

Jonathan Goodman

Ming Fay: From Money Trees to Monkey Pots

A veteran of the New York art scene, sculptor Ming Fay remembers the city forty years ago, when its urban ways were raw and rough, and even more financially troubled than today. Even so, the environment of the city at the time was favourable to sculptors who took over the big semi-industrial spaces of Soho and eked out lives entirely devoted to the production of art. Although his studio is now located in Jersey City, New Jersey, Ming Fay has been known to speak out in favour of those sculptors who persisted in staying in New York, saying that those who can survive its hardships end up being good artists by dint of tenacity and hard work.

Ming Fay, now in his late sixties, fits into that group himself. Born in Shanghai and educated in Hong Kong, he comes from a family of artists. Both his mother and father were active in the field; his father was an art director in the Hong Kong film industry and, later, in television, and his mother had an atelier where she taught art to young adults. Although he never really studied with either of his parents, he imbibed the atmosphere of art at home and spent a year (1959–60) making art in Hong Kong before moving to Columbus, Ohio to study design as a scholarship student from 1961 to 1964. After receiving his M.F.A. in 1970 from the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California, he taught art at the University of Pittsburgh from 1971 to 1974. He then moved his studio to Canal Street in New York in February 1973, commuting back and forth from Pittsburgh into the following year. Today, he is a true New Yorker, having lived in the city for four decades. However, his work reflects the tensions that accompany an Asian-Western affiliation, that for him has resulted in increasingly strong sculptures and installations that reflect an international outlook arising from both his upbringing in the south of China and his long residency in the United States.

It has often been noted that in the 1990s several Chinese artists made use of New York's internationalism and artistic freedoms to create works of astonishing variety and achievement (many of them have returned to China, often in quest of a more favourable market). But these artists were younger than Ming Fay, at times by a full generation. At that time Beijing and Shanghai art immigrants were greeted with the intense attention only a romantic reading of Chinese culture could bring; many in the New York art world made positive assumptions without basing them on in-depth knowledge, resulting in writing on these artists' work that was often superficial and lacking in criticality. In contrast to these younger artists,

Ming Fay’s experience from the late 1970s through to the first years of the following millennium was one of a degree of isolation, and very little was written on his work; he had to go it alone. He took refuge from this by concentrating on his work and developing a sculptural practice that seriously explored the context of nature and culture as he understood it from a Chinese perspective. Early in his career, images remembered from childhood likely fed his artistic sensibility, but he later established a kind of sculptural crossroads that included Western work that also became central to his practice. In many ways, Ming Fay’s artwork was inspired by and developed from his extended contact with various international tendencies—abstract, conceptual, and performance art—that were representative of New York art during the 1970s.

When Ming Fay first arrived in New York from Pittsburgh, he did not find a large community of Chinese artists waiting for him. He met a couple of artists from Taiwan in New York City, but that was it; as the artist says, “There was no presence of Chinese artists as a group.”¹ When he and his few Chinese artist friends did get together at a party, they would exchange stories about their attempts “to decipher the secret codes of the New York art scene”



Ming Fay, *Radiant Fruits*, 1990,
Tirabia Gallery, New York.
Courtesy of the artist.

Understanding the art scene did not mean, however, that all Chinese artists in New York had to acquiesce to Western culture. Some of these artists attempted to internalize the values of the New York art world of the time; others decided to remain independent from them. As Ming Fay comments, “We were all individuals who were determined to express ourselves, either with our ethnic background mixed into our work or with our background totally separate. During Ming Fay’s development as an artist in New York,

he increasingly made aspects of contemporary Western sculpture part of his work; for example, he created larger-than-life everyday objects, such as those in *Radiant Fruits* (1990), that evoke the exaggerated scale characteristic of American artist Claes Oldenburg.

