INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

JAMES COX

Interviewer: Jane DeBevoise **Date:**10 Nov 2009 **Duration:** about 1 hr 27 mins **Location:** New York

Jane DeBevoise (JD): I would love for you to talk a little bit about Grand Central Gallery, what it represented, whom it represented, your impressions about the exhibition, and how relationships were developed. You can tell any stories you want to tell.
To begin, can you talk a little bit about Grand Central Gallery, how it was positioned and how you came upon these artists?

James Cox (JC): I came to New York in 1976, and the reason my wife and I came was that I got a job, which is always a wonderful opportunity. I was 30 years old. I met my wife in Oklahoma City when we were in college together. Her father was an artist who showed in Chicago, New York, and Santa Fe. The New York gallery that represented him was the Grand Central Gallery. He was very familiar with the staff but more importantly he was familiar with the first Director of Grand Central Galley, who founded the gallery in 1922. He had been director for 56 years and was ready to retire. My father-in-law kept saying, 'You really ought to go to New York and get in touch with the board; let them know that you are available…', and so on. So I did that. I was very lucky to be hired.
In brief, the gallery was set up to showcase American art, and was backed up by prominent American businessman including very major names in business, banking, and law. It was also built to be a partnership between the business community and art community. John Singer Sargent was one of the earliest and most prominent artists to be represented, in 1922. The Director I replaced came from Chicago and had a gallery there. He founded a very large gallery that had an unusual connection with the business community, on a national scale. The gallery was named the Grand Central Gallery because it was on the top floor of Grand Central Station, which is the largest railroad terminal in the world, with sixteen sky-reaching salons on the top few floors. Grand Central Gallery occupied that sky-space for about forty years, and they moved into an adjacent space in the Biltmore Hotel, which is also a historical landmark. So that's where the gallery was located when I took over the directorship.
In 1980, there was a sudden change of ownership of the hotel and railroads, and our lease was ending. I decided that with the consent of my board, we needed to move away from the Grand Central area, to an art-relevant section of New York. I chose a place on 57th street, so from 1980 onwards, we were located in a rather sumptuous space on 57th street. We had 9000 square feet, which made us the largest gallery in New York. (We were considered the largest gallery in New York at Grand Central too.) I had a wonderful staff, and we had exhibitions, primarily Realism works. We were connected to various academies in the US, and many art faculty, members of the Art Students' League and the National Academy of Design would come through. I would say that during my tenure, I was really looking out for exciting artists who fit the realist tradition but were more cutting edge and adventurous in their subject matter.
It was about 1985, five years at our new location, when a good friend of mine by the name of Greg Glasson -who owned a small foundry called the New York Foundry in Queens – was handling a commission for me of a bronze cast by Nina Akamu. We were having multiples of the Pegasus-like cast made. I periodically visited the foundry, to check up on the project, to decide on patinas and the sort, but it was also a great

opportunity to spend time with Greg. One day during this process, Greg said 'You know, we got the commission to do a miniature of the Statue of Liberty for the Liberty Island Foundation.' This was for the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty, and was a big deal in New York. They also restore the Statue of Liberty, re-guild the torch, and have big galas. The celebration called for a commemorative casting of the statue, about 15 inches tall. So Greg did a search to find the best artist for the job and told me to go see a sample. We went back to a small section of the foundry, and there was a model of Lady Liberty being made. And working on base of the statue was a Chinese man. He looked up. He had an open, friendly way about him and his name was Wang Jida.

Wang Jida was the first of Chinese artist of the New Wave Movement to come to New York. Here was a Chinese sculptor, sculpting the Statue of Liberty. I was really interested and curious about the whole process. How did he get picked? It turned out to be this network; a friend of Greg's who owned another foundry had hired Wang Jida to do some small works for him, and raved about how good he was, and how capable he was at working with very tight, miniature versions of sculpture. So he referred him to Greg and Greg hired him to do this piece.

I remember thinking it was quite remarkable. At that stage, it was only clay. But imagine effectively reducing a 300-foot statue down to 15 inches and having it read clearly. I was extremely impressed by Wang Jida's skill.

I travel a lot, and was used to encountering a lot of people who didn't speak English, but instead reverted to sign language, reference gestures, pictures and the sort to communicate.

