

# Singing Colors And Resonant Spaces

*There is a remarkable search for energy in the art of Chinese artist and singer Ai Jing.*

*At the same time, there is an intense sense of love running through her art and its presentation.*

*Ai Jing is clearly inspired to think in terms of universal harmony, which draws the viewer  
(and listener) into all her art.*

By Robert C. Morgan

**M**ention the name “Ai Jing” to almost anyone Chinese, particularly between the ages of 20 and 40, and they will immediately respond: “Oh! The singer! She’s famous.” But if you mention that Ai Jing is also a committed

artist—a painter and a sculptor—you will more often than not receive a cross-eyed glance. In this regard, her image in China is not unlike Bob Dylan’s in the United States, also a serious artist, or for that matter, Juliette Binoche in France, who is also a painter.

In the age of “social media,” the notion that someone like Ai Jing, a popular singer, might also be a serious artist is virtually beyond comprehension. Most folks who pay attention to pop culture, which in today’s world is both culturally specific and economically global, under-



Ai Jing and Kengo Kuma, **When Ai Jing Meets Kengo Kuma**, 2014, mixed-media installation at the China Art Museum, Shanghai. All images: Courtesy of the Artist.

stand art not as something that transcends specialization, but as intrinsically related to it. From a media point of view, this easily filters into the public mind, where the assumptions about contemporary art made by the popular media are generally short-sighted.

Having seen the work of Ai Jing recently at the China Art Museum in Shanghai, I was taken not only by her *I love Color* paintings, accompanied by a quilt work, sewn by her mother, but also by an installation in collaboration with the Japanese architect Kengo Kuma that occupied a major section of the floor space near the entrance to the museum.

**T**his installation, titled *When Ai Jing Meets Kengo Kuma*, was featured during the final stage of the exhibition. Apparently, the piece began as a concept when the artist visited the recently completed Nezu Museum in Tokyo, which was designed by Kuma. She felt particularly drawn to the materials he used, such as granite, wood, bamboo, and glass. She found a paradox in the appearance of the architecture that she describes as “soft and delicate but contains some unfathomable strength.” She further intuited that this paradox between delicacy and strength was precisely found in the rhythmic movements of *tai chi* or, in her words, “a rhythm of stillness and movement as if the architecture and the environment are breathing at the same pace.”

The manifestation of this concept eventually came to the China Art Museum, recently relocated in the former World Expo building, completed in downtown Shanghai in 2010. Here Ai Jing worked with Kuma on a series of flat templates using durable corrugated materials derived from stone and wood that would be stacked in relation to one another in organic spaces and at different heights. Occasionally one would spy one of Ai Jing’s resin stones in black or white, which she has used in earlier installations. In general, the work functioned very much like a garden. With the high towering ceilings in the interior of the museum, one could truly meander through the installation into various conduits and passages, various alcoves and miniature mazes. Accompanying the “garden” was a wood-carved, actual-size tree with a bird that Ai Jing had shown previously.

In this case, the recycled work, not only of materials but also of component works from earlier exhibitions and public installations, was of considerable interest. This suggested a work that I had seen approximately a year earlier by Haim Steinbach at the Hessel Museum at



**Ai Jing and Kengo Kuma, *When Ai Jing Meets Kengo Kuma*, 2014, mixed-media installation at the China Art Museum, Shanghai.**



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Bard College on Annandale-on-Hudson in upstate New York in the sense that Steinbach also recycled earlier works (not just materials) into a larger context, thus changing not so much the meaning of the work but the way we relate to it according to semiotics and visual function.

If architecture, stone, granite, and wood can be one component in Ai Jing’s art, then color is another. From her vantage point, color is not everyday color but a conceptual phenomenon, where the result of the quasi-geometric organizations on canvas is replete not with direct meaning but with a lingering thought-provoking aura.

For Ai Jing, her paintings may resonate, but this is not the whole story. It is as if she were searching for a lost world, a world misbegotten or taken away, as if the world was an inspired reality of her own beset with a full-color narrative, as in film, as in dance, other media that she brought to the stage at Shanghai’s China Art Museum.

