

I quote, therefore I am

Wang Xingwei's Chameleonic Painting

Wang Xingwei is one of the most peculiar painters I have ever met. His production, although limited in number (a hundred paintings in the last ten years), shows, on the whole, an astonishing variety. A rather enigmatic person, his reflexive silences are often interrupted by spontaneous and generous laughter. Day after day, and with great lucidity, he has built up the recognition which nowadays people accord to him both at home and abroad. He absolutely refuses, however, to allow that recognition to limit his free will or the critical and corrosive vein to his paintings that is always new and constantly exercised afresh, and which allows him to apply, without any limit whatsoever, his free will and a critic and corrosive vein to his painting's always new exercise.

Born and raised in the Chinese region of Dongbei (North-East, also called Manchuria), he has faced, from the very beginning, the academic local tradition of oil painting, which is aimed at obtaining an accomplished technical skill and at building up a personal style, a recognisable cipher which distinguishes every single artist. To this commonly accepted approach, Wang Xingwei opposes a practical critique which has become more and more articulate and assured.

At the beginning of his creative phase, in the first half of the Nineties, even though he knew well that painting was considered a somehow 'by-passed' artistic form in the West, Wang consciously chose to dedicate himself to it. However, his strategy has been to take an oblique approach towards both the technique and the subject, a kind of pictorial meta-language which he has continued to perfect and to develop into a highly sophisticated parallel.

From the very first paintings we can notice that the artist uses both the history of western and local art, especially after-Duchamp, as a main fountain head, and that he conjugates it with autobiographical allusions and political and social questions. It is as if he was re-writing personal and collective history, evoking times and places, placing famous people alongside himself and his family members, widening the already infinite chances painting has to modify reality. In oils like 'Dusting away the romantic male history' (1995) or 'Poor old Hamilton' (1996), the artist reproduces and juxtaposes fragments of artworks by different artists of different times – from Ingres, to Duchamp, to Hamilton... with an ironic nonchalance that is breathtaking. In them, the technique adapts itself to the theme and to the style of the original work, stressing the fact that its semantic relevance cannot be separated from the subject.

On the other side 'The oriental way' (1995) and 'Blind' refer to episodes of the recent history of the People's Republic, where the social function attributed to painting by the regime, with its heavy load of rigid and univocal symbolism, has negated the freedom of creativity that art requires, provoking thus situations very similar to those of the 'degenerated art' in Nazi Germany.

Nowadays the artist considers the paintings of that period too explicit, filled with quotations which, although refined, are quite easy to recognise for a careful and cultivated reader. In those works the painter is now aware of having followed, although in a personal way, the same method of the 'mass-code' applied by socialist realism: even though the meaning he wants to convey is here decided individually by himself. While the juxtapositions are daring and fresh, the viewer is carefully guided to a reading which is univocal. So doing, the artwork is deprived of that aura of 'undefined', 'secret', 'unsaid' which should be its primary characteristic.

And it is exactly that connotation of 'unsaid' which stimulates Wang, tickles him and pushes him to continue his research, moving on in the culturally stratified field of art history, and mixing it with actuality and autobiography. The references used are now chosen from a much wider source, and therefore less immediately recognisable.

As time goes on, the artist builds up a system of quotations which refer to his own works. We discover then that an installation dating to the year 2002, made of the neon writing 'Et in Arcadia ego', which has been hung on the façade of a museum in Suzhou, has been preceded by an oil painted in 1996. On a background with a landscape in the Poussin style, there is a male figure who discovers on a ruin the words 'IN ARCADIA'. The same male – tall and slender – appears in many other paintings, and loosely resembles the painter himself. In this case the Latin quotation, which may appear quite familiar to a European, is totally cryptic for a Chinese viewer, and the artist admits that even for himself it retains a purely literary connotation, as it lacks the familiarity he feels for other subjects, nearer in time and space.

One of the most disconcerting characteristics of Wang Xingwei's pictorial production is the total lack of an aesthetic norm. When asked about it, he vaguely answered that he "likes best paintings with strong colours". On the other side his use of colour is very far from the traditional concept of harmony: the chromatic juxtapositions are often daring, or they are previously decided following laws fixed by the artist. In this way he strengthens once more his total freedom to subvert as he feels like it, and to question radically both technique and content. He requests the viewer to apply a continuous and immediate visual gymnastic. Moreover, the canons he chooses are sometimes modified within the same painting. In this way he avoids appearing obvious or univocal.

From 2003 onwards the artist enjoys himself with a rather unusual support; he uses prefabricated undulated panels. The waves of the background modify or reinforce the subjects, distorting the perspective and forcing the artist to keep this in mind and to correct it. His 'Football ground' (2003), made of a homogeneous green background on which he has traced the borderlines of the playing areas, is by itself an example of non-painting in its technical simplicity, but the three-dimensional support suggests movement even in such a still geometry.

Wang Xingwei's way of proceeding is becoming more and more complex and articulate like in some mathematic system of variations on a theme: even within a pictorial series, for instance, the relations between the different

paintings are not so clear, rather they work with different references (the use of a special colour, i.e. green, or the existence of analogies amongst the subjects, like the penguin and the panda,...) which link two or more paintings. Even though he has never painted anything abstract, and he perceives abstraction as something strange to him, the artist in reality is probably closer to it than others. His interpretation of figuration is now so far from its narrative function, while on the other side it never really acknowledged the aesthetic one.

We can say that subjects and techniques, colours and images, are deprived of their original meaning and re-dressed with different functions, which are not fixed by the artist, but left, like in a never-ending rebus, for individual interpretation. The viewer can enjoy figuring out all the layers of intellectual complexity and obscure quotations, or feel content with an uncommon or audaciously tautological visual feeling.

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