



INTERVIEW

with

Chen Li

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Translation from Mandarin courtesy of Dr. Yun Tao Ma

Katrine Levin (KL): *Chen Li, thank you for giving up some of your time to do this interview. I am going to begin by asking you some introductory questions about yourself, we'll move on to your work, of which I am a huge fan, and we'll conclude with some wrap up questions that might put you on the spot! Let's start.*

Katrine Levin (KL): *When and where were you born?*

Chen Li: I was born in Kunming in 1971, I grew up here, married here. I have many good memories of playing happily here as a child. I love this place, it's my home.

KL: *Have you always worked as an artist?*

Chen Li: I've sketched and painted for as long as I can remember, but I did not start out making a living as an artist. After graduation I worked in a bank for two years, then in advertisement, I also managed an art gallery. I did not fit into any of these jobs, I don't know why. It's just that I wasn't happy even if I did a good job and made good money. But painting makes me happy. To me, art is a more familiar and understandable environment. I can freely express what I think, my personal feelings.

KL: *What do you feel when you paint?*

Chen Li: I feel internal struggle, a negotiation between acceptance and negation. And great joy. Which is not to say that I don't feel irritated sometimes when I see the final result!

KL: *When did you first know you **needed** to paint?*

Chen Li: In 1996, when I managed an art gallery and was constantly exposed to art and paintings by local artists.

KL: *Your father is a famous painter in China and one of the most famous in Yunnan. How was it growing up with an artist father?*

Chen Li: My father wasn't famous when I was young and he was often away from home. But I was very fortunate to grow up with an artist father because even in the early days we had many art albums spanning centuries and styles of artworks from the East and West (in those early times the West was mainly represented by Soviet-Russian realist art) and books about painting theories - colour theories, techniques, critiques. I could not understand them when I was a child but they helped in the future. Most of my father's colleagues are painters and art teachers, so I grew up listening to their conversations and debates about

painting in the East and the West. So, I had many teachers and looked at many different painting styles from my early years. I grew up in a good environment.

KL: *I know your father's painting style is quite different, but is there any element of your style that you think was influenced by your father?*

Chen Li: My father's work has strong cultural characteristics, inspired by the ethnic minorities of Yunnan. He developed a decorative and flowing style and harmonious colours. He influenced me on colours and lines. He also taught me to constantly experiment and follow my own ideas. He is never satisfied with a specific method, always experimenting with different techniques.

KL: *Do you have a formal education in art?*

Chen Li: In 1987 I was admitted to a school affiliated with the Yunnan Academy of Fine Arts. I received four years of art education there and was fortunate to be taught by excellent professors to whom I owe a great deal. In addition to oil painting, the Academy also has a department dedicated to woodcut prints but I learned most of my woodcut techniques from my father.

KL: *What do you think is essential to the work of an artist?*

Chen Li: Artists past and modern, from around the world, they leave their spirit in their paintings. I am very much moved by them. So, I would say, study and practice, practice and study, work hard. Study from previous masters. Study and study. This is very important. And after that, have the courage to disregard the rules and do it your way.

KL: *Is artistic life lonely?*

Chen Li: Lonely, very lonely. But this is necessary.

KL: *Tell me something you love, and why?*

Chen Li: I love to go to the mountains, I feel happy there.

KL: *Tell me something you don't love, and why?*

Chen Li: I don't like Karaoke because you just repeat after others.

KL: *(Laughs) This is very telling of your work, you march to the tune of your own drum. OK, let's talk about your work.*

KL: *What inspires you?*

Chen Li: Searching for new possibilities of expression in the context of my background and ideology.

KL: *What Western painters do you most admire and identify with?*

Chen Li: Picasso, Chagall, de Kooning, Bruegel, Dali, Tàpies

KL: *What Chinese painters do you most admire and identify with?*

Chen Li: The 8 ancient Chinese painters, Guang Xiu, Zhao Wu-ji, Xu Bing, and Huang Bin-hong

KL: *Have you experimented with combining traditional Chinese ink painting techniques with Western painting techniques?*

Chen Li: Yes, I think about this the most, I am pursuing this all the time. I want to combine both Western and Chinese techniques but so far I am not able to go deep enough when I combine both techniques. I tried many times but when I reach the half-way point of a painting, of my concept, I feel that I cannot take it further, cannot continue. Possibly I do not have enough energy to do this. But I will keep trying.

KL: *Could you describe your day and working habits?*

Chen Li: Every day except Sunday I start work in my studio around 10am and go home at 6pm. I like to paint during the daytime, not at night.

KL: *Do you listen to music when you paint or do you prefer silence?*

Chen Li: Music is indispensable. I listen to all kinds of music, depending on my mood - the blues, Buddhist chants, traditional Spanish music, especially the classical guitar; country music. I also love ancient Chinese multi-stringed instruments.

KL: *You said that if you experience artistic block, you read a book to help you over it?*

Chen Li: Yes. I feel that the more I read, the more my own ideas become clear, even if I'm reading a book on Chinese medicine. Sometimes I read several books at the same time and I read all different genres although I prefer historical books.

