

## A NIGHT DIALOGUE WITH DEATH - CHEN FEI'S PAINTING

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His heart beat with a metallic sound,  
 One could see how the silver petals of the enormous,  
 Stainless flower slowly opened.  
 I guess I died. -Suehiro Maruo

This is one poem written by the representative figure of Japanese violence aesthetics and heresy cartoonist Suehiro Maruo, who is highly praised by Chen Fei. He even created a painting *To Those I Love-to Suehiro Maruo* to salute him. In the painting, he re-interpreted the cover of Maruo's most famous, freaky and cold comic *Shōjo tsubaki* and changed the shorthaired young girl into a longhaired one. That is Chen Fei's eternal heroine—his girlfriend. The young girl is wearing a dress with yellow dots and holding a parasol. Crows and sparrows are flying and circling around her. The seemingly peaceful and nice picture is somehow decorated with some unharmonious factors: her single blind pack, her messy hair in the wind and the agitated colors...All these make the whole picture covered in a kind of inexplicable horror. This is exactly the same kind of psychological reaction often caused by Maruo's works. Besides, one can see the indistinct influence of Maruo from the heresy taboos and the bad and heavy taste that are often seen in Chen Fei's works. What he also highly praises is the originator of Japanese horror comic—Umezu Kazuo. His visually impactful flat horror depicts weirdness and suspense among squares, let alone the black humor and imagination. It is not difficult to explain why Chen Fei likes him so much.

Besides, Chen Fei is unconsciously influenced and nourished by countless movies that he has been watching since he was a child—from the masterpieces to those cult movies with much bloodshed and Class B movies. This is something he loved as much as painting when he was a child. In order to realize his dream, he even went to Beijing Film Academy. Also out of passionate love, he painted those villains that have impressed him deeply in the movies and finished 202 characters from 197 movies. From *The Clockwork Orange* to *Ichi the Killer*, from *The Shinning* to *Kill Bill*, from *Hard Candy* to *Bride of Chucky*, from *The Untold Story* to all sorts of forms of aliens with lively-reproduced costumes and props. Altogether he painted them for half a year and even wrote a book about these 202 characters—*Biographies of the World Movie Villains*. It is not at all academic or literary as ordinary movie reviews. The whole book adopts a plain language with a sarcastic tone to tell the evil, bloody, deadly and freaky stories of the villains, as relaxed and fun as if he was enumerating his family valuables.

This lightness and black humor in the style are also completely embodied in his paintings. All sorts of scenes about death and even scenes about anatomy seem like some harmless jokes under his brush. For example, his painting *The Rag-picker* deconstructed Pre-Raphaelite painter Millais' *Ophelia* into himself cut open in the water, while his girlfriend uses a stick to poke his internal organs. The other details all copied the original work, which transformed the originally heavy, sad and beautiful work into an absurd but humorous black banquet.

As for the choice of theme, no matter writing or painting, just as Chen Fei said, what gives him deep impression are not those decent people, but the lifelike villains. In his painting, he does the same. He does not like those beautiful and healthy things and will be bored after painting them for a while. Then he will paint those things of bad and heavy taste. Even in the seemingly fresh and nice *Barren Mountain*, which depicts the fairy tale of the Little Red Cap, if you look carefully enough, you will see through the complicated details and find that in the basket of the Little Red Cap, there are carrots, cucumbers and other column-liked things. This will make people evoke a hearty smile. The innocent look of Little Red Cap and the wolf that is on watch for her afar add some weird tension to the picture. Similar sexual suggestion is also shown in *Midsummer Night*. Chen Fei changed the donkey in Shakespeare's original work into a half-naked man with a rabbit head and an arm full of Japanese style tattoos. In front of him lies a soundly asleep maid with short skirt. In the night forest filled with mysterious atmosphere, with all the dreamlike plants and animals, everything is permeated with self-evident yet ambiguous organic atmosphere.

Chen Fei said himself that every time before he paints, he will create a story and then slowly paint it, but he will not tell the plot to anyone. Even if other people misunderstand the story, it will be interesting for him. Just like in *Slight Heat*, for the hand sticking out of the dense branches, different people will have different understandings. I don't know if somebody will think about the movie *Blow-up* directed by the New Wave director Antonioni: a body discovered through zooming in a radiant and enchanting photo taken in the park. Sometimes the attraction of an object often lies in what hides behind it; underneath the esthetical semblance might be death or even decomposition. The zoomed-in truth is always despairing, in fact perhaps you can never find out the truth.

As for the painting *Don't Worry* in which a skeleton gently strokes the hair of a girl sitting in the dark, there is a weird and mysterious feeling revealed from the sad tenderness. Considering Chen Fei likes the Southern Song Dynasty painter Li Song, it is natural to associate him with his rather alternative *Skeleton's Phantasmal Game* in the history of Chinese painting. That painting is weird and mysterious and has been like an enigma for hundreds of years. Similarly, it also integrates the regions of life and death into one painting. In Chen Fei's painting, the silent but penetrating dialogue between the girl and the skeleton has inadvertently surpassed death.

Under Chen Fei's brush, the content in his paintings are all simple things around him. They might be familiar people or details, a simple scene, a classic movie scene, a fairy tale or a painting. With his interpretation, these things are not the same as what we have gotten used to. He uses his strange imagination to add a kind of weird, illusionary and attractive imago to the plain and ordinary things. Meanwhile, this gives people a kind of pleasant sensation similar to peeling off a hypocritical mask. He will never be like some artists who always paint a positive, healthy and bright world with delicate brushwork. Most of his paintings look silent, peaceful and even sweet, but pictures like this display scenes of death. This seemingly sweet atmosphere makes us impassively feel and understand death and violence as if we are hypnotized in this game-like carelessness, which further highlights the cruelty.

In Chen Fei's almost squeamish processing of the picture, even the exposed intestines or other bloody and indelicate things can still be expressed with extremely restrained, clean and sharp lines, as if he could not stand those free and casual lines. His paintings are always carefully and conscientiously done. The pictures look gorgeous and delicate. Those complicated and even mechanic depiction of lines and colors is different from the brushwork and the technique meant for expressing emotions, which we have often seen in many paintings. The application of the super-flat technique, the perfect balance in composition and the almost bigoted harmony of colors have formed a kind of alienation effect-it does not want to make you moved or bring you into a kind of mood; it keeps you at a certain distance, to step back and watch, to accept passively and to admit the existence made possible by that scene.

Similarly, Chen Fei's way of painting determines that his painting is a long and almost boring process demanding lots of patience and perseverance. Every day, going to paint is like going to work on time. After a whole day's work, the painting still looks almost the same as the previous day. This day-in-and-day-out and year-after-year work will be suffering and torture to anyone else. We reckon in the process of each stroke, he can more or less feel the meaninglessness and nihilism. However, after getting through all these, his practice gives rise to the kidnapping of your spiritual world and makes you form a kind of reverence and acceptance of existence, which resemble the Stockholm syndrome. Like hypnosis, you will feel the existence of life and its meaninglessness while accepting this meaninglessness has yielded a meaning.

At the same time, Chen Fei is still on his road and in the long-term process of work and exploration. Just like his painting *Night Walker*, a lonely traveler is walking ceaselessly in the eternal night. The intelligential deer that followed him has been weathered away during the long process of walking. Perhaps the traveler is having some sort of communication or dialogue with the skeleton or death itself and looking for his own direction. Nevertheless, finding it or not does not matter. What's important is he still keeps on marching forward. Although there is possibly endless darkness ahead, in the dark, the starlight of the Milky Way seems to be within reach.