



Celebrity Interview

Fits ...

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Mummy devotees will recall that Rachel Weisz played the character in the first two films. “I knew from the start I couldn’t fill Rachel’s shoes,” Bello says. “She’s so pretty and such an ingenue. But I played Evie more like Katharine Hepburn at 40 — she has a grown-up kid, a 20-year marriage, she’s a bit more cynical. She dreams of being someone like Rachel Weisz.”

The official line is that Weisz was reluctant to bring her young child with her to China for the arduous shoot, but it is rumored that the 37-year-old balked at “ageing up” to play the mother of a 20-year-old man. If this is true, the filmmakers couldn’t have arrived at a more appropriate replacement than Bello, who has made it something of a mission to ensure that women who don’t fit the cultural ideal are represented in cinema. She still receives letters from women grateful that she revealed her body in all its far-from-aerobicized glory in *The Cooler*. “I’d given birth to my son the year before and I was about 20kg overweight. I had cellulite on my ass, which I still do, but I thought that was a good thing to show. All these Hollywood movies with perfectly toned female bodies make you think, ‘Am I not sexy? Am I not good enough?’”

Despite her dalliance with the *Mummy* series (for which she has signed up for a further two installments), Bello seems to be keeping off the straight and narrow in all other respects. Her forthcoming films include *Downloading Nancy*, about a self-harming housewife who enlists a thug whom she meets online to put her out of her misery. That sounds like a feel-good romcom next to *Towelhead*, a drama so bleak that the darkest character is not even the pedophile who falls for a 13-year-old girl, but the child’s monstrous mother. Can you guess who plays her?

“She’s just the nastiest,” says Bello, laughing. “So many actors say you have to find something you like in each character. I’ve never bought that. I think there are people in the world who are plain mean. Not many, but some. So that’s how I decided to play her — without sympathy.”

But how can she live for months on end with a character for whom she has no respect? “I don’t live with my characters,” she shoots back. “I can’t take them home. I’m a mother.” It transpires that, as a consumer, she has no truck with the serious or somber. “All the films I like are escapist. I don’t want to have reality thrown in my face when I go to the cinema. I’ve never been a cinephile. My friends give me DVDs of Bergman or Truffaut, and I never watch them.”

This is ironic, not only because Bello specializes in making exactly the kind of films she does not watch, but because if Bergman were alive today, and working in America — big ifs, admittedly — it would not be far-fetched to see Bello’s poise and emotional intensity as a good fit for his austere temperament. “I know!” she says, agreeing with me — and yet, I sense, not quite agreeing. Minutes later, she is confiding that the person she would most like to be is Oprah Winfrey.

Of course, there’s no reason why the nature of an actor’s work should be reflected in his or her personality. But, perhaps because of the emotional investment demanded of performers, we come to expect it. Certainly you can trace the fierceness that Bello brought to *A History of Violence* or *Coyote Ugly* back to her blue-collar, Polish-Italian family. The Bellos are, she says, a boisterous clan. “When I brought boyfriends home, they would ask me, ‘Why is everyone shouting?’ I’d tell them, ‘They’re not shouting. They’re communicating.’”

Bello came to acting relatively late, having initially studied law; she was 30 when she landed her first major roles, including a regular gig on *ER*. But even when she was told by casting directors that she had no talent, she drew on reserves of self-belief and a vague sense of benevolent fate. She tells about how she was plodding through New York after being sacked by her agent, when she saw a gold shoe in the snow. She tried it on and it fitted, so she took it home. Now she updates me on recent developments.

“Guess what? This is pretty fascinating. I was going back to New York for a few weeks and a friend suggested I perform some ritual to thank the universe for my good luck. So I brought my gold shoe along. I got a piece of cardboard, and wrote on it, ‘Miracle shoe, size 8. If this shoe fits you, please take it. It brought me good luck, and now I want to pass it on to you, whoever you are.’ I don’t know who got it — I put it right next to a methadone clinic, so maybe it’s gone to someone who’s really struggling. When I left, I was crying with joy at being able to pass it on.”

The tears are falling again now. Bello, who has already written an unpublished novel about celebrity called *Under the Blonde*, dabs her eyes and tells me that this Cinderella saga inspired her to write a book of short stories about miracles. I can’t vouch for its literary merit, but Oprah is going to love it.

