

## Nature in the Works of Li Huayi

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The highest pursuit of Chinese classic culture embodies a perfect combination of nature and personal temperament. Thus Chinese artists are obsessed with delivering the incredible charm between “likeness and unlikeness”. This is also the lifetime pursuit of Chinese artist Li Huayi, who has been living in San Francisco for decades, away from the Chinese art world. As I recall, during the interview of “Arts China”, the TV program, the usually introverted Li turned to be very talkative with his unique perspective, “The Western arts, brilliant and bright as the sun, tend to excite the audience with their shocking power. On the contrary, ink wash paintings will appease the audience just as delicately as the moonlight does; they afford a gentle power of meditation, a source of justice. The two arts provide differing forms of enjoyment. The Chinese ink wash painting represents an Oriental lifestyle that is elegant and natural.” The “Song-style landscape painting” featuring typical Oriental aesthetics of grandeur, solemnness, majesty, and elegance is the sacred artistic peak in the heart of Li; meantime, his contemporary way of thinking and temperament that displayed in his artworks have contributed to the originality of him as a painting master worldwide. Hence, he has to be considered as a contemporary artist instead of a traditional ink painting artist.

As the destructive influence of the global financial crisis decreases, and the smooth navigation of China’s economy and society in particular, to build a new image for contemporary China has become a common pursuit in the Chinese art community. Either to trace back to the Chinese cultural resource in tradition, or to strive to transform from “made-in-China” to “created-in-China” have manifested the fact that the new generation elites in China are now in deep thinking over cultural independence and innovation. Chinese contemporary art as a significant emerging force advocating “Cultural Enlightenment” in the 80s, and the most direct and incisive mirror image of contemporary social change, has also transformed its effort from responding to serious historic reality and making equal dialogue with the Western world to reviving and continually carrying on the traditional spirit of art, as well as building a new artistic order. In the past three decades, in witnessing the ups-and-downs of contemporary China and due to the tradition of practicing Realism Art, the most outstanding artists have, with a variety of artistic languages and forms, met challenges with force on the theme of “confronting reality” for the most time. They are brewing more fresh ideas and energy – in which we firmly believe, because a culture of excellence derives from a rich and energetic social reality. Contemporary China is full of numerous unsung “miracles”; however, we should never neglect

another artistic direction with equal historical and academic value as the “Review of Tradition”, which since the second half of the 20th century, has been hidden under the shadow of China's development featuring politicalization, commercialization, conceptualization, and entertainment dominance.

In fact, there are plenty of artists working in this direction. They are either habitually absent from the mainstream view, and are content with entertaining themselves, or standing at the forefront of Chinese society, confronting the facts, speaking in a straightforward manner, turning to thoughts on carrying on the tradition, looking for breakthroughs, and reshaping the Chinese cultural spirit, or have determinedly transformed from successful geniuses and stars to hermits mixing in with the crowd.... They may choose the beloved objective world directly as the subject of representation, or gain nourishment from the great thoughts of respectable former masters, or ponder contemporary society in a natural state. But they never forget to reflect on the contemporary human spirit, and adhere to innovation in solitude and silence, with multiple contemporary artistic languages such as painting, sculpture, installation and video to make painstaking explorations. It is all the more precious against the current era of being “unnatural” and “non-natural”. More importantly, this kind of thinking is gradually inspiring people's views and cultural perspectives. There seems to be an increasing tendency among us to get close to nature, review the classic works, and discover “contemporary” spiritual temperament and living concepts in ancient relics and legacies. For example, the terra cotta figurines in the Qin and Han dynasties, utensils and decorations in the prosperous Tang dynasty, landscape ink paintings in the Northern and Southern Song dynasty, as well as Ming-style furniture, etc. Contemporary society invariably falls in love with traditional Chinese aesthetic beauty, and is likely to incorporate it into daily lives. It seems that the artists' practices are providing an extremely significant and brand-new thought for a “Cultural Renaissance” – a theme on the inheritance of Chinese traditional culture and progression of contemporary culture.

