

## Painting as a note

Liu Libin

If we look Shen Tianhong's works with a usual way, then 70% of the elements will be away from your eyes, because his painting attitude is different from most other artists'. If most artists' creation is centralized, like seeking gold in sand, then Sheng Tianhong's creation is walking-style, like collecting shell on beach. For Sheng Tianhong, painting is just like eating, an innate thing. And his paintings are more like a "note". Every work records his different moment of real-time nature and thinking. His paintings and writings belong to himself. The "self" is also the artist who has a unique understanding of art and life. I think this is the most valuable point of Sheng Tianhong's creation.

Sheng Tianhong's paintings record his expression of real-time nature on the one hand; and they also reflect his deep thinking on many issues. Emotional and rational are convergent in his works with his alienated attitude. And this makes his works be different from nowadays theme works which are seemingly heavy and painful. And they are also different from those cartoon works which pretend to be tender and playful. So if we want to analyze Sheng Tianhong's works, we should analyze his attitude to the world and painting at first.

Sheng Tianhong wrote in his article: "My 'Kite', during the long-term flying, was blown away by European wind, slowly, unconsciously. Perhaps, it is moving in a direction to find a new home." I think in this paragraph, we can get some hints to understand his state. What made the kite with break string? What kind of "string" it was before broken? How the string broke? How is the "new home" built?

When I first knew "Sheng Tianhong", it was 9 years ago, the autumn of 2001. At that time, I just entered in the Central Academy of Fine Arts. My roommate Liang Gang was his good friend before he went abroad. Liang Gang gave me a whole set of books and tapes of <Family Album, USA> to me as a gift. Sheng Tianhong left them to him. I opened the book. What I saw were the handsome tidy characters and what I felt was his embedded and delicate attitude. Later, Sheng Tianhong's old friend became my friend. I heard a lot of stories of Sheng Tianhong. And I slowly learned Sheng Tianhong's other side: innocent, lovely, straightforward, persistent.

Nine years later, his old friend is busy with his own. But I met Sheng Tianhong himself. I enjoyed his works, read his words. And related to what his old friend talked about, I have to sign: "Time flies, but the things are still there". Sheng Tianhong's true state of life and art keep always until present.

From Sheng Tianhong's experience, he started to tangle with the painting from his childhood. With the help of the work "Kung-fu Boy" (which is described about Jet Li participated in competition), he expresses his real practical experience of juvenile training. He wrote: When people gasped with admiration at Jet Li's skillful Kung-fu, they won't know that practicing Kung-fu from young age is a nightmare to him. It is won by scarifying his childhood happiness. And of course, the products at that age are really lack. We can see that from the atmosphere." Does Sheng Tianhong have the same memory of painting? Did the memory impact him on his subsequent painting life? When "painting" got into Sheng Tianhong's childhood, was there any opposite effect besides natural part?

Because of his early experience in Zhejiang Academy of Art, Sheng Tianhong was exposed to "the '85 New Wave" in his childhood. In this most important act of Chinese contemporary art movements, Sheng Tianhong was in the first row of audience. We can speculate his react when he saw the works of "the '85 New Wave". It must contain the blank understanding and question to the art. But then, he got into the middle school of CAFA and oil painting department of CAFA. Under the environment which is strict to the traditional painting skill, his priority is to improve his skill. But the memory of art in his early age and the "blank" made him "clear" in his mind (Or he is away from learned technique): studying painting while keeping distance to the mainstream. And he started to think seriously about the personal significance the painting brings to him. So he went abroad to Germany after graduation to have a look and find out how Europe – the birthplace of oil paintings – solves this problem.

After he went abroad study, Sheng Tianhong used "complete Stanger" and "blankly" to describe his state in western art system. The extremely different cultural background made him start to re-think of himself and the art itself. He saw lots of contemporary artworks in Germany. The western people's admiration to photography in 80's and 90's of 20th century and the return back to painting, gave him an opportunity to reconsider the "painting".

In the process of intimacy and alienation with painting, Sheng Tianhong's attitude of painting and life formed: he records his daily thoughts and state by painting; he touches and understands the world and past art in an "innocent" way. What does his "innocent" come from? What kind of mentality his "innocence of the eye" based on? And how did he get such mentality?

