

Void · Journey

- A Review for *Zhu Zhengming Solo Exhibition*

Sun Xin

In the ultimate sense, barely any artworks can be declared as “finished”. The stop of drawing, mounting and hanging often indicate the completion of the work. However, from the viewer’s perspective, the work at this point is at a suspending position, waiting for interpretation. If we take it as a point of departure, we’d realize that it is surrounded by a variety of unpredictable routes incurred from this point. In a sense, it may remind people of the image of a labyrinth. The genius of Zhu Zhengming lies in the fact she hides Ariadne’s “thread” and only makes allusion to it. On the other hand, viewers enjoy the absolute freedom in terms of their choices of “entries”/“exits”, the directions of their consciousness and how they want to deal with the “thread”.

The temperature and characteristics of an artist, inevitably, would be secreted from the work slowly but clearly. In other words, things that are delineated by the artist’s painting brush can be seen as a kind of “substitute” of the artist herself. However, that is not to say when what is delineated features “human figures” we could come directly into conclusion that such figures refer to the artist herself. Instead, it’s more precise to say that they represent the “multi-facets” of humanity. As a result, what is shared in common surpasses the “individuality”. To put it in another way, a true artist may start with “individuality” but will never stop there. The focal point of the artist extends from the inner self to the common destiny of human beings, and during the process a dimensional shift from individual life consciousness to collective life consciousness is completed. Bearing in mind it’s not hard for us to explain why we’d find sympathy within works that were created centuries ago. The first time I saw Zhu Zhengming’s work, I felt deeply attracted to it. And at that time, I haven’t even met the artist for once. The ingenuity and vision lying behind the work, subtle as they may appear to be, can be perceived vividly.

Void

Before Buddhism was introduced into China, the concept of “nothingness” in Taoist sense shared

similar meaning to “void”. “To act without thinking of acting; to conduct affairs without feeling the trouble of them; to taste without discerning any flavor” is a typical example of that in “Tao Te Ching”. Let it be and the ultimate innocence will finally emerge. “Nothingness” and “void”, as an important concept in Chinese traditional philosophy that has profoundly influenced the value systems of Chinese traditional culture, lay the foundation for the aesthetic core of Chinese art. Traditional Chinese ink art put an emphasis on “spirit” rather than the “form”, indicating that “trueness” often lies in the invisible realm – the infinity of “void” and “nothingness”. According to Gong Xian, a painter of the Ming Dynasty, only by going beyond the delineation of so-called “realness” could one truly be recognized as a painter. In other words, objective depiction is often confined to fixed patterns and hence its possibilities are limited, which will turn to become an obstacle in one’s future practice to explore for the ultimate “trueness”.

“Void” is the premise of everything. For artistic practice, “void” refers to the value of both “emptiness” and “fullness”: only by eliminating all the unnecessary and distracting thoughts could we manage to make enough room to experience, to absorb nutrients and to transform thoughts into visual language. The awareness of “void” would lead to an intentional breakaway from fixed patterns and the possibilities of develop “new” patterns that aren’t confined to previous skills and rules but attach importance to the reflection of the trueness of the inner world and the harmony between self and the outside world.

Zhu Zhengming is an artist of this kind. She manages to maintain the state of “void”, to which she resorts to observe, absorb and reflect upon the world and to re-shape and re-build another world. If we take a close look at her works created before 2008, we’d find traces left during different periods of her life. Books she read during adolescent years, plants she observed, landscape around her house, antiques she collected, travel notes and images of traditional/contemporary Chinese/western art, in a sense, have become a kind of database at her disposal, leaving a somewhat ambiguous and remote imprint in her work that gives out a sense of “void” transcending memory, reality and herself.

Artistic practice has its context. So does cultural tradition. Ink and water represent the language of

fluidity and are closely connected with the art forms of traditional cultural contexts. In ancient time, it was seen as a way to demonstrate the root of our culture. However, when previous narrative was no longer able to express all the new concepts, we'd need to develop new language from the old. In the 21st century when global cultural resources have already become the spiritual nutrients shared by all people, the world we are faced and dealing with is becoming even more complicated. It requires people to not only understand the characteristics of their own cultural system, but also have the capacity to reflect upon their cultural systems from the perspective of diverse culture. In Zhu Zhengming's work, a sense of detachment could be clearly perceived, probing into individual life awareness and the origin of life. The somewhat aloof and estranged strokes featured in her work, in a way, corresponds to Giorgio Agamben's idea of "contemporary", which in turn put her work at a position that is both "in" and "out of" the time we live in. She tends to narrates the eternal rather than the ephemeral and believes that the essence of the eternal lies in the recognition and expression of "voidness". Excessive closeness to the contemporary era would easily blunt our self-perception and make it impossible to take a critical position. The emergence of such an idea could be traced back to her visit to Nara National Museum. When classic masterpieces from two different cultural pedigrees – wooden Buddha statues from the east and modern artworks from the west – were presented within the same space, it felt very harmonious. She deeply felt that for art, the difference lied not in time, nation or genre but only in quality.