Li Huayi is also an outstanding artist in this direction. He has intensely studied from a Chinese ink painting artist in his early years, which has provided him with well-grounded knowledge and skills; he has also drilled in Western painting, especially during the time when living in the United States he has attained a close bond with the development of contemporary Western art. His works draw constant inspirations from Song landscape painting, but boldly break the old artistic forms. As a result, while keeping the classic temperament of the heyday of Chinese classic ink painting, his work also bears contemporary Chinese aesthetic consciousness. For more than ten years, Li's representative works have been collected by many world renowned museums, artistic institutions and individuals, and are widely recognized by the academic world. However, as Li is not a very productive artist, and his artistic

concept and style does not follow popular culture, few of his works have been exhibited in China.

The Beijing Center for the Arts has paid close attention to Li Huayi for several years, and after more than half a year of painstaking preparations, the two exhibitions – “Images of the Mind: The Ink Painting of Li Huayi” shown at the National Art Museum of China and “Beyond Representation: Li Huayi’s New Art” presented by the Beijing Center for the Arts – are committed to bring to light an artist who has devoted many years to focusing on his works and to pondering the contemporary transformation of traditional spirit. The former exhibition will gather nearly thirty pieces of fine representative artwork from many significant world collectors; while the latter will stage some of his latest artistic creation. We hope that the two exhibitions would offer inspiration to the “contemporaneity” of Chinese art world and favor its future development.

We should say that such an inspiration is closely linked with Li Huayi’s daily life, creation status, artistic concept and the “nature” reflected in his works. On the surface, Li still selects natural objects that often utilized by the antecessors. In addition to his sophisticated style of representation, it reminds people of classic works which share similar characteristics. However, when you take a closer look, you’ll find the position of the landscape, trees, clouds, stones, etc. in his works reveal something “unnatural” and “alienated”, creating a strong sense of distance and visual shock, which apparently reflects a perspective of contemporary people. Speaking of artistic style, even though Li, like most of his friends, loves the convenience and vitality of the contemporary world, he still constantly pursues the natural casualty of being “natural and clear” in his life and works. Li’s works are never aggressive, but they allow people to comprehend the rapidly changing world in a peaceful manner, as if they are far away from the daily hustle and bustle. One thing particularly interesting is that no one who has ever met Li believes he is over 60 years old, which may give credit to his humbleness and diligence. Li never follows a stereotypical routine, but instead perpetually seeks innovation based on profound knowledge and experience. We are so deeply impressed by this willful but charming artist. Because of his long years of experience abroad, he came to understand the changes of world contemporary art history earlier and much more than his Chinese counterparts of the same age or even younger. He often gets excited about profound classic culture in European countries, he is involuntarily surrounded by the dazzling postmodernism waves, and he travels frequently to absorb the excellent qualities in Indian or Japanese cultures; yet he is still able to return to his world of ink painting in calm and relaxation, and work for his lifetime pursuits. We firmly believe his natural state of respecting culture, setting foot in the contemporary world, and his ability to combine the best of both ancient and contemporary Eastern and Western arts is the best indicator for the restless and tangled contemporary Chinese art

world.

Some people wonder what direction Chinese contemporary art is heading. What kind of tradition should we revive to create a prosperous scenario for contemporary Chinese culture? In fact, we need to look back to have a clear view of history. The supreme level of art is never to express freedom but to express freely. Therefore, we don't have to waste our time to find a correct answer. The only thing that never changes in China is the phenomenon of change itself. That the traditional artistic attitude of "heaven-human-in-one" and "forget the existence of both the object and self" has departed from contemporary society. We seem to go further away from "nature" and get too tense and nervous on the journey to see the path in front of us. What's more, nature also appears anxious, as a warning. The earthquakes in Wenchuan, China and Haiti, drought in southwest China, volcanic eruption in Iceland, flood in Australia, and tsunami in Japan..., human beings have been continuously punished after damaging our own living environment. Therefore, while praying for the deceased, it is time for us to take a moment to calm down. In peace, we shall not deny the past blindly, or envision the future unrealistically. What we should do is to feel and think with our hearts based on reality. Since its opening till now, the Beijing Center for the Arts has been paying attention to nature and environmental protection, and particularly, dedicating itself to making the great contemporary art an important driving factor to the advancement of society. If we are compelled to accept the complicated and changeable reality, then our lifetime efforts shall be devoted to seeking out a natural and free spiritual world with the wings of the arts.