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## *Propaganda Painting to Abstract Expressionism Art: Memoirs of Yu Zhenli*

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Yu Zhenli Art Museum

## My Childhood

I was born in Yujia Village (于家村), Huajia Town (華家鎮), Jinzhou District, Dalian City, Liaoning Province, on March 2, 1949, the third day of the second month of the lunar calendar, i.e., the day of Xinmao (辛卯), the month of Dingmao (丁卯), in the year of Jichou (己醜). There are eight children in my family, and I am the fourth in line. If I use the Chinese numerology of trigrams (象), numbers (數), qi (氣), and li (理) to conclude, I am born in the month of pine and cypress wood i.e. a rabbit, my nativity is the chou ox (醜牛), and I was born at 11:35 in the fiery ninth purple hour (火熱九紫時) of the noon horse (午馬), so I have the phase of ox, horse, and rabbit in my destiny. The chou ox, which is a symbol of the cold and lonely effort, is a symbol of the morning silver ghost and the fire in the furnace of spring awakening, together with my fate of pine and cypress, self-restraint and self-birth baked to serve others. Because I have been dissipating shallow leakage for many years I came to the far countryside to reflect again and seek resources, my destiny to resist the cold or loneliness.

I am originally from Dashuipo (大水泊) on the Shandong peninsula, where the coast belongs to the ancient Qi State. During the Han Dynasty to Ming Dynasty, my ancestors were exiled and sent to Yunnan because of a law broken by a family member who was a court official. After the Ming Dynasty, they moved back to Dashuipo. However, as a result of the lessons learned from that move, the ancestral rule was that no descendants were

allowed to become officials, and most of them were literary scholars and artisans. When they came to the Liaodong Peninsula by boat, they were poor and had nothing. So my great-grandfather, who spoke Japanese, Russian and Korean, started to do business and later bought some land and cultivated it. However, my grandfather did not take care of his family and liked calligraphy and gambling, so the family's fortunes fell apart again before the liberation.

My parents were engaged to be married when they were two years old. My father was highly nearsighted and he had glaucoma, so he could only see within one meter. My mother was from a better family and married my father at the age of seventeen, which was a bit of a bummer. In the village where I was born, there was a group of folk artists from dozens of miles around who were good at blowing, playing, singing, writing, and painting, so I was exposed to and received a lot of influences. When I was six years old, I used to follow my grandfather at home while he wrote spring scrolls and delivered wedding couplets.

Later, my family was classified as poor peasants and after the land reform we rented a side room. In 1959, when the Three Red Banners and the communist culture became prevalent, our house was turned into a communal canteen and we were forced to move to another side room, which gave me a depressed feeling as a child. At that time, three of my sisters took turns to be women's cadres in the village, and two of them loved to act in plays; they, together with my other four sisters, had many friends who were women, so the house almost became



Figure 1. Yu Zhenli. *Stalin Square*. Gouache on paper, 20×27cm, 1968.

a women's club. If I wanted to draw or read, I had to go up the hill or into the haystack, so I grew up very lonely. I have always lived in an environment surrounded by women, and since I was young I have developed an avoidant, withdrawn character, quiet, shy and flexible, tending to be more feminine, pecking between the gaps and waiting for something to happen. The female is the yang, the mysterious envelope of fusion, the symbol of the earth, the broad, the night and all its colors. The house is the mother, the earth is the mother, the motherland, and this connection is a sacred and inaccessible fear of the female herself. In Heidegger's book *On the Way to Language*, he quotes Georg Trakl's poem, which is what I was thinking at the time: "Language made to speak as the sound of silence, silence like a woman" "...Pagans on the earth of the soul."

In 1959, my father lost his sight, but this did not stop him from doing farm work, namely cutting grass. My father had to cut two large straw stacks, as high as a 20-meter-long private house, every year for thirty years. He often told me stories such as *Water Margin* and *Records of the Three Kingdoms*. The fact that my father knew so much despite not being able to see anything had a very big impact on my young mind, and the fact that my father was often bullied after he lost his sight made me very disgusted with bullying, so helping and caring for the weak was a habit I developed from a young age, including by extension my loving attitude towards natural life. At the same time, my father's probing with his hands and awareness with his heart inspired me, little by little, to explore, practice, express myself clearly and clear away the mess and clutter. Before liberation, there was a revolutionary in my hometown who spread Marxism-Leninism, named Guan Xiangying, whose

calligraphy had a profound influence on me. My fourth uncle, who was a simple man and loved to paint, was also a great encouragement to me.

