

arts/entertainment

Artist Li Shan transcends language barrier



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Li Shan

By Penelope M. Smith

Li Shan's work is an essence that encompasses all the seasons of the self with nature, presenting to the world a harmony that transcends the bounds of corporeal self. It is the poetry of light, wind and water, and the magnitude and strength of the universe.

Li Shan, one of his country's most popular artists, is on cultural loan to America for six months from the People's Republic of China. The 57-year old Nanjing artist's works are on display at Sheldon Art Gallery, and he has been presenting lectures and demonstrations at the request of the UNL art department.

Li Shan spoke to a group of students Tuesday night at Sheldon concerning his art. Professor Leung of the UNL physics department acted as translator.

Shan is a slight man with an underlying tranquility and strength even in his frequent animation. What follows is

in part the speech of Li Shan himself, and in part Leung's translation.

Shan began his lecture by staring quietly into space. Then folding his hands he said softly, "My painting is very bad, I will welcome your criticism so that I can improve."

What followed was a presentation, both verbal and nonverbal, so consumed with aesthetic awareness of nature, that it mattered very little to the audience that they could not understand Mandarin.

Shan first went to his paintings and pointed out trees. "Tree, tree, tree, one, two, three, four, but they are not the same even though trees are the same for everybody. The reason they are different," he said, "is that at the time they were painted the emotion was different."

Relies on mood

He then went on to single out specific works to further illustrate the reliance of his work upon mood.

profile

"In this painting, 'Stepping on the Morning Dew to Get Water,' the girl is getting water in the morning, the little lamb is bouncing and the feeling is very fresh and happy," he explained. He then made bouncing motions with his hands over the elements of the painting like the bouncing of the lamb's feet.

"This technique, di-ta, di-ta, the dots in the trees creates the whole effect of the painting. It's dancing mood and freshness are reflected in every object."

Vital to Li Shan's art is not only the quality of ink used but the tempo of his strokes, how quickly or how slowly he chooses to paint. He used a work entitled "Human Heroism Through Cherry Blossoms" to explain this.

"In the branch of cherry blossom the speed differs from length to length of the branch. As I go slowly, the water spreads. I express the strength of the branch the worst thing is uniformity, therefore in one line we have dark and light, fast and slow."

"Here," he said, pointing to a heavy area of a branch, "I wet very slowly. I put pressure on the branch bending it down, but it comes back up. I used this tree to express heroism, the forceful quality of a very strong person. It is winter in this painting, but the tree is very strong. It is the same thing when a strong character is exposed to a strong outside force, you will see a dip in the tree but it always comes back up again. I hope that this flower expressed the emotion that heroic people cannot be repressed," he said.

In many of Li Shan's paintings like "Birds on the Vine," the color exceeds the fine ink boundary line. For

Shan this expresses the life of the flower itself.

No boundaries

"The color walks," he explained. "It is greater than the object itself. I care about balance but not about the boundaries, the flower, because it has no boundaries, is no longer static. No longer bound, it becomes emotion."

An integral element in Li Shan's paintings is the accompanying calligraphy, which is just as important as the painting itself. Li Shan explained simply how a westerner can understand calligraphy, even though he cannot comprehend the meaning.

"There are two things. Simply, the element of understanding the character, but also the expression of the character, its shape or style or form," he said, producing one of his works.

"In this work, the two character mean 'dragon song' or 'chant.' I used different strokes to keep the dragon feeling." Shan went on to trace his finger over the drawing, slithering his finger down the undulating feeling of scales and bony tail, stopping slowly at the heavy dark "head of the dragon," he drew his hand along "The Chant" itself, moving it like a fading echo as the ink itself had faded.

Four idyllic years

When Shan graduated from Zhejiang Art Institute he requested and received a position as art reporter in the far western province of Xinjiang. Some of his pictures express what were for him four idyllic years spent in the mountains among the tribesmen, living in tents and riding camels.

He drew a quick sketch of a little boy sleeping on a camel with the moon behind him and said softly:

"From the time he is a little boy he spends his life on the back of a camel. When I think of the past I fade back into a dream. I can still feel the horse beneath me, feel the camel beneath me in my sleep."

He still places two seals on his paintings, one is his name and the other is what he calls a "little remembrance," a symbol for the mountains and rivers of Xinjiang.

The other great inspiration for his work, besides the beauty of his homeland, is the music and literature of his country. Shan began as a student of classical literature and also is an accomplished musician. Between moods of tranquility he is likely to recite Li Po or hum a range of music from Chinese folksongs to Schubert.

