



Ai Jing sits on one of her installations, entitled *Love Tree*, which is made of more than 20,000 chopsticks, in her Beijing studio.

ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

Changing colors of folk rock

Pioneering musician Ai Jing returns to the musical stage with an album inspired by her adventures in art. **Chen Nan** reports.

Ever since her 1992 debut album *My 1997* sold more than 5 millions copies, Ai Jing has been seen as the nation's pioneer of folk rock. The album, which tells the story of the singer-songwriter's love for a man living in Hong Kong and her longing to visit him after the 1997 handover of the region to China, not only aroused nationwide attention but also resulted in the release of its Japanese and English versions. She also became one of the first Chinese singers to hold concerts in Japan and the United States.

Her later albums continued her signature style of combining her personal stories with long, colloquial lyrics and easy melodies, to great success.

However, she soon tired of the satisfaction stardom brought.

To everyone's surprise, she disappeared from the spotlight and took a decade-long break to travel the world, visiting the Americas, India, Europe and Africa, and has been living in New York for the past 10 years.

"The success I achieved in the 1990s was so overwhelming that everywhere I went, people would ask me to sing *My 1997*. But as a musician, I didn't want my music to remain at the same point," she says. "I am a restless woman who loves to take risks, and I want my music as well as my life. I didn't know much about the world so I left what I had

and went around the world. That was a very important part of my life," she says.

"There were days I really hated singing, especially the song *My 1997*. Maybe it was too successful. People overlooked my other songs, which were even better than *My 1997*."

After years of self-searching and reflection, the 42-year-old returns to China with an album and a series of concerts, which are also inspired by her new pursuit — art.

"If my identity as a singer blessed me with unlimited opportunities, then my role as an artist is a personal point of departure," Ai says. "I have been reborn in some ways."

Her studio located on the north side of the capital's 798 art district has installations and paintings scattered around. A big photo of Ai performing with a guitar, adorns one wall and brings to mind her glamour days as a

singer. There are also pictures of her with Cui Jian, dubbed "the godfather of Chinese rock."

"Believe it or not, I don't miss the stage," she says. "Whenever I see those photos, I just recall the stories behind my songs."

In the past 10 years, she has visited a number of art exhibitions around the world, absorbing the ideas and forms of avant-garde art. She also lives an ordinary life in New York, taking the subway to her studio on the lower east side, and walking home at night. Her artworks include oil paintings, installations and sculptures.

Keeping a low profile, she held two solo exhibitions *All About Love* in Beijing and *Love in Shanghai* in 2008 and 2009. In 2010, she held her first exhibition, *Ai Want to Love*, in New York's Soho district.

Many of the displayed works, both paintings and installations, revolved around love.

"Love means nothing when it is just a word. It comes to life when it's linked to various items in different contexts," she says.

"I believe that the job of an artist is to amplify some details in life and give certain meanings to them," she adds.

Ai's love of art can be traced back to 1994 when she visited Paris. As she strolled through France's Louvre and other magnificent art museums, she couldn't help but wonder about the people and landscapes in those artworks and the stories behind them.

She became a regular at galleries whenever she traveled outside China. She put herself through painting classes back in China in 1999 and took her studies further in New York.

"I express my emotions through both music and art," she says. "Like music, brushing on a big canvas also makes me ecstatic and frees my inner wildness and imagination."

Ai attributes her love of music and art to her family. Her father was a folk musician and her mother was a Pingju Opera performer. Her penchant for taking risks led her to quit her stable job at the prestigious Oriental Song and Dance Troupe in Beijing.

Her music broke all the conventional rules then, and she believes her art also goes the same way.

"In the past when I wrote music, I always had a lot of images floating in my mind. My music was natural and full of color, and I guess that was why I became popular," Ai says. "I didn't want to create ordinary music just like I don't want to create dull artworks. I found my own style in music, and it is the same with my art."

Her new song, *Questions and Answers*, tells of her experiences with art in the past 10 years.

Her upcoming concerts will see some of her artworks and installations on stage.