In those days the Soviet army was still stationed in the village and I used to watch them play basketball and football by the barracks, making their cannons and military vehicles out of yellow clay, and after I finished I would set up a window sill, tie a rope to them and drag them around. In primary school, there was a full range of classes—crafts (art classes), music, PE, languages, maths, etc. What shook me the most was that in the second year of primary school, Mr Zhang committed suicide after being branded a rightist for painting. This incident stimulated something sensitive and fragile deep in my heart, and I miss him very much to this day. Later, I met another teacher, but he took exception to my handmade clay figures and my drawing in and out of class and pulled my ears, which made me cry with disgust. Luckily, I met another beautiful female teacher who encouraged me to continue painting.

### Art in My Adolescence

When I reached junior high school, I attended the local Huajia High School, now known as Dalian 110 High School. The houses there were Soviet-style buildings with full facilities and a sense of sanctity. My art teacher, Liu Chunzhong, was a war correspondent during the war against Japan and had an extremely strong personality and a temper, but some talent. I had the opportunity to join the art group in the first year and made a set of clay sculptures of a girl raising pigs and a group of pigs, which were colored and won the highest prize in Dalian Junior Art at that time. At that time, I was also the maths representative, interested in geometry, in love with geography and bored with language and theory classes, and I also enjoyed grafting plants, playing with electrical appliances, and managing the school radio. In my second year, I was expelled from the art group because I had too many hobbies, but I was still in charge of the school board and I still had all the opportunities to paint. In junior high school, I learned to sketch in watercolor. Near the end of junior high school, I wanted to go to high school to attend an art college, but at that time my family was very poor and could not afford to pay for my studies. Later I heard that there was an art class at the Dalian Normal School (formerly Dalian University in Xiajiahe) and that I could enter the art school at this school, so I took the exam. In hindsight, if I had taken the high school exam, I would have been an amateur.

Because the social movement began in my second

year of school and there were no art classes in high school, I was given some formal training in art at the Dalian Normal School. At that time, the school had a strong teaching staff, with several teachers returning from abroad, such as Liu Chaozheng and Yu Chaogang. I painted one watercolor a day at that time and enjoyed sketching. The houses in Xiajiahezi (夏家河子) were all strange, once old Russian and Japanese villas, and I was particularly interested in them.

After 1966, the school was in chaos overnight. I was in the second group, I was only seventeen years old at the time, and I followed my feelings and went to many cities. I saw a group of teachers sweeping the floor, and then looked at an exhibition of black paintings. I went to Wuhan, Shanghai, Tianjin, Jinan and Nanjing to see the Academy of Fine Arts, and at that time I was particularly interested in gouache and oil painting. The social movement had a huge impact on others, but for me, it was an opportunity. I didn't have to pay for my ri-

des and could go everywhere without spending money. I saw cars, people, and landscapes, and I was enchanted by the many things I saw, which left a profusion of traces in my young heart.

I also saw Mao Zedong three times in Beijing and bought three copies of Fan Wenlan's *General History of China* for a nickel in the Xidan district, which was how I got to know Chinese history systematically and how I developed the habit of reading. At the same time, I saw many Western painting books, went to various art schools to look at paintings, drew down black painting compositions, and walked around for nearly three months in total to introduce what black painting was all about back at school. When I returned to Dalian, I began to climb on the building to brush and write large letters, which was the trend of the "Red Sea" atmosphere.

Then I walked with eighteen students (fourteen girls and four boys) from Dalian to Beijing, for thirty-three days. I drew a picture every day, and more than half of



Figure 2. Yu Zhenli's photo when he was creating the propaganda painting. 1970s.





