



Fan Dongwang Carving Perspectives

25 January to 22 February 2025



Connections and disconnections across time and space: the work of Fan Dongwang

举头望明月
低头思故乡

*Raising my head I gaze at the bright moon
Bowing my head I think of home.*

— Excerpt from 'Quiet Night Thought' by Li Bai (701-762)

Chinese Australian artist Fan Dongwang's work illuminates the tensions, contradictions and disconnections – as well as the often surprising connections – inherent in the transcultural fusion of imagery and ideas. Motifs of dragons, curling clouds, bamboo fronds and Chinese pavilions with upturned eaves painted in a vivid, Pop-inspired palette jostle with Australian imagery. A painting of the humble structure of Wahroonga Railway Station, for example, recalls a garden pavilion, or a lakeside tea house in a misty shan shui painting. *My Deck and Watery Sky* (2024) turns the artist's suburban Sydney home into a Chinese scholar's garden designed for contemplation of

the moon, referencing Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai. It is as if the new world is superimposed on the old – as we gaze at the painting each distinct cultural world shifts in and out of focus.

While I sat in the artist's studio recently, surrounded by old and new works, a connection with the life and work of another member of the post-Cultural Revolution Shanghainese artistic diaspora occurred to me. Chen Zhen (陈箴, 1955-2000) moved to France in 1986, four years before Fan Dongwang made his journey to Australia. The transition was not an easy one, and Chen labelled his emotional state 'transexpérience' (*rongchao jingyan*), explaining the experiences of the immigrant who must learn to navigate two cultures, building bridges between different traditions. Chen Zhen felt, he said, like a kind of amphibian in his new life in Paris, likening his disorienting sense of cultural dislocation to the experience of existing in both air and water.



Cover (top): *Dragon Banners 1–6*, 2024, each 1 x 3 metres, printed fabric, Courtesy Sydney City Council

Cover (bottom): *Train Station (Wahroonga)*, 2024, 60.5 x 90.5 cm, acrylic on canvas

Left: *My Deck and Watery Sky*, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 90 cm

We see a similar cultural fluidity in Fan Dongwang's works in paintings such as *Empyrean Landscape - Courtyard Light* (2024) and *Yellow Crane Tower - Homage to Shi Tao* (2023), inspired by the Chinese poet Cui Hao (704-754). These works are described by the artist as 'bittersweet', representing his nostalgia for a place and time that no longer exists except in memory, a home that can no longer be returned to. Fan's paintings are complex constructions of multiple layers, motifs and ideas that shift into new patterns as you gaze at them. The past is always resonating in the present. What might at first appear to be a straightforward image of a landscape or a dragon, on closer examination becomes a much more complicated edifice in which references to Chinese philosophy, Chinese and Western art histories, as well as contemporary references to gender, environmental concerns, technological change and geopolitics are revealed.



Yellow Crane Tower — Homage to Shi Ta, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 71 x 42 cm



Empyrean Landscape — Courtyard Light, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 61 x 92 cm

Fan Dongwang was an established artist in Shanghai before he left China in 1990 to emigrate to Australia under the Distinguished Talent visa program. Like so many others of his generation, he was eager to learn more about Western contemporary art and to discover ideas and art techniques that had been unavailable to Chinese artists until Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms to 'open-door', giving them a glimpse of a different world. Fan says, "I wanted to learn Western art. The proper Western art – cutting-edge stuff, avant-garde." In late 1980s China, the satirical, cynical

art movement known as 'Political Pop' was about to hit the global art scene with a bang, and the 'Shanghai Style' of artists such as Li Shan and Yu Youhan (Fan's painting teacher) was making waves. Inspired by these artistic rebels, Fan was keen to discover American Pop Art and learn how Postmodern theory was influencing the practice of contemporary artists. Once in Australia, however, rather than abandoning the Chinese art traditions in which he had been intensively trained, Fan instead found himself re-examining and reinventing them. In the process he created



Dragon In Water Diptych #1, #2, #3, 2024, acrylic on canvas, each 180 x 120 cm and 180 x 180 cm

a new, idiosyncratic visual language.

Fan's Cultural Revolution childhood, in which he had excelled at drawing portraits of Mao Zedong on the classroom blackboard, was followed by rigorous training at the Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts in the ancient traditions of jade, lacquer and ivory carving, a skill which continues to underpin his painting. In this traditional practice the artist draws a design on the surface of the jade or ivory to be carved before cutting away the superfluous material to produce a beautiful and refined low relief. Jade

was as highly valued in China as gold is in the West. It was also believed to possess moral qualities of wisdom and virtue, and the tradition of carving is imbued with Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian philosophy. Despite his thoroughly contemporary practice today, Fan Dongwang continues to be profoundly influenced by these traditions.