The formation of the idea might come into being even earlier when she started to read Chinese and western classics and sense the difference between Chinese and western cultures. During her life journey, she met many people. By observing them, she managed to weave a spiritual "ragged robe". Nowadays the "patches" are not easily to be recognized as traces of the edges are blurred. Collectively they have become a mirror of Zhu Zhengming's vision of the world. Influence and aesthetic visions of Mu Xi, Shen Zhou, Jin Nong, Li Shutong, He Shaoji, Michelangelo, Matisse, O'keeffe and Rothko could all be perceived from within Zhu Zhengming's personal style. Moreover, influence of writers and filmmakers, such as Shen Congwen, Xu Dishan, Kurosawa Akira, Hirokazu Koreeda and Mishima Yukio, has also left imprints in her work.

Journey

Zhu Zhengming's work mostly features the normality rather than the sporadic, giving out the impression of loneliness and tranquility. Moreover, her work often features single protagonist. Even if two characters are shown in the work, there's no trace of communication between them. Take "Reclusive Greenness" (2016) and "Sudden Inspiration" (2018) for instance. The two works both give out a sense of unspeakable estrangement, and the characters surrounded by the animals and plants appear to be more like a scene of monologue.

Life is a journey during which loneliness is common. It seems Zhu Zhengming sensed loneliness at an earlier age than most other kids. To trace the origin of such loneliness, we need to revisit the remote but intimate history – a girl who wanted to freed herself from interference of others, observed the world alone and quietly, liked to take the time to be in a trance or gaze at the moss, had a liking for "One Hundred Years of Solitude", always finished her homework on time, no longer felt satisfied with book collection at home and wanted to look for more in bookstores, and was very much used to the landscape delineated in classic Chinese paintings. In her heart, it was brimming with loneliness. Zhu Zhengming's vision of the world took shape when she was a kid. Her initial impressions of the world were collected, stored and collaged together, and after a long and slow process of fermentation, they found a way to emerge through her work. Virginia Woolf wrote: Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while. Zhu Zhengming's loneliness never escapes. On the contrary, it is deeply integrated with her daily life, which can be clearly perceived from her "One Hundred Years Solitude" series. Different from the "Reclusion" series (2010) which showed the influence from Tibetan Buddhism, the "One Hundred Years Solitude" series reflected more influence from mediaeval western painting. She endeavored to integrate the speculative and questioning awareness, which were typical in western culture, into her practice. During the process of making selection and judgement, she managed to build a connection with alien cultures and developed something new from it. In the beginning of "History of Face" it wrote: the most intriguing thing in the world is human face. Faces not only belong to human, they are also reflection of the society, history and culture. In a sense, body seems more natural than face. But face carries more contents. Specific faces have to be placed in corresponding social and cultural contexts to be interpreted accurately; if they are placed in alien

contexts, what they reflect is more likely to be subjective imagination and symbolic meaning. In the “One Hundred Years Solitude” series, human faces are detached from the nature and seem to be the frozen past and the nonexistent existence. Among the peculiar flowers and plants, the eyes looked down and were concealed behind the frozen faces. If we take a close look at the eyes, we’d find they are teeming with a sense of void. It reminds people Japanese haiku poet Matsuo Bashō’s famous verse: with young leaves, the dew from your eyes I want to wipe.

In her view, not only faces, but the tiny changes in skeletal structure, muscle density, bones and flesh are also subtly delicate. Like a micro-cosmos, the wisdom and intelligence lying in it are beyond any words. In the “Reclusion” series, the human figures no longer featured head portraits or bust like previously. The monochrome background gave out a sense of serenity and seclusion. The flattened delineation of human figures imbued the work with the imagery of man in a lifeless land. It’s not hard to see Zhu Zhengming’s preference for elegance of Qin, Han, Wei and Jin dynasties and the open-mindedness of Sui and Tang dynasties. It’s also easy to perceive her determination to internalize the cultural experiences that transcend time and space. The iris in “Green Tea”, pine branches in “Pine Reclusion” and bamboo in “Void Journey” all turn out to become her props, through which she tries to shield worldly logic from the elegant imagery. Her monologue echoes “Twenty Four Styles of Poetry” by Si Kongtu, a poet and poetic theorist in the late Tang Dynasty: Like the immortal, he holds a hibiscus and rides the heights along with wind, clouds, mountain, and moon.