KL: *In what other ways do you energise yourself artistically?*

Chen Li: Travelling. Every location has its own history, its own stories, its own ideas.

KL: *Do you do any research before beginning a painting? How do you work out your composition?*

Chen Li: I don't do research but I start with a concept. If I have doubts, I work out the concept on a small canvas first. You see many of these small paintings around the studio - segments of mountains or trees, thinking exercises for the overall composition. Sometimes I come to enjoy these small paintings so much that I never make the larger ones! But once I do start a large painting, I've resolved the smaller issues so I am free to focus on other questions. Other times, instead of using a small canvas, I work out the composition through a series of sketches exploring the same topic or idea from different angles. Yet other times, I may decide that my idea is better suited for a woodcut which tends to produce a clearer image.

KL: *Which medium do you prefer, which one is closer to you emotionally?*

Chen Li: Just like writing a love letter, content is the key, what pen you use is not important. That said, oil painting is where I communicate with my hands and soul and yet in expressing Chinese culture, traditional Chinese rice paper used for ink painting feels more spiritual to me.

KL: *You do painting in oil as well as works on paper and woodcut prints. What was the first medium that you started with?*

Chen Li: I started with oil painting on paper first mainly because I could not afford canvases and luckily paper was also convenient to take with me on sketching trips before we had a car. Since I was learning woodcutting at that time many of my paintings were made on paper from failed woodcuts, complete with oil and knifing traces which added an interesting accidental texture. But I could not make large paintings on such paper.

KL: *You keep a journal of your thoughts. Tell us more about it.*

Chen Li: I make notes about my ideas, experiences, perceptions, self-critique, world-critique, just thoughts and feelings.

KL: *How do you view nature and how much influence has the magnificent natural landscape of Yunnan had on you and your development as an artist?*

Chen Li: It is a wonder that we see nature with eyes first but our mind opens only when our heart feels it. If nature is worshipped – and I don't mean this in a religious way - it is harmonious with people. In my artwork I feel inspired by nature but it's not my only source of inspiration, sometimes I just go where the feeling takes me. I do not meditate over my ideas. Once I have an idea, I explore it from all angles through multiple sketches but I do not force the idea in the first place. I am interested in the microscopic elements of nature, that is to say the human perception of nature. Our perception of nature is so affected by sunlight that many colors are like a mirage, not real. That is why traditional Chinese painting prefers black and white colours, because it is not possible to realistically represent true colours. But it's beautiful to represent a perception of colour.

KL: *You have a very lyrical style of painting, very harmonious. Do you strive to achieve this lyricism and harmony?*

Chen Li: I live in my own way and in my environment, naturally and relaxed. I have no boss and I have little contact with other painters. Perhaps this is why my paintings are lyrical.

KL: *How would you describe your style?*

Chen Li: I strive to be natural and follow my heart. I do not care about my style. I care more about what I want to say, and whether I say it clearly. Or if there are other ways that I can say it better. I don't think it's good for an artist to lock into a style at an early stage because it may stifle future exploration and make it more difficult to continue to develop. I do not know what style I have. I paint to finish my idea, my hope. That is all.

KL: *To me, your work is like going to a pure oasis where I am happy and energised. When I look at your work, I smile and feel magic all around me. Is this what you would like to convey or is it something else?*

Chen Li: *(Laughs)* It is so good you have this feeling when looking at my paintings. My works make you think, you feel happy after thinking. This is meaningful. This is right.

KL: *What inspired you to move away from figural painting toward abstraction?*

Chen Li: Abstraction developed very early in Chinese calligraphy and is a part of our culture. We know it quite well. But I want to go beyond that concept, develop further.

KL: *When you paint, what do you prefer to use – a palette knife, brushes, your fingers?*

Chen Li: I often use a palette knife and a brush that I designed. But really, I use everything.

KL: *Do you always paint with oil or do you mix acrylic paint and/or ink?*

Chen Li: Currently I use oil.

KL: *What is the correlation, if any, between your mood and the colour you choose?*

Chen Li: I haven't paid attention to this. Maybe there is some relationship.

