

One day in the late 1970s, as a member of the "The Star Art Exhibition", Zhao Gang (b.1961) refreshed his knowledge to the oil paintings world through an imported impressionism catalogue at a friend's home. The foreign oil paintings images with which he was familiar were all from those painters during the Soviet Union or Tsarist Russia (such as Repin, Surikov, etc.). At that time, Zhao Gang, sixteen or seventeen years old, was far from thinking that the western had been relieved the burden of "promote" the art history. He just blindly immersed those "unprecedented" painting pictures from the French Impressionist painters in the 19th century. And the more important is that he and other artists in "The Star Art Exhibition" believed that after the failure of "Cultural Revolution" the artists should create some different artworks, distinct from the Russian Socialism works under the official aesthetic principles. Art should highlight the independence and freedom of the individual. Therefore the Impressionism and the artistic practices of various genres of European modernist in early 20th century which he learned gradually later, all became their "methodology" of establishing and embodying the "personal image".

For Zhao Gang, the individual as a kind of feeling is not an understanding when he first in contact with the art, but from his experience of his family was confiscated in the "Cultural Revolution". Zhao Gang's family was like the "objective enemies" - from American philosopher Hannah Arendt opinion, which produced by the totalitarian country in political campaigns to maintain their system operation. In Zhao Gang's opinions, confiscation the property seems to imply that his family was thrown into an extreme opposition. And just in the "sea of the people," he realized that his family was not in that sea - a passive collision between the individual and national politics caused young Zhao Gang had a kind of vigilance and anxiety to collective will in his heart.

Until the late "Cultural Revolution", with the contact with those underground groups of painting, literature, poetry in Beijing, Zhao Gang finally found the charm of an individual in art - freedom. And once the "freedom" expands from the personal spiritual world to the public and attempts transfer to a tangible political rights bottom-up, the individual will have to withstand the pressure from the official institutions, such as "The Star Art Exhibition" in 1979 which Zhao Gang participated in. In many narratives about Chinese contemporary art history, "The Star Art Exhibition" is defined as a start. But as far as now known, whether "The Star Art Exhibition" , or "The Star" named on above exhibition, the artistic practice of its members were almost at the same history period with "the No Name" in Beijing, "The Grass" (Cao Cao) in Shanghai, and both have a similar background as well as the independence of folk art. In contrast, just because "The Star Art Exhibition" was the first to break the "underground" status, to display the western modernism artworks without official censorship, it was discussed more by latecomers. And the radicalization and rebelliousness in the speech were more from the political significance of "The Star Art Exhibition", which was then linked to the Chinese political context - in the December of same year Chinese government ban of the "Democracy Wall" in Xidan.

In fact, in the early period of Chinese economic reform around 1980, two different modernization paths had begun to compete for the dominance of future China. However, young Zhao Gang was reluctant to participate in them and to become a politicized artist - any forms would make him anxious. What was thought-provoking is when Zhao Gang took the scholarship to study abroad (1983), China officially started a political movement of "get rid of the spiritual pollution" nationwide. Although the movement ended hastily, it had already buried a history foreshadowing for that political storm in the spring and summer 1989. Zhao Gang didn't experience above all, either the 85'Art trendy which was throughout the country during that period, or the social upheaval brought by China's market economy, Zhao Gang were all absent, he removed to Europe, settled in New York for more than ten years, and finally returned to Beijing until 2007.

Indeed, Zhao Gang missed the changes of various stages after Chinese economics reform, which is the foundation and logic when many Chinese contemporary artists, critics and curators present opinions. If you change a point of view, Zhao Gang's lost is a kind of lucky, because his paintings were also lucky of surviving from becoming a kind of sacrifice – the methodological contrast between Zhao Gang and domestic artists, is they just occupied the two ends of the process of globalization. At the time Zhao Gang in abroad, there was no so-called "Chinese Contemporary Art" existing in the international arts system yet, and Chinese experience also didn't become a kind of system strategy yet. In contrast, the traditions of Western modernist painting, which Zhao Gang used before going abroad, was still affect Western painting as a confirmed principles. So Zhao Gang remedied the difference of the perception of the world soon after studying in Europe. In Zhao Gang's own words, after a few years he went to the United States, he became a complete "Western artist".

