

The Street Light and the Blazing Sun

by Zhang Li

Wang Xingwei has around a dozen artworks from between 2016 and 2018. I will attempt to divide them according to the scorching sun of day, and the evening colors of night. But aside from a few indoor works, there are a few outdoor works that are also quite special, such as *Zhong Lifang and Zhong Liping* (2018), *Unfaithful Lover* (2017) and *Self-Portrait* (2010/2018). These three paintings are all figures painted in a natural, daytime setting. There is ample light, but the sense of light and color are those of Courbet, like indoor lighting. They don't employ indoor lighting techniques, and appear a bit grayer. *Harvest Season* (2017) has a similar palette, calling to mind *Wang Huashang* from 2012, and the 2011 works *untitled (Shidu)* and *Bai Yansong*. The other works all have palettes that are clearly fitted to their own situations.

Classifying the works according to color and lighting is merely for convenience. Wang Xingwei continues to use such techniques as transposition, role-play, exaggeration, quotation, reference, contrast and double meaning to expand the possibilities of painting, and is increasingly drawing individual life experience and the everyday into his works. Under the solo exhibition title *The Code of Physiognomy*, these artworks were linked together with the weighing of people's fates. Amidst widely varying themes, "physiognomy" stands as an implied meaning within portraiture, connected to the various levels of interpersonal relationships and social mores. In a sense, this is a continuation of the previous solo exhibition, *Honor and Disgrace* (2016). When combined with the works relating to this over the past few years, it forms a thread of Wang Xingwei's artworks in a particular stage. The satirical properties of the quadriptych *Four Seasons* (2016/2017) comes from the exaggerated and diagrammatic methods of comics, while the demeanors of the figures, and their surrounding environments, have analogues in Wang Xingwei's other works. The people have avoided and forgotten names and likenesses of these four corrupt officials through a form of tacit agreement, making them almost taboo, in contrast to the flood of critical political cartoons of political figures who fell at the beginning and end of the Cultural Revolution. The principles and techniques of political cartoons appear strikingly out of date in our time. This "artistic" approach has fallen behind, and has few bedfellows today. As far as Wang Xingwei is concerned, this is quite natural. He is continuing his method of using such techniques as exaggeration, comparison and quotation to generate a painting language, which he applies to subjects close to the common people's hearts, such as the shifting sands of destiny and moral judgments. The "elegant" oil painting art of the elite has "fallen" to the level of the prosaic, and "oil comic paintings" have been truly realized. For Wang Xingwei, this is an elevation or an achievement. The cartoon in *untitled (Pan Changjiang)* (2014) appears as a "picture within the picture," in an exploration of the conflicted mentality that exaggerated features elicit in the subject of the painting. *Son of the Beekeeper—The Painter Liao Guohe* (2017-2018) is a direct ode to the destiny of a successful figure. The distortion here is a reverse exaggeration: the normally short Liao Guohe has been made tall, but the logic is the same, which is that one can exaggerate in order to debase, and one can likewise exaggerate in order to praise. *Harvest Season* represents Wang Xingwei's impression of the countryside, an impression which has been shaped to a certain extent by the long-lived northeast Chinese television series *Country Love* as harmonious and prosperous. While the image of the pig has not been exaggerated, its very appearance here has cartoonish qualities.

