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Interview with
Leah L. Wong [王丽华]

INTERVIEWER: Jane DeBevoise
LOCATION: Leah L. Wong's Studio, Columbus OH
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TIME: About 2 hours

Applying to Zhejiang Academy

JD: Leah, I am delighted to have this opportunity to meet you and hear what you have to say about the 1980s. I would like for us to focus primarily on the 1980s, and maybe just before and after. You were originally from Shandong?

LW: Yes, Qingdao.

JD: We would like to know how you applied to the Zhejiang Academy of Arts; a little bit about your decision, what the application process was like, why you decided to go to art school and why you chose Zhejiang Academy.

LW: It was a long time ago. When I was young, I liked to draw, and always wanted to be an artist. I was academically strong, so my parents didn't want me to become an artist. Nonetheless, I went to all the youth palaces to work on drawing.

By the time I was a teenager, it was clear that I wanted to go to art school. I got a job at Qingdao's Xifang district Worker's Club [四方区工人俱乐部] to paint billboards for movies in the club theater. I met Sui Jianguo [隋建国] when I was about nineteen [early 1979], and when he was twenty-something. He worked at the Xifang district Cultural Center [四方区文化馆]. My back door faced his front door. We were young and had a lot of energy, and our ideas began to attract a lot of young people. We drew and painted together with no true purpose. The Cultural Center became a preparation ground for art schools. There were very few girls and a lot of guys.

My painting and drawing skills weren't so good then,

but I was surrounded by very good people. I learned from everyone around me and decided to apply for art school as well. Sui Jianguo took the exam first. He was accepted into the Shandong Academy of Arts [山东艺术学院] in Jinan in 1980. After he entered, everybody else wanted to follow. At that time I didn't really think I could get into Zhejiang Academy of Arts. At the time, I was thinking maybe I could apply and have a chance to go to the Shandong Academy instead. When I looked at a map I realized Zhejiang Academy in southern China was far from Qingdao. I didn't know much about art schools, other than what circulated among the people around me, but I knew I wanted to move far away from home. It was that simple.

The actual application process was quite complicated. You had to send about sixteen original works of art, which were not going to be returned. You mailed them to the school and then you would be told if you were granted permission to take the entrance exam.

JD: What kind of work did you send to the school?

LW: I sent drawings, including still-life works, sketches, portraits, and a couple of colored works. There were also different disciplines into which to apply. I applied to the Oil Painting Department, but I didn't know how to use oil paint at that time. For the exam, we needed to use gouache because it dries fast. I think I only applied to one department - Oil Painting (although we were allowed to apply to multiple disciplines). I sent everything to the school knowing nothing was going to come back. Everyone in our group applied to the same schools. There were five or seven of us who received permission to go to Beijing for the Zhejiang Academy entrance exam in 1981, and I was one of them. You couldn't take the exam in your local area, unless you were in Hangzhou, Shanghai or Wuhan, etc., where they had examination centers for the Art Academy.

I was assigned to Beijing. The exam took place at the affiliated high school of the Central Academy of Fine Arts [中央美院附中]. When I arrived, I saw an ocean of people but I knew the school was planning on taking only ten students. I also saw a lot of people who had graduated from the affiliated schools.

For the exam we had to make a portrait drawing and still-life in color, and then there were other components: for example, creativity, literature and other subjects. There was also an interview, with three teachers present per interview. It was an incredibly stressful process. It was quite scary! But what could you do? I was stuck there for three or four days. Until more than two months after the exam, I had no idea I had gained acceptance into the Zhejiang Academy.

JD: From your area, how many women applied with you?

LW: I was the only one in our group. Ever since I was a kid, I had been like a boy and had hung out with guys a lot. We were all separated once we got to the examination center. We looked for our names and numbers, and then we were sent to different places accordingly. A lot of people who came from the affiliated school already knew how to paint as they had studied painting for three years or so. I didn't think I had any chance.

I came home and thought I should just hope for admission to the Shandong Academy. The exam was taken in beginning of May. The rejection letters from Zhejiang Academy were sent out first in about mid-July. Acceptance letters were sent out about two weeks later. I never saw a rejection letter, but I was told that they were on pink paper. All the guys received the pink letters. Some called to ask me whether I had gotten one. They thought my letter must have gotten lost in the mail.

I waited for two more weeks. Every day I thought that maybe I would receive mine the next day. It was quite a torturous experience. When I received the letter, it was white with a green letterhead. I didn't know what it was. I opened it and it said 'Congratulations' or something like that. I couldn't believe my eyes! It was an amazing moment. I went to our bookkeeper's office and asked her to read it for me. She asked, 'Can't you read it yourself?' I said 'I have read it. I need you to read it for me.' It was unbelievable when she told me I was accepted. When I told the head of the club that I would have to quit my job, he thought I was lying about getting accepted because I had told him earlier that I didn't do well on the exam. It was an interesting moment for me, and the acceptance into Zhejiang Academy really changed my life.

At Zhejiang Academy

JD: You got accepted in July. Did you start in September?

LW: The school term began on September 1st, so I went to Hangzhou at the end of August, a few days ahead of time. Hangzhou was very different from Qingdao. I was young and hadn't traveled much. I was quite shocked at the differences.

JD: Tell us a little bit about how you felt when you got there: the atmosphere, the teachers you met, and who was important to you.

LW: There was no direct transportation between Qingdao and Hangzhou at the time, so I had to transfer through Shanghai. Shanghai was pretty interesting. I stayed there for one night, and went on to Hangzhou the next day. For one or two days, I was totally shocked by everything and didn't know what to think. Hangzhou was quiet at that time, grey and calm; Qingdao was by the sea, bright and colorful; Shanghai was noisy with a lot of people and buildings. The color schemes in each city varied greatly. There was a very different and interesting atmosphere in Hangzhou that I had never seen before. I liked Hangzhou, but it took me some time to adjust.

There was a senior student Jiang Yanbo（姜衍波） from Qingdao who helped me navigate the campus; he showed me the administration office, canteen and all the other basic facilities. Although located on the same site on West Lake, the campus then was quite different from today.

JD: Did Liu Dahong come in from Shandong too?

LW: Yes, he is from Qingdao, but I didn't know him when we both lived there. We actually lived pretty close to one another in Qingdao, but he studied at the Shandong Affiliated School [山东艺术学院附中] in Jinan.