But recognition of Western tradition did not necessarily mean that he downplayed his Chineseness—Ming Fay remained true to the heritage that was so much a part of him. In the mid-1980s, he founded the Epoxy Art Group, a small group of similarly minded artists from Hong Kong. Ming Fay says the following of their experience:

In artist parties, we talked, we ate, and we worked together as a group. We were looking for possibilities in finding the gap between the East and the West. We worked together and had shows as a group, taking part [in 1990] in the Decade Show at the New Museum. In the end, though, we started to unglue as a group as individual members found their own niche to work in.

Ming Fay acknowledges that today, the Chinese diaspora in New York is much more expansive than it was when he first arrived. He sees more complex connections in the sense that the affiliations between American and Chinese cultures are stronger and more intricate; this is evidenced by the increased two-way traffic between art centers like Beijing and Shanghai and New York. Even so, Chinese diasporic artists are struggling to find their individual place in the art world. Ming Fay comments, “I think we face the same issues of identity, but I think we have a longer history from which to proceed.” In fact, the notion of identity remains in the thoughts and art of the Asian artists of Ming Fay’s generation in particular, as can be seen from their often personal and identity-oriented art.

Above and beyond disputes about cultural correctness—the place of the Chinese diaspora in New York City’s large but sometimes impenetrable art world, or the amount of coverage of Chinese art—is the business of making art and the public recognition that faces each artist who sets out to become known. One must collect one’s energies to produce the strongest art one is capable of. For Ming Fay, the goal was to make art that was accurate in regard to, but larger than, nature: “In the beginning my work was exacting in rendition, but with a twist—the sculpture was always bigger than the real thing.” Even so, his work continued to evolve into hybrid forms that only he could imagine—different kinds of nonexistent species of fruits and plants.

Later on in his career, in the early to mid-1990s, he started making “monkey pots” as allegorical warnings not to be seduced by one’s appetites. A monkey pot is the edible fruit of an Amazonian tree Ming Fay discovered in the Singapore Botanical Garden. Its name is based on the habit of monkeys who eat the seeds of the fruit by sticking their head inside the sphere-shaped gourd, hence making them vulnerable to attack—in their greed to devour the seeds they are slow to pull their heads out. He thus returned to a kind

Ming Fay, *Ramapo Garden of Desire*, 2005, Kresge Gallery, Ramapo College, New Jersey. Courtesy of the artist.



Ming Fay, *The Garden of Qian*, 1998, Whitney Museum at Philip Morris, New York. Courtesy of the artist.



of a lyrical realism based on an outsized rendering of nature that he was known for. Making individual sculptures that refer to plants and fruits, Ming Fay constructs individual pieces that coalesce into an installation in which a forest or jungle emerges from the wealth of detail. Indeed, two of his strongest pieces, *The Garden of Qian* (1998) and *Canutopia* (2012), are installations composed of myriad individual works.



Ming Fay, *The Garden of Qian*, 1998, Whitney Museum at Philip Morris, New York. Courtesy of the artist.

Most Chinese would know that *The Garden of Qian* also can be read as “the garden of money”; *qian* means money in Mandarin. Also, I expect that Ming Fay was aware of the proximity of the Whitney Museum of Art’s satellite gallery—where *The Garden of Qian* was exhibited and which was located at the time in the Phillip Morris building across the street from the Grand Central Station in midtown New York—close to the heart of the business community and financial services industry. So, we have a context of corporate money, in the form of funding from Phillip Morris, psychologically surrounding Ming Fay’s garden installation, which inhabited the entire space. While his money trees may not have consciously been meant as a metaphor describing the American economy, which was depressed at that time, to US viewers this interpretation was likely not far from mind.

