

ETC



When Roland met Lan Ding

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Number 20, November 1992, February 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35987ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

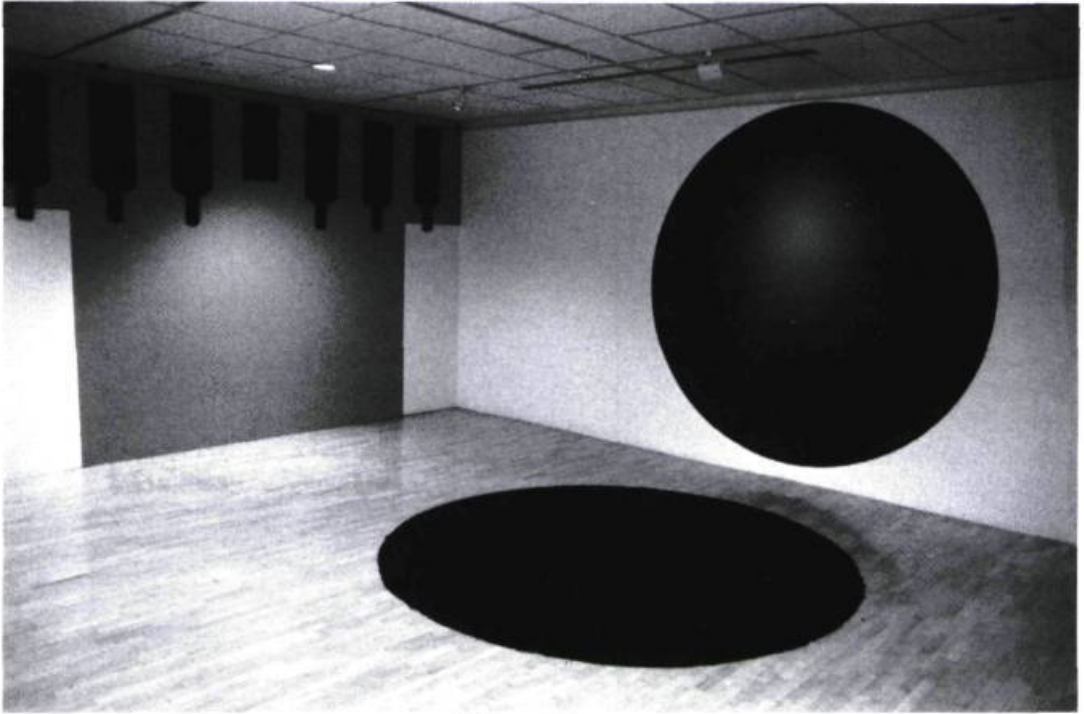
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Cite this review

Molter, M. (1992). Review of [When Roland met Lan Ding]. *ETC*, (20), 28–31.

ACTUALITÉS / EXPOSITIONS

WHEN ROLAND MET LAN DING



Roland Bastien, Installation view.

Roland Bastien has been in town for a few years, twenty-five or thereabouts, but as a sensitive struggling young artist he still knows where he is coming from. Liu Lan Ding rolled into town in time for Christmas 1991 on the VIA sleigh from Toronto, her native Chong Qing's Canadian twin city, before catching the AMTRAK down to the fast lane in the Apple on May Day 1992. She has been on the road now since I first met her on her arrival in North America at Banff, Alberta, in August 1990, where we had both gone for a course at the invitation of The Banff Centre.

In the few years that Roland has been in Montreal he has produced a lot of artwork, music and performance. Last summer saw him in an exhibition with a Toronto Haitian artist, Roland Jean, at Harbourfront. "Roland Bastien's educational background in art began in 1969 in Haiti, at the *École des beaux-arts*. His immersion in Canadian art took place at l'Université du Québec à Montreal between 1976 and 1979. ...Choosing as his battleground the concept of art, Bastien, in a 1991 exhibition at Harbourfront's York Quay Gallery entitled *Does Postmodern Art*

Breed Inaction?, irreverently interrogated postmodernism."¹

This summer it's back to Toronto for an exhibition at Power Plant, June 26 to September 7. "Like the other artists, Bastien represents the richness, diversity and complexity that exist in the non-monolithic black communities across Canada. ...Bastien's installation, in the far right corner of the North Gallery, consists of three circles of three metres each. Inside the first circle, which is inscribed on the wall to the right, are twelve luminescence tubes that simulate waves. On each eclectic wave are the names of specific ethnic groups from which slaves were shipped to America. ...according to Bastien they allude to the 'soul presence' of the successive waves of Africans who were forcibly brought to the New World to begin the creation of the African Odyssey in this hemisphere. ...The sound of the ocean accompanies the display – a reminder of the sound indelibly imprinted in the psyche of those who made the passage to the Americas, chained in the hulls of slave ships."²

Toronto installation artist, Lois Andison, in sending photos she took of the installation, writes about the

Power Plant show: "The juxtaposition of the modernist discourse with the applied content is a much more visceral / felt form. I am intrigued by him sitting in the soil, leaving his imprint. I am intrigued by the circle of the soil that mirrors the intense blue circle, radiating, hovering like the moon. Divisions in color, divisions in space, divisions through time. First the draw of the moon, then the draw of the tide."