Figure 3. Yu Zhenli. *Always Follow the Revolutionary Course Blazed by Chairman Mao*. Propaganda painting, 102.5×73.5cm, 1976.

the music class performed at various venues. I carried an erhu on my back and learned to play the flute when I walked. There was an exhibition of heroic deeds at the art museum at the time, which included gouache illustrations of He Kongde (何孔德) and Gao Hong (高虹). We stayed for a month and made copies of all the paintings, including the text, in preparation for our return to an exhibition. In my later gouache paintings, there are elements of Ho Kung Tak and others who were my teachers for several years. After returning to Dalian the exhibition was not held, and I was confused and joined the school's propaganda team troupe to play erhu accompaniment for performances in Liaonan major theatres, at industrial and mining sites, and rural performances for a year. During this process, I was painting every day. I was drawing portraits of Chairman Mao and Lenin to give to friends, and drawing illustrations for newspapers, and I was energetic at that time.

I met Zhao Dafu at the end of 1967, which was another turning point in my life. At that time he came to Dalian and brought with him a single slick of "Red Light Bright (紅光亮)" propaganda and large sketches (Red is to depict leaders, heroes and workers, peasants

and soldiers as strong, healthy and glowing; Light is a painting technique that requires realism; Bright means the image must be clear). In 1967 I made my first painting of the four leaders, lithographed on sketch paper, and he was so impressed that he became passionate about painting, and in 1967 I made my first oil painting, a full-length portrait of Mao Zedong in the snow, and I have loved oil-based materials since then.

In late 1967 I returned to school to paint a 4-meter-high portrait of Mao Zedong, was unwilling to stay on the performance team, and was discovered by the military representative who asked me to paint a portrait of Mao in the artillery unit. The first one I painted was a joint portrait of Mao and Lin Biao, 7 meters high by 12 meters wide, using paint and a few oil colors on canvas (with the cooperation of Zhao Yun's classmates). After that, during my year in the army, I painted about 120 of them, enlarged in frames.

### Post-Youth Age: Receiving Re-Education from the Poor and Lower-Middle Peasants

On December 26, 1968, I took the train to the village to join a production team and receive re-education. I had always wanted to leave for another place, but my third sister wouldn't let me go and wanted me to go back home, so I joined the production team of Huadong, which was close to my hometown. I reported for duty just after the New Year in 1969. This year was an important turning point for me. I remember that I had been working for only three and a half days when someone came to me to draw a blackboard newspaper. People were pleased with my drawings, so the secretary started asking me to draw portraits of Chairman Mao. After painting two of them, I went to the commune to paint them, and after painting them at the commune, I went to the production team to paint them again. Because my portraits were good, the production team leader liked them so much that he let me live in his house with a man who studied mathematics. Both of the leader's children went on to study art and both became successful. The team was also awarded the National Advanced Unit for the layout of my paintings and writing. Six months later, when the Jin County Revolutionary Committee decorated the offices and corridors, I was asked to paint the auditorium, and all the offices were decorated with my writing of Chairman Mao's quotations and poems.

During that time, Xue Jiayi often came to see me paint. In September, when college and university graduates were assigned jobs, I was asked by Mr. Xue, who was then at the Jinzhou Museum (formerly the Jin-



Figure 4. Yu Zhenli. *Long Live the Motherland*. Propaganda painting, 76.5×105.5cm, 1979.

xian Exhibition Hall), to specialize in the artwork. I was so excited that the first thing I did when I arrived at the museum was to paint a 7-meter portrait of Mao Zedong. Later, when I was copying the painting of Chairman Mao going to Anyuan, I fell off the shelf and fractured my pelvis, so I went back home to rest for two months. During my recuperation, I did some paintings for a school exhibition and painted a portrait of Chairman Mao for the commune. On December 26, 1969, I formed my first creative group and began to instruct students. In the same year, I created my first oil painting of 3.3 meters × 2 meters, *The Red Heart in the Wide World*, which was entered into the Liaoning May 23<sup>rd</sup> Art Exhibition. It was the first work that launched my career as a political propaganda painter. Following this, I began to have appointments and subsequently created several political propaganda paintings, including *Scientific Farming*.

