

There's rather more to award-winning artist Fan Dongwang than the media beat-up about his humble roots. **David Wilson** encounters a 'born intellectual'



Photo: David Wilson

Working class, my arts

NEWSPAPERS ACROSS the world reported Fan Dongwang's story as one of a lowly Chinese labourer who miraculously turned into an award-winning artist. "A former house painter from Shanghai has taken out this year's Art on the Rocks Prize in Sydney," said the Australian Associated Press newswire, adding that Fan had beaten some 400 other artists for the A\$20,000 (HK\$110,000) purse. The winning work, a nine-panel piece called *9 Rocks*, was created during a single weekend.

Dressed in a natty white jacket and sitting at a downtown Sydney cafe, the working class hero could hardly look less like a labourer. And, as it turns out, the Shanghai-raised son of a doctor may well be Australia's most educated artist. The 46-year-old lists his academic achievements: a diploma from Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts; a diploma in applied art from Shanghai Xu-Hui District College; a masters degree in media art from the College of Fine Arts in Sydney; and a doctorate in visual arts from Wollongong University in New South Wales.

So, where did the house painter story come from? The media, Fan says with a wince, mistakenly – or, perhaps, not so innocently – interpreted his love of painting cityscapes as being a former career as a painter and decorator.

Fan's labouring has largely been of the mind. "I like the intellectual challenge," he says of his years of study. "I often read translations of western philosophy books and those have incredibly difficult concepts, but I like those ideas. I like mentally challenging myself about what is art. So, you could say I'm a born intellectual."

Fan says he identifies with other intellectual artists such as Van Gogh, Renoir

and Cezanne. To refine his technique, he used to copy the works of the French impressionists. He says he could forge a Van Gogh that would look "70 to 80 per cent convincing". But he's vague about his influences. "I can't tell you, because I have so many favourite artists."

Nonetheless, he admits to having been influenced by Tibetan art. Jabbing the air with his fist, he describes it as "very strong" and distinct from Chinese art. "It gives you raw energy," he says. "Very strong energy and mystery." He also says he likes to listen to pop music – the like of Michael Jackson, for example – while working. It's reflected in his cartoonish paintings and use of bold colours, such as turquoise and Post-it note yellow.

Fan describes *9 Rocks* as an adventure in shifting perspective. Like many of his other works, it combines ancient Chinese technique and western contemporary art concepts. He uses clashing angles to challenge the linear outlook of western art, and to reject the traditional restrictions of time and space. "You walk into the landscape and look around, and you can see multiple scenes," Fan says of *9 Rocks*. "Each [panel] has to work in its own respect, but it also has to work with the other panels in one big painting."

"I'm a perfectionist," he says. Every painting he produces must be just right. "I'm just starting to find my voice," he says. Nonetheless, Fan says he rarely feels a need to throw paintings out, as he did before he moved to Sydney in 1990. With sunlight glinting on his spectacles, Fan talks happily about Sydney's lifestyle and climate, and how its western ways have influenced his life and art.

True, he's not in great financial health,

and plans to use the prize money to pay off his debts. But he has no regrets about having left Shanghai, which he describes with a mixture of awe and estrangement, dubbing it a gigantic "futuristic theme park".

"It's changing every day," he says of his home town. "Even my parents, who are living in Shanghai, can't keep up with the changes because, if you don't go out for a week, it's completely changed. It's just unbelievable. I've become a complete foreigner in my home town."

Not unlike China, Fan is eager to combine the old and the new. On one hand, he considers his Shanghai schooling in classic Chinese technique – in every me-

ambiguous meanings. He uses the dragon symbol, which crops up repeatedly in his works, as an example. Whereas westerners may regard it as evil, those from the east see it as good luck.

9 Rocks is quite simple compared with some of Fan's other canvases. Another of his paintings, entitled *Shifting Perspectives and the Body*, is nine metres long. Fan describes it as: "St John the Baptist and a child dressed like St John the Evangelist watching the Australian Rugby players fighting against Mao's Red Guards – a seriousness versus absurdity. The anxious Chinese/Japanese tourists come to the Opera House in Sydney to observe an old-

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dium from calligraphy to painting and carving – as the bedrock of his development. "You know, history and tradition are the most important things – really they are," he says. On the other hand, he's eager to move his art forward. "If you come to this [western] lifestyle, the emphasis is on new art forms. That's also very important because, if you're lost in only the traditional, then it's difficult to become a contemporary artist. So you need to have the base knowledge, the traditions and the new ideas."

Fan expects his work to become ever more densely packed with complex,

fashioned feminist women's band celebrating the downturn of a religious figure who is holding a female baby in his arms in a Chinese interior."

Nobody could accuse Fan, whose works are in the Shanghai Art Museum's permanent collection, of lacking ambition. He admits that successfully executing any painting in his prismatic style is hard. "I don't mind how much time I spend, how much energy I spend," he says. "I don't bother about whether I can sell these or not. I just want to do good work, and so that leads me from one to another, one to another."