

LISTENING TO LIGHT

Bi Rongrong in conversation with Elisabeth Condon



Bi Rongrong, Moving Greyscale, 2014, acrylic on wall and window shades, gallery size 12m x 4.08 m. June 2014, painted at the Shanghai Gallery of Art for the exhibition Present-ing Recital Louder Than Paint (6.28.14-8.26.14) (Image by Guo Bo)

BI RONGRONG. August 12, 2014, via Skype. I first met Bi Rongrong at 50 Moganshanlu, a concentrated area of galleries in Shanghai, in a rare, free moment in July. She'd been working intensively on two major installations and was preparing to leave for the UK imminently. I was excited to talk about her work, her background in ink painting and transition to installation works. We met again at the Swatch Art Peace Hotel, where she had worked in my current studio, Workshop 1, when a resident there.



Bi Rongrong, A Tangible Shadow, 2014, deformed steel bars, paint, 40m(L) x 3.1m(H) x 4.5m(W). July 2014, Sifang Collective, Nanjing.

Elisabeth Condon: Just before Skyping from an artist residency at the Center for Chinese Contemporary Art (CFCCA) in Manchester, UK, Bi Rongrong received an email from her friend the artist Kie Ellens [Visiting artist and curator at the Frank Mohr Institute, Holland, where Bi attended graduate school] with feedback about her recent installations “Moving Greyscale” and “A Tangible Shadow.” Ellens had just returned from a stay in the Hedjuk Tower in Berlin and applied that experience in his comments about Bi’s work.

Bi Rongrong: Kie Ellens is the Director of Wall House, an architecture designed by John Hejduk. Wall House maintains the building and invites artist-in-residence. Erwin Wurm made a great exhibition in Wall House; Coco Rosie also was in residency there. This background is why the building is important in his comments.

Kie said that my only enemy is beauty. He wrote, “...in [*Moving Greyscale*] you allowed ‘Light’ to help me. Also here you are still listening to light and I see no reason why you could not talk back.” It is a strong proposition. The work, the environment, and me—the interrelationships are always in question.



Bi Rongrong, Moving Greyscale, 2014, working drawing. Photo, Shanghai Gallery of Art.



Bi Rongrong, Moving Greyscale, 2014, acrylic on wall and window shades, gallery size 12m x 4.08 m. June 2014, painted at the Shanghai Gallery of Art for the exhibition Present-ing Recital Louder Than Paint (6.28.14-8.26.14) (Image by Guo Bo)

The image in *Moving Greyscale* at first glance, could be from a scroll, but is clearly a natural environment contrasted with the work's Bund backdrop. The overlapping images evoke the question of time and the role it plays in your work.

For *Moving Greyscale* I took pictures in a forest, so it's a very realistic image directly from

the forest. I traced it on to the windows in front of the Bund.

The title in Chinese is *The Greyness of the Time*. In this piece I want to say that at different times, the grey changes. The forest assembles many landscapes together, so you see many different kinds of grey. When the greys come together, no pure color remains. Over the duration of time the grey perpetually changes, from day to night.

So I chose these windows to place my landscape, when it layers with light from outside and in with changing time and color. I actually used a very pure, almost fluorescent green, but it never looks pure, but subtly changes to different greys with time. Before I started to paint, the greyness was not as clear because it was just in my mind, but after I finished I could see it clearly. During the day, the window shades are stronger than the walls and after sunset, it is opposite. I only saw it in its entirety after finishing it, which is interesting.



Bi Rongrong, *A Tangible Shadow*, 2014, deformed steel bars, paint, 40m(L) x 3.1m(H) x

4.5m(W). July 2014, Sifang Collective, Nanjing. Installation View.

Your recent Nanjing installation expands on the concept of Little Wood Sticks Featuring Light and Shade, a 2013 dialog between you and Li Zhang available on your [website](#). It is easy to imagine color reflecting the light and the shadows of the shapes moving with the light over time.