The senior student, Jiang Yanbo was very helpful He is now a chief editor and the head of Shandong Art Publishing [山东美术出版社] in Jinan. He and the people I met along the way helped me understand what college was about. College was reinstated in 1977, and the first graduation [post-Cultural Revolution] occurred in the winter of 1981, which was kind of an odd time. That was the class of Lin Lin [林林] and Lu Hong [陆泓]. They were among the first group accepted into college, and they graduated the year I enrolled.

At the beginning I thought I was going to study with the entire class of my year. But we were assigned to three different studios on the first day of classes. I had never heard of the studio system before. It was new, and I was told it was an experimental system. Studio meant one would study with one leading professor in a group setting. I was assigned to Studio No. 3 [第三工作室]. The leading professor was Quan Shanshi [全山石]. Other professors were Hu Zhenyu [胡振宇], Xu Mangyao [徐茫耀], Gao Youlin [高友林], Huang Faxiang [黄发祥], and Chen Shouyi [陈守义]. Studio No. 1 [第一工作室] included [professors] Jin Yide [金一德], Zhu Xuan [徐君萱] and Chen Aikang [陈爱康]. Studio No. 2 [第二工作室] included professors Wang Chengyi [汪诚一] and Xu Yongxiang [徐永祥].

Studio No. 1 was focused on the [Eugen-] Poba style [博巴派], a kind of heavy stroke style, Studio No. 2 was Maksimov's [马克西莫夫] Soviet style with loose brushwork, and Studio No. 3 followed a Soviet art academy style [苏派]. There were ten of us new students in oil painting in 1981, and we were divided into the three studios [4:3:3]. There was a girl in No. 1 who transferred

to our studio and a guy from No. 2 transferred to No. 1. After a few weeks, it became 4:2:4. So our studio included Jiang Yaohui [蒋耀辉], Li Zheng [李争], Qiu Ping [邱萍] and myself. Qiu Ping dropped out in 1982.

Studio No. 1 included [students] Liu Dahong [刘大鸿], Geng Jianyi [耿建翌] , Wei Guangqing [魏光庆] and Wei Xiaolin [巍小林]. Chen Ren [陈仁] and Ruan Jie [阮杰] were in No. 2. During our first year we were not in the same studios, so we didn't know each other well. We knew people older than us better than people in the same year, because freshman and sophomores were working in the same space, just with different assignments.

JD: How much time did you spend in studio? Maybe you can explain how your day went, what and how you learned.

LW: We spent most of our time in studio, five mornings a week in class and a lot of time after classes. For the first three years, we also had culture classes [文化课] in the afternoons, including courses on perspective, literature, history, philosophy and English, etc.

JD: That all took place in the same space?

LW: No, in different buildings. Studio was studio, and regular classrooms elsewhere were used for our afternoon culture classes. Including all majors in our year, there was a total of 37 students entering the Academy in 1981. No matter what your major was, you attended the same afternoon classes. For studio, we stayed in our studio with students of varying levels.

JD: What kind of studio assignments were you given? What problems were you asked to solve?

LW: The first year focused on fundamentals. We had to make still-lifes and portraits. We were not allowed to do nude portraits and had to stay above the shoulder, but we started to study anatomy and perspective as well. It was quite systematic. We really wanted to engage more advanced forms of drawing, but we had to stick to the basics. Our studio was very realistic; you know Quan Shanshi's style. We had to do very accurate depictions of things in a traditional way. That made the course quite challenging. If you had to focus on drawing the same head for three days, it became increasingly difficult.

At the end of every semester, we went to the countryside to do a creative assignment, called 体验生活 [tiyan shenghuo, i.e. experience life]. The Oil Painting Department always went to the countryside to find its 'peasant life' subjects, topics like the fishing villages in Zhejiang. The Design Department went to the city for all things more fashionable.

JD: Did this happen every year?

LW: No, almost every semester.

JD: What was the farthest or the most memorable place you visited?

LW: Most of the time we visited places within Zhejiang, but for our thesis show we had a budget and could go to any place we chose to visit. So, everybody went to a different place. I went to Dagang Oil Field [大港油田] near Tianjin and stayed there for one month by myself. That was really something, far away from everything and alone.

When Porf. Zheng came back from the USA

JD: Let's go back a little. What did you do your second year in school?

LW: We worked on figurative art. Then we engaged landscape, and then went on the field trip. The first two years were pretty straightforward. You knew what you were doing, and most of it was technical-foundational type work. But during our third year, Zheng Shengtian [郑胜天] came back from America. That changed things and everybody wanted to learn from him.....

The three studios were merged into one class because there was no way he could teach all three classes separately, in the given time. Quan Shanshi was originally the Chair of the Oil Painting Department, but then he became Dean and Zheng Shengtian became the Department Chair. Zheng Shengtian and Jin Yide taught us all together in our junior and senior years.

JD: I have heard from other people that when Zheng Shengtian came back, he started giving slide shows.

LW: He did that a lot in the evenings and between classes. It was exciting for some people, but I felt really confused and lost. I didn't do well during this transition period.

JD: Why did you feel lost?

LW: Because for two years you knew what you were learning and what your teachers were expecting from you. You could gauge good and bad, even though 'good' and 'bad' were subjective. When Zheng Shengtian came back and showed us installation art among other things, you

started to question what you were doing, why you made painting, and what this whole thing was about. There was too much for us to absorb. Maybe students like Liu Dahong learned things faster. I often felt alone, and felt even more alone after the other female in our year, Qiu Ping, dropped out of school during our sophomore year.

I had spent most of the time in the studio with my professors, friends and two other guys. We had used similar vocabulary and had discussed similar issues for two years, and then when something new came in, we didn't know what to discuss anymore….

Zheng Shengtian came back to the Academy in 1983 or 1984. Jin Yide was directing the class, and Zheng Shengtian came in and out of the classroom. I had to relearn a lot and it was painful. Liu Dahong and Geng Jianyi and other students had studied with Prof. Jin for two years. They already drew differently from us, with a very hard edge – our works were still blurry. We became acquaintances during that time. We later talked to each other more but didn't have a lot of contact. Mr. Jin taught very different. I had to re-learn a lot of things. I changed, but it was a painful process.

