

Searching for Meaning in Hair

From: Lynn Burlingham
Date: Monday, January 30, 2012
To: Hong Chun Zhang
Subject: Exhibit "Hay Wire"

Hong,

I wanted you to know how affected I was by your exhibit. Your work is so distinctive. It gives me new ideas to think about. Also, being transplanted to Kansas from elsewhere made me see how you are integrating your two very disparate worlds in your work—owning them both. Your artist's statement on the wall is very helpful to the viewer in taking in your ideas. I read it three times, before, during, and after looking. I will definitely be returning to the exhibit to experience it again.

Hong, I can't remember if I told you that I write. One theme I am working on is how women see their lives through characteristics of their mothers: rejecting, changing, or owning that uniqueness. I have had an idea for a short story on this theme that has to do with the characteristics of hair. Since hair is so much a part of your work, I would love to discuss the subject with you; perhaps we could meet over coffee.

Happy Year of the Dragon!

Lynn



My Life Strands by Hong Chun Zhang
Charcoal on paper scroll, 2009
Collection of the artist, copyright Hong Chun Zhang



Lynn Burlingham's hair at age twenty-four.
Black and white photograph

I sat across the coffee shop table from artist Hong Chun Zhang. Hair was on my mind. Why hair? I had been thinking about the meanings that it holds for me in flashes for years. Recently I had written two pages of a short story about hair that had dribbled off the pages into a poem. I was stuck.

But minutes before, bustling towards me with a pot of tea, was this tall, statuesque Chinese woman with silky black hair flowing all the way down her back. I had two main purposes for this get-together: to learn what hair represented for Hong in her art; and to see whether in pursuing this quest, I could unblock my short story or poem and find the way to write what I wanted to say about hair. I also wanted to see whether by listening carefully I could hear something about how Hong had integrated her lives in urban China and rural Kansas. I was raised in New York and London. I have lived in Kansas for thirteen years. I have been struggling to find a way to make these different worlds come together.

Let me give you a brief overview of Hong and hair. I first heard about Hong Chun Zhang from my husband, who works in the same department as her husband at the University. "She's a serious artist," my husband told me. "She's Chinese. Her work has something to do with hair." I did what everybody does these days: looked her up on the Internet.

Here's where things get a little personal. The second I saw Hong's charcoal drawings of hair, I was changed. How can one be changed from looking at art about hair on the

Internet? Perhaps because its metaphoric meanings had been on my mind for a long time; more probably because true art leaps across the resistance of boundaries to strike the inner core of a person receptive to it. That core shivers and shakes, and when it settles back down, it is different.

A few days before our chat over tea, I had been to the opening of Hong's solo exhibition "Hay Wire" at the Lawrence (KS) Arts Center. In one gallery (the "Kansas room") she compares hair and hay in two oil paintings; she also includes the mediums of classical Chinese fine watercolor, charcoal drawings, and actual hay to depict the peaceful rolling Kansas landscape. In a second, smaller gallery (the "China room"), she juxtaposes these ideas with the chaos inherent in urban China, as represented by hundreds of flyers and 5,500 feet of entangled wire attached to utility poles in a small dark space.

Hong sat down across from me, and as we sipped our tea, we began to talk.

"Hong, as I told you in my email, one theme I am working on in my writing is how women see their lives through the histories of their mothers, including their mothers' characteristics. Despite the difficulties I had with my mother, I have come to realize that she had certain characteristics that drew me back to her. With regard to hair, however, I was the one who had the long, wavy, thick hair; and that drew her to me. I know she admired, perhaps even envied, my hair. As I've gotten older, I've discovered that I'm not as different from her as I once thought. I have pursued

threads of this theme in my memoir, a portion of which will be coming out shortly in *New Letters*. For you, does hair hold such a meaning in your work?"

"Not exactly. It is more that hair is a common characteristic among my sisters and me. My identical twin sister and my older sister, we have this long black hair. It is a personal characteristic we all share. My twin sister lives in China, my older sister in Atlanta. Our hair is one of our bonds, even though we live separated and far away from each other. My twin sister is part of me, and I am part of her. We have that twin connection. It can be seen and "felt" through our hair, as I show in my work *Twin Spirits*. We three sisters are all artists trained in different mediums at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, China. My older sister, Ling, trained in oil painting. My twin sister, Bo, studied printmaking, while I studied 'gongbi,' a style of Chinese fine style ink painting.

"The metaphoric meaning of your charcoal drawings in *Twin Spirits* goes beyond the bond of twin sisters?"

"I think it has universal implications about similarities and differences in people. Even though my twin charcoal drawings of long hair look the same [Hong was referring to her *Twin Spirits*], if you look closely, there are slight differences. I always like to compare one thing to another. That points to the unique quality of each thing."

“Hong,” I asked, “how *did* you come up with hair as a subject?”

“I suppose it started from a characteristic of my own hair,” she said. “It took off when I explored this theme in my work in larger-than-life-scale charcoal drawing. It had a three-dimensional effect, partly because of its size. People took it in and gave it universal meaning.”

“Does the presentation of your charcoal drawing as a scroll have anything to do with its temporary quality: the scroll’s owner can unroll it or roll it back up as he wishes?”

“No, its presentation is simply from Chinese culture.”

