

Some reflections on looking at Chen Hui's works

By Li Xianting on 09.16.2008

'Strange Fashion' is a term I blindly coined in an attempt to verbalise my feelings towards my own life circumstances. More than ten year ago, while I was still frequently travelling abroad, I was particularly struck by youngsters, and especially by youth from their teens upwards to twenty. Their 'bizarre' mode of attire flabbergasted me. Friends told me then of the English word 'trendy', which I understood to mean 'novel fashion.' At that time, I recalled the early 1980s, when bell-bottoms were all the swing and a resulting controversy convulsed the media - although I say controversy, the majority roundly and soundly condemned the very notion of wearing bell-bottoms. And although I was already into my 30s, I was still into the 20-odds' groove of wearing bell-bottoms, so I went out and bought an overstated pair of my own to get up in. Then, I bethought me of those years stretching from the 1950s to the 1970s: that fully three decades, in which, for virtually all Chinese, if their duds weren't blue, why then they were grey. Styles took the form of either a Lenin suit, military uniform, or what almost all wore: the Sun Yat-sen suit (foreigners call a Sun Yat-sen suit a Mao suit!).

But, a brave new age was looming, and bold breakthroughs were booming, initially in such spheres of humdrum life as attire, with the shake-ups spearheaded by sensitive striplings sullen at the sartorial status quo. In practical terms, a movement with propensities of protean proportions was smashing the icons and usurping the lead role in macro-social engineering (even if mere over-compensation, this was eminently understandable). So, naturally enough girls and boys blazed the way in decking themselves out in bell-bottoms and thus bashing through the barriers of boring and banal clothing styles. Afterwards, when touring abroad, I got hip to just where to hop to go see the boys and girls gagging together in New York and London, though the names of those streets I can never remember. The duds those kids donned are still fresh in my mind and - especially in those streets around Tokyo's Harajuku district - imparted a singularly vivid impression, with entire lanes full of spontaneously-organized troupes of singers and dancers coming in continuous columns. After buying a motley miscellany of brightly-hued gadgets in the shops, I went and thronged together with the young boulevardiers, all flamboyantly garbed; I thought 'Almost all of them have come to here just to flaunt and strut their stuff.'

I am not an expert fashion researcher; I don't even dare to talk fashion, but to my eye this was not on a level with fashion. So-called fashion is tip-toe, top-to-bottom fashion; its background is the entire panoply thereof, consisting of every stratum of expertise supported by a gargantuan financing machine: a unified, mature operating model of the consumer society that sucks in the mainstream of societal consumption, but at the same time is a covert, colossal, monolithic, impenetrable 'modern device' bent solely on multiplying money by any means! But when I say 'strange fashion,' this indicates a spontaneous, popular, not-for-profit, beholden-to-itself-alone, self-propagating, self-entertaining venting of one's feelings. This process can naturally derive from various sorts of 'emblems of popular images,' which may relate to such things as fashion, popular film, TV and drama - their apparel, attire, human images - which it appropriates.

In Chen Hui's paintings I find, she uses her own eyes to view and express her own take on "strange fashion." These paintings transcend such mundane levels as human images, figures, hairstyles and attire to express and craft her 'strange fashion.' Among these images, one of surpassing excellence is an anti-fashion image. In media swamped with pictures of breathtaking beauties, her form is a tad eccentric: the image of a rebel, eyes with single eyelids [most Chinese lack a lower eyelid and thus, in obedience to the dictates of logic, lower-eyelid insertion is one of the most popular forms of aesthetic enhancement surgery in China], small eyes set far apart - an indicator of low IQ, they say. However, these small eyes Chen Hui draws are very determined little orbs: bounding with confidence, yet brimming with suspicion, even fraught with fear. I particularly like the Xiao Q image, with its small, fleshless face, its cheekbones high but solid and the short, sharp chin which highlights the minute face and lips of this woman, lips so thin it seems the words issuing from her mouth are so caustic and sarcastic as to strip away your own face.

And especially those unutterably dubious, glaring expressions in her two eyes - resolute yet confident - harboring that kind of gimlet power capable of boring into the heart and mind of every viewer. In Xiao Q, Chen Hui portrays on the face of this 'ugly girl,' born with an unsightly physiognomy and with such unusual features, such anti-fashion beauty and such counter-traditionally auspicious features with specific "differences yet," with a clear suggestion of "strange fashion". In forming her other images, Chen Hui, although this is not done perhaps as brilliantly as in Xiao Q, nevertheless expresses a very distinct meaning, and especially the manner in which the eyes are wrought is extraordinary. While a number of years ago the international fashion catwalk began to flounce some alternative 'ugly models,' that flaunting of elegance on the catwalk is, after all, still all about 'apparel' not 'people.' Therefore, Chen Hui's works with respect to their human expressions depict by contrast the 'strange fashion' of a unique and irreplaceable 'person.'

Now, aside from those models plying the catwalk who are the incarnation of some alternative brand of weirdness, models are models after all, and in choosing their figures; there are clearly-demarcated bounds beyond which one dares not stray. By comparison, in this series of works by Chen Hui, with respect to the human figures she moulds, and in contrast to the figures of models, the women have no complementary convex/concave curves and her men also lack the sought-after inverted v-shape - all have small breasts, large bellies and bloated forms, or otherwise unsightly persons of a cast not calculated to elicit the plaudits of fashion. Moreover, their movements are exaggerated, and thus project a comic and jocular air about them.

Clothing – here we must say apparel - is also one of Chen Hui's signature features. Hairstyles – whether these are 'blown up,' 'rat's nest,' 'lion's mane' or 'firework perm' or whether these come dyed yellow, purple or red and orange, the only truly weird and unusual show is "strange fashion." Although misappropriation of fashion clothing is a bit of a factor, this seems cheap and weird, brightly-coloured and garish. What is particularly special about apparel is the confusion between everyday wear and performance attire and this seems to be because there is no distinction drawn between them, or one might rather say that here this sort of garb is in itself "strange fashion" and that its focus is self-enticing, self-amusing and both stylish and consumptive of its own consumption and that it incorporates the Internet modern youth fashion attitude and the fiction between human comedy and everyday life. This is a new sense of realism – a nagging feeling of helplessness amid contemporary society's games.

Realistically-depicted art is a hallmark of Chen Hui's works; her brush-strokes are both exquisite and serene in form, particularly with regard to facial parts and bare torsos, which however incline towards an exacting technique. But this is not realism in the classical sense: Chen Hui intentionally recoils from a technique of creating human figures in a classical ambience and often paints people into the backgrounds in graduated shades, or these people are set into the background as part of a scene similar to those in famous paintings, or simply wedged into a cubicle. All human figures she models she deliberately extracts from their true habitats and then inserts them into a fictional, dramatized space, with the aim of providing a foil to the ideal human figure wrought in the image of the youth of today. We intuit from Chen Hui's works that the human figures in her works are bursting with sincere, wistful love, because she is herself youthful or perhaps styling herself that way in her imagination, and we also have a hunch the people inhabiting her works are frisking and frolicking together with her in this latter age.

Translator = Ben Armour