In 1972, when Jiang Jianzhang, Tang Baoshan and others wanted to train a group of students, they invited teachers from the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts to Lushun, Dalian, to run an oil painting training course.

This course provided systematic training for the students, with key teachers from the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts giving lectures and tutorials, and a presentation exhibition was held at the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts in Shenyang. Zhao Futian and Zhao Dajun influenced my sketching and coloring.

### **The Carnival of Icons: The Practice and Internalization of Pop Art**

In 1972, my first political propaganda painting, *Celebrating the Victory of the 10<sup>th</sup> CPC National Congress*, was published by Liaoning Press. Immediately afterwards, at the request of the People's Art Publishing House, Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House, Shanghai, and Publishing House, I created a large number of political propaganda paintings and gouache paintings, such as *Welcome Brothers and Sisters to the Countryside*, *Socialism is Advancing Triumphantly Everywhere*, *Hailing Two Victories*, etc.

In 1976 I worked at the Jinzhou Cultural Centre, where I was in charge of counseling the mass art





Figure 5. Yu Zhenli. *Yaoqin Cave*. Oil on canvas, 65×100cm, 1981.

activities of the whole region. In 1975 I painted a diptych, *We Must Grasp Revolution and Increase Production, Increase Work, Increase Preparation for Struggle, to Do an Even Better Job*, and in October 1976 I received a notice from Beijing to paint a scene of cheering and enthusiasm for a critical exhibition. The painting was delivered to Beijing on the 16<sup>th</sup> and printed in five days for national distribution. The Tangshan 1976 earthquake affected my thinking when I went with a friend who was terminally ill to Tangshan to see his relatives in the army. When I arrived there, I saw the scene after the earthquake and suddenly had a sense of devastation; the ruins, the dead bodies, the empty bottles, the events and time that had passed, the infinite silence that pervaded, and the death of the three Chinese leaders in succession that year caused the blind, passive, giddy idealistic thinking I had been doing to quiet down and I began to be introspective, to look within, to realize life.

### **Something Leaps in My Soul: Experimentation and Exploration**

I painted political propaganda paintings for ten years,

and over eighty of them were published. At that time, most of my paintings were signed “Collective Creation” and very few were signed by myself. In 1973, my painting *Welcome Brothers and Sisters to the Countryside* became a national sensation and was published by major publications. The last propaganda painting I did was *Long Live the Motherland* in late 1978. During this period, I was influenced by Romain Rolland’s *John Christophe*, Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, Raffaello Giovagnoli’s *Spartacus*, and the works of Lu Xun, Mark Twain, and Balzac, and the one work that sticks in my mind the most is Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphoses*, which I came across through the internal publications of the Literary Federation. I was also influenced by the portraits of the Russian Serov, the Frenchman Gericault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*, Eugène Delacroix’s *La Liberté Guidant le Peuple*, Courbet, Millet, Romanian painter Corneliu Baba, and the murals of three Mexican muralists.

In 1976, I went to the seaside of Ant Island in the town of Dawei for a month to sketch and paint a large number of gouache paintings. There, I felt the sky, the earth and nature, and thought deeply about life, the nature of nature and social relations. At the time,

I was reading Hegel's *Small Logic*, a philosophical journal run by Hegel, with Goethe writing the foreword, which included the line "The fetters of wrong thinking and behavior that a man suffers from in his youth become transcendent and profound once he returns to himself." This quote became my quotation at the time. During the same year, I met and became friends with Zhang Tianhong and Cai Jiping from Tieling, and we began to discuss and study modern oil painting.

After 1977, I devoted myself to the creation of oil paintings, following the style of Baba. At that time, I also hosted the first oil painting class in Dalian. The oil painting I created in 1977, *Sleep Out on the Streets*, was first entered into the "National Art Exhibition". After that, I began to study foreign and Chinese art history systematically to prepare for the postgraduate entrance exams at the Central Academy of Fine Arts.

I got married on January 8, 1978. It was the Year of the Horse in the Year of the Wu-Wu (戊午), and people said that marriages in the Year of the Horse would lead to divorce, but I didn't believe them.

