

Feng Fang: Chinese Academic Imagery Painting at the Crossroads

Since the 1985 New Wave Movement, Chinese contemporary art has witnessed thirty years' growth. As one of the most important cultural phenomena after the reform and opening campaign, Chinese contemporary art has developed from a marginal school to a major art trend. During this period, various genres contributed to the prosperity of contemporary art, and the academic school is the most significant one, with its remarkable achievements and praise from all parties.

In China, the relationship between academy and contemporary art has long history. Chinese academies were established in the trend of the modernization of society. The first modern academy was the Imperial University of Peking, the predecessor of Peking University. Founded in 1898, it demolished the outdated conventions and customs and welcomed the new waves. Today Chinese academic education continues this tradition of innovation, particularly the academic art education.

In recent years, academy and contemporary art are hot issues and receive continuous concerns. The academic education's mission of revolution and innovation conform to the spirit of subversion in contemporary artistic creation. The deans, vice deans and department directors of major Chinese art academies are also important artists and theorists. Under this circumstance, the connection, integration and interdependence between academies and contemporary art are ever closer. Contemporary art adds a lot to the openness, diversity, inclusiveness and innovation of academic education. For instance, China Central Academy of Fine Arts and Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts successively set up their school of Experimental Art. We also have China Academy of Art's School of Inter Media Art, Sichuan Fine Arts Institute's Movie and Video Art Department, together with Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts' School of Contemporary Art. In different ways, those academies carry on their education of contemporary art, achieving abundant harvest in experimental art and synthetic art. Apart from education, many academies have established their galleries to promote the outstanding contemporary artists (teachers and students cultivated by academies) to more audiences via holding contemporary art exhibition and annual academic exhibition open to the public. On one hand, Chinese art academies foster key artists. On the other hand, with the help of academies' excellent environment of art creation, those academic artists gather to be an active creation group with high equalities, wide horizons and humanistic concerns.

Except for art academies, film and theatre academies, as visual art education institutions with academic specialty, also fostered numerous important contemporary visual artists. For example, Beijing Film Academy developed Ai Weiwei, while Shanghai Theatre Academy fostered Cai Guo-Qiang. Today, with the diversification of art forms, more and more artists make art through multimedia. Many excellent artists, such as Ai Weiwei, Cai Guo-Qiang, Tan Dun and Shen Wei, graduate from art academies and make art via special media such as directing, stage, music or dance. They develop their

special artistic style different from other contemporary artists. Tan Dun's work *NU SHU: The Secret Songs of Women* were widely recognized at the opening ceremony of the 56th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia. Moreover, Shen Wei's solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art integrated the interaction between drawing and dance, winning international recognition.

Looking back over the past thirty years, we can find that the academic education of contemporary art grows up from nothing and gradually develops to be dominant. Among various contemporary academic schools, the imagery painting, with its spirit of "Chinese memory and contemporary representation," is one of the most remarkable genre. Its spirit of Chinese memory is represented in contemporary works created by all kinds of media. In other words, an oriental sentiment and the personal expression of artists become an internal part of contemporary Chinese paintings, decorations, sculptures, behaviors, multimedia and other art forms.

Chinese contemporary imagery painting has integrated the concrete and the abstract as well as the imagery and cultural motif. Imagery stresses the personal expression of artistic spirits, artistic concepts, the perspectives of observation and the exploration of forms. In the current background of contemporary art, imagery is more a reasonable language and the cultural reference internalized in the works' structures. Furthermore, it echoes the main development trend of Chinese art history, in which the expression of both subject and artist is an integral part in painting, calligraphy, architecture, literature or even movie. Art has always been encouraged to go beyond just the "appearance of forms" in order to express the ideas and cultivation of the artist.

Shang Yang's works trace back to the Chinese paintings' motif in the medieval period, when artists integrated human beings with nature in their paintings. Mr. Shang tries to show in this way his reaction and answer to the alienation of natural and cultural landscape in modern society.

Tan Ping's works show his personal state of minds via abstract painting elements such as dots, lines and surfaces, representing the "abstraction of nature" (qtd. Yin Shuangxi). He synthesizes abstract elements so that all in mind and nature can be rendered with brush and ink. The authenticity of nature and the feelings that nature arouses in his mind become alive in his works.

Zhang Fangbai's works have massive visual impacts, reminding audiences of traditional Chinese artists Shi Tao and Pan Tianshou's imagery works. At the same time, their contemporary elements are also important.

The crane is the imagery that recur in Feng Fang's works. He is an expert of utilizing materials, especially the synthetic materials, with which he always creates works with great tension and imagery.

All the works of above-mentioned contemporary Chinese academic imagery artists create an artistic atmosphere of oriental imagination.