Although New York commercial galleries accepted Zhao Gang, they cannot offset the artist himself deepening individual anxiety. How to understand this anxiety? One aspect, it came from the helpless of the status out of paintings. When the interior practices of painting are insufficient to promote the art history, it means that the avant-garde as an ideology has nothing to do with the painting. And the other aspect, it came from the tired of professional identity. The painting did not become a political tool, but a means of livelihood. After the escape of some authoritarian political repression, Zhao Gang met the invisible shackles of developed business society. In the space-time conversion of two cultures and two social systems, the former cultural imagination of foreign country lost its projected object, which made Zhao Gang fall into a completely existential pessimism.

Thus, Zhao Gang finally decided to give up art in the early 1990s, another life began. This life was re-shaping the image of Zhao Gang: nine years of work experience at Wall Street, purchased an international magazine of art as publishers, art dealers, even once hosted a gallery in Beijing. He is just like a myth of individualism - Zhao Gang, but eventually chose the painter back as his identity.

Surprisingly, after transferring to the figurative paintings, Zhao Gang who regained the brush revealed a certain destructiveness on the canvas, even it was never happened in his abstract expressionist painting in the late 1980s. At that time, his paintings always had a nice internal structure with harmony colors, emphasizing the materiality of surface texture. After a brief experience of painting with similar type of Luc Tuymans, Zhao Gang began to emphasize the screen visual tension, focus the overall visual sense controlled from the background. His brushstrokes were directly, the horizontal and vertical strokes were clear visible, intertwined, and enhance the strength by the sense of speed while sometimes he will adjust the image plane through outlining the contour line of prospects, if only so, then the introduction of images into painting, in terms of Zhao Gang, is just a show of innate intuition and acquired experience at most, but cannot be a reason for him to continue painting.

The reason of re-painting is driven by that kind of destruction, which was related to the theme digging in recent two year. If it is listed here you will find that Zhao Gang rarely touch upon the current, he is always backtracking, to use Chinese historical visual material. The "past China", as a scope of discussion, is confirmed in the Zhao Gang's paintings. Many people think that is a response of Zhao Gang to his own "cultural identity", corresponding to the experience of the artist himself living overseas. But we should also see that the "past China" is infinity of time and space, a world cannot experience, so for Zhao Gang, he found a foreign land never can be stepped into, to stimulate of a romantic individual feelings in the imagination, to defend the quality of contemporary which caused anxiety.

The latest solo exhibition of Zhao Gang in AYE Gallery "The Emperor and his", continued the ideas of the exhibition "Khitan people". In the "Khitan people", Zhao Gang made a connection from his Manchu identity to the earlier nomadic Khitan people in northeast China, and after the invasion to the Central Plains, they experienced chinesization, war and national integration, and ultimately disappeared in history. Zhao Gang tries to butt-joint his individual politics and reflects the racial and cultural integration in the process of globalization by the history of Khitan people. In "The Emperor and his....." Zhao Gang will make his sights turn into the literati emperor Huizong in Northern Song Dynasty. In his view, this emperor was a tragic individual, who may spent his life in the fear of power loss. Because they were both the temporary agents of power system – the two exhibitions are talking about the tragedy history, while the latter one tells us the historical fate between the individual and power systems. In the new exhibition, there is an outstanding special piece called "look upward ": in the oval screen, one blue-black bird hung upside down in a landscape scene. Like many of Zhao Gang's works, the birds, or landscape images are all from the misappropriation of ancient Chinese painting. But the dazzling part of this painting is that the bridge across the water was covered with a few strokes of graffiti. If we look at this painting regarding the integrity, the graffiti indeed destroyed the picture; however, Zhao Gang just wants to use this improvised strokes to deconstruct the image, with the

negative attitude and the way of destruction to prove the existence of the individual in the moment. Zhao Gang's paintings are oscillated back and forth between compromise and radical, as a self-fighting without enemies, seemingly pointless and desperate, but let us empathy, hard to leave.