

About Bu Di

Conversation among Three People

Participants: Bu Di, Liu Ye and Hao Liang

Liu Ye: The influence of one's childhood in adulthood, whether conscious or unconscious, is crucial. You were already nationally famous at a very young age. I remember you were about seven or eight years old. What are your own views on your childhood painting experience?

Bu Di: When I was three years old, my art educator father began teaching me to paint according to his own teaching methods. One of those methods was reading. I was reading Paul Klee catalogues as a young child. I can't say I definitely understood them, but that sense of purity and sincerity in his works was something quite close to the young me. It fit. Meanwhile, those simple lines were something I could get quite close to in my expressions.

Other artists who had a profound impact include Joan Miró and Zhang Guangyu. Miró's *Farm* left a very deep impression. He could fold all of these things from the real world, the farm, plants, the land, the fields, and even insects, into his own individual language. Meanwhile, with *Havoc in Heaven* and *Manhua Journey to the West*, Zhang Guangyu folded ancient Chinese legends into his own visual system.

I really did not want to be famous when I was young. Fame meant pressure, followed by responsibilities, like drawing the blackboard bulletins for the school, and holding painting performances at the Children's Palace.

Hao Liang: Your formative art experience was quite unique. In China, the formative art education in the academies since the liberation has been based on the Soviet model, a system of drawing, colors, sketches and creation. Since you learned at home, you went directly into modernism, and never went through the so called academy education. How have these experiences influenced you?

Bu Di: When I first encountered modernism, I really didn't understand it, but it truly is the most established field in the development of art history. At the time, I was mainly receiving information unconsciously.

I never had a systemic academy education. In the late 1980s, due to certain social events, I was unable to study abroad and missed my chance to enter the art academy. I had made preparations for the art academy examinations, taking drawing classes after work. I was quite rebellious in those days. Under Miró's influence, my drawings weren't the kind you would make to practice for the exams. My teacher said it wasn't right, and I turned around and asked him, "do you know Joan Miró?"

Liu Ye: You may not have received an academy education, but because of your father, you received professional art training at home, and that training was modernist-influenced. This is quite abnormal for an era marked by such a paucity of information.

Hao Liang: How strong an influence was your father, Bu Weiqin?

Bu Di: Painting is a very arduous task. You need people at home encouraging you, or else you'll give it up.

Liu Ye: In the 1980s, Bu Weiqin edited a few books that left a very deep impression on me. One was *Collected Woodcuts of Rockwell Kent*, and another was a monograph on Belgian print artist Frans Masereel. I still have those books. These books were beautifully bound.

Bu Di: Masereel's work touches me more deeply than that of Käthe Kollwitz because of its innocence. Early on, my father also edited *Pablo Picasso's Ceramics*. There was little information on Picasso in China at that time.

Back to why I like Zhang Guangyu, what I appreciate the most is his ability to generalize. He really liked the formal language of ancient Egypt, which is also highly generalized. To this day, my art has never been able to escape his influence.

Liu Ye: This is also about individual knowledge background. You are a lover of ancient artifacts, and are fascinated by ancient civilization. Your collection of Chinese artifacts is based on a Western understanding, rather than being an outgrowth of Chinese tradition. It is quite different. The artists of Zhang Guangyu's generation were cultivated in Chinese tradition, but they also had a thorough understanding of Western modern art.

Bu Di: Here's why I preferred ancient Egyptian art over ancient Roman sculpture as a child. First, I was always more attracted to the two-dimensional aspect of Egyptian art. Second is that their lines and shapes were much more complete. When I was young, I went to the first Beijing International Book Fair, and for the first time, I saw many foreign art books. There was one I particularly liked, a book on Tutankhamen, and I began painting from it. I then went on to paint from the Northern Wei dynasty line drawings, which were mostly derived from sarcophagi. I have continued this linear approach to modeling since childhood.

There are certain behaviors you repeat throughout childhood that disappear at a certain point, but others continue to grow. My first painting lesson was to fill the painting. To this day, I have never been averse to very full compositions. Looking back, this trait in my painting is not altogether unrelated to my childhood experience.