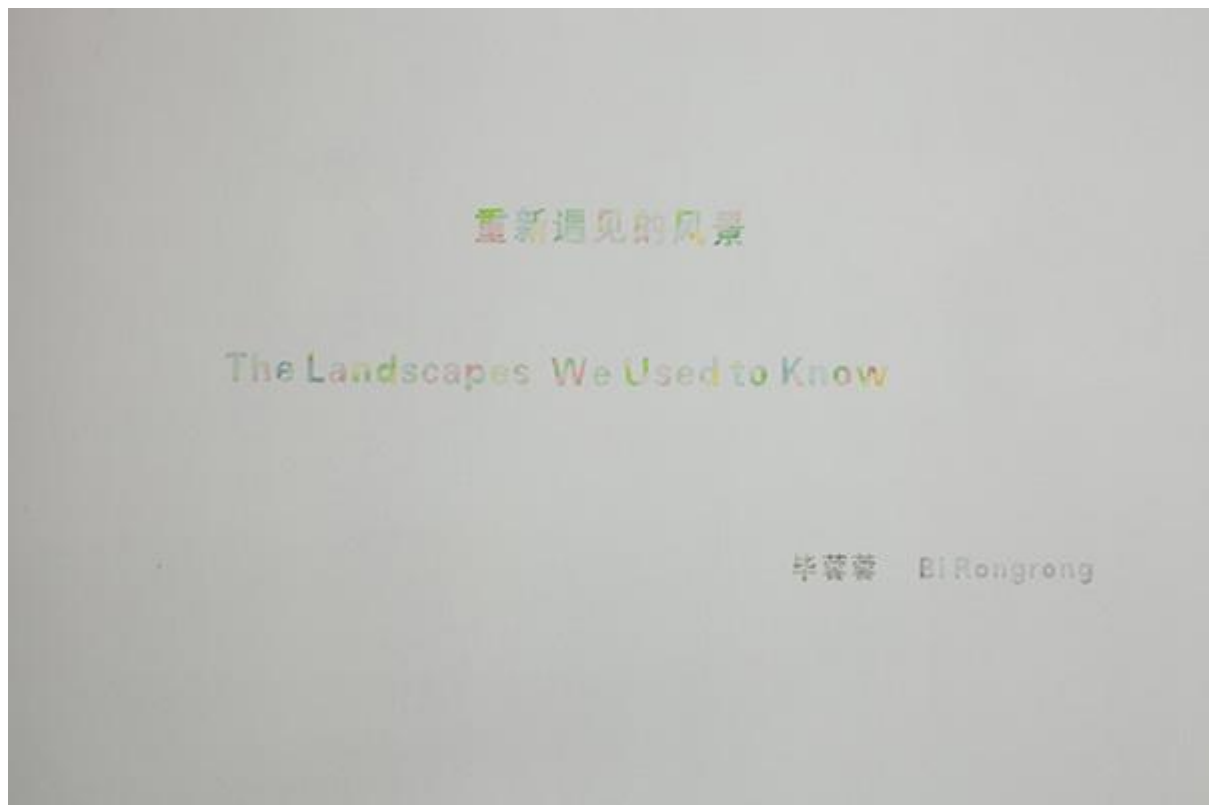
A Tangible Shadow, the piece in Nanjing, was limited by the space, which is not only for exhibition but daily use as a corridor that connects with conference rooms. People move inside and out to attend meetings, so the space's function differs from a museum where visitors are more careful about how and where they move. As the corridor's purpose is practical, I had to be very careful with the structure. Though I thought the steel lines should go crazier, go everywhere—there are fire doors and fire extinguishers to consider. It's exactly how Kie mentions: *A Tangible Shadow* shows a 'reading' of the space, so that while it is strong it is also a little bit careful. He's so sharp (laughs) and can always tell. But I also think the photograph makes it look flatter; in real life, because of the scale and light from outside, the piece gives more than what is seen in the picture.



