

Emptiness And Substance

By Ian Findlay

The Chinese-Australian artist Chen Ping makes art that embraces both abstraction and figuration. His forceful works disturb and reveal as he honestly and directly examines the fragility of contemporary life.

Chinese artists started emigrating to the West in search of personal and creative freedom in the 1920s. France was the first choice for most of them, but after the Second World War, the United States also became a haven. Since the early 1980s, when China began to open up to the West, more and more artists have made their homes abroad. The choice of country in which to set up home has broadened considerably as have the expectations and the creative possibilities. Although many still choose France and the United States, others have settled in, for example, Germany, Austria, Italy, Denmark, Japan, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia, one of the most popular choices for artists for whom wide-open space is important. Such was the choice for Chen Ping, who moved to Australia in 1990 to study English and then in 1997 to study painting at the University of Tasmania.

Even without the considerable social, political, and family pressures on Chinese artists to conform, a decision to emigrate is rarely easy. For Chen Ping the political uncertainties after the disaster of Tiananmen on June 4, 1989, decided his move to Australia. As with other emigrating artists, Chen's future looked unsure. Most Chinese artists had little knowledge of what it was like to live in a democratic society free from political and cultural constraints. Many of their expectations on acceptance of their art were unrealistic. The struggles and sacrifices of the *Stars* art movement and others, of the late 1970s and 1980s, meant little to those in the Western visual arts world, many of whom viewed contemporary Chinese art at the time as merely an echo of passé Western art traditions. Many then were unprepared for rejection. Chen Ping, however, is a pragmatic man for whom rejection is an incentive to change. For Chen the most important challenge "was to reform myself from the academic art ideas and practices after over ten years with the Chinese academic system...[in which] I started my formal art studies at Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art when I was 15."

Looking back at Chen Ping's art practice of the past two decades one sees an artist who has maintained a clear development in his content and aesthetic, with a strong emotional core. In a series of oil-on-paper studies made in the early 1990s, Chen's line and color are softer than today but his use of positive and negative space remains strong. Early figurative oils such as *Study 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6* are not only good examples of early experimentation that blend elements of both Chinese and Western aesthetics but also hint at his future development and the kind of questions that he wishes to address. Among

these questions are: What has become of the soul of humankind? How are people broken by reality and 'dehumanizing media and technology?'

Born in 1962, Chen's education at Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art, from which he graduated in 1985, was a mix of Chinese and Western art, which introduced him to a wide range of art movements. "I was generally traditional and was attracted to Degas's work [from which] I learned a painting was constructed by the relationship between figures and background. And in terms of composition, both were equally important." This relationship between Eastern and Western art remains strong in his painting as has been observed by others.

Michael Edwards, director of Contemporary Art Tasmania, has written: "Over the past decade, Ping Chen has continued and maintained a wonderfully balanced and highly considered relationship between traditional Chinese cultural values and art education while engaging in, and experimenting with, concepts and

practices from a contemporary Western perspective."

Chen Ping entered the post-modern age some years ago and has held fast to it for it is in this age that he has to come to maturity. But, at the same time, Chen has also maintained his links with many of the aesthetic ideals of traditional Chinese painting. His large abstract oils, *Dalai Lama with Soldier* and *Dalai Lama Morning Prayer* (both 2008) are suggestive, not of figures, but of rugged landscapes in which rock and earth and flora are floating in space, abandoned to the grip of the cosmos and now mystical in their reality. In *Dalai Lama with Soldier* the soldier's rifle becomes a slender rock formation in the mind's eye. These works remind one of the art of such painters as Chuang Che and Zao Wou-ki, but they are looser in construction, less rooted to the earth. Yet, as one interprets these works as such in close up, when one stands back, one is able to discern the human face in the form of a mask as part of the landscape. This is



Above: Chen Ping, *Dalai Lama Morning Prayer*, 2008, oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm. **Previous page:** Chen Ping, *Dalai Lama and Soldier*, 2008, oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Gaffer, Hong Kong.

perfectly in line with Chen's thinking. "I think my work is more related to the Taoist spirit and concept of emptiness which contrasts with the substance of human structures," he says. "My work is neither pure abstract nor purely expressive, it is also conceptual and realistic."

Regardless of the *ism* or *ist* that one may wish to apply to Chen's art, it is clear that they are thoroughly contemporary. They are bold paintings; the heavily impastoed surfaces speak to the tragedy of modern angst and alienation, which is reminiscent of the work of Francis Bacon.

This is perhaps why Chen's abstracted figures appear mangled when viewed close up and why they are mask-like and tarnished by thick dripped lines of paint from a distance. The idea of the mask is clearly important to Chen, as one sees in his *Dalai Lama* works, both as something



Chen Ping, *Abandoned Girl 1*, 2008, oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm.

that humanity uses to hide behind and as a revelation on how humanity might see its true self as it ignores so much of the destruction that it has wrought on the world.

So much of this slowly became clearer to Chen as he furthered his studies in Australia where he "learned more about post-modernism and contemporary art movements. They brought me back to focus on social content and the relationship with artistic expression," he says. "I dismissed art as being only technical developments. It is also a self-discovery of artistic language deeply rooted in an artist's heart. At the same time, I was disappointed by lots of incompetent artists using contemporary art slogans in attempts to establish new artistic conventions and order. I was luckily able to see the connections between the traditional art I knew well and contemporary art practice. This has allowed me to explore freely all possibilities in order to develop my own artistic language."