Themes of marriage, family and child-rearing have also found presentation in multiple artworks in ways linking them to destiny, for example *Harmonious Smiles No. 2* (2014), *Bananas and Pregnant Pears* (2014), and *Old Lady, Xinxin and Xinyi* (2017). These paintings either imitate sculptures in painting in order to capture certain features, combine likenesses of people and objects, or continue the artist's research into mass and simplification. Even when not using cartoons as his formal language, Wang Xingwei still employs diagram and replacement techniques, and continues to seek and evaluate the way fate is revealed through the study of faces, while treating moral judgments and controversies as the material for his artworks. This is a model shared by cartoons. All of the works with portrait properties entail this layer of meaning. *The Balance of the Moral* (2017) uses the slant of a decorative painting on the wall to denote an oppressive atmosphere, while the "picture in picture" is actually Wang Xingwei's 2004 painting *Extortion. Unfaithful Lover* depicts the character Xu Xian from the drama *Legend of the White Snake* in the awkward position of being castigated and attacked by Green Snake. The figure possesses certain traits of a self-portrait, seeming to imply that the artist has "let down" the viewer. Furthermore, the artist playing the unfaithful lover is acting out Adam's hand and pose from Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*. In Wang Xingwei's logic, this is a deeper level of "guilt," one which should be classed alongside Courbet's rebellion against tradition. This theme of "self-criticism" is also used in *Noon Break* (2017-2019). Here, the fat and thin Chinese race traitors who fell over in *Honor and Disgrace* are depicted as artist Ai Weiwei and the painter himself. The two of them had a dispute in 2014 over taking part in, or being excluded from, the exhibition at the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art in commemoration of Hans van Dijk. Satire can be applied to an adversary, as well as to the self. The exaggeration of traits heightens the contrast between fat and thin as the players take a short rest. The Japanese soldiers, also resting, are no longer frenzied or tormented. They strike poses to hide from the scorching noonday sun, seeming almost to inspect themselves to see if they fit Wang Xingwei's demands, as he cares a great deal about their posture, spatial mass and blocking. *Autumn* is an allusion to the tortoise and the hare. Here we see a different outcome from resting, and the fates of the two protagonists are thus changed. The tortoise and the hare are played by an upturned basket, and a resting man and his clothing, respectively. The clouds in the sky foreshadow their fate. *Parting/Enigma of Destiny* (2017) can be seen as a sister work to *The Balance of the Moral*. Objects appear in the picture in pairs, forming contrasts in shape, mass, and color. Aside from the focus on the main figures and their fates, there is double meaning at play. The man's pose can be interpreted as him playing the cello, and though this can be seen as an allusion to male identity, the deeper intention follows the same logical relationship as the replacement of the man and woman's heads with a pitcher and a flower pot in the 2013 work *untitled (watering flowers)*. This transposition is most apparent in *Pengci* (2016). Here, the head of the elderly woman who has fallen down, and the body of the young real estate agent, fit the natural order, but the rest of them are composed from the cartoon technique of using objects that convey their identities, conditions and emotions. The landmark building from Beijing's Wangjing neighborhood, and the baby stroller, show that this incident of feigned injury is an aberration, and that normal society continues to follow the operational model of child-rearing and buying real estate in prime school districts.

This theme of the enigma of destiny shifts to nighttime, just before daybreak, in *Shenyang Night* (2018). Through the arch in the bridge, the mid-century Chinese style roof of the Liaoning

Industrial Exhibition Hall already shows the first traces of dawn, while the TV tower is bathed in a beautiful light. The city is still in the darkness of night, lit by street lights. The figures in the foreground are also lit by streetlights that are not visible. Standing in the middle is the painter thirty years ago as a student. His hands are parted as he holds a partially rolled-up school banner. To the right, two students wearing headbands, one fat and one thin, hold each other up, and clutch the other end of the school banner. The “No U-Turn” sign represents the *China / Avant-Garde Exhibition* held at the National Art Museum of China early that year. An electrical transformer is affixed to the utility pole in place of the street light. The red fire hydrant on the sidewalk mirrors the young Wang Xingwei’s pose. Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts student Feng Xiaoguang sits alone in front of the concrete curb, his brow furrowed. His pose and likeness are drawn from a photograph from that time which has appeared numerous times in the works of painter Qin Qi. This is a setting for group destiny, a turning point for a people in history, a scene that is constantly appearing and being processed in recollection.

The exploration of destiny expanded from the individual to a group or even a generation, and then focused back down to a pair of lovers in *The Encounter of Life* (2018). The painter and his wife encounter each other as they ride self-balancing scooters on a forest path in the rain. The street lights have come on, and cast out a soft light that leaves a long trail on the rain-soaked path. The colorful umbrellas and red-tinted leaves of late autumn create a dreamy sense of romance. Wang Xingwei, famous for his rear view, is sharply dressed and holding a blue umbrella as he rides toward a girl in a purple dress with a pink umbrella. The band of light cast by the street light onto the path divides the two people, but Wang Xingwei is already leaning into his scooter to turn toward Zhong Lifang, his future wife. What the painting did not show, however, is that Zhong Lifang’s pink umbrella would be carried away by Wang Xingwei on his long distance travels a few years later, with the same view from behind, except that the dress shirt and suit pants would be in a 1990s cut in the 1995 work *The Oriental Way*, and the 1996 work *Blind*.

