



Ai Wei wei in his studio Photograph

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Brushstrokes in time

Sylvia Vetta investigates the influence of Chinese artists Qu Leilei and Ai Weiwei and their connections to Oxfordshire

Until recently, it has been my privilege to review many exhibitions on behalf of *The Oxford Times*. Few have made as strong an impression on me as the first show at the Ashmolean Museum by a living Chinese artist.

In 2005, Qu Leilei's, *Everyone's Life is an Epic* exhibition consisted of 21 striking contemporary portraits. Each subject had been asked to describe his/her philosophy of life. Under one portrait of a homeless man – whose dignified head looked as if it had been taken from the columns outside the Sheldonian – was written 'You are not a failure until you give up trying.' The chiselled features were surrounded by bold colour with the Chinese translation in calligraphy. East

and West met in this portrait.

I was commissioned to write a profile feature about Qu Leilei and I learned first-hand of the epic life that was Leilei's. Although my interest in China goes back to when I was 18, the story he was telling was new to me. Qu Leilei was one of the five founders of the Stars Art Movement (1979).

As a young child, Qu Leilei had been enthusiastic about the Communist revolution and enjoyed using his painterly skills to celebrate revolutionary heroes. His father was the popular novelist Qu Bo of whom most Chinese aged over 35 are still aware.

The Cultural Revolution changed everything. Qu Leilei told me about beatings and interrogations which ended when he, like most educated youth, was sent to the countryside

for re-education as a peasant.

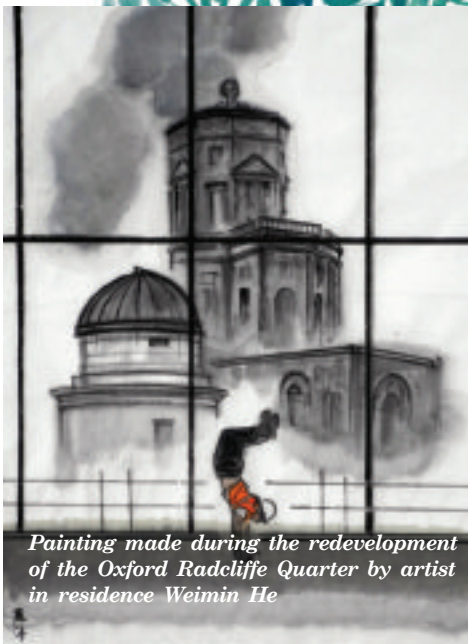
Qu Leilei described his overwhelming emotional reaction when he first saw reproduced in a book, work by the Impressionists. He had heard the word 'Impressionist' but it had been used as an insult because Western art was capitalist and criminal. That is the background in which the Stars were nurtured.

Once they were exposed to Western art they too wanted freedom of expression. The artists, poets and democracy activists started underground magazines. They mostly knew each other and were part of the ongoing process of opening China to new ways of living, and they risked life and limb to do so.

The Stars founders Huang Rui, Ma Desheng, Qu Leilei, Wang Keping, and

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Green Oxford by Weimin He



Painting made during the redevelopment of the Oxford Radcliffe Quarter by artist in residence Weimin He



Qu Leilei with his paintings which will go on display in the British Museum in November

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A Cheng tried to arrange an exhibition but no gallery would let them show their sensational new work. Having agreed to call themselves Xing xing (the Stars) they mounted an illegal exhibition for 20, artists including a very young Ai Weiwei and Shao Fei.

They hung their work on the railings outside the Beijing National Gallery. I visited Beijing when Qu Leilei was there and he showed me where these brave artists hung their controversial pictures in 1979.

When the Stars artists' illegal western inspired exhibition was closed down by the police, they organised a march to Tiananmen Square demanding artistic freedom – only to be met by serried rows of white uniformed police.

Their story inspired me and I was surprised that so few people outside China knew about the Stars and their

art movement although one of them, Ai Weiwei, has become a 'star' throughout the world. In this brief period, art was instrumental in edging China towards free speech and self-expression.