Bi Rongrong, Open Studio. Transparent red plexiglas, fish string, gouache on aluminium panels, red paint on wall and printed transparent red stickers on windows, sun lights. Volume: 25 square meters. [“I used my studio as a complete installation in which I built relationships between paintings and installations, colors and spaces, works and environment. In this piece, I combined natural lights with the studio, which brought a new experience to my work. Visually, the piece would change with difference of natural lights. Therefore, the visiting time was not after sunset.”]

You have increasingly worked with installation since the 2011 open studio, which “built relationships between paintings and installations, colors and spaces, works and environment.” [Bi Rongrong, [Statement for Open Studio](#), 2011.] Beginning a trajectory that culminates in the 2014 installations, you “ combined natural lights with the studio,” so that “visually, the piece would change with the difference of natural lights.” Do you have a studio now? What are your preferences for working space?

For the immediate moment, I have a studio at the residency in Manchester, but in Shanghai I work in my living room. I don't have a separate studio. For small works, I can easily work at home, and except for specific projects I don't like to spend lots of energy going all the way to a studio and back. If there's a studio, like at the residency right now, I like it, but if I don't have one I don't mind because I can work on the screen, use drawing programs on the computer or do some drawings on paper. Drawings you can do anywhere, it can be a part of daily life. So I don't demand a big studio. But a temporary studio to work on specific projects is very important. When given an opportunity to work on site, I consider where to place my work, allowing the location to evoke what kind of work I'm going to do, and the site becomes a temporary studio. For Nanjing, I initially developed plans on the computer in Shanghai, but upon arriving to the site discovered the plans were not really suitable. So, I made a new model directly in the space, because when I am inside of it I feel the dimension more correctly.



Bi Rongrong, The Landscapes We Used to Know, 2013. Acrylic on wall (text)



Bi Rongrong, The Landscapes We Used to Know, 2013. Oil on canvas, 195cm x 195 cm (2 paintings), acrylic floor painting, 70 m², pen and water color on paper, 100cmx75cm, laser cut on paper cut-out work) 55cmx40cm

In his email, Kie mentions that in *The Landscapes We Used To Know* (2013) “the colors are larger than the letters.” Color passes beneath the characters on a scale only confined by the characters’ contours.

In the beginning I thought that each piece [in *The Landscapes We Used To Know*] would have a title. But as I was working in the space, eventually the whole space became one piece with each piece a process in the whole. That’s why there is finally just one title for the exhibition, which is also the title for each piece. The color from my paintings came into the title and that’s why Kie said ‘the colors are larger than the letters’. These connections are sometimes hard to see in the photos. The photos of the show are very different from when you are actually there.



Untitled, from the 2005-2008 series of ink works



At Delfzijl, 2009, sketchbook



Bi Rongrong, Virtual Studio II (top) and Virtual Studio I (bottom), 2014, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 cm./35 x 45 cm. Photograph by Guo Bo.

You received a BFA and MFA in Chinese painting in Sichuan universities before attending a second graduate program at the Frank Mohr Institute in the Netherlands. While the ink paintings from Sichuan reflect intensive study of Chinese ink painting, in Europe you began to make small, brightly patterned oil paintings similar to *Virtual Studio I* and *Virtual Studio II*, 2014. These small paintings can be seen as either interior or urban spaces. Can you talk about this transition in your work?

Actually, it's not like I changed my skills or work [methods], or gave up wash ink for a different way of painting. In Sichuan, where I studied in two universities, Chongqing and Chengdu, in Chinese painting classes, we needed to do lots of sketching from nature. Wash ink is one part, sketching from nature is an equally important part. Maybe I hadn't found a way yet when I was studying there. When you sketch from nature you really can

draw what you see, but when I went back to the studio to start wash ink paintings, my mind was more fixed on the wash ink rules than what I experienced in nature. So, there was a big difference between the sketch from life and the studio work. In that time this transformation was the most difficult part of my studies. It is still difficult.