The Garden of Qian consisted of a major installation of artificial trees with coin-like leaves that was augmented with other sculptures of plants and fruits, which resulted in an entire garden consisting of organic shapes built from materials as simple as paper and cloth. By demonstrating both cultural and natural differences, the artist slyly asserted the otherness of Chinese culture through its representation of flora from Asia, which are inevitably different from those of northeastern the United States. At the same time, the beautifully constructed garden was emblematic of the landscape architecture of China, likely from the Qing dynasty period. Unlike Western garden practice, the Chinese garden often is noted for its asymmetrical treatment of flower and plant installations—a design that is seemingly closer to the way nature works. This particular installation was key to Ming Fay’s career, being a formal construction of unusual accomplishment and exquisite effect as well as a charged memorial to an aesthetic that he brought with him from China.



Top: Ming Fay, *Canutopia*, 2012, Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, New Jersey. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Ming Fay, *Canutopia*, 2012, Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, New Jersey. Courtesy of the artist.

In *Canutopia*, installed fourteen years later in a building belonging to the Grounds for Sculpture, an art and education site located a few miles outside of Trenton, New Jersey, we see evidence of Ming Fay's further understanding of the form and effect of natural phenomena. Here, the artist had to deal with a difficult space complicated by ceiling by water pipes, air vents, and uneven walls, and part of *Canutopia*'s achievement lies in its considerable beauty achieved despite the architectural obstacles facing the artist. It is easy to remember upon seeing *The Garden of Qian* and *Canutopia* that, even today, in Ming Fay's hands the Chinese aesthetic remains compelling in its presentation of nature. His work has moved more or less in the direction of the garden as the theme of his installations: He sees his gardens "as a metaphor, as a world within worlds."

The garden theme is also central to *Canutopia*, albeit in a different direction—upward. The cavernous gallery space given to Ming Fay enabled him to draw a comparison to a canopy, the upper stratum of trees, where an entire ecology exists separate from the world beneath it. Ming Fay populated the ceiling and walls with all manner of fruits and other motifs representing nature: apples, gourds, and money-tree leaves achieved a density that evoked the uncanny sense of a forest canopy—this, despite the fact that the space’s rather austere structure remained visible.

Ming Fay has created his own versions of the Chinese garden—a form that traditionally is a beautiful, often sacred manmade space. In each of his installations, the overall effect is lyrical to the point where it feels as though poetic intuition guided the artist. His use of realism paired with lyric metaphor in *Canutopia* combine to create a manmade garden that reflects a ready-made one in the forest. Not all the forms hanging from the ceiling, however, were entirely accurate in a botanical sense, but that allowed Ming Fay a greater degree of artistic freedom. The general effect was cumulative, taking place over time as the viewer walked beneath the canopy. The eloquent presentation of this canopy piece, despite the large expanse of space and prominent beams, demonstrates just how structured his process is.

It might seem irrelevant for someone like Ming Fay to readdress the theme of Chinese versus Western aesthetics, or the nature versus culture debates. Given the vast travels and geographical locations of artists throughout the world, the theme of difference inevitably asserts itself. The globalization of art is now a reality, and it is hard to put a national label on many kinds of art shown today. Yet the specificity of Ming Fay’s work makes it clear to me that it originates from his Asian experience even as he deliberately turns his art toward a combination of realism and abstraction, thus seeming to carry to some degree a Western pedigree. The resilience of Chinese cultural origins in the face of sweeping historical change, especially in mainland China itself, demonstrates that early experiences, and the memories of them, die hard in the aesthetic of Ming Fay. Like many artists today, he belongs to New York’s mixture of a desire for newness and a transparent wish for recognition; at the same time he is determined to solve the specific aesthetic problems he faces as an artist—the influences of two very different cultures.

The issue of “identity” art has been intensely debated for at least two generations, and it is showing signs of fatigue. There must be another, new way in which people struggle to align themselves with others beyond the restrictions of a specific identity. In much of Asian culture, there is an attempt to place community ahead of the individual, sometimes at the expense of the individual, but Ming Fay manages to achieve believable references to both the Chinese perception of nature as a living organism and to the Western emphasis on visual perception and individuality. Because of the international exchange of information, there may come a time when questions of cultural difference will no longer matter to the extent that they do today. Yet it is interesting to question whether the tension between cultural differences spurs the artist to accommodate both its psychological

and cultural anxieties and then transcend them. Such an accommodation, I believe, has been central to Ming Fay's career.