JD: When Zheng Shengtian showed slides, were there certain artists or works that you found particularly shocking or interesting?

LW: At that time, even Matisse was new to us. Take our school library, for example. For the first two years, we were only allowed to see books on the lower floor, most of which were quite conservative, traditional and descriptive in a Russian style or the art of the Renaissance. When you

became a senior, you were allowed to visit the faculty library to see works by Matisse, Picasso and other modern artists. At that time I was interested in color, and liked Matisse and Mondrian, even though I didn't understand Mondrian's works….

JD: At that time when you were intrigued by abstract works by Mondrian, did you experiment in that field?

LW: You can find influences from both Matisse and Mondrian in my final thesis work. Paul Klee came into my awareness later. The child-like style in his paintings made me think about why we did art the way we did. And why did we have to receive this academic training? If you see art that looked this simple, but it's not simple, when you thought about it, you'd debate within yourself.

Zheng Shengtian brought a lot of fresh air to the Academy and we became more rebellious. Up until then we were so controlled that we didn't know what to do when we had a little freedom, that kind of 'aimless freedom'

Thesis Work

JD: How did you start to prepare your thesis work your senior year?

LW: The idea of turning art into life was essential at that time. We were taught that between form and content, content should come first. So we all went to different places to 'experience life' before deciding our final thesis topics. At the beginning, I had had enough of painting scenes of peasant life, but was influenced by Zhang Peili's hard-

edge style when I saw his work in his studio. I started thinking about industrialization, and structures that were not organic but man-made. In the end, I chose the oil fields, which at the time I thought must be considered "structural" and 'hard edged.'

JD: So you were aware of Zhang Peili and Wang Guangyi at that time?

LW: Yes, they were a year ahead of me. Although I didn't understand it, I was attracted to their cold, structured style.

JD: How were you able to view their work?

LW: They had already had their thesis shows and I saw their completed works there.

JD: Did they give any lectures on their works?

LW: No, I don't remember them giving any formal talks, but we knew each other very well. At that time, people ahead of you really had a strong influence on your thought processes. They influenced my decision to paint oil fields.

JD: How did you get connected to the oil field in Tianjin? Did you have to write a letter? Did you have an introduction through someone, or did they just let anybody come wandering in?

LW: If the project you proposed was permitted by the professors, you would receive a budget and an introduction letter from the school. I brought my student ID and the letter to the director of the oil field and explained the reasons for my wanting to do my thesis work there. They were very supportive. The problem was

that there were mostly men in the field. So I stayed with the girls who checked the meters. At night, the workers went home and nobody stayed in the field, but there was an empty room for the workers to rest in during the daytime. I lived alone in that space for a month. It was kind of scary.

During the day, people came in and out. Most of the field's female workers would check the meters in the field, and men performed the really physical work. I took my camera out and made sketches in the field. There was a truck that brought you into the field at a certain time, and also brought you lunch. I stayed out there for the whole day, and then returned to the base area with all the workers.

JD: How did the workers react to you making sketches of them?

LW: I was new, and everyone was curious about what I was doing there.

JD: So after one month, you returned to Zhejiang Academy. How did you and your professors interact while developing your thesis project?

LW: I had to go through my project with both Zheng Shengtian and Jin Yide. I had many sketches of female workers working, waiting for buses and the like, because I had spent a lot of time with them. Professors Zheng and Jin were not happy with my sketches, so I didn't receive approval to move on. Everyone else passed but me and Chen Ren.

JD: What did they think of your sketches?

LW: Professor Zheng [Shengtian] told me to forget about the oil fields and work with things I was familiar with. Turns out my one-month trip didn't help me in the end. I was really stuck and didn't know what to do. I was interested in structures and still wanted to make structural forms in my paintings. So, I looked around and realized the classroom was like a structure. I decided to work with the students, with my own life at the Academy. I started to line up canvases, easels and people, making works that flattened the familiar three-dimensional space. Professor Zheng liked the work but asked me to keep it simple. There were seven or eight people in my first group of sketches, and I reduced the number to three after a long process. Finally, I got the approval to move on, as did Chen Ren with his work about children and the ocean. Chen Ren and I were the last two students. We were still working on our final project ideas after everyone else left. I think we didn't have much time left by then.

JD: This is interesting to me; submitting sketches again and again to gain approval for the next stage of the thesis project. At the point when you were allowed to move forward on your project, did they give you canvas to work with, or did you already have access but were restricted to sketching until permission was granted?

LW: We had access to canvas, but we were not allowed to move forward with our ideas on canvas unless approval was received. We were not even allowed to work on the larger-scale drawings before we got the approval. We had to work on the small ones again and again until the professors thought you could move on to a larger size. Because larger work needed more details and specific

depictions, therefore more research was required.

JD: When Geng Jianyi made the big smiling or screaming faces, was that for his graduation project or post-graduation?

LW: After graduation. His graduation piece consisted of two people coldly sitting together.

JD: The work was criticized for not being warm or happy enough. So I guess he went to the other extreme!

LW: I think it has something to do with that. For a long time, we were taught to study from life and to study from workers, peasants and farmers, and then to produce art that reflected "real life". Important subjects and messages were encouraged. Art was supposed to communicate well with the masses in a kind of Socialist-Realist style. We didn't understand that we, as individuals, played a specific role in the greater context of life; until that point, we often understood ourselves to be a part of a cohesive whole. So I think that was the breakthrough for me. I could now paint my own thoughts and feelings, not just other people's lives and feelings. It was quite different from how I thought when I first entered college.

JD: It sounds like Zheng Shengtian had a big influence on this kind of thinking, as though he were guiding you back to your own life.

LW: Yes, he was, especially since we were all so used to Socialist Realism. For example, Li Zheng [李争] worked in that genre. He knew what he wanted. But I wanted a change, but I didn't know what to do to make that happen. I was looking for something I was interested in and eventually produced a cold, industrial-style painting. I was not a

cold person, so it wasn't really for me. Maybe that's why Professor Zheng felt it was not right and told me to go make some other works. When I started working with the classroom setting, I tried to include the hard edge I was using in my previous sketches, but it took on a new life in the work.

The Zhao Wuji class and 1985 Graduation Show

JD: In 1985, there was a graduation exhibition, which was then publicized in several magazines and even caught the attention of the Beijing authorities. Can you talk a little bit about that?