In Holland, at the very beginning I'd go out to see the city, to see the landscape and cityscape, to the harbor to draw ships. I did quite a few sketches from the city and from nature as well. These sketches, how I did them, were exactly the same as in previous studies, trying to develop drawings from outside the studio. Back in the studio, I actually didn't need to transform them into washed ink paintings. In Sichuan, as a Chinese painting department student, I had to complete the next step, but in Holland, I didn't really need to do the step or make a specific type of painting. I could have, but I felt free that I could do whatever I wanted, so the first step became showing my drawings in the graduate seminar.

Before, the drawings would have maybe been just unfinished or part of the process, not the final work. But in Holland it could be already a finished work—just show the drawing, right? So it actually gave me a bit more confidence, in that I finally had some completed work! [laughs]

But presenting these works became a new question, because I still didn't treat them as finished work but as process. When one arrives in a new environment and does something familiar, it raises new questions because of new people, new experiences; classmates or teachers might question something about which you had never been questioned. So new questions, such as how to present these drawings, arose. Actually, the question is similar to that of how to transform drawings into washed ink paintings.

The next step was similar but a bit different: transformation. It became liberating to test different methods. For example I transferred drawings on transparent glass and layered them together, and enlarged them, like the paintings on my website, on the walls. They also become colored panels with some parts filled with color. When I played with scale and colors, I got a different energy in the same way that wash ink is a different energy from drawing. When I transformed the drawing, color was a big possibility for experimentation, so I tried many things. It's not like a color painting is totally different from washed ink paintings—it's just one of the ways to experiment how to transfer my drawings.

Ink painting, traditionally, is about retreat, contemplation, and ultimately transformation through the sublimation of location into a dream world. Your work inverts this inward trajectory, flowing toward the outside world, as if through drawing the artist becomes an instrument dispersing the work into the world.

I think drawing from nature is a process in which you become a part of nature. You experience the nature and places, and talk with them with your own way. But in the studio you are separate, more isolated from that active and live experience. So for me bringing

those experiences back to the studio, or where I work, is important, right? I enjoy being a part of the environment. I can feel more that I exist there, being a part of it. So when doing exhibitions, I am also aware of this kind of existence. That's why I really make consideration of the exhibition space. Sometimes I don't choose a white cube space. I like to choose a space closer to a daily life space. My drawings were from reality, so I want to be back in reality. The process is one of looking for a new reality for my drawings, so the process is very important.

Since Holland, when I started to experiment with environment and space, more and more new topics arose. In the past I never considered public art, nor did I really look at architecture, but as the work develops I've become really interested in architecture. New interests result from experimentation.

Landscape, nature and architecture—any other influences?

Olafur Eliasson is a role model. I think of his work as good public art, offering people transformative power. It is the ideal situation for my art too, in the future.

How did you decide to become an artist? What was your educational background?

At the very beginning when I learned to write characters, I learned calligraphy from my grandpa, who is really good at that. Since I grew up with my grandpa I did lots of calligraphy practice and was quite interested and skillful. What you learn in childhood can really influence you a lot, later. In primary school for the electives, I always chose calligraphy or washed ink painting. These two are related. I learned fast and had fun playing with brushes. I never stopped learning or practicing it. In high school, I chose fine art as my elective. The teacher considered me quite suitable for art college, encouraged me, and I studied for the exam. Finally I attended the art department in a university. It was just natural to follow this direction.

At the university there were so many things about traditional Chinese painting I still needed to learn. Until graduating, I felt I was still far away from getting somewhere. I went on to do a masters program with landscape, or maybe I should say water and mountain painting, as my major. Landscape was always fascinating to me, so I kept going. I was interested, but also felt I wasn't good enough. (Laughs). In the masters program I felt a bit stressed, not as free to deal with my ideas. I wanted a different environment to keep developing, keep solving my difficulties, so I applied for schools in Holland. It was a quick decision to do an application. In Holland, there are so many possibilities and I need so much time to experiment with them. After graduation I returned to China, but for me it is just the beginning. Two years' study in Holland was too short. Compared to my whole art study experience, two years was very short, not enough time to experience art in the west. That's why I keep applying for residencies now.