The years 1978-1980 saw a time of hope in China. Deng Xiaoping allowed the building of a 100 meter long Democracy Wall on which people came from all over China to write petitions, complaints and opinions. After the trial of Wei Jingsheng the authorities tore it down.

In 1980 the Stars were eventually allowed a show inside the National Gallery in Beijing their work was reported throughout the world as a beacon of change. Many of the Stars took advantage of the opportunity to leave China.

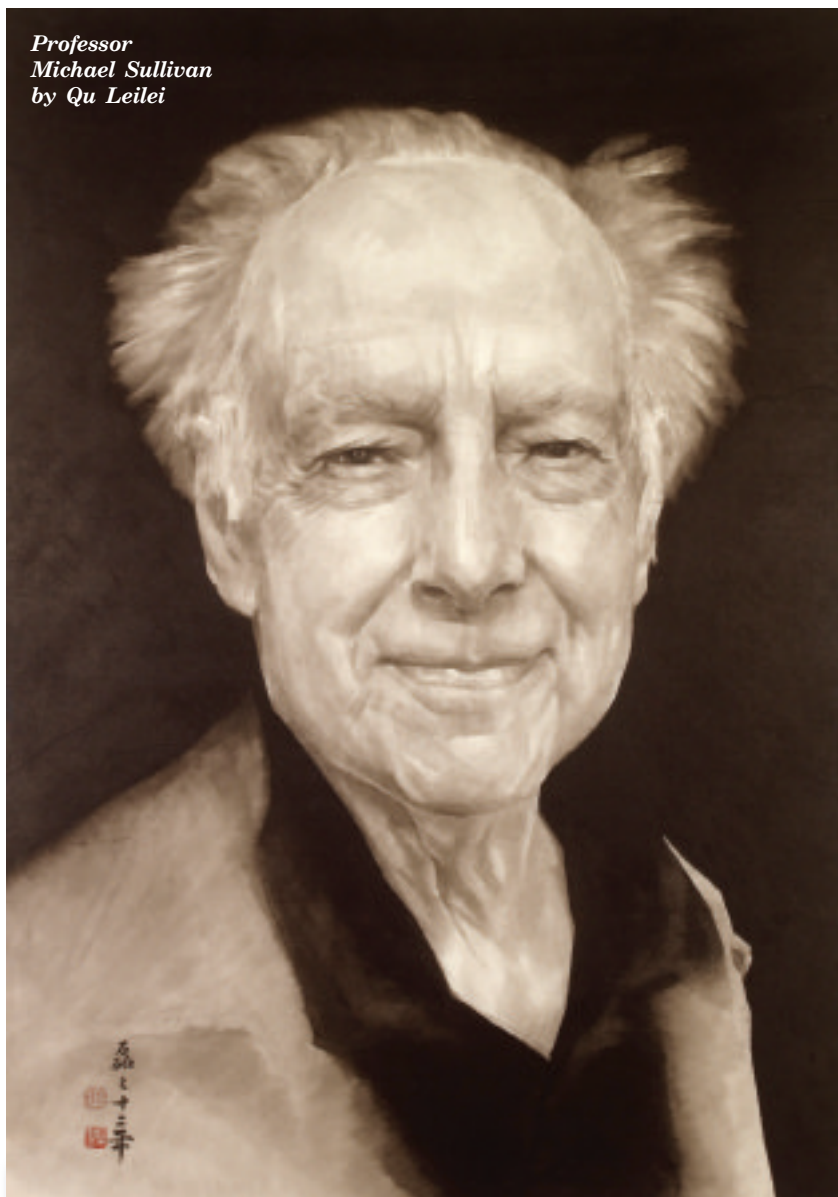
From 1983 to 1993 Ai Weiwei honed his art in the USA. Last year I reviewed Ai Weiwei's exhibition in Blenheim

Palace. At that unlikely venue there were 55 photographs from that period of his life. They were displayed alongside never before exhibited photographs taken by Andy Warhol on his visit to China in 1982. With echoes of Warhol, Ai Weiwei painted – Coca Cola style – a pair of Han Dynasty vases with a Caomina logo.

