

A Brush of Grey — the Oil Painting by Chen Wenji

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I always relatively believe the relationship of art and reality is a mirror of society and generation. If to inspect the relation of art and reality from the history of Chinese contemporary art, there are two noteworthy tendencies, one is that many artists are rigid throughout in the direct projection and the reflection of art to the reality, believing the modernity can see clearly the truth of life and the reality itself, therefore the artistic function becomes naturally the reflection to historical trend; another is rigid throughout in the performance of great historic course and in exploring the social condition and revolutionary fervor under the urgent nationality and conflict of classes. They both have connections with the national humiliation and the social crisis the Chinese modernity history faces, which is one of the characteristics of China's history inevitableness with Chinese modernity. After the Open of China, because of the rich complexity of Chinese reality itself in social reforming, it provides abundant resources can be used for the Chinese prior art, the marvelous sight and different view rooting in the present world constitutes a unique charm. To ponder and be keen on contemporary culture circumstances and individual survival in this kind of situation will cause to transform the old artistic form in methodology, and what the artists need is a kind of method and language about stipulation for art to manifest this idea of thought. This is not only one of the standards I judge an artist's value of his work but also the supporting point in the method of thought that I pay attention to and am involved positively in the contemporary experimental art.

If according to my above judgment, I am more interested in the series of work by Chen Wenji like Yellow Sofa, Red Scar and so on at the end of 80's and the beginning of 90's on last century. Although there is no noise made from the reality in the paintings, only solemn and quiet scenes and utensils, but the logic pondered derives directly from the reality. It refracts the loss and restlessness of people to the reality at that time, and the spiritually floating without the date of return, as well as the incredible metaphor to the reality itself. To the end of 90's, Chen Wenji moved his view of creation from utensils of his own room to the sceneries of outside window. This description for scenery launches from the dark green uncultivated landscape. Chimney, flagpole, street light appear in the work of Supreme Series in an hazy tone as ash, the works like Prospect, Weak Breath and so on dive a breath of the time and the shadow hidden behind the new times full of vitality, Final Infinite and Detains Light then focus further on an dull, unconcerned atmosphere with deficient individuality which are caused by the specific environment in the suburb cities, as well as the visual impoverishment and bleak from modernism deeply extending his question about the inorganic quality of modern life. This kind of city image with cultural memory being lost is not only a symbol presentation about modernism culture, but also simultaneously a real appearance of city development and the plan image in China. To compare with his scenery of early time, the creation mentality is inherited, but the concrete scenes are different which are more purely, brief in language of oil painting. His recent work like Three Chapters, Determination, One Definition and so on show a simple life with inactivity increasingly probably far

with the reality, and also being gradually far with the vanguard after departing to pay great attention to the individual cognition and experience of inner feelings observing calmly as well as the unceasing penetrating and purifying to the language of oil painting with the titles of works filled meaning of Zen. He attempts to manifest the mood of the East in the thought and the ideal condition with new sense of language and linguistic environment that demonstrates his paintings which express a kind of uncertain function and infinite change unable to grasp in a non-concrete relation after pursuing the real resembling.

If it is said that this is a simple narration about Chen Wenji's creation of oil painting, it would rather said that it is my personal opinion. Now, I think it actually does not matter, different people having different views. But the historical advancement and the reality diversification are often not simple and uniform. In my thought at present, I care about the question on tendency of personal creation standpoint of several generation evolved by Chen Wenji's individual art experience. One is the question about being getting new or getting old.

It refers that since the Chinese modern history, some revolutionaries and scholars had devoted in introducing systemically the western academic thought and scientific concept to involve positively the reality, taking society transformation as own duty, their contributions will never be possible to die. But at their older age, these warriors had been too disappointed to the western science and polity to transfer to the Chinese traditional culture. Those characters experienced the transformation of that time are perhaps not infrequent. Although there are traitor's shadows of that time on their bodies of nowadays, they turned actually to be the roles hoping a tender feeling. They are still alternatives but have actually gotten down from the focus of the time as retirement. To have a look closely to the Stars Exhibition of Fine Art and the Ideological Trend of Art in 1985s, the paintings by some vanguard artists nowadays and the attitude of some radical critics at present have not been able to surmount these so-called historical home of being getting new or getting old as the revolutionaries. As them, it is just a transformation in their individual art career, but there is special significance actually by the time. And it is not only about one person with the phenomenon of being getting new or getting old in the art field. It is a reflection in the art field of various contradictions because of the social vicissitude, and also because of individual personality and experiences as well as of the time and the age. In short, it is a special cultural phenomenon with worth of pondering.