"In the art of poetry and the art of painting there is no differentiation for me. They are both in my work. I express the poem in a painting, the painting in a poem. I am a painter but the poet helps me to imagine. When a poem is on my mind I forge the realities of Earth."

"I ask the sky, I will ride the wind," he went on to recite, "I do not know warm or cold, I dance on the good earth into the wind."

Li Shan said that in music he could express what he felt about his painting simply in two songs; one Chinese tune he likes very much and, astoundingly enough, a western song.

"There is a song about a bee," he said, beginning to hum. "The bee collects all the pollen, it makes the best sort of honey and gives it to the world. This is why you, me, we all work so hard and we hope our work will be appreciated. Life is very short and only our art survives."

"The other song I like," he said, laughing, "is 'The Spanish Cavalier.' Do you know it? 'The Blessings of my country and you dear, the blessings of my country and you dear, I care very much for my country and my people?'"

Six women's films featured at Sheldon

This weekend, the Sheldon Film Theater is offering a series of films by women working outside and inside the Hollywood industry.

Six short subjects with a total running time of 96 minutes will be shown: *Odalique* by Maureen Selwood, *Whale Song* by Mary Beams, *Interview* by Caroline Leat and Veronika, *Soul Thriller* by Sally Potter, *Woman: Who is Me?* by Judith Keller and *The Emergence of Eunice* Emily Hubley. Screenings are at 7 p.m. and 9 p.m., with a Saturday matinee at 3 p.m. Admission is \$2.50 (senior citizens and children \$2).

Thriller, the longest of the films, is considered the first feminist murder mystery, as Potter charts a course through operative form, women's history and contemporary theory. In *Interview*, two women animators are seen making a film about themselves. The film opens with the filmmakers at home, each composing a visual portrait of the other.

Woman: Who is Me? concerns persistent myths about women and evaluates stereotypical images and roles of women. The film explores biblical and mythological themes as well as contemporary portrayals.

Commercial subtlety costs \$9

It used to be that I could watch television commercials for free on the three major networks. Now, thanks to the ever-growing field of cable television, I pay nine bucks a month for the privilege.

clark

If I'm going to pay to watch commercials, I want to see something really outstanding. No more brazen and unashamed hucksters for me; no more Frank Sinatra bowling me over with the virtues of the K-Car when I know that in real life he wouldn't let his dog be chauffeured around town in one, no more Cool Whip at Tucker Inn, no more McDonaldland characters, no more coffee with Mrs. Olsen, no more Wessonality, no more leading pain killers, no more doctor's surveys, no more minimum daily vitamin requirements, no more anything. If I'm going to watch commercials that I have paid to watch, I want them to be diabolically subtle.

Subtle messages

I have seen one series of such commercials. Getty Oil Company has put together a series of messages in favor of the decontrol of the oil industry that never once say the words "oil," "profits," "prices," "OPEC," or "here to serve you." Most of these advertisements run on ESPN, the cable all-sports channel. Controlling interest in ESPN is owned by, you guessed it, Getty Oil.

The first time I saw one, I didn't even know it was a commercial. It was a videotape of Franz Klammer, the Austrian skier, blazing down the slope at some important international meet. The announcer was making a big

deal out of the fact that Klammer was going all-out, striving as hard as he could. Then the videotape stopped, and a second announcer with a slow, authoritative, aged-in-a-keg mellow voice came on to explain that the reason Klammer succeeded that day was that he was free to win or lose on his own. Then, at last, came the message:

"Sadly, neither you nor we enjoy such freedom in our daily lives. The government will protect us from it. Something to think about, from the people at Getty."

Ad genius

Sheer genius. Since the Klammer advertisement, we have seen a manned balloon ascend to a record height, we have seen a speed record broken on the Bonneville Salt Flats, a man-powered flight across the English Channel, and a woman walking the ocean floor. Never does Getty Oil try to make for us the rather flimsy association between these accomplishments and the ability of an oil company to generate profits in a free economy. But you've got to believe that Getty wouldn't feel too bad if sometime, like maybe during the droning tick-talk that passes between Dick Vitale and Jim Simpson disguised as basketball insights, you made the connection in your own mind.

Very likely, this kind of advertising is less effective in the short run than the hard-sell approach, because of the inherent problem of giving a television audience "something to think about" when one of the reasons people watch television is to avoid doing too much thinking. But Getty Oil has plenty of time and money, and there must be more videotapes of great achievements that worked because the participants were free. Ultimately, this kind of message is probably more effective because the viewer draws his or her own conclusions, so we are likely to see Getty Oil continue with this campaign. It is, as they say, something to think about.