Hao Liang: Bu Di's painting method is different from the current popular trends. The distinction comes from the way his images are constructed. It is a unique language for organizing the painting.

Liu Ye: Bu Di has his own methodology for translating the world, and uses reality to translate himself. He uses certain corresponding objects from reality, but only as supplementary tools for his translation.

Bu Di: I am actually quite opposed to the use of images for painting. This method is just too easy. Images are readymade material. You can utilize and alter images any way you want. During a certain period in my painting, I would start with a single detail, which would constantly expand, and then I would pull it back and adjust it.

Hao Liang: Reading your paintings calls to mind Chinese traditional painting techniques. In literati painting, many of the great painters became so through their ability to rein in and concentrate the painting. Dong Qichang and Wang Yuanqi both began with a single detail and followed it from there. They always filled the space by finding balance between interlocking components. There are similarities here with your painting.

Bu Di: Interlocking is a very appropriate way of putting it. We were looking at a Wang Yuanqi painting the other day. There was one mountain in the middle distance that looked superfluous, but it was just right within the overall painting, because there was a relationship of progression. It is an ability to synthesize knowledge. The understanding of the world is built upon literature, music and the like.

Liu Ye: The world is just an excuse for Bu Di. For him, subject matter isn't all that important. He does not need to look to reality for his perceptions. Bu Di first decides he wants to paint, and then seeks out an excuse in the real world. It is life imitating art, rather than art imitating life.

Hao Liang: Literati painting takes the Yuan and Ming dynasty tradition of respect for nature to its extreme. In the Yuan dynasty, painting was still immature. It still relied on revelation from the real world. When Chinese painting grew more formulaic, methodology became quite important. Many Western artists first decide on their methods, and then decide what they want to paint.

Bu Di: Back to my own painting, during the construction of the basic shapes, I will seek out different structures, such as blocks, within the details, because they are prone to producing relationships of contrast. Paul Klee's paintings seem to be filled with small blocks, but there are contrasts of light and shadow within. I also seek out these kinds of relationships in my paintings.

Hao Liang: These are like arrangements of cells. You translate all of the content into cells. This is a painting language you understand. In your creations from the past three years, it seems that your approach to organizing the painting has increasingly tended towards classification. It has grown more apparent in your latest works.

Liu Ye: Classification is the establishment of connections between elements in the painting. I feel that the connectivity in Bu Di's paintings is established on a complex, indirect foundation. Sometimes it is even expressed as conflict. He does not simplify the elements of the painting, but instead maintains its richness.

Bu Di: So called classification is not about less, but about things that, when concealed behind the painting, are slightly less, but lead to more perceptions. This is the allure of painting.

Hao Liang: There are some seemingly abstract structures in your recent works, interspersed with concrete objects. There are rich, undulating layers in these paintings.

Liu Ye: They are somewhat akin to Chinese literati ideas of landscaped garden design.

Bu Di: That is correct. I use ideas of literati garden design to lay out the structures and threads of the paintings. I also reference Song and Yuan dynasty painting. The Song and Yuan, from China's Middle Ages, had the most powerful way of understanding the world. I often wonder how Song and Yuan approaches to understanding the world would respond to our present day. In some of my paintings, I will follow sculptural methods. It looks like I have completed the main structure of a sculpture, but I am actually rendering it on the plane. In painting, I complete a visual processing of reflection of all the things in my mind. Meanwhile, the clouds, boulders and trees are all in a fluid state in my mind, like how clouds shroud the mountains while revealing them at the same time. I complete this process on the plane. The shifting image in my mind is my creative process.

Hao Liang: There has been another change. Before, you placed great emphasis on atmosphere, but in your works from recent years, you seem to have been removing the atmosphere. Your painting has grown more solid, but we can also get a sense of the shifts in your ability to control. How did you progress from your previously very mature language to your current methods?

