



Double the Art

Spouses and co-teachers at NYU Shanghai, Jian-Jun Zhang (JJ) and Barbara Edelstein discuss life imitating art

How did you two meet?

Barbara: We came from opposite sides of the world (me from LA and JJ from Shanghai) when we met at a party in 1990 in New York. I was accepted into the PSI (a studio art program connected with MOMA) and JJ was there on a fellowship through the Asia Culture Council. I had recently done a large installation piece in Snug Harbor, New York—a huge tree, with branches raining water into a pool below.

JJ: When I saw that tree, I thought it was gorgeous and kind of familiar to me, being natural and very Zen. It really struck me. When I discovered that Barbara was behind that amazing piece, I realized I found the artist just as attractive as her artwork! We started dating in 1992 and married in 1999.



How are your approaches to art similar and/or different?

Barbara: I never really did Western one-point or three-point perspective. I just didn't get it. I always did it the way I saw perspective. And then when JJ saw my pieces, he told me, "You do Asian perspective." For me it's more about my subject matter, rather than the actual pieces. I do video, drawing, sculpture—a variety of mediums.

JJ: I actually started on a more Western artistic journey. After the Cultural Revolution, I expressed more through abstract works. Later on (1979) I became interested in Zen and Daoism, and learned a completely different way of working. I started looking at Chinese traditional culture and began to integrate Chinese philosophy into my artwork, over a period of years.

What is it like teaching art together?

Barbara: We have two classes designed to teach Chinese ink art, with calligraphy in the first half and later offer a combination of ink with video, performance or something integrated. The students get very creative, and we push them to combine art with their own experience.

JJ: By teaching together, we can be multicultural. There's a lot of integration between the two of us. We are very lucky to work in this unique way, doing what we love.

When did you know you wanted to be an artist?

Barbara: Both parents were artists: my mother a painter and performer, my father a graphic designer and photographer. My brother and I always had use of their studios.

JJ: When I was 5. My father did calligraphy and he asked me to grind the inkstone (for the calligraphy ink) and he bought me a book to practice. **SF**

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Last Word

Three things you cannot live without:

Love, art, friendship

Next dream joint-installation?

On the moon.

NYC and Shanghai Favorites:

Museums, international culture, family, friends and fantastic art assistants