

On Fish, Birds and Pears: A conversation with Kristin NG-Yang

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by Carol Brown

Kristin Ng-Yang was born in Shandong, China in 1970 and came to South Africa to in 2001 to study English. She settled in Pietermaritzburg, Kwa-Zulu Natal where she still lives. I had met Kristin briefly and have always been fascinated by her art. The interview was meant to be a chat over coffee, but the COVID-19 lockdown changed that. Instead, we spoke over Zoom and exchanged emails.



Kristin and Yisun NG-Yang

CAROL BROWN: *Can you tell me a little bit about your family?*

KRISTIN NG-YANG: I was born in Shandong province in China. My maternal grandfather, Boming Chen, was a traditional Chinese *literati* artist. My father Chunming Yang is also an artist, but he is an oil painter in the western style. He paints landscapes and still lives in China. My mother has passed away. My father worked in Zibo Cultural Centre in China during the Cultural Revolution. This place taught the workers about art, but it was not for training professional artists.[1] He worked there from the time he left university until he retired. He has exhibited frequently and had a solo exhibition. There are currently some of his paintings at Tamasa Gallery in Durban where I also exhibit.

I grew up with art because my grandfather and dad were always making art. Also, the visitors who came to our home were all artists so I grew up surrounded by

creatives and thinking everyone could make art. My son, Yisun, also feels that he can make art. He is like me when I was growing up. You just believe you can do it.

CB: *When did you start taking a serious interest in art?*

KNY: I started high school at the end of the 1980s and university at the beginning of the 1990s. China was still using a Russian system then and it was quite a serious kind of training. For example, in still life drawing classes, we had to draw it exactly as it was. My hand is good, I can draw. But later I felt it also destroyed my artistic hand. I struggled for a long time to find my own style.

CB: *Were there any artists in those early days that you particularly liked, whether Chinese or Western?*

KNY: I like Van Gogh's work. His paintings are not very colorful which I like. Impressionist artworks were very popular in China. I think it also depended on that time in China and what we had access to. We couldn't really see more contemporary works. Lucien Freud's works were also popular. I think the government selected which artists we could see.

CB: *The Cultural Revolution was from 1966-1976 so you would have been born just towards the end. China was pretty closed then.*

KNY: Yes, I was born in 1970. But the political unrest was around the 1980s when China started opening the country. Those years were exciting times. By the end of the 80s, China closed again for a bit during the Tiananamen Square Uprising.[2]

CB: *You have previously mentioned that the philosophy of Taoism interests you? Can you elaborate on this?*

KNY: I grew up with Taoism. It's based around the idea of meditation and spirituality. A friend once mentioned that my representations of fish show them as always floating and having a shadow. I think they take you to a place you never knew subconsciously. Also, the figures in my paintings are always walking in empty streets but you can feel that they are in a public area or space. My work is quiet, but I won't say I have made work specifically to follow Lao Tzu's philosophy.

CB: *Why did you choose to come to South Africa?*

KNY: I was an art teacher in China from 1993-1999 and it was by chance that I met an agent looking for people to come to South Africa to learn English. I had not thought about South Africa before. I planned to stay for two years but I am still here since 1999.

CB: *I know that you attained your M.A.F.A. at University of Kwa Zulu Natal (UKZN), Pietermaritzburg and your topic was French landscape paintings in the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg. What interested you in this topic?*

KNY: Impressionism in China was very popular, and it is a part of history I am very familiar with. I battled with the language when I got here but I had the artistic

background and knowledge for my study. I never thought I would find so many French artists' works in a small art museum in Africa. It was amazing for me. I also took my dad to the Tatham when he visited South Africa and he was amazed.

