

# Marco Cali

## Interviews Zhang Xing

MC: Could you introduce yourself. A few words on your career, your artistic aims, your curatorial and teaching career.

ZX: I am an artist from China, currently living in London. I majored in painting and began to curate shows while I was teaching at the Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts in China. In 2015 I got cancer and have been living a quiet life since. It is hard to talk about my own artistic aims; I haven't thought about them for such a long time.

MC: Can you introduce us to some of the outsider artists that have come to your attention?

ZX: I became interested in outsider art while I was teaching in China. I met a self-taught artist who worked as a life model in the same college I was working for. It was the first time I had met an outsider artist.

There are a few Chinese outsider artists who have drawn the attention of the art world. Guo Fengyi is the best-known Chinese outsider artist today. She was a retired factory worker, who adopted drawing as a way of healing her illness. As a female, her work often gives an impression of being located in the mysterious force of the cycle of birth and death. The way she draws is like the performance of a shaman; she uses her drawings to communicate with supernature and the world of the unknown. Her expressive, high-density lines feel like chanting and dancing on the surface of the paper. She was nobody, came from nowhere and ended up at the Venice Biennale. Sadly, she passed away before she became recognised as a leading figure of Chinese outsider art. And one of the best Chinese female artists ever.

Xiyadie is another Chinese outsider artist who has recently drawn attention from the Western art world. His work will never be popular in his own country. He uses traditional Chinese 'Paper Cut' technique as a vehicle to voice his mixed feelings of pleasure, guilt and struggle as a gay man, a migration worker, a husband, and a father living in modern China. In his work, he found freedom in a queer 'Garden of Eden' he imagined. The explicit images he has created challenge thousands of years of conventional Chinese culture, and transformed a traditional art form, 'Paper Cut', into a contemporary one. He is the true pioneer of Chinese queer art.

MC: As a curator, what do you envisage for the outsider artists from China?

ZX: I haven't curated any outsider art exhibitions myself, but will be really excited if I have an opportunity to do so. In China, many outsider artists are hiding. Their artistic talents will never be recognised and appreciated if we don't do anything.

MC: What do these artists do that is different from 'insider' artists? What are the qualities that stand out for you with these outsider artists?

ZX: The lack of communication with others. Working in isolation and being disconnected from the art world or society are the factors that have made them different from insider artists. Their power of rawness and originality always attracts me.

MC: What are the obstacles to insider artists being able to make work with these particular qualities?

ZX: I believe outsider artists work with much less pressure than inside artists. They are totally free from the financial, art historical and social pressures that insider artists unusually bear.

MC: What artistic, philosophical, political and personal questions do these outsider artists raise for you?

ZX: It would be a very different art history without the influence or contribution of outsider art in the last one hundred years; insider artists have never stopped absorbing or getting inspiration from outsider artists. Actually, outsider artists do not always stay 'outside'. They have changed our aesthetic and perception of art enormously.

A question always fascinates me: Do good education, training, knowledge, and intelligence make good art? If so, why can't I convince myself when I see someone with autism or a child draw wonderful drawings?

However, I found some answers from a Buddhist story handed down for a thousand years in China. Huineng, an illiterate layperson who worked as a chef at the monastery kitchen, became the sixth patriarch of Chinese Chan Buddhism (the originating tradition of Zen Buddhism). This was because his insight into Buddhism lay far beyond the monks he served in the monastery. As he had experienced a 'sudden enlightenment' which changed how people understand and practice Buddhism in China. This story tells people that one can achieve Buddhahood despite potential shortfalls in one's education and social background; this also applies to outsider art.

Huineng's 'Sudden Enlightenment' can be understood as a transcendental experience, rooted in illogical thinking, which has always been central in outsider art.

**Interview completed on 29 August 2023**