[ART JOURNAL]

Pop Art gets it on with Mao Zedong

Mao’s star power has multiplied in the Pop Art of China

BY **HOLLAND COTTER**
NY NEWS SERVICE, BEIJING

interests in popular culture, popular religion, power politics and the mechanics of propaganda, not to mention Pop Art and Chinese history past and present, the mausoleum was a must-see. Doubtful glances. Finally a young art consultant and translator named Megan Connolly, a native New Yorker living in Beijing, agreed to go. Warning me wryly that she had never been to the Statue of Liberty, she booked a car for an early morning pickup.

Our driver, Yang Jie, was a find. In her mid-30s, she reminded me of Diana Rigg as Emma Peel in *The Avengers*. Driving her own SUV, she handled traffic as one imagines Emma might, with bold but diffident grace. Firm of opinion, up on the news, she was an utterly cosmopolitan person, although she spoke only Chinese and had seldom left Beijing.

She drops us off a block from Tiananmen Square, where security, unrelenting since 1989, is tighter since the recent unrest in Tibet and protests over shoddy school construction after the May earthquake. Police officers, in and out of uniform, patrol the area. Soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army, in crisp olive-green, parade in front of Mao’s tomb as Connolly and I get in line.

Just the day before, I rubbed shoulders with olive-clad soldiers crowding a government-organized exhibition called Tibet: Past and Present at the Cultural Palace of Nationalities. The show, enthusiastically covered in the Chinese news media, was presented in two thematic parts.

The first, called The History of Tibet and Feudal Serfdom in Old Tibet, consisted mostly of old photographic images of what the labels said were peasants maimed and crippled at the hands of Tibetan lords and Buddhist lamas. The second, New Tibet Changing With Each Passing Day, was a full-color travelogue account of the country under Chinese rule, an idyll of progress and cheer.

The whole business was a classic exercise in propaganda, so blatant as to verge on kitsch. And it felt familiar. We get similar shows on Tibet and China in the West, in only slightly more nuanced form, with the good guys and bad guys

“I went to see the Great Wall. You know, you read about it for years. And actually, it was really great. It was really, really, really great.”

That was Andy Warhol after his only visit to China, in 1982.

He loved what he saw. He loved, he said, that everyone here dressed alike. He loved that the Great Wall, the world’s biggest Private Property: Do Not Enter sign, was in a Communist country. He loved that Mao Zedong (毛澤東), whose face he had painted because *Life* magazine called Mao the most famous man in the world, was still a superstar even though he had been dead for six years.

China was Pop. It still is. It’s still a nation of uniforms, but of more and more kinds of uniforms. I saw outfits with matching corsages on department store salesgirls, the slate-gray shirts of guards stationed at luxury high-rises and the Chloe Sevigny T-shirts that teenagers wear on Beijing streets. Mao’s image is less conspicuous here than it once was. His status took a dip when the savageries of the Cultural Revolution began to be told. His face doesn’t appear on a new 10 yuan banknote issued for the Olympics, but it’s on all other currency above the small-change level. He remains omnipresent, like some Warholian multiple. Look and you’ll find him. His star power holds.

And there’s advertising on top of advertising. Next to the stretch of the Great Wall that Warhol visited — actually a modern reconstruction, fake history — there now stands a large billboard emblazoned with the Olympic slogan, “One World One Dream.” It simultaneously promotes an image of the New China and interrupts a view of the old one, a vista of a romantic landscape that has been kept, for travel-brochure purposes, development free.

Warhol knew all about new-old. He didn’t paint Campbell’s soup cans because they were so cool and 1960s but because they were homely and 1930s, relics of his Depression-era childhood. He would have grasped in a flash that there’s something very old right in the center of the splashy new Beijing: a cemetery, a symbolic one but a cemetery nonetheless.

It has three parts: Mao’s mausoleum, where he lies in state; the Forbidden City, where the nation’s imperial past is embalmed; and, between them, Tiananmen Square, where the ghosts of a still-recent political trauma, the 1989 massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators, find no rest.

Of course Warhol had himself photographed with the Mao portrait in Tiananmen. Whether he toured Mao’s mausoleum — officially the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall (毛主席紀念堂) — I don’t know. I knew I wanted to go. The problem was finding a companion. Several expatriate contacts begged off. None of them, it seemed, had ever made a visit, and they wondered

why I would want to.

I tried to explain that, with my



Part of a tableau of sculptures by Li Zhanyang, featuring Mao Zedong and the artist Joseph Beuys.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE