

His principal art works mainly consist of paintings on paper and three-dimensional sculptural installations. Some of the works such as "United Nations Black and White" 2003 enter into the domain of public art. All of Qin Chong's art in these various media is approached from an experimental perspective rather than by following any established artistic conventions. The paintings are abstract as they begin as squares or rectangles some with textured surfaces and shapes, mainly black and white with occasional soft hints of alternate coloration. Another series of paintings

experiments with spirals, triangles, and squares in brown to burnt tones of varying shapes, one with the artist's photo in the center. On occasion, the artist's painting surfaces appear to be layered with multiple strips of white laid criss-cross on the flat paper surface. Across the layered white strips are strong brush marks, likely soot or black ink. In other of the paintings, the black markings take the shapes of coils of string or rope where, on one instance, the color red appears at the top of three intertwined coil shapes. Alternatively, the paintings take on simpler forms as the works assume the characteristics of brush marks used in Chinese calligraphy—not literally, of course—but in the manner of contemporary Chinese artists' experimental variations of calligraphy.

Of the sculptural installation works, I will begin with comment on these, "Past and Future" 2005 presented in an exhibition "Black White Grey" at the Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art with variations elsewhere in Hong Kong and Berlin, and "China Tops the World in Cultural Production" 2007. "Past and Future" consists of multiple white cylindrical columns of irregular heights and made of paper. The irregular circular edges of the three dimensional columns are colored of soot or ashes from being tinged with fire. When viewed together in this installation, the mass of white columns with burnt edges offer a strikingly beautiful image that invites contemplation beyond its visual impact. Indeed, one might imagine, with this image in mind, the architectural remnants of a burned out city, or a civilization that has lost its glory and exhausted its power.

"China Tops the World in Cultural Production" is a metal construction of 99 "gold" bars each measuring 19.9 x 9.9 x 3.9 cm with text etched into the metal. The gold metal bars, forged by the artist Qin Chong, as attested in his signature on the bars, are stacked in pyramid formation to intensify their visual impact and possibly offer a conceptual meaning. Is this work

intended as a comment on the material power enjoyed by China's economic success, as the title might suggest? Or is the piece to be taken as a comment on the drift of cultural production in China into commodification? In any event, the piece can simply be enjoyed as a well-formed three-dimensional spatial abstraction for its aesthetic interest. In either case the piece succeeds in commanding attention for its clarity of form and a possible narrative interpretation.

Another intriguing sculptural installation, "Up to the Limit" 2000 reveals a further dimension of the artist's creativity. This piece consists of nine metal stands that display pure water as works of art. (The piece thus embodies two of the elements (water and metal) identified in ancient Chinese cosmology.)² The drops of water, arranged in differing shapes and patterns, are placed on the metal surfaces by the artist, a process requiring scientific precision guided by a steady eye and hand, as well as artistic imagination. Each of the nine exhibits offers a variation on the concept, and will vanish as the water evaporates during the course of the exhibition. The sheer simplicity of the idea and the beauty of the forms in "Up to the Limit" would be sufficient for appreciation of this work. On this level, the interplay between the highly polished metal surfaces, drops of water of varying size and shape laid out in elegant fashion, and the light offer a rich visual delight drawing on the elements of light, space and, except for the reflections off the metal, the absence of color. The piece also exemplifies "the tension of opposites" as in yin and yang in Chan Buddhism, in this case the tension between the rigid metal ground and the fluid structures of the drops of water. As a metaphor of broader dimensions, the piece also invites contemplation on the possibility for harmony between nature (water) and human constructions as represented in the fabricated metal surfaces thus echoing a prominent theme (harmony between nature and people) found in traditional Chinese art.

The final two works for our discussion here, "United Nations Black and White" 2003 and "Passing on..." (burning white paper torches) 2008, shows the extension of Qin Chong's art into the realm of public art. "United Nations Black and White" is incorporated into an indoor-outdoor exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Beijing, August 2009. The work consists of a permanent outdoor installation of the flags, complete with poles for their display, of the original 51 member states of the United Nations when it was founded in October 1945. The colors of the respective national flags are reduced to black and white in keeping with the artist's intent to simplify his visual language. These colors may also symbolically exemplify the global aim of world cooperation in realizing the aims of "peace, equal rights and justice" on which the United Nations was founded. The outdoor flags are presented in conjunction with the artist's installation commemorating the inauguration of the United Nations within the galleries of the Museum of Contemporary Art Beijing (MOCA BJ).

