Barbara Edelstein  芭芭拉 · 爱德斯坦

Born in California and based in Shanghai and New York, Barbara Edelstein has been featured in exhibitions in both the US and Europe, as well as China where she has shown in an array of solo exhibitions, and also been selected for public sculpture projects. Ever an artist with an open mind, Barbara was influenced by Zen Buddhism and Daoist philosophy, as well as traditional Chinese arts from an early age. Her affection for China was further cemented after she married into a Shanghainese family. Now teaching at the New York University Shanghai campus as an arts professor, Barbara is dedicated to helping her students achieve a better understanding of both China and the US. Moreover, she is passionate about contributing to the multifaceted bridge between China and the world through the language of art.
A Proud Daughter-in-Law of Shanghai

Artist Barbara Edelstein looks back at her fateful journey to the city

By Clarisse Stulp

Barbara Edelstein was destined to come to China. She recalls her arrival in Shanghai as if it happened only yesterday. In fact it was 1997, and the American was enjoying her first few days in the city. Barbara had always thought of herself as a seasoned traveler, who had seen the world, went places, always managed to find her way, talk to people, and get around. Walking alone around some of Shanghai’s old neighborhoods she was confident she would know how to find her way back. But without having mastered any Chinese at the time and with no English on either street signs or buses, unlike today, she was lost. She had to call her Shanghainese husband, Zhang Jian-Jun, from a phone booth and ask him where she was. And next; how to get home.

Barbara grew up in Los Angeles, California in a family of creative people. Her father was a graphic designer and photographer, her mother is a painter and performance artist, and her brother is a sculptor. The Los Angeles of her youth was a fertile ground of Asian influences. “It didn’t strike me like an epiphany. These Asian ideas were always around,” she said. She lived in a multicultural street in Laurel Canyon. Her neighbors were American, Japanese, Korean and Chinese, among many more nationalities. There was also a multitude of museums in California that exhibited Asian artists. “I do remember, that at 13, when my parents came back from a trip to Japan, that their pictures of Japanese gardens had a big influence on me. And another big influence was the book Zen in the Art of Archery by the German philosopher Eugen Herrigel that I read around the same time.”
In high school, ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi and the principles of Daoism were “just passed around” by her classmates. They would talk about the works together, and also listen to Alan Watts, the British philosopher who moved to the San Francisco Bay Area and who introduced the then-burgeoning youth culture to Buddhism and Zen through his radio and television programs. “California was a very unique place to grow up at the time,” Barbara recalled.

From the outset, Barbara’s trajectory has seemed distinctly Chinese. Most prosaically, she’s never been partial to coffee, and always preferred tea. But there are more significant connections too, pointing to an altogether deeper cultural connection. For example, her preferred artistic material is ink, and her technique bears clear resemblances to ancient Chinese ink paintings. Similarly, when drawing she doesn’t use the Western geometrical perspective; like most Chinese landscape painters, she employs a “flattened perspective”. Chinese painters consider a lack of perspective as space for viewers to imagine, and to form their own perspectives and opinion of art. It is a belief that well suits Barbara’s views as to how art should be experienced—although she attributes her lack of geometrical perspective to the educational freedom that was given her. “It was never required to learn perspective drawing. When I asked my teacher to show me how to do one-point or three-point perspective, he said; just learn from a book. But I never did and drew it just the way I saw it.”

A New York Love Story

After graduating with a Master of Fine Arts, Barbara moved to New York through a grant from P. S. 1. This studio program is now affiliated with the prominent Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and its mission was to turn an abandoned public school building in New York City into artist studios and exhibition spaces. New York was the worldwide magnet for contemporary artists at the time, as traditional museums were not providing adequate exhibition opportunities for site-specific art. As an emerging artist creating large outdoor sculptures, Barbara was eminently suited for this program.

