

H. C. Fred Liang by Cliff Eyland

Liang's new work merges Western scientific systems of inquiry, using the human genome project as his point of departure, with ancient Eastern transcendental modes, in order to give expression to the intangible....Liang visually engages us in his process by focusing upon the nucleus or individual unit from which an object is comprised. Liang's paintings of single cell organisms...seem to pulsate upon their stark white background and suggest a meditative state. This consideration of the object beyond that which is readily accessible to the eye points to a modern day paradox: how the concreteness of scientific investigation and the ineffability of spiritual contemplation both seek to peel away the obvious in order to understand the world's inner workings.

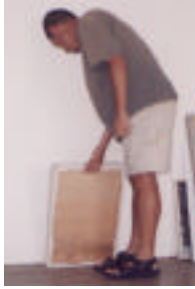
- Robin Reisenfeld (*Hybrid IDs*, p.8)

Born in Wuhan, Fred Liang grew up in China during the Cultural Revolution. Later he and his family moved to Winnipeg, Manitoba, where Liang attended the University of Manitoba's School of Art. Since then Liang has earned a Masters of Fine Art degree at Yale, taught art in Windsor, and worked as an art researcher in New York. He is now an artist and art professor at MassArt (Massachusetts College of Art) in Boston, where he teaches printmaking and advises graduate and undergraduate students.

Liang's Gallery One One One exhibition includes digital prints and Manitoban wild rice. The prints are based on original drawings. The rice is a unique local Manitoban foodstuff, something with which Liang is familiar from his earlier years here. Liang's installation is like a strange Oriental garden full of seeds that are about to germinate, but with no full grown plants. It engenders thinking about the "scientific need to understand the microscopic world," but also, as the artist puts it, a "...Taoist desire to journey into the infinite emptiness."

The imagery in Liang's prints and paintings suggests microscopic life forms, single-celled creatures as seen by a microscope. I thought of bacteria in the midst of a burst of reproduction. Other works have the configuration of fingerprints, as if Liang were making a visual pun on the traits coded into a microscopic thing. Some are reminiscent of electron microscope scans. Double helixes are not depicted, but one nevertheless tends to think - too quickly perhaps, as Liang cautions - of DNA strands as one looks at the works. Sometimes Liang arranges his prints in a grid in what he calls a "magic square," a reference to those grids of numbers that produce mathematical symmetries when the figures are added across, up and down, or diagonally.

I visited Fred Liang in Boston in the summer of 2001. The sun was hot and the city was hung green with vegetation. Construction cranes loomed over the city, threatening, Liang said, low-rent studios like his. An underground highway was being built and Boston's waterfront was being redesigned. Liang's studio seemed exceptionally sparse, with paintings turned against walls.



Liang told me about the deep culture of learning and university life in Boston; about the redevelopment and gentrification of his Boston neighbourhood; about the school "MassArt" at which he teaches; about his interest in technical media like CD-ROM making (evidence of which is on this CD-ROM disk); and about his print making. He showed me his own prints and also the prints he had produced for artists such as Kiki Smith. He made elliptical reference to the privations of his childhood in China during Mao's chaotic cultural revolution: Fred Liang's life has been unpredictable.

He lent me a book to read on my bus ride back to New York called Dust, by Joseph A. Amato that reiterates, in its own way, Liang's ideas about the very small as a signifier of the infinite.

Liang is obviously culturally "eastern" according the odd logic of origins that we tend to too quickly apply to people. I suspect however, that like any determined contemporary artist, Liang has chosen to connect his art with an eastern philosophical tradition for his own artistic reasons, that his interest just happens to coincide with his ethnic background.

If Fred Liang's art suggests the orient, one must acknowledge how long East has been meeting West in Modern and contemporary art. The Western avant-garde has had a fascination with eastern philosophies for at least a century. Theosophy, a cult begun by Madame Blavatsky, appropriated Hindu and Buddhist concepts and influenced early Modernist artists such as Mondrian, Kandinsky and Canada's Lawren Harris. Theosophy was an ecumenical spiritualism that attracted culturally Christian artists after Darwinism (amongst other things) challenged their traditional beliefs. It was also one of the intellectual sources of abstraction in Modernist art.

Fred Liang's art is not a break from the avant-garde tradition, but a lengthening of one of its strands. Eastern philosophies like Zen and Taoism seem more consistent with contemporary science - especially quantum physics - than traditional Christian beliefs, and this coincidence still leads contemporary artists eastward (scientists tend to revile Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics*, but this book, if read skeptically, is a good introduction to aspects of contemporary science and eastern thought). Most importantly, the post-war artists associated with Fluxus were and are enamoured of eastern philosophies. John Cage's advocacy of Marcel Duchamp - and Duchamp's art itself - was a defense of inaction over action, of non-commercialism over commercialism in art, and of intellectual paradox as the basis for art practice, in short of a culturally "eastern" set of artistic values.

- Cliff Eyland, eylandc@hotmail.com



References and Suggested Readings:

Joseph A. Amato, *Dust* (Berkeley:University of California Press, 2000)

Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (Suffolk: Wildwood House, 1975)

Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (Toronto: Penguin, 1988)

Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life* (Toronto: Penguin, 1989)

Jeffrey Keough, *Rapture* (Boston: Massachusetts College of Art, 2001), 14-15

Robin Reisenfeld, *Hybrid IDs* (Boston: Boston Center for the Arts, 2001), 8, 11, 16,18

Gary Stix, "Little Big Science," *Scientific American* vol. 285 number 3 (September 2001):32-37

Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp* (New York:Henry Holt and Company, 1996)

James D. Watson, *The Double Helix* (Toronto: Penguin, 1968)

Artist's Statement

Image \ language / visual system
perception \ perspectives / view point
relationship \ coalition / context
icon \ ideal / faith
religion \ system / beliefs
games \ chance / organization
concrete \ analytical / random
religion \ icon / art

Faith, belief, religion, status, influences, power
game, chance, magic, system

worship, ancestor, lineage, genes, cells, structure, DNA

religion
worship
magic

science
history
myth