

Qiu Shihua – The Image as an Epiphany

Inscribed within the ambivalence of shape and non-shape, image and non-image, Qiu Shihua's (*1940) paintings are literally sensations beyond rational understanding. They reveal themselves solely in the imminent contemplation of a vast perceptual field which persistently eludes conceptual comprehension. At first glance, notwithstanding the figurative elements they contain, these paintings radiate mainly a "void", which Western beholders immediately assimilate with the concept of monochrome paintings; a sterile interpretational context when taking into account that Qiu's works – though representative of a relevant position in contemporary art – position themselves beyond the self-reflective, formalistic concepts of modernism. Here, Frank Stella's pragmatic, yet arrogant motto – "what you see is what you see" – runs idle.

It is characteristic of Qiu's paintings that different beholders generally make out different shapes within the image, while actively perceiving and identifying the motive more or less clearly as such – an astonishing occurrence, even if one considers that perception is an individual phenomenon. Indeed, the extremely cautious articulation of the paintings gradually unravels their pictorial character under the gaze of the beholder, a phenomenon where time plays a key role – not unlike James Turrell's lighting rooms whose pictorial presence only constitutes with time. While Turrell's works require the eyes to adapt to the peculiar light they radiate, Qiu's paintings seem to involve yet another dimension: a contemplative momentum not merely addressing sight. Embedded in the pictorial surface, the motive is not aimed at representation but rather at evoking an essence, something which Roland Barthes, in his melancholic reflections on photography, missed when contemplating the photographs portraying his mother: amidst the numerous petty details he was unable to recognize the beloved being he remembered.

The chemical process of photography provides a cunning metaphor for the perceptual mode induced by Qiu's paintings. The way in which their motives slowly condense to form a picture and take shape in our spirit can be compared to photochemical processing in the dark room. Immersed in a chemical bath, the photosensitive paper progressively reveals the imprint of light captured by the camera; we witness the image surface from the depths of the blank paper and its features become progressively distinguishable until the process is disrupted, whereby the illusion is recorded as a transient representation of the world. Along the lines of this analogy, Qiu's paintings appear to coincide with the intensity and time span of perception in different stages of the constituency or "development" of the image they contain. Untouched by the putative objectivity of photography, their volatility demands the viewer's careful evaluation of his perceptions, presuppositions and speculations. One always faces a highly ephemeral phenomenon; an epiphanic apparition which can hardly be termed unreal nor, for that matter, virtual in contemporary terminology – quite on the contrary.

The paintings' sheer materiality is beyond doubt: the structure of the canvas as well as Qiu's concise technique sustain their reality. There is but the landscape, a motive derived from Chinese painting tradition, to divert our

attention from the contemporary quality of the images. But once the veil of exoticism is shed, one discovers a painterly argument which holds a quite unique fascination for the Western view as well. According to Qiu, his working process grounds on the premise of forgetting about such painterly matters as motive, technique, emotion, thus achieving pure sensuality in the void space from which the image must emerge rather than construct itself. This involves a deliberate Taoist-inspired notion of unintentional practice, best illustrated by an anecdote about the 13th century Zen priest Ch'en Jung. Ch'en is said to have painted clouds and fog by spraying ink and spitting water on his paintings. Then, once he was replete with wine, he would be shouting while brushing his large strokes with his hat. This story echoes the incident related by Leonardo according to which Sandro Botticelli threw a sponge drenched in color on a canvas and subsequently modeled a landscape from the stains. As a matter of fact, the stain in itself is not art, but it can trigger the artistic imagination.

Qiu may not be working according to this recipe but he is nonetheless concerned with the unintentional aspects involved in painting. Provided that one broadens the idea of "stain-art" to encompass French impressionism, a current in painting which he particularly cherishes – and which literally reduced its perception of the world to the level of stains – yet another interpretational layer discloses. Starting with the "tache", impressionist painting builds on the fragmentation of visible reality, a process which dismisses the mimetic rendering of the motive in favor of the evocation of its substance – Qiu's landscapes bear a similar degree of dissolving and substantiation. Still, their materialization is ultimately withheld, as if in the spirit of Caspar David Friedrich, the artist were shutting his "bodily eye" in order to paint straight from the heart. His evocation of romantic spirituality should not be evaluated in historical terms, for it expresses a fundamental attitude still present. Elaborated on the backdrop of abstract painting, Qiu's art acquires a new dimension. In both practices, the image emerges from the practice itself: without reference or ideology. Qiu's paintings confide their meaning through perception and cognition, through contemplation.

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