At this point, a yellow sticky note caught my eye, a reminder of things I had thought about when I attended Hong’s “Hay Wire” exhibit.

“Hong, do you see hair as a conduit, like the mass of entangled utility wires in your China room?”

“Yes. From a distance, the telephone wires in China look like black curly hair.”

“And in your Kansas room, were you trying to convey the current of free feeling that one gets on the prairie? Willa Cather described that feeling so well.”

Hong just nodded her head. I don't think Willa Cather's descriptions of prairie were a reference point for her in the way that they are for me.

I added hopefully, “With the flow like in the current of winds?”

“Perhaps.”

As I glanced over at Hong, it occurred to me that the rolling hills of the Kansas prairies had touched her the way her art had touched me. She had internalized her experience; it had changed her, and she expressed this change in her drawing titled *Prairie Waves* and in her paintings *Flint Hairs*, *Hay*, and *Hair*.

“Hong, what do you think hair says about life and death?”

“My braided hair charcoal drawing, *My Life Strands*, tells about woman's complete life cycle. It goes from thick, silky, long black hair to thin gray, and ends with white paper. It leaves each person to think about his own life cycle. Therefore, life and death.”

“What about the truth? Does hair tell the truth?”

“If an adolescent girl in China cuts off her long hair, she is trying to say she wants a new sexual identity...trying for a new truth about herself.”

“But I think changes in hair can also hide the truth.”

“Yes. In my *Hairy Objects* there are some hidden truths. Hair in food, like in the hamburger I did, is unattractive, whilst hair as a roll of paper can be beautiful—long hair rolling out. These *Hairy Objects* can playfully get to the hidden truth about aspects of popular western culture. Anyway, this series is meant to bring humor to my art.”

“So you believe that hair has the power to hide or tell the truth, approaching the subject seriously or humorously?”

“Yes.”

“Here’s something I’ve thought about. Do you think that other women are jealous of long, silky, beautiful black hair?”

“Not in China. All young Chinese girls have such hair. But the monks in China shave their heads as a sign that they are giving up their sexual identity. And as I said

before, teenagers in China sometimes cut their hair to mark a change in their sexual identity.”

“There’s power in hair, don’t you think?”

“Yes. What one does or does not do with one’s hair can either strengthen or weaken a woman. In China, when a woman gets married, she cuts her hair or wears it in a bun. She does not let it hang loose.”

“You wear your hair long.”

“Yes, I am married, but a Chinese woman westernized.”

I thought about my own hair. How my mother would never let me have long hair when I was a child. How in my teens, I finally grew it out, and I felt such a sense of freedom and individuality in doing so. After that, I always kept it long: a mark of my new identity as a girl free to choose.

“What will your next exhibit be about? Has it been scheduled?”

“It’s an exhibit I will do with my sisters at the Sacramento [California] State University Gallery, called “Earth, Wood, Water.” My older sister will do earth, my

twin sister wood, and I will do water, with something to do with hair as water. The exhibit will be in the spring of 2013.”

Our tea ended with my promise to go to Hong’s presentation the next evening at the Lawrence Arts Center, where I would hear her speak more formally about her work to an audience. It would also give me the opportunity to get her “Hay Wire” catalog.

Driving home from our meeting, I thought about integrating disparate worlds through identifying and writing about the unique characteristics of each one. After all, Hong had her Kansas room *and* her China room; they did not occupy the same space.

I had written about the disparate worlds of growing up in the shadow of the Freuds and the Tiffanys in my memoir; surely there was a way I could write about my Kansas experience—give it its own separate space.

However, this all started with examining the meanings of hair, and my thoughts soon turned back to that.

As soon as I reached my house, I went to my computer and opened it up to a blank Word document. Inspired by the talk with Hong Chun Zhang about hair and her art, I wrote a poem in a flash, then worked on it over the next few days.

Hair Waves

Russet long hair—Cut
Meticulously placed on a scroll and rolled up;
Waves preserved for our daughters.

Bristle brushes groom the threads
That tumble
Over little aged mothers,

One mother
Snipping her daughter's hair
Sliced her earlobe,
Drowning the silky black fibers in a river of blood.

Pigtailed, this girl doesn't have to be anything
But cute.

Honey hair, washed fresh in a mountain stream
Streaks gold in the afternoon sun and
Squeaks as she flicks it over her shoulders.

Hair roaming long and free
That girl saunters
Down city streets,
Heads turn.

Tony, David, John, Chan, Leonard, Blue, and Harry
Stroke her hair.
"Like silk" they say,
Twisting it in their fingers.

One long braid down her back
For her husband
To unweave
With his holy touch,
To inhale the wind
And rain and salty spray
Of her.

Cinched with a clip, she works.

Gold is her sister.
Brown is her mother.
Black is her grandmother.
Gray is

The russet waves
Our daughters unfold.

Hong Chun Zhang is exhibiting *My Life Strands*, charcoal on paper scroll, as part of the exhibition “Portraiture Now: Asian American Portraits of Encounter” at the National Portrait Gallery—Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., August 12, 2011-October 14, 2012.

Lynn Burlingham is a memoirist, short story writer, poet, and blogger. A memoir piece titled “The Freuds, the Tiffanys & Me” will appear in the March 2012 issue of *New Letters*.