(JD): He didn't speak English?

(JC): No, he didn't speak any English at all, and of course I had zero Chinese knowledge. So I was just pointing out the area he was working on, giving my indication that I really understood what he was doing, and that I was impressed. At the end of the day, I spent time with Wang Jida and gave him my Grand Central Gallery business card, gesturing to him to come visit sometime. That was my first encounter. A week or two went by, and then he came by the gallery. I think he was impressed. We had escalators, if you could image, that swept you off from the street to a second level. Five Chinese people came rolling up the escalator, and Chen Danqing was first in line. He knew some English. He began speaking for the group, and then everyone introduced themselves one by one. Wang Jida was there, as well as Zhang Hongnian, Jin Gao and Li Quanwu.

So I began doing hospitality-related things; took them on gallery tours, showed them art and exchanged enthusiasm about certain pieces of art, and so on. And I was able to communicate enough with Chen Danqing to find out a little bit more about their background, why they were there, and so on. My understanding was they were the first artists to be allowed out of China. Chen Danqing had preceded the others by a few months or a year, and he was the first. I was surprised that Chen Danqing was already connected to a gallery too, to Wally Findlay Gallery. I don't know if you know that name. It was a gallery with social connections from Palm Beach, New York and Beverley Hills. They showed very flamboyant rather decorative art. It's the kind of gallery that serious art scholars and serious collectors don't focus on, but it's a big operation. So I was really curious that he was represented by them. Even though he was already being represented, it dawned on me that I had four painters and a sculptor at my fingertips and so I made it clear to Chen Danqing that I would love to see more of their work. He agreed and we set a date. We had an interpreter at our next meeting. We had two or three interpreters that year. One of them might be Vivian Tsao [?], who I mentioned to you before, and who had been involved with this group from the start. Whoever it was, I remember it was somebody who had a connection to the Wall Street Journal.

(JD): Where did you meet?

(JC): Right in the gallery. In Grand Central Gallery. They brought their work, and for the most part the pieces were unframed and un-stretched. But I was able to see what they had been working on and was very impressed. I was amazed that they were making oil paintings on canvas. I didn't know that many people in the West, in the United States or elsewhere, who were aware that artists in China were working with these kinds of materials and with, well basically, a Western academic tradition. That was the first big surprise for me. I thought of work from China in terms of traditional watercolors and scrolls, but I had never seen things like this before. It was high quality work and I liked all the artists right off the bat. They were fun too, personable. They were full of energy and excitement for the adventure they were on. We met over and over again. It took me three or four meetings to really get a grasp on who they were, how they got to New York, what they were working on and what their works were like… We represented American art and realism, but I wondered at the time if I could take a detour away from the general commitment and tradition of the gallery. You know, all those questions needed to be explored.

Ultimately I decided that it was the beginning of a whole new era of America. The barriers were coming down between China and America, and in a sense these artists were pioneers, so it was a legitimate project to explore. I decided to introduce them as a group. I tended to think of them that way anyway, as the 'Group of Five'. We went to work on this process and I brought them to Central Park. I remembered taking a 35mm camera with me to take their portraits with a park backdrop. I then went to their studios.

I was very blessed that we had a 12-person staff. I had a resident scholar-writer. I had a public relations woman who was very smart and knew how to handle press and publicity. I had a group of sales people. So when I said 'I' went to studio, it was typically a group of people, providing feedback on all perspectives. 'Can we sell it? What can we write about it? How can we break this news?' We approached everything together. All five were living in situations typical of first-time immigrants. In other words, they were renting a room or sharing a room with other people in a building owned by one person. Pretty humble circumstances but not unusual for New York, or for recent immigrates. It was cramped, I remember, and many people shared one rice cooker. I remember every one of them smoked a lot, so you could see coffee cans filled with cigarettes butts, and there were no easels but clamp-on lights lighting a work in progress, something typically of Chinese subject matter. Some of the works were about Tibetan and Mongolian subjects. They had black and white reference photographs, oil sketches, chalk sketches on paper…and some field paintings they rolled up and brought in from China. It was interesting to look at the materials, to see that the canvases were of poor quality and not true linen. But the work was good, and it looked like they each had a full set of oil paints to work with too. The subject matter itself was reason enough for us to have a dialogue. I hadn't seen a yak being milked, for example. All of those things were exotic and interesting to me and of course to my colleagues as well.

