

# Wei's way of painting old and new pays off

A BEAUTIFUL woman strikes an assured pose in front of Tiananmen Gate. Dressed to kill in designer clothes, she almost outshines her chaperon, an old Qing prince seated in uncompromising splendour. Welcome to the anachronistic world of artist Wei Rong. Her fusions of old and new China, conservative mandarins mingling with modern, independent women, fetch thousands of pounds on the international market.

At her spacious studio inside the villa she designed herself, Wei Rong is finishing her latest work, seeking with each stroke a photo-like realism. "I must have been born under a lucky star," she says. "For as long as I could remember, art was designed to serve the masses. Today we artists can pursue art for art's sake."

And for money's sake, too.

BY LIJIA MACLEOD  
IN BEIJING

a million dollars in New York. Growing world interest stimulates more Chinese artists, such as Wei herself. Born to an ordinary worker's family, she was among the first students enrolled by the leading Preparatory School of the Central Art Academy in 1979. It had only just resumed teaching after the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. She opted for the copperplate department, leaving others to compete for places in the more popular oil painting department. But for her graduation project, she created a series of copperplate works based on street shots she took, scotching the belief that copperplate was only good for abstract styles. Wei had made a splash. Photo-realism became her trademark. In 1996, while teaching, she

young female artists. The works touched a wide audience, and Wei abandoned copperplate for canvas. This was the exhibition at which she met her future agent, Lawrence Wu.

Within a year, Wu had brought Wei's paintings to Christie's in Hong Kong and auctioned them for over £350 a piece. Encouraged, Wei focused on oil paintings of women. "The art world remains very male-dominated. Perhaps I want to express a kind of feminism," she suggests.

Her style changed dramatically in 1994 after a tour of an antiques market with her husband Wang Hao, a fellow artist. There she discovered an old album of family pictures from the late Qing dynasty. In a series of oils, she experimented with these images, and produced a collection of "old

The big breakthrough came three years later when she considered combining the old mandarin styles with the new designer fashion. The price of her paintings leapt to £22,000 apiece. "Gathering" is a typical example, in which two young girls in modern attire are inserted into a black-and-white group "shot" of Qing dynasty patriarchs. The result offers rich material for interpretation and analysis by intellectuals and feminists.

Yet despite her success, she maintains a low profile. Barely exhibiting within China, she avoids publicity, and is known only to a relatively small circle. For years she continued at her teaching post, mainly as she needed a studio. By 1997, she had saved enough to buy a plot of land in a village near Beijing. There she and her



Wei's fusions of old and new China, ancient mandarins and modern women, fetch thousands of pounds. LIJIA MACLEOD

gration of other artists and celebrities that the area is known as "star village".

Wei and her husband quit teaching to dedicate themselves

artistic atmosphere, but now, if you are commercially successful, others may criticise you for pleasing a foreign audience," she complains. "But what's

exposure, particularly as China's own position becomes more powerful, Chinese art will sell at even higher prices."

Attacks labelling Wei as an

manly but at least she does not face political censorship. "Before, people would panic if neither partner in a marriage was part of a work unit. Now, luckily,

## Wei's way of painting old and new pays off

A beautiful girl strikes an assured pose before Tiananmen Gate. Dressed to kill in designer fashions, she almost outshines her unusual chaperon, an old Qing prince seated in uncompromising splendour, inside a Cultural Revolution stamp. Confused? Welcome to the anachronistic world of artist Wei Rong. Her fusions of old and new China, conservative mandarins mingling with modern, independent women, fetch thousands of pounds on the international market.

At her spacious studio inside the villa she designed herself, Wei Rong is finishing her latest work. With each confident stroke, the portraits gain a photo-like realism. "I must have been born under a lucky star" confides the independent artist. "For as long as I could remember, art was designed to serve the masses. Today, however, we artists can pursue art for art's sake."

For money's sake, too. Paintings by famous artists such as Chen Yifei fetch up to a million dollars in New York. Growing world interest stimulates more Chinese artists with great potential, such as Wei herself. Born to an ordinary worker's family, Wei was among the first group of students enrolled by the prestigious Preparatory School of the Central Art Academy in 1979. It had only just resumed teaching after the chaos of the Cultural Revolution.

On entering the Academy itself, she opted for the copperplate department, leaving others to compete for places in the more popular oil painting department since she viewed herself a second grade student at best. For her graduation project, she created a series of copperplate works based on street shots she took, featuring exquisite detail and fine techniques, contrary to belief that copperplate was only good for abstract styles. Wei had made a splash. The photo-realistic effect became her trademark.

Upon graduation, she was assigned a job at the Preparatory School. While teaching, she included some nude works in an oil painting exhibition by eight young female artists in Spring 1990. The upbeat spirit of the women's works touched a wide audience. From that point forward, Wei abandoned copperplate for canvas. Just as importantly, this was the exhibition at which she met her future agent Lawrence Wu.

Within a year, the agent had brought Wei's paintings to Christie's in Hong Kong and auctioned them for over HK\$4,000 (350 pounds) a piece, a far cry from an art teacher's modest salary. It was also the first time that the works of mainland artists had been auctioned in the international market. Encouraged by her success, Wei worked even harder, focusing chiefly on oil paintings with women portraits. "The art world remains very male-dominated. Perhaps I want to express feminism in a more unconscious way," Wei suggests.

Her style changed dramatically in 1994 after touring an antique market with her husband Wang Hao, a fellow artist and keen antique collector. There she discovered an old album of family pictures from the late Qing dynasty. In a series of oil paintings, she experimented with these old images, and produced an absorbing collection of 'old' black and white pictures that quickly sold at Christie's for HK\$80,000.(7500 pounds)

The breakthrough, however, came three years later when she suddenly considered combining the old with the new to give her work a more complex feel. It proved to be a clever move as the price of her paintings leapt to HK\$250,000 (22,000 pounds) per piece. 'Gathering' is a typical example, in which two young girls clad in modern, colourful attire were inserted into a black and white group 'shot' of Qing dynasty patriarchs. The result is striking, and offers rich material for interpretation by intellectuals and feminists who may discern women demanding equal footing with men.

"People often tend to look back and feel nostalgic about the past." Wei offers by way of explanation for the success of the old picture series. But she is reluctant to explain any deeper meaning. "There is a certain connection between the images, but I leave it up to the imagination of the viewer. I care only how to make my paintings look good." Lawrence Wu praises her as 'one of the few Chinese artists who can combine both great ideas and great technique.'

Yet despite her success, she maintains a low profile. Rarely exhibiting within China, she avoids publicity, and is known only to a relatively small circle. For years, she continued at her teaching post, mainly as she needed a studio. By 1995 she had saved enough to buy a plot of land in a village in the southeast outskirts of Beijing. There, she and her husband built a villa and studio that encouraged such a migration of other artists and 'celebrities' the area is commonly known as "star village".

The changing atmosphere in the art world finally forced Wei and her husband to resign, and dedicate themselves to paint. "People stay at the Academy for its prestige and artistic atmosphere, but now, if you are commercially successful, others may criticize you pleasing foreign audience and so on." She complains. "But what's wrong with that? I am confident as Chinese art wins more exposure, particularly as China's own position becomes more powerful, Chinese art will sell at even higher prices!"

While unkind remarks on Wei such as 'imperialist artist' smack of basic jealousy, Wei's dilemma is shared by many famous Chinese artists, including film-makers Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. Yet, luckier than them, she faces no strict censorship from the authority or other political taboo. "Before, people would panic if neither partner in a marriage had a work unit. Now, luckily, society is tolerant enough for people like us to exist."