

Approaching the Infinite Meditation on the “Intermediate Zone”

A Study on Zhang Dejian’s Painting Practice

Wang Pengjie

The issue that each artist faces is to create himself.

-- Motherwell

Zhang Dejian is a special painter in contemporary China, for over several decades he is barely known to the artistic circle despite the teaching experience in the department of oil painting of Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts. He has been studying and painting for years, but he keeps a startling few works, and now merely has dozens of relatively complete paintings, which appear simple and free from complicated techniques. In spite of his cautious attitude towards art and the persevering inquiring mind, he seems not to insist on the perfection and success of the works, but is always in a stunningly poised mood. He is always like an “outsider” in the faculty system, regardless of his teaching experience for several decades. Nevertheless, multiple students still regard him as the most excellent teacher in the school (for the sake of prudence, “one of” could be added here) and think that they benefit the most from him. Objectively speaking, there are not a few art practitioners in each age like Zhang Dejian, who are accomplished but remain unknown in the industry. However, he has few desires for reputation. It seems quite reasonable that artists can achieve nothing without “ambition” as many people have said, but it seems not applicable to Zhang Dejian at all. If we must say that he does have some desires in art, it must be that he attempts to explore an individualized road to art.

I. De-cocooning and Seeking: the Evolution of Painting Concept

Just like the majority of Chinese painters with college background, Zhang Dejian was also deeply influenced by the “Soviet” realistic school when he just graduated. This painting model that regards “realistic reflection theory” as the philosophical basis, takes representation of life phenomenon as the practice objective and emphasizes the documentary and publicity functions confined generations of Chinese painters to the shackles of the one-sided aesthetic standard and insufficient technical resources. More importantly, the one-dimensional value orientation has passivated the artists’ initiative and severely hindered them from seeing art with the open minds and diverse viewpoints. In the late 1980s, when pursuing the master’s degree in Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, Zhang Dejian realized that the mechanical Realism was simplistic and closed, therefore he actively studied the fruits of modernist art when Western art and literature ideas flooded towards the East. He once appreciated and learned various schools, including Impressionism, Post-impressionism, Fauvism, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism and Neo-expressionism, among which he liked the style of

Matisse the most, probably because that the strong oriental flavors (especially the high-quality application of the linear models) contained in Matisse's paintings were well suitable for his tastes. When graduating as a postgraduate in 1989, he found this method of learning and studying art was problematic: on the one hand, the modernist art had become the new tradition in the Western countries and masters like Matisse had been mounting on the "altar" and Modernism had been accepted by the Chinese artistic circle in a dislocated space-time -- merely taken as a pure technique and grammatical resource by most Chinese painters then and had no big difference from the "Soviet" Realism in essence. More seriously, his learning from Western masters could only remain on the simple imitation and copy, for he knew little about related art history framework; his aesthetic consciousness and ideological judgment were still sunk in sleep. He did not know how to fiddle with skills and the pictures were merely false images, let alone expressions. This was not just his difficulty but the dilemma that Chinese local painters generally faced, which made him unable to continue painting. In his opinion, painting is not a random behavior, but contains many reasons. If the problems ahead are not solved and the creation idea is not smooth, it is useless to paint more. Each honest painter needs to face a common ultimate problem: how to enter the painting state in the individual way? Painting cannot be continued if this problem is not dealt with. In the late 1980s, New Art Wave was roaring, and under this circumstance, Zhang Dejian was more longing that his art could move out of old state of imitation. However, he did not know where to start and nothing could be done, as it's said that "no desire for the old road and nowhere to find the new road". This gloomy period continued for around more than a decade since he gained the master's degree. Out of the strong confusion, he painted little, which can be an extremely harsh challenge for any artists, and it does require bravery and ideal to have faced his own problem so stubbornly and persistently for so long.

