

THE EVERYDAY AS ONTOLOGY — EVERYDAY TIME IN THE PAINTING OF ZHANG XUERUI Bao Dong

To understand the work of Zhang Xuerui, often described as “abstract painting,” seems like a simple enough task. Any experienced viewer should quickly be able to discern her method, which is to strictly divide the canvas into an orderly grid, and to fill the units in that grid with gradually shifting colors. For this reason, people are often quick to classify her work as part of one of the various mainstream threads of Western contemporary art, such as post-painterly abstraction, hard edge abstraction, minimalism or op art. In fact, however, this is one of the key challenges in discussing Chinese contemporary painting or other forms of art. We often unconsciously apply the existing (Western) art history framework and stylistic typology to the work of Chinese contemporary artists, which limits us to appreciation and classification, while never forming actual understanding. “Abstraction” is representative of this challenge.

If abstraction in Western art has clear conceptual pursuits within the art history context, then in comparison, abstraction in Chinese contemporary art lacks a clear conceptual definition. Instead, Chinese artists and critics treat “abstraction” as a conventional and open concept without a clearly defined style, because the various artistic practices the term describes come from very different beginnings, and follow different paths to different goals. Not only has “abstraction” not formed into a specific art history narrative in China, it is actually a style that stretches back into ancient times, from folk decorations to literati calligraphy and imperial ornamentation. In ancient Chinese tradition, “abstraction” is an established fact, an everyday aesthetic, and for that reason, there never arose a need for discourse, nor did there ever form a corresponding set of critical concepts.

Abstractionism is, however, a typical discourse in Western modernism, a discourse used to resist the representationalism that stretches back to the Renaissance, and to seek legitimacy for artists’ non-illusionist, non-figurative artworks. The contemporary art of China is not a direct continuation of its ancient artistic traditions, and has been heavily influenced by Western artistic traditions, however, since ancient times, Chinese artists have never worked under a linear framework of artistic evolution. For this reason, their “abstraction” is a stylistic genre that is equal to other styles, rather than an independent, exclusionary dogma. In other words, though they create artworks in an abstract style, they have never been abstractionists.

For the artists of Zhang Xuerui’s generation, the visual resources of Western contemporary art have appeared before them in an even more fragmentary form. Abstraction is merely one of the many styles available to reference. Many of them choose an abstract style not solely as an important thread in Western contemporary art, but also because it reflects ancient Chinese traditional aesthetics, as something that has always been a part of habits, mores and customs. More importantly, as it does not have any clear subject matter, it provides a path for differentiation from the practices of socialist realism and politically critical artistic practices. The generation that preceded them, whether teachers in the academies or successful contemporary artists, mostly held fast to these two artistic concepts. The works of these Chinese artists born between the late 1970s and early 1980s mainly appealed for the removal of (often excessive and compulsory) political meaning, and a return to aesthetics as an emotional pursuit. Here, “abstract” merely provides an entry point. The abstract forms in their works are not necessarily cut off from concrete external experience, and so we must not overlook the experiences, ideas, thoughts, methods and means behind these artistic practices, only treating the final physical outcome as the sole subject of judgment.

For this reason, Zhang Xuerui has her own special content and meaning behind her “abstraction.” She majored in architecture, which has to some extent influenced her precise grid style and exacting painting method: once she has begun, she must continue until she finishes the entire grid. This is not only due to the rigor and technical requirements of architectural drawing (the adjoining colors in the gradient must be completed while the paint is still wet), but also encompass a process of aestheticization of everyday time and the labor of the body; time and labor have been marked down in each single individual square of the grid to become subjects of self-reflection and contemplation. For her, the grid approach to painting also evokes the experience of practicing calligraphy using square guidelines. The structure of her paintings is just like the calligraphy practice books from her childhood, using squares as their fundamental units.

