

Interviewing Artist Shi Qing

By Gao Yun Xiang

This interview took place on November 5, 2006 between Shi Qing, the noted Chinese film maker, photographer, and art critic, and Gao Yun Xiang, Assistant Professor of History, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada. Before the interview Gao watched his older films No Lotus in Winter, Black Taboo, and then Shi screened his new film, Anorexic. The following interview includes selections from the two and a half hour session between Shi and Gao.

Gao Yun Xiang: Shi Qing, would you first please introduce yourself? Tell us about your upbringing, education and work

Shi Qing: Originally, I majored in electrical engineering in a college in Hebei province. Later on, I was enrolled in China Central Arts & Crafts Institute (Today's Qing Hua Arts & Crafts Institute) to learn art design. However, I did not finish either school. That was the 1990s, the so called new-media art just started in China. Therefore, relevant information and resources were very limited. There hardly were any exhibits. I learned new trends and information mainly through magazines. Everyone in this field ended up here by both choice and chance.

Gao: What about your youth before college? I know that you were born in Baotou, Inner Mongolia.

Shi: That part was quite complex. Yes, I was born there, but I lived in many places afterwards.

Gao: Why are you called post-sense sensibility artist? What does Post-Sense sensibility mean exactly?

Shi: I believe that the post-sense sensibility exhibits held a special position in China's art history. Post-sense sensibility has two dimensions of meanings. One is historical, the other is academic. Let me start with the historical dimension. In January, 1999, more than 20 young artists participated in the first Post-sense sensibility exhibit entitled "Alien Bodies and Delusion" organized by Qiu Zhi Jie and Wu Mei Chun.

That was their first or second time to participate in a public exhibit. A group of young artists emerged from the show and many of them are very famous now. It is fair to show, the group of young artists who has worked in the art field for 10 years are more or less related to this show. In this show, a human corpse was used as artistic material, which was the first time in China. Due to the controversies it caused in terms of values, it drew media attention and became the focus of the exhibit. The creation of other artists was tentatively neglected. Academically, the concept of "post-sense sensibility" was raised by Qiu and Wu. I can not guarantee that my understanding is exactly theirs. To me, that was against the over-conception trend in contemporary Chinese art. People are pursuing so called "idea arts." They got a concept or idea first, then spent all the energy in showing this idea or concept. Post-sense sensibility is to counter, adjust, and change this over-conception trend through adding in sense. But this sense is different from the traditional sense. Rather, it is post-rationality sense.

Gao: Then what kind of sense is this post-rationality sense?

Shi: You have to ask Qiu and Wu about this. I can not answer for them.

The second Post-Sense Sensibility entitled "Spree" happened in 2001. Different from the first exhibit, the goal of the second one is against Chinese exhibit system. Traditionally, each artist occupies his or her own space and exhibits independently. This time, artists were asked to work together to produce inter-related art works. The third post-sense sensibility exhibit entitled "retribution," which was the most powerful, complete, and influential, happened the same year. After the four exhibits entitled "Inside Story" in 2003, the mission of post-sense sensibility was fulfilled and individual artists began to pursue their own ways.

Gao: Can you talk a little bit about your work and

your basic artistic philosophy?

Shi: My work involves setting, performance, video, photography, and multi-media. One of the characteristics of my work is to combine all these formats inside one theme and show them together. Since I have strong interest in the sense of time, performance and video are the major fields in my creation. Short video is a major media. Photography and setting is about space. They are still in terms of time.

I divide my work into three stages. I call the first stage (1999–2003) "Black Taboo" period. The name is from my individual exhibit in the "Long March Space" in the 798 Space. I focus on how human sub-consciousness discussed by Sigmund Freud and Karl Jung is reflected in adolescents' mind and sense. I feel China then was in an adolescent stage, energetic, disordered, and confused. That was a kind of confused youthful power. I combined these two directions for my first stage.

Gao: Were you trained in psychology?

Shi: No, self-taught. The second stage (2002–2004) is "Myth Language" period. This stage overlaps with the first stage. If the first stage focuses on individuals, the second stage is about the fate of the nation, and the collective. Myth is something every one in the group can relate to and it offers a bigger platform for my work. The third stage (2005–) is the period centering on the cities, the changing cities in China. China is experiencing the transition from countryside to city, which involves both disorder and opportunities. This is related to my personal life experience. My father worked in a secret nuclear plant and my family lived in a remote mountain area. I have lived in cities for twenty years by now. To certain degree, everyone in modern China lived in agricultural society in the countryside. As we can see from Chinese classical literature, especially poems on landscapes, countryside represents tradition. Our current and future living environment is and will be cities. Both my mind and living environment experienced the transition from traditional Chinese countryside style to cities. Ultimately, my work explores the status quo and future of China as a nation.

Gao: How do you view the presentation of bodies in your work?

Shi: For me, art has the role of self-direction. I hope to demonstrate my research of the society through sense-oriented means. Philosophy and sociology is logic oriented. Artists have to use individual sense to express themselves. Therefore, physical sense and

experience are very important. This is also related to what I read. As an artist, after you expressed some instinctive feelings, in order to advance, you have to resort to the accumulation of knowledge. My early work focuses on psychology, and now my work is more about body. As a significant element to influence society, body serves as an angle and method for me. My attention to body is mainly influenced by Michel Foucault. My new work Anorexic demonstrates its theme through body as well.

Gao: Tell me more about this piece, please.

