

The Ring of Life: On the Art of Zhou Li

Chia Chi Jason Wang

The line is the formal core for artist Zhou Li, just as it also forms the titles of her artworks. Unlike analytical or geometric constructs, Zhou Li's lines possess a sense of body and motion. On close inspection, we further discover that Zhou Li's so called "lines" are uneven and that they do not follow uniform principles. Not only that, the lines are not even really lines, but something more akin to shapes. These are linear shapes with outlines and a sense of mass, and visible spatial properties.

Zhou Li's lines are replete with awareness, and they absorb resources for transformation from Chinese traditional art and aesthetics. It is worth noting that while this linear style is rooted in Chinese art history, the traditional theoretical discourse never discussed lines, but instead spoke of "brushwork". The expressive, free linear shapes we see in Zhou Li's works are precisely an embodiment of this "brushwork" from Chinese calligraphy and painting. Her lines twist and turn, penetrate and intersect, and in the process of curving the wrist and moving the brush, they undulate, giving the lines rich formal changes that allude to multiple spaces.

Looking at the development of abstract art in the West in the twentieth century, geometric rectangles, polygons, circles, straight lines, curved lines and relationships between vertical and horizontal have always been the main elements that form the visual body of the artwork. In comparison, Zhou Li's spaces of lines and colors are laid out through irregular, rhythmic, and warped rings or circles. The rings and circles change constantly, sometimes expanding, sometimes contracting, sometimes coming together, seeping and expanding into each other to create a layered, interlocked and cramped spatial dynamic.

Listening to the operations of the bodily and emotional awareness, Zhou Li manipulates the spatial aspects of the artworks while also revealing their temporal aspects. Unlike the accustomed Western spatial composition method of a window or a frame, Zhou Li's recent works seem to be consciously expanding towards the two ends of the horizon. It is clear to see that her paintings have long ago surpassed the scale of the traditional Chinese handscroll. Zhou Li's horizontally-expanding compositions are more of an embodiment of an abstract aura of bodily motion through time and space. Undefined yet tangible lines grow within a transparent void or tranquil liquid realm, forming waves that converge on high, endless illusory loops drifting through an open, colored yet unnamed space, and coexisting with time.

Zhou Li's creations belong to the realm of subjective constructs. They set out from direct, individual perception, and do not follow the reality or spectacle of the phenomenal world. The painterly and the writerly exist in tandem as she uses multidimensional lines to simulate an abstract cosmos that escapes from physical logic and appearance—beyond a portrait of an individual mindset and expression of emotions, it also awakens living memory. Zhou Li has said herself that remembering her father is one of her main creative motivations. Emotion lies within the body, concrete yet soft. Memory is also connected to this, though with time's passage, it gradually turns into a hazy, indistinct pseudo-abstraction. A series of almost illusory loops resemble transparent channels through space and time which call to mind leaping and traversing—here, memory hesitates, turns back, and struggles to let go. In this regard, Zhou Li's art can be seen as a hybrid writing of individual emotion and memory, almost a self-portrait.

Though the "brushwork" of traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy has been a profound

influence and that it serves as one of the main sources of her sense of beauty in the line, Zhou Li has also liberated the brushwork from its functions of forming words and composing likenesses, and she brought the line back to pure formal art. In bestowing abstract brushwork with shape and space, and with sufficient clarity and spirit, the expression of ideas and emotions, narratives, or a depictive world, and the revelation of the true nature of the universe become important topics.

Never compromising with reality, Zhou Li follows her consciousness, the depths of an invisible other space to illuminate extraordinary scenes and ponder extraordinary realms. Sometimes, the semblances of familiar landscape scenes or people suddenly emerge in her paintings, at once revealing her traditional roots, while also illuminating the depths of her consciousness, and her perceptions of life. The other things viewers perceive in her works are often beyond the phenomenal realm. The linear time and space she creates is also in a state of persistent flow and transmutation, neither fixing a fleeting moment nor presenting the final view.

How can the line as an element of abstract form come together with color while also escaping the confines of formalism? Based on the experience of the development of American Abstract Expressionism in the 20th century, the incorporation of universal themes or eternal symbols is crucial to adding depth in meaning and value to abstract art. In regard to Zhou Li's creations, just as she is establishing the self-contained order of the "line" as form, she must also link the spiritual signifier and signified of this "line" to the inner structure of the artwork itself.

As discussed above, Zhou Li's lines are intimately linked to the brushwork of Chinese calligraphy and painting. Her writing style reflects the brush operations and compositional atmosphere unique to Chinese calligraphy, which sets her work far apart from existing Western styles. This truly is a different path, because Zhou Li's lines rooted in her brushwork are able to freely flow with meaning, expression and sentiment as a function of time.

Not only that, Chinese classical poetics has served as an important aesthetic aide in Zhou Li's art. Aside from providing inspiration, it also enriches her thinking. Zhou Li does not hesitate to point out that *The Twenty-four Categories of Poetry* by Tang dynasty writer Sikong Tu (837–908) has always been a great love of hers. In this text, the author intersperses twenty-four examples of poetry with metaphysical philosophy and visual language to interpret twenty-four abstract types of poetic aesthetic qualities he has defined. Using her own corresponding abstract creations, Zhou Li has created a resonating space for the imagination. This is certainly a unique creative idea.

Though the forms in her works do not possess the shapes of written characters, they do possess the ability of allusion, which gives rise to spiritual associations. For instance, her irregular overlapping curves and circles are like stylized bubbles or cells that evoke life and breath. The imagery also summons playful childhood memories of blowing bubbles. Meanwhile, the reference to "bubbles" also reflects a state of an illusory world, like the Buddhist claims that "All that exists is like a bubble or a flash of lightning. This is how it should be seen".

Zhou Li's transparent shapes are like membranes. They appear prone to popping, but also possess the ability to embrace, protect and nurture life. These curved, circular or bubble structures resemble arrangements of cells as well as nurturers of organic life, and metaphors for the unending cycle of life. Though not consciously so, when you listen to the inner breath of nature, Zhou Li's individual abstract iconography is quite tangible indeed.