

The Flesh of Texts: On Zhu Zhengming's Portraits

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Zhu Zhengming's paintings of human figures are remarkable. When most other young painters who deal with meticulous brush techniques spend most of their time and energy on details such as the weaving of hair, she has made the decision to do a dramatic subtraction in terms of delineating the figures. Apart from the face, other parts are all delineated in a simplistic manner. The human figures under her painting brush appear to be very much detached from the worldly feelings and perception and give out a sense of aloofness. Some people may think Zhu's choice is under the influence of Buddhism or Taoism. But as a matter of fact, as a trained fine-brush painter, the figures in her work still feature the use of a variety colors and are far from breaking away from the earthly world.

Painting of human figure directly reflects the artists' attitudes toward the world, be it worldly or unworldly. The themes vary: sometimes they deal with daily life and sometimes, Buddha statues. But apart from all that, is there a third state? Definitely. Some artists find a way to explore for the ultimate questions while taking their root in the real world. Most of the artists of this kind are western artists. They resort to their intuition to find a critical point of the earthly world. Philosopher Dewey wrote: Ultimately there are but two philosophies. One of them accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities—to imagination and art. ("Art as Experience") Zhu Zhengming's choice of a somewhat lingering position is probably a symbol of such intuitive belief.

The human figures in Zhu Zhengming's work share one thing in common: the elimination of appearance. "The elimination of appearance leads to essentiality, and the elimination of words leads to truth." (- by Cui Yuanhan, official of Tang Dynasty) What the artist depicts dissolve man's social attribute to the maximum degree, especially gender characteristics. The figures featured in her work are either hairless or naked. They show no facial expressions or emotions as if they harbor no human desires at all. In the view of Buddhism and Taoism, that counts as "negative". "Negative approach attempts to eliminate difference by telling us what the object is not about. [...] If the negative approach is not the final approach, it would be impossible for us to reach the ultimate culmination of philosophy." ("A Short History of Chinese Philosophy", Feng Youlan) The deprivation of desires brings people one step closer to eternity, inspiring people to think beyond the worldliness. As a result, the figure per se is simplified. As a matter of fact, the prototype of truth must be something simplified if not "void" as this is the way to approach the essence of life.

Painting will never be lifeless. So is life. As a kind of mask of perception, the surface of Zhu Zhengming's figures is ingeniously texturized. For instance, quite abruptly, traces of "crackles" could be seen on the figures' faces; and there're tattoos of words and plant on their bodies. Such is a "positive" approach, and in a way, it counteracts the sense of aloofness caused by the "negative" approach. These subtle and yet very specific decorations demonstrate the artist's persistent and yet novel desires that are rooted deep in her mind. "A gorgeous appearance combined with a visionary mind" would be a fit comment here.

Signs that she creates by following intuition cast light on the influence from the outside world upon her inner world. They are somewhat fragmented and couldn't be counted as systematic philosophical narrative. However, when we take a holistic look at Zhu Zhengming's practice, we'd realize that the imageries she chooses collectively constitute a chain of evidence, which is the most interesting part of Zhu's art. Probably this should be ascribed to her innate savvy because it seems she resorts purely to her intuition to produce the works that seem highly convincing and precise. If such is not her real-life experience, we could only guess that it's the legacy from her past life. For instance, she often says that she is "obsessed with India". But in fact, she has never been to India. Her passion to the country seems like some kind of nostalgia on the subconscious level.

If we make a comparison between Indian traditional thoughts and Zhu Zhengming's work, we'd see there is some interesting coincidence. The animals that accompany the human figures – elephants, monkeys, leopards, deer, snakes – are all related with Indian culture and familiar Buddhist stories. In a sense, there's no hierarchical difference between the human figures and the animal figures. All creatures are born equal. The root cause to such "equality" lies in "reincarnation". Whatever you are born to be, it's the process of reincarnation. Traces of Taoism can also be perceived in Zhu's work. Butterfly, crane and turtle, in Taoist view, are also animals with holy halo and possess the ability for "metamorphosis" and "reincarnation". In "One Hundred Years of Solitude No. 42", Zhu Zhengming has the character "彼" (the other place) tattooed to the man's neck, an apparent indication of the influence of religious thoughts.

A fundamental framework for "metamorphosis" and "reincarnation" is "time". Both Indian traditional thoughts and Taoism believe that time is loop and there's no beginning point or ending point. Also, there's no difference in the time of mythology and time of history. If we look at Zhu Zhengming's work in a systematic manner, we'd see a hidden "timeline" in it. "Time" is infinite and illusory. In Zhu's work, she tends to use "blankness" as the background to show that "time" is on the move and transient. Take the "crackles" on the faces for instance. On the one hand, it's a symbol of China's traditional Ru ware; and on the other hand, it's an omen of "metamorphosis" and "transformation". Indian people also see time as a kind of "Kalpa". It is described in some Buddhist documents that if we use a piece of silk scarf to slightly whisk a mountain every one hundred years and each time the scarf whisk the mountain, the peak of the mountain will be eroded a little bit, then the time needed to erode the whole mountain would be the time for a "Kalpa". The cracks, fragile as they are, indicate the power of ongoing devastation and the desire for rebirth.

Zhu Zhengming's work, when displaced together, gives out a sense of the progressiveness of time. The figures may be transient, but the charisma of painting lingers. The gestures, costumes and properties of the figures in her work are imbued with a sense of poetry, mythology, yoga, alchemy and past memory. The way she deals with them is simplistic and plain, but the result leads people to sense weirdness and bizarreness, demonstrating that Zhu's painting is imbued with an endless flow of classic verve which in the end makes her work become the flesh of the text.