

Painting as an Attitude—the Art of Chen Wenji

Yin Shuangxi

To discuss the value of Chen Wenji in the field of contemporary art, it needs to put Chen Wenji on the background of that the Chinese contemporary art has been far away the painting-in-itself day by day to trend towards politics and market since 90's. However, Chen Wenji has become famous in 80's of last century, being noticeable as modernism painter from the Chinese contemporary academy, he always does not take his own art as dependency of the politics, market or other anything external in the art. To Chen Wenji, painting is a part of his daily life, he finds the value of his individual existence and the joy in life. Speaking accurately, to Chen Wenji, painting is an attitude but not technique. He regards the plain understanding by himself about painting as the way to record his individual experience of inner heart, displaying the intrinsic vigor and strength of the real world. This is a power of vision with the character of quietness and self-control. The value of Chen Wenji is to express the emotion but not to analysis the society in some concrete space and abstract time.

The work of Chen Wenji has the character of radiation. He always follows his own feeling to choose the theme and the method of painting. In his way, the method is developed along with his innermost feeling of expression, the objects are selected and combined also from this. He is not like some painters who immerses in to the infatuation about their self-images and techniques of oil painting to change all themes and technologies into the self-duplicated demonstration, thus enable their works to have some kind of suspicious tendency with industrial volume production.

On July of 1986, an occasional chance, Chen Wenji painted his first oil painting of life and awarded, which had opened his true life of art. During the study before then, he realized more the predecessor's outstanding and savored the master's mystery. But after that, he gradually launched the personalized travel of art with unique absorption and devotion formed by the youth time, been attacking accidentally the standardization in the painting field at that time. The uniqueness of Chen Wenji is he never treated himself as an oil painter. He does not care about that people watch his work by the judgment as oil painting, he does not want to make his painting look too oil painting. He does not care either about the final effect of work and some kind of fixed form, he is infatuated in the painting process whatever this process can extricate him from the worry of real life.

Since 20 years, Chen Wenji's work has maintained leaving abstractly to the reality. The world in Chen Wenji's painting always relates with and the nature reappearance to get rid of the real life unceasingly. Although there are extremely real images in his work, what he describes is absolutely not the concrete life scene but a real world pondered and the filtrated by him. Chen Wenji is always seeking the foundation of his art in the perceptual world. He perhaps can surmount this foundation, but will never separate from it. He establishes his distinctive quality of art upon this foundation, explaining the authenticity of reality in the limited space and the objects.

To Chen Wenji, the form has life, is the carrier of abstract and complex thought. Chen Wenji cannot express to indicate it with explicit language, but he presents silently the intrinsic essence and hiding order of the real world in the coagulation image. The possibilities to constitute these all precisely comes from Chen Wenji's unordinary sensitivity, not only the sensitivity about form, also the sensitivity about human nature obtained by his calmly observation in a long-distance way.

You may not like Chen Wenji's work, but you are unable to reject and to avoid his work, because he obtains the most valuable simple and explication of art by highly calmness and plainly expression. I think art is just the memory artists regarding to the past, regarding to the dialysis on reality and revelation of future. Only the artists who are not hampered by prejudice to dare to take risks can explore it. Brave expedites the elements of imagination, is the premise developing the artists' individualities. To Chen Wenji, it is more important to let us enter his paintings but not to understand his painting in usual ways. Material and technique are unimportant for art, but are very important for the artist, because this is the bridge deciding the effect the artist expressing.

To Chen Wenji, the material and the technique are what he pays extremely attention to. But finally he takes whether he can fully express his feeling as the judgment of whether his work can be completed. He does not like his work becoming the thing shown off in living room of the middle class, just as some people demonstrate labels of famous brand commodities in front of other people. So he never made his art become solidified symbol, style and model, but always be loyally in his innermost feelings.