I always felt lost because I didn't go to my first postgraduate exams. During this year, I was particularly interested in primitive, impressionist stuff. I looked at a large number of foreign painting books in the People's Art Press library and the Liaoning Library, and Kandinsky's work and his *On the Spirit of Art* continued to influence me for years. I seemed to have found something that leapt in my soul, and his ideas became the origin of the spirit of my abstract painting. Later, I copied works by Georges Rouault, Joan Miró, Amedeo Modigliani and Paul Cézanne, and my painting images changed drastically as a result. I began to experiment with painting, sometimes in black and white, in red and green, in light, divided, and did a lot of formal exploration.

### Return to the Home of the Spirit

The reform and opening up in 1979 allowed me to reflect. The birth of my son was another turning point for me. At that time, when I failed the postgraduate examination of the fresco department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, China was gradually starting to think highly of Western art. Therefore, I went to Bingyu Valley to paint some sketches. After that, I explored various styles in my creation, such as impressionism, and Cézanne's technique. I experimented repeatedly until I furthered my studies at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1988. That year, the flood in my hometown destroyed a large number of my original works of art and propaganda paintings, which made me sad.



Figure 6. Yu Zhenli. *Sea Breeze*. Oil on canvas, 46×46cm. 1982.

Searching for my focus, experiencing personal perception, and returning to my spiritual home, something became clear in my soul. I paid attention to what had happened and moving events over the years. I hoped to break free and gather some scattered flashes into a river of life, flowing through the wasteland of my soul. That year, I created more than ten oil paintings in the *Shore* series in expressionist style. I struggled with the confusion and contradiction of expressionist style, exploring between Klee and Miro, and wandered in the copies like as if in a game.

In 1980 I participated in the establishment of the Liaoning Oil Painting Research Association, and the realistic and expressive oil painting *The Poetry of Peng's Hometown Visit*, which I created in the same year, passed up the first National Youth Art Exhibition to participate in the research exhibition. Staff from three provinces participated in the "Ah, North East China" exhibition in my home meeting in 1981. I was full of enthusiasm and enthusiastic about organizing activities, like an idealist. I unintentionally titled the exhibition's name; however, my abstract representational work *Yaoqin Cave* was rejected later for the exhibition. At the same time in Beijing, I saw the German Expressionist exhibition "Hammer Collection Exhibition" and the classical works of Michelangelo, Giotto, Botticelli, and some other modernist compilations, as well as artwork from Zhu Da, Xu Wei, and Mi Fu, brick murals from the Han dynasty, the tomb of Huo Qubing, Dunhuang murals, and also some folk art. All of these works influenced me.



In 1981, I painted *The Sound of the Wave* and a large number of experimental works, a series of cold abstract paintings entitled *Life*, and participated in the “Liaoning Oil Painting Research Exhibition”, all the while creating illustrations for magazines throughout China. My oil paintings *Summer* in 1982, and *Sea Breeze*, were shown in “Liaoning Small Oil Painting Exhibition” and the “National Peasant Painting Counseling Conversation”.

In 1984, the oil painting *National Elegy* was entered into the “National Art Exhibition”, and in late December, I painted expressive oil paintings *Innocent Sea*, *Tide: Over the Sea*, and *Confession to the Sea*. 1979 to 1984 was a period of experimentation when I stepped out from the passionate political propaganda paintings and tried to understand myself, exploring self-potential and searching for possibilities. My four friends Zhang Tianhong, Cai Jiping, Zhou Wei, and Liu Zhongchen from Tieling in Northeast China, Zhao Dajun, and Wei Lianfu from LuXun Academy of Fine Arts, became most active discussants of mine. We read a lot and shared our writing ideas. In addition to asking for art, I was fascinated by art and visual perception, meaningful forms, spiritual movements and 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde art trends, and philosophers such as Nietzsche, Marcuse, and Heidegger during this period.