We decided to have a group show, and we were building up the knowledge to be able to put a catalogue together for publicity purposes. The paintings that would sell in our gallery had to be framed well and be of a large size – to accommodate our collectors. So, I tried to find ways to give the artists money to work with. Generally I would take one of the paintings, frame it and bring it to a collector to see and to sell to. That was an interesting experience because they didn't know what it was worth or what the market could bear. Some of the artists already sold their paintings, but they were selling them to other Chinese in New York for nothing, like twenty dollars, forty dollars, or something. Some of them were selling paintings to their landlords so they could live there. But I can remember Hongnian, in particular. He brought something into the gallery. At the time - I was showing off a little bit - I had a client from mid-west who loved to buy at the gallery. I asked Hongnian to leave the painting at the office, easel it, and with the lighting I could control, asked Hongnian to step outside. I brought in the collector, showed him the painting and sold it. Later, I went to the bookkeeper and dramatically wrote a check for about 1,500 dollars and gave it to Hongnian, who was blown away by it. He was really happy because it was enough for him to rent an apartment and buy art supplies for the exhibition. I did this with every artist.

We organize the show, and published what was then a nice catalogue. That was back in the old days, when we cut and paste things in. Anyway, it was a fairly elaborate catalogue with good color, and the show was a big success. I can remember, that realism from China intrigued a lot of people because of its similarity to Russian art. I later learned from the artists that their instructors were from Russia and had connections with Russian academies. We wrote about that in the catalogue. Another thing we wrote about were the similarities between work from Tibet, and work by American artists from the early 20th century, when Americans documented and romanticized about the American Indian. The essay pointed this out too, though in retrospect, I don't think it stands true.

(JD): You said your show was a great success; can you talk a little bit about your audience?

(JC): Our audience consists mainly of spending clientele. We have Grand Central, which includes support from our Board Directors. We also have a somewhat unusual setup for a gallery. Essentially, Grand Central Gallery is a non-profit organization. We have a Board of Directors and we had two forms of membership. You can be an artist member, or a lay member. A lay member pays 500 dollars a year to help support the gallery's operation. This was set up when Sargent became a part of the gallery. We would hold big exhibitions, have a cocktail party and host a dinner. Every lay member could pick a favorite painting, and a little girl drew names from a hat to see who would get what. Everyone walked away with a painting! So the artists would contribute artwork, and the lay members would contribute artworks. In terms of the exhibition, I would to say that it was largely made up of our Board of Trustees and our regular collectors, as well as our lay members. We have a nationwide collector base.
We had a large enough audience to sell about half of the exhibition. The buyers were made up of the upper-middle class and wealthy people, geographically spread out across the country. It wasn't really the sophisticated, Park Avenue clientele, but much more mid-western in character…a lot of high power businessmen who looked to the gallery to help them develop taste in art. They looked to us to advise them on the soundness of their investments. We also carried historical classical American art, which sold for a lot of money. So, we had people who were buyers of classical American art, and who were aware of the developments in China, the openness of Deng Xiaoping, of barriers coming down, and the sort. Opportunities were growing, and they had an interest in investing in it.

(JD): You said it was national in scope, so people from the Midwest came to the event? It wasn't just a one-off situation, like buying a souvenir?

(JC): No, they were buying for their personal collection. Our invitation went out well in advance, to notify those coming from outside of New York. A lot of people even had their own private air transportation, so it wasn't difficult for them to make the trip.

(JD): It sounds like a very unusual situation.

(JC): We weren't a 501c3 organization, because we preceded the tax law. The gallery was known as a New York Membership Organization. That's how we qualified for dual membership.
The clientele we had for the Chinese artists had homes all over the country, so I would frequently arrange trips to go to different locations in America so that the artists would become acquainted with different parts of America. I wanted them to see the American West. I wanted them to see what it was like out there, to get a feel for American painting; of Native Americans in Santa Fe for example. A lot of the gallery's Board lived near Phoenix, Arizona. I wanted them to see the Grand Canyon so I organized a trip, and we all flew out to Phoenix. We went from collector home to collector home to see their paintings hung

among rather impressive artists and collections. I rented a van and we traveled the state. We went to the Grand Canyon too. It was a fabulous trip.

