

Shen Lieyi: Poetry Lies in What Is Left Unspoken



Shen Lieyi, born in 1969 in Hangzhou, is a Council Member of the China Sculpture Institute, Vice President of the Zhejiang Sculpture Research Association, and Deputy Dean of the School of Sculpture and Public Art at the China Academy of Art.

No description can surpass the richness of nature.

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Photographs courtesy of SHEN Space

For as long as he can remember, death, darkness, and a persistent sense of time's urgency have cast a shadow over Shen Lieyi's heart, stirring constant anxiety and unease.

This shadow first appeared in childhood—and has never fully lifted.

Now, as he approaches fifty, "each time I look into the mirror, there are a few more white hairs." He has come to terms with death to some extent yet still finds it difficult to balance art and life with ease. Thus, anxiety continues to bind both his body and his thoughts, like an instinct that refuses to loosen its grip. Only when he enters the process of creation does this anxiety begin to fade, even if only slightly.

[I]

What remains most vivid in Shen Lieyi's memory is the day he almost drowned at the age of eight. That very day happened to be Mao's memorial service. On that day, death collided with his world for the first time.

Behind his house ran a branch of the Grand Canal of Beijing and Hangzhou. At the time, he was alone, paddling and playing on a small farming boat. Across the river stood his sister's school—a four-story building—where students had gathered in the hallways, queuing to attend the memorial service. Yet Shen Lieyi lingered on the boat, swaying his body showily toward the students in the corridors. And then, in a single careless moment, he toppled from the boat and fell into the river.



Shen Lieyi (sixth from the left in the back row, wearing dark clothes)
elementary school graduation photo

His entire body sank into the water, and fear briefly stole his memory; he could no longer recall how he had grasped the boat's edge. When he opened his eyes beneath the surface, he came face to face with the darkness cast by the boat on the river. Yet around the boat, light still lingered. ***In that moment, the river, with its own force, revealed to him the mysteries of nature and the delicate boundary between life and death.***

He stared at that vast, seemingly flowing darkness, struggling desperately, every shout stifled back in his throat. From the far bank, some students began to erupt into chaotic noise, and even in the water, Shen Lieyi could hear someone calling out to his sister: "Your brother has fallen into the river."

He was rescued by passing boats and brought home. His mother arrived in

haste but did not scold him—she simply helped him change clothes and hurried him off to the memorial service. Throughout the entire process, Shen Lieyi’s thoughts remained suspended. The only thing that could stir his memory was the sight of some people around him crying as if their lives depended on it, some even being carried away.

For this experience, his memory began with death—and ended with death.

[II]

Many years later, he came to hold the belief that: ***"Whenever I think about any creation, 'water' always enters my thoughts unconsciously."***

Even excluding the experience of nearly drowning, Shen Lieyi has harbored a deep reverence for nature since childhood. Whenever a storm approached, he liked to stand on the terrace, watching the tall trees nearby bend under the wind and rain, only to gradually return to their upright posture once the gusts passed. Above him, the asbestos tiles were hammered continuously by the downpour, “which left a tremendous impression on me.”

During the rainy season, the water level of the canal would rise, sometimes flooding the streets and reaching pedestrians’ ankles. Shen Lieyi often lingered there, gazing toward the river’s end, as if he could glimpse the vastness and power of the ocean.

This sense of reverence is clearly reflected in both his life and his art. When I asked him about his thoughts on “harmony between heaven and humans”, he laughed: "Looking back, I used to place myself too high." In his current understanding, he does not place himself in a state of “harmony between heaven and humans,” but sees it as a kind of ***“innate nature of the natural world.”***

His works aim precisely to embody this innate nature, seeking to allow others to immerse themselves in their own inner world through it.



Rain: Shanxi Black Granite
165×123×70cm, 2001

The earliest “Rain” series works began in 2001. At that time, he participated in the 2nd West Lake Sculpture Exhibition, organized by the China Academy of Art. The theme of the exhibition was “Time Like a Song.” From this, Shen Lieyi felt the essence of “memory,” and his imagination gave rise to the concept of “Rain.”

“Rain” has always permeated his memory, and at this moment, it revealed a gentle glow. Shortly afterward, he came across a black-and-white photograph of rain patterns. In an instant, the scenes of raindrops falling from the sky into the land, which he had observed since childhood, were awakened in his mind, and some past emotions seemed to be enveloped within it. He decided to bring this to life.

He chose the hard granite as the medium to recreate the ripples of water. When the soft rain “falls” on the rock, the fleeting moment of arrest captures the viewer’s thoughts as well. In the next instant, the water spreads outward in patterns, and the viewer’s thoughts begin to flow along with it.

To this day, this work remains in Gushan Park. The last time Shen Lieyi visited, the low stones were being used as benches, the taller ones as tables, marked with traces of spilled drinks and eggshells. Around the stones, fallen leaves and ants trembled gently.

