

ASIAN ART

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YUAN FANG

by Olivia Sand

Over the course of the past 10 years, the artist Yuan Fang (b 1996, China) has led a fast-paced life, completing art school, building up her practice, and establishing herself as one of the most interesting artists of her generation. Following a solo exhibition at the Long Museum in Shanghai, she has been catching the attention of the art world and has been singled out to be part of the Forbes *30 under 30 Asia 2024* list.

In a short period of time, Yuan Fang has come to build her own vocabulary based on colourful curves that intertwine on the canvas, representing the chaotic state of our world. Having created her own calligraphy, her elaborate paintings convey both movement and speed, matching the artist's drive to take on the idea of abstraction with all its challenges.

In the following interview, we follow Yuan Fang on her artistic journey that although already remarkable is bound to produce more illuminating experiences.

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Yuan Fang in her studio. Photo: © Frenel Morris

Asian Art Newspaper:

You have just finished a residency in New York two months ago.

Was it a positive experience?

Yuan Fang: The residency is called Silver Art Projects – a one-year residency for artists in Lower Manhattan – and it is free. Silverstein is a property development company that has been rebuilding the entire World Trade Center complex. With the floor they own at 4 World Trade Center, they decided to allocate it to artists instead of renting it out as office space. So, we had the studio free for a year, which was fantastic. Before starting the residency, I was working out of my studio in Brooklyn, where it is quieter. I feel it makes a considerable difference coming into the city every day, commuting like someone who has a regular job in the financial district. I like the energy the city brings to my practice.

AAN: You embarked on an artistic career shortly after arriving in the US.

What led you to change your path from business to art?

YF: Both of my parents work in finance in Shenzhen. Consequently, once I graduated from college, they expected me to be in the financial world, too, or at least study computer science and join a company like Google. They wanted me to go to college in the US, preferably to an Ivy League. This is the reason why

SKARSTEDT



Green Snake Spitting Out Its Tongue (2024), acrylic and oil stick on canvas, 210 x 170 cm, courtesy of the artist and Skarstedt, New York © Yuan Fang



Where the Lights Are Fading (2024), acrylic and oil stick on canvas, 210 x 170 cm, courtesy of the artist and Skarstedt, New York © Yuan Fang



Open Fire (2024), oil and charcoal on canvas, 220 x 170 cm, courtesy of the artist and Skarstedt, New York © Yuan Fang

I attended an international boarding school in China, enrolled in SAT (Standard Assessment Tests) camps, and studied towards advanced placement courses.

Although I did not take any art classes in China, I always knew I wanted to do something creative when I grew up. In high school, I was interested in photography, looking out for photography magazines at my school whenever I could. It was my goal to create something, even though I did not know under what terms it would be or if I would be any good at it. Then my parents decided to send me to Boston University to study business. After one semester, I dropped out and changed direction, applying to art school instead. I moved to New York to start as a freshman at the School of Visual Arts (SVA).

AAN: How did studying photography at the SVA ultimately lead you to become a painter?

YF: In Shenzhen, I did not grow up seeing paintings in institutions and I had no connection to the medium either. I was initially studying photography at the SVA because Shenzhen does not have much art or culture in general, and therefore, there are not many art museums. Basically, the only time I visited museums was when my parents took me on trips to Europe. In addition, as a high school student, I was so busy studying for my SAT that I neither had the time nor the energy to create paintings. When I began my studies at the SVA, photography seemed like the most logical choice at that time. Once I was in New York, I began visiting museum and gallery shows since my student ID would allow me free entry to all the institutions. In freshman year, there was not much homework, and I felt it was a perfect opportunity to observe what was out there. This is how I got into painting, especially abstract expressionism. It was most interesting, and since I did not have a studio or a physical space to make paintings – and was on a tight budget – I started drawing in my sketchbook. People who saw my drawings were very enthusiastic about them, pointing out that I was actually very good at it.

Reflecting on what people had said and after giving it some thought, I concluded that I was not much of a photographer and decided to change

my major. I opted for 'visual and critical studies', which is like fine arts, but with an emphasis on philosophy, art history, and humanity classes. Even though I ended up taking two painting classes as an undergraduate student, my priority was not to have someone teach me how to make a painting, which I thought I could do on my own, but rather to learn about art history. As such, I just went ahead with my work, making a lot of bad paintings as I started out. Over time, however, everything fell into place.

AAN: What drove you to the conclusion that you were not that good a photographer? Were you questioning the quality of the finished photograph, or were you missing the hands-on aspect you find in painting?

YF: First, I myself was terrible at teamwork, and as a photographer, you shoot in the studio with an entire team that involves lighting people, assistants, etc. I could not really function in this way, nor did I think I could direct a model. Also, for me, there were not many perspectives as a photographer, mainly because I did not want to do anything figurative. When I was studying photography, I was doing a lot of semi-abstract still-life photography like Barbara Kasten (b 1936), and I also admired Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's (1895-1946) work. Ultimately, I got bored with photography but quickly identified that I needed a medium where I could start from zero. Sculpture was not an option as I am not comfortable working on anything three-dimensional and I am not a handy person. I also ruled out filmmaking since I am bad with narratives. As I began making drawings, I became fascinated with it and people quickly acknowledged that I was much better at drawing and painting than any other medium. Looking back, I am grateful for the advice and guidance I received, which encouraged me to get started.

AAN: When you began sketching, were they already abstract drawings?

YF: Initially, I was very fond of Surrealism, basically because Surrealist paintings are easy to transfer through reproductions and pictures. I came across Surrealist images browsing on the internet and their content truly caught my attention. Looking back, I felt

attracted to Surrealism probably also because I shared their approach, completing some drawings based on Automatism. Then, I began to transfer my drawings onto canvas, but the more I did it, the more I realised I did not want to depict on the canvas anything I could see in real life. As a result, I turned my direction and focus to abstraction.

AAN: What specifically prompted you to avoid depicting anything you could see in real life?

YF: There are several reasons for it. Initially, when I moved to the US, my English was not very practical but rather based on what I had learned in China to pass the SAT exam. So, it took me a long time to learn how to communicate with people. Because of the language barrier, I went through a long period of isolation. In undergraduate school, when I was around 18 or 19 years old, I was basically just a quiet Asian child sitting in the classroom making drawings. I came to realise that making these drawings was a way for me to escape reality. Growing up in China and then moving to the US was a huge change, and with no family members nearby, there were some moments when I went through hard times and felt depressed. Drawing and painting felt like therapy. That is why I did not want to depict anything from my surroundings because I was longing to escape my reality. Drawing and painting allowed me to do just that.

AAN: How did coming to the US and experiencing a new culture affect you not only as a person, but as an artist?

YF: Moving to New York has changed me much more than coming to the US. Arriving in New York and walking on the street, I had this exhilarating feeling that I could do whatever I wanted without anyone noticing. I could cry on the street without anyone caring. That gave me this feeling of unlimited freedom, allowing me to explore myself not only as an artist, but also as a person. At first, I was fighting the idea of becoming an artist, because I did not know whether I could make a living at it all. In addition, my parents were not familiar with the life of an artist and thought it was a terrible idea. They decided to cut me off as they did not see any point in sending me money to simply paint. I had to make my own living, which at that

stage was extremely challenging. However, it pushed me to be very hard-working and constantly improve my practice. Looking back, the very fact of coming to New York and living there made me a stronger person.

AAN: Visiting shows in New York must have taken you in two different directions: envisioning all the possibilities yet acknowledging the pressure of the past. Was it an eye-opening experience?

YF: It was indeed an eye-opening experience for me, as you rightly point out. When I go to MoMA, for example, and see the paintings of De Kooning (1904-1977) or Lee Krasner (1908-1984), I am amazed and impressed at the same time because I truly appreciate what these pioneers have accomplished, as these works still resonate with me and I have a deep connection to them. I keep having this idea that maybe, if I work hard enough, I will be able to make good paintings. Perhaps in the long run, once I have passed away, people will also establish a connection with my work, which would be very rewarding. To answer your question more specifically, I don't worry about the past, I simply intend to work even harder.

AAN: Beyond De Kooning and Lee Krasner, which other artists have had an impact on your development as an artist?

YF: I would consider Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) and Krasner as my 'painting parents'. It is how I started painting, but now I do not see them as major influences at this point in my practice. I am now more inspired by earlier artists like Francis Bacon (1909-1992), Arshile Gorky (1904-1948), and Roberto Matta (1911-2002). As for contemporary artists, I love Ross Bleckner (b 1949) and then, surprisingly, David Dale (1947-2019). They are my major influences and, of course, I also like Cecily Brown (b 1969), but I think that would be obvious.

AAN: Looking back, what was the pivotal moment that brought the twirls or the curves (depending on how you want to call them), into your paintings?

YF: To me, they are more like curves. I feel curvy shapes or lines represent female bodies and desires. In that respect, the female body

– and as a result the female desire – is less straightforward than men's. It is more subtle, yet also very powerful. Over time, I came to realise that this subtle rendering came out better in oil than in acrylic. When you first see these paintings, you may just see harmony and beautiful shapes. Looking closer, however, there is chaos or turbulence, with different layers interacting with each other, creating that bizarre feeling.

