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An abstract painting by Peter Liew, featuring a dense, textured composition of thick, expressive brushstrokes in a vibrant palette of blue, green, yellow, red, and white. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and complex layering. In the lower center, there is a small, dark, rectangular object with a white, stylized face or mask-like feature. The background is a deep, rich blue, providing a strong contrast to the other colors.

## PETER LIEW



**Shanghai Biennale** \* **Cesare Syjuco**  
\* **Zhang Family** \* **Arpita Singh** \*  
**Ly Tran Quynh Giang** \* **Reviews** \*  
**Books** \* **India Art Summit** \* **Auction**



# A Gracious Respect

*There have been many families of artists that have made an impact over a number of generations in different art worlds. During the past two decades, Chinese art families have gradually emerged. Among the most amiable is the Zhang Family—father, mother, and three daughters—who have been displaying their varied talents in the United States.*

By Dorothy Joiner

At the end of the 19th century, Rudyard Kipling published his well-known quip affirming the divide between Asia and the Occident—"Never the twain shall meet." Though often repudiated, Kipling's assertion now seems hollower than ever in view of today's precipitous accommodation of the two cultures. An intriguing example of the ever-narrowing gap between East and West are the Zhangs, a Chinese family of artists: father, mother, and three daughters. The parents, Zhang Sheng and Bai Yuzhi, both display Western influences despite having been educated in China's "fine line" (*gongbi*) tradition of ink painting. Whereas Yanling, the eldest daughter, finds transcendence in Tibetan spirituality, the twins Chunbo and Chunhong exhibit a playful and intriguing commingling of Chinese and Western ideas and techniques.

A number of the family's works are currently being exhibited in the Southeast United States. In LaGrange, Georgia, their art appeared in three venues: The LaGrange Museum of Art, The Cochran Gallery, and the Lamar Dodd Art Center. Works from these exhibitions will travel in the spring to the Malone Gallery of Troy University in Troy, Alabama. Along with paintings, prints, and drawings, the Zhangs also brought to America a gracious kindness, good humor, and an infectious enthusiasm for art.



Zhang Sheng, **Roaring over the Mountains and the River**, 1983, ink and color on paper, 56 x 30". All images: Courtesy of the Artists.

A retired professor of painting at the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts in Shengyang, the family patriarch, Zhang Sheng, now lives in Beijing where he remains active as

an artist. He has exhibited widely in China and around the world, notably Spain, Iran, Malaysia, and the United States. A protean painter, Zhang is adept in both fine-line and free-style figurative painting, as well as in landscape and animal depictions. He is also known for his expertise in copying masterworks from the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties. His narrative paintings include interpretations of well-known stories from the tradition, as well as the celebrated series *The Long March* (1974–1976), which chronicles Chairman Mao's trek during the 1930s, with the Red Army, through more than ten provinces and over 8,000 miles. An inveterate draftsman, Zhang produced an admirable collection of sketches during a recent trip to Puerto Rico, which he showed enthusiastically at a gathering of friends.

Zhang's memorable painting of his favorite animal, the tiger, *Roaring over the Mountains and the River* (1983), exemplifies the "verve," which he says must come before the "first stroke." The magnificent feline stretches its flank, paws perched on a rocky elevation next to a low, rushing falls. Facing away from the viewer toward a mountain in the distance, the animal turns its head to the left in a graceful yet powerful curve. In Chinese thought, the tiger represents *yang*, the active, energetic principle, complementing the feminine passivity of water, the ephemeral *yin*.

More Western in feel are Zhang's



Zhang Sheng, **Long March**, 1974–1976, ink and watercolor on paper, 16 x 20" each.





watercolors, such as *Fog in the Morning* (1955). A small boat rests on the water near the horizon, its outline lost in the bleeding lavender hues of the dawn mist. In the foreground, irregular patches of pale coral, soft green, and rose suggest the water's surface: an Asian Impressionist scene. A pastoral reverie, *Bank of the River* (1954) shows an anonymous shepherd in the distance, surrounded by a flock of snow-white sheep. Defining the currents of the river in the foreground are swirls of blue, lavender, and sea green. "Art cannot replicate life," Zhang says. "It needs to go beyond the moment. It's the recreation of God's creation."

