

Positive Utopia – the Source of Chen Yufan's Works

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In <China's Interpretation of Abstract Paintings>, I divide the interpretation of abstract paintings into three categories: one is tending to "Restoring ancient"; the second one is tending to "admiring west"; the third one is tending to finding out the reason of Chinese abstract paintings' creation from the context of reality. I have been inclined to the third point of view: exploring the creation foundation of Chinese abstract art and making the relationship between Chinese abstract paintings and China reality clear.

The third explanation is divided into two kinds. The first one is paying great attention to either the antagonism among the Chinese abstract paintings, official ideology and the mainstream art (the artists are described as "the liberalism fighter") or the illusory color of abstract drawing and the Cynicism tendency. Both the "Liberalism" and "Cynicism" can be seen as the umbilical like between Chinese reality and abstract paintings. The former one emphasizes the initiative free ability of abstract artists while the latter one emphasizes negative free tendency. Both belong to "Liberalism". The second kind takes Gao Minglu as a model. He emphasizes the natural disposition of Chinese abstract painting", namely the Chinese abstract paintings is growing naturally under China real environment. The "Maximalism" exhibition planned out in 2003, the "Yi Pai – Thirty Years of Chinese 'abstraction'" exhibition in 2007, are both the instances of considering the abstract art as the outsider of Chinese modern narration.

In April, 2010, Oliva planned the exhibition "The Great Celestial Abstraction – Chinese Art in 21st Century". This time, he was standing on the point of "Trans-avant-garde" which he insists on to bring out the Chinese abstract art. Because of this, he provides another interpretation of Chinese abstract art. In his view, the western Avant-garde's mainstream of 20th century is the promotion of art language. It believes there is a potential connection between the art evolution and the social development. In its behind, it is the historical progressive optimism angle of view. In Oliva's opinion, Chinese abstract art has exceeded the western avant-garde art from many aspects. Thus it provided another possibility for the western avant-garde art of 20th century. Oliva build the hope of western avant-garde art of 20th century upon Chinese abstract art. So he called this kind of art "The Great Celestial Abstraction".

The four interpretations above cannot effectively explain the artist Chen Yufan's abstract works. The Chinese ancient art is not the source of Chen Yufan's creation. Neither is western abstract art. In the

third interpretation, as far as what I know about Chen Yufan, the creation dimension of “Liberalism” and “Cynicism” is not his concern. So, if the interpretations of Oliva and Gao Minlu are able to explain Chen Yufan’s works?

In Oliva’s symposium, I proposed a doubt – Oliva considered Chinese abstract art as the reification of “Zen” and “Tao”, so how did they come into the artists’ works? What is the middle layer? And in the reality, how did they play? Oliva responded that also confuse him. Gao Minglu made attempts on this issue, such as “City Zen” which he proposed to figure out the “middle layer”. In 2006, I planned the exhibition “Visibleinvisible”, wrote an article <The Real Existence after Taking Away the Images>, and made dialogues with 9 artists. All I did were to break through. I always think it’s hard to skip over the reality of Chinese cultural transformation of 20th century if we explain the Chinese abstract art metaphysically and link it to ancient across time and space.

Only making a link with reality can solve the problem of the abstract art’s source? This is the question which I further pondered. Although both of Oliva and Gao Minglu realized the importance of reality, the paradox is: both “Negative Utopia” of Oliva and “City Zen” of Gao Minglu regard the artist as a negative individual and think their works are the natural revelation of daily life, idea situation, creation method, even the life condition. What needs to further question is: will the “revelation” become the reason of the blame of Chinese abstract art? That means: beside correspondence with the reality, is there any other creation dimension of Chinese abstract art (so does Figural Art) --- to make a “Positive Utopia” which is different from western as the self-creation source? Specific to the artist, it turns into: in addition to the appearance of the state of their own reality, is there a creation source with more possibility? And this source can be traced to the same origin with their values and culture (China is lacking of inheritance and shape of values and culture in the past century. Instead, China is keeping revolution and deconstruction all the time.) . In another words, can the artists transcend the correspondence relationship with reality, and have a new creation dimension? Perhaps it is Chen Yufan’s works’ meaning.

First, let’s have a look at the creation source of Chen Yufan which he built for himself.