Ai Weiwei's father, Ai Qing was a poet and painter and was a founding voice of the People's Republic in 1949. Life for peasants and most women was better after the revolution but sadly the idealism of writers like Ai Qing was to be challenged when Chairman Mao turned himself into an Emperor. When

in 1966 Mao launched the Cultural Revolution the Ai family were banished to Xingjiang. For a time the family lived in a hole in the ground and Weiwei's The sculptor Antony Gormley has said of Ai Weiwei "He is the bravest artist

Professor
Michael Sullivan
by Qu Leilei



“Ai Weiwei never got to see his work displayed at Blenheim in person because his passport had been confiscated”



Family Plots by Xu Bing, one of the paintings made especially for the exhibition at the Ashmolean



Installation by Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace

to come out of China and perhaps the bravest artist alive today.”

Ai Weiwei is a very brave man, but so was Qu Leilei.

Qu Leilei secretly recorded the trial of the democracy activist Wei Jingsheng in 1979. Because his defence was pasted on the Democracy Wall and the Western press reported it, Wei believes Qu Leilei saved his life.

Ai Weiwei never got to see his work displayed at Blenheim in person because his passport had been confiscated. He successfully designed the show in a ‘virtual’ world from his studio in Beijing. But what happened to make him so unpopular with the Chinese government?

Ai Weiwei returned to Beijing from the USA in 1993 when his father was taken ill. He pioneered a new wave of warehouse studios and at that time was appreciated by the government who commissioned him to design the Bird’s Nest Stadium for the Olympics.

2008 was the year when everything changed because the artist championed the parents of children who died in the

Szechuan earthquake (because of poor quality school buildings). Since then he has been beaten up, arrested and held for 81 days without charge in 2011.

I first met Ai Weiwei at the press day for *Sunflower Seeds*, his installation in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in 2010. Porcelain was invented in China and played a large role in this exhibition. It consisted of about 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds, each one unique.

One feature of the Tate exhibition was that Ai Weiwei invited visitors to ask him questions via the internet. When Alison Klayman, his film biographer, asked him what was the most important moment in his life he replied: “Getting on the Internet”.

Ai Weiwei began spending eight hours a day on the net writing his blog and communicating on Twitter. His blog was closed down by the Chinese government in 2009.

In July this year, Ai Weiwei’s passport was returned – so he can attend the opening of his show at London’s Royal Academy. Do watch the YouTube

video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSu5DP4EQA8>) of Ai Weiwei talking about *Straight* – one of the key installations within the exhibition.

Straight is part of the body of work related to the Sichuan earthquake of 2008. Fabricated from 90 tonnes of bent and twisted steel rods (used in the construction of reinforced concrete buildings), collected by the artist and straightened by hand, *Straight* will be the heaviest sculpture ever shown at the Royal Academy. It is a moving monument to the victims of the earthquake.

Adrian Locke, curator of the Ai Weiwei show at the RA, talked about another highlight of the show.

“With eight individual trees placed together in the Annenberg Courtyard, this installation is the largest single gathering of Ai Weiwei’s work called *Tree* to date. The scale and ambition of this work will not only make a lasting impression on those visiting the Royal Academy but will amply reflect the

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Qu Leilei by the railings in Beijing where the Stars staged their illegal show in 1979

Stars march to demand freedom of expressing in 1979

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broadier aspirations and scope of Ai Weiwei in the Main Galleries."

The original Stars' careers have taken very different paths. For an exhibition at the Pompidou Centre, Qu Leilei made an impressive conceptual piece about the Tiananmen Square massacre.