The opportunity of breaking through the dilemma appeared in 1998, when he got the government-sponsored chance of studying in Royal Academy of Fine Arts located in Belgium. It was there that for the first time he fully saw the real state of the modern and contemporary Western art: frequent and daily exhibitions, inseparable relations between art and life and constant emergences of various concepts and media, which presented to him another art world totally different from the Chinese academies and the New Art Wave Movement. Actually, the academy he studied in Belgium was a relatively traditional school in Europe; however, even the painting class had strong pertinence of topics and students would conduct active research learning around various different issues, which gave much enlightenment to Zhang Dejian in his future teaching and creation. Outside the school, a variety of interesting and fresh art activities could be seen here and there, including both the works of the classic masters and the contemporary creations. Art existed freely and briskly there like air and the humanistic and ecological edification utterly changed his former cognition of art. He could treat the naturally-growing art types in a more tolerant and reasonable way. It also boosted the individual awareness of problems and helped him push his artistic

practice forward conceptually. The learning experience made his artistic concept go beyond the limitations of the majority of domestic painters of his age and get out of the ideological shackles within Chinese art colleges by a large margin.

After returning home, Zhang Dejian wanted to paint again, for his painting concept had been updated and renewed. He summarized his learnings in Europe while continuing to think about the root issue of his own painting. His thinking focused on two aspects, first he had to find the firm reasons for the painting action, for making a pleasant or artistic picture merely shows techniques, and it cannot constitute the necessary reasons of painting, yet it may be superficial to simply go back to the self-discipline within painting and do “art for art’s sake”, which had little to do with his own life state. But there was one thing that can be determined: the significance of painting does not lie in its external functions, but lies in its function as an effective way of self-cognition. Second, what his individual path that can cut in painting practice would be? He cannot rely on the existing means and techniques, nor be guided by the rigid concepts; he can merely depend on the internal aesthetic feelings and knowledge framework of painters, therefore, the access of painting tends to be implemented in some concrete aspects, such as how to understand colors and shapes, how to view and understand the existence of things and how to feel space and ray of light. There are limitless modeling factors in any visual art; as long as one chooses out of the real wishes, he can find a feasible direction of exploring in the process of constant self-criticism and self-confirmation, the pursuit and exploration of keeping finding rationally the ultimate correspondence between himself and painting is endless. In the painting process, many judgments based on sensibility and intuition are not reliable in terms of criteria, so Zhang Dejian set some concrete topics to study for himself, such as what the symbiotic relationship between light and color is in plane space, what different potentials forms have in representing different object images and emotions, what models are the most related to his own sensitive experience. Such a study method seems very simple, but it can indeed touch the core of the problem in trial and error and also in correction.

In the early 1990s, he discovered his own style, which, however, did not become clear until later in his life. The few paintings of this period left are characterized by relaxed brushwork, simple colors, and generalized forms. And they also reflect his focus on linear shapes and indifference towards creating sense of dimension. Combining the aura of Chinese oil paintings between 1912 and 1949 and the flowingness and gracefulness of ink and wash paintings, those works are precise and well-controlled in the using of colors, with solid colors only applied thinly in the crucial part of the paintings to create an overall sense of leisureliness. Although these features reflect the influence of modern masters such as Matisse, they also indicate Zhang’s stable aesthetic tendencies such as resentment towards tumbled volumes and punches, stress on the quality of overall modelling, the delicate use of contour lines, which are all noticeable in his later abstract works. After 2000, since his spirit worked better with his hand, he got a more clarified painting concept and established

independent painting methods. He once described his own method as “learn from the ancients, the nature and the heart”. To put it specifically, it means to learn from the traditions in the long history; to understand the subtle relationship between oneself and the surroundings in the changing and open world; to confirm one's heart repeatedly through continuous self-examination and self-understanding. This description, though being pertinent, is also a sign of elitism and classicism, indicating that the painter has taken art as both a mirror to examine himself and a temple that he held in awe.