Another question is the about to choose different path of for life or for art. Mentioned this is like some platitudes. Recently I have thought frequently that since the Movement of 4th May, the Chinese modern culture revealing flows is always a kind of cultural radicalism, the call of for life or for art has been following the development of Chinese culture and art. Although after new China established, the Left's radical manner has dissimilated by the government to be an ideology of political rights, it still affects or continues this revolutionary standpoint to the generations. Since China's reform and open, the Chinese prior art has been taken this precisely as flaunts to challenge traditions, subvert orders and criticize realities, even to adopt some extreme behavior. The reason that the Chinese prior art is so hot like a raging fire favored unceasingly on domestic and overseas has been closely with the reality. Certainly, just because of, it creates opportunism of this trade to eager for quick success and immediate gain, which is denounced by the public media. Another diving flow camouflaged by the Left

—the tradition of to do art just for art, a kind esthetic modernity has still displayed its function besides the modernity of saving the nation and making enlightenment. However, this tradition of pure art favoring in the esthetic modernity has not had opportunities to be realized in China's modernity, and also been constrained in the art system of Chinese modernity. The advancement of Chinese globalization and marketability with high speed economical growth since the 90's has brought a series of historical perspectives and the form of society completely different with the modernity of the Movement of 4th May. It is difficult to use the explanation to China from the Movement of 4th May to face the change of the reality in China, and the imagination of for life has already been difficult to face the life under the globalization and the marketability in China today. Art seems to achieve finally the purity unprecedentedly, to become a peaceful field where people can carry on the exploration. This is the attribution on the culture of a new century. The serious mission bared by the art for life has been dispelled quietly, it seems that there is an objective foundation for the pure art to develop its independency, and the art returns to be itself more and more truly. This does certainly not mean that the art has itself isolated outside of the world, but means our imagination and requirement about art are changing. This changing is exactly a new style of art unchanged with time. Art turns gradually the high-level and marginal language of humanity.

Then to look at the creative experience of Chen Wenji under this background, there are three periods. His field of vision contracts gradually from the direct reality to individual innermost feelings. With a manner of low type, Chen Wenji does not like to be known widely. He is not that kind of artist who has a direct feeling about the reality, but actually pays extreme attention to contemporary culture and art. I heard from his students that on his class they all obtain benefits from his observation and thinking about the contemporary art. Chen Wenji maybe too difficult to learn the vanguard of using the world, or is just not willing to do so. He said I am not usually willing to emphasize excessively my own standpoint, to have too obvious tendentiousness. Perhaps it will become the one like bandit if cannot learn well, and he just bypassed after his vanguard experience. Therefore he is in favor of thinking alone without drifting with the current to retain his individual field as an artist, even an enjoyment of ivory tower. This makes an illustration for his separation with the vanguard field. Unwilling to be involved in the reality revel to obtain the purity of soul in the mixture world is just from the heart and along the nature, just like this. To look at his recent works, we can discover the sceneries related to human nature in the daily carelessness but certainly not the great narration. The art he requests is not restricted by the external social reality to obtain some kind of unprecedented independent imagination, purified, time-honored, warm and peaceful, without dark color and various colors, we can see the personal integrity of another side of the reality. Compared with those works like blood spurting in prior art, Chen Wenji's paintings show a quality of dilution with auspiciousness, separating with those arts about the love of injury. His work seems no traces of words on present time with origin from the thinking about art and traditions of for art since the Movement of 4th May. Although this kind of language is alternative, it has a purifying to soul and trembling of sense. Those fashionable popular colors are tasteless in front of Chen Wenji's work even his color is always grey. He said I like occupying myself in a status of balance, no up and no down, no left and no right, not to front and not to back, without partiality. This is a kind of state of spirit and criterion of material. And it is just a brush of grey on vision. As the personal nature urging, I can understand the essence of grey, and I am close to the

original intention of grey. It is so-called the painting as the painter. If you saw his sincere and steady eyes, you can understand clearly him and his painting all in your mind. The spirit of gaining self's sufficient, the positive practice for moral of Confucianism and the philosophy about shunning the world of Lao-Zhuang in Chinese traditional culture are integrated ingeniously together, forming a golden balance that he remains himself purified and incorruptible. It maybe a kind of return, but it is not to seek the paradise simply which is a cheap presentation of contemporary to escape from the noise made by the reality. It provides resource of thought from the spirit observing calmly to offer possibilities of thought and judgment continually. To be too into the society is succumbed in the reality to lose self, and to be out to the society basing on individual experience may find the existence of identity as the one with faith of itself. Actually, whatever for life or for art, the two choices are two different experiences taking root in the reality of Chinese society: realistic participation and artistic practice. Therefore they are also two different ways to express the Chinese modernity. Is it right? Or wrong? It is perhaps different from people and complex, but absolutely not the simple dual opposition. It is because that the situations of history and reality and individual are often more promiscuous and tricky than our imagination and combination.

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