

He Xue-sheng

Painter

Interview takes place in his home which is also his gallery and studio. (There is a courtyard that is very lovely. He is clearly doing well as an artist.)

Date: September 5, 2009

Place: Song Zhuang in Beijing (an artist village)

Interviewed by Doug Blandy

Notes by Kristin G. Congdon

Translator: Myra Tam

His work is all about the high mountain area in North West China. The area is huge. There are large spaces. They do farm work. One farmer, one farm. Each village has several hundred people in each family. This is where he is from.

It is hard to do the farming because there is little rain.

The work and art are all about involvement with the mountains. (He shows us photos he's taken of the area.) He goes back to the area to do fieldwork when he can. Some of the pictures look as if houses have been built into the mountains.

Born in 1963. Came to Beijing in 1993. Beijing is the cultural center. He was an artist before he came to the city.

He works independently. He has his own studio; there is no government support.

He was born during the Cultural Revolution.

He decided not to go to the U.S. because art is best now in Beijing.

He went to an art institute in his home area to study art. This was 1984-1986.

The government assigns people jobs, and he worked in cultural organization until he came to Beijing to be an independent artist.

He is Han—not from a minority group.

He is from Su Pu village in southern Ningxia Hui Autonomous District in north central China and areas around there.

Women do not dress showing skin.

People come from other areas to this place because it is cooler there.

Islam is practiced there. Han are in the minority. The Han live together.

Mr. Hue believes in nature.

The white balls in his paintings are clouds—hoping to have more rain. They stand for fertilization.

He does not believe in religion.

Doug asks if he is painting to show that life (humans) can live in harmony with nature or if he is documenting his hometown. (Answer not clear.)

Mr. Hue notes that he works in oil paint and that comes from Western culture. This is what attracted him to painting like this.

He paints details. He knows the heart of the spiritual.

He depicts life of the village. He wants people who live there to have a happy house.

He only paints something he likes, but he does it to earn a living. The first thing for him is art for art's sake. That he has a passion about.

He works in both oil and acrylic, but mainly uses oil, which is more stable and firm.

He sketches his work—the scenes—when he is in the villages. Draws first. When he comes home he does the painting. (He shows us some small images.) From there he paints the large works—from the small paintings. A small sketch/painting takes him about two hours. The bigger work has more details. When he does the sketches in the villages, people gather around.

His family still lives in the area which he paints. His mother has her own place now.

(He shows us a book—The History of Art book—that has all the Western art in it.) He likes the Western portraits and the Renaissance work. He admires the detail. He integrates all kinds of art styles. He doesn't want to copy anybody. He needs to do his own work.

Doug notices the perspective on one painting that reads like a Chinese scroll. It is moving bottom to top.

Mr. Hu talks about all the people who are coming to his neighborhood village to do art. They are coming from all over the world and China. Many people come to do painting. He says the cultural exchange is good. He likes the experience of meeting people from all over. He is pleased that China is now an open door. That way more people come to exchange ideas with artists.

We look at a painting with skeletons in it. One has red hair or fire coming out of the skull. We ask about this. He says that village people who believe in ghosts have a ghost festival. He images that different ghosts are there. He mixes reality and abstract ideas. There are always wars and changes in China, he says, so there is the imagination. Some ghosts land in the clouds. There is a spoon in the painting because the ghosts must eat. He says it is hair on the skull, and not fire. Some ghosts have energy, words come from their mouths. It is like white air. There is an ox at the top of the painting, which is in heaven. IT is a cow ghost—which also has spiritual energy. Even in heaven there are trees, and ghosts doing various things.

We move to a ceremonial painting. Women are in various shades of red, pinks, and purples. They wear tables (?) like skirts and have canopies over their heads. It is a wedding scene. Two women are in Western white wedding dresses—central to the painting. Marilyn Monroe is in the sky al la Warhol. Men hold video cameras to document the events. Women in the background are dressed in bra tops and tight pants. There are village people and city people all together—also people from the East and West. There is a beauty salon and a massage service. Western and Chinese culture is together. The title is something like: We develop the harmony in society and economics. Everyone is moving into a better life. This painting also has the Monkey King in it.

We move to a third painting. It is dark—nighttime. People are watching a movie outside. People are being entertained in a village. It is shown on a white cloth. WWII is the content of the film. There is also a live performance. At the front of the painting a couple is dating. Behind is a sand hill. Figures are in the sand. This festival happens around New Year time.

Doug asks about what we should say about him and he tells us that it doesn't matter. It's all a cultural experience.

Mr. Hu buys us lunch at a local restaurant. Lots of dumplings and vegetarian food for Doug and me.

He tells us his paintings are sold all over for about \$2,000 U.S. for a medium size work. He says foreign dealers come to buy from him.

He talks about the artist village he lives in. He says rents are cheap—maybe \$700 a year. His is more expensive since it is finished off. He says the area used to be a farm and that this is the place where the Guggenheim is looking to build a museum. He says there is a mountain and a river nearby and these things are good inspiration for the painter.