Theoretically, his research attitudes and methods are best suited for the college system, however, it is ironically that the academic art community does not seem to care much about his work. Many senior academic painters cannot even read his paintings created after 2010, which in turn brings out the unique value of his practice for the academic ecology.

II. Intermediate Zone: Issue-consciousness and Specific Painting Practice

How to establish individuality in painting? One cannot establish individuality through creating unique formal languages and techniques. After all, today's painting scene finds no real original methods, but the use of countless materials out of the painting history, and it's not greatly significant to create a personal style out of millions of painting paradigms because the myth of Modernism has ended long before. After 2000, he gradually got rid of the limitation of techniques and looked calmer at the medium features of painting. He understood that painting is nothing more than brushworks and that there is no need to pursue techniques and language utopia, thus, he has led the painting practice to the individual world and made attempts by “asking questions and answering them by his own”. He cares nothing about standard and rules in contemporary art system but only pursues the natural and smooth expression of his thoughts, which is the only standard he has been following. It is hard to do that, because achieving such a free state requires him to abandon the safe “travel guide” of the standardized technical rules and to make every decision based on his own experience and consciousness. However, instead of taking the practice seriously, Zhang Dejian treats it more as a dialogue to himself. He paints when he wants to experiment on canvas. If the painting satisfies him, it means he has used the right techniques; but if it doesn't, he then finds out the cause of the problem and makes adjustments. In short, he uses a trial and error method, and does not measure works by the visual effects, which allows him to set himself to paint easily and explore his own painting style honestly. However, it does not mean that he cares nothing about the visual effects. In fact, the visual sensitivity and familiarity acquired in years of practice enable him to bring elegant colors and vivid charm to works without extra effort.

Narrowly speaking, form is the only dimension that can be directly identified in a

complex painting endeavor. Thus, the knowledge and experience of form are of great importance to every painter. Zhang Dejian, who seeks inwards instead of outwards holds that the so-called content is just the message carried and implied by the form. And form is built not for the perfection within language but for the accurate expression of individual's inner spirit. Considering this, it is not surprising that after 2010 his works become almost purely abstract. Before 2010, he has consciously stripped the surfaces of "appearance" and concentrated on digging the "field", an open space under "appearance" and it can link the artist and the object, with remains of figuration kept though. In two of his works in 2009 named "Untitled", which may be painted when he was facing an album or a book, he painted color squares to capture the flow of consciousness in a static atmosphere of viewing. He carefully blurred the visual surfaces of the objects with a tentative stroke and measured the distance between the center square and the background. He also patiently examined whether the edges of the rectangular shapes should be distinct or soften. After several amendments, the image seemed to achieve a harmony between stillness and dynamic forces. Abstraction is neither his methodology nor his pursuit, but only a result. As his feelings towards painting grow deeper and subtler, he attaches less and less value to specific appearances of objects, for him, tangible images or subject matters are just a source of inspiration while the interactions between the objects and the subjects in the changing atmosphere is his real concern. In his opinion, it doesn't matter what to paint, in fact, the simpler object is easier to be studied. For this reason, most of his later works depict the corners that are easily ignored. On this ground, he is like Giacometti who depicted one human figure over and over again since both of them try to capture the momentary perception of inter-subjectivity. However, unlike Giacometti, Zhang Dejian doesn't tangle and cover on a same canvas, not to mention to leave dazzling tracks that indicate his struggling during creation. Instead, the color and brushwork of his painting are getting simpler and purer, without even the slightest sense of stagnation. At the first glance, people may think his works, which are lively and refreshing are made unintentionally for fun, but a closer examination reveals that those paintings are full of breathing-like vitality that are achieved by soft color, tender light and free brushwork. Judged by the choice of color and the rhythm, his works are orderly and harmonious. The colors he applies are opaque as if seen through the mist while the hue is limpid which adds glow to the overwhelming grey, thus achieving an intermediate state between illusion and reality. Although he likes painting's directness and spontaneity and prefers clear and decisive brushwork, he does think for a long time before applying his brushes, to make sure each painting move is triggered after repeatedly confirming his correspondence with his object. This kind of subtle control is all dependent on intuition, and it cannot be falsified or asserted, so he sometimes continuously paints two or three pieces on a same theme, and leaves the most accurate one, to confirm the accuracy of the subtleness. As the painter never presets any expectations on the canvas world, nor attaches importance to results, the accidents inevitably occurred becomes opportunities where he can reconstruct paintings. There are many happenings in his paintings, accidental shapes,

