



ESSAY: Huang Rui Works Offer Glimpse of Afterlife of a Revolutionary Hero

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by Charles A. Riley II

It seems like such a wishful anachronism to call an artist a “hero.” That kind of adulation—typically reserved for artists like the feisty Gustave Courbet or the dauntless Vincent van Gogh among others of the distant past—can seem out of place in an age of irony or indifference to the role of the artist in society. And then there’s Huang Rui, the Chinese artist known for social and cultural criticism, whose “Zen Space” exhibition is on view through December 8, 2018 at Boers-Li Gallery in New York.

When I saw [Huang Rui](#) noiselessly appear in the doorway of the elegant main room of the Boers-Li gallery the day before his opening in October, hands folded before him, his owlish glasses downcast, he hardly looked like a fire-breathing revolutionary.

That image of nerd-as-troublemaker, captured in Huang’s self-portrait which is in the show, recalls the excitement of that movement in its echoes of Wang Dan, one of the top leaders of the Tiananmen protests, a skinny history major whose glasses were emblematic. But anyone familiar with the star-crossed history of the Democracy Movement in China would know better than to take his mild-mannered demeanor at face value.



“Self-Portrait” by Huang Rui, 1982. Pencil on paper, 31.1 x 21.3 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Boers-Li Gallery New York.

Huang, little known on the Upper East Side of Manhattan prior to art lovers’ exposure to the quiet riches of this show, is a living link to one of the bravest chapters in his nation’s cultural history. As artist, spokesman, organizer and curator, he played a giant role in the formation of the [Stars group](#) and the stunning breakthrough of art and literature that is still referred to as the Democracy Wall.

Archival photographs from 1979 of Huang and his fantastically brave artist and writer friends—including the poet [Bei Dao](#), as well as the better-known but at that moment less important [Ai Wei Wei](#)—hanging their art and manifestos on the tall iron fence at Beihai Park surrounding the National Gallery in Beijing are all the more remarkable because they predate the more famous, eventually disastrous Tiananmen Square uprising by a full decade.

The Stars show, which Huang and his band of intellectuals hung on a sunny September 27, was pulled down by white-jacketed policemen just a day later, but its resonance lasted for years. The shocked and fascinated crowd who essentially stormed the fence for a look comprised an assembly alarming enough to the paranoid Communist party leadership around the corner in their Zhongnanhai compound.

Beyond that incipient threat, it is easy to see what it was about the art that pissed off the authorities. Huang's full-breasted goddess rising over the crowd in his [now-infamous painting April 5, 1976](#)—the title refers to an earlier spontaneous demonstration in Tiananmen Square mourning the death of Premier Zhou En-lai—was just too darned hot to handle for a government that deemed Beethoven's symphonies a form of "spiritual pollution."

At first glance, the cool abstraction of the "Zen Space" at Boers-Li seems a long way from the incendiary paintings that Huang flung in the face of the Communist Party. I spent some time with the serene *Yin and Yang* paintings that Boers-Li alertly hung slightly off-center (*feng shui* at work) near a window on a generous wall. The work refers to the *I Ching*, a classic text of divination with a powerful graphic dimension. It is based on eight trigrams, abstract symbols that represent nature that run through permutations of 64 hexagrams, each formed from six abstract strokes that are subtly invoked in the excellent catalogue accompanying the show.



Installation of "Huang Rui: Zen Space" at Boers Li with "Ying and Yang No. 3" and "Ying and Yang No. 1" on left and "Zen Space - Wood" on right. Each "Ying and Yang" painting is oil on canvas, 39.40 by 31.50 inches, 1984. "Zen Space - Wind" is oil on canvas, 52. 50 x 61 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Boers-Li Gallery New York.

Huang's grisaille renders the male and female principles of the *I Ching* in an aptly meticulous, hard-edged idiom. After 15 years in Japan, he has acquired an aesthetic patina, the habit of reflection that lends greater depth to the show because it offers us a glimpse into the after-life of the revolutionary, especially in a cultural moment that sees Xi Jin Ping ascendant and the ideals of the Democracy Movement rapidly fading from collective memory.

