

Suspense Under The Sun
— On Li Dafang's Oil Painting

text / Feng Boyi

It seems that Li Dafang's oil paintings are using a mock serious guise and a realistic language to narrate the dramatized plot of a graphic novel, but in fact, one discovers upon closer examination the story that he "weaves" for us is completely unreliable. These realistically painted scenes posing as serious do not contain one single thread of actual plot. Perhaps we could say they provide more of those hard to describe "under the sun" suspenseful and bewildering puzzles that will not adhere to reason. The fabricated, preposterous significance in his paintings—they seem to be real, forced reality, yet they are manufactured, fictional to the extent that you can hardly distinguish which way is up!

Therefore, on each occasion I find myself before Li Dafang's paintings, I'm reluctant to use simple Realism to define or draw conclusions about his works. Despite the fact that his painting uses actual, realistic and concrete details to represent and reflect his social environments or way of life, at the same time it lacks the typical attributes of conceptual Realism. Namely, they lack the artist's execution of a so-called choice, refinement, or generalization on topics that constitute real life, thus profoundly revealing several essential characteristics of life. Real life phenomena are diverse, muddled, and complicated; recording such phenomena according to the facts is solely the art of the photographer. Realism therefore demands that the artist chooses significant people and events from this rich and varied existence, and through artistic processes of personalization and generalization creating prototypical people and prototypical events. But the subject matter in these works, the pockmarked desolate wastelands that we encounter, the gloomy streets, flowing rivers, secret factories, warehouses, tunnels, etc., his particular combinations of urban and rural spaces, these are tendencies of Naturalism. There are two points particularly worthy of note, the first being that in his type of ambiance there is always the installation, or the grafting of one or several figures who are all profiled or viewed from behind. You cannot see the expressions on the faces of the characters he has cast, and you cannot see clearly what they are up to in these pits, trenches and underground tunnels. Ignorant observation actually has the effect of making one constantly anxious. At first glance, these figures seem to have some sort of relationship with their surroundings, but upon close inspection he or she lacks completely a cause and effect relationship with the narrative plot of their surroundings. Secondly, within the artist's domain, evidenced in the works *Kill the Wife*, *Second Uncle* and *E Han in Armour*, realistically, such actions seem impossible; they have a kind of unrealistic existence and a recognizable unfamiliarity. The dislocation of reality, ambiguity, and the mysticism of the works themselves highlights their absurd elements. This is already a departure from the "objectivity of explicit portrayal" that is the definition of Realism, and runs counter to the formerly stressed notion that "the artist must naturally express his/her ideological inclinations and sentiment of love and hate through the scenario on the canvas," and it doesn't seem to fit in the realm of Neorealism. I absolutely cannot identify in Dafang a desire to dispassionately or objectively provide the viewer with a kind of artistic standpoint, nor can I identify a political macrocosm, and I cannot get to the root of any social background. Therefore this article was titled "Suspense Under the Sun," reflecting precisely my impressions, generalization and misgivings about Dafang's creations. There is no apparent secret in "under the sun," and no villainy, because everything is exposed under a bright sky. However, the actions of nameless characters and visual sentiments in such works as *Strange Dialogue*, *Skinny*, and *Sting Operation* seem to imply a sort of "criminal activity" that invites the viewer to follow Dafang's narrative intrigues and quest for logic—but they will discover nothing—he creates a temporal in-decipherable obstruction or misunderstanding. This produces an intense contrast, contradiction and suspicion, and a space where various possibilities might occur. I believe this is at the core of evaluating Dafang's works, the starting point for determining the significance of his works and the terminus of his creative sensibilities. Although Dafang and I have discussed the value of his works and their directional significance more than once, they continue to

