

THE INTENSE ART OF WENZHI ZHANG

Having visited China three times and Taiwan twice as an art museum director, usually in pursuit of art for the museum I directed for twenty some years-the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, my observations of change has been quite acute since 1978 when I was invited to join a group of American Art museum directors and deans of several University art departments in what our government called a “people to people” program in which we were introduced to our “counter parts” in the principal cities of China and were very generously entertained. Nowhere however did we see art that showed any influence from the west. Painting departments in all major art schools in Guangzhou, Shanghai, Nanjing and Beijing were still dominated by Russian social realism as a painting style and ceramics were without any expressionism except for social realistic figurines which I and other visitors bought as souvenirs in Foshan near Guangzhou, a rather sad state of affairs for a country with such a long history and artistic culture. And so after another brief trip in 1978, I was invited to help organize an international ceramic symposium at North China University with Mao Lee, a Chinese artist living in New York, which attracted a large audience of mostly ceramic artists from many regions of China giving one a definite impression of Chinese diversity. During my talk to a large audience of artists from all over China I received only one very enthusiastic round of applause, after I said, for those of you who have never traveled outside of China, do travel and it will make you not only better informed but may stimulate you with new ideas and possibly make your culture progress. You will not loose your “Chinese ness”, do not fear! Come to New York for instance and you will see many Chinese-Americans who have progressed in their lives and occupations and arts without loosing their language or their Chinese culture.

Since then, three decades later much has been accomplished and Wenzhi Zhang of Guangzhou is an excellent example of this cultural phenomenon in the

fast growing economy of the world's most populist nation. Wenzhi Zhang is in fact becoming an international artist of considerable stature, expanding her use of media from ceramics, which she is best known for to metals to wood and most recently to natural lacquer painting, an ancient natural resource of her home state of Guangzhou.

Prolific and productive, creative and knowledgeable, eclectic and modern, symbolic and post-modern, her work extends and expands widely across the globe. She frequently travels between the Atlantic and the Pacific, teaching, doing art shows and attending international art conferences, (we met on a Greek ship in the Mediterranean with the International Academy of Ceramics Biannual Conference some ten years ago).

Her latest "New Sacred Calligraphy" series of natural lacquer paintings resonate with glowing colors and seductive designs. They are abstract configurations suggesting potent ancient mysteries, fragments of landscapes sliding off the earth or off some other planet; as she casts about for her new or ancient subjects to be exploited for their inherent artistic values, labor intensive paintings that achieve a maximum degree of meaningful expression. While still relatively young, Wenzhi Zhang's lacquer paintings evoke for me the aura of an "old master".

Ronald Andrew Kuchta
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