(JD): Was Chen Danqing on that trip?

(JC): Oh definitely. As you can imagine, we spent so much time together. They came to my apartment for many holidays and they reciprocated. Their apartments were getting better; a little bigger each time. We did that kind of thing for Chinese New Year, and one year made six thousand dumplings together for a big party. I had them over for Christmas, New Years and July 4th. Over time, the natural thing happened - we were able to develop shorthand for communication. I would often use art books, movies and other related material. We became very close friends.

(JD): Did they talk about China?

(JC): That's all they talked about. They talked about it for hours and hours - we traveled in a van for two weeks, and that's all we talked about. I got a rather rare, in-depth understanding from them all; what their childhood was like, what their life was like during the Cultural Revolution, what the Central Academy was like, their families and so on.

(JD): They were all from the Central Academy of Art?

(JC): Maybe Chen Danqing was not.

(JD): He was from Shanghai, but he ended up with the Central Academy of Art.

(JC): Yes, he was the first person who channeled in somehow. Overtime, they changed a lot. Li Quanwu wanted to find himself a woman and found himself someone who eventually became his wife. Chen Danqing brought his wife and daughter over. Ultimately, for various reasons, I decided to leave Grand Central Gallery, and entered my resignation in 1989, to leave that same year. The Board of Directors asked me to stay on, to have me rethink my decision. I stayed on for another year, but left in 1990. I wanted to move my wife and children out of New York City, partly because we bought a little cabin in the Catskills and I loved it up there, and partly because my children, who were 9 and 12, would benefit from living away from the city. As an employee of Grand Central Gallery, I was well paid and enjoyed an incredibly lavish position with an unlimited expense account. That was one of the phrases you heard thrown around, but I literately had that. It was an amazing run. Also, my wife was a landscape painter, and her studio in New York was a windowless brick cube, which handicapped her career greatly. So a variety of reasons to leave the city came together. I had been running Grand Central Gallery for 14 years, and decided it was time for a change.

In keeping our closeness, all the Chinese artists would come up to our cabin in Catskills. We would have Easter together, and they would come up for the whole weekend to cook, paint and relax. They became a part of our new life upstate. Since moving out of the city, I had to find a place in the Catskills to open a gallery, and also a good place for my kids to go to school. Most importantly, my wife needed to find a place to work, paint and teach, and live the life and career she deserved. So we decided on Woodstock. As you may know, Woodstock has an active art community. In fact, it has been a haven for artists, writers and musicians - for creative types of all kinds for over a hundred years. It was famous for its art scene for over a decade. I decided Woodstock would be a good place to give a try and I encouraged Hongnian to come up to Woodstock, because at that time, his daughter, who was living in Jackson Heights, was going to an elementary school where 80% of the students were Chinese and she was not learning any English. He

was still living in pretty substandard circumstances, and didn't feel good about having his daughter live in those conditions. So we kept encourage Hongnian to come to Woodstock to spend the weekend. At one point, he asked 'What would it be like if René, [my daughter] lived in Woodstock? She only speaks Chinese.' My wife Mariana took René to Woodstock Elementary School, and introduced her to the principle who hypothetically said René could enroll without any issue. The principle also said they had Vietnamese and Eastern European children moving to their school and that they all adjusted quickly, so he was sure she would be fine. So, Hongnian decided to move to Woodstock and has lived there ever since. We moved in 1990, and he probably moved to Woodstock in 1992. He made a big mark on the Woodstock artistic community - he's well known, and loves to throw some of the best parties in town.
Of course, Hongnian continued to be very Chinese, but now, he and his wife Lois are kind of bi-national. They have an apartment in Beijing. He shows in China as well as in the US. But I think he considers Woodstock is his home base.

(JD): When you were at Grand Central Gallery, you put together solo shows, right?

(JC): Yes, we did. Each of the five artists had a solo exhibition. Some were successful, others not as much. But overall, I think they were great for the artists. They didn't sell evenly, or anything like that, but it was good for all of them, and they did well. We gave them a lot of publicity.

