

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Linhan Yu

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For our goal was not only the East, or rather the East was not only a country and something geographical, but it was the home and youth of the soul, it was everywhere and nowhere, it was the union of all times.

Hermann Hesse 'Die Morgenlandfahrt / Journey to the East' (1932)

In the multiplying conditions of this transitive moment, revived parameters or feelings as to making, embody a new and freshly applied sense of materials and their contemporary use. While contentious ambiguities within post-modernism as to the boundaries of drawing and painting persist, there is nonetheless one residual discontinuous constant that remains—the making of the mark.ⁱ The expressive use of mark making with pen, pencil or paint has always been at the traditional centre of creative artistic practices. But when speaking of the practices of two distinct and separate artists a century apart in age, that is to say, active and no longer active practitioners from antipodal continents and cultural histories, what is shared follows necessarily from the expressive use of graphism and the making of a mark. For it is through line and the conceptual and artificial use of colour (that is to say colours of the mind's eye) that connects the works of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) and the contemporary Chinese artist Linhan Yu (b. 1990). In fact Kirchner saw that colour even preceded the power of line in his work, for he referred to himself as a **Farbenmensch** and colour permeated almost every aspect of his practice including his printed works.ⁱⁱ This said as Kirchner himself observed “there is no better place to get to know an artist than in his graphic work.”ⁱⁱⁱ Hence line and colour are the two essential aspects that drive forward Kirchner's art.^{iv} In the current shared exhibition space the line-based graphism of the German master, his streetwalker figures, cabaret dancers, nudes, and figurative images of urban life represent the investigatory processes through drawing that served for the subsequent development for his paintings and/or the variables of print and later woodcut reproduction.. As a result they show all the freshness of Kirchner's immediate and stark staccato drawing technique where lines syncopate the Expressionist rhythm of a Nietzschean cognate.^v And it is the immediate use of line that is indicative in the drawings thence expanded upon through paintings that forms the works of Linhan Yu. For where the latter differs is in the use of line to mediate the space between the figurative and the abstract, rather than the compressed issues of urban space and the linear and pseudo-gothic verticality seen in Kirchner's drawings. Linhan Yu often incorporates chosen desideratum prosthetics and medically derived extraneous objects in his drawing processes, where they function as abstract denotative (less connotative) references to the body.^{vi} Yet his interest is less that of the anatomical depiction but rather that of an associative bodily identity through pictorial artifice. It points to a distinction between the modernist approaches to the contoured figure, as distinct from postmodernist emphasis placed on the body as material object. For Linhan Yu emphasises the object-like aspect of the body, as against a form conventionally represented by mere contour or figural shape.^{vii} A comprehensive revaluation of shape and form saw radical changes in

the contemporary understanding of perception in the latter twentieth century.^{viii} Linhan Yu also incorporates and adapts other new technologies, using multiple computer screen shots, collaged by transfer printing onto his canvases. This offers a further dimension of image-expanded graphism that is distinct from that of hand crafted and the more traditional wood block print techniques of Kirchner.

The Chinese artist's use of the line to form a stabilising pictorial grid, a modernist trope, creates an equivocal underpinning structure that in reality becomes an optical palimpsest. For the grid has superimposed layered drawn and painted contents, crosses, patterns and imaginary globular florescence(s) of various sorts. While some of the applied accretions mask the grid below, others retain a thinned use of paint transparency that appear as if to float freely on the surface of the support. The line and over painted forms operate in terms of a continuous if intermittent relationship, or, as the artist puts it, in regard his painting *Tracking* "...in fact arrangements of figurative objects, as I need a medium to carry my points and lines, rather than points and lines to carry the images, which is an essential reversal." Therefore the use of line in this respect instigates that which is polemical and disputable throughout Linhan Yu artistic production. On the contrary his synthetic use of colour is that of personal intuitive consciousness, since colour becomes artifice to the extent that it is taken from the eye of the artist's mind, rather than as copied perceptions and transcriptions of the natural world. This aligns Linhan Yu's use of synthetic colour choice to Kirchner's psychical observation in 1910 "...art is made by man. His own figure is the center of all art...Therefore one must begin with the man himself."^{ix} As a reader we might take this to mean that the sentient consciousness of our mind shapes the world as it is presented to us, appearance and colour sensations must be assimilated and thereafter reintegrated into a newly formed pictorial expression. As the linear relates to planar concerns of configured space, to those inferences of directed forms of inflection, colour relates to the nature of light—as line creates tension colour generates tone. To Linhan Yu colour is therefore abstractive and fluid and not obliged to conform to the contours or fixed considerations of local colour. His use of colour operates through visualised examples of mark making expressed as extended gesture in terms of material non-confinement. In considering these two artists born a century apart, with different historical paradigms, we cannot expect to create total a realistic synthesis. Kirchner and Linhan Yu work in different material scales and frames of intellect, but what may be said is that they share in the universal language of mark making. It may seem a rather banal and neutral observation for what first begins in childhood, namely the making of a mark. Yet as per the epigraph the journey is everywhere as nowhere, and in the journeying that by perchance one finds the synthesis that is union of all times.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ The term discontinuous in this context refers to Michel Foucault's usage "things are no longer perceived, described, expressed, characterized, classified, and known in the same way" See *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (*L'archéologie du savoir*, 1969), Eng. Trans., A M Sheridan Smith. London and New York, Routledge, 2002. Deleuze argues that Foucault begins the debate on the modern theory-practice of 'multiplicities', Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, Paris, 1986, (p. 14)

ⁱⁱ Jill Lloyd 'Colors that shine, even in the Darkest Corner', *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, New Museum, New York, Prestel Verlag, 2019, pp.14-31

ⁱⁱⁱ See Louis de Marsalle, Über Kirchners Graphik Genius, [Ernst Ludwig Kirchner]. Zeitschrift für die bildende und alte Kunst,, Vol 3, Issue 2, 1921, pp. 250–263. Drawing as seen in the work of Kirchner precedes and is part of his development of prints and woodcuts. See Günther Gercken, ‘The Role of Printmaking in Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s Oeuvre. Kunsthandel Jörg Mass, Berlin, 2014, not paginated.

^{iv} See the analyses of Bruce Davis, Stephanie Barron, *German Expressionist Prints and Drawings: Essays*, Vol. 1, The Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies, Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art, Los Angeles and Munich, Prestel, 1989.

^v Kirchner as leader of the 1905 Expressionist art movement took the name of the group **Die Brücke** from *Also Sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen* (Thus Spake Zarathustra; A Book for All and None, 1883-92), and Nietzsche has remained the philosopher most associated with the Expressionists and the movement of Expressionism across, literature, art and film.

^{vi} See *Illusion of Doubles: Linhan Yu*, catalogue, Hive Center of Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2019-

^{vii} The idea of the ‘embodied line’ rather than contours of linear inflection was part of the extended perception in post-war phenomenology, Maurice Merleau Ponty’s *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1946) and another famous short text ‘The Eye and the Mind’ in his book of essays *The Primacy of Perception*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964,

^{viii} See Rudolf Arnheim, ‘Shape’ and ‘Form’, *Art and Visual Perception: The Psychology of the Creative Eye*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London (1954, updated 1974), 2004, pp. 42-95, 96-161. This publication has been in continuous print for the last half century and is among most influential in determining modern understandings as to the distinction between shape and form in the post-war period.

^{ix} Norbert Nobis, *Der Blick auf Fränzi und Marcella: Zwei Modelle der Brücke-Künstler Heckel, Kirchner und Pechstein*, Sprengel Museum Hannover und Kunstmuseum and Stiftung Moritzburg, Halle, 2010, p 17