

The Composition of a Garden: The Perpetual Existence and Extinction of Schema in Bu Di's Works

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Translated by Chloe Yang

Around December of last year, I walked into Mr. Bu Di's studio for the first time. The entrance hall was a dim transition with damp and musty smells, connecting his storage room and studio. In the middle of the hall, messy papers piled up on a ping pong table. Bu Di mentioned that they are gifts that he thought were lost. He had just brought them to set aside for the time being and to disperse the smell. I picked one up, and it was a piece of calligraphy work that Gu Yuan had written for Bu Di when he was a child. I turned over a few more, including works of Li Hua, Liu Haisu, Zhang Ding, and Wu Guanzhong. The words written above are blessings and praises for the art prodigy, such as "True Force Emerges" from Liu Haisu, and "Wonderful are the childhood dreams, sincere is the pure heart." from He Jingzhi. There were also his paintings from when he was young, mostly around his adolescent years. What impressed me most was the long scroll drawing of *Investiture of the Gods*, with many characters, finished smoothly without a hitch.

The past is in the past. For about ten years, Bu Di has passed through the darkened transiting hallway again and again and stepped into his bright studio, spending time alone, quietly, and diligently, "self-studying", as he calls it. He paints, reads, and watches films. Bu Di made three paintings as an homage to Fei Mu's film *Spring in a Small Town*. The most recent one, *Tribute No. 3 to Spring in a Small Town*, was completed this year: four faces line up a row in subtle jade color, and two bodies lean against the corner of the wall below. Just as Brancusi summarized the Greek Muses, Bu Di abstracted the face into an ellipse, and the body stacked and nested of seven or eight ellipses. He used a pencil to trace the face like a piece of Zhou Dynasty jade. The ellipse that makes up the body has a thickness, volume, and narrative, which reminds the audience of Zhou Yuwen fallen in bed in the movie. She lives in a small city and stays with her husband who has no courage to live. She is drained and depressed. Even in moments of lust, her body is limp: being intoxicated, she knocked on the door of her ex-lover Zhang Zhichen. In a battle with desire and conscience, he could not receive her and blocked her at the door. Zhou Yuwen broke the glass panel on the door and stretched out her hand to him, blood flowing. The pain made her sober. Under the full moon, she returned to her residence and collapsed into her bed, ashamed. She thought of death. Before, she would not dare to die.

Tribute No. 3 to Spring in a Small Town is Bu Di's brightest and tenderest painting yet in recent years. In his series of artworks from 2017 to 2019^I, tenderness is veiled. At that time, Bu Di's perspectives and brush strokes were objective and sharp. He seems to want to create a distinct schema^{II}, a conceptual model that separates from a specific scenario and cannot appear in any image. Facing this impossible task, Bu Di did not take any risks. Comparing his paintings at this stage, we can find forms that resemble immature pine cones, with plump and round scales like petals of blue haze^{III}. Each *pine cone* is different. *2018-8* has four petals, *2019-14* has seven,

and 2019-6 has five. On the lower part of *Empirical Scenery 18-04*, the stems and petals are autonomous of each other, which may be the origin of the form - a character that translates to the pond is situated on top, hinting at the connotation of being bottomlessness^{IV}. The schema in my mind is like a bird rushing by the forest. I could not catch it. What fell on the image was merely an ephemeral silhouette.

2019-9-10 also has two *pine cones* blooming, similar in form to 2019-14. Their pink flesh is reminiscent of ushnisha on Buddha's head. With thick outlines, the ellipses that construct the *pine cone scales* are ready to be transformed into the face and body in *Tribute No. 3 to Spring in a Small Town*. With thick outlines, the schema emerges and becomes a form, adopting the power of image history; the outlines bear a close resemblance to the pattern on the Kizil Caves paintings^V. The thickness, curves, and ratio of the contour are the most proper. They used to be silent for a long time, but now they have come back to their senses. Once, they were dismembered on an expedition far away and separated from their mothers; now, revisiting them in another context would not interrupt the harmony - though the painting is named as the time of completion.

In Kantian philosophy, a schema is a cerebral form, it is to formulate laws for nature, it is a summary of the essence of the material world, and it contains rationalistic optimism. However, such a form presented in the context of Buddhist art could not be explained in complete rationality. The suitability of such an outline is not just in conformity with the schema. It is a bit decorative; it is tender, mellow, and full of mixed regional characteristics, and it speaks the accumulated pain and joy of the folk. Order and form could be merged and summarized by reason, but pain and joy could not. Instead, they could only be sympathized, recorded, and awakened. Venturi declared that "less is a bore." He tried to introduce contradictions and complexity into Mies' modern architecture. He tried to criticize the suffocation caused by reason in architecture: for this, those curves would nod in agreement. That sense of suffocation also appeared in the Western modernist art represented by Greenberg. What Greenberg could not agree with was that form is always related to the exterior of form. In our modern art history, form is indeed related to its exterior. For example, Chairman Mao once wrote to Chen Yi to discuss the forms of Classical Chinese poetry. He said, "One must consider the level and oblique tones in *lüshi*, and if there are no tone patterns, it is not a *lüshi*."^{VI} In 1977, this letter was published in People's Daily. In 1978, Wu Guanzhong mentioned it in another letter. He stated: "The publication of Chairman Mao's letter to Chen Yi shows that the central committee of the Party recognizes the liberation of literature and art. Principally, it's the fundamental issue of establishing imagery thinking on the basic theory. I estimate the issue of formalism would be raised to an unprecedented position since the establishment of the People's Republic of China." This gentleman who had once inscribed for Bu Di was the earliest advocate of modern art and aesthetics in China. He was harshly criticized by top leaders for this and stated "One hundred Qi Baishi is not on a par with one Lu Xun." He wrote to the then eleven-year-old Bu Di to "Never lose an innocent heart."