LW: When Zhao Wuji (Zao Wou-Ki) came in 1985, we attracted a lot of attention. It was May 1985, we were working on our thesis show in our own studios. I had a studio by myself in the back of the department building. The guys had four shared studios in a couple of studio buildings; two guys shared one space. All of a sudden we were going to have class together again. We were also working on our graduation work, but suddenly we were told that we were going to take Zhao Wuji's class for a month.

Of course we already knew about Zhao Wuji's abstract paintings, so everybody thought we would be making abstract work in his class. However, we began painting models. A lot of people were confused that an abstract painter was teaching us to make representational work. But the class was not about what you made – it was about how you thought about what you made. This class gave me an idea about where abstract painting came from. I was interested in abstract painting, but no one taught me how to do it.

JD: When you entered the classroom, there was a model standing there. Was it a nude model?

LW: Yes. We were already in our senior year then. We had started to work with nude models in our sophomore year, upper body first, whole body later.

JD: How was his teaching different from that of your other professors?

LW: Zhao Wuji wanted you to look at the model, not just copy it. Those are two different processes. He also taught us various forms of mark-making. He talked about the concepts of abstraction, which were not about random paints coming together on a surface, but about an outcome of reason. You really had to get into yourself, follow your feelings and understand what you made, without copying things from the outside. Most of the time we didn't ask why we spent time depicting figures. The class combined techniques, structures, and forms. Everyone's work looked somewhat different from each other's, which was really nice.

JD: Did he show slides of his works or works by other abstract artists?

LW: He gave a lecture about the development of his own works. It was very educational and eye opening for me.

JD: Did he encourage discussion with people in the class?

LW: I didn't talk a lot, because that class consisted of a mixture of teachers and students. A lot of people knew what they

were doing, but I was among the confused bunch, so I listened more than I talked.

JD: Do you think that is a female trait or a personal trait? How many females were there in this class?

LW: There were four females, but I was the only female student, and the others were faculty members. Ouyang (欧阳) was older and hung out with different people, and Chen Haiyan (陈海燕) was a printmaker. The other woman was Teng Ying (腾英). Her home was in Hangzhou, so she usually went home after class. Chen Haiyan and I used be roommates and were close friends. We didn't talk a lot about the class, but I talked a lot with some of the guys in the class.

JD: Let's go back to the graduation exhibition – can you talk about the controversy or excitement that developed after the '85 graduation show?

LW: The main issue had to do with art and life relationships. The traditional ideas of "art reflecting real lives," "art depicting major events," "art for the masses" and etc. were challenged. I think we were caught in the debate of what was of the purpose of art and how to deal with art forms, art subjects and messages. Some thought that subjects and messages were the main issue that needed to be stressed, and others thought that art form was an essential frame for art and art form could serve its content. There was almost no majority opinion in that discussion. The show was sort of cold, playful and aimless. There was no major theme or message. The content was small and was not obvious. We were not sure how art could exist without "life experiences."

A lot of the works looked cold, and I felt many had no readable thought behind them. This period of institutional change [with Zheng Shengtian and Zhao Wuji coming in] was very dangerous to some people. They worried that too much Western influence could "corrupt" the younger generation, and felt that Chinese oil painting should emphasize "Chinese nationality [油画民族化]" – it's a strange term. No one uses it anymore. But for others, especially the young students, it was exciting. We were given new perspectives never previously experienced in the PRC. All of a sudden artists could do what they wanted without incorporating a "theme". We didn't have to fold heavily-loaded messages into an artwork to make it fit a political or social purpose. We could depict ourselves, our own lives and thoughts in our artwork. We were suddenly exposed, naked, in a way. Normally each student had to create one graduation work, but that year we were allowed to have multiple pieces. I had two large paintings. There is a saying, 'a small person makes big paintings'. Other students like Liu Dahong made three or four.

JD: Where were the works exhibited?

LW: We had a gallery space in the Academy for thesis exhibitions, but things have changed at the Academy so it may not exist anymore.

JD: Were the works divided into different disciplines or exhibited altogether?

LW: Yes, they were exhibited by discipline, but all at the same time. Oil painting, printmaking, design…and sculptures were exhibited in the middle of the big room. The graduation show was a very hot topic in 1985, and there

was a real debate that occurred too. I didn't have a hard time though; the major question I was asked was why I had flattened the space and why a classroom became a series of abstract lines. I explained that the work was semi-realistic and passed. Then and later on, my two paintings did very well.

JD: Did you have to defend your point? Was there a group of teachers posing questions?

LW: There were about six or seven people who asked questions, some teachers and some school administrators, but the artworks were not in the room. The defense took place in front of a huge audience in a small auditorium.

JD: There was an audience?

LW: Oh yes! It was open to the public. There were only about 200-something students in the entire school at that time, and the room was not that large, but it was filled to the brim.

JD: So that was your thesis defense.

LW: That's right. It was the first time that everyone could join in on the defense. It was probably Zheng Shengtian's idea.

JD: Were you the only one on stage?

LW: Yes, we all had to walk on stage one by one for our defense. Once on stage you were all alone in front of the examiners. You were required to read your twenty-page thesis, and then answer questions about your concept and works. Liu Dahong and Geng Jianyi received a lot of difficult questions.

JD: Do you remember the hardest question?

LW: I think the examiners were easy on me because I didn't make anything too controversial. The only thing they didn't like was my description of the space. There were two men in my paintings but you only see their backs. So they also asked about the faceless figures and their relation to my own feelings toward the school.

JD: Were they satisfied about your answers?

LW: They didn't question my answers.

JD: As one of the few women in the entire school and in the Oil Painting Department, do you think you were treated differently? Did the school expect something different from you? How would you describe your treatment at school?

LW: I don't think the treatment was any different, but I think if you were a woman in a male-dominated field, you had to make sure you were tough enough to be part of it. It was a compliment if you were a girl with work that 'felt' masculine. If a girl drew very fine and detailed paintings, it would be considered too girl-ish, and consequently given negative remarks from professors and people in fine art. If a man made girl-ish things, the work was considered to have subtle overtones. One of my classmates, Jiang Yaohui, drew in such a subtle way that some people mistakenly thought that he was the one female student in our class.