leave me with an indescribable feeling. Reexamining the topics in his paintings, such as "Ruan You," "school bag made of buffalo hide," "Gang Ci," "bai ye bai (white night white)," "zongzi (steamed rice dumplings)," and "the rope is my home" etc, it is even more difficult to follow the clues that lead to the meaning of his works, these clues instead cast viewers into a state of confusion. I surmise that this is Dafang's intention, that he deliberately chooses current photographic realist settings, the actions of representational characters and the titles of his works—three points lacking a superimposed logical relationship—to present an unsolvable context, both mysterious, complicated and suspenseful. Or we could say, the schematic structure of Dafang's oil paintings, the relationship between the environments, the characters and the symbols offer an on-the-spot record, a fabricated, reconstructed *Verfremdungseffekt*. They provide an intuitive sight and have a distinctive visual sensation, one that facilitates a supra-realistic discourse and interrogation between viewer and the artist.

This cannot help but lead me to doubt certain phenomena engendered by the Chinese contemporary art ecosystem. With China's current social organization, her economic patterns, cultural conditions and international frameworks, these conditions are progressively evolving into a social model and a functioning mechanism with no history, or effective cross-references. To put it another way, she provides the world stage with new social issues; she is brimming with beauty and chaos. I have always believed that the various contradictions, bewilderments, misgivings, etc, the bounteous oddities emerging amidst China's social change in the past thirty years are entangled with and feed the underlying vibrancy of contemporary art from China, which is both rich and filled with opportunity. Accordingly, many of China's artists utilize history thus art is inundated with the visual language and political symbols of the red legacy of a socialist era, or draw on actual culture as a resource. Especially in relation to the essential "one to one" derivation of current realistic subject matter, causing so many works to be classified as a kind of cheap, so-called embodiments of contemporaneity, or to be caught up in vulgar expressions of sociological significance that often lack artistic transcendence and transformation. Because their realistic directivity, metaphor, and symbolism are too obvious, these themes have emerged as cliché, systematic, and excessive characteristics or inclinations in subject matter within the ecosystem of Chinese contemporary arts. Looking at it from this angle reveals how Chinese contemporary artists are more cunning than others. In fact, the brilliance of reality often surpasses the visual tension in artists' works, and certain artists seem to be depleted of experimental expressions of this metaphysical reality.

By extension, interpreting Dafang's works from this point of view I discovered that his creations are more honest recounts of personal experiences. Li Dafang was raised in Shenyang, in China's Dongbei Province. The area was classified a "heavy manufacturing" base after the establishment of New China in 1949, he has said that as a child he often played around in those factories; he grew up dependent on those hollow voids and spacious, barren environments. His creations will unavoidably contain traces of these memories; perhaps we can also view it as a reason why his works fall in love with the characteristics of industrial spaces similar to Dongbei's industrial district. Because "memories" attempt to protect the experiences we have already had, we thereupon construct an imagination that resists bereavement. Yet this type of imagination eliminates the bitter and acerbic memories shaped in the low consumption era of the 1970s, using reconstructive methods to recreate his past visual memories he extracts the purity from within it. Looking at it from this angle, his paintings are both the actual development of his memories, and are also a meta-experiential expression of the metaphysical. These types of expressionist elements also profited from his studies at Shenyang's Luxun Academy of the Arts and years of experience teaching oil painting. From these we can grasp the blood relationship he maintains with Realism, and we can likewise identify the differences between them. Moreover, Dafang's experience is not an exposure of, criticism of or revolt against reality; it is instead a tacit agreement and a dialectical relationship with it. Therefore his art does also not fall into the predicament of criticizing Realism. This is because existence—in his opinion—is not an issue; his issue is one of choosing the right target and the proper method. He has already cast off the one-sided naïveté of the artist who meddles with life and is more inclined to construct a personal space for discourse through some individualistic and intuitive knowledge expressed in his art works. In 2005, when he held a solo

