



**Age of
Artists**

Interview

Zhang Wei

Beijing, 13.04.17



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Introduction

Zhang Wei is a Chinese artist who grew up in Xi An and lives and works in Beijing for now. He became very famous for his photography and Collage techniques that he uses to create new faces. He was nominated by 2016 Prudential Eye Awards Contemporary Asian Art, he won the prize of 2013 New Photo Award of China and in the same year was selected in the photography annual ranking. In 2011 he won the prize of The Top 20 of China and in 2010 the prize of The Global Times 2010 Artists Award Of The Year, 2009 Zhang Wei was nominated by Sovereign Asian Art Prize and in the same year he won the prize of Lishui Photography Festival Award.

Interview

AoA: How did you become an artist?

Zhang Wei: When I was a child I really liked drawing. And I was not good at studying. So art was the way that I would like to follow.

AoA: Did you feel that you were talented?

Zhang Wei: My objective was to draw well and at the beginning I saw that I couldn't draw well. As time passed I could draw better and I took some lessons. At some point I decided that I want to become a painter.

AoA: What is the difference between art and craftsmanship?

Zhang Wei: In that time, the 1980's, the education of drawing was just to teach you how to improve your drawing skills. You were just practicing all the time in order to draw better and better. Then I went to the College in Xi An. At this time I used to go out to the book stores where you could find some modern Western art. I began to learn something about the new types of art. And that was really different to what the teachers taught us at the class. I realised that art is not as easy as they taught us at the College. Art is not only classical and I was very curious about the other forms of art.

AoA: Is it common in China that people focus on the traditional types of art?

Zhang Wei: Yes, at that time our art education came from Sowjet. So it was just about traditional oil paintings.

AoA: Nowadays do you focus more on painting or photography?

Zhang Wei: Photography. When I used to paint I felt I could maybe paint well but nothing else. And I became very interested into movies. I came to Beijing and I wanted to learn something about movies. But it was too expensive, so I chose the cheaper one: Photography.

AoA: Today almost everybody has a camera or a smartphone to take photos with it at any second. What is the difference between these photographers and artists?

Zhang Wei: In the first way there is actually not a big difference, because we both use cameras to take the photos. But of course there is still a big difference: Artists need to express themselves. They use lots of methods and media to express what they think. I always try to get the link to society.

AoA: How can you enter this process to express yourself?

Zhang Wei: It took a long way. About 15 years ago I truly wanted to find a way to express myself. At the beginning I was just very confused. I tried every method that I can think about. And actually all the method was just about the method: So I came to the camera to record what I saw, to record what was around me. At first I just focused on myself and on my friends. Then I found out it would be a bigger thing to connect with the society - that is the process.

AoA: How did your work change when you felt more connected to society?

Zhang Wei: Before it was like that I made all my work just for myself or my friends. After that I just thought time has come to observe the world.

AoA: How important is feedback for you? How do you feel about it when someone doesn't like your work?

Zhang Wei: Before a lot of people actually told me that my work was not good. I felt really sad when they said that. As time passed on I thought it doesn't matter if someone says something bad about my work. I didn't care and just wanted to try my best.

AoA: So you were trying again and again?

Zhang Wei: Not only trying. Being an artist is not just to try things. It is mostly about experience and also to let it happen naturally.

AoA: When you take a photo of a person, what is the main thing that you focus on?

Zhang Wei: When I take a photo of a person I want to freeze the moment if there is a certain emotion or is there no emotion at all. Or there is an emotion changing. After a while I also thought if I could make an emotion by myself or to create no emotion or a changing emotion. So I used the computer and the Collage to create such pictures (showing one of his catalogues with such pictures). Finally a person's features like nose, eyes, ears and so on were not just from one person. With this technique I also created new emotions.

AoA: How did you decide what you are going to combine?

Zhang Wei: In that period I just put the things together by occasion. I didn't design it before. I just felt it was suitable and then it was okay. That was my face-making period.

AoA: Is there something that you always keep, even if you go through different periods with different styles?

Zhang Wei: What all of my periods have in common is that I always took care of the human until today.

AoA: Do you feel like a server for the human?

Zhang Wei: Well, I haven't thought about this before. But what comes out of my mind is that I always try to record not just the moments but also the changes because our society keeps on changing all the time. I want to give back my thoughts about this to the people who see the pictures. And hopefully through this they also can connect better to themselves. So I definitely think that I want to help people. But I don't know if this is related to a server.

AoA: What plays a bigger role when you photograph people: You and your mind or how the model is behaving in that moment?

Zhang Wei: In the first way my mind is more important. And during the process the emotions of the person become very important, too. I will need the expression of the person to express my mind.

AoA: How do you interact with the person? If you see that your plan how to take the photo doesn't work do you change your plans or do you keep trying to instruct the person?

Zhang Wei: When I take photos of a person and I instruct them I won't really see their emotions in a deep way through the lenses, neither can they. So there is not much that I can enforce. But after I shot the photos and I still think the emotions cannot reach my former idea I will change their faces.

AoA: Normally you would consider a photo as a record of reality. But some photos and especially art photos seem like going beyond of reality as if that moment was not real. How can you get such a moment?

Zhang Wei: It is mostly about me feelings. As I am an artist who feels very connected to society I mostly try to get the moments where I can see something of the true society that goes beyond the surface. And with some techniques I can exaggerate this truth.

AoA: What do you think about censorship?

Zhang Wei: I choose freedom and no censorship. My work has been caught off here in Beijing at many big exhibitions.

AoA: What could organisations and society learn from artists?

Zhang Wei: I think the responsibility of artists is to impact people and to guide them and to improve their ability to understand the visual language. More concrete I think about a project in Korea where some organisation works on the interaction between farmers and artists. They organise the artists to live in the countryside together with the farmers. They paint pictures for instance of the farmhouses so that the farmers can directly feel the beauty of art. I think this is a good way. And I know some people who want the common people to learn more about art like also your project. But there are still many things to do and it is a long way.

AoA: Can you think about some options how to make such a connection between art and people stronger?

Zhang Wei: I prefer some simple and direct ways to make people understand the art. For example what I have done with the faces: Some people wanted to understand what I wanted to express. And then they began to think.

AoA: Where should you start to connect the people? Directly at your local environment or do you think it is more effective to go the global way and to spread your messages to a larger extent?

Zhang Wei: To me the local way is the better way because artists only know about their local areas. I don't know much about the whole world. And also for the local people it is easier to understand the local artist.

AoA: If the idea is to start in a local way how could we all get along with globalisation when we share same ideas but live in different societies?

Zhang Wei: Communication with each other is the key. What I like are some resident projects where artists from all over the world live together and communicate with each other. And they all say: "We are actually the same. All what we try is freedom". To give such a spirit also to the rest of the world is a fantastic idea.