

The conditions of being spotless — about Zhang Xuerui's recent works
Text/ Xu Sheng

Zhang Xuerui's works make me think of a sentence describing silent people: "All the happiness and the sadness of the world rise from her like dust, and she remains spotless." In the contemporary art scene, ambitions for the future come from one side, and nostalgia for the past from another. Everyone is looking for a safe place, but few can remain who they were when they did. Zhang Xuerui fits a solo, as she always talks to herself. It can be seen as brave, or as meaningless. All the critics like to put their own standards onto the artists, and eventually simplify them as "good" or "not good". And Zhang Xuerui doesn't work for other people's conclusions, but for herself. This choice has been made after she has known, understood, and experienced all the actual connections that may be there between the future, the history and herself.

The words above seem to be the most feasible compliment to any artists who "have their own individualities", but they actually have particular meanings. In order to talk about Zhang's works more clearly, it's necessary to review briefly a history of the influence made by outer critics and values onto the artists. When artists were still "craftsmen", like the masters of the Renaissance or the masters of Chinese Buddhist frescos and sculptures, their works were decided by outer values, for example religions. Later, as civilizations moved on, human had developed further in culture, economy, society and individual liberty, so the early modernist movement began in China of the Song Dynasty. Along with the development of the "Philosophy of the Mind" and the "Philosophy of the Rule (Neo-Confucianism)", artists of the Song Dynasty had firstly become "literati", or "independent intellectuals with free mind". Their arts were then no long serving any outer purposes, but representing their own inner world. In Europe, this kind of arts first appeared also during the Modernist movements, for example the works of Manet or Cezanne, but only about 1000 years later. In these situations, artist decided their own works. Based on this, in China of the Ming Dynasty, and in Europe of the 20th century, art critics became more and more professional. Today in China, many audience understand "art history" as an equal to "art critic", but "art critic" is far more than that.

Along with the trend of postmodernism, literature and art critics became active with a new tendency, which could be traced to Stanley Edgar Hyman's "The Armed Vision" (1948), and Rene Wellek and Austin Warren's "Theory of Literature" (1949). They have emphasized the importance of methodology: textual, social, structural, psychoanalytic...etc. All the critics written by the critics, have usually been accepted or refused based on the contents. However, no matter what their contents are, the most important thing is the methods of the critics. In the post-modern context, when different methods stand facing each other, all phenomenons of literature, visual art, music, as well as those of society, politic, and history, have all become instruments of these methods. And every method can demonstrate their reason and power using their critic cases. Today, it's not important whether these methods are "just", as they have all stimulated the contemporary culture for a long time since the WWII.

However, the eventual result that can be seen today is that, the methodologies themselves have overwhelmed the contents and become representatives of different opinions, values, academic authorities, and, for contemporary arts, the trend of the markets. The critics and art theories are no more in an equal position with the arts, but stand in a higher position. Contemporary artists are now in a general deadlock: they find themselves a tool of the critics, they have to choose and be guided by a theory or another. They barely have the courage to resist the "armed vision" based on histories, realities, and philosophies. The "individualities" or "freedom" of the artists are usually educated by theories. They have the "individuality" of "Foucaults" or "Derridas", instead of their own. The artists have to question again and again their "gestures" or "attitudes": are they really based on their own experience of life, or just following the existing powers? All the readers of art critics today should also reflect their own purpose: are they expecting to re-experience the artworks through the path of the words, or are they hoping to see spectacular theories which can eventually imply the potential prices of the artworks?

The methodology of Zhang Xuerui's works are quite clear: to control the subtle gradual change of colors. The difficult part is how to control it. From color modulation to the control of brush, and the lights, and eventually the perception of the eyes. She needs many years of experiences to know and to complete this process. After this, she will arrange the positions of the squares in different rhythms. In her completed works, the overall rhythms are more "visible" than the gradual changes between every square. The most difficult and "technique oriented" part of the paintings are not highlighted at all, but buried in the arrangement which is based on empathy of the vision itself, so no spectacles happen in her paintings. That's how a proper temperament and grace can be found in her works. When she reaches the empathy of human perceptions, she won't decorate her works with big theories or concerns about society or politics, because she is experiencing all these like anyone else. What she chooses to do is to look after this experience in her own way.

