

# ART FROM THE LATRINES OF THE GREAT NORTHERN WILDERNESS

BY WANG AI

An artist breaks with tradition to express a unique vision of creative resistance in China.

On October 24, 2003, the Amerasia Bank of Flushing, New York presented an exhibition of more than 50 unusual paintings. These huge works in Chinese ink depicted repeated images of black barred windows, crystalline tears, blood dripping down the face of the canvas, twisted, dismembered corpses framed in black, and clusters of teeth and claws - ferocious images that assaulted the eye.

The exhibition shocked all who went to see it.

The artist, Yan Zhengxue, was born in 1944 in Zhejiang Province. He was accepted for study at Zhejiang Fine Arts Academy in 1962, and in 1990 was appointed head of the Yuan Ming Yuan Artists Colony, referred to at the time as the Soho of China. In 1993 he was elected a deputy of the People's Congress of Jiao City, Zhejiang Province. In 1994 Yan was arrested on trumped-up charges after leading opposition to the government's dismantling of the Yuan Ming Yuan Artists Colony, and was sentenced to Reform Through Labor (RTL) at the Beijing Xianghe RTL camp in the Great Northern Wilderness. There he was tortured with electrical truncheons for six hours, a sensation he compares to being skinned alive. Finally, when the camp guards saw he would not submit, they began giving him ink and paper and allowed him to paint.

Yan Zhengxue used the coarse paper and brushes he was given to express the rage in his heart. Often a camp guard would enter while Yan was in the process of painting, and Yan would quickly wad the painting up and step on it and tell the guard that it was only a useless discard. After the guard left, Yan would retrieve the crumpled painting, painstakingly smooth it out and resume painting. In this way he created more than 100 works.

After completing a painting, Yan Zhengxue would wrap it tightly in plastic, and whenever he was sent outside of the prison to work, he would conceal a painting in his clothes. While laboring he would take an opportunity to use the latrine, and while the camp guard waited for him outside, he hid the wrapped painting in the latrine. Because of the cold weather in the Great Northern Wilderness, the contents



of the latrines were often frozen, and by covering his painting with debris, Yan could ensure that the camp guards would not find it. During his three years in the RTL camp, Yan Zhengxue concealed his works in several different latrines. When one of his fellow prisoners was about to be released, or when he was expecting a visit from a family member, Yan would ask them to recover paintings from the latrines and take them away. Yan knew that what he was doing was very dangerous and that if discovered he would be severely punished. But his artistic instincts told him that he must express his true feelings about life in the prison to the outside world.

On April 3, 1996, three days after Yan Zhengxue was released from RTL and allowed to return to his home in Beijing, he held an exhibition of his works entitled, "Yan Zhengxue's Prison Exhibition." The exhibition alarmed the police, who that same afternoon dispatched a large group of police officers to close it down.

Prior to his recent exhibition in New York, Yan Zhengxue

tried several times to bring his paintings out of China, but did not succeed. Finally, through special connections he was able to smuggle them into the United States concealed in shipments of other goods.

Traditional Chinese ink paintings are characterized by their glorification of tranquility, gracefulness, deep meaning and reticence. Cultured people throughout Chinese history strove to suffuse their works with a lofty and otherworldly atmosphere. Even in the more realistic paintings of the Ming artist Chu Ta (1626-1705), strong feelings of pain for his country's losses were subtly expressed through images of damaged lily pads and wilted flowers or solitary, sightless birds. Chinese artists chose bamboo, orchids, plum blossoms and chrysanthemums to express their dissent, and their sense of beauty eventually became a kind of aesthetic tradition in which viewers are pulled into superficially playful works that are actually a uniquely restrained response to suppression.

Yan Zhengxue is probably the first artist in the Chinese ink medium to use coarse black frames, tears, blood,

dismembered corpses and other such fierce images as a direct and naked expression of pain and a howl of protest from the oppressed soul. Yan Zhengxue's works replicate the characteristic spirit but not the form of traditional Chinese ink paintings: although he uses the flowing beauty of the ink to express his feelings, he chooses a monumental square format more characteristic of Western paintings and the immediacy of realistic images to give a new face to traditional ink paintings. It is through the works created by Yan Zhengxue in prison that we can see how an ink painting can be full of sound and emotion and power.

Yan Zhengxue said to a reporter at the exhibition, "I am a painter, I cannot express myself through language but only through painting. To let others see through my paintings how an artist in China is oppressed, to awaken others to the suffering I endured, that is my greatest hope."

The hope of a true artist.

Translated by Stacy Mosher