He cut out magazine and newspaper photographs of the victims and pasted them inside a huge frame. In the middle he placed a mirror and when you viewed it you saw yourself among the victims. But Qu Leilei has mainly devoted his life to painting.

Ai Weiwei's tutor, Sean Sully, at Parsons School of Art in New York told his student that his drawings had 'no heart' and Ai Weiwei devoted himself to conceptual and performance art. Although their lives and art have taken different paths, their careers began in 1979 with that brave illegal exhibition and the march to Tiananmen calling for freedom of expression.

Qu Leilei's paintings have 'heart'. The Ashmolean Museum owns some thanks to the celebrated expert on Chinese art, Professor Michael Sullivan. He and his wife Khoan built up an extraordinary

collection of 20th century Chinese art and when he died in 2013, it was bequeathed to the Ashmolean.

Qu Leilei made a portrait of Michael for St Catherine's College.

The result of Michael and Khoan's generosity is the gallery named after them in the Ashmolean. It is used to display Chinese art. One exhibition that I particularly enjoyed last year was by Fang Zhaolin, a successful female artist at a time when opportunities for women were few. In the main exhibition space, in 2013, the subject was *Landscape Landscript* by Xu Bing. He is a friend of Manchurian born but now Oxford based artist Weimin He.

When Weimin co-curated the exhibition China Prints in 2007, he introduced Xu Bing to the Ashmolean. His most famous work is *Book from the Sky*. His Oxford exhibition was inspired by the Chinese landscape tradition and a desire to connect with nature at a time when it is threatened.

Outside China, it is hard to think of a better city than Oxford in which to discover fine examples of Chinese art through the ages.

In May 2015, Maggie Hartford wrote in this magazine about Chiang Yi – author of *The Silent Traveller in Oxford* (1948) – whose enigmatic illustrations delighted me and my customers when I was director of Oxford Antiques Centre in the Jam Factory.

Our current day Chiang Yi, painting and recording life in our city in delightful paintings, prints and sketches is Weimin He. You can see 50 examples of his work on the giant hoardings in the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter.

Many Oxford people remember affectionately his exhibition at the opening of the rebuilt Ashmolean in 2009.

After learning about the Stars I set myself the task of telling their story. I felt that it would communicate better in the form of a novel. *Brushstrokes in Time* will be published by Claret Press in spring 2016.

I invented a fictitious artist, Little Winter, telling the story of her life I weave real events and the Stars artists (including Ai Weiwei and Qu Leilei) with the fictional. I hope her moving story shines a light on the internal workings of China and portrays an engaging heroine



The journey Qu leilei at the BM

who rises above oppression to discover love, hope and success.

I describe the fate of actual members of the Stars Art Movement. Dr Maria Jashok who is research fellow at LMH and director of the International Gender Studies programme, lived in China between 1979 and 1995, the time at the heart of my novel. I am honoured that she has endorsed *Brushstrokes in Time*, saying: "It is surprisingly successful – surprising because a character created by a Western author to evoke the volatile relationship between Chinese politics and the arts through most personally

felt experiences could have gone awry, felt forced or artificial. That this has not happened, that the authenticity of China's contemporary artist's life and work is not compromised is testimony to the quality of the writing."

My novel is also about an inter-generational relationship between Little Winter and her American daughter and contains what I hope is a moving love story, so it should be an easy way to empathise and connect with this interesting period of Chinese history.

If you are interested in the Stars, there is a related exhibition at the British

Museum in November. Stars artists Qu Leilei and Ma Desheng will be staging a Q&A session and some new work by Qu Leilei will be on display. For details visit the British Museum website, www.britishmuseum.com

If you visit the Ashmolean Museum regularly do make a point of visiting the Khoan and Michael Sullivan Gallery. Ai Weiwei's exhibition runs until December at the Royal Academy. Weimin's hoardings will be surrounding the ROQ building site off Walton Street for several years.

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