

# Personal experience and transition of the time — talking about the art of Chen Wenji

Song Xiaoxia

In 80's of last century, the art of Chen Wenji is regarded as the art between the modern art and the non-modern art. His paintings were shown in the Exhibition of Chinese Modern Art and the 7th National Exhibition of Fine Art in 1989. But he does not belong to the mainstream of the post-modernism prior art since the New Wave of Fine Arts in 1985 nor the so called structure of traditional art. For his nature, Chen Wenji is only an artist, living in seclusion in the system of fine arts institute.

After more than 20 years, the artistic language type we discussed has already had an integrity change worldwide from the modernity to the post-modernity and from the modernism to the post-modernism. This change does not mean the end of the modernity, also not mean the radical change of the hegemony structure in world culture. When we trace its meaning in the West original ecological environment, it provides us a turning point to reconsider the modernization advancement of Chinese fine arts.

The social politics condition for Chinese contemporary art is the accumulation of material and culture and the ideology precipitation since the reform and open policy for 20 years. The question about the modernity of Chinese contemporary art is closely linked to the reforming, the opportunity and the challenge of all aspects of China in contemporary era. Chinese contemporary art since 90's of 20 century presents the tendency of turning back to history and tradition. Certainly, the tradition was already not the synonym of backwardness and stagnation from the general saying of the tradition and the modern in dual opposition in 1980s, but became the resource and treasure of contemporary culture. In this new tendency, it contains a new ideological trend of returning to the concrete Chinese, to a forming world of life.

The solo exhibition of Chen Wenji on October in 1999 presented his personal experience during the transition of the time as a concrete person/ an artist. In this exhibition, Chen Wenji showed several series oil painting works. In which the most noticeable was a series of oil painting about landscape. They are likely the beam of light recollecting to the memories of past experience, covering a pessimism infiltrating from the tranquility-- a recalling and thinking of the love and pondering to the yesterdays. We were very easy to find out the inner connection with the present situation and the cultural scenes of our life. I discovered at last, under Chen Wenji's calm vision, there are originally the nagging of self and many helplessness.

Supreme Series, a work series isn't that conspicuously in the exhibition. These were some objects refined unexpectedly from the scenery paintings of the later period——smokeless chimney, still street light...their images are lonely and noble, observing calmly and watching silently the time fluctuating. I remembered when Chen Wenji painted still lives, he had immersion in his unique personal world to dig

deeply. Now the world ever-changing arrogant exaggerates before his eyes, which scatters his feeling and realization overall to the world in the past time, the solid foundation once before “was instead somewhat creakiness” (Chen Wenji said in the article named waiting for transformation or for destroying in the painting collection Chen Wenji). Therefore, those sentimental sceneries were just like a break after his experience of the hopeless situation of art, and also a completion to his experience to the past time. Hereafter Chen Wenji then started to throw his own vision to today’s world, opened his consciousness to the transformation of the world.

Chen Wenji’s point of view about painting changed obviously. This change is the transformation of the artist himself as a human of his own, is the transformation of intrinsic structure happened in his body, his soul and his spirit, and it is not the transformation of artistic style, so it cannot obtain the key point to define from the theme type, the style type and the language construction. When others also in ponder over there is Spanish style or not in Chen Wenji’s scenery painting, stepping out toward from the Supreme Series, he completed 8 pieces of paintings about object series which were not collected into the exhibition record.

This series of work is quite the same as solemn with physical strength collected. To come up shortly, the objects in the paintings are unexpected deeply, even with the feeling of slightly incompatibility. These dignified images are obviously not the objects we seen in daily life, but the visual representation unscrambled by Chen Wenji. He strips the objects in the paintings from the scenes in reality, entrusting them with dignity of god, the occupied space of religious statuary.

Chen Wenji is likely building statuary for the shrine in our time, although these objects spread casually on his visual memory territory: The big chimney with lofty significance, is the ideal of the modernization as the symbol of industrialization the Chinese have altogether in the 20th century. The pentacle on the top of flagpole and the head of lance are the sparkling images of Chinese revolution in historical period, condensing the light and the heat of idealism. The idle Chinese tunic suit, repeats the cultural experience of the Chinese in one century. The pesticide and the mineral spring bottle reports that Chinese society has already stepped into the so-called expense society in the final 10 years of 20th century, the infinite vessel preserves the similarly infinite desire for materials, innumerable base and low triviality in life ——building the milestone of the time.

As if Chen Wenji would make an individual inventory with the small images to the modern history with standards changed we are experiencing. The above objects belonging to different times are put by Chen Wenji in the unification of grey, carrying on the introspection by the concrete individual experience to all sorts of modernized Utopia, emphasizes their own bodies ——actual conditions of energetic entities at this very moment, and also narrates simultaneously some kind of social meaning.