### **The Choice of Sea Consciousness: Declaration of My Heart**

The 85 New Wave thought trend had a great influence on me. In 1985, I was painting the human body at Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, lectured by Li Zhengtian from Guangdong and improving my original idea to its maturity; that is, the authentication of the identity of East and West art. Wei Lianfu, a student of Zao Wou-ki's when he came to China to give lectures, was my teacher as well as a friend. He held Zao Wou-ki in high esteem. In the transcripts of my conversations with Wei, we talked about the theory of Taoism, such as Zhou Yi, mathematics, Lao Zhuang, trigrams, numbers, qi, and li. This not only benefited my paintings but also helped me to explore the spirit of nothing (無). In the same year, I made two friends, Ren Chuo and Liu Yi. I organized the Dalian Youth Art Activity and successfully held the first figure painting class in Dalian.

In 1986, Liu Changshun from Beijing and I curated the “Dalian-Beijing Youth Oil Painting Exhibition” at the National Art Museum of China, where I saw abstract works by Robert Rauschenberg from the United States and got some enlightenment. At that time, the one-off painting techniques of American de Kooning and

Brancusi's Abstract Expressionism also inspired me. In my spare time, I insisted on practicing calligraphy and reading Chinese paintings. Faced with many plagiarized styles, I was always searching for my artistic form and identity.

In 1987, *Art* magazine published my creation *Talk the Choice of Sea Consciousness*, which is the declaration of my heart.

### **The Seeds of New Artistic Creation: Trace in My Life**

I systematically understood Western modern art through studies and sprouted the seeds of new artistic creations. Conceptually, I also found my identity in the Eastern spirit and my art form.

In the spring of 1986, I was invited to attend the first “Chinese Oil Painting Symposium” in Beijing, where I met several old Chinese contemporary oil painters and young artists of the 85 New Wave, then I thought about many questions.

After that, when Norway held an exhibition of abstract expressive paintings in Dalian, I stood in front of the works almost every day to ponder and wrote an interpretive article published in *Dalian Daily*. In the meantime, I led more than ten people to Shanxi, Henan, Xi'an, Gansu, and Dunhuang to read up on the relics and took a traditional lesson, gaining an in-depth understanding of the culture of the Yellow River basin.

In 1987, when I was in charge of the exhibition of Yunnan peasant paintings in Dalian I traveled to Yunnan for more than a month to study and sketch, which was very rewarding, but with a heavy mind.

I had been trying to deepen and extend every trace of my own life, expanding and transcending concepts and ideas, waiting for them to condense in my materials, to gather into an appearance, an innocence, and a pure grasp of the present situation, to become a kind of original spirit with an entity. But at this time, I was still vague, and I hoped for my clarity, so I was still searching.

To receive more awareness and information, and to get the opportunity to realize my ideas, I enrolled in the workshop of the Oil Painting Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1987. The academic world in China was active, with many novel lectures and exhibition events, so I saw many foreign exhibitions during that time.

Moreover, the exercise course allowed me to experiment, and I used my spare time to read and create a lot, constantly striving closer to my direction: painting is not bound by form, but serves the spirit, and it is not only a narrative but more of a manifestation of the spirit.





Figure 7. Yu Zhenli. *Black Aria*. Oil on canvas, 130×130cm, 1988.

Finally, the direction of Abstract Expressionism became clear to me, which had been my wish for ten years.

During that period, Kokoschka, Rouault, Modigliani, Dali's ethereal spirit, structuralist expressions, and the religious paintings of El Greco in Spain influenced me a lot and were reflected in my series *Life* and *Women Eating Wedding Wine*.

I also created a large number of experimental works, from realistic to expressionist; each exercise was different and there are more than forty of them. I also rented a house from Beijing's Ox Street to Chunxiu Road to Luogu Lane, where I got along with more avant-

garde painters and young friends who went to major art exchange venues together. Especially in Ox Street, I mainly studied Lao Zhuang, Zhou Yi and other Taoist thoughts and was interested in phrenology and numerology.

I systematically understood Western modern art through studies and sprouted the seeds of new artistic creations. Conceptually, I also found my identity in the Eastern spirit and my art form. Based on the reflection and deconstruction of traditional culture, I started to decipher the text.

Editor: Li Yang, Liu Kexin