Bu Di: I am always wary about paintings that I and other people really like. I don't like doing things that come easy to the hands. If I want to devote my life to painting, I must be responsible to myself. At first, I started with lines, and I think I developed a distinctive taste and individual language, but after developing that to a certain point, I found that following taste was not serious enough for me. There was too much free supposition, and not enough control. I cherish the sense of difficulty. My proficiency in lines comes from my childhood training, and it has had an influence, but I have always wanted to keep my distance from proficiency and habit.

Liu Ye: I feel that Bu Di's most essential shift has been his transition from emotion to reason. On the path from following his natural talents and habits to a deeper level, he has completed a shift towards rational thinking and higher pursuits. Mankind's natural

properties are not necessarily the most valuable ones. Sometimes we need to struggle. To a certain extent, I believe he is now entering into a relatively rational period. He has begun attempting to classify things, and to reduce the sense of narrative. This is the need for reason that emerges after the elevation of emotion. When an artist no longer depends solely on sensation in his work, it demonstrates he has reached a new phase.

Hao Liang: I see the emotional component in his earlier paintings as sometimes being too redundant, and the narrative layer often too flimsy. In his current paintings, he has room to wander around, and the narrative feels richer. I also think that Bu Di has strong emotional sensitivity. There's this energy that's always on fire. After interacting with him for several years, I found that I have a very important quality, something that none of the artists from the academy possess—the ability to learn. Many people's understandings of painting and art come to a standstill after a few years in the academy. All of Bu Di's work, on the other hand, is continuously changing its images and methods.

Liu Ye: This touches on a question of active and passive learning. The learning at the academy is a passive kind of learning. Most artists, after years of passive, even horrible learning at the academy, lose the capability for active learning. Though Bu Di did not intend to miss out on an academy education, it was not necessarily a bad thing for him, because he had to spend his life actively learning to move forward, which required him to engage his perceptive side. He also had to constantly observe. He never conformed to any academy standards. The Central Academy of Fine Arts may not be his school, but perhaps the exhibition halls at MoMA became his classrooms.

Hao Liang: Perhaps it is due to your unique learning trajectory, but I notice that your tastes as a collector are quite different from those of other people. There are generally two types of collectors of antique art. The tastes of the first tend towards palace art, the enjoyment of luxury and power. The second follow the literati thread. But your tastes seem to blend the two. You collect stone engravings and enamelware, but you also collect statues and portraits.

Bu Di: Collecting is an understanding of history. I prefer artworks with the aesthetic produced by clashes. For instance, the art of the Silk Road is a product of ethnic fusion. Buddhist art also took on its current form through unconscious exchange. I just follow my own aesthetics in collecting. My collection is not limited by threads of vintage, material or craft.

Hao Liang: It is this taste, perhaps, that leads your paintings to appear more reserved and ambiguous as you have absorbed Chinese traditional painting. I am quite averse to the imitation of the surface effects of traditional painting. This state which is limited to graphic transformation is very dangerous. In your paintings, however, I have seen the traces of such artists as Dong Qichang and Fan Kuan. There is a reserved exploration of ways and rhythms for constructing space.

Bu Di: I try my best to avoid Eastern schemas and flourishes. Painting the mountain is not about painting the mountain. In my painting, you can see the mountain-painting techniques of traditional painting, even traditional chapped brushwork in some of the details. But when you look back on those artists, such as Dong Qichang, who lived in the 16th century, they never saw the art of today. Today, we have seen so many new things that we cannot simply reach back. We should ponder the way in which the world was understood in their time, and the order through which they grasped things. Another reason is that I do not want to use a single artwork to explain tradition. I treat painting as an endeavor, one that I will spend the second half of my life on. This is much more important than any single painting.

Liu Ye: The fusion between civilizations is a challenging affair. Would Wang Yuanqi have been an even greater painter if he could have seen the paintings of Jan van Eyck?

Hao Liang: There is one trait in your work that differs from the current methods of Chinese contemporary art. When people talk about so called painting now, they usually approach the matter from reality and history, or the means of production of knowledge and theory. I think that your working method is closer to that of modernist painters. It's more closely linked to form and art history.