This was precisely Shen Lieyi’s original intention. He hoped that people could engage with his work, becoming participants and part of its existence. "It was also my first unintentional encounter with public art."



At this point, Shen Lieyi suddenly laughed. He said: "Many of the works I created afterwards all have elements of 'sitting'—they are works for beneath the buttocks."

Many years later, his works for Hangzhou Xiaoshan Airport, "A Trace on the Long Causeway" and "A Dot on the Pavilion in the Lake", were also related to water. Water, in this context, became a form of continuation.

The airport originally requested a sculpture purely for viewing. Shen Lieyi wanted to try an unconventional approach: "I will create something that not only reflects Hangzhou's cultural characteristics but is also practical—a bench for people to rest on."

He explained his idea to the organizers. He attempted to combine the airport's sense of transit, the shuttle in Hangzhou's silk weaving culture, the intersecting flight routes, and the Silk Road's network, all into a single piece suitable for the public. During the creative process, he happened upon a verse by Zhang Dai: "Heaven and clouds and mountains and water, all in one white; on the lake, only a trace on the Long Causeway, a dot on the Pavilion in the Lake, a speck of a boat, and two or three people inside." This inspired him to integrate the West Lake landscape, resulting in the two works: "A Trace on the Long Causeway" and "A Dot on the Pavilion in the Lake."



A Trace on the Long Causeway: Bamboo / Stainless Steel
590×120×60 cm, 2012



In 2016, the wives of G20 leaders sat on Shen Lieyi's work "A Dot on the Pavilion in the Lake" at the China Academy of Art for a group photo.

Shen Lieyi also created a work centered on a bridge. The red bridge spanned the land and the river, and its middle section was deliberately twisted, reminiscent of a temporal tunnel or a strand of human DNA.

In his view, a "bridge" best represents the relationship between humans and nature. Its significance does not lie in conquering nature, but in yielding to it. When rivers once obstructed human movement, our ancestors did not think to fill them in; instead, they built wooden or stone bridges above. People walked on the bridge, while the river continued to flow beneath.

Today, humans use various technological means to conquer or manipulate nature. Out of his innate reverence for nature, Shen Lieyi feels concern about technology. He

questions himself and everyone else: "Will you still be the same person after crossing this bridge?"

Shen Lieyi has always pursued a Zen-like state in his works. A long time ago, I asked him: *"Within Zen culture, is it still possible for the author's self-consciousness to exist?"*

At that time, he did not answer.

When I raised the question again, he said: "I actually really wanted to talk to you about this in person. I haven't studied Zen extensively, but what you're describing is exactly what I seek. My current works certainly have personal limitations and scope. The old sayings—'craft surpassing nature' or 'a stroke of genius'—refer to a piece of work that seems naturally generated, where the author's self-consciousness might not exist. Perhaps that allows viewers to gain more insight. After all, what is natural encompasses the most."

He added: "All your descriptions can never be richer than nature itself."



Boat: Shanxi Black Granite
500×90×85 cm, 2012

For this reason, he sometimes resists providing too much explanation of his works. He has always avoided becoming the kind of artist who constantly throws concepts at the audience. In a sense, sculptural art is like poetry, and the poetic essence lies precisely in what is left unsaid.

Sometimes, the artist's self-explanation not only limits the work itself, but also encloses the viewer's imagination within a pre-woven net. This can prevent the imagination, which ought to be expansive, from flourishing.

"Let the audience engage with the work on their own, and let them understand it through their own perception." This has always been Shen Lieyi's intention. "Of course, in the case of more abstract works, an appropriate explanation can also serve to awaken understanding."

[III]

When he was around seventeen or eighteen, Shen Lieyi had no concept of being an "artist". The state he imagined for himself as a young man was completely different from what it is now. At that time, he was simply thinking of art as a way to make a living.

His parents worked at the Hangzhou Silk Printing and Dyeing United Factory. Many of the employees there had graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Art) and were engaged in designing printed patterns. "As a benefit of the union, some of them would take time to teach us how to draw. It also kept us kids from wandering outside during the holidays," Shen Lieyi recalled. He also remembered his earliest experiences with drawing: "Before I even went to school, I was often locked at home alone. My older sister would frequently bring home colored chalk used for school blackboards. I would draw randomly on the cement yard with the chalk. I drew battleships, and I drew the sun."

When he grew up, it seemed only natural that he would apply to the Academy of Fine Arts. ***But his path to admission was far from smooth or straightforward.***



Garden II: Trees / Iron
60×300×30 cm, 2011

In his first year, he felt unprepared, and “dared not take the exam, feeling somewhat disappointed.” His parents did not impose plans or limits on his life; notions like “finding a proper job” or “taking the exam as soon as possible” could be postponed. He then went to a cultural station run by a classmate’s older brother to help with woodblock printing and magazine production.