However, it was perfectly acceptable for a female student to draw finely if she majored in traditional Chinese realistic painting [工笔画]. I had drawn like a guy for a long time, because in that environment if a female student made sharp, rough and strong expressive artwork

she would be considered as brave and with potential to become an artist. I wanted be brave [大胆大气] and be able to fit in and to have the capability as an artist. Other female students, like Chen Haiyan and Wang Gongyi, did similarly to be outstanding. At one point I was really fed up with having to work like a man and appear like a man, psychologically. Professor Zheng encouraged me to follow my own style, and it was liberating for me. So, I painted three girls in pink. The three models were my classmates, one sculptor and two designers, and I made them pose in as feminine a way as possible. It was part of my wanting to make a statement. After this work, I was very comfortable and didn't feel the need to justify my work for a male-dominated audience.

JD: I'd like to go back to this photograph of the graduating class of 1985. There were seven women in total?

LW: One is missing from the photo. The ones standing in front were all teachers.

JD: So eight women students in total. When you look at the picture with Zao Wou-Ki, there were only four women: three teachers and you as the fourth and only student. That is very interesting.

LW: Yes, it is.

Reading Fever

JD: In the 1980s, and in particular the period between 1980 and 1985, what we observed was the onset of 'Reading Fever', a period when suddenly, all these books were entering China, including various translations of western

philosophy and literature. Were you interested in reading at that time? If so, what were you reading? Do you have a favorite book?

LW: Oh my, there were so many. So much was translated into Chinese, so I don't think I know the English titles of the books I read. Texts by Kant, Hegel, Plato on psychology, aesthetics, on art and science and artists' biography and diary, for example, Philosophy of Art by Hippolyte Taine [〝艺术哲学〞丹纳著] – which I read from cover to cover in my sophomore year. And also there books such as A Treatise of Human Nature by David Hume [〝人性论〞休谟著], Conjectures and Refutations by Karl Popper [〝猜想与反驳〞卡尔•波普尔 著], Conversations with Goethe [歌德谈话录], Plato – [柏拉图文艺对话录], Diary of Delacroix [德拉克罗瓦日记], Ingres on Art [安格尔论艺术], Corot – Artist and Human [柯罗－艺术家•人] , and so on. There were also many popular books by Chinese scholars and authors, for instance, 〝德国古典美学〞蒋孔阳 著，〝西方美学家论美和美感〞 北京大学哲学系美学研究室 编，〝悲剧心里学〞 朱光潜著, and so on. I think I brought some of the books with me when I came to the US. I read as much as I could and made notes along the way. We traded books and information. Reading was a big deal; if you didn't read, you were left behind.

JD: You say you were interested in philosophy and psychology. Do you remember any specific books or authors, which were particularly exciting to you? Or, perhaps specific

issues that opened your eyes?

LW: There wasn't one specific book as much as there was so much information circulating. Everything jammed into your mind and there almost wasn't time to read everything completely. We had a habit of taking notes while reading, so it took forever to read one book. I had a pile of notebooks, and here are three, for example. Every page is some annotation of what I was reading at that time. Nietzsche came later, and then Freud, whose texts made me think a lot about dreams. I don't know whether I understood the texts or not, but I thought differently after reading them.

JD: When you took these notes, did you discuss them? In what forum or what way were you discussing them with your friends?

LW: We had more discussions about philosophy than about art. It was really exciting to engage philosophical arguments. There was once a little bar for beer and canned fruits nearby where we would hold our discussions and I joined in from time to time. We would start to talk if someone mentioned a book. It was never planned.

JD: Were there certain people in your school or class who often led these debates? Any students who were better known for debating these ideas, who in a way, kick-started these debate forums?

LW: They were not formal. Our school dining hall's dinner usually took place from five thirty to six thirty, but by nine o'clock we were often hungry again, so we would go out for noodles. People from different groups all ended up in

the same place, sitting around the same table. Sometimes we discussed, sometimes nothing happened. I don't remember anyone planning anything. In the summertime, toward the end of the semester, we gathered at the bar every night. Some bartended, others spent the night talking.

JD: I remember some pictures of Gu Wenda and someone else dancing.

LW: We danced a lot on Saturdays, at the dining hall. It was the 1980s and disco was very popular.

JD: Let me just go back to what you were reading at the time. Were there books and magazines about contemporary art? Many of the philosophers you were reading were modern philosophers, if I can categorize them that way. Were you reading magazines like Art in America or other contemporary texts?

LW: We really relied on *Xin meishu* [新美术], which had a lot of translated texts. *Meishu* [美术] was more like a national magazine. *Fuchunjiang Huabao* [富春江画报] sometimes had interesting images and texts, and Jiangsu Huakan [江苏画刊] was pretty good too. Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe [上海人民美术出版社] published a lot of foreign books most of which were modern but not contemporary.

JD: Were you seeing these texts in libraries? Were they circulated amongst the studios?

LW: We bought many of them from bookstores. Our school library carried imported books, but a lot of them were quite old. By the time I was a senior, we saw a lot of things that were supposedly new, but could not be checked out.

So, we spent a lot of money on books while in school. Everybody had a personal library of sorts.

JD: Were there bookstores in town? What kind of bookstores were you visiting?

LW: Just regular bookstores that had a section for art books. If you had a book someone else didn't have, they wanted to own it, too. So, I suppose, our personal libraries were all somewhat similar.

Exhibitions

JD: In the 1980s, there were exhibitions of western art that came to China. Some went to Shanghai and others to Beijing. Did you ever go see some of these exhibitions?

LW: Yes, in 1982, there was one show in Beijing called 'Hammer' [after Armand Hammer]. I'm not sure about the exact title of the show. I think it was something like Hammer's Collection Exhibition［哈默收藏画展］. I was a freshman in my second semester and it was the first time I saw a real Van Gogh. My heart almost jumped out and I felt dizzy. That show had a huge impact on a lot of us. We were too afraid we would forget it and visited the show multiple times. Then around 1983 or 1984 there was a Picasso show in Shanghai exhibiting a huge body of his works. That was shocking to me because the prints I had previously seen were so different from the originals. That was also an important event for all who engaged oil painting. Later, there was a small show at school that showcased some very good imported works including Rembrandt's paintings. In oil painting class, we were given permission to copy one painting from the exhibition, so I copied a portrait I liked. We had a chance to see some originals, but not that often, so they had an impact.

JD: Did you remember that in 1985 there was a show of Rauschenberg's works at the National Art Museum of China [中国美术馆]?

LW: I didn't go to see that show, but knew a lot of people went, so we read all about it.

JD: At that time did you have opportunity to exhibit your work outside of the graduation show?

LW: We had a 'Zhejiang Oil Painting Show' [浙江油画展] in my first year there, and my very first oil painting was included in the show. The second show in which I exhibited was the national show.

JD: Can you tell us a little bit about the process of getting into the national show?

LW: Yes, it took place in 1984 and was called the 'National Youth Show', which meant that everybody had to be under 35 years old to qualify. We were seniors and therefore semi-professional. They provided us with an announcement with details about what they wanted. Professor Zheng said my graduation project could be part of it. So my graduation piece was sent to Beijing. The whole procedure felt like a school application process, because any student or faculty under 35 was eligible, and the school would deal with the basic logistics.

JD: So once the work was in Beijing, did you receive some form

of acknowledgement?

LW: Yes, we [Zhejiang Academy] received quite a few acceptances into the show. Those who were accepted were mostly faculty members, including Gu Wenda. I was one of three students from Oil Painting to be accepted. I think Chen Haiyan was also in the show, and a few traditional Chinese paintings by other artists too.

JD: Was that a great honor? How did the school react to that?

LW: They were happy. I was one of two from my class that got an Honorable Mention award and also got into the exhibition catalog. It didn't have a really huge impact on me because it came after my graduation show, but it was helpful for my job search soon afterwards.

After Graduation – Theater Academy

JD: After the 'Zhejiang Provincial Show' and the 'National Youth Show', did you partake in other exhibitions?

LW: No, I got a job right after graduation.

JD: Let's talk about this transition - how did it happen? Were you assigned to a post or did you choose your first job?

LW: It was quite complicated. At that time, we had a lot of people coming to choose students for various positions. Students from Shanghai often wanted to return to Shanghai, but I was from Qingdao and didn't want to go back there because Qingdao had few jobs in art. The ideal was to stay close to our art school, but there were limited jobs there, too. People often looked for a job ahead of time by contacting different places to see whether they were in need of artists, and then went ahead to ask Zhejiang Academy to officially request a position for them. At first I tried to stay in Hangzhou, but it didn't work out because the Hangzhou Painting Academy [杭州画院] focused more on traditional Chinese painting. Professor Qin Dahu, the Party Secretary, one day told me that I might soon have a good job opportunity. Later, I was informed that I had gotten a job in Shanghai at China Textile University's Fashion Design Department [中国纺织大学服装系]. Now the school is called Donghua University [东华大学]. I was hired to help set up a new department program for painting and drawing. The first year [1985-86], I didn't teach and spent most of my time organizing everything. The second year [1986-87], I went to Beijing to recruit the first class of students. Then, in 1987, the Shanghai Theatre Academy Stage Design Department [上海戏剧学院舞美系] had an opening. I applied and it took almost half a year before I started working there in winter 1987.

JD: Can you give us a little background of the position? Who had the position prior to you?

LW: It was Cai Guoqiang's [蔡国强] position. He left for Japan in the mid-80s and I arrived in December 1987 to replace him at the Theatre Academy.

JD: What were you teaching?

LW: I was teaching painting and drawing with Li Shan [李山], mostly in the Stage Design Department. There were many exchanges between different departments in the Academy. We taught directors how to draw and make compositions,

and we taught actors about color design and theory.

JD: Some people say it was quite a good and unusual opportunity, because it was inter-disciplinary. A lot of academies in other places were much more focused but the Shanghai Theatre Academy engaged cross-discipline dialogues, and some people found it to be a very creative place.

LW: It was. A lot of Shanghai artists had graduated from the Theatre Academy, people like Li Shan who had worked there for a long time, and Chen Junde [陈均德] too. Many graduates from the Stage Design Department became artists later. The atmosphere was very relaxed, multi-disciplinary, and not too media-conscious. I also worked in the art gallery in the Theatre Academy [上海戏剧学院艺术画廊].

JD: Can you talk about how you decided to work in a gallery? How did it all start? I am very interested in learning about this process and the shift toward the commercial.

LW: The gallery was a commercial-academic space. Timing was important. I happened to be there at the right time and the right place. It was not my idea to start the gallery. What happened was that the Shanghai Theatre Academy opened a new building on Huashan Road in 1988 and wanted to turn the lower floor into a gallery as a way to build its profile. There was already a small gallery elsewhere at the Academy. Zheng Shengtian encouraged us to open a public gallery that could exhibit contemporary art instead of solely works by the school faculty. Zheng Shengtian, Lian Cheng [连诚] and I started working on the idea that same year. I think I still have pictures of the three of us together. I was mainly in charge of communicating with the Academy, which was pretty open to our ideas at that time. With the help of Zhou Benyi [周本义], Chair of the Stage Design Department, we managed to get support from the school authorities. The first show was called 'Shanghai Contemporary Artists', and included artists Zhang Jianjun [张健君], Chen Junde [陈均德], Zhou Changjiang [周长江] among others. It was a successful show because a lot of good artists were brought together. We decided to open on June 4th, 1989.

JD: So the idea came about in the fall of 1988. Was it clear that the gallery would be for profit? Would the works be sold or not?

LW: Yes, the works were sold. The revenue was split between the artists and the school, but I don't remember the exact percentage. I didn't get anything from the transactions. I received only my monthly faculty salary from teaching.

JD: Was it the first gallery of this sort to open in Shanghai?

LW: Yes, it was the first contemporary art gallery of this size in Shanghai. Shanghai Art Museum [上海美术馆] had held exhibitions, but they were mostly large-scale, not-for-profit officially organized or juried type exhibitions. We had more freedom in our exhibition choices because we were a self-supporting academic/commercial gallery. Therefore, we didn't have censorship issues. I was able to make independent decisions.

JD: So, you could decide completely what content would be in the show?

LW: I had to talk to my department chair, but yes, rarely was there any interference.

JD: How did you choose the artists for the first show?

LW: The three of us [Zheng, Lian, and me] chose the artists together. We didn't have a specific theme into which everyone had to fit, but we were looking for something contemporary, something unconventional. Li Shan's first group of faces were very interesting to us.

