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MEMORIES OF NORWAY

A Passage To China

**FRENCH ARTIST FABIENNE VERDIER'S WORK MERGES
EASTERN AND WESTERN SENSIBILITIES,
WINNING HER INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM** BY CHONGWAN TAY

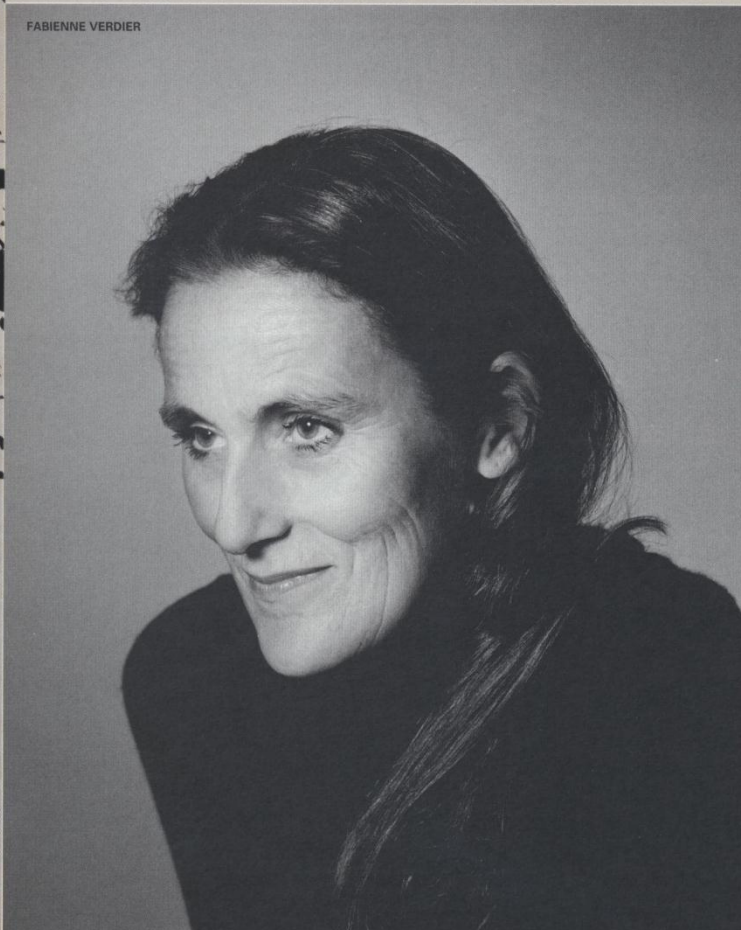
Viewing the work of an artist doesn't always give you a glimpse into his or her life. But for French artist Fabienne Verdier, her life story is palpable in her fierce, bold brushstrokes and Chinese sensibilities.

Verdier is the only French artist who has ever mastered traditional Chinese brush painting, a technique she works into her contemporary abstract creations. Indeed, Chinese calligraphy takes years to master, its seeming simplicity belying complex layers of skill and self-mastery. Like any true apprentice, Verdier threw herself headlong into its study when she left Paris for Sichuan, China in 1984 at the tender age of 20. It turned into a 10-year cultural immersion that changed her life, and the indelible ink it left on her became a bestselling memoir, *Passagère du Silence*.

The autobiography is an intriguing page-turner that inevitably converts the reader into a follower of her art. Verdier's narrative not only tells her story but also takes the reader on a journey through China's history, traditions and its cultural revolution.

Upon arrival in Chongqing, a Sichuan province, Verdier enrolled in a small university located on the outskirts of the city, near a steaming power station. The language barrier, isolation and strict Communist Party policies that ruled the school system were but some of the obstacles facing her as she adapted to life as a foreigner in China. Still, Verdier insisted on fully experiencing what it was to be a local student, eschewing special foreigner privileges available to her, like a private room, meals and personal lectures. As she learned Mandarin and the Sichuan dialect, she also discovered firsthand the poverty, harsh living conditions and

FABIENNE VERDIER





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malnutrition that plagued a Chinese student's life. Despite this wretched environment, and struggling to maintain her health and mental wellbeing, Verdier immersed herself in Chinese culture and realised that the system had marginalised the traditional arts.

Ignoring the Chinese government's ban on traditional Chinese art, Verdier embarked on a search for a true master of calligraphy and painting. She found her mentor Huang Yuan, a old hermit-like artist who quietly defied the system and kept the habit of calligraphy and poetry reading. It was then that Verdier's artistic initiation truly began.

Under Huang's tutelage, Verdier fully immersed herself in the country's old cultures and the art history that were lost and suppressed during the communist era. She journeyed through the mountains with him and spent long months learning beyond mere brush handling and calligraphy techniques. Her arduous journey ended in 1989, as she became a member of Sichuan's Association of Calligraphers, a prestige that had never been bestowed upon a foreigner. For the next three years, Verdier served as France's cultural attaché to Beijing, a dramatic turn from her once impoverished circumstances.

Verdier's own art came from her decade of rich and often challenging life experiences in China. "I learned to be a human being from living in China during that era," says the artist. "I was expecting to just learn art and painting but I realised that to be able to say something in art and convey a certain essence to the world, I first had to become a true human being."

Verdier left China in 1993 with a profound understanding that beneath the trajectory of a brush stroke lies the spirit of life. "It has been 30 years since I have been working on what captures my imagination most as an artist," she explains. "The Chinese call it 'chi', meaning the big breath of the world, the energy. This golden rule of 'giving life to the rhythmic

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breath' was introduced by Xie He (one of China's pre-eminent painters, critic and art historian known for his 'Six Principles' of Chinese painting) in the fifth century."

It is this depth of cultural understanding, her unification of Eastern and Western philosophies of art, that have earned Verdier international success and recognition. Her works have been exhibited in Chongqing and Beijing in China, Paris, Taiwan and Hong Kong. She has also created works for private collectors such as Francois Pinault and for public collections such as the Centre Pompidou.

Verdier's first solo exhibition at Art Plural Gallery in Singapore this year received wide acclaim. She is now collaborating with Jean Nouvel on the building of the new National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) in Beijing and preparing for a solo exhibition at the Groeninge Museum this May in Bruges.

As she crosses cultural borders in her life and her art, Verdier says that she has come to understand the meaning of universality that lies in this thought, expressed in poet Rainer Maria Rilke's words: "Listen to the breath of space, this continuing message made with silence". It is this quiet message of her work that has made her an ambassador and communicator by art. ■

FRACTALSCAPES II, PAYSAGE DANS L'ÉNERGIE D'UN TRAIT