After arriving in Sydney Fan embarked on postgraduate study in the rather more freewheeling environment of COFA (now UNSW Art & Design), where he was encouraged to explore his cultural inheritance, translating the motifs he had once carved in jade into the medium of acrylic on canvas. Initially resistant, he came to realise that as a contemporary global artist his Chinese traditions were as significant as the work of the European and American artists he admired. It was a time of experimentation and exploration, the dislocation of the diasporic experience mediated with a new feeling of freedom.

A plethora of influences is evident in Fan Dongwang's work, ranging from Tibetan thangka painting and Buddhist frescoes to Renaissance oil painting and French Impressionism, yet his layering of colour and gradated light and shadow recall his knowledge of carving – Fan likens his paintbrush to the jade carver's chisel. The technique results in an astonishing unity, and an unusual spatial depth distinct from European linear perspective and Chinese landscape painting. Fan thinks deeply about the

conceptual basis of his work – indeed, his PhD research at Wollongong University established a new theoretical framework for comparing how space and depth is represented in Chinese and European painting.

Deep research into Chinese and European art history is evident throughout Fan's oeuvre. *Lady & Lion – After Botticelli Pallas and the Centaur* (2023), for example, reveals an intentional contrast between Eastern and Western aesthetics and an exploration of gendered power relationships and a beguiling sense of humour: the sinuous

lady in her flowing robes appears to have the masculine crouching lion well under her control. Other works such as *Jade Maze (Pendant of Auspicious Clouds)* and *Jade Dragon* (both 2010), more directly reference Chinese tradition and Fan's personal history as a carver. *Jade Maze (Pendant of Auspicious Clouds)* features a motif that has been used in China since the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE) to indicate peace and social harmony. In Fan's hands, however, it becomes metallic and machine-like, hinting at a modern industrial society overlaying earlier agrarian histories.

A recent series of paintings and drawings expands the Chinese dragon imagery for which Fan is well known.



Fragmented by horizontal bands of darker and paler colour, these new dragons represent change and transformation. They rise from the sea. "Water dissolves and transforms the old into the new," says the artist. The Daoist/Confucian concept of 'tian di ren heyi' (heaven, earth, human united) is

an interconnected triad in which humans endeavour to live in harmony with the cosmos, and a philosophical thread that connects the different elements of Fan Dongwang's bodies of work. In this exhibition we traverse Fan's literal and metaphorical journey between China and Australia, and through his connection with an ancient Chinese cosmology we are drawn into his concern for our fragile, endangered earthly environment.

Dr Luise Guest, December 2024



Above: *Lady & Lion - After Botticelli Pallas and the Centaur*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 184 x 174 cm

Left: *Jade Maze (Pendant of Auspicious clouds) and Jade Dragon*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 180 cm



Fan Dongwang

Chinese born Australian artist Fan Dongwang is an established Shanghai painter who exhibited works in Shanghai Art Gallery regularly before moving to Australia in 1990. He is now based in Sydney. He completed his doctoral thesis, *Shifting Perspectives and the Body*, in Wollongong University and has exhibited at National Gallery of Australia and numerous university and regional art galleries throughout Australia. His artworks have won many art prizes and feature in various public and private collections in China and Australia.

In recent years Dr Fan Dongwang has combined his traditional Chinese carving technique with his new acrylic canvas paintings to create his unique visual language, *Sculptural Painting*. Known for his contemporary depiction of traditional Chinese cultural symbols such as dragons along with western cultural icons, Fan Dongwang has explored cultural differences, often from diverse visual perspectives in his large and colourful paintings.

My painting is a process of reversing the low relief carving back into painting. I use brushes to 'carve (paint) out' the painting's surface, to produce decorative lines, patterns and shadows as if carving jade or lacquer in low relief landscapes. Thus I bring out a restricted sense of 3D volume protruding from the 2D canvas surface, a visual illusion expressed brilliantly in traditional Chinese decorative carvings. Here western art theory was instrumental in the painting's process of transforming the traditional Chinese art seamlessly in combination with the western linear perspective and pop art to achieve a sense of space beyond the canvas surface.



A Foot Bridge towards Abbotsleigh, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 65 x 89 cm



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