

People

BACK TO NEW YORK

WITH LOVE

By HEZI JIANG in New York
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After three successful solo exhibitions in Beijing, Shanghai and Milan, singer-turned-painter Ai Jing embarked on a trip back to New York City, the cradle of her visual artistry.

Her exhibition LOVE runs from Nov 16 to Dec 30 at the Marlborough Gallery, an international modern and contemporary art dealer in Midtown Manhattan.

It features Ai's works, including 20 new paintings from her major series I Love Color and Walking in the Sun and a large-scale installation, My Mom and My Hometown, showing a woman knitting a ceiling-to-floor blanket with patterns of the letters spelling LOVE.



Surrounded by the greatest artworks, I was never defeated, but more excited than ever and inspired every day."

Ai Jing

Ai was born in the fall of 1969 in Shenyang, Northeast China's Liaoning province, where brutal winters take the temperature down to -20 Fahrenheit. People there are known for their bold character, and Ai in particular was born with a free soul.

As a youngster, she would casually go off on journeys. At age 9, she slung a big bag over her tiny shoulder and took the older one of her two younger sisters with her to the countryside to visit her grandparents.

She left a note to her parents telling them not to worry and told her youngest sister to look up at the moon whenever she misses her. "We can always see the same moon," said the artist, still a romantic at 47.

"I'm obsessed with being free, especially free to express myself," Ai said.

Her avant-garde music propelled her to fame as a pop star.

In 1989, at the age of 20, Ai wrote the song My 1997, relating her experience of moving from Shenyang to South China and falling in love with a man from Hong Kong. He could visit her, but she couldn't easily visit him before Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997.

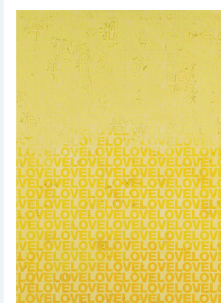
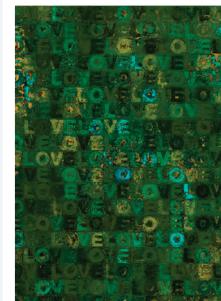
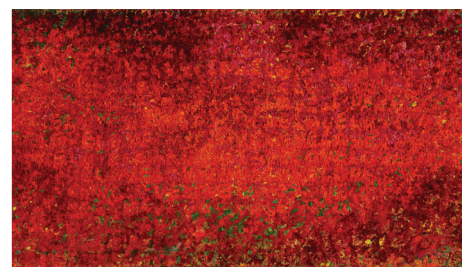
The song was a huge hit, and by age 24, Ai had established herself as a singer and actress in movies and television. She would go on to release five albums and publish books of prose and poetry.

China's Northeast News called Ai "China's most talented female folk rock singer".

Later, her quest for a new way of expression brought her to painting. She began her studies with renowned contemporary artist Zhang Xiaogang in 1999, eventually devoting



Ai Jing works on the *Walking in the Sun* series at her studio in Beijing. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



A selection of Ai Jing's paintings that are showing at the Marlborough Gallery in Midtown Manhattan.

herself to visual art.

Ai said the current exhibition is a test to Ai on how the world receives her art.

Her three previous solo shows were all public exhibitions for museums. This exhibition is commercial, and all paintings are for sale, with \$150,000 the highest price tag.

"The result will be a reflection of how my works are accepted among international collectors," Ai said. "People say, 'If you make it in New York, you will make it everywhere,' right?"

As a tourist in Paris in 1994, she was introduced to modern and contemporary art.

But it was on a trip to New York in 1997, filled with visits to the Museum of Modern Art and an appreciation of street art and architecture, when she started to understand and fall in love with the art form.

"Looking at the works by artists like Andy Warhol and Keith Haring raises my heart

rate," she said.

After many more visits to the Big Apple, Ai moved there, settling in SoHo, where she stayed from 2000 to 2008, before moving back to China.

She wrote her first English song, New York, New York, with a limited vocabulary acquired at New York University's language school.

*New York
You make me excited
New York
You are my cup of coffee
New York, New York
My love, my town
How many stars are shining for you
How many beauties are dying for you
New York New York*

"So many artists come here, giving all their strength to light up this city," Ai told China Daily. "Surrounded by the greatest artworks, I was

never defeated, but more excited than ever and inspired every day."

She rented her first studio on the Lower East Side, where the concept of the LOVE series was born — creating the letters LOVE repeatedly over and over in thick impasto block letters in oils and oil stick on canvas.

"Back in the day, I unleashed my emotions through songs. I scream, I perform," she said. "Painting is my calmer way of expression. I learn to control, to do things in order. Less is more."

Her days in New York revolved around two activities: painting and cooking.

She remembered once walking in a Chinatown fish market in a fedora and long trench coat and asking for a "dead fish".

"I didn't want to kill it myself," she said to her own laughter. "It was a very funny period of my life."

Since her return to China eight years ago,

Ai visits New York and its museums and galleries every year.

"New York has changed so much in the past three years. I'm seeing so many shining buildings. SoHo was gone a while ago, now Chelsea is gone," she said. "I went to look for a record store that I used to go to all the time, and that's gone. Where did all the records go?"

"The city is still full of energy. But more distant," she said. "It's probably not the city's fault. It's the world we are heading toward with artificial intelligence and all that coming up."

But she still loves her old home. Her song New York, New York ends with the lines:

*How many times I've been calling you
How many times I've been missing you
New York New York
All those things in the night
All those kisses in the night
New York New York*

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