**A**s an art education student at the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts, Bai Yuzhi was introduced both to Western-style painting and to traditional Chinese techniques. Now retired from teaching middle school in Shenyang, she remains active in the Liaoning branch of the Chinese Artists Association. Her reputation is international, having exhibited around the world in Macau, Spain, Iran, and the United States. Bai's favorite format is the traditional scroll painting, but with a bow to modernity, she eschews silk, preferring Dacron, a synthetic fiber. "My inspiration comes," she says, "from the land of perpetual snow, harsh winters, and the vast icy forest, where I was born. My life and art are nurtured by that immense snow-covered land we call *Hei Long Jiang*."



**Above left:** Bai Yuzhi, *The Deep Birch Forest-3*, 1985, Chinese ink and color on Dacron. **Above right:** Bai Yuzhi, *Cranes - Early Spring*, 2003, Chinese ink and color on Dacron, 22 1/4 x 28 1/2".



**Zhang Sheng, *Fog in the Morning*, 1955, watercolor on paper, 23.6 x 17.3 cm.**

Dramatizing the forces of nature, *Cranes: Early Spring* (2005) shows two birds in a snow-laden skiff. One gazes toward the frozen pond; its mate bends over, huddled against the bitter cold. Reflecting the Chinese preference for feral over domesticated animals, the artist chooses birds rich in symbolism. Associated with purity because of its white plumage, the crane, a Taoist emblem of immortality, stands for longevity and faithfulness. In *Winter: The*

*Deep Birch Forest-3* (1985), snow covers the ground, leaving white patches on the barren trees. Despite the pitiless weather, the trees continue to lift their gently curving trunks, indicative of nature's infrangibility in the face of adversity. In these works, the artist has melded a Chinese sensibility to Western perspective. The birch trees diminish in size in the distance, their edges blurring. And the straggly vegetation behind the cranes seems to merge into the snowy landscape.

Before moving to the United States over 20 years ago, Zhang Yanling earned an MFA in oil painting at the Central Institute of Nationalities in Beijing. She has exhibited widely in America and abroad: Mexico, Taiwan, France, Spain, and Britain, among other venues. Ling credits Tibet as one of the "deepest" influences on her life and work. During frequent trips, she encountered there "the mysterious and surrealistic Tibetan Lama religion," which she sees as focal to her thinking. Her work treats, she says, "the conflicts between human instinct and lofty ideals, between fantasy and reality." Her themes are "spiritual transformation and personal experience."

Reinterpreting a Tibetan mandala, Ling's *Infinite-Blast* (2009) conflates a symbolic diagram of the cosmos with an aid to meditation. Concentric circles in shades of saffron—a hue ubiquitous in Tibet—graduating to yellow, surround an orange circle raised from the surface and punctuated with a black center. Hands





emerging from the inner circles make traditional gestures for compassion, wisdom, good fortune, and blessing. Eyes on the hands refer to Buddha's cognizance of the world's suffering. Instead of the square representative of the earth seen in a conventional mandala, Ling bisects the image with a horizontal line to indicate the intersection of earthly reality with infinity. Finally, the dark "hole" in the center refers to the enlightenment rewarding meditation: nothingness.

More terrestrial in temper, Ling's ink and watercolor drawing from the *Nature/Culture Series* (2006) is based on her sister Hong's outdoor installation. Twisted branches cascade to the ground from a vintage school desk. Set against a ground of agreeable pastels, the desiccated, leafless branches are a metaphor for the burgeoning effects of education, suppressing the past as it offers hope for the future, an image particularly germane to contemporary China.

**Z**hang Chunbo, the elder twin, earned an MFA at Georgia State University in Atlanta, where she worked for three years as a studio artist at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. In 2008, she was invited to produce a series of lithographs at Poligrafa, a prestigious print workshop in Barcelona. She has exhibited widely in both the United States and China. Refusing to be "classified by trends or categories," Bo chooses "a diverse and eclectic vocabulary."



Zhang Yanling, *We Lived We Hoped*, 2010, ink, pencil, watercolor on rice paper and canvas, 36 x 48".



Zhang Yanling, *BLAST-I, Infinite*, 2009, ink, charcoal, and watercolor on handmade paper mounted on canvas, 72 x 48".

Bo's response to her country's rapid Westernization is one of impish humor, as exemplified in the *Treasure* series. Her prints juxtapose meticulously rendered antique bowls from the Qing and Ming dynasties to a variety of everyday "things": inglorious detritus of contemporary culture. A set of monotypes (2005) features a barely perceptible embossing from a toilet seat cover above splendidly embellished wide-lipped bowls: one with a fiery crimson dragon frolicking over a golden surface; another with a profusion

of flowers in coral and aqua against an indigo glaze; and a third with fluttering birds and delicate almond blossoms on a gold background.