AAN: Beyond the female bodies and desires, what would you want to reveal about the female condition in general?

YF: It is a very broad topic. Obviously, it is much easier to be a woman today and have equal rights than it was 50, 20, or even 10 years ago. However, in my opinion, there is still a lot that needs to be done. Even though there are trends in the art world, like the increasing interest towards female abstraction, for example, there is only one living female artist, namely Cecily Brown, who has had a solo show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (*Cecily Brown: Death and the Maid*, 2023). That is why I feel there is still a lot that needs to be improved. It is a fact that today the most expensive artists are still mainly male artists.

AAN: As for your paintings, do you consider them autobiographical?

YF: Yes. Initially, I was very inspired by my own story. When I start a painting, it is very much about improvising and then being driven by the flow.

AAN: You mentioned improvisation.

Do you start the painting intuitively? How would you describe the process?
YF: Most of the time, I follow a very basic composition and colour palette that I have in mind to begin with, even though in practical terms it is not exactly the way it will probably go. While I am a very together person in daily life, when I work, I choose to let the painting direct me. I like this contradiction between my life in the real world and my life in the studio. Sometimes, when I am working, I end up staring at the painting for one or two hours before suddenly deciding to add this or that. Whenever I finish a painting, I take a photo of it with my iPhone, reviewing it later, which leads me to add something the next day once I am back in the studio.

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Installation view of Yuan Fang: Flux, at Long Museum, Shanghai, January to March 2024 © Yuan Fang

AAN: Looking at your work over the last few years, it seems the way you handle the colour distribution is much straighter forward. What are your thoughts?

YF: Beyond the interaction with each layer and the composition itself, the rest of the paintings are busy or chaotic enough that I do not need too much colour. I believe reducing my colour palette can make the rest of the painting much stronger. The same applies when it comes to its shapes, for example. One also needs to keep in mind that I only started painting around 2017-18, and my work involved a lot of experimentation as a student, followed by changes and breakthroughs over time.

AAN: You indicated that you recently started working in oil. How did the transition from acrylic to oil take place?

YF: It is a natural transition because, in my mind, oil is much more visceral as a medium. It feels much creamier than acrylic. When I first started painting, I did not have that much money or space. I basically needed something like acrylic that was quick and convenient. However, I have been using this medium repeatedly, and after relying on it for a few years, I needed a transition and a change. Last summer, I tried working with oil, and since then I have been enjoying it, feeling very comfortable with it.

AAN: How do you go about entitling of your works?

YF: I draw inspiration for my titles from everywhere and anywhere. Sometimes I use a song I like as a title, and sometimes, when I start painting, I have a plan for a composition. On other occasions, I just use an original image, without knowing how to title it. The painting *River Cutting in Half* refers to the fact that I was trying to depict a river, but it ended up being a broken river. I do not know if it looks like a river at all, but I kept the title since that was how I started the piece.

AAN: With so many layers in your painting, do you rework the piece? Is it difficult to determine when a painting is finished?

YF: I do not really paint over, but I add to it. Usually, the painting will not be finished until the day before the handlers come to pick up the work.

AAN: What drives your practice forward?



Installation view, detail, of Yuan Fang: Flux, at Long Museum, Shanghai, January to March 2024 © Yuan Fang

YF: There are two kinds of paintings for me. One is about fixing something to make it the perfect painting that I envision in my mind. Then, there is another type of painting, where I accidentally did something new, and this is the kind of work that is truly helping me to improve my practice.

AAN: Growing up in China, were you familiar with the first wave of Chinese contemporary artists that became successful abroad, such as Chen Zhen, Huang Yongping, Yan Pei-Ming, Wang Keping, Zhang Huan, and Fang Lijun?

YF: No. The first time I started learning about Chinese contemporary art was in New York! Within my art history curriculum at the SVA, there was also a session on Chinese contemporary art. Even though the class was disappointing, it nevertheless made me aware of contemporary art in China. I began to follow shows in New York, like Jia Aili (b 1979) at Gagosian, or the one at the Guggenheim a few years ago – *Art and China after 1989: Theatre of the World, 2017-18*. This is basically how I learned about Chinese contemporary art, by going to exhibitions, which is ironic in some ways since I had never heard of these artists while I was living in China.

AAN: Were you more familiar with traditional Chinese calligraphy than the country's contemporary artists?