JD: Did you conduct studio visits?

LW: I knew almost everyone we showed on a personal level, so it was not hard for me to contact them. For example, Li Shan and I were colleagues; I knew Sun Liang [孙良] beforehand and visited his studio; Liu Dahong was my classmate; and Han Juliang [韩巨良] was my studio mate. There were also many artists, e.g., Zhou Changjiang [周长江] ⍰from the Shanghai Oil Painting and Sculpture Studios (上海油画雕塑院，简称：油雕院).

JD: How was their reception to the idea of your gallery?

LW: They were excited. Here is a picture of the artists. It could have been even more exciting had the events of June 4th not occurred. June 4th really cut off a lot of things.

JD: Before going into June 4th, I'm curious: how did you decide what prices to put on the exhibited works?

LW: We discussed prices with the artists. We actually sold quite a few for a couple hundred US dollars. The prices were high compared to our salaries at that time. Liu Dahong sold several small pieces in our gallery.

JD: Who were the buyers at that time?

LW: Mostly foreigners, like consulate personnel, other businessmen, and some Japanese buyers, but no Chinese from Mainland China.

Opening of the Art Gallery of Theater Academy

JD: Tell us about the opening and the unfortunate timing of June 4th.

LW: We did our best considering the whole situation. The opening date was set three months in advance, and we had sent out about 400 invitations to people on our guest list. A lot of guests replied saying they would come, but we were really worried as the protests in Shanghai went on and on.

By June 4th, Beijing was a nightmare. We still wanted to hold our reception, and sought advice from the school. Yu Qiuyu [余秋雨], the President of the Academy at the time, decided to do it as scheduled and see what would happen. So, I got everything prepared. Our school was also involved in the protest. We heard that the students in Beijing were dying but to keep moving forward with the show we had to pretend nothing was happening. It was not easy.

Many people made it to the opening by bike because public transportation was discontinued. There were a lot of students protesting on the streets, cops blocked many areas and all bus lines were closed, so there was no public transportation at all.. I was lucky that some of my

students were among the Academy's student leaders and they persuaded the student protestors to not interfere with our event. They helped to prevent possible chaos at the opening.

Afterwards, almost everybody fled the next day, including Professor Zheng, whom I took to the train station. After he left, for two months, events were really sparse. You had to have quite a bit of spirit to keep going in those days. Some people worried the gallery would close, others wondered in what direction we were headed.

Then, in 1990, an American publishing company called Greenwich Workshops had contact with Professor Zheng. They wanted to have their first Limited-Edition Art Prints exhibition in Shanghai in our gallery. The owner of the company was David Usher. His assistant Liu Jiafang [刘桂芳] in the US. I don't remember her English name) was my contact for the exhibition. Around that time, Hu Miaosheng [胡妙胜] took the place of Yu Qiuyu as President of the Academy. With the school's support, we started to work again on the gallery's program, inviting city leaders and doing everything carefully. It worked out well and attracted a huge crowd. At that point, with the new momentum, we got attention from many newspapers and journalists.

JD: The first group of work that you showed in the Shanghai Theatre Academy Gallery was work by your colleagues and friends. Were most of them oil paintings? What kind of work was shown?

LW: A variety, including mixed media, oil, acrylic and ink paintings. The major criterion had to do with the contemporaneity of the works, and we didn't have any specific requirement for the medium.

JD: Can you remember which works were sold?

LW: Just like most commercial galleries, we sold some small landscape pieces. Liu Dahong's works were sold later on.

JD: Was he making things that related to the Cultural Revolution?

LW: Yes, but his work has changed a lot since then.

JD: After June 4th, you mentioned the mood had changed quite dramatically. How did the exhibitions change?

LW: We had some small and not memorable shows before we showed limited-edition prints from Greenwich Workshops. The work was not contemporary and leaned toward the conservative, but they were beautifully made.

JD: Was the space showing many Chinese artists?

LW: The small shows had Chinese artists, but I don't remember what we did. The Greenwich Workshop show was mostly American artists, including landscapes and other works related to American-Indian themes in a western style, but the print quality was really nice.

JD: How was it received by the local audience? Did people buy the work?

LW: No, but I don't think they [Greenwich Workshops] had an intention to sell much. The space became a platform for exhibition and cultural exchange. Some people liked the work, but others thought it was very conservative. They had an interesting talk on the opening night

about commercial art spaces, which was quite new and challenging to engage at that time. I have a picture of the opening. Basically, a lot of people were interested in their business.

JD: And their business model.

LW: China at that time knew nothing about [art as] business or running a commercial gallery. So they [Greenwich Workshops] were among the first to introduce this idea in Shanghai and to give us the opportunity to see how such a space was professionally run. I think it was a pretty big deal.

JD: Did you start selling work again in 1990?

LW: The gallery sold small pieces and we maintained financial security. We organized a lot of shows for friends. Sometimes we lost money and sometimes we earned a profit. We organized various shows just for the sake of art without the desire to sell. One example included a show of beautiful ink works by a French artist. When I left the gallery, we had earned a small profit for the Academy.

JD: Were there other galleries in Shanghai as the 1990s started to progress?

LW: There were some small galleries, but they were more like souvenir shops. After I left, the school changed again.

JD: When did you decide to leave? What did you do after you left?

LW: I stopped working at the art gallery in 1991. I was dating an American guy. We got married two years later, and so I quit the Academy job and left China in 1993.

JD: When in 1993?

LW: It was the fall of 1993, in September. I spent the first couple of years in Berkeley, in the Bay Area. At first, language was a big barrier for me. When I was in art school in China, we were required to take English classes, but we had this idea that people who learned English well were probably bad artists. So most of us [who wanted to be good artists] didn't take English seriously. My American boyfriend spoke Chinese, so we didn't use English when we were together in China.

In addition to English, I also started to study computer-based graphic design, which was quite new at that time. In 1997, I got a degree in graphic design from Portland Community College in Portland, Oregon when my husband taught in that city. I thought I could be a graphic designer, but found I didn't like it and later I turned toward illustration.