colors and strokes, without destroying the overall atmosphere of the painting, but refilling it with more vitality. For example, “Untitled 11-5” created in 2011, renders the shape of a chair with vague contours. The strokes start to disperse from the image of this specific chair whose back and lower legs almost melt in the dark background, yet the blurring colors and atmosphere don’t slacken the chair, and the white strokes with sharp edges in warm-gray are obviously a “delicate touch” of his experimentation and the highest pitch in the painting, and moving vigorously along the chair, they tightly embed the shape to be apart inside the color block. Two thick black strokes next the white ones endow a more powerful momentum to the solid and stable painting, and make the formal entanglement and wrestling between firmness and looseness more enchanting.

In fact, concrete image has never been absent, and the figurative period is a transition when he breaks away from the realistic painting model and begins to do individual studies. Facing object is still his main method of art-making, and his still life paintings like “Bottle Flower” painted in 1999, “Untitled” in 2004 and several other works with the same name made from 2004 to 2011, well illustrate his dependence on painting-on-the-spot. These works also show that when facing the still life, he is more inclined to treat the “appearances” before him as a life-like situation, rather than something tangible, so the increasingly loose way of brush-application also reveals that he is yearning for getting rid of the conventional shackles. “Untitled 12-6” (2012), painted by directly sitting in front of a curtain is not a depiction of the curtain as an “object”, but an expression of the curtain, the intuitive order. The details show that the painting consists of small even and neat color blocks, lined as carefully as building wood blocks, and even every light-and-shadow bit and wave of the curtain is arranged by color blocks. Looking at this painting as a whole, we not only get a purely abstract and plane image, but also feel the texture of the curtain, as light as breezing, and seemingly inadvertently, the painter delivers the integration of the object before eyes. While his non-figurative paintings, seem to follow some other rules. 2009’s “Untitled 09-1” in bluish violet tone, 2008’s “Untitled” composed by “grids” and in grayish violet tone and 2012’s “Untitled 12-4” built by bright gray “grids” and most of the works after 2015, render a geometric abstract effect, where the artist attaches great importance to the balance and integrity of structures, so the sizes of color blocks and the intensities of hues form a visual composition, the paintings seem to have visualized a short and melodious song -- a modernist one of course. “Grid” has highly frequented his works made in a recent decade, hence a strong evidence of his aesthetic and emotional preference for the classic Modernism, and a close connection with his knowledge background. The use of “grids” to split object and to rebuild picture, also shows that he is conscious of the existence of frame or the larger “grid”. Frames define the scope of visual exploration, give him the foundation for his painting-construction, at the same time prevent him from becoming one with the realistic life. Frame is an entrance, and an exit, or a barrier, the four sides of which enables him to look separately into the worlds of canvas and of reality, but

also demands him to adopt ways of structured segmentation and combination to express an object, consequently the eyes naturally focus on a single or a single group of objects and the focal sight-point causes such a phenomenon: many of his paintings appear flat, but they seem to have concealed the special depth and perspective. The new works created in 2016 seems to consciously break this latent focus pattern, as their spatial depth has almost been completely filled, and they eventually become relatively pure planes, liberating the viewing.