Unlike the imagined scenes in *Noon Break* and *Unfaithful Lover*, the works *Four Seasons*, *Shenyang Night* and *The Encounter of Life* are imitations of reality, reasonable imaginings of past events. The events and settings can be described using any number of models, and presented in various forms. They did not necessarily have to play out in the way they are depicted in these paintings. The focus here is on their outcomes. The outcomes were definitive, and locked the paths that followed. People truly do use the constant construction of “truth” to obtain meaning and thus gain a reason for continued existence. It is just like *VR Experience* (2018), in which Wang Xingwei’s mother-in-law and sister-in-law don VR headsets and are temporarily cut off from reality as they excitedly step into another world. Meanwhile, in a certain sense, the “truth” has never really taken place. All we have is a constant procession of moments of the present. “Reality” can only exist in the mind’s construction of events and in replays in the form of memories. That is to say, the significance of reality lies in the impact it produces. When it takes place, it is virtually blind and arbitrary. This is also why Wang Xingwei is so enamored of Courbet. Courbet only focused on the present. For Wang Xingwei, Courbet’s life and works stand as a starting point or crossroads rooted in reality, one which could lead to Impressionism, with its roots in scientific beliefs, but that is just one of multiple possibilities, not the sole “correct” or inevitable direction. It could also lead to a more essential physical and psychological space. And just like Wang Xingwei’s use of crude, “anti-elegant” techniques from

commercial landscape paintings, graffiti, comics and folk tastes, the true pursuit is for greater room for freedom and possibility in painting.

The reality under Courbet's brush is a firsthand reflection of an individual's sensory and cognitive perception of the world. His opposition to classicalism and romanticism touched on the artist's subjective consciousness and self-awareness. His revolution led toward anarchism, not utopia. This inevitably influenced his opposition to stylization and his active exploration and experimentation in different approaches to painting language. Compared to the scientific and politicized realism that came after, Courbet's realism instead represented the freedom and autonomy of the artist's choices, and his own personality often stood out in front of the "art" of that era. Courbet belongs to that group of painters before the emergence of Impressionism (Honoré Daumier, Camille Corot, Jean-François Millet, Gustave Moreau) who turned themselves into a crossroads: causing art to grow from classicalism and romanticism toward realism and all manner of possibilities, to make a revolutionary progression from the refinement and conservatism of the aristocracy and the new bourgeois toward the coarseness of the masses. To understand Courbet requires these two dimensions, rather than just approaching him from the angles of artistic language and pure form. The next revolutionary who cannot be understood from the artistic dimension alone was Marcel Duchamp. Wang Xingwei already departed from Duchamp's crossroads in 2000 with *Summarization*, and proceeded into Courbet's crossroads in 2003 with *untitled (Stone Breakers)*. He remains there to this day. Looking back today, Courbet's astonishing acts at the time amounted to little in the rapid shifts and constant conceptual progressions of French painting in the latter half of the 19th century, and he was overlooked and forgotten. Many of Courbet's themes were no different from those of the Impressionists, but looking at Courbet through today's eyes makes us uneasy, because our eyes have been trained by the conditional color techniques of Impressionism. Much of Wang Xingwei's "bad taste" painting is aimed at getting people to remove their tinted glasses, and to discover the rich "sound effects" that various languages and forms produce, thus reaching a broader, more exciting space. Here, meaning and value do not exist unconditionally or a priori. Instead, they are bestowed by the painting language, and must land on specific objects and circumstances. Painting language does not have a linear order or pattern. Painters must actively set out to discover, refine and apply it. In form and language, there is no hierarchy of high or low, superior or inferior. They can be placed alongside each other, or interchanged. In their application, the right to bestow the artwork with meaning and value is gained. The artist uses small, specific things, uses the everyday, uses folk wisdom, uses the people and things around them, as well as himself, to construct a "reality" that can be expressed and recognized.

The street light can be rose-tinted romance, or a symbol of mob lynching. The street light is just a street light, and the likeness of the street light can only be expressed in painting.

Translated from Chinese: Jeff Crosby