CB: *You met your husband, Siu-Ah NG, from Hong Kong, at UKZN where he was Professor of Mathematics and he died from cancer shortly after your son Yisun was born leaving you as a single mother. I'm sure this has influenced your life and art.*

KNY: I did not consciously think about a plan for my life. When I got to South Africa, I knew I could draw and paint. But I didn't know how to paint or draw without a still life to copy. I think the Centre for Visual Art (CVA) at UKZN gave me this opportunity to hone my skill. When I started there, I studied many images of food. After that I still didn't have a direction of what I should paint. Mainly by looking at things surrounding me I found a style. Later, after I had Yisun, I started making work around him and my life. These include the thirteen oil paintings called "You and Me" which are abstract interpretations painted in soft colours to express my sadness. I never told myself that I must make works that followed my own life but looking back, that is what I did. Interestingly, when Yisun started school, he pushed me back into society. Before that I only had a small social circle mainly with artists and galleries.

CB: *Your work has changed a lot from 2015. Your early works, Out of Balance, Zulu Series, My Cage, were the beginning of what you are doing now especially in terms of your use of space and bringing together Western and Chinese elements.*

KNY: The *Zulu Series* were charcoal and print works on paper. I had an exhibition with Vulindlela Nyoni at ArtSpace in Durban. At that time in 2007, before I had Yisun, my husband and I travelled a lot. He liked to drive and sometimes during the long drives I used to sketch and photograph. South Africa had a lot of problems already, but I would sit in the car and felt separated from the space. I had my own space in the car looking at surrounding things. The country was so beautiful. People were walking in the streets so peacefully. But I felt separated from what I was seeing. I couldn't feel or hear what was happening outside the car. I think this is why my work is very quiet.

I also did the *Bird/Cage* during my husband's cancer treatment. I think he started treatment in 2004. He had the treatment and recovered but he had a shadow around him because of the cancer. He needed care and had no freedom.

I also did *Balance*, a drawing of a man walking and trying to balance on a string. I don't want to directly say out loud that it was painful for me, but these were a way of expressing that pain. When my husband was in radiation, I made three paintings. One had a figure with a mask. I finished two but never finished the third one. Because during his treatment I had the energy to do it, but afterwards I never had the energy to finish the third.

When the cancer came back, I made a painting of him. The painting was two metres squared. One figure is in the front and the figure in the back is flying a kite. This was the day the doctor told him the cancer was back. On his last treatment I made an abstract painting, *You and Me*. It related to my life. I never planned to do anything but that is how they came out. I also created pictures of my son as a baby.



Kristin NG-Yang, *China Baby No. 13*, 2014. Image courtesy the artist.



Kristin NG-Yang, *Untitled No. 1*, 2012. Image courtesy the artist.

CB: In 2016 you won the Ovation award at the National Festival of Arts for the installation *Bird/Fish*. Can you talk about that work and the fact that it was a collaborative work?

KNY: In the 1980s there was a Taiwanese woman singer whose work I admired and she sang a song called *A Bird and a Fish*. The bird was falling in love with the fish. When my husband passed away, I went back to China after almost 20 years. I met old friends and we talked about this song. This woman singer had one daughter. She married and later divorced. She also wrote a song about being a mom and her relationship with her daughter.

Around 2010 I was doing a lot of work around fish. Several people started calling me “the fish lady”. I normally start focusing on one subject for a long time, leave it and come back to it. I wanted to push my study of the fish into more contemporary spaces.

They related to my life. The bird falls in love with the fish, but they never get a chance to be together as they occupy different territories. Like when you are separated from the people that you love, and you never get a chance to see them. It’s the same kind of thing. That was the inspiration behind that work. That was my feeling in putting this work together. I never thought I would do collaborations. At first, I thought I would make my fish using glass. I could hang all my fish, but it didn’t work. I tried ceramics but it didn’t work either. Finally, I decided to use printing ink to paint the fish on Perspex. I wanted to do an installation using all my Perspex fish. When I was taking photos of the installation, I noticed the shadows created by the fabric behind. A friend suggested I get dancers to move among the fish and see what it will look like. We contracted local dancers and used African music and Chinese music in the piece.[3]



Kristin NG-Yang, *Perceptions and Prejudices*, 2017. Video still.