At the time of Barbara’s residency, P. S. 1 provided studios for 20 artists from the US, and 20 artists from Asia and the world. With her fellow studio artist, a woman from Japan, Barbara went to a party thrown by the Asian Cultural Council (ACC), an American organization founded by philanthropist John D. Rockefeller III (1906—1978), a third-generation member of the prominent Rockefeller family. The non-profit organization
was dedicated to promoting cultural exchange between the US and Asia. In fact, that’s exactly what Barbara ended up doing at the party. There, she met her future husband Zhang Jian-Jun, an artist from Shanghai residing in New York since 1989, who first came to New York on a fellowship from the ACC. Through a translator—whose presence has dissolved in her memory of the evening—Barbara and Jian-Jun talked endlessly about art, their work, and the use of water in sculptures. After that evening, it took them about two years to grow their friendship into love. “We would go to museums together, to galleries. We were always looking at art together. Jian-Jun would come over to cook for my friends; he’s a great cook! And by the time we actually got together we had very naturally grown into being each other’s best friends. That was such a great way to start a relationship. We’ve been together ever since.”

Much later, for the occasion of the ACC’s 50th anniversary celebration in Shanghai they had an animated conversation with the Council’s Board Chairman David Rockefeller Jr., and his wife Susan. Barbara revealed: “When we told them we met at an ACC party in New York in 1990 and are actually the embodiment of the ACC’s mission to connect cultures, they said, ‘For 50 years, we move people across oceans and this is the first romance we know about!’”

**Embracing a New Identity**

The first time Barbara came to Shanghai was in 1997 on a visit of several weeks to
meet her Shanghainese family-in-law. Jian-Jun had an exhibition in Tokyo and they
decided to join his family for Chinese New Year afterwards. It was late January, early
February. The weather was wet and cold, but the welcoming was warm and accepting.
Barbara recalled; “Jian-Jun’s father and sister came to pick us up from the airport. We all
got to his parents’ apartment in Lixi Road near Yuyuan Road. I met everyone; his
parents, two sisters, his brother, and their families. It was wonderful.”

She had been a little worried about whether she would be accepted as a foreigner into
this Shanghainese family. “One of our close friends from Chinatown in New York brought
home a friend who wasn’t Chinese, and her mother was in tears because her child wasn’t
going to marry someone from the same background.” But luckily, this particular
Shanghainese family didn’t share the same traditional values of the New York immigrants’
family; Barbara was welcomed with open arms. She also remembers the hospitality and the
warm welcome of Jian-Jun’s friends: “They took us out and made sure I tried all the
different foods. It was lovely to meet them.”

In Chinese, a woman who is married to a Shanghainese man is dubbed a “daughter-
in-law of the city”. Li Xiangyang, the former director of the Shanghai Art Museum and a
good friend of Jian-Jun, would always call Barbara by this moniker. For her, it’s a badge
of honor she wears proudly. She knows she is lucky to have a Shanghainese husband, who
are famous for taking good care of their wives.

Embracing this new identity, she has managed to adapt to local life seamlessly and
almost effortlessly. She often forgets that she is a foreigner in a Chinese environment. “It’s
true. If I don’t see my own face, I forget. Here is home, I see myself as a local. Especially
as an artist, wherever you are, you take in what’s around you, you process it and it
becomes part of who you are.”

Increasingly, curatorial teams and exhibition committees are also seeing Barbara as a
local. For example, she was the only foreigner with work included in the 2005 exhibition “100
Years of Chinese Sculpture” at the Shanghai Sculpture Space. In 2012, Barbara’s work was in
“Culture Shanghai: A Return Oriented Towards the Future,” which surveyed 30 years of
Shanghai art. Later, she was one of six contemporary Shanghai artists shown with five Ming
Dynasty artists in a 2013 exhibition at the Zhu Qi-Zhan Art Museum entitled “Dialogue with
Ming Dynasty Artists”. And currently, Barbara and Jian-Jun are both in an exhibition about
Shanghai culture, called Wu Yu Fang Yan. Even abroad, in Irvine, California, Barbara’s work
was in the show “Under Heaven”, which showed contemporary artists from China.
Making Life More Beautiful with Art

Barbara used her first trip to China to see more than just Shanghai. With her husband she traveled to Hangzhou, Suzhou, to Luoyang by train, and finally to Xi’an before returning to Shanghai. She was anxious to see even more, but realized there would be other trips and more time to explore this new destination and absorb inspiration from everywhere.

As she did on all of her traveling, during that first trip in China Barbara took lots of photographs and carried a drawing pad to make notes and sketches of everything she saw. In particular, the gardens in Suzhou and the ancient trees around Hangzhou’s West Lake inspired her greatly. She ended up making very detailed 7-foot-high ink drawings of the trees. “I always used ink when I was drawing, since I was young. It was my favorite material. Also when making these drawings of the trees in Hangzhou, I didn’t know then, but they actually were very much like gongbi baimiao, the traditional Chinese line drawings.”