Subtitled *I Love Color*, the artist was undoubtedly inspired by her mother’s quilt. This was conceived as a performance piece where her mother would sit in a chair at the museum among the colorful paintings of her daughter and sew together pieces of fabric of various colors.



Ai Jing, **I Love Color #9**, 2013, oil on canvas, 197 x 197 cm.



Ai Jing, **I Love Color #2**, 2013, oil on canvas, 90 x 90 cm.



**Above left:** Ai Jing, **I Love Color #4**, 2013, oil on canvas, 90 x 180 cm.



**Above right:** Ai Jing, **Once upon a time on yanfen street**, black-and-white television from the 1960s, fiberglass reinforced plastic, 38 x 47.5 x 45 cm.



Ai Jing, **MR #9**, 2013, oil on canvas, 197 x 197 cm.



Ai Jing, **MR #2**, 2013, oil on canvas, 197 x 197 cm.

The choice of the design was entirely her own; and from those choices, Ai Jing would think in terms of her own arrangements. Some of the canvases are large and others medium large, either stretched as square or horizontal rectangles, some extremely horizontal. Most of the canvases employ bright mixtures of color heavily applied on the surface, while others are darker, brooding colors, perhaps in some way, sentimental or remorseful in their affectation. The fact that she is painting bars of color without clearly defined measurements is interesting. As far as I could see, taped edges were not apparent.

**M**y first thought (often my best thought) in regards to these paintings is that, although the colored bars are imprecise geometric angles, her point is to work the color within the bars as one might consider a gesture by Willem de Kooning or the mature canvases of Hans Hofmann.

By this I mean that she is looking for an energy (*qi*) in these colorful bars that equates with the freehand gesture, which suggests emotion or, from her perspective, “love.” This is to suggest the source of these paintings, albeit conceptual from her perspective, stem from her mother’s love, from her mother’s willingness to sit for hours in a gallery and sew colored fabrics together. The mother’s love appears as the foundation for these works, not only the foundation but the inspiration and the motivation for Ai Jing to think in terms of peace, energy, solace, and harmony—all of which are feelings expressed in many of her songs during her previously active career as a singer.

Going further than expressing the transitional point of love from the mother to herself, as symbolized through the sewing of fabrics together, and the painting of colored bars on canvas, Ai Jing took it upon herself to organize a drawing competition at the museum for children, titled *Little Genius Drawing Competition*, to enter their colorful drawings. Ai Jing’s deeply felt interest in children is made apparent in the richness of this project. Therefore, the cycle becomes completed from the mother to Ai Jing to the children that are influenced by her paintings in making their own.

Ai Jing has also noted that she believes her paintings reveal in some indirect way her feeling for being childlike and her appreciation for children who are able to paint without any clear reason or intention, just painting out of enjoyment and, in some case, exhilaration. What she learned from this project is the extent to which art becomes a sign of liberation, of freedom to do what one wants



Ai Jing at the *Little Genius Drawing Competition* at the China Art Museum, Shanghai.



Installation view at the China Art Museum, Shanghai.

to do, to possess with the power of the eyes, the hands, and one’s mind to show the world what the interior of the soul is trying to define for itself and represent to the world.

Here, I would like to return to my point at the outset. Ai Jing is a singer and an artist, they are not only complementary but they also enrich one another. At the symposium held at the conclusion of her exhibition in the China Art Museum, a group of invited panelists were asked to speak on different aspects of her work. The speakers included the curator, Chen Lusheng, vice president of the National Museum of China in Beijing; Li Sheng, deputy director of the China Art Museum; and the renowned television host, Liu Fangfei. In addition, the architect Kengo Kuma came from Japan,

Dr. Pier Francesco Fumagalli, director of Far Eastern Studies at the Accademia Ambrosiana, made a lengthy trip from Milan, and I joined the panel from New York. The panel was, naturally, supportive of the artist, Ai Jing. But most remarkable was the international context in which the presentations were delivered, translated, and felt. For Ai Jing, who also spoke, art is the highest expression of humankind, but it also signifies the possibility of a better world. If this exhibition achieved anything, it was to communicate this idea: that peace and love are as inseparable from one another as they are from art, even when art is shown in the context of an important museum. Δ

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