



FENG YAN THE QUEST WITHIN THE MEMORIES

Text by Guo Jing Photo by Dong Lin

*Born in 1963, Feng Yan is one of the most renowned professional photographt artists in China. He graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1989. Before he became a photographer, he was a quite successful story writer. His photos were kept by many museums and institutions around the world. His solo exhibition **The Monuments** held in Three Shadows Photography Art Centre has just ended in May, 2013.*

Feng's workshop is full of the old furniture – long benches in old church, leather bench in museum, well kept file lockers, etc. Being there makes one feel like living in the past. "These are the furniture for daily use. I have many others in other warehouses. The workshop can't store all of them", he said. Feng's workshop is very tidy. Books consume everywhere of the 2nd floor. "I have read all these books.

Feng was born in an intellectual family in Xi-an. His father was one of the pioneers in industrial arts and had immense influence on Feng. Feng learnt Chinese painting from the renowned figure of Chang-an school Mr. Kang Shi-Yao for three years. Feng's photographic skills learnt in Beijing Film Academy led him a prosperous life after his graduation. But he was getting sick of it very soon.

From the end of 1980s to the mid-1990s, Beijing was obsessed with an atmosphere of idealism. Feng was attracted by it as long as he devoted himself in economic world. At last he decided to go to America and terminate this constrained, routine photography work. He can afford his life by working 2 days a week. He can spare much more time to think about his past experiences.

After reading enormous amount of books, Feng started to create poems and short stories. He returned from USA in 2001 and then spent 3 years to finish two fictions. "I was living behind the agricultural museum. There are Suzhou-styled architectures, an artificial lake and a dense forest. I and my wife had a secluded life". He felt that he had accomplished a mission when he finished his novels.

He picked up his camera after his fiction writing. This time the camera became his eyes. The painting experience in childhood shaped his understanding of Chinese culture. Combining this with his life experience in Western world, Feng captures the moments of life with a fully-new thinking style. He expressed his ideas by the form of picture. Both the series of *The Rockery* and *Psychedelic Bamboo* has strong Chinese elements. *The Power*, *The Order*, *Red Calligraphy* seem to express a nostalgic respect and new interpretations to the old traditions.

Art works usually have intimate relationship with its creators' character. It is difficult to express oneself whole-heartedly in this shallow art market. Feng did that. Feng loves natural and simple things. He tried to recreate the natural things through his own understanding. He has been using a 6×9 scale Fuji camera for these years. This scale is close to the movie film frame scale, thus leaving his works a strong sense of movie scenes. It gives its audience a space to imagine.

ART BANK: These furniture are remarkably beautiful.

F: I bought them not only because I want to take photos of them. I would use them too. The leather chair in the exhibition poster was from the museum. You can see the label on it. Though it is not made by real leather, but the design is good. It represents a sense of publicness. I used to go to the second hand markets but I seldom do that due to my busy work. Perhaps I have enough of them

ART BANK: You like reading books very much, don't you?

F: Yes. Reading is a part of my life. I started reading from the western modern literature. I felt like it was written by myself. It triggered me to devote to novel-writing. I can judge the narrative style by intuition. I like the narratives with rigor, strength and smoothness. Like Faulkner, Calvino and Borges had early influence on me. I like reading Dostoyevsky too. I like reading something which hurts one really badly like a knife. I've read Proust's Remembrance of the Past for one and half times. I met my wife because of reading, as we found that we were reading the same books the first time we see each other. Kafka's quote "Writing as a form of prayer" influences me the most.

ART BANK: When did you decided to return to photographic art?

F: After the SARS in 2003 towards 2004, I finished my second long story, The Wild Goose Pagoda, which is about the violent fights in Cultural Revolution. The fight scenes give me a lot of visual impression. Another novel Zhongnan Mountain was about the changes of the cities in 1980s. Writing such a long stories felt like experiencing a war, in which we went through life and death. After finishing two novels with a million words in total, I was exhausted and I would like to change the format of expression. I started creating images in 2004. It is a necessary consequence of novel-writing. Monument's image was originated from my textual work The Reflecting Sound of Chair.

ART BANK: Your works has a lot of Chinese element mingled with strong western ideas, aren't they?

F: My father's interest in arts, the place where I spent my childhood – Xi-an, and my experience in America shapes my language of creation. Western modern literature constructs my value system and gives me the diachronic sense of time and space. Just like in the narratives, different events can across each other in one space-time realm. I created Dazzling Bamboo, monument and Mountain Rocks series simultaneously. Besides, I love the Gongbi style in Chinese paintings. I think it has a rigor with a special perspective. I still have a Gongbi-styled work by my painting teacher in my bedroom. I pay my respects to them by the Mountain Rocks series, in the particular way of my time.

ART BANK: Why do you insist using photo film, while many others are using digital cameras?

F: Actually I don't think I'm a photographer. It's not about which identity, an artist or a photographer, is more important to me. Photographer usually depicts a man prepared to go everywhere with his camera, like a soldier with his rifle. But I don't. Digital camera's convenience is not of utmost importance to me. But since it allow you to see the product immediately after shooting, I'm planning to have one, for the new themes I want to do.