YF: No, not at all. If you put a masterpiece next to something that is worth nothing, I could not tell the difference!

AAN: Your first museum solo show took place in 2024 at the Long Museum in Shanghai. Is it important for you to contribute in some way to contemporary art in China?

YF: When I moved to New York and decided to be a painter, I was looking around, trying to identify galleries that were showing young Chinese artists like me. I initially thought it may be helpful to have a career model to study, as I was quite confused at the time about how to go about building my career. In addition, my family and parents had no art background or advice I could rely on. The Chinese artists with gallery exhibitions in New York were famous artists like Jia Aili and Zhang Huan (b 1965), who represented a different era. I could not identify with them and learn from the way they had built their careers. I therefore basically just followed my intuition and moved ahead. For the future, I wish that young Chinese artists have a role model to follow. It is important for me to give young artists who may be confused guidance and advice. I want to encourage them to realise that if I could do this, they maybe can do it, too.

AAN: Would you say now is an interesting time to be in contemporary art?

YF: I find the art world to be a very interesting stage right now. As I progress in my practice, and as I am getting older, it is becoming increasingly hard to be impressed by what I see in the art world compared to the time when I started out. I have been living in New York for 10 years,

and, for example, visiting the Whitney Biennale for the very first time was a highlight, whereas visiting the later ones just underlined the fact that overall the works had not changed that much. In this sense, it has become harder to discover things or artists where I get truly excited. In this context, I believe I now need to put more effort and energy into discovering new things.

AAN: What do you want to try to contribute to contemporary art as a whole?

YF: We find ourselves at a stage in contemporary art where defining a movement is very difficult. Right now, I do not think there is a movement based on a strong or unique concept. Since we live in a very globalised society with countless things going on around us, I do not know now what I can positively contribute to our history or our world. However, since I am still at the beginning of my career, I will strive to make better and stronger works and see where that takes me.

AAN: Do you feel nostalgic at times, wishing you were back in China? Is having a studio in China an option you would consider in the future?

YF: Having a studio in China is an option, but I do not know how it would work out in practical terms, as whenever I tried painting in Shenzhen while visiting my family, I could not paint. The energy of the city of Shenzhen has nothing to do with New York: it is very isolated from the art world and resembles more a kind of Silicon Valley. When I am there living with my parents, I am taking care of my duties as a daughter. It is a kind of role play, and I am not an artist when I am there. Therefore, when in China, it may be easier if I simply had my own studio, but not in Shenzhen.

AAN: Would you consider cities like Shanghai or Beijing that have a similar energy to New York?

YF: I am more a Shanghai girl than a Beijing girl, because I am from the south. In addition, my mother's parents are from an area near Shanghai, creating more of a connection to the city than Beijing. I have this ambivalent feeling towards Shanghai, as I enjoy and do not enjoy the city at the same time. In some ways, I came to realise that my identity as an artist was not linked to China, since while I was

living there, I never made any art. Therefore, I remain with a question mark when it comes to me having a studio in Shanghai and functioning as an artist there. Another point to take into consideration is that I am not part of the art community in Beijing or Shanghai. Some people may know who I am, but on my end, I am basically starting from scratch. I became very aware of it after returning to China following the pandemic. However, I am fortunate to have my studio in New York, because if you are a Chinese artist living in China and only have a Chinese audience, it is very hard to have a global platform.

AAN: Deciding where to establish a studio has become a challenge since the art world has become so global.

What are your thoughts?

YF: After travelling to various European cities last year – London, Basel, Berlin, Amsterdam, and Paris, which I very much enjoyed – I still feel New York is the city that has the most to offer. However, Europe has the advantage that every single city can be reached in less than a two-hour flight, making it very convenient to go and see things. In New York, it is all concentrated in the city itself, and travelling within the country requires more effort, as the next biggest art location in the US is Los Angeles, which is a six-hour flight away.

AAN: Following the Silver Art Projects residency, would you like to pursue a similar experience in the future?

YF: Absolutely. I am thinking of a summer residency either in upstate New York or in Europe for two or three months. It would be fantastic if something were to work out next year.

AAN: Your pieces feel very gestural. Do they reflect your personality?

YF: I feel that to be an artist, you must be honest, and you cannot hide yourself in your work. Therefore, I think my work is like me. You decide to be an artist not for being famous or for the money. You just want to be honest with yourself, and that's why you pour your entire soul into the painting.

AAN: How would you describe who Yuan Fang is and what she does?

YF: This is a very difficult question. Basically, I am just a person who is trying to navigate between the East and West, aspiring to make better paintings every single day.