While Liu Lan Ding was in Montreal she produced the work for the exhibition *Soul on Fire*, organized by Josette Oberson with Lili Michaud for Galerie Occurrence. She was in town for little over four months, but made her presence felt in the Montreal art community, at least, from Lincoln Street off Guy to the 5th floor at 372 St. Catherine Street.

So what did Roland and Lan Ding talk about over coffee? About her love for classical violin as a trained and accomplished musician. About contemporary Western culture. *Soul on Fire*, an exhibition of contemporary Chinese Brush paintings, was produced with the accompaniment of everything from saxophones in the metro to CBC latenight Jazzbeat. Seems that she has emerged as a contemporary brushwork artist through a political conviction, after long study with masters of the tradition in Sichuan province. And what is it she admires about Western ways? Freedom, I believe... but more about that later.

Roland asks Lan Ding about "what is going on in the visual arts in China".

She says "Big question" and gives a short course in Brushwork Art History: "The brush is the special part, you need a very smart brush... but to be an artist, how to handle, control the brush is most important." She describes the emotional aspect, the conceptual and spiritual experience, and describes her source as nature. It seems she could not enter a music institute in China because of her father. He was a professor in the old regime and was hatted.³ Music plays an important part in her art, immediately causing her to become involved with her brush.

Roland, of course, asks what she has been doing since landing in Canada.

A winter in the foothills of the Rockies with a sellout exhibition at the University of Calgary, where she also gave a course and presentations at the Glenbow Museum and Calgary Chinese Cultural Society. She published her work in the special issue on

calligraphic art of Dandelion, in which John N. McDowell, former editor, translates the titles for her reproductions and John Stocking writes: "When she returns to her home in China this summer, perhaps Professor Lan Ding will transport some of this strange new calligraphic energy back to the heartland of the brush, across the venerable ancient bridge of ink between the East and the West. The trans-cultural free-way system which the sages built, their disciples are dedicated to maintain for future service, and will extend and expand as a living monument."⁴ And then, you know, the usual sort of thing: meeting artists, painting with one of them, Myken Woods, for whom she has great respect as a Western brush calligraphic artist having strong interest in Chinese culture and with whom she produced a painting included in her one-woman exhibition. Just the beginning of her cultural exchange as it turned out, as it is now a summer later. Directions expand, plans change according to intuition and the need to experience.

Roland wants to know "What about Toronto?", where they almost met after I suggested that Lan Ding check out the York Quay Gallery show when she called me from there in August 1991.

Well, the arrival there inadvertently coincided with the economic downslide, but she did make it while there was still at least something to see at the AGO. In fact she gave a presentation at the Art Gallery of Ontario, accompanied by George Koller on bass cello and David Mott ("the best jazz saxophone Toronto has to offer"), and she pulls out a clipping of them.⁵ A lecture at York University and a workshop there with Bruce Parsons. A lecture tour that included the John Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art of the Royal Ontario Museum, the Ontario College of Art, the Anne Tannenbaum Gallery School and, of course, a session with the Cabbagetown Community Art Centre. You know, cultural exchange.

Roland comparatively inquires, "and what about Montreal."

"Apart from the weather and the parking patrol 'green onions', the people are warmer here, there is good communication. I love the freedom of the artists in the West to do what they want., to express what they want, in any way and any material that they want. The results are often disastrous, but they are free to choose their concept of contemporary art and the mar-

ket is free to buy what it wants and to select from a magnificent array. The galleries are open, and generally receptive, and there is relatively good media coverage of the visual arts. I found that the students at my McGill presentation were the equal in level of interest to that I am used to dealing with in universities in my experience in China. Université de Montréal was very receptive, but there I was confronted with students of Chinese culture and art history. Concordia professor David Moore was a welcome challenge and I truly enjoyed workshops with his class. Irene F. Whittome is a remarkable woman artist whose work I deeply admire. I enjoy both their sensitivity and its grounding in their work."

"My early formal contact with music has led me to work with music in my brush art. After I connect with music, like that with George at the AGO and at York and here at Centre Saidye Bronfman, I am red in the face, my back is stretched to the limit, that's where I got the title for *Soul on Fire*. Yet my work in Montreal is much freer. My experience here developed in a new direction with inspiration from contemporary contact dance. In China, it's different, I warm up with meditation, good feeling, good emotions, a sword and Tai Chi movements to begin to surface and emerge my emotions. The work in Toronto was related to sound, in Montreal dance had a big impact on me."

Roland asks: "how do you perceive abstraction?"

"Real abstraction – let yourself touch people. Exchange according to the viewer. The way you use abstraction is related to spirituality and everything outside yourself. One piece of art cannot show all my feelings. With the chop, after an emotional experience you are able to analyze and bring out the strong. Abstraction is a physical image from the mind. Sometimes I see it like a human with bones. I have to build a form the same way with 'corpus'."

"And what about the cultural climate here?"

Roland wants to know.

