

A New York sojourn pointed a Chinese singer-songwriter down a new path, all about love

By CHEN NAN
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In 1997, Ai Jing visited New York for the first time, when she performed at the CMJ Music Festival in Lincoln Center, an important New York showcase for new bands and musicians from around the world.

Then in her early 20s, singer-songwriter Ai had risen to fame in China in 1995 with her song *My 1997*, a semi-autobiographical ballad about her love for a man in Hong Kong. She looks forward to Britain's 1997 handover of the island to China so she can visit him.

That had not only won a large fan base for her in the Chinese mainland but also in Japan. As an artist of Sony Music Entertainment of Japan then, Ai performed seven of her songs at the New York festival, eager to promote Chinese pop music to the global market.

Unexpectedly, that trip would ignite a new passion: contemporary art.

After her performance, Ai walked around in New York and came across a small catalog, titled *Love*, on display in a bookstore window. Inside, she learned about the artist Keith Haring, whose visual language seems simple but powerful and direct.

"I was impressed by his expressions about love. That was the first time I sensed a connection between popular music and visual art," Ai recalls. "It seemed as if I had begun to understand contemporary art and discovered the similarities between the two creative processes."

Now, two decades later, the 48-year-old Ai has transformed into a contemporary artist. The word "love" has become the main theme of her artworks.

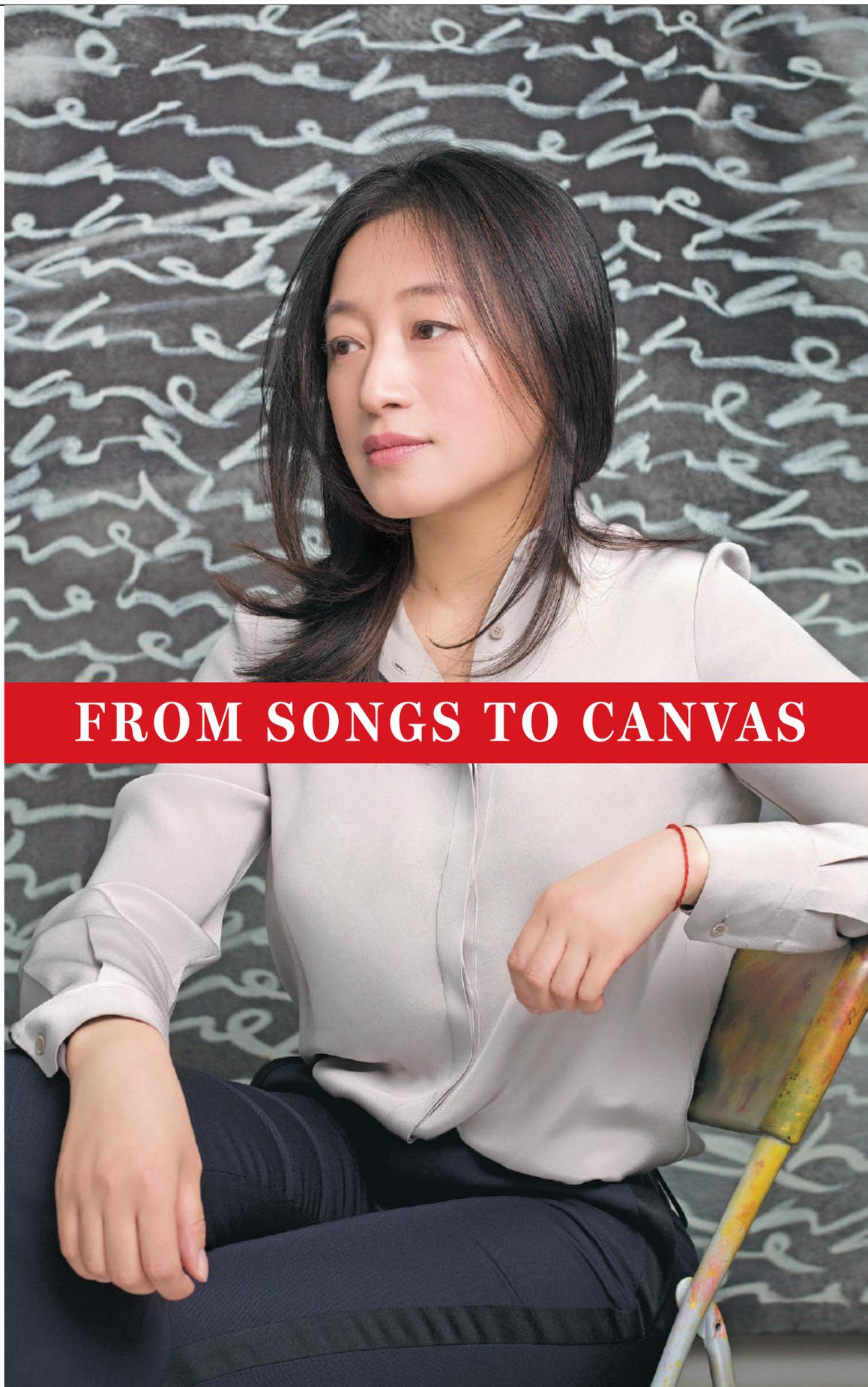
Art career

Ai recently released an English-language book in Beijing. Featuring photos of her artworks, her images, and her diarylike articles, the book, titled *Ai Jing Love Art 2007-2017*, is "a summary and reflection of my 10 years as a professional artist," she says.

In the book, she writes about the important events in her art career, such as her solo exhibition, *I Love Ai Jing*, in 2012 at the National Museum of China in Beijing. Ai was the first contemporary Chinese artist to have such a show there, and her "Love" series later traveled to the Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan in 2015 and the Marlborough Gallery in New York in 2016.

