

Han Yuguang's Take on New Figuratism

By Chen Xiaoxin

People who truly love art must walk a road of no return that is filled with thorns. This kind of person, in the eyes of the world, is simply strange, as if part of another human race. Han Yuguang, however, is a proud member of this race.

This is already my second time setting foot in his "home studio." It is located in a simple, average old residential building, in a small apartment. The kitchen, washroom, living room, and master bedroom are altogether quite simple. The small living room is full of paintings. The master bedroom also doubles as a studio with a bed, a wooden chair, a nine-inch miniature TV, a mini sound system, an easel, paintbrushes, paints, and painting frames. He just uses this small room, paying the rent with the 700 or 800 RMB he makes each month, living day by day, year after year producing his works, and has been doing this for a total of eight years! In jest, this time period alone is enough for an "eight-year war of resistance!" In these eight years, he has not sold any paintings. In these eight years, he has not participated in any major exhibits, nor has he made an appearance at any expositions. In these eight years, he works at the slow pace of finishing three or four pieces each year (each work takes one or two months to complete, and some even take more than three months), building up his own portfolio. It is precisely because his portfolio is small that he has given even more effort to his work, and so he pours out his life into each piece...he has used eight years of time to seal himself off, divorcing himself from the outside world, and working with intense concentration. One cannot say he is a singular exception in modern society, which is fickle and selfish and full of vulgar trends, but it is enough that I have been truly moved.

People like him are rare, especially those artists with great artistic talent who uphold the sanctuary of art on their own, with single-minded focus. Isn't this precisely the center beam of today's art stage?

In my two visits, he gave me the following impression of himself: tranquil, introverted, detail-oriented, unsocializing, precautious; tenacious and strong-willed; neither overbearing nor obsequious. If we carefully look at his works, we will come to appreciate the profound wisdom in the old Chinese saying, "art is like the artist".

He also lived through a painful childhood and adolescence. With his own

eyes he saw his parents face terrible persecution for historical and personal background reasons. Those tragic months cast a heavy shadow on his young, pure heart. But it is exactly this unhappy time that influenced his personality and even his art.

The first art school Han Yuguang attended was Anshan Normal University (where he majored in art) which was right next to his home studio. His second school was Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now China Academy of Art; also known as China National Academy of Fine Arts), where he majored in oil painting. In 1991, after graduating from the art school, he stayed in Gelin in Hangzhou Province to paint for a few years. A few of the classical realistic landscape paintings he created then still remain today. Four or five years later, he returned to Anshan to make a living and create more art. His eight years of work yielded pieces such as “Sunflower Series” (3 pieces), small “Still Life Series” (3 pieces), “Cabinet Series” (3 pieces), “Latex Glove Series” (3 pieces), and some portraits. Upon first glance, his works give me a strong intellectual feel and convey sheer intrinsic attributes, commanding my careful inspection. The “intrinsic attributes” that I value is not what manifested by the “Figuratism” eagerly promoted by some oil painting instructors at many art academies in China in the past few years (which had resulted in an irreversible bad habit, constricting teachers and students’ freedom in creating art). It is, rather, a branch extended and developed from the realism oil painting. In this genre, the more notable artists are Xu Mangyao, Zhang Peili (from the 1980s), etc.; among the newer artists are Han Yuguang, Tan Zidong, etc. Their path, which is merging with the “New Figuratism” as exemplified by many oil paintings in China, has formed an important platform for Chinese oil painting, attracting the attention of critics in many major exhibits and art markets.

The special aesthetic trait of this “New Figuratism” lies in the depth of attention the painter pays to the overall subject matter and specific details. The main subject of Han Yuguang’s new works is objects (still life), but sometimes includes humans and animals. It appears the decision of selecting the subject is rather random. Perhaps it is merely an impulsive choice or it is invoked by an unexpected interest in some details (for example, in “Sunflowers” and “Latex Glove”). But once they are selected to be subjects, the objects and backgrounds “become new visual effects for our eyes”, according to Han. The original objects and details by themselves are merely property of the creativity and instrument of imagination for the artists. The so-called “new visual effect” shows realistic shape (but isn’t super-realism). It “captures the glimmering particles in the air”, according to Han, resulting liveliness and spirituality on the canvas. In pursuing the perfection, balance, strength in composition, Han makes use of the

construction methodology for abstract paintings. For instance, he uses the division and composition of vertical and horizontal lines. He distills the colors of the original objects and painstakingly infuses layer and layer of light through countless minuscule, even strokes to achieve a harmonious hue and texture. The objects, animals, or humans in the paintings are vividly brought to lives against the meticulously managed background, in an overall simple yet elegant atmosphere. The effect is emotional and hallucinatory. The manifestation of the background, texture, somewhat like the white paper in the traditional Chinese painting, is meant to go beyond the borders of our tangible realm. This is the unique characteristic displayed by the Chinese mainland artists.

The supposed “new visual effect” is different from expressionism or “figurative expression.” It is a subjective method of detachment based on figuratism, a channel of exchange between the mind and the objects. It is not a willful exhibit of vitality or emotion. “Filtering” the subjective method of detachment, the New Figuratism does not only embody a humanitarian touch (constructing an imaginary world and emitting one’s deep concern for the surroundings), but also possesses a symbolic morality. For example, it signifies the eternity in daily life, the real essence in ideas, etc. There is an old Chinese saying, “intelligence born from stillness. We have seen such ingredient in Hans’ “world of still life”.

This is a kind of restraint as well as a grace, but moreover it is a wisdom that strikes a balance between emotion and logic.

The second impression his works gave me was a strong foreign flavor. Needless to say, because of the influence of the 20th century European and American art through media, we can see the traces of this foreign influence in Han’s works, especially by masters like Balthus. This may be a creativity issue that requires his self-analysis later. However, we cannot say that he mimics some one. On the contrary, he has always tried to emphasize his own artistic personality and explore the differences between Chinese and Western art. This effort is visible in the aforementioned subjective detachment and co-existence of realism and abstract methodologies. Clearly, he is not bound by any particular artist’s style or any certain technique. He has reordered the perspective in Realism painting and crafted a mechanism that is operated by him alone. This mechanism is responsible for his current New Figuratism aesthetics, a style that is a true reflection of the whole package of his temperament, personality, experience, training, preferences, etc.

Of course, this style will continue to evolve and develop. In 2004, a new piece of art, “A Cabinet of Toy Dolls,” seemed to have opened a new direction. It

may illuminate his future path of thoughts.

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This essay was written in Chinese by Chen Xiaoxin (陈孝信), art critic in China. Mr. Chen graduated from Huadong Normal University with a B.A. degree in Chinese Literature in 1967. In 1981, he received his master degree in Chinese Literature from Sichuan University. He had worked at the Nanjing Arts Institute and the editorial department of the Jiangsu Art Magazine. The essay was translated by Ann Chao, a student majoring in Social Studies and East Asian Studies at Harvard College (Class of 2009).