

Song Kun: Classic VS Cool

Bao Dong

2018

The art of Song Kun encompasses two very different cultures. The first is the classicalist culture that has been preserved and passed down by academy education, which is embodied in her artistic character and taste as expressed in her paintings. This not only includes her precise sketching, rational modeling, sliver-gray palette, and her control of the paint to give it just the right level of materiality; it also includes her preferences for portraiture and figures. Depictions of people, and particularly closeups of faces and hands, are always appearing in her works, and this is where we really see her academy modeling skills.

On the other, perhaps opposing side of this aesthetic taste for reason, precision and elegance, is the subcultural content of the times in her works: anime, cosplay, experimental electronica and cyberpunk. It is of course not difficult to understand the incorporation of this content. As is the case for most artists of her generation, these contemporary cultural resources provide her with the momentum and nourishment she needs to escape the pressure of academy traditions and gain a sense of individual identity. Unlike many of her peers, however, Song Kun does not belong to any of the tag-line schools of "anime aesthetics." Her works do not have that icon exaggeration or Pop appropriation, which is perhaps because she is actually truly of that culture, rather than a bystander making strategic use of it.

If the academy classicism brings restraint and elegance, then what popular subculture provides is trendiness and coolness. Song Kun's works effect an astonishing combination of the two, as we see in one work featuring a girl dressed as a character from Inuyasha, with the precise costume design of an anime spirit, but also the classic clothing textural style of "Cao's robes rising from the water." Implied within this rendering of "Cao's robes rising from the water" is Song Kun's focus on modeling the twisting form of the body, as well as the classicalist focus on outline drawing and sculptural feel. Using a classical eye, Song Kun has transformed contemporary imagery into a style that is hers alone. In this sense, she resembles Constantine Guys as described by Charles Baudelaire, a painter who finds the timeless within fleeting and random modern life.

The Chinese artists born in the 1970s are part of a generation that has perhaps truly encountered the urban modernity described by Baudelaire. They bear the imprint of Socialist culture, but have also been truly situated within a rapidly capitalizing society, especially during their youth. They

may not have had a clear “enemy” as the previous generation did, but they have intimately felt powerful experiential tension, and have been forced to rapidly change and adjust their thinking and mindset until each of them could settle on a relatively stable individual worldview in order to finally make peace with the world.

For Song Kun, this making peace with the world is perhaps completed in her artworks. Academism and Pop, orthodoxy and subculture, classical and contemporary, conservative and radical all seem to have become unified under a conceptual system we could call pan-Buddhism. The concepts and aesthetics of Buddhism are precisely what allow her to see the timeless in the present. Many of her artwork and exhibition titles lift phrasing from Buddhism. The vivid colors subdued under gray tones are also in line with the Buddhist glass-sheened depiction of the Pure Land. The figures in her paintings also have a touch of the dignity and solemnity of Buddhist iconography. Whether it is the East or the West, Song Kun prefers the simple beauty of ancient times. In fact, the “Cao's robes rising from the water” approach to clothing textures is one of the basic modes of early Chinese Buddhist art, and can be traced back to the art of the Hellenistic period.

For most people today, Buddhist faith provides an escapist mindset from worldly life, and that possibly applies to Song Kun as well. Her works are not Buddhist art meant to serve Buddhist thought and doctrines. The relationship between Song Kun and her works is more like the relationship between the literati and Zen painting. Her works are an overall presentation of individual concepts and tastes, while the “Buddhistness” can be seen as a rejection and retreat from various vulgarities and shortcomings of the present. In other words, in today's world flooded with cool pictures, Song Kun uses classicalism in the cultural history sense to reach a coolness beyond cool.