The current show is fascinating because of this retrospective calm. Between the Robert Rymanesque white on unprimed canvas of one *Zen Space* painting, to the yellow and black palette (reminiscent for Western viewers of [Robert Motherwell](#) or [Ellsworth Kelly](#)), the path from direct expression to re-directed or indirect refraction is intellectually as well as artistically founded. Huang presided over the installation in the Boers-Li warren of white rooms with their fireplaces and elaborate moldings, propping delicate paintings on small blocks of wood slid slightly off-center on the mantels. The curation is terrific.



“Zen Space” by Huang Rui, 2018. Oil on canvas, 20.70 x 25.60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Boers-Li Gallery.

A word or two about the gallery is in order. The similarly brave [Waling Boers](#), who introduced me to Huang in New York, is a Dutch curator who made his name as a bridge between contemporary Chinese art and the west when he ran the non-profit Buro Friedrich space in Berlin with fellow curator Pi Li. In a stroke of geopolitical and economic prescience, they opened Boers-Li Gallery in 2005, and five years later became a pioneer of Beijing’s cutting-edge 798 Art Zone, still the nation’s hottest gallery and studio neighborhood despite its remote location and the best efforts of the humorless Communist Party censors.

In Beijing, Boers-Li is the go-to gallery for historic “underground” No Name Group and Star Group artists from the 1970s, the Beijing Abstract Movement from the early 1980s, the ’85 New Wave Movement, the New Media Movement in the 1990s, as well as the younger generations: the so-called “Millennials” and “Post-Internet.”



“Houhai” by Huang Rui, 1981. Oil on canvas, 31.50 x 25.60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Boers-Li Gallery.

Just three days after previewing [Huang’s](#) earnest and substantive exhibition, the Nassau County Museum, where I serve as executive director, hosted a reception for a multigenerational alumni group from China’s most prestigious university (Beijing, or “Beida”) and the heroism of Huang’s generation, represented by a smattering of doctors mainly, stood in stark contrast to the interests of recent graduates whose neurotic passion for smartphones and Chanel bags is a pallid echo of the hunger for books of their elders and betters. It is an open secret that diplomas and fake grade transcripts are commodities in today’s China.

The alumni visit brought back memories of an early moment of student dissent at the university in China where I worked starring real bookworms (*shu dai-zi* in Mandarin), which is no longer a compliment on campuses where hooking up via WeChat is an addiction. When they descended on the library, books disappeared. The librarians banned satchels, and the students (my future wife among them) assembled on the steps chanting a famous line from a story by Lu Xun about a dejected scholar named Kong Yiji: “To steal a book is not a theft.” That love of learning, and the courage to lay it on the line in public, seems dead in today’s soulless China.

To conclude this essay, I offer the words of the artist, transcribed from the gallery archive and unedited to preserve the honest passion from which they spilled. I type with tears in my eyes,

prompted by my admiration for Huang and his decent, brave generation and by an elegiac sense of an integrity rapidly vanishing from the shallow academic and artistic worlds, not just of China but of my own country:

“Why was there such a strong response? A kind of fever, why would it have been there if not because everybody was scarred, in our understanding of the times, if we could only count on our means of expression, our artistic means were not mature, they could not bring about this effect on our audience. We caught the real face of life with our art, we exposed reality in our depictions of life, and correspondingly, we were successful, and at the time it was a product of our enthusiasm for life. We hoped that through our love for life, and through our art, we could shout out other people’s cries, out from blocked up mouths, to let people understand our answer to humanity would be one of justice.”

BASIC FACTS: “Huang Rui: Zen Space” is on view October 26 to December 8, 2018 at Boers-Li Gallery, 24 East 81st St, New York, NY 10028. www.boersligallery.com.

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