In the second year, he failed to obtain an admission ticket. During this period, he studied painting on Nanshan Road during the day and attended cultural classes at Hangzhou University (now Zhejiang University) at night. After each painting session, he hurried home, riding his bicycle at full speed, leaving all other bikes behind. The wind played a continuous melody around his body, while the evening light spread across the entire road.

At that time, his parents had been sent to Sichuan for technical work, his sister had married, and his older brother worked in Shenzhen. At home, he cooked simple meals for himself. After eating, he rushed to Hangzhou University for class. After several months, “with little nutrition, I became very, very thin.”

Later, a teacher noticed his keen sense of color and invited Shen Lieyi to his studio to study painting—without charging any fees. After a while, the teacher told him: "Your sketching isn't strong. I'll introduce you to the Sculpture Department at the Academy of Fine Arts to improve your sketching."

That marked the moment Shen Lieyi shifted from painting to sculpture.

In the Sculpture Department, he practiced sketching and clay modeling, performing as well as the enrolled students. The teachers were very supportive and didn't charge tuition. After six months, they said: "Why not try taking the sculpture department exam?"

His professional grades were excellent, but his English fell short by a single point. Once again, hope seemed about to slip away.





Sky Series

"Back then, I was stubborn too. If I couldn't write an English composition, I simply left it blank. Actually, if I had just copied a sentence from the exam paper, I would have gotten a point."

Shen Lieyi had always been intimidated by English. He attended a children's school and began learning English in third grade. In his memory, the English teacher was a stern woman with permed hair, often scolding students, tapping the blackboard with a

pointer that rang out a sharp, metallic clang. That image lingered in his mind and never faded.

Now, because of missing just one point in English, his path to admission seemed to collapse once more. Later, he heard of an opportunity to enroll at his own expense, but the matter could not be settled immediately. It was only after other students completed military training that a solution emerged. Yet another challenge appeared: being one point short meant paying over ten thousand yuan, which was a considerable sum in the 1990s.

"To spare my mother the worry, my sister borrowed ten thousand yuan from our uncle," Shen Lieyi paused, then continued: "I was actually quite fortunate. At that time, the self-funded slots were limited. Without the support and recognition from the Sculpture Department teachers, and without my uncle's financial help, I might never have obtained the spot. My entire life could have changed. Afterwards, many others also helped me, and I have always been deeply grateful to them."





Sky Wander, Cloud Travel

1800x600 cm, 2016

At that time, the state paid university students a monthly stipend. As a self-funded student, however, he was treated differently. Several teachers in the department took part of their own salaries to help him. Shen Lieyi consistently ranked at the top of his class, and because of his abilities, some teachers would even take him along on outside jobs, giving him a share of the earnings. By his senior year, he had fully repaid the money borrowed from his uncle.

The only time he ever took leave from university was to make a five-meter-tall Santa Claus. The job was introduced to him by Shen Ke, the son of the Sculpture Department head, and could earn him over ten thousand yuan. Shen Lieyi set up a temporary shelter in his family courtyard. Due to the tight schedule, his older brother, sister, brother-in-law, and father all came to help. After more than a week of work, the sculpture was finally completed on the night before Christmas Eve, and transported overnight to Wulin Square.

Shen Lieyi always remembered Shen Ke's kindness. Later, shortly after graduating from university, Shen Ke had an accident at the intersection of Wansongling Road, and his young life ended abruptly under the flickering sunlight.

"Looking back, this is simply a story."

[IV]

Death, once again, crept toward Shen Lieyi. It constantly coiled, waiting for the precise moment to strike with all the accumulated force. Fortunately, just as in the drowning incident when he was eight, death still could not fully take shape.

The difference, however, was that his childhood near-drowning had intensified his imagination and fear of death. This time, it allowed him to face death with a sense of tolerant acceptance. He could sense the presence of death, yet he did not try to disperse or block it—he let it flow freely.

Recalling the experience, he said: "Since then, I haven't felt as anxious about death. I can calmly accept the passage of life."

The incident occurred in 2000, when he was thirty-two. At that time, his teacher and senior students had lent him and a few others a space to work on sculptures. The landlord, seeking extra income, had also erected an illegal temporary room nearby, inhabited by a person with a rather aggressive temperament. Due to the dust and noise generated by the sculptures, this individual frequently complained to the local authorities, accumulating numerous conflicts.

As tensions escalated, Shen Lieyi felt a measure of guilt and unease over the trouble caused to his teacher and senior students, so he decided to speak with the person, hoping to reconcile. He knocked on the door—unaware that death was already spreading at his feet.

