

Originating from Realism – Li Zhanyang’s Realism Tendency

by Gao Minglu

Now, “Reality”, this word nearly has not existed, because art is full of various “post-ism” today. In China, the Social Realism---“Reality beyond Life” was criticized in the end of 1970s and was laughed at by the artists at the beginning of 1990s. In 1980s, idealism including pursuit of reality was also discarded by the artists. Then, a lot of emerging media and photography of idealistic technique came to an inundant trend. It seems that the Chinese artists with post-modern temperament have easy control in the matter of using the technique of “embezzlement” and “virtual reality”. Traditional Painting, Revolutionary Realism and Cityscape were scratched up together by these artists in order to satisfy people’s visual worldliness and joviality, not to show the social reality. Under this situation, using a traditional way to show the social reality is unsuitable and almost impossible. But when I saw Li Zhanyang’s sculpture for the first time, I felt surprised and excited. Because I believe that he pursues the social reality with his sculptures tenaciously, which is the return of true realism.

Just this excitement made me invite Li Zhanyang to take part in <Harvest: Modern Art Exhibition> directed by Wang Mingxian and me, in 2002. On the exhibition, Li Zhanyang had his “Every Phenomenon of the World” a series of sculptures exhibited. From my angle, the skill of realism Li Zhanyang uses is very particular. Although the way of his observation and reappearance has not essential differences with past realism. He always shows the street-life of different hierarchies in Huangjueping Street by narrating and telling story. But he made full use of serial pictures, which made us think of “Rent Collector” in Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. But, “Rent Collector” is representative, as a monument, and it is a rare product of Social Realism. The most important point of support of Li Zhanyang’s serial sculptures is to look for conflict and dramatic. The composition of these serial sculptures emphasizes on integrity and commemorative. This way of Li Zhanyang is similar with that one which shows the hierarchy conflict between Liu Wencai and farm hands. The landlords exploit the farm hands cruelly and the farm hands resist the landlords angrily, which forms a serious of uniform and harmonious pictures. While the purpose of Li Zhanyang’s serial sculptures and “Rent Collector” are polar opposites. He didn’t pay his attention to make a tragic atmosphere or heroism pattern. He holds the mirror up to the people’s real life. We can read his story slowly by stages. Li Zhanyang’s works is like a traditional and folk street-opera, as clay sculptures pinched by MR. Zhang in Tianjin, or “Hell” in stone inscription.

Recently, I have seen some photographs of Li Zhanyang. All of these photographs has not so-called affected “integrity”. These photos seem like the original material preparing for making sculptures. All of them were shot unconcernedly, without intended further working. Although these trivial things of Huangjueping-street and unimportant things everyday are meaningless, they are very familiar to me. For example, the tires of heavy trucks I can see everyday; the loved couples of village appearing among the noisy market; the laborers carrying refrigerator happily; the sorehead youth walking along the street; several courting couples in the corner, and so on.

These interesting scenes are rarity in America, even in the big cites of China such as Shanghai, Beijing. Huangjueping-Street is a very special place. It is a combination of city and village and this characteristic is decided by its geographical position. There are a lot of hierarchies---the rich and the poor, and these people are living in peace with each other in this street all the time. There are few opportunities to become rich in this place, so most of people lose ambition to change their fate. The laborers are still glad to earn their coolie hire--two yuan each time, and the bosses are still unscrupulous to visit prostitutes and gamble, living in good circumstances. There is no risk, there is no competition. Or on the other hand, the people have no ambition of risk and hostility. The life of this street doesn’t change. Even if someday changes, it will resume to the same as usual. Just this place, it has original taste and flavor. Only the persons living here know the real people’s livelihood and populism.

Li Zhanyang has a habit of peeping the others from his childhood. This place is a great convenience to satisfy his habit. Here, Li Zhanyang can read this wonderful life of Huangjuepin Street with his keen eyes freely. Not only he can observe the dramatic and vivid scenes of this street, but also relish human’s complicated nature and the conflict between human’s sociality and life. Li Zhanyang loves this reality. Because the things observed by your own eyes belongs to you, and you needn’t to believe what the others said. You won’t want to use art to cheat the people, and you will show the reality you observe by art. Whether it is well shown depends on the talent of the artists, while whether it is true depends on the conscience of the artists. They can cheat the others, but can’t