After the meeting with many other people, she met herself.

Fantasy · Trueness

Chinese traditional culture puts an emphasis on harmony – harmony between man, heaven and the whole world. Zhuang Zi wrote: He chiefly cared to occupy himself with the spirit-like operation of heaven and earth. Moreover Xie He from Southern Qi Dynasty, Su Shi from Northern Song Dynasty, Xu Wei from late Ming Dynasty and Dai Xiwu from Qing Dynasty all attached great importance to concepts like “energy”, “ultimate form”, “transcendence of specific form” and “fantasy as the gateway”. While western culture stresses on rationality, logic and desire to conquer;

Chinese culture, on the other hand, stresses on harmony, sentiments and inclination to live in seclusion. In its view, the relationship between man and the nature is mutually penetrating rather than mutually contradictory. Chinese painters in ancient time looked very much forward to freedom and a fictitious land of peace and happiness in the hope to find a space to express the feelings and visions that they couldn't express in the real world. When they managed to occupy the world by pushing the reality away and poetic dwelling, they found a way to enter the field of "fantasy" to experience the void between the world and ourselves.

Apparently, Zhu Zhengming's work gives out a sense of "fantasy", opening up a world that "transcends the worldliness". In other words, in this world, fantasy is the gateway but when you go inside it you'd find the world is beyond fantasy. Under her painting brushes, holy animals like deer, monkey, eagle, leopard, snake, butterfly and phoenix, and peculiar plants like plum, pine, bamboo and iris, have all transcended the meaning of simply being some kind of externalized spiritual signals. Take the tattoo-like butterfly in "One Hundred Years of Solitude No. 96" for example. Its intimate relation with human imbues the world with a kind of fantasy-like ambience. In "Red Dust", the patterns on the clothes echo the stripes on deer, leading to the metaphor that all things were born equal. Moreover, the pine branches and cranes in "Pine Reclusion" are delineated in the same surface but would miss each other forever. In "Void Journey", the body that tangled by holy snake and phoenix, the palms that hold the bamboo branches and the eyes that look into the eyes of the viewers all point out to her vision of "void", the essence of life and even the universe. Speaking of "fantasy field", Gong Xian of late Ming Dynasty once wrote: There are many peculiar places in the world. Without the depiction of painters, most people would never have a chance to see such places in their whole life. However, such places don't have to be. As long as they are in the painters' vision, they can be considered as real. Fantasy develops from the heart, and without it, it's hard to perceive trueness as trueness is always hidden behind the fantasy. The "transcendence of worldliness" is also demonstrated in Zhu Zhengming's delineation of androgynous human figures. Despite the sense of restraint and simplicity, the figures give out a strong sense of tensity – the tensity of tranquility! It seems the artist intentionally keeps a distance from so-called feminine approach, which in turn gives her more room to explore the essence and ultimate meaning of life.

Fantasy is the essence of the world and the cause of everything. To Zhu Zhengming, artistic practice is a kind of meditative ritual that is isolated from life. During the process of creation, the artist who is meditating and the artist who is narrating progress simultaneously. She never makes a draft, which means she needs to constantly and delicately coordinate the balance between sensitivity and reflection. Sources that inspire her fantasy towards the world, including traditional humanistic experience, classic western patterns and contemporary ideological trends, are represented in the form of faces, bodies, animals and plants and integrated with the images, giving out a harmonious sense of conflicts in which the classic and the contemporary, the real and the virtual, fantasy and trueness are merged together.

In the context of globalized cosmopolitanism, the voices of dialogue are of paramount importance. Such voices have to be generated from different places and cultural backgrounds. And with the contribution of artists of different cultural genes, such dialogues will both absorb nutrients from other cultures and give new elements to the formation of local cultural identity. Zhu Zhengming's work is not all about eastern mysticism, which could be ascribe to the inspirations from various cultural resources. Thanks to that, even her work is presented in different cultural contexts, viewers would not feel hard to resonate with it conceptually and emotionally. Within "fantasy", Zhu Zhengming believes that "trueness" could be presented in different forms through multimedia approaches. The artist chooses to resort to metaphorical and symbolic images to confront consumerist culture. But under the surface, she points to the inner world, the general experience, the field of void, and the "landscape" depicted by Rainer Maria Rilke, an Austrian poet and novelist. According to Rilke, awakening desire, they make a place where pain can enter; that's how growing happens. They bring suffering along with their laughter, and longings that had slept and now awaken to weep in a stranger's arms.

Good artworks are a remarkable journey and the destination is of infinite possibilities.

September 12, 2018, in Wangjing