A set of lithographs of 2008 marries the porcelains to plumbing equipment: a white vessel ringed in red with a carnelian-hued fish is turned upside down to serve as the rubber cup of a toilet plunger; a red vessel with cobalt flower and green foliage hovers over a chrome drainpipe; and a lovely white bowl with a crimson flower sits perched above a curved PVC pipe. In thus adjoining articles from opposing ends of the alimentary process—in Bo's words the "clean" and the "dirty"—she reveals a wry humor.

Equally as prankish as her twin, Zhang Chunhong earned the MFA at the University of California, Davis. Her work has been exhibited in Washington DC, New York City, and Australia. She now lives in Lawrence, Kansas, with her husband



Zhang Yanling, *Culture & Nature*, 2006, graphite and watercolor on paper mounted on canvas, 40 x 40".





**Above from left: Zhang Chunbo, Treasure 1-2, 2008, lithograph, 30 x 22". Zhang Chunbo, Treasure 2-1, 2008, lithograph, 30 x 22". Zhang Chunbo, Treasure 3-6, 2008, monotype, 16 1/2 x 14".**

and daughter. This year the family is in Xian, China, where her husband is working on a Fulbright fellowship.

Characterizing her work as "a combination of traditional skills and contemporary ideas," Hong displays her mastery of the "fine line" tradition using charcoal, which, she says, "incorporates fine details, darkness, and illumination." She often chooses hair, moreover, as a focal metaphor—long, luxuriant black tresses like her own. In the East, she says, "a young woman's long hair is associated with the life force, sexual energy, growth, and beauty." Melding this rich symbolism with a playful accent on the quotidian, Hong effects mischievous visual oxymorons. In *Cheers* (2007), a pool of wine spilled from a shattered glass takes on the fringed outline of hair. From a crack in the shell of *Egg* (2005), a hirsute "chick" can be seen. Hair-lettuce peeps from under the bun in *No Cheese* (2005). Knotted like a tie, hair

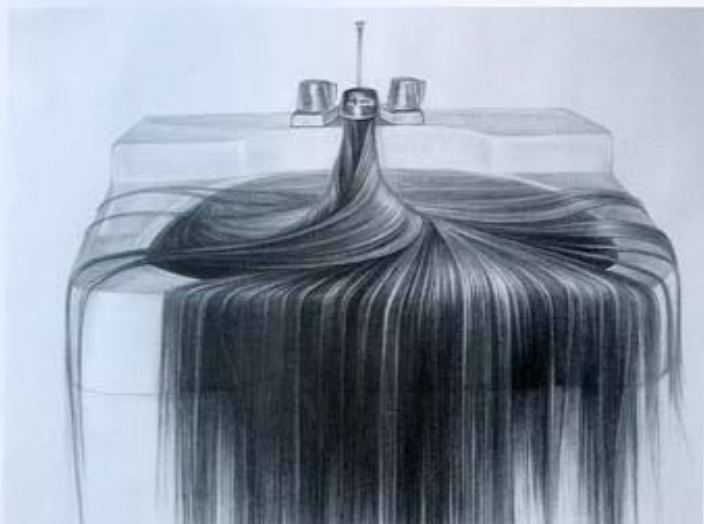


**Zhang Chunhong, Twister, 2009, graphite on paper.**

drapes from a coat hanger in *Knot Hair* (2005). In *Twister* (2009), a length of hair kissed with light swirls into a point, imitating a tornado. Hair flows from a tube in *Paste* (2007) and forms the crinite tail of a bullet in *Split Ends* (2007). In *Clog* (2005), hair flows over the sides of a basin just as water would.

Welcome visitors to the Southeast United States, the Zhangs have brought their art, a microcosm of the precipitous evolution of traditions during the past 40 years in China. The enduring respect for masterworks seen in the parents becomes in the twins a prankish, fun-filled yet respectful manipulation of the legacy. One thing that has not changed nonetheless is their amiability; the daughters are no less gracious than their parents. Δ

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**Above left: Zhang Chunhong, No Cheese, 2005, graphite on paper, 18 x 24". Above right: Zhang Chunhong, Clog, 2005, graphite on paper, 18 x 24".**