

Kong Qian, a Man out of Step with the Times

Xia Jifeng

*Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there... No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?"*

— Questions Of Travel, Elizabeth Bishop

“How do you know about me?” This line from Kong Qian sealed my memory of our first encounter. It was last year, and I had travelled to Tianjin to visit his studio. In that space crammed with paintings and books, a pale yellow light flowed in from the window and spread itself across the floor. The sun in autumn and winter has a special sense of mass, making the already small space suddenly seem all the more crowded—it was a plentiful, saturated kind of crowdedness, one that fused with the separation that is a normal part of first meetings such as this. Frankly, I can’t remember what exactly it was that we were talking about, just that we were having a really good time, the conversation flowing easily. Sometime into our meeting, I realized that I had begun to sweat under the hot sun. I took off my sport coat, which tends to put people on a conservative footing, and that is when artist Kong Qian broached the question I began with.

How do you know about me? As an art professional, I have lost count of how many artist studios I have visited over the years, but I can say for sure that this is the first time an artist has asked me a question like this, a question fit for an outsider. Kong Qian’s tone was marked by the astonishment you would expect from a spy who had maintained an intricate cover for many years and had just been found out. Semantically, his question could be interpreted as asking “through which channel did you find out about me,” but when you consider that the asker himself is quite aware of his own standing, the “channel” is not important. What is important is the “result” at the end of this channel. In our discussion that day, Kong Qian gave me the impression that he is not the kind of person to brag about his achievements as an artist; he prefers to talk about his status as an art academy professor. As he talks, the topic often finds its way back to teaching, to his colleagues, to his students, to comparisons between Chinese and Western painting—his focus at the Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts. This mild-mannered identity, however, cannot conceal the aura of his thirty years as an artist, and his question gave away the pride concealed in his heart: the act of painting is like a secret spiritual pact he shares with art. It is just as French philosopher Simone Weil held, that the sacred is concealed within the profane.

I am often astonished at Kong Qian’s attitude and approach to remaining “out of step with the times” in life. In this age of unsettlingly robust information, a time when we might as well give our privacy a proper burial, I’m not sure whether Kong Qian is showing enviable talent or expressing biting criticism of society in remaining so unknown after three decades of artistic practice. It is difficult to imagine someone being able to withstand the onslaught of the vulgar world without strong self-reliance and the desire to maintain a distance from the cacophonous revelry. The hobbies he has cultivated since a young age, including basketball, swimming, ice

skating, raising crickets and bicycling, to name a few, have made him unshakeable—of course, these also include painting and teaching. He is also the type to never use the internet, and only purchased his first mobile phone last year—a Nokia costing only about one hundred yuan—which he purchased for the sole purpose of staying in contact with his ill mother, and which finally solved the mystery of him having to ask who I was every time I called him, though he still hasn't learned how to enter people's numbers into his contacts. This life "out of step with the times" calls to mind Franz Kafka. When the First World War broke out, this forefather of modern literature wrote the following in his diary: "Germany has declared war on Russia. Went swimming in the afternoon."

The first time I heard the name Kong Qian was from young artist Leng Guangmin. Leng is a graduate of the Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, but his style markedly differs from the familiar methods and approaches advocated by the Chinese academy system. In 2013, as Hive Center was presenting his first solo exhibition, he mentioned several teachers who had a strong impact on his artistic path, and Kong Qian was one of them. That name is easy to remember, and I immediately searched for information on him on the internet, but I was left disappointed. On the vast reaches of the internet, all I was able to find was a blog post about his drawings by his colleague Yu Xiaodong, an old catalogue of his sketches from 1998 for sale on a used book website, and a faculty profile on the academy's website. There was a Baidu Wiki article, but it merely states, "Kong Qian, from Shandong Province, born 1956 in Tianjin. Currently serving as a professor at the Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts Oil Painting Department." The few drawings I was able to find, however, left a deep impression. They seemed not to belong to any mainstream styles of contemporary art, but were also quite distant from the orthodox academy style. This is what kept me interested in Kong Qian.

