

Marginalization and Insulation

On Shao Fan's Painting and Art

by Feng Boyi

In its current state, Shao Fan's creative work stands aloof from the mainstream in a marginalized relationship of "estrangement". So-called mainstream art here does not refer to the art officially sanctioned in China – which is characterized by the didactic function of a parable – and nor does it indicate the established, self-sufficient system of collegiate art in China; instead, it refers to the main current of thought winding its way through the sub-community of China's avant-garde movement. The basis of this judgment or impression is that Shao Fan's work is divorced from the mainstream art described above, that it is autonomous and independent. Perhaps it is the artist's introspective, low-key style that prompts his disinclination to revel in reality, together with his aspiration to search amongst the chaos of the world for a tranquil refuge for the soul and pure cerebral experience. Having been illuminated by traditional Chinese culture, his artistic creations are thus the fruits of this single-minded, focused approach.

Shao Fan is ever attracted to and enraptured by the timeless artistic allure of traditional Chinese culture. He would even venture to assert that: "The old stuff is all great!" Accordingly, in this exhibition in which he advances his "appreciation of oldness" model, this rubric likewise serves as its title and theme. "Appreciation of Oldness" correlates to "appreciation of beauty" and appreciation of ugliness" as an esthetic concept whose surface import reiterates a reexamination and endorsement of traditional Chinese culture, while also implicating his sense of the decline of ancient culture and offering insights into the so-styled "emergent crisis" in Western culture, a crisis of a sort seemingly deliberately calculated to sidestep those issues studied by myriad social evolutionary theorists. In fact, though, Shao Fan's art rests upon China's unique tradition of "appreciating oldness"; through his cognition of and complexes towards traditional culture, he discovers within art a new linguistic medium which he uses to convey his attitude and stance towards it and culture.

Shao Fan harbors an especial penchant for classical Chinese mortise-and-tenon style furniture. His early works help themselves freely to the resources of post-modernist methods and juxtapose and dovetail China's history, recollections and the very reality of her survival, precipitating these as the background color to an object, with textual discrepancies imparting a historical focus to most furniture and daily-use utensils, and via transubstantiation of these implements into symbols, he emblemizes China's potential in the course of modernist history for conflict, with a tangled, realistic interdependence. Yet his works of late vintage have retreated from this posture on the fringe of the hub-bubbing madding crowd. Via his uniquely introspective and calm perspective, upright and middle-way, Shao Fan's works, while shunning the raw reality of the madding crowd, appear set in an environment of expansive, purely imaginary, and concentrated chaotic gray; he examines and presents simple, yet bizarre and subtle forms – furnishings, animals, landscapes, people – through graduated colors that touch and mingle. The images contain latent implications that spring out, creating unconventional visual tensions, and giving the form itself the potential to shift and change endlessly. Or is it during the creative process that, once he has grasped an anthropomorphic state of instinct, he presents an unaccounted, unaccountable enigma, a tortuous puzzle fraught with brooding foreboding, and convoluted context and steadfast "upright and middle way" stance. There is no exit from this cloistered maze. With its unexpected latency, it is akin to a nightmare in a trackless wasteland. Beset by incubi, there is no way to dodge these phantasms that encapsulate Shao Fan's own experiences, feelings and memories. Perhaps this ethereal phantasmagoria and the visual fidelity thereto in Shao Fan's painting are really just human angst and depression, together contriving this mood of cloistered melancholia. Yet Shao Fan's paintings at the same time stand for a restoration of a sort, one marking a behavioral return to the wellsprings of visual art that re-approaches the very creation and origin of life itself through its penchant for a naturalist composition. He preserves, moreover, a free and open mind, and scorns to tamely transcribe a mere view of life. His freedom, and even his exploration and infatuation with the vernacular of painting, bridge many gaps others have vaulted over, creating an over-arching composite of the whole and leaving traces on the canvas. These traits of Shao Fan's painting style are the very

means by which an artist attains a state of outright paranoid phobia and, in his recent works, what prompts the observation that Shao Fan is a renegade artist whose painting style finds no place amid the mainstream.

The attitudes that different people adopt towards art itself are based on their own anomie, marginalization and non-conformist propensities. Yet utterly unlike the “wildling” artists of the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village and Beijing East Village, who were driven in the early 1990s to seek sanctuary in an alternative plane, in Shao Fan’s case, this is a voluntary or self-initiated choice, a form of sequestered freedom. Although his paintings draw upon sources from traditional Chinese culture, this is certainly no mere misappropriation of images or symbols, nor do they employ the subversive, deconstructive, sarcastic and jocularly attitude of mainstream post-modernism; his work transcends the reality-focused, hyper-politicizing, -socializing, and -ideological forms of artistic expression common in China – a trend that either assimilates or marginalizes Chinese artists and their work – and preserves a sense of individual imagery and imagination. This is because his pursuit of art is unconstrained by external social realities, instead possessing unprecedented independence and freedom. Through static illusion, the reality of Shao Fan’s pictorial style bridges the binary antagonism of the real and the virtual, and within its interplay of imagination-induced space/time and people/animals there lurks a strange hybridization: an uncertain function, an ungraspable, unbounded conflict. For Shao Fan this uncertainty is by no means a matter of mere form, but rather a detailed microcosm of his life experience and his innermost feelings; it showcases the transcendent nature of his art after it has transited beyond verisimilitude and crossed over into a new context of freedom. This, the emblem of Shao Fan’s art, is what makes his works alluring, and more importantly what differentiates him from other artists.

Art contains elements of both the mainstream and the fringes; the symbiosis of the two – and their dialog – requires input from the fringe. Difference is the prerequisite for this dialog, but one which demands independence of every interlocutor in the exchange. Such independence is manifested in attitudes toward art and its creative autonomy. Consequently, the mainstream is constantly interceded and challenged by the fringe; without this interaction society’s voice would be reduced to a single monologue, or worse, a cacophony of self-dialog. It is only through the influence of the margins that the hub-bub of the people, diverse artistic expression, and the symbiotic ambiguity of ideology and culture can be represented within society’s complex gyrations. Art also possesses virtual elements, which cause it to become even more insulated from reality. It is the virtual nature of art that allows artists to give full play to their emotions and innermost thoughts, which they no longer hide from the people around them in the real world. Entry into the virtual world can seriously alienate people from reality. Art becomes an enclave that is set beyond social reality, a virtual habitat, a theme park, just like the alienated fringe inhabited by Shao Fan.

Translated from Chinese: Benedict Armour