Chen Ping, *Man in Red*, 2008, oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm

Unlike many of his generation who have not left China, Chen has developed a language and content that is far removed from the slick iconographic figures of Mao

or gaudy, big-toothed smiling faces or works laden with Western brand names reminiscent of Pop art. Besides his traditional Chinese influences Chen has clearly been taken by the work of such Western masters such as Rembrandt, El Greco, Degas, and Francis Bacon, to name but four, and each has played a significant and separate role in how he has made his own art.

"In China, I saw a reproduction of one of Rembrandt's self portraits. I was wide-eyed at seeing oil paintings having such strong impact: the texture of oil paint profoundly revealed the skin of his ageing face. This image has been imprinted on my mind ever since," he says. "El Greco and Francis Bacon have had a fundamental influence on the structure of my figures. Movement and the connection to human emotional content have provided me with a great ability to construct my human figures freely. And through the

music of Beethoven and Shostakovich I can almost feel the struggling human breath in their notes, which made me understand how important an art form relates to its



Chen Ping, *Injured Man*, 2008, oil on canvas, 180 x 190 cm.



Chen Ping, *Protestors*, 2008, oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm

content. Art is not only interesting exercises but a human story."

On the surface Chen's narrative is a simple one. But internally it is a complex one expressed through an abstract figuration that is deeply human, filled as it is with the voice of post-modern anguish. Chen is filled with a deep awareness of humanity's painful human existence. The people and situations upon which he draws for his narratives are not mere figments of his imagination. They are real. We recognize them clearly. "I normally choose subjects and images from newspapers and magazines," he says. "It is all about humanity. Most of my newest paintings are based on current international events."

The spontaneity that one sees in works such as *Refugee with Broken Head* (2007) and



Chen Ping, *Sudanese Refugee with Broken Head*, 2007, oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm.

Abandoned Girl I (2008), both of which appear like shattered masks, is achieved through Chen's talent of going "straight to the blank canvas to start my painting and work till [it is] almost finished." Through this method he realizes a forceful tension between his figures, in which he is tearing away at their humanity, within an empty background. Here is human struggle and survival at a visceral level. As the Australian art critic Peter Timms notes in his essay *Taking off the Mask* (2000) about such work, Chen's "...big, bold, blustery images are full of sharp, sometimes jarring, contrasts." Timms sees the great energy of these figures in Chen's space, and how color and textures come to define character. Chen's protagonists are made human by hinting at physical characteristics: a rough nose, sunken, sightless eyes, as in *Red Old Soldier* (2008).



Chen Ping, *Red Old Soldier*, 2008, oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm.



Chen Ping, *Big Flood 1*, 2007, oil on canvas, 210 x 180 cm.

The "chaotic (or at least seemingly chaotic) abstraction," Timms notes, into which Chen's works "collapse", is a rich one indeed. Within this "chaos" there are "lots of contrasts... the abstract elements dispute the realistic elements; the existence of art's traditional technical values have been under threat by the contemporary tendency," says Chen. "Individual incidents generalize human fate, the emptiness of the background overpowers the figurative subjects, the complexity of idea is expressed through a simple form of narrative, and the colors struggle between being emotional or realistic."



Chen Ping, *Night 4*, 2009, oil on canvas, 150 x 180 cm.

The heavily impastoed works suggest that Chen has an interest in sculpture, the most textured of which remind one of light and fragile relief sculptures. He says that in recent work in the empty space his "figurative elements are minimized," which reminds him of his liking for Giacometti's sculptures. Paintings in the manner of *Big Flood 1* (2007) and *Red Old Soldier* clearly suggest the minimal and rugged nature of Giacometti's compact faces. At the same time, Chen has discovered that his paintings look like those "of one of my favorite Chinese traditional ink painters, Bada Shanren (Zhu Da) (1626-1705)." The experience among many Chinese painters of rediscovering links to their heritage and traditions while in "exile"



Chen Ping, *Study 2*, 1990, oil on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm.

is not uncommon: these are too deeply rooted to dismiss.

Far removed from the haunting, pared-down, distant protagonists of his abstract figuration, Chen recently made his *Night Series*, a group of colorful and thickly textured works about Sydney. These paintings are playful in their execution and show that Chen has a lighter side to his nature that revels in bright color and the freedom that this gives him to project a shimmering world of light. He suggests a carefree world behind his colors, something even of the hedonistic life that exists under the cloak of darkness. There is no critical message here beyond pleasure's surface attractions.

If there is one single message to the world in Chen's gritty abstract

figurative painting, it is an uncompromising statement on how humanity has abused not only itself but also the planet in which it lives. It is no mere coincidence or flight of fancy that Chen has chosen to concentrate on the individual. "The figure," as he says, "is an important communicator between artists and audience. I believe that we are the center of the whole universe." This belief has helped Chen to choose the best "emotive individual photographs as a starting point for my paintings. Through the depiction of specific human structures melting in vast space, I try to generalize the subject of human struggle."

Chen Ping's art is firmly rooted in reality: dreams are not for him, neither is the slick and unrealistic iconography of recent contemporary Chinese art. At the very core of Chen's painting, however, is a subtle but puzzling mystery that demands the viewer's full attention for it is only through close scrutiny of his art that his "messages" are made clear and a fuller understanding of the nature of oil painting is revealed. There are also many intensely lyrical passages to console the disquieted mind's eye. This is as he wishes it for he knows that he needs to create a balance between his vision of violence and humankind's vulnerability and the "increasing sense of spiritual loss that seems to be building around us today." Δ



Chen Ping at his studio.