Then, in 2015, more information about Kong Qian began to appear online, mainly in connection with an exhibition of drawings he had done with an organization at the Tianjin Academy. After this, I began reading many of the artist's writings about creation, though there were few critical essays available, which left me disheartened. Luckily, and more importantly, I was able to see more artworks, both oil paintings and drawings. They were just online images, with somewhat poor photographic quality and uneven lighting, but they were enough to clearly convey the artist's unique creative style. My first reaction was that the Chinese contemporary art scene had overlooked a unique, independent artist, and had done so in Tianjin no less, right next to the art center that is Beijing. I was incredulous. I could no longer rely on internet searches to see what they would show me of his work. I had to make a personal visit. After seeing his works in his cramped studio, I immediately started planning for an exhibition. My plan was to use a retrospective to present all the possible surprises for Chinese contemporary art represented by the art of Kong Qian.

"I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it...I like to think of the world I created as being a kind of keystone in the universe; that, small as that keystone is, if it were ever taken away the universe itself would collapse." Like writer William Faulkner, most of Kong Qian's creations are connected to what he describes as a "seven kilometer radius" in the city of Tianjin. Tianjin is the keystone of

his universe. Take it away, and Kong Qian's artistic world would not come together. Tianjin's role and importance in modern history are well known. It was the site of the first clash with Western culture, and a microcosm of the honor and shame experienced by China in its modern history. As Kong Qian sees it, since Tianjin was turned into a trading port and a semi-feudal colonial outpost in 1860, the city has continually wavered between open and closed, both in its view of itself and its stance towards the outside world. Through the closing of the nation, the Foreign Affairs Movement, the First Sino-Japanese War, the Boxer Rebellion, the movement for democracy, Yuan Shikai's restoration of the emperorship, and the Republican government, Tianjin regularly shifted between open and closed, thus shaping a complex hybrid culture. Those who have lived in Tianjin for a long time may be familiar with these sights, but in Kong Qian's works, the old buildings, past events and figures, the ups and downs of history all take on a spectral air, quivering with vitality.

Meanwhile, by being "out of step with the times," Kong Qian has remained outside the field of clamor and revelry of contemporary art that has taken shape since the 85 New Wave. This may not have been his intention, but he truly has spent the past thirty years accompanied by silence and solitude, wandering alone through his own construct of "Tianjin". "There is a goal but no way; what we call a way is hesitation" (Kafka). The reality that emerged from this dislocation from the times has pushed Kong Qian to return deeper into life experience, into the dialogue between the individual and the world, and into the refinement and fusion of painting language, giving him an attitude of aloofness above the difficulties and impossibilities of creation. In Kong Qian's works, we can clearly see the "historical sense" that is so rare in Chinese contemporary art. This idea, as T.S. Eliot used it in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, is mainly directed at the traditions of poetry composition, but I think it could equally apply to Kong Qian. When it comes to "tradition," Eliot did not see it as something that was inherited; it is something that requires effort and labor to obtain. One must understand the pastness of the past, as well as its presence. One must not only possess the background of his own generation, but also perceive the simultaneous existence of the art world and the overall art of the country, through which to piece together a unitary scene. The "historical sense" gives Kong Qian a keen understanding of his position in time and its relationship to the contemporary.

As time marches on, we have gradually seen that the standard for judging the quality of a Chinese contemporary artist is not how much his creations resemble Western art. In fact, it may be the opposite. Perhaps it is only when a person has a clear understanding of his identity and cultural traits, approaches his own reality through tradition and aesthetic experience, and for whom each artwork is a response to past artworks and all of his past artistic experience, that we can see the artist's great power and ambition. This is how I see Kong Qian as an artist.

When the times march forward with dizzying speed, perhaps the only way to avoid being pulled under by the currents and continue wandering the great open fields of the kingdom of art is to stay out of step with the times. Solitary and complex, silent and firm, this is the way of the true artist, perhaps the only way.

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1. Elizabeth Bishop, 1911-1979, the Confessional poetess of United States.
2. Simone Weil, 1909-1943, French philosopher ,social activist, and mystical ideologist in twentieth century.
3. Franz Kafka, 1883-1924, Austrian German fictionist in twentieth century.
4. William Faulkner, 1897-1962, American writer and the winner of the Nobel Prize in literature.
5. Thomas Stearns Eliot, 1888-1965, British poet, critic, dramatist and the winner of the Nobel prize in literature.