

## Avoiding Both Simulation and Narration

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Zhang Dejian's paintings, seem like the realistic ones under the abstract appearance.

People will regard it as an abstract painting at first sight. And they will further find that each of his paintings is about his portrayal of the external objects, such as a book, a curtain, or a gate-and-courtyard.

These objects are from a small corner of his life space, or a small article. They are ordinary for him, but have a character and a style. When they get extended, it is safe to say that all objects surrounding Zhang Dejian have such characters.

Therefore, Zhang Dejian needs not go around to seek for some dramatic scenes and subjects or to capture exotic atmospheres, just as many fashionable "Xieyi" (free-styled) and paint-from-life painters do. On the contrary, he can find various objects "to-be-painted-from" around him pervasively.

Zhang Dejian has concealed the dramatic appearances of these images. In other words, what he has chosen and tried to explore are exactly the non-presentational and non-dramatic visual factors.

Therefore, it may make Zhang Dejian's painting somewhat "abstract", just like the fruits and hills painted by Cezanne, which have lost the vivid and lifelike presentation features and turned into the structural volumes.

Surely, Zhang Dejian's painting-from-life keeps a longer distance from the realistic presentation of appearances; he attaches great importance to summarizing the objects into geometric images. The painter fades the three-dimensional image by making it frontal (or flattened) in the painting. For example, he places the front of an imaging machine in the center of the picture, thus highlighting the geometric shape of the original object and making it part of the whole geometric composition.

However, we should not thus draw the conclusion that Zhang Dejian's painting is purely technical; on the contrary, the above implicit technical factors exactly derive from the aesthetic taste and spiritual pursuit of Zhang Dejian, namely a steady but reserved metaphysical pursuit.

Philosophically, we call the discussions about the mutual relations between appearance and spirit, meaning and image, emptiness and fullness as well as existence and nothingness "metaphysics". And Zhang Dejian's painting is seen with such metaphysical features. In the 1980s, I once named such artistic tendency "rationalistic painting".

This metaphysical "rationalistic painting" aims to discuss the interaction among "ideal, matter and appearance", that is to try to present the integral perception of the principle, concept and appearance through the artworks.

Therefore, the key point of this "rationalistic painting" does not lie in "rationality", but lies in artists' transcendence over the ways of knowing a certain extremity (any way to perceive ideal, matter and appearance). In short, "the rationalistic painting" has to capture a certain spiritual state and aesthetic taste through the integral perception. Hence, it is neither abstract nor realistic in essence.

Through different gray tones and blurred appearances, Zhang Dejian flattens and distances the concrete realistic objects. So they, like a gate-and-courtyard, turn into the plane composition in the picture, which provides the painterly that can be pondered and depicted for Zhang Dejian. It is

both the color and hierarchical relation (ideal) of the picture, as well as the “physical property” (matter) of the realistic object; meanwhile, it also reserves the looks of the realistic object (appearance). Zhang Dejian describes such an integrating process like this: “to imitate nature outside and obtain the source of heart inside”, which derives from the principle of “studying the nature of things” proposed by the philosopher in the Song Dynasty.

As a result, it is more exact to say that Zhang Dejian’s paintings show how he “investigates and studies” rather than that they depict certain objects directly from life. He does paint from tangible objects, but his observation avoids simulating objects and tries to evade conceptual narratives. Zhang Dejian enables us to feel the natural quality of objects from an unusually detached and distant presentation. At the same time, we can also feel certain naivety from his simple images and uncomplicated brushwork.

I have known Zhang Dejian since the end of 1970s, when he became a young teacher of Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts after graduating from it. We used to chat idly in the library. He once studied in Europe and then taught and painted in Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts for dozens of years. Every time I see Dejian’s paintings, I see him.