

Xue Song

In the earliest days, when he was a little baby too young to have any memories and ability to turn over his body, he would lie on his back and facing upwards all day long, staring at the water mark on the ceiling. He had nothing to do, but repeatedly investigated into the mark, a little “landscape”, which is bizarre, motley, and ever changing; and it seems that all that he was to see in the future was contained in this little water mark.

Many years later, he would stand before the canvas, giving the first brushes taking the shape of a patch of water on the canvas—unlike that which was made before, nor that which was to be made later. What it was to become? A rabbit or a duck? Black or white? All of these, he did not know yet. He looked carefully at this vigorous “leakage patch”. Now, he was in his forties, but was somehow excited as if he returned to childhood—yes, it was the feeling of amusement when he was playing a game.

“He was also a magician. He walked with great strides through the fields, looking at the sky and waving his arms. He commanded the clouds. He wished them to go to the right, but they went to the left. Then he would abuse them, and repeat his command. He would watch them out of the corner of his eye, and his heart would beat as he looked to see if there was not at least a little one which would obey him. But they went on calmly moving to the left. Then he would stamp his foot, and threaten them with his stick, and angrily order them to go to the left; and this time, in truth, they obeyed him. He was happy and proud of his power.....” (from Jean-Christophe)

He is always a veteran in playing games, patient and temperate. Composed of wayward lines, the colors on the canvas appear to be gradually dispersed, now rich and varied as rosy clouds that are rising slowly, now resembling dirty snow that are thawing. Graceful and skilled as he is now, he maintains a perfect rhythm of light and darkness; it is a skill that integrates the technique of commands and that of instrumentalists. There are highlight with white colors in a black background, as well as vague brush with black colors in a white background. He only uses black, white and gray, which, presumably, is a result of his seven years teaching career in sketching. In such works, mysterious light seems to pour down from rolling clouds, forever drifting on the canvas. Sometimes, there seems to be a horse which no sooner shows up than disappears. Sometimes, it is like the image of a tiger, but, with another glance, is not. The audience is all the more likely to detect an eye, a skull, a face, etc. on the canvas, which are indeed beyond “between like and unlike”.

In this adventure full of casualness, he keeps poised and composed. Everyday he would spend five hours in painting, sometimes only to yield a work in a couple of months. In daily life, his pet phrases are “slow down, slower than others”, and “lower your value of excitement”. That is the secret of his every victory in painting games. This resembles a lot a currently popular French jazz trumpet player, another master of improvisation, who was able to beget explosive effect among the audience, while he himself would leisurely dangle one foot on the other on stage.

We can be sure that his religion comes from the “will of the visible” (John Berger), as Rembrandt and Paul Cézanne do, who are his favorite painters in his youth. He grows up in a mountainous village. There in front of his house is a rivulet; He has every curve and every stone of it at his fingertips. He even knows where to capture a crab in the curves of the river, at the risk of the encounter of toads. The toads! Yes, he is mostly disgusted with ugly things. He is a sworn brother of a soldier and a poet. His common entertainment is mountain climbing. Sometimes he would climb a practically vertical, that is, a 90-degree hill—he might be a cynic, but never a coward. He finds fun in overcoming harsh risks, and enjoys the cloudy and giddy sight on the top of mountains. He is also fond of flowers and birds; it is his habit, which is kept to the present day, to haunt the market and buy a fish after scrupulous examination of over a hundred of fishes. His observation of the hills, waters, trees, stones, animals etc. is far more intense than the common people. And “when the density of observation has reached a certain degree, people are to find an equally intense force coming from the object under examination.” (John Berger)

Now, what about his hands? It is a pair that has won praise from his friends. In his youth, he was an excellent painter, woodworker, poster painter, sculptor, decorator, designer, stage art worker, chef of Sichuan cuisine—all these roles well acquainted him with knowledge of various materials and their characteristics. From the occasional convergence of the features of canvas, brushes and paints, he identifies the changing forms and texture of mountains, waters, trees, and stones. And this is no work of chance. “It is nothing but practice that helps” (from Chuang-tzu). A fellow painter once commented, “sometimes, experience is equal to imagination; sometimes, experience gives life to imagination.” And this comment works well in Xue Song’s works.

He says he is painting a stone; actually, it is an abstract work. What he paints is, obviously, not the stone frequently produced by Chinese conventional literati, for in his mind there is no overburden, no prejudice. He is no melancholy literati. In reverse, he is a childish, happy man. Of ponderous, grave, large but burdensome things, he is inherently disgusted; he takes delight in talking about

details; he is enthralled by nature and beauty. His paintings, though incapable of preaching and education functions, display unfathomable power, profound and full of changes. Perhaps, he has little to do with Heroes; but he is truly Educated Nobles.