(JD): In terms of publicizing the exhibitions and writing critical reviews, were any of the artists reviewed in a way that framed them within the American critical art context?

(JC): Articles, yes, but no true critiques. I had a friend, Milton Esterow, the editor and publisher of Art News, whom I invited to have lunch with the artists. He was fascinated by the whole project and assigned a writer to come to the gallery to write about the artists and their shows. There were articles published in Art News, the Wall Street Journal, the American Artist, Arts Magazine, and others. Typical publications would provide write-ups but not critiques. We never got the big bananas of the New York Times coming to the gallery. No one knew if and when the New York Times would come by.

(JD): In terms of these write-ups, was it about the phenomenon of Chinese in America, about technique, subject matter, or something different? Do you remember?

(JC): I would have to reread them to remember. I think it was news more than anything. I don't remember much writing on the formal elements of their paintings. It was just news that they were in New York. Of course they each developed different styles, and focused on different subject matters.

(JD): Interesting. Can you articulate the difference you saw coming out of the American contemporary realist versus the Chinese realist?

(JC): There have always been certain prejudices or certain modes that have been criticized or lauded in realist painting. I would say that in the world that we inhabited, it was a plus to paint from life and a minus to paint from photographs; it was a plus to paint easel-paintings and stand-alone frame-paintings, and a minus to paint for the purpose of reproduction, illustration as an example. There were notions as such that existed in the New York realist world we inhabited, but some of those thoughts fell apart when I came upon this group of Chinese artists. For example, I remember some of their references, and some of the things they drew from about China, for example, the artists often referred to these black and white, poorly printed newsprint-like images of works by Andrew Wyeth. No color to refer to, but the concepts were there and the subject matter inspired several of the artists. So they 'filled in' the color

and imagined the details, all from a tiny newsprint or book of Andrew Wyeth paintings. So, the act of basing work off of photographs would have been considered poor form by American realists. The idea of repeating the same painting or copying a painting would be another example. I noticed this in other countries of the Orient…the concept of being the 'one and only' wasn't as revered I guess as it was in the US. So variations of the same theme in painting was something I wasn't used to, and I readjusted my thought structure to understand how these artists could fit into the category of realist painting.

(JD): You said you saw something Russian in it. Something that was neither American nor French. Can you explain what you mean?

(JC): I think the romanticizing of the peasant, the ethnographic peoples, I think that was true, and was similar to turn of the century painting from Russia. The struggle with or against or through nature was there. Even the color, even the palette…there was a somber quality about it that I thought looked a lot like Russian paintings. There were compositional devices that I could see as well, of a march, or of the perspective of heroic front figures and diminishing figures... The use of nature through animals, beasts of burden, and the cycle of life…and as mentioned before, documenting people…that was there as well.

(JD): You mentioned that you saw that they were looking at Andrew Wyeth. When you were in their studios, did you personally see these soft print, newsprint reference materials you mentioned earlier?

(JC): They knew few American artists and Andrew Wyeth was one of them. They knew Sargent, which was interesting. Back to the differences in training, I would say every one of them was capable of making a good portrait. They actually received a much more authentic academic training than the American artists. The Russian Academy, as I understand it, which continues to this day, is really based on the French Academy. What they received in Beijing at the Central Academy was much truer, in a sense, to the French Academy than the National Academy of Design. By the time my generation came along, you could go to the Academy but it was still free form – start when you want to start, pick and choose your professors etc. It wasn't step by step like the Central Academy. All of those artists went through that process, and it showed.
Pick ten people who have graduated from American university; put a subject in front of him and ask him to paint of portrait, and you will see what I mean. Every one of these artists and their colleagues and friends could do that.

(JD): It was a very different technical training. That's interesting that you were able to see that.

(JC): The whole concept of heroism was in their work too, whether they were painting a Mongolian cowboy, or something more political. They were painted well. That was not typical in American or Western art in the 20th century painting. By the time I met the artists, I think they were all pretty comfortable in their own skin, in every way including as painters, and I never remembered any of them hiding or being ashamed of having photographs to work from. You see it a lot with American artists; they even do sketches after a whole painting is done so that they can pretend they worked from a sketch of some sort. That prejudice in practice still exists in America realist painting.

