

THE LANDSCAPE PAINTING OF SHANG YANG

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The first time I met Shang Yang was in 1996. I went to his studio located at the South China Normal University in Guangzhou to select some artworks for the Chinese Art Exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, which I was planning and organizing. Guangzhou of the 90's was a city immersed in the excitement and impulsive passions stimulated by the growing economy. However, in the moment I viewed his Great Landscape series, I fell into a meditative state while becoming profoundly detached from mundane life. On the canvas traditional landscapes were deconstructed into elements reorganized by the artist – the intricacy of details dimly visible in the giant silhouette-like geometric structures generating an effect of violence and exclusiveness that shocked the visual senses. Primitive natural patterns composed of extracted shapes, lines and monotonous tones expanded the nature of temporal distance while drifting symbols of modern architecture, daily objects, doctor's uniforms, and X-rays questioned the environmental surrounds of our lives. The stillness before eruption presented in the volcano-like mountains expressed an awareness of the collapse of our living environment and culture. Shang Yang's landscapes were not a copy of the real natural existence; he involved these elements into the cultural illustration and reformation of our reality.

The official replacement of portraiture with landscape as the major painting form in the Song dynasty was directly linked to the political and cultural transformation of the time. The emerging social class consisted of the intellectuals who had required an arena where they could develop ethical dialogues with their surroundings, thereby avoiding oppression from the social hierarchy. The landscape was just the form they needed as it was not man-made, but provided by Nature. Song dynasty painting could be based on aesthetics and ethics, not decoration, and used as a means to pursue and create a new culture, history and economy.

The recent landscape series of Shang Yang is attempting to find a more suitable visual form to convey his concern of social and cultural issues. Rather than painting, Shang Yang has said he tends to spend more time probing the issues of society, culture, nature, and our living environment, which explains the profundity of his work. A good example is the "Dong Qichang Project" series, created in 2003 at the same time the whole nation was unexpectedly struck by SARS. In this series, the artist has endowed the landscape with an active cultural behavior that fervently participates in social interpretation. Dong

Qichang, of the Ming dynasty, had established the rules and principles of painting forms for the later literati landscape paintings. He deconstructed the heritages absorbed from historical achievements and re-organized the pieces by adding abstract elements. The mountains and stones of his paintings had regained their fundamental shapes and structures, resulting in a sense of modernity even from today's viewpoint. The "Dong Qichang Project", for me, has reflected Shang Yang's meditation on the arising instinct of survival for a modern people when life was threatened by the SARS epidemic; his concern of the degeneration of our living environment; and his appeal to address the crisis.

To paraphrase W.J.T. Mitchell's viewpoint: we should consider the landscape as a verb, not a noun, and as such Shang Yang's paintings stand not as a process of visual enjoyment, but as a construction of his society. The meaning of his landscapes functions as a reflection on a cultural behavior that demands our attention. Landscapes as a cultural media have naturalized the constructions of culture and society, presenting a world inevitably affected by human behaviors, while retaining the ability to illustrate human interventions. Shang Yang's landscape always welcomes and embraces us in a certain space or atmosphere, even if in response we sometimes feel lost, or otherwise removed from it.

In Shang Yang's painting, the landscape is applied as a media of mobility. Despite our existence and movement within it, his landscape is itself involved in a spatial and temporal transformation. It is not only a space for visual transmission, but also a juncture for the process of conforming cultural rights and identities.