In a 2013 conversation with Li Zhenhua, [Li Zhenhua and Bi Rongrong, Little Wood

Sticks Featuring Light and Shade-A Dialogue (2013), Vanguard Gallery, Shanghai. Translated by Wu Chenyun and proofread by Thomas C. Chung.] you observe that in the current context of China to produce work seems a grave task, while in the West it becomes something pleasant and enjoyable.

Actually the context for this comment was the Chinese Painting department, which assigned students the role of 'Chinese Painting painter.' In this role you must focus on certain material and forms. Plus, Chinese painting has been developed for thousands of years, it's so mature, and it becomes very difficult to find yourself in it; it is too powerful! So it became heavy and difficult, less about experimenting and more about spiritual experiencing.

Now a few practical questions about daily life. How does an artist survive?

I have a part-time job at Shanghai Visual Art Institute. When I graduated, in the first months I got a part-time teaching job. I was quite clear with myself that I don't want a full-time job because I want more time for my art, so I looked for something part-time. Of course, it makes living more difficult, but I am quite happy with this situation. The school is a good place to communicate with and share my experience with the students, which is nice.

And make time to work?

I just try to do less social things. (Laughs). If I am just by myself the time is enough. But if I spend lots of time meeting friends, I feel less calm, then stressed and guilty. (Laughs). Alone, I like to waste lots of time because for me after wasting time, doing nothing, then when I do something I can be REALLY focused and work toughly. It's important to just waste time by myself.

Is identity as a Chinese or global artist a topic in your works?

I am Chinese! (Laughs). I am a Chinese artist, for sure. I think I am more trying to be ME, instead to express I am a Chinese artist or a global artist. I think who I am flows naturally. Experiences I had before will never leave me, like my long study of Chinese ink painting emerges naturally though maybe for a time it's hidden inside. And with new things I'm learning and training for, it always comes together. I don't know how to say in English, it will mix, or integrate. So it's quite natural. I don't need to try hard to say where I come from, but people can tell eventually.



Studio, Manchester CYMK, UK

Bi Rongrong was born in Ningbo, Zhejiang in 1982, and currently lives and works in Shanghai. She received her MFA from the Frank Mohr Institute, Groningen, The Netherlands, in 2010. Significant exhibitions and public projects include “Waves,” Bund 18 Temporary Art Space, Shanghai, China, 2013, “7:3 Colors,” Shanghai World Financial Center, Shanghai, China, 2013, “Present-ing Recital Louder Than Paint,” Shanghai Gallery of Art, Shanghai, China, 2014, “A Tangible Shadow,” Sifang Collection, Nanjing, China, 2014, IVY Art 2015, Today Art Museum, Beijing, China and the collaborative stage set “A Transformation of Tri-Image 2/3” for “American Finch” performed by Uferstudio, Berlin. Bi’s public collections include the White Rabbit Collection, Australia. See more at www.birongrong.com.

*Following the traveling exhibition **My Generation: Young Chinese Artists** [Pollack’s exhibition selects artists born after 1976. In an **interview with Richard Vine** in the August 4, 2014 online edition of **Art in America**, she summarizes the artists’ attitudes as global, individualistic, less interested in traditional motifs or traditions than new media and metaphors that better suit this time.] while based in Shanghai for six months in 2014, I interviewed five artists born after the one-child policy to*

determine how their thought and aesthetics might determine China's new cultural landscape. A Hanban Confucius Studies China Program's Understanding China Fellowship under the auspices of Dr. Cheng Amien, Ph.D., Dean and Professor, Institute for National Studies, Nanjing University and Shi Kun, Director, Confucius Institute at the University of South Florida Tampa, with assistance from Cherry Zhen Zhu of Artist Pension Trust, made these interviews possible.

- Elisabeth Condon