Also benefiting from the external changes in forms, Bu Di liberates in a wider world, and his form is not limited to the Parisian manner that Wu Guanzhong admires. Bu Di likes Buddhist art, bronze and jade, Bauhaus architecture, Ni Zan, Angelico, and Brancusi. He never doubted his vision - what he loves, he has always loved, this is examined and confirmed. Acrylic covers the engraving of pencil, then engraving covers paint in return, back and forth, once, again, without stopping, without tiring. With such hard work, he is capturing a schema, a logic, and a form. There are three paintings in the *Rhymed Syntax* series, each with a doorway in the middle. There are gods, humans, flesh, and bones inside. After a few strokes, the ancient image obtains a modern resonance. What he likes belongs to neither the past nor the future^{VII}. His paintings would be regarded as exquisite and even decorative, not lacking sharpness and exuberance. In *Rhymed Syntax-2*, the frequently appearing sharp angles cut nine ellipses in the center of the frame, and the twists and turns are vigorous, like the crossing strokes in calligraphy. From top to bottom, a breath passes through between the acute angles. Bu Di once sent some images to the exhibition staff for the production of a promotional video, which contained a part of Huang Tingjian's calligraphy *Through Fubo Shrine*. *Through Fubo Shrine* is a poem by Liu Yuxi, he wrote: "Roe deers and flying squirrels fight on broken Han ramparts, Southern springs bring sorrow with fog and rain." The six characters *Jun Wu Dou* and *Man Xi Wu* were in the picture Bu Di sent. The layout and strokes are like the scenery in the gate of *Rhymed Syntax-2*. Only the contour and inner structure of the characters are summarized in opposition and coherence by the painting. The poem and characters are both in memory of the deceased: *Han Lei Jun Wu Dou*, meaning the ramparts of Han Dynasty is already in ruins.

With Bu Di, we would talk about the abandoned garden in *Spring in a Small Town*. Dai Liyan sits inside all day long, awaiting the belated spring. Bu Di's studio is like a small garden, and his capturing resembles an arduous waiting. But of course, Bu Di is more optimistic than Dai Liyan. He yearns for the past as well. In the past, the logic of form was already discovered, not stained or clean, no increase or decrease. The descendants use it repeatedly, and they cannot consume it. But they can spend a lifetime to digest it, to love it, to miss it, to pray or wait for it, and to let it come back to life. It is because the form is always related to the exterior of itself. The external world of form experiences ups and downs, metabolism, birth and death, and all over again. It is only with these references to reincarnation that the logic of form would last.

^I Bu Di's works from this stage was exhibited in the individual section "Pond" in the 2020-Song Art Museum Invitation Exhibition (2020, Beijing, Song Art Museum).

^{II} *Schema* is Kant's concept, and the author extends it to the inherent logic of formalist aesthetics in this article. Zhang Jian once wrote under the "Connotation of Formalist Art" part in his essay "The Rediscovery of Modern Art: From Wu Guanzhong to the New Wave Movement": "Wu Guanzhong's artistic and aesthetic decisions can be traced back to Cai Yuanpei during the May Fourth Movement. The latter's artistic production and creative education concepts are closely related to the 18th century

German aesthetics and philosophy trends, especially the philosophies of Kant and Wilhelm Humboldt, and also benefited from the French modern art movement in the early 20th century.”

^{III} Blue Haze is a perennial and succulent plant belonging to the genus of *Pachyphytum* and family of *Crassulaceae*. It is a horticultural variety crossbred between *Pachyphytum bracteosum* and *Pachyphytum glutinicaule Moran*.

^{IV} The author once wrote a short essay for Bu Di’s individual section “Pond” of the 2020-Song Art Museum Invitation Exhibition. In the article, he mentioned the extended meaning of the word “pond”: “He [Bu Di] studied various visual resources: Buddhist art, Western Avant-garde sculptures and paintings from the early 20th century, traditional calligraphy, and even Neo-realistic movies. There is a pond hidden behind those paintings: the depth of the pond could not be determined, and on the heavy and low part, the vague schema emerges and then dims.”

^V Currently located in the Hermitage Museum, Russia, the cultural relic number is: BDce-845.

^{VI} The article was published on the front page of People's Daily on December 31, 1977. The letter was signed on July 21, 1965.

^{VII} Bu Di’s father, Bu Weiqin, when discussing Greek vase paintings on page 4 of the preface, quoted similar words from Picasso in the book *World Decorative Paintings* (published by Lingnan Fine Arts Publishing House in 1988) . The original text reads: “Picasso admired the extraordinary achievements of ancient Greek art. He once said: To me there is no past or future in art. If a work of art cannot live always in the present it must not be considered at all. The art of the Greeks is not an art of the past; perhaps it is more alive today than it ever was.”