Bu Di: I've recently been reading Luc Tuymans. He says he wants to escape from modernism. I still haven't worked my way through Chinese tradition. I don't have the ability to walk away from it yet. It is because of the powerful foundation of tradition that we can have the art of today. I also follow the current arts, such as video and new media, but for me it is basically just supplementary studies. 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. I used to think that creation was a process of discovery. Now I think that creation is based on specific reflections synthesizing various forms of knowledge.

Liu Ye: Effective methods are not necessarily valuable ones. Many people imitate the effects of Chinese painting, which looks like a legitimate method with Chinese characteristics. I think it is just inertia at play. This approach is easy to explain, has clear ideas, and can easily produce results. Bu Di explores the roots. He has chosen a difficult path. As an artist, you should not seek out easy solutions. You need to lay down some obstacles. That will give you more vitality. Bu Di's painting may not be perfect, but it has openness and potential. There is more to look forward to here than in those works that appear perfect yet have no more possibilities.

Hao Liang: Rather than presenting recent works under a clear framework, you attach more importance to presenting the complete thread behind the artworks.

Bu Di: This is connected to my working method. There is a sense of generation within. It is a process of repressing, digesting and absorbing my experiences and new ideas. When I'm reading different things, they emerge in my works in different ways. You cannot fool people in painting. Whether or not your knowledge and understanding can engage with the world on equal footing is clear to see in the painting. First and foremost, in painting, you cannot fool yourself. If you just stick to your proficiencies, you end up fooling yourself. You have to burn up a bit of your life to create a good artwork.

Liu Ye: Art is a game, but it is not a very easy one to play. Art interacts with the deepest depths of the human heart, and the heart is a boundless black hole.

Hao Liang: The thing that makes artists so precious is that they dedicate their lives to one thing. Some may dig a deep well, while others open new territory.

I think that among all the forms of art, painting is the most ethical. On questions of beauty, structure, form and balance, each era has adjusted, revised and returned for a thousand years. That makes the judgment of painting a complex affair. It cannot be defined in simple terms of good and bad. Nor is it established on aesthetic taste, or something that can be achieved by utilizing social resources.

Bu Di: You cannot cut corners in painting. In Chinese tradition, painting is considered the embodiment of the artist's level of cultivation. Mistakes will happen along the way, and you have to find further solutions to them. This is all established on your existing experience and judgment. Some steps simply cannot be skipped.

An artist must learn throughout his life. Working is one method for learning. The learning only ends at death. You do not just find a perfect outcome from the beginning and then enjoy this outcome for the rest of your life. Art is a process that requires constant

self-correction. Kazimir Malevich is a prime example. When he got to the black square, he had reached the extreme, but he did not stop to enjoy this lofty status. Instead, he turned back.

Hao Liang: Personally, I am strongly against excess theorization or popularization in painting. Both extremes are diseases. There is a threshold to painting. This is where its vitality lies.

Liu Ye: Excess theorization makes painting too much about ideas, and it loses its vitality. Excess popularization reduces it to a tool for entertainment.

Bu Di: Truly metaphysical painting can only be for the few. Only they can project the shifts in the way they see society and the world from the depths of their hearts into painting. Through art history composition, it is seen by later generations. In the process, biases and selections emerge.

Hao Liang: I like reading treatises on painting written by the ancient painters themselves. They are very sincere. The way Chinese literati painting was discussed was quite similar to the postmodern theoretical structure. It is not clear at all, but it all comes from inside. Do you know what artistic discussion really resembles sometimes? It resembles the Longzhong Plan, the meeting of minds between Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei. They were both insiders, and that allowed them to reach a consensus.

Liu Ye: The discussion of painting by ancient Chinese painters was a very sincere philosophy. The theories of Western artists are more like manifestos. Either way, in the face of painting, text is so empty.

Bu Di: Painting is a language, but it cannot be translated. You have to understand it yourself. You cannot solely rely on translations into other art forms.

Liu Ye: No art form can be replaced by another.

Translated by Jeff Crosby