If you observe the real life day after day, you will go beyond the dogma of life, which has become possible. Li Zhanyang said, "If I can solidify every person of Huangjueping Street, I'd like to move them here, but all of them are living. So I can't do so." Life includes soul and physical body. When you read the soul and physical body of the others, your soul and physical body will be read by yourself. The nature of human is not solidified, so you can't explain it frigidly. In daily life without obvious conflict, soul and physical body close to human's instinct gradually. In Li Zhanyang's sculpture work---"Every Phenomenon of the World", hooker and whoremaster, boss and hire hand, policeman and thief are peeped humanly. Li Zhanyang doesn't judge them only by moral standard. "Food, appearance and desire" is normal to human, and everybody is equal when they face these three things. What's more, we can't judge the people by their wealth and hierarchy. Probably, wealth is the result of the person's fate or wisdom, but it is not the essential result of human's nature and it is not the excuse of discrimination. Therefore, all the past moral standards including heroic pattern are tested again through Li Zhanyang's peeping. Just as Li Zhanyang said, "I did a painted sculpture "Wusong killing his sister-in-law" in 2002. Wusong, he is a hero in Shui Hu Zhuan. He must appear as a hero on the historic stage because the sister-in-law killed his brother. Wusong must put the sharp dagger to aim her chest. This plump and sexy breast may be the most beautiful one he had seen; or probably he had only seen this one. In a word, he must put the dagger to aim the chest that excited him. I always imagine that he must have been inconsistent. I try my best to reappear and redistribute the history from the angle of human's nature in order to deny the lasting heroes. I want to show the secrets or problems of these heroes they didn't to reveal. We should understand they are not only bold and generous. In fact, we have not enough encourage to face their weakness. we are used to judging everything by moral standards. Actually, the ideas from heart and their instinct are opposed to these moral standards. I want to discard all these standards and to think the nature of human. Now that there is nobody to tell me, I look for it by myself. I imagine that Wusong's heart was inconsistent when he saw the sexy breast of his sister-in-law. Hostility and desire, as devil, tormented him at the same time. What's more, I imagine the scene of Xi Menqing and Pan Jinlian carrying on a clandestine affair. Pan Jinlian was also inconsistent, because she loved Wusong so much. But her body catered to Xi Menqing, as a runaway horse running to the river of desire."

We always think that, Wusong was wrathful with this scarlet woman when he saw his sister-in-law, then killed her directly. But in the view of Li Zhanyang, wrath and lust came to Wusong's mind at the same time. The behavior of Wusong's killing the sister-in-law gave centralized expression to many different conflicts. From the angle of Freud's psychology, the behaviors of Pan Jinlian's adultery and killing her husband (Wusong's brother) were to revenge against Wusong's coldheartedness; while Wusong's killing his sister-in-law was the result of repressing his own sexual desire. This way of narration overthrew the traditional one completely. But at least, it gave us a possibility of another special explanation, even if it was not the only truth. Undoubtedly, Li Zhanyang's analysis questioned the formative and decadent pattern. He wanted to test this old pattern, with the background of real human nature and this long history. After it, he would get a true narration.

Therefore, Li Zhanyang's Realism, if I call it "Originating from Realism", what did he really want to say? In other words, his "peeping" life and showing the nature of human through this real life. How this meant to the artistic history and realistic criticism.

Li Zhanyang's sculptures convey the power of Populism that the past commemorative sculptures have not. The essence of Populism is anti-commemorative and anti-heroic. But it isn't cynicism. Because the cynicism is intellectual escapism, laughing at oneself. And populism has simple primitiveness and healthy living-consciousness. Although populism originates from mass culture, its essence is grass roots culture. It doesn't belong to the popular culture such as exquisite Hollywood culture and it is the culture of people's livelihood. The system of Li Zhanyang is nativism, naturalism and life-ism. From the angle of theory, it is anticenter, antiauthority and anti class-distinction. Just like, "open the door to welcome the king, but don't pay tax when the king comes." Therefore, it equals to populism. His simple equalitarianism overthrows and destroys all the authorities. When all goes to all, populism is not philosophy or theory, but a value judgment to experience. In recent society, we can see populism everywhere. Especially, China has changed a lot, which leads to polarization of poor and rich, so the consciousness of people's livelihood and civil liberties. But the populism in the art is still extremely rare. Because the modern art doesn't belong to populism in its identity and it has nothing to do with ideal in the mass. Li Zhanyang's realism led by this populism ideal has some distance with different kinds of social realism in China 20 years ago, and it also has some distance with popular art of the day.

The realism of the past 20 years in China is thought to be the development of Social Realism in China. Social Realism, generally speaking, is regarded as an international phenomenon, such as “itinerant drawing group” in Russia, in 1900c; the mural of Mexico, in 1930c; “garbage drawing group” in 1930c. Social Realism differs with Socialist Realism. The former is out of social ideology and artistic system’s control. Realism is the free intellectuals’ independent thinking and criticism to the social reality. Therefore, social realism always pays close attention to the real life of roughscuff and but it embodies intellectuals’ populism and democratic logos. In China, the Social Realism can be traced back to “Engraving Movement” in 1930c. Then “Scar”, “Native Soil” at the end of 1970c, “Actual State” of “Bohemianism” and “Cenozoic” in 1990c, and so on. All of these had a strong trace of “Elitism”. For example, “Scar” and “Native Soil” were criticism of the intellectuals after “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” to reality from historic angle. “Bohemianism” and “Cenozoic” were products of traditional scholars’ cynicism. Today, we can see that a lot of popular “Realism” has lost the meaning of social criticism. Therefore, I think that Li Zhanyang’s art shows a possibility of “Originating from Realism” to develop realistic art. Probably, Chinese social realism will develop in the environment different from “the Third Space”. This new environment is just the vivid reality of Chinese people. What’s more important is that this kind of realism began from low-hierarchy reality and it criticized Chinese recent reality and surveyed justice and human’s nature. On the other hand, Li Zhanyang’s populism is continuation of traditional art in Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. From “Rent Collector” to “Scar” and “Native Soil”, from Luo Zhongli, He Dongling to Li Zhanyang, all of their art originated from narration. But, “Rent Collector” is monument and magnificence, while “Native Soil” is anti-monument and anti-magnificence. Both of them narrated the real life of low-hierarchy people from different angles. Li Zhanyang’s art is not “anti”, and he just narrated without monument and magnificence. His works is more anti-academism, anti-orthodox and anti-elitism. Li Zhanyang inclines to Populism.

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