Kristin NG-Yang, *Bird with Fish No.2*, 2016.



Kristin NG-Yang, *Fish* installation at National Festival of Arts, 2016.

CB: *In your artist's statement for your second installation, Perceptions and Prejudices you speak about the experiences of displacement and migration. Many of these comments centre around food, home, and memory.*

KNY: When I first came here, I couldn't speak English. I remember I went to Musgrave Centre where they had a bookshop that also sold kitchen stuff. I couldn't read much but the cooking books were interesting to me. I had never seen a recipe book like that in China. The pictures were beautiful. I was also interested in the way Western people eat food. In China there is a communal dish in the centre of the table, and everyone puts their chopsticks together. Utensils like knives and forks were very strange for me.

When I came to the CVA, under Professor Terry King, all the students had something interesting to do. I could paint beautiful still life's but didn't know what my subject matter was going to be. I did several paintings for the first few weeks. The thought of the recipe book inspired me to do something around that. I bought some books and started doing paintings of food. When my dad saw my paintings years later he gave me an idea. He said, "You were probably very hungry at that time." He kept saying this. But he lived through the 1960s during the famine in China. He thought I was hungry and I never knew how to convince him otherwise. I painted food for two years. I first had the shape of the food. Later they became very abstract and colourful paintings. I think in the food series it really taught me how to use my skill to create an artwork.

In 2004 my husband and I went to Germany for his sabbatical. During the day I painted in our apartment. One day I went to buy fruit. We bought two pears and they were quite expensive. I thought let me paint these expensive pears and that's how the series started.

CB: *The shape of pears is very like the female body. Was this on your mind?*

KNY: I was a little bit naughty in how I painted them. I would paint the pears quite big but also you could see a more human kind of shape in the pear. Later I pushed them more.



Kristin NG-Yang, *Pear No. 1*, 2004.

CB: *I looked up the symbol of pears and one of the things that I found interesting was it said that the same word for a pear in Chinese (li) also means separation.*

KNH: Usually in Chinese culture, people won't share a pear with you. The word for pear in China also means we are separating. That's why culturally the Chinese don't like sharing pears. They like pears but won't cut and separate the pear. I had an exhibition in China and many people commented that if I painted apples people would love it rather than the pears.

CB: *I noticed that most of your pear paintings are not traditional still life. They float like your birds. You use the same sense of space as you would for the fishes or birds. I wanted to talk about the installation Pears and Lace which was shown at the gallery Hui Space, Songzhuang, Beijing in 2018. I think that bringing the lace into the female shape goes back to how you painted the pears. The idea of floating the lace pears from the ceiling is like your use of space with the birds and fishes.*

KNY: I've always loved lace. I am a very feminine kind of woman. I love lace details very much and I love embroidery. Sometimes I don't know how to translate it to art. I love knitting and I knit for my son. I started knitting when I was very young. In the later 1980s in China I saw a Japanese artist who did a lot of female figures with lace. When I came back from Germany in 2005, I did a collagraph using lace. That was the first time I incorporated lace in art. I had an exhibition in Beijing two years ago and the gallerist loved the lace pears and pushed me to make an exhibition with the lace. I also paint with lace on the canvas and pull it off when I am done so it leaves an impression.



Kristin NG-Yang, Pear and lace installation, 2018.



Kristin NG-Yang, *Pear No.5*, 2019.

CB: Let us go back to *Perceptions and Prejudice* which you showed in Durban in 2017 at *The Other Room* and at *Hui Space, Beijing*.