Min Zhou Chinese culture makes the brothers of Chen Yufan and Chen Yujun has a mysterious outside world --- “Nan Yang”, which has certain connection with them in their potential minds. They have great curiosity to the “Nan Yang” people and their living environment, so they construct a world of “Nan Yang” by scattered pieces to figure out the difference and similarities between the world they built and the real one. And they think during the process, such as: the foundation of psychological barriers. This is their works’ source. Since 2007, they started this project which can last for a long time, to organize

the family memories and some unexplained emotional entanglement. “Man” and “Geography” (including natural and human environment) are the two core matters.

The base of “construction” is the truth of “pieces”. The “imagination” makes “misunderstand” mix in the process of construction. “Constructing” in one hand, “thinking” the reason of “misunderstand” in the other hand; doubting the self-mind in one hand, insisting the mistake in the other hand. With the help of the Nan Yang’s imagination, Chen Yufan combined the contradictory ego with the imagination and reality, entered into as half real half illusory Utopia, in order to keep both alienated and intimate relationship of the reality and dream. The specious world Chen Yufan built made the artist suspend between the reality and dream, separated from the daily life. The former is Chen Yufan’s positive Utopia; the latter is the Chen Yufan who is entering the work condition.

Let’s take a look at how and in what kind of specific way does Chen Yufan to make the “source” flow out the “running water”?

Chen Yufan and Chen Yujun made some large installations which symbol “Utopia”. “Mu Lan Stream” and “Asia Scenery” are the most typical two. “Mu Lan Stream” is a river of Chen Yufan’s hometown Fujian. He built a model of “Mu Lan Stream” to symbol the ecological space of emigration Chinese. For him, this is a work of restoring. It provides his studio a “Scene”, or “Space” in another word, to make him touch the memory pieces and organize various clues more specific and consciously. “Mu Lan Stream” includes the concept of “water”, contains “flowing”. It is a moving vein, running through “Man” and “Geography”. “Asia Scenery” is a stimulant room space with information pieces. It is the construction of outside physical world. It is also the concept extend of imagination world. The works try to show the fragments of life, or the awareness traces coexisting with the physical space. It leaves a empty space and awareness gap which should be filled by personal experience.

With the help of macro installation, Chen Yufan built the effective support of art creation. This “support” is shown as the work visually. Beside it, it is also the concrete figure of his psychological space. It’s not simple to classify this work which is full of historical cultural information as well as visual elements as a single work. To some extent, it is the world Chen Yufan live. It is just this world become his “source” of creation. The various “running water” in his works indicates the unlimited possibilities of his creation.

In the moment, there are two categories of his typical works after taking out from the installations. One is the works in plane, such as “INTO ONE”, “Chuang-Tzu” which is installation at the same time,

“Flowing Space Model Room – Scene”, etc. The other one are some small or medium size works, such as “Asia Scenery – Temporary Building”, “Flowing Space”, etc.

The first category makes many viewers consider Chen Yunfan as an abstract artist. But in my opinion, he did memory slices in the most of time. And of course, this “memory” is a mixture of reality and imagination. Chen Yufan focuses on interpreting his observation, analysis, management, doubt of the “slices”. The “point” he draws is just like the smallest particle of objects. The images which consist from “points” enlarge the details which is possible to be ignored. This is not enough. He also selects some fragments of details to enlarge and interpret once again by the way of covering. At the first look at “INTO ONE”, people usually associate the organism genes. However, here, it is the gene of culture and memory. Chen Yufan is distinguishing and restructuring by his own way.

The second category fully embodies the richness of Chen Yufan’s creation. An element which selected in “Utopia” becomes a branch source of him. In these small or medium size installations, Chen Yufan combines various art forms, such as sketch, paint, sculpture, installation (in fact, for Chen Yufan, there is no boundary of art forms). These relatively smaller works didn’t lose the complexity and diversity of the large installation. If we call the first category as “slice”, the second can be seen as the “cell group” during the process of differentiation --- the cells with same origin gradually has respective shape, physiologic foundation and biochemical characteristics. Here, the “Into one” above turns to “multiple”.

The creation methods of Chen Yufan bring some vitality to the silent Chinese abstract art which is full of metaphysics atmosphere. The richness, spontaneousness and various possibilities of his creation are all presented based on his “positive Utopia”. There is a poem of Southern Song Dynasty philosopher Zhu Xi “There lays a glassy oblong pool, where light and shade pursue their course. How can it be so clear and cool? For water comes fresh from its source.” I choose the word “source” from the poem to be the subtitle of this article in order to find another dimension besides the interpretation of “Zen” and “Tao”. I think this is one of important value of Chen Yufan’s creation.