In contrast to the monumental "United Nations Black and White," "Passing on..." takes Qin Chong's art further into direct contact with the people in a variety of street settings. This piece is a work of performance art taking place all around the city in various locations, beginning on the museum grounds outside MOCA Beijing. The piece is held together by a common element of people holding the flaming torches, as is captured in photographic documentation of the piece. (Participants were invited to submit photographs documenting their enactment of the concept.) Perhaps the work is intended to reference the passing of the Olympic torch in anticipation of the Beijing Olympics which took place in 2008. This installation consists of people holding flaming rolled white paper torches in a variety of street settings. The torch bearers of all ages are mainly (but not always) wearing white T-shirts. Sometimes they are in groups as if celebrating together, for example artists, school children. One torch bearer

is a young motor cycle rider, another an older street vendor, another a worker. The effect of this work is to foster a sense of shared community, reminding us that art has an important role in helping people with differences in culture and personal beliefs come together in the quest for world peace.

From the point of view of their aesthetic, these works have a definitely positive aesthetic feeling. They show excellent craftsmanship and skill, as well as a sensitive artistic eye and thoughtful mind. If the art of Qin Chong is calm and reserve in its demeanor, as opposed to expressing wilder tendencies of spirit, there is no lack of curiosity and a willingness to explore the possibilities of his chosen media. Throughout, the work exhibits a clear artistic vision, one aimed at personal and aesthetic rather than commercial purposes.

Although it is not necessary to an appreciation of Qin Chong's art to link it to any particular artistic movement or style, what comes to mind first, in viewing the paintings is perhaps a spiritual, if not a material kinship to the artists of the Fluxus movement that began at Wiesbaden, Germany in the 1960s and spread to the USA, Europe, and various other parts of the world. With this movement Qin Chong shares an interest in globalism, experimentation, and simplicity or even parsimony of formal devices. And, in at least some of his works, Qin Chong appears to employ an element of chance, if not playfulness, in the experimental arrangements of the elements in his compositions. In particular, the scores of John Cage (1912-1992), which also work as drawings, and his works in print media come to mind when viewing some of Qin Chong's paintings.³ (Coincidentally, John Cage's main artistic influences were from Eastern cultures). As well, the sculptures of James Lee Byars (1932-1997) come to mind when contemplating Qin Chong's sculptures. For example Byars "The Golden Tower, Gilt column" 1974. Unlike the Fluxus artists, however, whose works were often (though not always) created in active dialogue

among numbers of artists, Qin chooses to create his work acting alone.

What then is the place of Chinese culture and art influences in Qin Chong's art? Given recent developments in Chinese contemporary art, such as the reinterpretation of ink paintings and calligraphy, his work seems to fit well into the path of those who wish to connect their contemporary explorations, whether or not informed by Western global art, to the living and changing culture of China today. His sculptural installations extend beyond traditional art forms taking Chinese art in a future direction with definite references to contemporary life. If I have correctly identified his main link to Western artists as being the Fluxus movement, it is worth noting that these artists drew significantly from Eastern art for their inspiration. Speaking more broadly, whatever references to Chinese art and culture appear in Qin Chong's works, the traces are in the form of exemplificational symbols (symbols which convey their significance as metaphors embedded in rhythms and dynamic shapes of the pictorial and sculptural structures), rather than by representational forms of reference pointing to the external world beyond the works of art.

3. See for example John Cage, "Portfolio, Seven Day Diary," 1978 and smoked paper monotypes 1986, in Alexandra Monroe, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2009), 268-273.

1. Pierre Soulages, "Statements and Documents," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences: Special Issue: The Visual Arts Today*, Winter, 1960: 99.

2. In the cosmology of the early Yin-Yang school, five elements, soil, wood, metal, fire, and water, were identified as symbols of influential forces guiding the affairs of the Chinese Emperors. These elements respectively, were attached to the reign of the different emperors and were taken as a pattern to guide the emperors's affairs. In this hierarchy of forces "the nature of water is to moisten and descend, ...of metal to yield and be modified." See Fung Yu-Lan, *Selected Philosophical Writings of Fung Yu-Lan* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1991, 1998), 336-38, 341-44.