Shi: Anorexic is imagination of the living conditions of a special group in China. Actually, it absorbs the real lives of people I know, including my relatives, my friends, and my neighbors. They were born at the end of the Cultural Revolution, experienced the trend of "becoming workers" in the transition from agricultural society to industrial society after the Cultural Revolution, and went through the later transition to market economy. They were thrown to the very bottom of society after a series of enormous social transitions in China. This work is also about my attention to "murders without intension." They kill not for romantic affairs, for hatred, or robbery. Rather, it is a violent release of emotion long oppressed and ignored. The majority of those who committed "murders without intension" is from the above mentioned group. Anorexic is my attention to the above two points.

Gao: Why do you express through bodily phenomenon?

Shi: This is my methodology. Anorexic is a subtle analogy to the flawed social system. Why?

Because human existence depends on food. When our body system rejects food, it is actually self-rejection and self-destruction. This is very much like our current society, which is supported by the above mentioned generation, but rejects and neglects them at the same time. This isolation amounts to scary urban unstable elements. Bad examples are already emerging. The longer and deeper is the isolation, the worse the result.

Gao: Why do you write the captions at the very beginning and times of the whole day on bodies?

Shi: For visual effects.

Gao: What kind of visual effects?

Shi: (Laughter). Let the formats be richer. I use different times in a day to symbolize the different stages of his whole life. Morning is his childhood, noon is his

middle age, and the evening is his end or the darkest time of his life.

Gao: Why do you use women's nude body?

Shi: Women's nude body is related to both the theme and the specific stage of his life. I use this body to show desires. His youth and mid age, the 1980s, is the period in which they express their (sexual) desires very strongly. This historical period is the very period when the economic conditions of Chinese began to change for better. The mark of better economic condition is the fact that we have meat to eat. We can eat meat daily.

Gao: So meat in food is symbolized by women's body as well?

Shi: Body suggests two kinds of meanings. One is desire to food and drink, the other is sexual desire. Due to the special situation in China, during and before the Cultural Revolution, both were severely oppressed. Expressing and discussing sexual desire could lead to jail time.

Gao: This special group includes both men and women. When you made this film about them, did you think about gender perspective?

Shi: Not at all. These roles are abstract concepts that include both men and women. A man on screen does not necessarily suggest a patriarchal society. I am not sure whether you have noticed or not, the four stages of his life is played by four different actors because I would like to make the role universal.

Gao: What if left for women to play the four stages of the person's life?

Shi: I feel women's bodies contain special meanings and the cultural symbols they represent are too strong. If I used four women, the audience would think I was talking about women's issues or feminist issues. It would be misleading and my real intention would be distorted.

Gao: Are you saying that the protagonist is abstract, at the same time, it must be a man?

Shi: No, I am not saying that it must be a man. Because man's body has abstract meaning, and woman's body is too concrete ... cultural symbol. It would cause misunderstandings. If I used woman's body, the audience would ask whether she was pregnant, violated, or bullied? This is not what I would like to demonstrate. For example, if I want to say something about apples generally, I would use a red

apple because red is apples' usual color. If I use a yellow apple, people would ask why it is yellow. They would inquire special meaning in the color yellow.

Gao: How do you view woman's dead bodies in the film?

Shi: Dead body involves biological corruption, which triggers his psychological collapse. Ultimately, it is shown by his own bodily reaction - throwing up. Throwing up represents the release of oppression.

Gao: Can we say that throwing up is a way for him to purify himself? Do you suggest that when he was poor, he was pure? Throwing up is a way for him to reject modern material and commercial civilization?

Shi: Throwing up is his self-rejection. When he was in poverty, he has strong desire for both food and sexuality. All his pursuits become delusions now.

Gao: Why do you have him wear a rain coat?

Shi: The raincoat is a part of the huge symbolic system I have been creating. The raincoat is a rich symbol. First, it offers sheltering and protection; secondly, being wrapped up tightly in a raincoat by himself in a rainy night suggests danger. In addition, the raincoat offers the four different actors the same universal symbol.

Gao: Is the bike a symbol as well?

Shi: It can be both symbol and stage set. I picked it up just because it is an integral part of this group of people's life. The audience has their own right to interpret it. I do not limit the meanings of a symbol. For me, symbols are lambs in my sheep pen. Where the lambs run has nothing to do with me.

Gao: What about the plants? They are always present in your films.

Shi: By borrowing traditional Chinese opera method, I use plants to symbolize forest. On the other hand, as we can see in traditional literature, forests represent psychology: green, with life, damp, knots, and easy to get lost in. I myself enjoy the visual effect of green plants.

Gao: When watching your films, I always feel that you as the director is always present, although invisible. What do you think?

Shi: This is a very good question. I believe art is a tool to show my ideas and views. I am not satisfied with just telling a story, which does not have too

much meaning for me. Like a scholar or writer, I would like to express myself through my work.

Gao: How do you find your actors?

Shi: Before, I used my friends. Now I hire the so called "mass actors" through special channels. Professional actors are very expensive. They also show too many hints of performance, which is not what I want. What I want are real people in real life. For these two reasons, I stick to "mass actors."

Gao: Do you need to train your "mass actors" on the spot?

Shi: Both friends and "mass actors" have their work. Long term training is impossible. I met most of my actors first time on the shooting scene. I just tell them, "do not think of performance, just be yourself in real life." I pick those fit in my roles on the spot. Sometimes, I change my roles plan according to the actors I found. When real people stand in front of you, they themselves are stories. When they do not meet my requirements, I adjust my requirements.

Gao: Do you have your audience in mind when you create your work?

Shi: Not really. All I care is to express myself. By the way, foreigners have a hard time to accept my work. There must be two reasons; On the one hand, my work is really hard for them to understand; on the other hand, they are more willing to accept the pre-existing cultural symbols in their mind, such as red lanterns, pandas, the Great Wall, and Cultural Revolution Statute. The shifting and real China is too alienating for them.