

From Pine Needles to Willow Groves

Zhu Zhu

In the years since he returned to the canvas, Bu Di has made the ancient shanshui landscape painting the object of deconstruction. This is not the conceptual outcome of some linguistic theory pursuit; his motives are more instinctual. He views painting as a "place to escape from reality." The landscapes and fields of shanshui painting are the perfect place for the projection of his emotions. He can lose himself within, and thus construct an individual language, form and sense of space. This path also fits his predilection for collection and connoisseurship of artifacts.

Specifically speaking in terms of self-actualization, he seems to look down on the superficial bait-and-switch of materials and concepts. He uses oil painting methods to reproduce classic Edenic images, and in a certain sense, make them more naive, viewing them as toys constructed with perfect grammar as he curiously pulls them apart, tosses them around, rearranges them and even leaves them scattered on the ground. This cognitive game akin to building blocks plays out in his creations through the following steps: he starts at any random spot on the blank canvas, and slowly expands through a proliferation of details until a complete whole gradually takes shape. This final shape may return to the existing structure of the original text, it may just magnify one detail, or it may present a powerfully warped terrain.

It becomes an image, but it is no longer that landscape. Ancient shanshui landscape paintings often serve as more of a structural reference text. The original semantics and connotations are stripped out to open up a field for him to practice his linguistic alchemy. As he has said, "My observation of tradition does not imply that I want to retreat into naturalism or recreate certain circumstances of traditional painting. I prefer to enter into classics of modernism and reflect on them anew" (see "About Bu Di:Conversation among Three People"). In terms of conceptual imagery, the pine trees that accompany the wise man in the garden take on sharp metallic properties under his brush. The tree trunks have become geometric blocks, the lily pads giant gears that do not sink into the water. The mountain ranges and boulders of the Song dynasty painters have been re-stacked through deconstructionist techniques, and even the inscriptions have been translated into graffiti-style branches and stones stacked throughout Bu Di's paintings. His knowledge is constantly progressing within a painting history with no defined spatiotemporal boundaries, accumulating a psychological layer to his own living experience.

In this thread that perhaps belongs to him alone, there are strong imprints left by Paul Klee and Joan Miró, with whom he was infatuated as a child, and the Surrealist tricks for creating absurd narrative atmosphere (which is blended into the wilderness and gardens of some of Bu Di's works). Meanwhile, he voraciously swallows all possible sources of knowledge in order to improve his sense of direction in his explorations. This emerges in his paintings as a progression from complexity to simplicity, a gradual departure from "very full compositions." Through the rhythmic flow, the original complexity and brittleness become free and open, the colors increasingly soft, the original reference painting becoming more of a hidden presence there to supplement his individual methods. This is accompanied by a softening of the original details from reality with their pine-needle sharpness, which are replaced by tranquil rationality that ripples with vitality. This sense of vision is evidenced by his recent works featuring willow groves with a supple Egyptian sense of form. The continuous unfolding of these real advances implies that he is no longer bound by a tense cognitive practice, but has begun to soothe us with a more spiritual aesthetic.

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Translated by Jeff Crosby