Before he could say a word, the individual struck with a weapon that had been premeditated and prepared. Instinctively, Shen Lieyi raised his arm to block it. The blade sliced through flesh, cutting his arm and then thrusting into his abdomen. Blood gushed instantly.



Sky_Tiananmen: Iron
248x120x2 cm, 2012

Shen Lieyi mustered his last strength to subdue the attacker. The two froze in place, and the pain made Shen utter muffled cries. Someone nearby heard him and rushed over to disarm the man.

When he was taken to Gudang Hospital, death was pressing urgently against his life. The doctors examined his wounds and said, “We can’t save him here. He must be rushed to the First Affiliated Hospital of Zhejiang University immediately.”

Upon arrival, he was pushed into the emergency room. After some initial treatment, he was sent to the ultrasound room for further examination.

Between the emergency room and the ultrasound room lay a short stretch of open-air corridor. It began to drizzle, and Shen lay on the stretcher, gazing upward as the sky darkened. Rain fell vertically from the high sky, lightly touching his face. In that moment, time seemed to slow, and he could even feel the very shape of time and life.

At that instant, his genuine feeling was: “My fear of death dissolved, all at once, to a great extent.”

[v]

Yet, the anxiety had only intensified over time, grinding his thoughts like interlocking gears. This became especially evident after he became a teacher and later the Vice Dean of the Sculpture and Public Art College at the China Academy of Art. He felt perpetually pursued by time, to the point that the time he could devote to his own creations seemed to shrink, gradually narrowing.

For a period, he repeatedly had a dream. In it, he committed acts of killing. Wherever he tried to escape, he found that “all places were scenes of the killings.” As the dream recurred, he began to lose distinction between reality and illusion, even fearing that he might have killed someone in real life. He had to constantly revisit reality, repeatedly affirming his own “innocence.”

“These dreams are probably caused by my anxiety and tension,” he said.

He described himself as “unable to balance these contradictions, dealing with one problem at a time.” He laughed and admitted he certainly had procrastination tendencies—outside of his art, he wouldn’t act until it became urgent.

Yet it was precisely these contradictions and anxieties that drove him to examine his own inner world, seeking peace and composure. This introspection also imbues his work with reflections on life and inherent nature. When people stand before his creations, “I hope they can step away from tangled thoughts and quietly perceive themselves and everything around them.”





Interior View of Shen Lieyi' s Studio

Although the teaching profession occupied much of his time, he believed that “teaching and creation complement each other. Especially in creative classes, interactions with students can inspire both sides. After all, artistic creation is fundamentally a process of communicating with the human spirit.”

In his teaching, he liked to set “traps” for his students. Once they fell in, if they could rely on their own thinking to climb out, they would gain insight. If not, he would use the confusion or flashes of inspiration that arose during their creative process to help them further extend and expand their thinking and imagination.

He also firmly believed that the plastic arts require genuine physical engagement with the materials. Therefore, he resonated with the term “Philosopher-Craftsman” coined by Xu Jiang. In his understanding, “broad and open-minded thinking and hands-on creation are equally important; it is the combination of the two that constitutes true art. We should be thinking artisans, stimulating thought through doing.”

Without truly engaging with the materials and the creative process, relying solely on thought, it is difficult to produce good work.



Still Water Flows Over Stone: Wood, Stone
1000×160×40 cm, 2013

This was not only a standard he set for himself but also one he applied to his students. “Many students say I am ‘harsh,’ because while creative assignments can be completed outside the classroom, my classes require them to be present. I need to see the entire process of their creation in the studio. This way, I can spot flashes of insight they might not notice themselves and provide timely guidance. It also prevents some students from only thinking and not practicing, lacking direct hands-on creation.”

He once had a student whose graduation project had very little time left, yet all he could produce was a few sketch lines. “He had been thinking about it for three months, and those few lines weren’t even done properly.” Shen Lieyi then gave him a strict order: Stay in the studio. If you can’t stay a full day, at least stay half a day. Use any materials, in any way, to create something with your own hands.

“After this period of hands-on ‘struggle,’ he finally completed a satisfactory graduation project.”



Shen Lieyi at Work

At the close of our conversation, Shen Lieyi paused thoughtfully: “Perhaps, one day, when my creative work demands even more of me, I may have to give up more of the external things in my life.”

Yet for now, he admits, he still lacks the “courage to further let go.”

Recently, he has been working on a piece made of liquid metal shaped into individual “coins.” When the temperature rises above 25°C, this specific metal transitions from solid to liquid. He places these “coins” in a chilled container, allowing viewers to pick them up freely. The tighter they hold, the faster the coins melt away.

Perhaps this also reflects his current state. Often, people, pressured by external forces or inner desires, trap themselves in certain predicaments.

How to break free, he suggests, may rely solely on steadfast self-awareness and the willingness to relinquish.