KNY: I created this multi-media installation to explore what it means to be foreign and displaced. As a Chinese artist living in South Africa for 17 years, I have encountered questions like “Do you eat dogs?” and “Where’s your shop?” When my son started school, the other children used to ask him such things which were hurtful. I decided to get to know the other parents and to socialise a bit with them to make them understand. I learned that other foreigners had similar experiences. An Italian/Scottish friend recalls how in the 1960s she was teased at school because of her Mediterranean roots and the use of olive oil before it became fashionable. This installation was born of personal experiences and it is my hope that these works challenge the viewers and give them a space to share their own experiences.[4]

CB: You have been called a diasporic artist and there is a lot of theory around diasporic artists. Nicolas Bourriard has a theory called altermodernism. He calls it a new form of cosmopolitanism and says, “It jolts us out of tradition embodying an escape from the confines of nationalism and identity trading.”[5] You are not working as a ‘Chinese’ artist as you have mentioned. Do you see yourself as an artist of the diaspora or just an artist? You have travelled more than most artists and exhibited extensively internationally. Do you have an allegiance to one place? Are you still influenced by Chinese upbringing or do you see yourself as an artist of the world?



Kristin NG-Yang, *The Empress and the Dragon*, 2020.

KNY: I’m not going to say I am a very Chinese artist. I don’t use Chinese symbols to produce my works. I am not into political subjects. I don’t even really like the news. Sometimes it is too much and too heavy. I try to isolate myself and I am loving quarantine. In the first ten years living in South Africa, I didn’t feel South African. Last

year I organized an exhibition at the Durban Art Gallery with Chinese artists. When they came here I realised that I belonged here. I never thought about it but as time went by, I did. Even with rhino poaching, I didn't feel comfortable to talk about that. I know it's all related to Chinese or Asian culture. But now I am more confident to talk about it. When I mentioned it to the Chinese artists, one of them became angry at me. I understand that for him rhino poaching wasn't something he was faced with almost daily. But if you live here you look at things differently.

With my art, I want it to be recognised as an international artist. I don't want to limit myself.

CB: *The Kristin Ng-Yang Arts Studio in Beijing, what is that?*

KNY: I had a space in Beijing in the artist village. For a long time, I thought I would like to do a residency exchange project, that it was a good idea to exchange artists from South Africa and China to do work together but it was too difficult to organise.

CB: *You turned 50 this year and had planned a solo show at Tamasa Art Gallery but COVID-19 changed that. What are your plans for the rest of 2020 and are there themes you are exploring?*

KNY: I recently did a project with the University of Cape Town. They have a project called "Recentring AfroAsia."^[6] They are planning to have a conference and will have a concert and exhibition. Hopefully this project will be going to China because it's related to Africa and China. People have been telling me about this theory of putting Africa and Asia together. They are calling it rerouting Africa and Asia. I did drawings with Chinese paper.

I still will make more work for the Tamasa show. This exhibition is going back to my work about food. Since I have become a mom I am mindful of what food I am giving my son. I think a lot about food, such as that my son cannot see a live chicken and eat it. I am looking into those relationships.

Carol Brown is a curator, facilitator and writer.

Notes.

[1] Chairman Mao adopted four goals for the Cultural Revolution: to replace his designated successors with leaders more faithful to his current thinking; to rectify the Chinese Communist Party; to provide China's youth with a revolutionary experience; and to achieve some specific policy changes so as to make the educational, health care, and cultural systems less elitist. He mobilized the country's urban youths into groups called the Red Guards. <https://www.Brittanica.com/event/event/Cultural-Revolution> . Accessed 29.07.2020

[2] These were student led demonstrations calling for democracy, free speech and free press in China, June 4-5, 1989.

[3] Music by Jianjun Wang, Choreography by Qiniso Zamandla Zungu, Dance by Sebelo Cele, Millicent Khanyile and filmed by Simphiwe Ngcobo

[4] Voices by Yisun NG-Yang, Simphiwe Fiddy Ngcobo, Rory Klopper, and Kristin NG-Yang; song by Nondudzo Mthombeni; song production by Li-Whiz Beats; filmed by Simphiwe Ngcobo.

[5] Nicholas Bourriaud, ed. *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, 2009.

[6]<http://www.afroasia.uct.ac.za/#:~:text=Re%2Dcentring%20AfroAsia%20is%20a,%20AfroAsian%20community%20of%20scholarship>. Accessed 15 January 2021.