After returning to New York Barbara’s work got picked up in China. Her first solo show was during the time of the third Shanghai Biennale in 2000. Back then, there were only 15 art galleries in the city. She was also invited to the “2nd Xihu International Sculpture Exhibition” in 2001 in Hangzhou’s West Lake. Her sculpture was actually the first artwork that was allowed in the lake since the Song Dynasty. The shape of the ancient trees and the willows around the lake inspired Barbara to make a large structure of copper tubing, which used water from the lake to rain down like willow branches. “My work is always site-specific, as they call it. Whenever I’m invited to do a large outdoor sculpture, I visit the site, look around, find what stands out, what makes an impression on me. And then I develop a work for that place. I often use water in my sculptures. Not like a traditional fountain, but water as an integral part of it. Water can really activate an artwork.”

Water and trees were also a big inspiration for Barbara’s work in the Jing’an Sculpture Park, at the northeast corner of Beijing Road and Shimen Road. “It was during the World Expo time, in 2010. A special curatorial committee, partly government and partly art critics and curators, selected the works. I designed a five-meter high sculpture in bronze and copper that rains water into a round pool. It’s again based on what I saw there. The bronze part is an abstracted willow leaf that I found when I visited the site. The copper is like a vine ball of the wisteria that was there. It’s a beautiful park.” Some of the works were temporary, but Barbara’s was permanent. It’s still there. Whenever Barbara is in the
Barbara’s work “Elemental Spring: Harmony” is exhibited permanently in the Jing’an Sculpture Park, at the northeast corner of Beijing Road and Shimen Road.

park, the guard there will point out to visitors that she is the artist who made the sculpture.

When the work was installed and the fence and the frame around the sculpture were removed, neighbors of the park gathered round. Barbara said: “This is China; there are always people out and about. They use the park for dancing and walking their dogs. When we were there to get the water working, there was a crowd of people. They were really excited and cheered. They came up to me and told me they liked my work. They were very pleased it got established in ‘their’ park. As an artist, you want to make the world more beautiful. That was so nice for me to hear that they appreciated and enjoyed it.”

Barbara is concerned with how city dwellers lose track of nature, in large metropolises especially. “By using natural imagery, such as vines, trees, leaves, water—whatever is there—and abstracting it into a sculptural form; and by using man-made materials such as copper tubing, and adding the element of water, I try to bridge the industrial world we live in with the essence of nature.”

Barbara’s work engages and connects people. When Jian-Jun, who is also a photographer, wanted to take a good night shot of the sculpture, the plaza was filled with people. “When they found out I was the artist, they cleared the way for the photograph and talked to each other and us, it was a nice welcoming feeling,” Barbara said.

Another example of how the community engaged through Barbara’s work was her “Hongkou Stones” project. To mark the leap year of 2008, the Zendai Museum initiated a year-long project called “Intrude 366”. The museum asked a different artist for every day
of the year to do an art project outside of the museum, connected to the community. Barbara proposed a project about the Jews living in the Hongkou District during the 1930s and World War II. She felt a strong connection to a family story of her cousin’s grandfather who fled to Shanghai and had been one of the Jews saved from the concentration camps in Germany. “Jews could enter the open port and escape their fate in Europe. I found his name in the books of Jews who lived in Shanghai at the time,” she recalled.

Her “Hongkou Stones” project was a memorial of the Jews in Shanghai. “The event started in the park in the ‘designated area’ for the Jews in Hongkou. They didn’t call it ghetto then, but it was walled-in. We told the stories of some of the Jews who had been living there. We were in a circle, passing stones around that had a mix of Jewish and Chinese symbols carved into them that I had designed. A lot of the old people still remembered and also shared their own memories. For the younger people we could fill in a part of history. We could tell them how accepting Shanghai was of these 20,000 Jews and how people lived and managed together.”

Expanding Art Landscape

Barbara recalls her first impressions of Shanghai vividly: “It was as bustling as New York.” By the late 1990s, Shanghai was already very international, thanks in part to the city’s history as a foreign center in China. In the mid-19th century, under the Treaty of Nanking, Shanghai was forced to open its port to foreign trade. Over the next 170 years, foreigners, their culture, products, ideas and influences played significant roles in the city’s development. “Even the majority of the people from China living in Shanghai are immigrants. It’s the mindset, people are very accepting of each other,” Barbara said.

