The Metaphysics of Hong Lei

By Maggie Ma

In the photograph, a dead bloody bird entwined with pearls lies on the ground. Behind the bird, one can see outlines of the palace in Beijing's Forbidden City, the seat of Chinese imperial power.

The picture, created and embellished with red paint by the 46-year-old conceptual artist Hong Lei, is titled "Autumn in The Forbidden City." And last October, it sold for nearly $35,000 at a Sotheby's auction in Hong Kong, making it one of the most expensive Chinese contemporary art photographs ever sold.

Suddenly, the work of Hong Lei, who makes use of computers, photography and painting to create colorful portraits of a classical world in decay, are being praised by leading art experts. Wu Liang, the distinguished art critic, calls Hong Lei, "One of the most unique conceptual photographers."

But long before Sotheby's auction, Hong Lei's works was gaining notice. His photographs were exhibited at leading international museums and galleries, such as the Pompidou Centre in Paris and the International Center of Photography in New York. And much of his work had been sold to collectors in Europe, Japan and the United States.

Among the first to acquire Hong's work was Ulrich Sieg, the former Swiss ambassador to China and one of the leading collectors of Chinese contemporary art.
"I think these are significant works," says Mr. Sigg, who bought two of Hong's works for about $600 a piece in 1996, as he looked at "Autumn in Forbidden City." "At first, you look and you think it's a beautiful image. And then you look closer and you see something deeper. It's about manerism and decay in Chinese civilization." Indeed, a central feature of Hong's work is duplicating classical Chinese paintings, by adding what he calls a "death complex" to them.

In his works, all kinds of uncomfortable and dissonant elements are fused together, creating a disconcerting interpretation of Chinese culture. What at first appears to be a work of beauty, is instead a scene of darkness. This is the philosophy behind Hong Lei's works. They are existential tales on the modern age in China.

In an interview several years ago, Hong Lei said: "Facing modern society, I chose a pattern of those times, the structure of pictures of the Song Dynasty. But the birds that were alive in those pictures are dead in mine. A dead bird, being a kind of conceptual symbol, is actually a continuation of my ideas when I made oil paintings." Then, he added: "That dead bird may be me."

Hong Lei was born in Chongansa, Jiangsu Province. His father served in the military and had a keen interest in literature. His ancestors, he says, were wealthy tea merchants. But when Hong Lei grew up, there was no trace of wealth or opulence in his family life, only a longing for ages past.

"But I love old things," Hong said, "When I see the rice paper, I always want to cry.

Early on, he says he was fascinated by splendid and elegant things from the past, things he discovered in his family history and local Jiangnan customs. That is one reason his photographs often use traditional images, like pine trees, bamboo, plum blossoms, orchids and Jiangnan gardens, which were once filled with luxurious jewels and carpentry work.

Hong, however, got a late start as an artist. He says his life was set back by the Cultural Revolution. And then he worked for a time before studying oil painting attending the Nanjing Art College, which he graduated from in 1987.

After college, he studied print making at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing and by 1993 had some of his expressionistic oil paintings exhibited in the Guangzhou Biennale of Modern Art.

He held a solo exhibition of his paintings in 1993, titled "Metaphysical Poetics." But his paintings never really took off, and by 1995, he was troubled. "I couldn't sleep well at night for a long time, I was thinking. 'What should I do next?'" he recalled. "And finally I discovered that Chinese traditional art was my favorite, especially the imperial court paintings of Song Dynasty."

On the other hand, he says he recognized that modern Chinese painting could never match those masterpieces of the past.

Meanwhile, conceptual art was beginning to emerge in China, allowing artists to use a range of materials and technique to produce modern art. Artists began using everyday objects, create installations or performance art, and using photography or video in their art works.
In 1999, Hong says he took a photograph of his installation work, "Chinese box," by chance. The photograph, of a dead bird with a pearl necklace in a red wood traditional jewelry box won him praise from friends and critics.

And from that moment, Hong says he switched to photography. He created, "The Imperial Court of the Song Dynasty Copy" series and "China Landscape" (Shanshui Gardens) series, as well as "Landscape in Black and White."

In these duplications of famous Chinese art works, the viewer can see that under Hong's shell of classical images, what he really wants to express is his anxiety about the conflicts between reality and tradition, good things as well as bad things. "This is how I understand Chinese ancient civilization. I can't say I criticize it or appreciate it. I just reveal the traditional Chinese culture that exists in my heart, and the way I understand it. It's like the saying of one poet: 'I love deeply and also hate the land under my feet.' This is kind of contradiction."

In the field of photography, however, Hong is neither the only nor the earliest artist to duplicate Chinese classical elements. Lang Jinghan (1942-1995), a pioneering photographer in China, combined Chinese painting and photography in his works in 1985s. Lang Jinghan tried to inherit and continue Chinese classical culture but Hong tries to question and criticize it.

"Lang Jinghan's photographs are just what they are, but Hong Lei's images are not actually what they seem," said Gu Zhenqing, executive editor of Zhuzi Garden Art Museum, the curator of "Right Here, Ain't Here." Lang Jinghan and Hong Lei's photography exhibition last March in Shanghai. "Hong is more like a contemporary artist. He uses a modern viewpoint to arrange materials. It's brilliant."
Hong's works are not only using classical aesthetics, but also symbols. In "China Landscapes," for example, the elegant garden, the blood and the setting sun are an enormous visual contrast. Hong intentionally places subversive elements of modernity into his copies of traditional Chinese paintings to give, for example, a transitory view.

In these works, the downfalls, decays, but beautiful characteristics are fit with his lost and desperate mood about modern society. Hong Li's inspiration was derived partly from literature, especially classical literature.

"I love classic novels such as 'The Dream of the Red Mansion,' 'The Gold Plated Vases,' and some poetry from Li Bai, the last king of the South Song Dynasty, and Qiong Dynasty poet Nan Xi Zangle,' "he said during an interview in his huge workshop. "Literature always stands on the top of art."

In his studio, Hong shows off some of his own short story writings from the 1990s, which were later used as scripts for some of his photographs.

But for all his fame as a photographer, Hong intends he's really not good at using a camera. "Taking photos, you see, is only the first step for his pieces. He usually re-creates or touches up his photo with paint or a computer. It is not properly traditional photography, he says.

"Photography is just a means to Hong Li," Wu Liang says. "The camera itself is replication technique. Once you press the shutter, there is only reproduction, no matter what you photograph. Whether it is born out of the nature or an artwork. It's just a myth of originality."

Hong's second solo photography exhibition, "Transmitting the Ancient," opened last spring at the Chambers Fine Art Gallery, 475, 29th Avenue East, Manhattan. It included three series of photos: "Speak: Memory" (2004-2005), "Tai Lake: Bones" (2005), and "Physic" (2002).

Translated by Wei Yung

"Tai Lake: Bones" (2005), and "Physic" (2002).