To Chen Wenji who always considers the society by the way of painting but does not consider the painting by the aspect of society, this is a substantive change. Its intrinsic basis of artistic change is not only the transformation of artist in his actual existence, moreover is the transformation of his judgment standard for the value of art. Take the mosquito medicinal and the mineral spring bottle as the example. In the *Essence, Extinguished Mosquito Medicine, Mineral Water* of 1992, the mosquito

medicine and the mineral spring bottle are still lives in the life scene. Although the paintings of Chen Wenji always unexpected, and also some incredible with many apposite factors, but as a whole he is pursuing a kind of independent and self sufficient esthetic idea: individual mind is certainly in the key point of life, the sensitive exquisiteness of visual sensation becomes naturally the individual style of the still life Chen Wenji painted, the language style of painting constitutes inevitably the core of his art. Chen Wenji distorted the images of objects after 7 years, so the frivolous mineral spring bottle was being congealed like stone, the tank of mosquito medicine also had eternality as bronze. He enlarges the daily necessities in our life into the fetish, no longer the still lives in the life scenes. I believe, the strange and incompatible feeling of Chen Wenji experienced directly in the in the reality of transition of the time, urges him to refine the this new relation between human and objects, this is also a beginning he tries hard to face the main body of art disintegrated and collapsed day by day by the time. Chen Wenji is experiencing passively like our majority the internal and external transition of modern time. His unique character is, he always experiences the questions he felt in the modern phenomenon with his individual attitude, planned experiencing his own intrinsic change by system standards changing, attempting to hear the cultural transformation of our time by a relatively independent standpoint. If we compare the society and art transformation of nowadays with a historical novel, Chen Wenji is naturally not relater of this historical drama, however his creating experience has actually provided an individual explanation for this historical drama, his work has touched the vicissitude of the inner historical energy by individual experience.

In the transition of modern era, artists have different choices respectively: some are converted the mainstream, some accommodates the reality, and some indulges in the art. Chen Wenji saw the weakness of art, he rather believes his own experience, rather pays attention to his own response in the creating process, because there is inside so-called "the self-satisfied esthetic sense" as his said. "The self-satisfied esthetic sense" means he regards the creating process as individual experience, the esthetic sense probably appears in the immersion of own condition, the instantaneousness of bumping unexpectedly with the world we exists. But, the individual experience is really credible? When the esthetic sense is not willing to appear, Chen Wenji is always not self-confident. The reasons of that Chen Wenji usually obeys his individual experience, one which of them is that he cares specially the feeling of his body, is extremely sensitive to the experience from body itself. Many artists neglects their own bodies, thinking them as one of multitudinous objects in the world, mostly takes them as the expression about desire and instinct. They never thought the body is our experience, the linguistic environment, the mood and the carrier which opens wide to the world. A man's vitality and energetic energy implicate in his perceptual thriving with consciousness.

Although it is not necessarily true that Chen Wenji regards consciously his body as the entity of body and mind for understanding the world, he understands to listen attentively to the demand of painting material and media with intrinsic experiences, seeking the coordination and conjunction of consciousness and the canvas, as he said, feeling comfortable and integration of physiology. His visual interests that he searches repeatedly in the objects, is mostly in order to sympathizing his own feeling and experience. These esthetic senses easy to cause the attention, the social significance and the cultural connotation just comes out while convenience. But it is still not able to know whether Chen

Wenji returns to artistic and survival source by exploring the consciousness and feeling to find the foundation for settling down and getting on with life. And his individual experience can only become possibly the reliable foundation of creation after solving the matter of intrinsic and metaphysics feeling of non-dependence.

In the current situation of the art world now, Chen Wenji's individual experience seems a little bit frail, much less the post-modernism compromised popular culture and classic culture has already announced the declination of individualism. I think, Chen Wenji is possibly facing continuously such difficult choices: one hand, he wants to be separated from the periphery, immersing in his own situation, to be independent relatively to create; the other hand, he must avoid to seal the entire world in the loneliness of himself. But his work series about objects has already disintegrated implicitly and completely his creating situation based on the individuality which does not ask the outside. It brings indeed a way out for the difficult position in a dilemma in the past time, but the new condition also constitutes naturally the new difficult position. Chen Wenji has already walked out of the sealed situation without participate he once pursued, and he still needs to maintain a personalized distance with the object examined carefully. The time changes quickly, but this person still belongs to Chen Wenji himself. As the matter stands, Chen Wenji must seek a middle path: to participate in the contemporary culture transformation with a personalized way.

Song Xiaoxia (Critic)