Over the last two decades, Barbara has been able to witness a lot of Shanghai’s rapid expansion; “It’s faster than Manhattan—it’s crazy!” She saw the skyline of Pudong going up, numerous metro lines being laid and also how the art world developed along with it at breakneck pace. Through Jian-Jun, Barbara was introduced to the Shanghai art community: “It was a strong group, very vibrant, with a lot of energy. They were very close, even though they worked separately on their individual projects.”

The very first Shanghai Biennale took place in 1996, at that time still only with local oil painters and a few Chinese installation artists from overseas, Jian-Jun being one of them. The Shanghai government had a strong say in the event; it reflected the development of China’s modern art since the beginning of the reform period. By the third
edition in 2000, the Biennale included international artists, curators and planners, all with the shared goal of improving Shanghai’s role in arts as the “gateway to the West”.

In Shanghai today, contemporary art fairs are on the rise, which attract top international galleries and the global art community to the metropolis. Museums and galleries have started to pop up as part of the city’s plan to turn Shanghai into a world-class arts and culture hub. When Barbara first came to Shanghai in 1997 there were around 15 art galleries in the city. “Now there are over 200,” she stated. The Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA Shanghai), located in a green corner of People’s Park, was founded in 2005 by the Samuel Kung Foundation as the first non-profit, independent, contemporary art institution in Shanghai. Many would follow, including the Rockbund Art Museum, housed in the former Royal Asiatic Society (RAS) building right behind the Bund; the West Bund cultural corridor, with both the Long Museum and the YUZ Museum, housed in the former hangar of Longhua Airport; and the municipal contemporary art museum, the Power Station of Art, at a former Expo site and home to the Shanghai Biennale since 2012.

Co-Teaching at NYU

The Shanghai campus of New York University (NYU) brought Barbara and Jian-Jun to Shanghai on a more permanent basis. It was the first American college to receive independent registration status from China’s Ministry of Education in 2011, co-established with East China Normal University. The first undergraduate class was inaugurated in the fall of 2013. The new campus was established in Lujiazui, in the heart of Pudong New Area.

Jian-Jun was already teaching at NYU in New York, as a photography teacher, before the campus in Shanghai was established. He later came to teach at the Study Away program of NYU Shanghai Center that was based at East China Normal University since 2006.

“We came in 2007 to teach our first Study Away spring semester in Shanghai. I say ‘we,’ but actually it was Jian-Jun’s position and I would come along and help him with the classes,” Barbara said. “From then on, we would teach spring semester in Shanghai and fall semester in New York. It was a great time. In 2013 we started doing both semesters here and at that time I officially became a teacher as well.”

Barbara and Jian-Jun continue to co-teach several art courses, from introductory courses to studio projects. They are able to give students an Eastern perspective looking at
the West, and a Western perspective looking at the East. Barbara added: “Actually, people often say Jian-Jun’s work is more Western and my work is more Asian. So it’s really this cross-cultural, global way of looking at the world. Since NYU started the campus the student population is half-Chinese, half-foreigners. We feel we are a perfect example of the cultural mix NYU aims to provide here.”

The constant in all of their studio art classes is ink. The students have to study how to use it and how to incorporate it in their contemporary projects. They practice Chinese calligraphy, *gongbi*, and *shuimo* painting. Barbara and Jian-Jun show that Western masters, such as Picasso or Matisse, also used ink lines in their work. Barbara explained: “There are similarities and differences too. We show both perspectives. In Chinese calligraphy, the line is about spirit and about thought. We teach our students that it’s energy, coming from your feet going up, all the way through your body. We do different exercises to hold the brush and show how it translates your emotion into a line and the fullness of it. A brush is never just a brush like it is with, say, oil painting, when it is just used to get the paint onto the canvas in a particular way.”

As to whether Barbara’s future will be in China or the US, she answered that it will be both—and beyond. “Why stay only in one place when the world has so much to offer?” she enthused. “When I was a child, my parents would take us traveling. There is so much to see, so much to take in. I think we will go places and find new experiences and new inspiration. Shanghai will always be our base though, it’s home—as well as New York.”