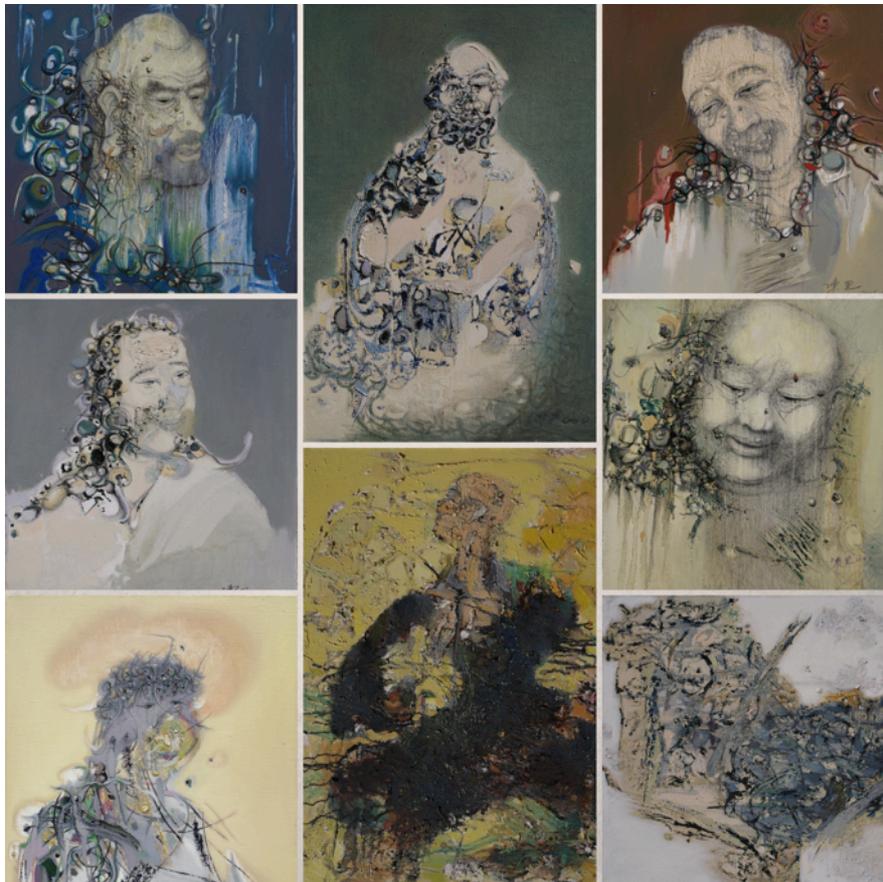
KL: You told me earlier that this painting is an expression of your mood at a point in time. It used to hang at a focal point in your studio and you meditated on it. Can you tell us more about it?



Chen Li, *Untitled*, 2005, oil on linen canvas, 100cm x 132cm, U.S. Private Collection

Chen Li: Before starting this painting I was very frustrated because I was not able to express my concept in a previous painting. So I gave up many lofty ideas and made this simple painting with leisure and relaxation, in one go without stopping. I was happy with the result and it was a reminder to me to relax and just let things flow, not force them.

KL: You have a series of “Human Buddha” paintings where Buddha’s face is surrounded by beautiful geometric swirls of colour and sometimes entirely abstracted. Can you tell us more about these paintings?



Chen Li: These paintings are my footprints. Footprints of my travels to temples with Buddhist sculptures, murals and frescos. From childhood, I have seen and internalised many Buddhist images both from visits to temples and from literature. This is my expression of these impressions.

KL: *Tell us more about this series of paintings. They are more minimalistic than your other works but with your trademark fluid lines. What are you expressing through them?*



Left: Chen Li, *Untitled (Joy of Movement)*, 2014, oil on linen canvas, 100cm x 132cm

Right: Chen Li, *Untitled (Wild Wind in a Mountain Landscape)*, 2014, oil on linen canvas, 100cm x 132cm

Chen Li: These paintings are a larger-scale exploration of a fast sketch. I used red, blue and black inks which produced a very good effect. These paintings are very interesting to me and I will explore them more in the future.

KL: *OK, wrapping up ...*

KL: *What do you like about your work?*

Chen Li: Freedom without restriction.

KL: *What do you dislike about your work?*

Chen Li: Too much freedom, just like too many branches on a tree without a thick trunk.

KL: *What, above all, do you want your viewers to perceive when looking at your art?*

Chen Li: I want them to feel peaceful and happy.

KL: *What memorable responses have you had to your work?*

Chen Li: Young people enjoy my paintings.

KL: *What do your artist colleagues think of your paintings?*

Chen Li: Basically, they don't know my paintings. I don't participate much in the standard national exhibitions, except the mandatory exhibitions that we have in China.

KL: *What do you dislike about the art world?*

Chen Li: In China, the old generation always dictates to the younger generation. The old hierarchical system is still in place. For example, to be "recognized" as a painter you need to belong to government-run associations which award you with institutional titles that you can put after your name. All of this requires that you do things the way the older generation tells you to do them. You must be within the system. I cannot

get any of these titles no matter how hard I try. I am always outside the system. But this is also good because no one controls me and I have my freedom.

KL: *What is your ultimate goal?*

Chen Li: I would like to explore and complete all my ideas and concepts, including larger paintings and sculptures.

KL: *What is the best piece of advice you've ever been given?*

Chen Li: My father told me to persist with my ideas.

KL: *What superpower would you have and why?*

Chen Li: *(Laughs)* Nothing. Just follow my own ideas.

KL: *You said before that this painting is how you see yourself at 50, as a monk. Will you become a monk and do you plan to continue painting during that time?*



Chen Li, *Self-Portrait in the Future*, 2015, oil on linen canvas, 132cm x 100cm

Chen Li: This painting is a momentary thought, a feeling. Becoming a monk does not mean giving up. It is simply a way of self-nurture, a symbol of recharging life. It is a way of striving to reach a new horizon of spirit and creativity.