When I read Sheng Tianhong's words, apart from the appreciation of his literary grace, I always feel out there are a pair of curious eyes flashing behind the words. This reminds me of Ruskin's adoration on "Innocence of the eye" (refers to looking without any preconceived view, pure, just like the looking way of a blind people who suddenly get sight). In addition, Ruskin looked around the natural world and

Gothic architecture in an exquisite way, just like enjoying a “dressing case”. He believes that the details have same structure with the vast universe to embody the existence of God. In his view, the observation method “innocence of the eye” contains the belief and fear to God. His religious belief is same with his way of observing the world. In the preface of his book <the Seven Lamps of Architecture>, he wrote: “if we put God out of our mind instead of talking about his will on small thing, it is disrespectful to him. God’s authority and intelligence is infinite and he has no fear to anything. There is not anything being too small to ask God for help to show our respect. As long as we handle, it is sufficient to insult for him. All apply to God himself, also apply to the hints he give to people.” So you can see, Ruskin thinks that no matter how small the detail is it embodies the spirit of God.

Sheng Tianhong is not an evangelical Christian, how does he get such way of looking world? The academy education he received gave him a specific object of reflection. And the new movement in his childhood, the experience of abroad studying, the attitude of keeping distance with things, all promote the reason of the formation of his style. In addition, we can also sort out another incentive by his admiration of Shi Tao.

In the past experience of Sheng Tianhong, there is a special part. That is his affection and influence by the Chinese traditional painting theory (His brother Sheng Tianye is the teacher of Chinese Painting Department of China Academy of Art). But how to make an effective connection between China and western art theories rather than the rigid graft? This is also the question Sheng Tianhong concerned. In the book <the Record of Kugua Monk Drawing Language>, what Shi Tao emphasized is “the painting based on one’s thought”. As a Buddhist, Shi Tao’s explanation of the rule’s source actually emphasized the dharma of no rule. Buddha once said:” all the rules (Fa) are named as “Fa”, but they are not based on Fa; but no rule (Fa) is still a rule (Fa). If there is no rule (Fa) to be based on, why care about whether it is a rule (Fa)?” but Shi Tao transformed it as: “yesterday we talked about rules (Fa); today we talk about breaking the rules (Fa). This is what I understand “Moksha Rules””. And the basic point of his theory is “empty”.

Interestingly, Sheng Tianhong shows his special observation method in his work <Chinese Graffiti>: to face this world by an empty “I” (Like me, who went abroad to study just after graduation, when I returned, there is still a complex of “youth is easy to back to school”). Under this state, even if the picture is of a symbolic signs, we also can get rid of the outside meaning and find out its essence. Sheng Tianhong’s paintings can not only show out a new perspective, but also stimulate various expression possibilities. In the work <the Road to Heaven> and <Blaze of Colors>, he made a conversation with the art character of Shi Tao, Cy Twombly and Dieter Krieg by playing painting to understand the Rule of this world in both east and west. “The painting is of alternate density in composition and color”. The oriental writing strokes, the western graffiti-like painting, are like piercing

a piece of paper, which is so easy to realize the agreement of Chinese landscape painting and western abstract art.

In addition, the special point of Sheng Tianhong, which is different from other artists, is that he doesn't pay attention to "breakthrough". He thinks that he still belongs to the inherited line. But he doesn't set an end to this line. He just paints out what he understands to this line. Trace the origin, and remove the confusion. Maybe one piece of work cannot make sense. But when all his works get together, his attitude is obvious. So this makes his work full of his feelings and vivid records of art and life. I think only "empty", to allow an artist most value "fullness", and make the eyes so pure, and spiritual insight so acute.

Apart from the character the above mentioned, some other works of Sheng his embody other side of calm and rational thought. As he wrote: "However, his courage to the history is just like Gunter Grass in his biography book <Peeling the Onion>. He faced his own history of Nazi Youth Corps". We can also feel another deeper reason of his alienation. That is doubt and reflection. The typical one of this type is <The Morning of DIAOYUTAI State Guesthouse in 1974> and <Onkel Rudi>. Those people and events are translated through Sheng Tianhong's perspective and language. After re-expression or reset of space and time, the meaning of an image (or a work, such as <Onkel Rudi>) will be changed. Different from those popular image artists, what Sheng Tianhong figures out is the philosophy support behind such method: re-excavation of images. Under this support, he restored a picture of Jiang Qing – a historical villain person, and re-made her get "fullness". He provided the audience a perspective to reflect the world which has been known and abstract. And on the deeper level, it is his question to the model of value judgment of "Duality Opposition".

If we consider the life and art as a book, Sheng Tianhong will be the person reading carefully. Actually, in the nowadays china, people who is reading carefully is not very much, let alone this book is life and art. In such times which people are expecting miracles and lucky, most of people are exciting by the colorful brilliant peak moment. Or they hope such moment is related to them. Under such environment, the normal attitude of Sheng Tianhong seems outdated but precious. Correspondingly, most of the interpretations are limited to the surface of his works' style. They could not reach the significance of his creation process. This is pathetic to Sheng Tianhong and this age as well.