

Title Dark Desires : Contemporary Chinese artist Fu Lei's works foreshadow what the world would be when it's given to excess

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HIS FATHER USED TO CANE HIM EVERY DAY to make him practise drawing. Today, an oil painting by Beijing-born contemporary artist Fu Lei fetches as much as \$10,000. His story might sound like a success story for Tiger-style parenting but the truth of it couldn't be further.

Born into the Cultural Revolution to parents who were a part of the naval contingent, Fu Lei grew up in world where he was always told what to do and how to live. You would imagine art to be something he used to escape his regimented life but even that was forced on him by his father – a decision that continues to baffle Fu Lei.

"I could never figure out why my father decided I should learn art in the middle of the Cultural Revolution," he said, amused. "But I would like to believe he was trying to equip me with a skill that would secure a better future for me."

Fu Lei's father had been worried he would be displaced to rural China for hard labour in compliance with Mao's Down to the Countryside movement in which more than 200,000 urban youths were forced out of the city to become farmers. Fu Lei's father had hoped that by equipping him with a skill such as art, he would be bolstered for an easier life than serving hard labour.

His father's plan didn't work. On graduating high school, Fu Lei was shipped out of Beijing into a cattle farm where he toiled as a rancher. "We had no idea how long we had to work the farms," Fu Lei recounted. "We were told we would be there forever."

It was during his time on the farm that Fu Lei escaped into art. He kept a notebook, pencil and a set of watercolour paints on him at all times, sketching and painting whenever he had the chance. For two years, he laboured as a rancher, eight hours a day, seven days a week, with nothing to eat but corn at breakfast, lunch and dinner.

When the Cultural Revolution came to an end, Fu Lei returned to Beijing, which was experiencing an influx of international influences. It was an enlightening time for Fu Lei. "I discovered this beautiful world of art that I never knew existed," he said. He had hitherto only been exposed to Russian communist art. Like a sponge, Fu Lei began absorbing everything he saw, learning from the artists of different countries and periods. He said the Impressionist period resonated with him most of all.

At the same time, China was at the crossroads of change, and Fu Lei found himself filled with disdain for what was

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Paradise No. 13; Fu Lei painting in his studio; a close-up of Paradise No. 4; Paradise No. 2

ARTS & CRAFT



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happening in his country's economy and social fabric.

"Everyone had been deprived of even a decent living. When they got a little taste of wealth and luxury, they developed a hunger for more," he observed. "They became greedy, and the world grew very ugly very quickly."

His disenchantment with his countrymen, however, had a silver lining. It became the focal point for his artistic endeavours. Fu Lei decided he would sketch and paint character flaws and produced works that featured morbidly obese people – practically dripping with cellulite – either as lone figures or in pairs, in mid-embrace. He successfully

captured the idea that greed and excess made people grotesquely ugly.

As time went by, Fu Lei began to include other forms of life, like animals and insects, into his drawings because he felt that they too could be guilty of the sin of over-indulgence. Precise in skill and wit, his paintings are a universal criticism of avarice and excessive consumption.

"Philosophical? I guess a lot of art is philosophical. Well, contemporary art anyway. Some people rationalise their thoughts through words, but I do it through sketching and painting," he said.

To a first-time observer, his paintings seem to present masses of random and disconnected things – a bizarre menagerie of people, flamingos, goldfish, ladybugs, snails, nautilus shells, fruit and high heel shoes – all melded into an inextricable mess in which these subjects seem trapped.

While the original inspiration behind his whimsical-looking art is something as dark as excessive desires, Fu Lei said he has grown to accept that character flaws are what make us real. "Everyone and everything is flawed," he said. "I used to condemn flaws but I've learnt that the best thing one can do is to accept them." ◉

RARE GLIMPSES

Fu Lei's first solo exhibition in Singapore *Dreams of Desire* is on at Art Plural Gallery until 13 December. It is a rare chance to see some of his earlier abstract and contemporary sketches that have never been exhibited before.