What's more important, he is no teleologist. A true teleologist harbors an ambition, attempting to construct something from nothing. But Xue Song has no ambition; he is "a near saint idling his time away" (from the novelist Han Dong). He has no well-thought-out plan. Perhaps this is the top class of improvisation. And just because he has no ambition, time in his paintings is no longer a targeted arrow, but a mystery. Like a dense mist, oil flows freely on the canvas. His strokes and touches are disorderly, even shapeless. You find it hard to make clear identifications. But consider, isn't the cloud in the sky is likewise a disorderly creature, which is unbelievably beautiful despite its shapelessness?

Shape comes from shapelessness, and ends in shapelessness. Xue Song paints things in accordance with his natural disposition. He only means to paint, in his words, "a good fengshui (geomantic omen)". He imitates only nature. The origin of nature lies in the dispersion of disorderly energy, such as the rise and fall of the sun, the moon and the stars, the cycling of seasons, the numerous natural turns of mountains and rivers. The highly accessible air, running water, soil, stones, grass, all carries an extremely vast and profound world view, for instance, in flower, you have ikebana, and in tea, tea-ism.

He looks at all this with his heart. The Poet Yu Xinqiao writes: "My heart adheres to heart. My heart is constantly attached to earthly existence, all the smallness in this world, the easy life of unimportant persons, all those pinpoint stages, all the small loopholes and small wounds, the petite love story taking place in a small train, the little occasions of saying-goodbye; My heart adheres only to the heart, the smallness of little beauties, and those smaller, far more smaller things, which compel hails from mountains and seas!" Behind the paintings of Xue Song is indeed a strange and changeful world which he has already seen, is seeing, or is to see.

Yes, in some of his best works, we dimly see "a childlike life... for eyes that could see into it there would be revealed whole worlds half buried in the darkness, nebula taking shape, a universe in the making." (Jean-Christophe)

This, I wonder, is what he most desires to see, isn't it? Or has he already beheld this when he was but a child?

A close-up of Xue Song:

Born in an intellectual family in 1962

When he was five years old, he sat on the bed, folding planes by papers given by his mother, which were usually designed with so special a quality as to fly quickly

At the age of seven, he built a palace for the ducks, in which all necessities were equipped. And he knew, without any instruction, the very proportion of water and earth that the ducks were accustomed to.

At the age of 12, he was apprenticed to the traditional Chinese painter Chen Manman.

The Cultural Revolution took place when he studied in the primary school and in the middle school, so that everyday he was allowed to play as he like half a day. As a five grade pupil, he would then employ magnets and brass wires to produce an electric fan. In the first year of senior high school life, he bought all necessary spare parts in the stores, and succeeded in assembling a bicycle.

In 1979, when he was graduated from senior high, he failed to get access into academy of fine arts, due to poor academic records.

In 1980, he worked as a cadre of the fine arts in the cultural center in Jiulongpo District, Chongqing.

It is notable that in 1982, he in person witnessed a UFO (then widely reported in various newspapers).

In the age of 23 and 26, he took part in two national exhibitions, thereby being recognized as a leading painter respectively by the fine-arts association at the city level and the province level (and if he was lucky enough to participate in a third exhibition, he would have obtained authentication from China Artists Association). Now he was rated as a top youth painter in Chongqing, winning wide praise from fellow painters.

In 1985, he began to study in Chongqing Fine Arts School, for the mere sake of obtaining a diploma; during which period, instead of attending classes, he spent most of the time working for himself as well as his tutors, that is, he opened painting training classes, made sculptures, did decorations, produced mural paintings, etc.

In 1988 at his graduation, he chose to stay teaching in the school, and kept a close relationship with teachers of Chongqing Academy of Fine Art.

In the 1990s, he tripped to and fro between Beijing, Shenzhen and Chongqing; and due to his diligence and skills, he was able to live a well-off life, enjoying himself in dines and wines for ten years.

In 2000, he moved from Chongqing to Beijing, turning into a professional artist. In this period, he received frequent invitations from distinguished contemporary personages, to attend a number of international artist events and work as a visual supervisor of artistic works.

In 2008, he held an exhibition in Courtyard Gallery.

In 2010, he gave his first personal exhibition in the National Art Museum of China.

by Yipeng Jiang

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