Zhang Xuerui often starts with three corners of the painting, deciding the colors of these three

squares. Her next task is to then form a virtually undetectable transition between them. For this reason, by the time she begins the color gradient component, the tones or the order of the colors is no longer the most important task. This is especially the case when she focuses her attention within a single grid. Within this one isolated unit, the act of painting, and the control of the body's movements, form an immersive experience. In addition, the highly compressed color contrasts of the neighboring squares focus our attention on the finest color perceptions, while our judgment of the whole is temporarily suspended, which is to say that the viewing of the painting has, just like the act of painting itself, entered into a linear (temporal) experience.

In this sense, Zhang Xuerui's painting touches on the sense of the everyday we all inhabit, magnifying a detail, or extending a moment, concentrating on a single shaft of bamboo while ignoring the forest around it. In our everyday experience, we do not experience the life around us as an external object. People don't think that their hair is growing longer, or they are gaining weight until they see a photograph from a year ago. In other words, everyday time is a continuous whole; it never actively provides points of meaning. For this reason, in Zhang Xuerui's works, there is no distinction between part and whole, center and margins, or even inside and outside of the frame. One meaningful detail is that in a given period, the individual squares in her grids will all be virtually the same size, regardless of the dimensions of the canvas. In other words, the wholes of her artworks do not precede the parts. She does not predetermine such metaphysical concepts as wholeness or completeness, and metaphysical properties are themselves typical markers of Western modernist abstraction.

All of her chosen colors are compound colors, colors closer to the actual appearance of nature. In her most moving painted works, the gradient color fields present us with the colors of the sky, as if they are records of daylight over time, as well as a salute to a day's labor in the studio, just as her artworks are named only by the time they were completed. Compared to language, color is a highly dense sign. Colors have infinite variation, limited only by the eye's ability to perceive them, and their boundaries seem infinitely expandable. This point gives a connotation of visual experimentation to Zhang Xuerui's work, but this experimentation does not have a presupposed goal, or even a presupposed starting point. Her choices of colors are almost entirely random and improvised, but primary or pure colors, being conceptualized and unable to take on everyday life experience, are never chosen.

In analyzing and discussing Zhang Xuerui's painted works, we should not overlook her textile works, which form a corresponding thread to her paintings. In these works, she often cuts out patterns on clothing or blankets—sometimes flowers, sometimes hearts, sometimes circles—then rearranges and affixes them together in a new layout that often resembles an abstract painting. These artworks more clearly reveal her close examination of everyday life experience: this item of clothing is something once worn by herself or a close friend; that blanket came from the single parent home in which she grew up; this worn-down worker's hat came from her husband. She took squares of material cut from these items, and stitched them together into a model of an old house from her hometown. Affection for old things comes from her individual experience, and that of this generation, of material scarcity in childhood, while the slow, repetitive process of cutting and sewing is an everyday labor experienced by every household woman. There is a fascinating contrast here. In Western contemporary art, the concept of the "ready-made" is a critique leveled at the "self-regulation" of art, but there is no conceptual or experiential contradiction between Zhang Xuerui's "abstract" paintings and her textile readymade creations. In fact, the two are in agreement as they come together to compose her artistic practice.

Another unavoidable point is her feminine experience. In China, women's art has overall taken shape in a way that differs from men's art, but these properties do not emerge from feminist discourse. They are instead a product of traditional female social relationships. As we see with Zhang Xuerui, she has chosen family themes, textile materials, as well as a prosaic, tender style. Like many Chinese woman artists, she does not feel that women must necessarily take on a feminist critical social stance. In fact, she and many others have adopted a stance-free stance. Lack of a stance is not nihilism, but is instead a stance that does not treat any particular values view as given. This is the conceptual background of Chinese contemporary art's increasing distance from all forms of "isms."

We must not depart from this background in our discussion of Zhang Xuerui's painting, especially the abandonment of dichotomies this background encompasses. For her, art is not the opposite of life, on-canvas art is not the opposite of off-canvas art, abstraction is not the opposite of representation, and contemporary is not the opposite of tradition. For this reason, we have no need to distinguish

between her art and her life. When she has labored on her painting for a day, she has lived for a day. Life and art are both passing the days, with perceptible time as its ontology.