"The variety of Western art is important. It is often spiritual and it is free. My digesting of Western culture and freedom of art is the main point of my visit. I have developed what I expected according to a plan; my direction – my sixth sense leads me-something like that. Basically, when I go back, I am very clear in what I am doing – I want to combine the

Chinese tradition, personality and background in my art, but with Western ideas and freedom."

Roland wonders about the next stop: "And what do you expect to find in New York?"

"Artist friends, museums and art galleries, as much as I can to open my eyes and mind. Follow nature – see everything that is good and then see how you develop yourself – it is not always clear – sometimes success, sometimes failure – each time a learning experience. Who knows, maybe do some writing. In China I translated into Mandarin a collection of essays: 'The Art of Andrew Wyeth'. Probably do some cultural exchange at the Metropolitan Museum and go to every gallery from there to SoHo. New York is so big, I feel so many things happen every day in this sea of art. It's crowded and expensive, but 'downtown's where it's at. I don't doubt that, just some days I can do without.' That last bit I learned from musician Loudon Wainwright."

According to Oberson: "Since beginning her exposure to Western culture and art, Liu Lan Ding's black ink characters have liberated themselves from pure technique, taking over freely the white field of the paper. Her brushstrokes are now solely directed by the impulse of her soul and spirit, combining effectively Eastern and Western art. Her formal training in brush technique was with master calligraphers Xu Bo Jien and Huang Hai Ru. She was taught as a musician at an early age by Jiao Ya Hu".⁶

"After seeing my exhibition at Occurrence, I feel I can develop myself – in Montreal I was inspired by contact dance, metro musicians and performance. Painting in the metro was a spiritual experience. I forgot about myself and meditation and spiritual experience brought out some strong contemplative pieces – close to Zen in emotion and feeling."

"Why show suffering on paper. We experience it in life. It is better to reach into the soul for feeling. We have enough misery."

"I travelled to Paris, Moscow and in Italy a few years ago; to Germany before reunification – I'd love to see the East – and Yugoslavia, before the recent crisis, of course: the most beautiful country I've known outside of my own Sichuan province, where I will return to work at the Sichuan Institute of Fine Arts when I get back. I have a daughter staying with her grandmother in Chong Qing. I miss her very much,



A painting by Lui Lan Ding.

she was just three when I left and has just started to play the piano and to do her own art to send to her relatives and kindergarten friends since I have been away. But I can't think about that too much now. It is to be a great source of joy for me, however, on my return."

"Now I am breathing in the culture of North America. My goal is through the medium of art to encourage and facilitate cultural exchange between China and the West. I expect you to come to China so that I may share with you an Eastern cultural experience in Chong Qing. It's a bit different from the Calgary-Montreal-Toronto experience and probably a bit different from New York and from Port au Prince as well. I couldn't say first hand, although if things ever calm down in Haïti I'd love to see it."

"Me too", says Roland. "Some very interesting art back in my old Antilles home. But I think I'll have a better chance of getting to China in the next while. And certainly New York is on my list again soon after the Power Plant show this summer in Toronto. That's providing of course that my grant ever comes through so I can pay the back rent on my St. Laurent main street studio. And I also have a family to see in Montreal weekends. Still, some promising reviews and interest in the show makes it look better all the time, and I do love New York, sort of..."

"Have you ever been to Regina?" inquires Roland. "I had an exhibition there a few years back and was that a culture shock. One of my earlier installation and performance pieces at the artist-run centre Neutral Ground. I think the only one I related to, or who related to it at the time, in the location time warp, was Joe Fafard, and it probably wasn't just because

he's a FranSaskois. Actually an isolated but interesting nowhere in the cultural flat side of the Canadian landscape."

"No, I had too much baggage and was in a hurry to get to Toronto, so I passed on that experience, but I hear it can be very abstract; maybe next time."

"Well give my greetings to Flatbush Avenue, I did a street performance there once that I'll never forget. Hope to catch a subway experience with you there too before its back to China time."

"I should collect the most possible from nature. Collect more information and develop more language and vocabulary in my art. But only retain and draw from what is good – always fresh in a new non-repetitive way. When I finish accompanied work, I often give my art to those who have helped to inspire it. The musicians can identify which work is theirs – the saxophonist can find the saxophone, the pianist the piano, and so on. When that happens that's what I call 'Soul on Fire'."

MIKE MOLTHER

Extract from interview with Liu Lan Ding and Roland Bastien, April 29, 1992, at Solona II Café, Bernard Street, Montreal, Canada

NOTES

1. NZEGWU, Nkini; *The Creation...of the African Canadian odyssey*, exhibition catalogue, Power Plant, Toronto, 1992, p. 22.
2. Idem.
3. During the reform and counter-revolution the bourgeoisie and educated class were imprisoned and their property confiscated. They were officially ostracized by the regime. Thus to be hatted implies all of the above.
4. STOCKING, John; "The Bridge of Ink", *Dandelion*, Vol. 18, No. 1, spring, 1991.
5. "Concerto for Paintbrush", *Toronto Star*, December 5, 1992.
6. OBERSON, Josette; exhibition statement, Galerie Occurrence, Montreal, April 12, 1992.