Part of his obsession with nature results from the unrelenting experience of brick and concrete in New York—man made architectural materials that tend to crowd out the trees and parks in the city. As the artist says:

New York made me realize I am out of nature and living in a totally artificial place. It is a machine with everything man-made—down to the organized planting of trees in Central Park. This is how I was inspired to create an aggrandized man-made nature as a metaphor for utopian thoughts of the human ideals. But all human ideals change or the forces of nature change it.

Ming Fay, *Shad Crossing/ Delancy Street Subway project, F train platform, 2005, tile mural, New York.* Courtesy of the artist.



In place of idealism, Ming Fay offers the sense of a specific site and a fair amount of communal fervor. Chosen in 2000 to create public art for the Delancey Street subway station, on New York City's Lower East Side, Ming Fay created a tile mural depicting a row of cherry trees on the wall of the uptown waiting area, a nod to the historical presence of the former Delancey Farms Cherry Orchard that was once located there, while in the downtown area of the station, the mural presents two giant shad fish, a scenario that refers to the East River that the subway trains must cross in order to arrive in Brooklyn. Both the shad fish and cherry trees are repeated on the outside of the stairs leading up to the street; the imagery, while quite literal, gestures to the persistence of nature in an otherwise heavily urbanized site.

In one of his more recent projects, completed in 2005, for an outdoor site adjacent to the Seattle Federal Courthouse, Ming Fay took his inspiration from a sliver of a cedar tree seed pod. This cedar is native to America's northwest, and Ming Fay's proposal was a twenty-seven-foot version of the sliver standing upright and balanced as a symbol of justice. The



Ming Fay, *Pillar Arc*, Seattle Federal Courthouse, 2005, wood. Courtesy of the artist.

sculpture rises dramatically into the air with a slight curve at its top; it is striking as an abstract sculpture that aligns beautifully with its site, one consisting of a mixture of grass, trees, streets, and public buildings. Here Ming Fay has reached a successful resolution in which his art merges with the surrounding landscape. At the same time, the sculpture constitutes a powerful humanist gesture about the necessity for the evenhanded treatment of people; the evocative simplicity of its aesthetic is something that can be enjoyed by all. The sculpture also evokes historical resonance in the sense that it subtly recalls the totemic structures that represent indigenous peoples in the region.

It becomes clear that in his public artworks, especially, Ming Fay is intent on revising history, challenging the mainstream, or whitestream—the white majority in North America. Perhaps he is aiming to restore a balance that is tipped in favour of the dominant culture. In many respects, Chinese art is the consequence of imperial culture, and it can provide an artist like Ming Fay a history that is an inherited, if not a living, context of cultural mores and references that enable him to make use of Chinese materials and imagery. While he is not one to bring up issues of identity, especially from a personal perspective, such concerns inevitably arise, and the complexity of his background and experience inspires his art.

Ming Fay, *Needle at Sea Bottom*, 2012, mixed media, 20 x 6 x 6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



In his Jersey City studio, Ming Fay continues to work on his “jungle,” as he refers to it. But, small human figures also have begun to populate his habitats. These figures, which suggest athletic poses, also have an origin in Chinese culture; they first appeared in this work about ten years ago when Ming Fay began to learn *tai chi*. According to the artist, “these figures live in the jungle as little people who are part of my bigger jungle.” It is interesting to speculate whether these human figures serve as a further humanization of the artist’s vision, which tends to see a shared responsibility in

the ecology of both his art and the real world. Ming Fay may have come from China, but I believe his interests are broadly humanitarian, reflecting and encouraging broad-based appreciation of the exchange between culture and nature.

Notes

¹ All quotes are from the author’s e-mail interview with the artist, which took place in the fall of 2012.