Chen Wenji is not the painter good at social significant subjects and literature expression, rather to say, he is a lyrical painter dedicating the language charm of painting and respecting the sensation of painting. In his work, there are respects to the art history of oil painting and sensitivity to the comprehensive language of painting. He diligently studies the broad cultural education the Chinese oil painters of early time have to enable his work to have historical breath. But his unique calm quality and custom of thinking alone enable his work to have a kind of rational rigorousness, providing a space of philosophy explanation about the world and the existence. Chen Wenji's work is so plain to leave a photographic memory. He pours a succinct characteristic into the painting, establishing the boundary can be passed through in between real things and their reflection. He suggests the modernism abstractness by the background of broad colors, and sets the familiar sights and things into a strange environment, expressing a tensional relationship between the human and the environment with calm and even cold signifying scenes.

The pop artists emphasize to attract audience's attention with the intense impression. Very many artists utilize the bright marks, the photography and other commercial methods to create the communication with audiences in order to accelerate their success. To use individual way for painting expression or to use marks and symbols from the outside world? Chen Wenji decided to use the self-innermost feelings as the foundation, expressing by individual way of painting to the experience of outside world. He has entrusted the things with forms as still live, thus has given these silent images the silent spiritual strength, which enables his work to have the spiritual effort under the gentle appearance and combines the significance and abstractness of forms into maintains a weightlessly scenery in the space with fuzzily physique, unfolding the static life.

Chen Wenji's work is not the reflection like mirror surface for realistic things, or things themselves. Only can say, it is the understanding Chen Wenji has to the things which are the spiritual products processed by Chen Wenji, a kind of trace of artist's thinking and acting. His work gets rid of the constraining of traditional realistic art and pop art to be a new art, a respects to self examination and cold expression.

What I am interested is, how Chen Wenji learnt to eliminate restlessness from the innermost feelings by inconceivable way, and has not sacrificed simultaneously the skill of painting. Chen Wenji is obviously a painter with highly self-conscious, whose sensitivity of modern ideological trend can keep connection with his feeling about the intrinsic authenticity. He pours his spirit into the paintings with all his strength, and avoids carefully dispersing audiences' attention with the trivial feeling in his life. This demonstrates the steadiness of style from the endurance in the painting as well as the curiosity provides unceasingly to audiences.

The art of Chen Wenji manifests the inner link of modernism and Chinese academic education. Even if we do not discuss these extremely successful Chinese contemporary artists are all from the background of fine arts academies, those most active young artists on today also all profit from the nurture of humanities tradition and the training on painting. More importantly, the academies should become the base of providing academic tradition and humanities ideology in the development of contemporary art, and maintaining the respects for art and the dignity for academic standards. It is precisely this point that can let us establish the independence of Chinese contemporary art to obtain the self-confidence of development under the strong influence of western art.

Ten years ago, I once referred in an article about Ren Xiaolin the influence to him from Camille Pissarro. It seems now there still are lacking of professional painters with dedication who concentrate in painting itself for Chinese contemporary art. The so-called professional painter is not referred to make a living by painting but referred to some people who regard painting as the certain matter in their life, a mission as well, contributes their whole life on the canvas, dreaming to have a view at the mystery of the Nature and good fortune in unremittingly diligently practice. Pissarro and the artists of his generation aspire rigidly and study steadfastly to the art, with strong desire for innovating the language of painting, on behalf of the ideal from the artists in 19th century. In art history, some artists asked questions to society at that time, others asked questions to the art tradition, who are all respectable. Although Chen Wenji's art promulgates the survival significance in a more concealed way, he is excited deeply by the charm and rich history of the painting, longing for study, for the understanding and making contribution. He knew the difficulty and long distance of this road, he prepares to pay. In Chen Wenji's work, I cannot see bad habit of eager for quick success and immediate gain in this field and roughly manufacturing under the impetuous situation of market. Chen Wenji established his unique value on Chinese contemporary art by making diligently effort for 20 years, and provided a clear path for the young people who would enter into this trade of art. This is a small path Chen Wenji stepping on, along which, we will be able to see more exciting landscapes.

Yin Shuangxi (Art Doctor and Critic)

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