

Nature exists, hence so does he

By Tang Jing

“We exist because of nature.”(from Martin Heidegger’s “What are Poets For”) is an abridgement of the beginning of a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke to present the structure of the poem which, as Heidegger put it, set “the existence of human beings” on the table. Of course, here I am not going to discuss the pure rationalism of the poetics, but to exclaim the stunning similarity between the Western and Eastern philosophical view towards the relationship between nature and humanity. And Xue Song, an artist deeply connected with nature, has fully interpreted the contemporary philosophy of nature by his unique way of life and artistic practices.

On first viewing Xue Song’s oil painting, for most people it is love at first sight; you will be amazed by its magic ability of fitting-everywhere. The painting seems like an old acquaintance, whom you aren’t really familiar with but still feel like a long-lost friend. I’d love to attribute this natural aura of Xue Song’s oil painting to a combination of both passion and subtlety, classic and modern that hide behind its pure representation and profound artistic concept. One might wonder: what kind of artist is he? The answer is: nature exists, hence so does he.

Learning from Nature

Born in 1962, Chongqing, Xue Song was brought up in a good household, with highly educated parents. Despite his love of oil painting for more than 40 years, Xue Song received an education in traditional Chinese culture and art. As a young man, he studied under Chen Manman, a master of traditional Chinese painting, (also known as a colleague of Huang Binhong) to copy landscapes in Jie Zi Yuan Hua Pu (a painting album of the garden of mustard). After years of practice, he gradually formed his own painting style, becoming fond of landscape sketching based around animals, plants, mountains and stones. In 1985, he attended the Chongqing Fine Arts School, learning western painting methods and techniques, sketching and body sculpturing. His studies in Chongqing would have an important influence on his future style of monochrome painting. After graduation, Xue Song engaged in art education. Apparently, adding to his distinct fondness of nature, it has been his acceptance of distinguished aesthetic values towards the nature of eastern and western art that has shaped his unique style of painting.

On one hand, if we take a look at the content of his paintings, most of his subjects, like dogs, fish, horses, pigs, or landscapes, come from our daily lives. However, the artist has endowed them with

distinguished characteristics such as of pride, happiness, introvertedness, jumpiness, or stubbornness while still being imperceptibly influenced by the passing time. This is what is known as "the style is the man". On the other hand, from a technical standpoint, his methods of painting and creation have masterfully integrated traditional Chinese painting and modern oil painting: neither does he apply oil to express the essences of traditional themes, nor reinforce classic concepts with modern knowledge. On the contrary, Xue Song unveils the abstract nature of painting, picking up emotion and spirit as his way of expression. Similar to the impact that instinct and spontaneity have on Happening Art and Action Painting, Xue Song first dots on the canvas with blots of paint, and then improvises to portray and design according to the current compositions of oil. As a result, the substances under his brushwork always look vivid and full of life, full of vitality and profundity. With respect to tones, Xue Song has inherited the tradition of classifying ink into five different shades, taking black and gray as his own style. Even patches of red, though seldom appearing in his paintings, are consistently subdued so as to emphasize of the tones of gray and pursue a sober and harmonious balance. Moreover, by sustaining the linear elegance and flexibility of traditional painting, he has broken through the sense of discursiveness, emphasizing a sense of depth presented in western painting. With respect to aura creation, he is, alike Ma Yuan, one of the four masters of southern Song dynasty in the field of painting, combining romance and elegance, and Chinese traditions of connotation and meditation together with emphasis on condensation, depth, structure and sense of quality.

Therefore, it's fair to say that the dedication of Xue Song's artistic creation over the years is to present "nature" in a natural manner

Naturally...

Painting for me is just a habit, something to amuse myself.

--Xue Song

Strictly speaking, Xue Song can not be categorized as a normal "artist". His practice of painting is nothing more than an attached complex from childhood; a persistent ambition; and an unrestrained style of living. Just like a man on a journey who would sojourn on his way for a cup of strong Italian coffee, painting is Xue Song's way of expression and communication whenever his emotions strike.

Although he is both peer and friend to numerous well-known "big shots" in artists circles; and younger than the intellectuals of the late 1970s, Xue Song has, together with all of them, explored

culture between the east and the west, and researched the traditional philosophies of Zen Buddhism, Daoism and so on. Xue Song has consistently sustained the deep social responsibility of his generation. However, he has refused to follow the trends of the day— the criticism of Scar Art, a straightforward realist style, the cynicism of Pop Art, uniqueness featuring some modernism, and the latter prevailing of post-modernism which show the superiority of concept -- but rather established his own way of internalizing art into a natural way of life. He has cast away the theme of asceticism and paradise in traditional art painting, advocating the renaissance of the air of detachment and romance that belong to the Wei and Jin period. Nevertheless, the artist is by no means wearing a classic suit that fits neither him nor the occasion. In any case, for a work (or an artist) that stands the test of time and is appreciated by people from all walks of life, who could dare to denigrate it (or him/her) as being shallow-minded? In fact, the real profundity of a man is one that can truly arouse the deep emotions of his audience.

The series of “Garden Rocks” is the rewarding result of the Xue Song’s internalization of art. Mountain and stone, as classic and timeless art images, have conveyed not only their inherent features of toughness and pliability, but also more of a sense of chaos and the ambiguousness of the universe. The mumbling-like images unconsciously reveal the realities in sight of the artist; and the obscure aura, full of changes and magic, reflects the evolution of human society. Therefore, I would prefer to define the state of Xue Song’s art as being that of nature resulting from a relaxed life, rather than an artificial construction of art. Confronting messy contemporary art, shouldn’t this warrant our reflection?

Xue Song’s admiration towards geniuses in the entire world and all throughout history is known among those who are familiar with him. Some geniuses such as Tao Yuanming could remain calm and rational when facing ups and downs; some would release their passion for art creation before sobering up; and some have inherited Zheng Banqiao’s connotation of " where ignorance is bliss, it's folly to be wise ". What’s more, irrespective of the secular restriction of their times, all of these artists have led normal lives as ordinary people. The legend-like status they have achieved were merely supplements to their lives, imposing no influence on their attitudes towards life and art. I do not, of course, propose to deny the achievements of the artistic elites of our time. It is simply that time has always stopped in front of geniuses who have struggled with the secular world to pursue unrestrained lives. If Xue Song makes his own way, I think it is because he has truly comprehended the essence of art and life.