exhibition at China Art & Archives Warehouse, I identified his creations with another artist, Wang Bing, and his documentary film *West of Tracks*, both were clever, with excellent results that were achieved using different approaches. Dafang said, "I'm not striving for his brand of social criticism. I like the ordinary, I don't like social criticism. I've always thought that this kind of environment was very intriguing. Just seeing that weedy grass or disorderly environment with pits all over, I feel like I'm a character in *Liaozhai*,¹ all dazed and confused and extremely amused." (see "Li Dafang—The Light of Day" catalogue, 2005) His attitude or stance is obviously not based upon the tense relationship of the artists' lofty position within their immediate surroundings or the self-conflict that was common late in last century China, it also does not painstakingly avoid, expose, or criticize the various ungracious things and phenomena in life. These things are no longer a serious interference, and do not need to be eliminated or diametrically opposed, he uses them as a pretext for his paintings—more directly as his premise for painting. He first accepts these premises, taking things as they come, then he examines the surroundings again to see what he is able to do within them. As a result, in his works you can see a concentration on the essential serenity of creation, on his person you can see a before seldom seen stillness and poise. He has already familiarized himself with the role of a free and independent creator, a rather purist mind-set and voice. This is also a kind of repulsion to the broad politicization and ideologicalization of contemporary art since the 1990s, and a sort of linguistic rectification of the "deconstruction," "irony," "teasing," and "trickery," that have been used indiscriminately by Chinese artists.

Of course, I could also say that Dafang intercepts these scenes, and there is a definite so-called pertinence to reality, at the very least it is an attitude towards the construction and destruction that is China's urbanization phenomenon, but isn't such an understanding overly simple and conceptual? Perhaps these quandaries and inexplicable perceptions about existence are Dafang's deepest, most secret worries and qualms; precisely because they are indescribable, they are appealing, have cathartic impetuosity and express desire. Upon most recently visiting his studio I don't know why I was incessantly reminded of the films of recently deceased Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni, in particular his 1966 film *Blow Up*. I also don't know whether or not Antonioni's films have influenced Dafang's creations, but my association between the two was a natural one. Perhaps it is because Antonioni's characters often migrate to the city, giving simultaneous testimony to their purposelessness and the bleakness of urban spaces. Also, the subjects Dafang presents, or those that he favors, also portray the city's texture, sometimes to the extent that it is unclear whether protagonists in his landscapes are the hollow spaces or the nameless people. Like in the scene in *Blow Up*, where after the corpse was discovered in the bushes, and there occurred various changes with increasing severity—but with no way to blow up the picture any larger, it became impossible to deduce the actual truth. The final scene is regarded as classic film history: several people on the court are silently waving rackets, but the ball is nowhere to be seen! Where is the actual truth? Antonioni's film does not provide a solution, and therein is his occult appeal. We could say that Dafang's paintings have a similar charm: is it the modernization of Chinese cities that causes human unfamiliarity and estrangement? Or does the human nature leave us powerless to become so? How can we seek out the so-called essence? This is the suspense in Dafang's works, and a question to which anyone concerned with Li Dafang's works must personally seek out the answer.

In China's increasingly pluralistic era, we cannot see the end of a modernization process that is making everything change so rapidly and bewilderingly. In a still endlessly changing era, things are complicated and many borders become fuzzy. Our sense of worth, our beliefs, hopes, personal interactions, our modus operandi, including our presumptions about the lucidity of money-based relationships, are all actually neither clear nor perceptible. Interpersonal relationships, the androgynization of gender, even divergent sexual feelings, and our inability to distinguish or allocate emotions bring about a superficial, indulgent and disassociated state. Perhaps Li Dafang's oil paintings reproduce the nameless and

¹ Translator's note: *Liaozhai* is a Qing Dynasty collection of Chinese ghost stories by Pu Songling.

intangible agony that is China's modern life, provoking fetishes that we don't understand, so is therefore difficult to define, lacks in extremes, lacks articulate concrete significance, and is simply a superficial and decaying state of existence. This kind of self-repression or self-indulgent artistic transformation touches on a kind of emotional or psychological reality, like feelings of desertedness and an attitude of self-respect. Perhaps, he is merely stressing that our unavoidable, insecure gaze into these precarious surroundings is really nothing like the "definite meaning" and identity that was stressed in the art of previous years.

Translation: Lee Ambrozy