(JD): Using subject matter as a profitable approach to painting is interesting; it's clear that Wyeth's Christina's World was something the artists had seen before; you could tell that it was something numerous artists referred to. And it's interesting to see how the translation gets made. But from an art historian's perspective, it's also interesting to try to pinpoint when they saw, where they saw it, how they got the material, and what they did with it afterwards. That's why I asked whether you actually 'saw them'

with those photographs, with reproductions in hand.

(JC): Not so much of 'famous' artists' work, but I saw photographs that they had taken in China and used as references. But, I've always had, and I still have, a big art library. I would spend hours and hours looking at art books with these artists, and I could tell who they knew, and whatnot. At a certain point in the late '80s, I went to Russia a lot. I was there five or six times and brought back tons of books. It was a real feast for them, because these were references of artists they had grown up on.

(JD): It's an interesting triangulation; a fascinating exercise. Did these artists have their own fans, or did they rely on you to introduce them to an audience? Did they have their own circles or collectors?

(JC): I was able to have one solo show for each artist. So, roughly we met in '85, I left in '90, and each of them had a show. They all had their own networks, friends and connections outside of Grand Central Gallery. I never desired to have any kind of an exclusive contract with them, in fact, I have worked that way throughout my entire career. At Grand Central Gallery or in Woodstock, for the past 15, 16 years. So they were free to do that, and they did. They were all smart. Everyone had their own social connections and friends, and even in New York in the '80s, there was a Chinese cultural network they plugged into and they made sales too. It was different for each artist. Wang Jida, for example, was in demand as someone who could model or reinterpret through sculpture. He found a lot of commercial work in foundries where they were doing things like having Wang Jida interpret in 3-D, something in 2-D, by the artist Erte. It was strictly commercial work, but it was good pay, and I think Wang Jida became quite adept at negotiating good terms for his labor and skill. So it ran the gamut of someone like that who toiled away as a pretty highly paid artisan, to someone who had social contacts, and made friends with wealthy New Yorkers or Chinese patrons.

(JD): For example, Chen Danqing, you mentioned earlier, had been represented by Wally Findlay Gallery. Did he continue to work with the gallery?

(JC): He didn't. I sensed that Chen Danqing understood from the beginning that he was in an odd place for him to be, and I think once we started showing is work, his relationship with Wally Findlay tapered off. Chen Danqing is a different story altogether. He sold infrequently at Grand Central Gallery, but he was on a mission to establish something separate and distinctly Chen Danqing and was making painting that we really couldn't sell. He knew that, and I knew that. He was in the process of making a name for himself, and wanting to create a political statement that may not result so much in sales, but in fame and recognition.

(JD): And you were aware that he was making things on that basis - did you see his other works? After '89 he made an amazing huge piece that was quite controversial and recently bought by one of his major collectors. He has a certain edge to his work. Did you ever see that piece or other works?

(JC): Yes. I saw most of his work at his studio. I think I would have most likely seen it in his studio.

(JD): Interesting. You mentioned you maintained contact with Zhang Hongnian after you left New York; did you part ways with the other artists?

(JC): Wang Jida and Jin Gao as well. I lost contact with Li Quanwu – everyone's lost contact with him. I never understood why; I don't think anyone does. I also have had contact with a few additional artists here in Woodstock. Jin Gao, as you know, lost the battle against cancer and died; Wang Jida continues to live in New York and I see him annually. Chen Danqing, I just hear about. That's kind of how it stands these days.

But we are very close with Hongnian and his wife Lois, who is a very good painter and portrait painter too. They are some of our closest friends, and our daughter and their daughter René are best friends and will likely be best friends for life. We have a very close relationship with them.

(JD): Right. Do you remember any of your artists responding to Tiananmen? Do you remember that moment? Was it a transitional moment for any of the artists or your relationship with them?