Around 1999 and 2000, after we had come to Columbus, Ohio, I decided to go back into painting and studied independently with some faculty from Ohio State University's painting program. In 2001, I entered the three-year MFA program at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. After graduating, I spent most of my time painting. There was a gap between 1993 and 2000 where I was doing things totally different from what I had done in China, and in the process was trying to figure out what I wanted to do. This period helped me a lot for what came later.

Hangzhou

JD: Let's go back to the '80s for a little bit: I want to ask you some general questions, questions that don't have factual answers. First of all, we started to talk about the regional differences in China. You came from Shandong and then went on to Hangzhou, and you mentioned the change in 'color', which was a very interesting comment. Then you worked in Shanghai. I don't know how much time you spent in other parts of China. How would you describe Hangzhou as a region or as a center, and how is it different in your mind from other parts of China? How is it related to the Academy?

LW: Hangzhou is interesting. I don't know how to put it. I just went back there a few weeks ago [in April 2011]. I feel Hangzhou is a great place to thrive and the Academy is great for art. I was happy to be there and I am still happy when I go back to visit. It is very calm compared to other places. Unlike Shanghai and Beijing, where there is always so much going on, there are very few distractions in Hangzhou and you can really focus on yourself and your thoughts, which is good for study. I am not so sure whether it is a great place for career development, because you don't get as much foreign traffic, and artists are much more individualized and focus on personal development. Hangzhou can be quite a detour. You see a lot of things, but you don't have as many opportunities for comparison.

JD: One thing that seems to come from Hangzhou is that even now, the Academy and the people who come out of the Academy have very different approaches to work, to materials and to practice. They are often more experimental than commercial. There are few oil painters who come out of Hangzhou in comparison to Beijing. There you have people working on video or new media, like Zhang Peili, or Gao Shiming, who is highly theoretical. I wouldn't say Hangzhou is a place that divorces people from society, but it is very intellectual, for sure.

LW: I think intellectual is a very good word for Hangzhou. I personally like Hangzhou more than Beijing, because in a way I feel it better fulfills the mind. Beijing is productive and outgoing while Hangzhou is much more self-reflective.

The end of the 1980s

JD: That's an interesting way to compare the two; the internalized work of the mind versus the externalized work of commerce. In terms of looking back at the 1980s and what it meant to you, Tiananmen was a major transitional moment. What kind of feeling do you get when thinking about the late '80s?

LW: The late '80s was exciting and refreshing for young people, but also incredibly confusing. It was an interesting and unique period, open to the new without saying goodbye to the old. Of course, there were always conservative people who wanted to hold back and avoid the new, but there were also people who were ready to be more edgy, to move on and move forward, curious and dying to know

things about the world beyond China. It was strange that people seemed to know things they didn't really understand. I was often confused, and I wasn't sure what I was going for or looking for, which was one of the reasons why the late '80s was a good time for me to organize the Shanghai Theatre Academy's gallery. Personally I wasn't really interested in arts administration, but I got caught up in it at such a historical moment. In any event, it was really a great contribution to the early Shanghai and Hangzhou art scene, and some people took chances to move forward with the wave. You can push through things when you struggle with them.

JD: In that period and in particular in Hangzhou, there were people like Gu Wenda, Wang Guangyi, Geng Jianyi and Zhang Peili who now constitute this '85 New Wave period. At the time, were you aware that they were so important?

LW: Yes, I knew they were very good, especially when I saw their work at New Space [新空间], the first New Wave show. I got to know the Hangzhou Group through my best friend and roommate Li Yang [黎阳]. She and Chen Haiyan were classmates in the Printmaking Department. The three of us were roommates from 1982 to1984. In school, her name was Li Xueqin [李学勤]. Li Yang became an editor of Fuchunjiang huabao [富春江画报] and was one of the organizers for the exhibition. I didn't really feel I fit in well and I wasn't interested in participating, because I didn't really understand what was going on.

JD: So was it clearly apparent at that time for people like you that they were going to be leaders?

LW: Yes, I knew they were making great things, but I didn't know it was going to have the kind of impact it has today. At the Theatre Academy Gallery, I was working with artists with whom I shared an outlook. At one point, we were like an artists center. Many artists often just stopped by to have a chat or discussion of some sort. Artists in Shanghai were more diverse and more independent in some ways. After June 4th, we didn't know where we were going, whether the country would remain closed, if it would open…what direction would they take… These were unsolved questions back then.

JD: When you worked in the Shanghai gallery, did you keep in contact with people in Hangzhou?

LW: Yes, we stayed in touch. The connection wasn't always about art, but about life and leisure. I visited many people in Hangzhou and we would have dinner together. I saw friends every time I went back to visit.

JD: Did your classmates come to Shanghai to see you and visit the gallery?

LW: The transportation was very convenient. The Shanghai Theatre Academy was right in the Jing'an Si [静安寺] neighborhood, a central location. People did come to Shanghai a lot, and we hung out every time.

JD: Your gallery was really a pioneer in the development of the art market, but the art market has taken off in Beijing instead of in Shanghai, at least in terms of where most of the galleries are currently located. Why do you think that is the case?

LW: Don't you think that 798 in Beijing makes a big difference? I don't know what really happened as I was in the States

during these changes, but there are a lot of good artists in Shanghai - I think Shanghai needs to organize some good shows to have people become more aware of their work.

JD: Was the Shanghai Theatre Gallery involved in the 'Open Door' Exhibition?

LW: No, that was organized by Zhejiang Academy. I think Zheng Shengtian knows the whole story. I remember he called me one day and said one of my paintings (titled "Studio") was going to be sold to a museum. Both of my graduation paintings were in the school's collection. So Professor Zheng proposed that I copy my own painting. I went back to the school and spent two weeks copying my own work. The one now in Hangzhou is a copy, and the original one went to Pasadena's Pacific Asia Museum.

JD: Do you remember for how much it was sold?

LW: A few thousand Yuan, I believe. I spent all of it in two months on dinners with friends.

JD: You never went to the show? The show took place in 1987, I think.

LW: No, I didn't go to the show, but I received a catalogue, which was nice. I was happy with my graduation pieces, because they made me feel as though I could do whatever I wanted. I was taught how to make what I wanted to make, and by the end I knew what I wanted to make. My two graduation paintings were well received. They brought about a confidence in me, but then the climate changed after graduation and I had a period of confusion. Now I am painting again and know what I am and want to be doing. It's quite a back-and-forth process.

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