It is worth mentioning that, Zhang Dejian loves to perform light on the canvas, which is also an important objective of his study. Colors are actually reflections of light sensations, and evidence and traces of light. Apparently having caught the abstract connotations and implicit narrative possibilities inherent in plane space, he tried again and again to depict the light there; the abundant associations light as an image or a symbol could stir in viewers, the light colors in dark and unidentified spaces can always pass the inexplicable odors of mysteries. In several other pieces titled “Untitled” and made in 2009, 2012 and 2015, there are nothing but light and the surrounding unknown space on the canvases, booming with metaphysical visual powers.

III, Endless Road of Meditation

In recent years, Zhang Dejian has thoroughly cleared and removed the appearances of painting, driven the sense of tangible images into abstraction, so seemingly it makes sense that some people inertially treat his works as abstract paintings for the reason that his recent pieces are composed just by a few blocks and strokes. Undeniably, his geometric picture structure is motivated by his intense attachments to Modernism, but his painting theory and philosophy and intentions of expression suggest that, what he is still pursuing is the spirit similar to that of Chinese literati art: the guardian of spirituality, the emphasis on the instant feelings, the creation of imagery and atmospheres, the grasp of the relation between “imitating nature outside” and “obtaining the source of heart inside”, and he even uses the traditional saying of “heaven and man are one” to describe his own painting methods. Now regardless whether his understanding of Chinese literati art and traditional philosophical lineages is accurate, it’s certain that such is his ultimate aesthetic ideal. The literati-liked aesthetic idea, or his traditional and classical aspect is shielded under his open and experimental side, and the two combines into a whole.

His painting is tranquil, detached, manifesting his spiritual spectacles of meditation and introspection. He must have been subtly influenced by Kant’s aesthetics, so he endeavors to remove the functional meaning of painting, and he doesn’t agree with the functional and material values of art, instead he emphasizes the non-utilitarian nature of painting for painters, and believes that painters don’t need to run for other

significances. Such a principle or more exactly the self-discipline of art is based on his individual awareness, for it's almost free from the contents of symbols, narrative concepts, medium techniques, etc, but it helps him to have simplified all the external problems painting may involve and highly refined painting so that painting behavior only connects with his own spiritual perceptions. In the world of painting, whatever object is doesn't matter, but facing an object matters, since the specific object provides fundamental reference for meditation and introspection, and the move, whether to show beauty of art or to examine one's own conditions deeply, needs to be done in comparisons and correspondences, automatic arrival of inspirations is just a bubble.

Throughout Zhang Dejian's painting practice, he is actually exploring a road toward the inner vision, and painting or the "medium" for him serves as a carrier through which he gropes and tests his art philosophy inside. Although the "intermediate zone" filled with uncertainties doesn't show any clear signal, it is not totally cold, but passes the warmth of human nature, and indicates how well he has maintained his hand-feel and temperament. It is necessary to add that both the state of "heaven and man are one" described by him or his emphasis on consciousness and enlightenment are based on his individual logics of sensitivity, therefore the "Way" of art in his understanding is likely to be a pictured metaphysical imagery. Because this imagery can only exist in the human's perceptual system, and it cannot be systemized into logic and knowledge, it can't be verified. His long-term attempts to specify the shape of the "Way" still turns to be something "impossible". He not only takes painting to interpret his understanding towards the "Way", but also hopes to present certain form of it, and though having been called by this profound metaphysical impulse, every painting move reveals no mysterious intentions, but falls substantially. The Way never increases or decreases, and this absolute "Way" helps individuals to reconstruct themselves in their countless and specific labors. A person's "self" is false and undetermined, or it is flowing and can never be fixed, or justified by any style or pattern, and as a "medium" it keeps being impacted by various sources and keeps waiting to be rebuilt. For Zhang Dejian, this reconstruction does not have to correspond to the activities of the outside world, but intends to stimulate his own infinite possibilities. By infinitely approaching the state of meditation, he pushes his own painting practice, and he has become a very unique case, greatly significant for the further discussion of how complex and profound Chinese contemporary painting practices can be.

2017.3.27