(JC): It was a big moment for me, and one of the reasons was that I was in Moscow at the time. I had taken a huge group of Americans to Moscow for a conference we organized at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. I remember literally boarding a bus in the morning and that was the news. Everyone was quite afraid, and it was an odd place to be because you didn't know what was going to happen next. But that was 1989, at the tail end of my time at Grand Central. They all knew I was leaving, and began moving in different directions at that time. Honestly I was really wrapped up in Russia at that time, I had an unusual entry – I might just tell the story briefly; I was working with a big collector; an Armenian businessman. Reagan and Gorbachev were having their first Summit Meeting in Washington D.C. A dear, dear friend by the name of Andrew Shahinian, had a big American collection, and had bought works by some of the Chinese artists. He also had a big Russian collection, and a branch of the Russian Soviet Collection was Armenian. Collectors can be pretty expansive, and he was an expansive man. He had collected 19th century Russian paintings and Armenian Russian works. No. 1 in his collection was Ivan Aivazovsky, and, as you probably know historically, the Armenians felt great gratitude to the then-Soviet Union for essentially saving Armenia from encroachments. My friend decided to make a gesture on behalf of the American-Armenian community. He got in touch with the embassy, and took to Washington a painting by Ivan Aivazovsky to give back to the Soviet people as a gesture of friendship from American-Armenian community and in a sense to thank the Soviet Union for what they had done for Armenia. If you remember, the Gorbachevs were the first leaders of the Soviet Union, and had great use of PR and of the use of the news media. They picked up on this before the meeting and invited him to the embassy for a press conference. Andrew gave the painting ceremonially to the Gorbachevs and they toasted him and had dinner with him and invited Andrew to be their guest in the Soviet Union, and to begin building a cultural bridge between the United States and the Soviet Union. I was having lunch with Andy [Andrew] three days after this happened. He'd already had snapshots to share with me at lunch. I said to him 'Well Andy, when are you going?' and he said 'Oh come on, that's for art people' and I said 'How could anyone turn down an invitation like that? Let's talk about this. I'll buy the tickets and we'll go together.' So we, then – I inserted myself into this diplomatic agenda and invitation – were the guests of the Gorbachevs in the Soviet Union. And that opened a whole new era of my life, and I ended up going back and forth about six times the next year. This was how I spent 1988 and 1989, and that's why I was in Moscow at the time of Tiananmen Square. I don't remember a direct response, except for Chen Danqing, to Tiananmen from the artists. A bit of a long-winded story about the Soviet Union.

(Q): No, it was quite interesting; all that happened in the Square was quite complicated. I am just curious though, you said that during the artists' solo shows, they didn't sell evenly. Was there one who was wildly popular or one who just didn't break through? Do you know why that might have been the case?

(JC): It's kind of embarrassing to say, but I think the one who sold the least was Chen Danqing. That was difficult for me. You wanted them all to be successful, to have them make money and have American commercial success. But his work was the most difficult for our clientele to buy and hang it in their living room. That obviously doesn't say anything against Chen Danqing but it was the least successful. Sculpture is typically also the hardest to sell in a group enterprise.

(Q): Do you think they had trouble selling because the subject matter was foreign to collectors?

(JC): I don't think so. This is very simplistic but there was a prettiness to the work by the other painters that Chen Danqing's dark, raw work didn't have. It didn't appeal to popular taste. That's all I mean.

(Q): Did you go to galleries and museum together?

(JC): Mainly museums. We'd discuss it at least, like 'You've got to see that show at the Guggenheim and at the Met...' There was always that element of peering into the world of other artists. The big man on our block was Chen Yifei. He was right across the street at Hammer Galleries on 57th street. Of course, Chen Yifei knew how to manipulate the system, and 'work' New York and gallery system better than anyone else did. Chen Yifei was just always there, driving everybody crazy. You know what I mean by that. It was not exclusively to the Chinese or Chinese artists. He drove people nuts because of the way he handled his career and the money he was making, and seemingly leaving everyone else in the dust. But they all knew and I knew in so many ways how vastly superior their work was to what Chen Yifei was doing. That difference between artistic success and commercial success was something we talked about a lot. I am trying to think about other Chinese artists we would go to see together and can't remember but there were a few. Grand Central showed Chen Chi – I'm not sure if you know that name. He came from Taiwan in the 1940s, and we showed him for 40 to 50 years. He made wonderful watercolor paintings. It was a big thing for them to meet Chen Chi. He was a member of Grand Central Art Galleries, and we belonged to the National Arts Club and Chen Chi lived at the National Arts Club. We were always taking side trips together and I took them to meet Chen Chi, and they were very impressed. There were a few other people, but the interest was mostly in big museum shows of American and European painters whom they could relate to, so we talked about that the most.