Like all genuine things, this kind of temperament is hard to be seen or perceived. The critics are not designed to find such things, but to find shocking forms or concepts. The fundamental reason is that, critics are lost in the capitalist world of the 21st century. It's not that they are chasing the capital's benefit on purpose, but that they have been influenced unintentionally by the logic of the capitalism: they also try to interpretate artworks in a fast, efficient, pragmatic way which is easy for the circulations. This unintentional compliance is more dangerous. They changed the way of seeing artworks, as everyone hopes to find a quick answer from any piece of work, just as when they are in front of any kind of articles of consumption. As a result, the arts are often acting like a circus, trying everything to attract attentions. However, the rules of the art have never obeyed the logic of the capitalism. They have only been covered and waiting for a rediscovery.

Zhang Xuerui's works have always been in this rule. For her, it's not even a choice about aesthetics, moral, or values, it's going without saying or reasons. Measured by the highest standard, her works are just in the beginning, but what's important is that she has kept herself in the path to that standard. She puts her efforts in those insignificant parts, seeing them producing a kind of influence which is weak and beyond expressions. This influence is like a radio with long waves, hard to be received but piercing all obstacles. Just like Schopenhauer said in his "On judgment, criticism and fame", all the best artworks are not accepted by the popular rules. And it's even hard for them to deny the popular ideas, as these ideas are so reasonable and adorable, connected strictly to the time. These artworks have to question themselves, until they find a way and place, which are far from the society and the reason, to be what they are. This kind of arts don't belong to those stories telling how a genius become famous after being neglected for a long time, because that kind of stories are just part of marketings today. These kind of arts never feel themselves neglected, on the contrary, they feel happy all the way in a different space and time. They are not misanthropic either, that's why they can be spotless.

Now the delicate changes in Zhang's works can be seen and felt in a proper background. The works are not totally from her inner world, from example, the choices of colors, and the arrangements of squares are from existing patterns. They are pure and simple in an industrial way, which can be seen as quotations from her daily experiences. The gradual changes of colors — instead of the colors as themselves — become the actual beings on the canvas. Her perceptions are not connected to any particular squares, nor to any particular touches or patterns, but to the comparisons and relations of them all. Her works are not expressive in any sense, instead, she blend herself into the canvas without narratives. And the silence of the canvas is inevitable.

This integration of the painter into the canvas is on the perceptual level, without any tendency of productions of knowledges or concepts on the intellectual level. Although her works can be easily classified to the category of abstraction, but in fact, her works have nothing to do with the development and evolution of abstractive paintings since the 20th century. Her works stand closer to the path of "representation", only the represented objectives are her inner feelings through the arrangement of colors and structures. She has abandoned the brush touches and narratives. And with programmed procedures, she simplifies the painting process to the most subtle levels of visual perceptions. Doing this, she has also abandoned creations on the stylistic level, and turning the paintings into extensions of her visual feelings. Experiences

ings. Experiences are needed to see her paintings, just as the necessary experiences to see the Chinese classical paintings: to realize how to feel what the painters feel. Or maybe no particular experience is needed, as long as the audience can be as thoroughly silent as her, to realize the inner rhythm of life which is inherent but forgotten in modern lives.

Entering Zhang Xuerui's particular rhythm, the audience will be touched just as when reading a classical poem which hasn't been seen for ages, or when hearing a long forgotten song. Even it's only a moment, the beauty and grace of the arts and the world can be remembered again. If a summary is needed, then Zhang's works are not about creating anything, but about reminding everyone the path of the arts and how hard it is to walk on it. Her works come from the love and awe for the arts and the life. The arts of any time could be contemporary, as long as the artists have confirmed their own feelings and lives at their particular moments.