A turning point in Ai's music career had come in 1999, when her fourth album, *Made in China*, was recorded in Los Angeles but never released in China.

"It was devastating," says Ai, who was born and raised in Shenyang, Liaoning province, a city of heavy industry in Northeast China. Ai had been interested in music from childhood and received vocal training at age 9. Her father was a factory worker and was good at playing several folk instruments. Her mother, who



FROM SONGS TO CANVAS



Ai Jing, a native of Shenyang, Liaoning province, is a Chinese contemporary artist whose fame started as a star singer-songwriter who has produced five albums of her own music as well as a number of EP albums and singles and she is also an accomplished artist. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

had a sweet voice, excelled at singing.

But the setback with her 1999 album gave her an opportunity to slow down, reflect about her life and figure out what she really wanted to do.

She took up painting and studied with Chinese contemporary artist Zhang Xiaogang. In 2002, she moved to New York.

Ai's first studio was in Manhattan's Lower East Side, where she began to incorporate the word "love" into her paintings. She was thrilled about having the studio, singing at the top of her voice for a while. She nurtured her new ambition every weekend in museums, auction previews, art fairs, and on the street.

With the word "love" as her visual language, she created installations with materials such as disposable chopsticks, vintage doors and newspapers.

"Keith Haring and Robert Indiana are the most well-known artists associated with this word. However, I believed that I would find my own way," says Ai.

Her family and hometown have become her early inspirations.

In one of Ai's artworks is an installation, *My Mom and My Hometown*. Fifty-five people, including her mother, friends and hometown relatives, helped with the piece by knitting yarn from old woolen garments they no longer wear. The resulting tapestry contains more than 2,400 pieces of fabric bearing the word "Love". The installation is 6 meters wide and 16 meters long. A statue of Ai's mother has been placed at the end of the work, diligently knitting.

A creative life

Though Ai says that she hopes that people forget about her musical past, her music fans are eager to hear her latest musical effort.

In one of her artworks, Ai combined her musical talent with her current identity as a contemporary artist. Ai's 2-meter-high installation, *To da Vinci*, was displayed at her solo exhibition, *Dialogue*, at Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan in 2015, along with nine of her other works, including paintings, sculptures and installations.

To da Vinci was inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's oil painting *Portrait of a Musician*, in which a young musician holds a folded musical score.

"I was not sure if the ambiguity (of the score) was intentional or just a result of time. Da Vinci left us a hint for further investigation," says Ai. "I began to imagine and compose the auditory aspects of the painting. Based on the notes in the portrait, I wrote music and turned it into a turning mechanical wheel."

"Those people, who choose a creative life, are often possessed of an inner strength," writes Benjamin Genocchio, an art critic and director of the Armory Show, a New York-based art fair where Ai exhibited in 2016, in Ai's new book.

"I saw that strength at Ai Jing's studio in Beijing, where I spent time observing her work. I was really observing her, looking for signs of passion and commitment to art. What I discovered was an artist, who approaches making art on a daily basis as a gift to be shared with others, the gift of joy, of hope, and of beauty."

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China streams its way to stardom in recording industry

By CHEN NAN

The global recording market for music grew by 5.9 percent in 2016, the highest since 1997, according to the latest report of the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry.

By the end of last year, there were 112 million users for paid music-streaming sites driving year-on-year streaming revenue growth to 60.4 percent.

Digital income accounted for half of the global music recording industry's annual revenue for the first time in 2016.

"The industry's growth follows years of investment and innovation

20.3 percent
rise in revenue in China from recorded music last year

30.6 percent
rise in streaming music

by music companies in an effort to drive a robust and dynamic digital music market," Frances Moore, chief executive, IFPI, says.

Streaming is helping drive growth in developing music markets, especially in China, he adds.

Recorded music revenue grew 20.3 percent in the country last year, driven by a 30.6 percent rise in streaming. And, thanks to a confluence of deals, technology, government policy and cultural shifts, China is being seen as the next big global opportunity, with the potential to rank alongside the biggest music markets in the world.

In a chapter, titled Focus on China: China's Phenomenal Potential

Unlocked by Streaming, the report says, "Historically hampered by rampant piracy, it was the sleeping giant that many in the industry believed would never be woken up ... Major and independent labels from all over the world, fired up by a new sense of possibility and positivity, are playing their part in building a new industry, founded on streaming and subscription."

One of the leading players in the streaming market in China is Tencent Music Entertainment Group.

The number of monthly active Tencent users accessing music in China is more than 600 million, Andy Ng, the company's vice-president, says.

"We see huge potential for growth as long as the market situation keeps improving and the piracy issue is contained," he says.

Both Warner Music and Sony Music have in recent years signed and extended licensing deals with Tencent, which then sub-licenses the catalogues to other streaming services in China.

Ng says the Chinese government's increasing resolve to tackle piracy, plus a change in people's attitude toward paid, high-value content, are helping to make the industry more professional here.

"We are all educating people to accept that content has a value and we are making progress. Young people

in particular are more willing to pay for a music service, they are happy to spend a few dollars supporting the artists they truly admire," Ng says.

Andy Ma, Warner Music's CCO for Greater China, says the combination of low-cost and high quality within the subscription model is making it easier for consumers to decide to pay for music.

He says companies are increasingly trying to improve user experience, with value-added services such as artist showcases, which music fans seem to appreciate.

"If a small fraction of this population (in China) pays for streaming services, it will be the biggest music market in the world," Ma adds.