(Q): What about the Chinese art market?

(JC): I don't think it was present yet. Or maybe I was not aware of it yet. I am very aware of it now. But remember, we are talking about '85 to '90…was it there?

(JD): No, not in New York so much. In New York, there were some so-called avant garde artists like Ai Weiwei. I wonder if they would have known who he was, but again, Ai Weiwei kept very much to himself. Their circles may not have overlapped.
From what I understand, Chen Yifei was a focal point (for the newly arrived Chinese art community): He was the star. Even for the amateur artist, or for the avant-garde artist, everybody was aware of Chen Yifei's success. He acted like a magnet, and he would attend small avant-garde-ish, do it yourself type artist meetings.

(JC): Yes, he was a friend and a frequent visitor to Grand Central Gallery. He and my father-in-law were pretty close friends. I also remember all of the artists, in particular Chen Danqing, having relationships with other scholarly, academic people, more than with other artists. He was really more interested in philosophy and history, and in people who were more influential in providing him with interesting material, not so much having to do with painting.

(JD): Chen Danqing has always been an intellectual. In fact, he's always been an intellectual as much as he's been a painter. There were people like Joan Cohen, whom you know, whose son Ethan had a small enterprise (called Art Waves) where young artists doing fun things with other artists of their same age,

but nothing at the level you were talking about. 57th street was up town at that point, and Ethan and his 'enterprise' was downtown.

(JC): I was into anything Chinese for a few years. When one of the Chinese opera troupes from Shanghai or Beijing came to Lincoln Center, we all went together. I haven't thought about this for years, but when the Barnum and Bailey circus came to New York, they would have the circus at Madison Square Garden. In '87, '88, the big headliner had to do with the Chinese acrobats. So my PR girl [assistant] got in touch with the circus troupe and got all the Chinese acrobats to come to Grand Central Art Gallery. We invited Chinese school children from Queens and had a big act in the gallery. We had Chinese acrobats tumbling and balancing at the gallery. All the little kids sat and clapped, and the artists talked to them, signed autographs…we got publicity from something like that. I haven't thought about the Chinese acrobats for a long time. We were interested in anything and everything that was Chinese.

(JD): You must have had a big space for that.

(JC): We had a big space. We would go to dine in Chinatown and things like that. There were certain restaurants that were interesting to go to, and things like that.

(JD): In terms of the '80s, the goals of the Chinese Artists Association and the Chinese government were quasi-diplomatic and quasi-business. The Hammer Gallery was a part of the business-diplomatic circle; Hefner seemed to have similar connections.

(JC): Well, you always refer to [Robert] Hefner as 'the big show', but I remember Hefner as a constant presence for several years. Our artists were very aware of who was in, who was out, who was being bought, sold, who was being promoted. He had a gallery too.

JD: Yes, the Hefner Gallery was in New York. They too were showing primarily realist painting at that time.

(JC): I can show you a painting of Mariana's that she made a couple years ago in Oklahoma City. She made a painting of Lake Hefner.

(JD): Really? He seemed to be a larger than life character, and very charismatic. I have read interesting interviews with some of the artists, with some of the realist artists talking about that adventure, and what he did.

(JC): Is there a big shake out taking place in China now?

(JD): It's interesting. There is so much money in China now, that it will only be a matter of time before something interesting develops. The Europeans have been involved for a much longer period of time (than the Americans), and I think they will probably stay involved. In China there is a strong interest in their own patrimony as well as in their own artists.

(JC): The Japanese, Korean, and Russian bubbles. I am not saying that China is going to have its bubble. But there is this huge sweep upwards. Something that impresses me - and it is so logical – is that collections that have been inherited by Americans for 50 years or more, and I'm talking about all the arts, ceramics and whatnot. Things are bringing huge prices, and are almost always being bought by Chinese, who can now be aware of everything that goes on in auction anywhere via the Internet.