

CULTURE & ENTERTAINMENT

Fabienne Verdier, whose work is now showing at Singapore's Art Plural Gallery, is one of the few Westerners to become known for her skill in a Chinese medium.

Chinese Technique, Applied to a Western Canvas

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When Fabienne Verdier headed to China almost 30 years ago, she was hoping to escape the confines of a Eurocentric art education.

"They didn't teach me a lot of things in French art schools," said the 50-year-old Parisian, who now lives in the countryside near the French capital.

In translated Chinese literature, she found a sensibility she could relate to. "Art is about human beings walking in harmony with the universe. That is why I went to China when I was very young, to try and learn this harmony," she said.

Today, Ms. Verdier is one of the few Westerners known for her work in a Chinese medium—in this case, ink painting. Her work sells for as much as \$200,000 and has been shown at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Palazzo Torlonia in Rome. In 2003, her book "Passenger of Silence: Ten Years of Initiation in China," was a surprise best-seller in France.

Her painting has rarely shown in Asia, though that changed with the opening of a solo exhibition at Singapore's Art Plural Gallery last month. The 60 works explore abstract geometric shapes as well as the Norwegian coastal landscape. While the themes aren't overtly Chinese, the impact of her training is apparent.

In 1984, Ms. Verdier enrolled at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing, but

the Asian influence she sought wasn't immediately accessible. With the Cultural Revolution a recent memory, the school had developed a curriculum around Soviet realism. "It was forbidden to study traditional ink-based painting or poetry," she said. "They said that traditional culture was bad culture."

There were other obstacles. When Ms. Verdier first encountered Huang Yuan, the Sichuan calligraphy master and landscape painter who eventually became her mentor, he was reluctant to instruct her.

According to him, "women never practice calligraphy," Ms. Verdier said. What's more, although she had studied Mandarin in France before arriving in China, Mr. Huang spoke only the Sichuan dialect.

After months of persistence, during which she studied Sichuanese and left completed calligraphy exercise scrolls at his door, Mr. Huang relented. She worked as

his apprentice for 10 years.

In her "Memories of Norway" series, for which Ms. Verdier spent three weeks traveling by boat along the Norwegian coast, the broad, black strokes contrast with the tinted, deckle-edged paper. These haunting natural scenes, which comprise roughly a quarter of the Singapore exhibition, could easily be mistaken for shuimo, or Chinese ink-wash, paintings.

Why use Chinese techniques to paint abstract Scandinavian landscapes?

"Every day in Norway, I was moving along a coastline and had a new trajectory," Ms. Verdier said. She was taken by the continuity and constant motion of the scenery, and thought that calligraphy offered her a way of recreating the form of it.

While in China, Ms. Verdier also learned to make brushes with animal hair and other utilitarian materials. Since then, she has

created many of her own paintbrushes, which are hooked up to a pulley system and can weigh up to 68 kilograms. The system allows her to paint her larger works—one of the Norway coastal paintings is a twelve-by-six-foot (3.7-by-1.8-meter) polyptych, or paneled painting, by manipulating the brush while standing on the canvas itself.

"With the pulley, she avoids the heaviness of the paint and the brushes and can paint in one flowing motion," said Carole de Senarclens, Art Plural's director. "It's just like with calligraphy."

Ms. Verdier's repertoire isn't limited to Asian-influenced art. For the past four years, she has been looking to her fellow Europeans for inspiration, particularly 15th-century Flemish painters such as Rogier van der Weyden and Jan van Eyck. Based on her studies of their work, she will this spring present an exhibition at Belgium's Groeningemuseum. Ms. Verdier will be the first contemporary artist to be housed in the permanent collection of the Bruges-based museum, best known for its "Flemish Primitives" art collection.

Viewers who can't make it to Bruges can glimpse this recent influence in Ms. Verdier's Singapore show, where her "Circles" series features bold splashes of color absent from the otherwise somber pieces on display.

"When I came back to France after all this time in China, I realized I had a different view," Ms. Verdier said. "But I am French and want to revisit traditional European art."

