

Ink big

Artist Fabienne Verdier returns to the country that shaped her career with a new exhibition as part of Le French May, writes **Fionnuala McHugh**

In her early days in China in the 1990s, Fabienne Verdier travelled to some of its sacred mountains with other students from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. At a certain spot, she set up her easel, just as Cezanne and Monet would have done years before in her native France. But her companions and her teachers laughed at this Western notion: in China, the master told her, "You have to let the beauty of a landscape enter you. You have to wait until it's been reduced to its essence within you before you can even think of painting it."

Verdier, who was 22 when she arrived in Chongqing from Toulouse, the first foreigner on a post-graduate scholarship, stayed for a decade. What she seems to have reduced to its essence was herself: when she eventually left, it was because of ill health. She had hepatitis and, after a horrendous bout of food poisoning, weighed 30kg.

She'd grown up painting on eschels along the quays of Paris – her father lived on a houseboat – but the French conceptual movement of the 1970s had dissatisfied her, which was why she'd looked East. In 1993, she returned to France where she had to find a way to reconcile opposite points of the compass, making them both a part of her so that she could create.

Those days she lives about an hour's drive northwest of Paris, where Vincent van Gogh spent the last few minutes of his life. This was the land of her grandparents. The light, on a clear spring afternoon, feels as if it comes from a different dimension and does both the old house, where she lives, and the modern studio, across the lawn, where she works.

Verdier, dressed in black and lithe in her paint-spattered trainers, understands fang shui: she built her atelier over a spring so that the energy of it could flow into her work.

Today, an exhibition of about 30 of her paintings opens at City Hall as part of Le French May. It's a particular marker on her artistic road: Verdier exhibited in the first French May in Hong Kong in 1993 at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, just as her own time in China was ending.

This new exhibition, *Crossing Signs*, has canvases so enormous that, in her French studio, they

require two men to haul them into place for viewing. The brushstrokes are huge, confident sweeps of ink, as if from some magnified corner of a Chinese scroll; yet the works have titles which refer to the great Flemish masters (Jan van Eyck, Hans Memling, Hugo van der Goet) of 15th-century Europe.

Verdier studied calligraphy with her own master, Huang Yuan, who was of the opinion that women shouldn't study calligraphy at all, but in China, Cultural Revolution or no, nothing was as it had been and so he took her in. Huang told Verdier to calligraphy would open the door of creation to her in two ways: that Western art could not. She would have to go back thousands of years in order to advance into her artistic future.

"It took 10 years to forget what I thought I knew," she says. "To contemplate and reflect on what I'd learned before, to work on my ego and learn modesty ... The other Chinese students laughed at me, they were interested in realism, especially Soviet Realism."

There's a sense of isolation in her early work. A 1997 painting, *Cinabre et dérivée*, exhibited in her new show, is crammed with



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FABienne VERDIER, ON HER QUART BOOTH

red calligraphy but contains a tiny enclosure of pale characters, like the determined speech of an as-yet unheard individual. The appeal of those "30s paintings relied on that era's extraordinary sense of yearning expression just as China was opening up both to itself and to the West.

Back in France, Verdier's own yearning was to have the tools to express more. At that time, she was turning out oil for a living. She worked with a friend, the painter and Chinese Master Huang had taught her to make her working life final of the inner and the outer of proper breath and contemplation. Any creation that felt to please her is burned; she estimates that she consigns 80 per cent of what she does to the flames.

But as the work grew, in every sense, she reached "a huge decision". One night, "after a few glasses of wine", with the help of her husband Ghislain, she cut the handles off her Chinese paintbrush and attached it to the handlebars of her bicycle. And with that severance, she discovered how far she could travel without leaving her atelier.

"I'm free to go wherever I want, to experiment here," she says, demonstrating the sweep of her giant brush, which is attached to the ceiling and consists of 35 horse tails. (These were supplied, from Mongolia, by the late Jean-Louis Dunias, former chairman of fashion house Hermès, who, out of love for art and Asia, wanted to sponsor Verdier's dream.)

Where she's arrived now is a meeting-point between two cultures. She can borrow a visual line from the Flemish artists – for example, the skirts of praying women in Memling's *Moried*

trippy – and create a Chinese-influenced abstract. Her atelier, she remarks, is like a chapel; this is her personal devotion.

Last year, the son of Master Huang travelled to the studio. He wanted to apologise for laughing at those years ago at her old-fashioned desire to learn from his father. The senior Huang had recently died, the son had come to give the apprentice her master's last brush.

This week will be Verdier's first visit to Hong Kong – to garden and her studio – to carry its landscape inside her. Verdier, 55, delivers its decisions, its delivery, its phantoms, its cat (as thickly plaid as a giant paintbrush) front gate. On one of the steps are the words: *La beauté est pour moi assimilable à la joie d'exister*, meaning "Beauty is for me similar to the joy of existence".

Now she'll start to measure the distance she and China have covered in the intervening decades since she learned to carry its landscape inside her. mcgump.com

Fabienne Verdier - *Crossing Signs*, Exhibition Hall, HK City Hall, Central, until Jan 8 (an accompanying exhibition of Verdier prints, *The Ink Discipline*, is at Allart Fine Arts, room 2005, 7 Tin Wan Praya Rd, Aberdeen, until Jan 7)



Verdier at work in her studio in Paris. Inset: her 1997 piece *Cinabre et dérivée* (below left). Photos: P. Chazot

