

Understanding Han Yuguang's Oil Paintings

By Zou Yuejin

Sound

Han Yuguang likes to paint still life and indoor scenes; when we consider all his paintings and accomplishments, we can understand why.

Han Yuguang's work embodies a sense of quiet stillness. Of course, silence is the same as sound, since it is but a form of the latter. All his paintings are built upon the basis of sound; thus, in my eyes, Han Yuguang's approach to the relationship between sound and painting is definitely unique, and he is able to create art through his experience of sound along with his high level of artistic ability. This kind of ability is first revealed in his grasp of the overall atmosphere of his works as a whole. For it is quite clear that his works are permeated with the tranquility of silent stillness, or rather the serenity of the life world, and we must use all our body and mind in order to hear and appreciate it fully.

When we talk about sound, our thoughts naturally gravitate toward music as well as poetry. In reality, the comparison of poetry, musical arts, and plastic arts is an effective way of understanding the similarities and differences between many different types of art. The wisdom of the famous sayings "Architecture is frozen music" and "Painting is silent poetry" lies in the fact that they do not only emphasize the similarities between painting and music and poetry; more importantly, they tell us that paintings are not only for viewing, but for reading and listening as well. From a creative perspective, the quiet tranquility of Han Yuguang's work is actually also established through the process of bringing the power of sound onto the canvas. In other words, the textures of colors, lines, shapes, spaces, light, and brushstrokes are like individual notes of life, and through Han Yuguang's meticulous deliberation and fine interweaving of rhythm, speed, highs and lows, and intensity, they become a truly moving tune, stirring the heartstrings of admiring listeners. Perhaps in terms of real music, this is a paradox that cannot be explained, namely because it uses notes of music to produce soundless tranquility, but to Han Yuguang, a person who engages with visual art, the ability to use this kind of paradox effectively is what endows his works of art with the unique quality of soundless serenity.

Light and Color

According to the theory of formalism, light and color are a kind of form in the language of painting, belonging to the category of art ontology, and are the primary bearers of the essence of art. However, to every artist, this is a very painstaking process, as they must labor very hard and employ much originality in order to change these statements about the abstract essence of art into a tangible, individual style and artistic language. If we look at Han Yuguang's oil paintings from this perspective, we will discover what he has uniquely pursued in this area. In the use of light and color, he avoids impressionism, instead preferring to start from the sights and senses of everyday life, emphasizing the artistic method of the color of light sources and relative colors. He starts from the spirit, externalizing the beautiful scenes he has experienced in his life, the ideal realm, in the light and color of his paintings. It is this kind of artistic pursuit that allows him to truly love using very subtle gray shades to depict his subjects. We can see that a bright room full of sunlight has been covered in a layer of transparent, focused but hazy rays of light. Han Yuguang likes light colors and soft light. In "My Sentiments toward Painting," he says the following:

"Good paintings are neither cute nor decorative. They often merely possess clear-cut structures and modest tones. They present simple, unpretentious, and non-provocative colors and strokes to the viewers – neither strange nor overbearing. They bring us aesthetic beauty that is enduring and enlightening."

In actuality, in the art of Han Yuguang, the serene quality of light and color and the aura of tranquility are one; the simplicity we see and the silence we hear are complementary, and together they create the ideal life world and unique artistic trends of Han Yuguang.

Rationality

On the ideological side, Han Yuguang is a rationalist. He is also a classicist in art, as precision, focus, balance, harmony, and stability are the basic traits of classical art. If we look at Han Yuguang's work from this angle, we will discover that he identifies with and upholds certain aspects of classical art in terms of form and structure. This kind of identity and adherence, in our eyes is first evident in his choice of subjects (indoor still life), because in his work, indoor architectural space, furniture, and objects consist of perfectly geometrical lines, all different sizes, colors, masses, and shapes, and in a certain sense this satisfies the requirements of logical focus and precision in classical art. It is very apparent that Han Yuguang

not only paints the external forms of indoor spatial structures and objects in a naturalistic fashion, but he also deliberately and reflectively arranges and lays out the interconnection between every line and geometric shape, the logical connections in aesthetics. Perhaps it is appropriate to use the word “management” in the concept of the “placement management” in Chinese traditional aesthetics to describe the painstakingly detailed level of the form and structure of Han Yuguang’s work. In his own words, “I carefully contemplate every shape and symbol on the canvas to establish their connective relationship and harmony.” Thus, in a certain way, Han Yuguang treats the form and structure of his work as thoroughly and exactly as an architect. From this we can see that Han Yuguang’s art has a distinct architectural feeling, or a sense of classical architecture.

Of course, to be accurate, Han Yuguang’s standpoint in realism and classicism has been baptized in a modern consciousness, reminding us of Cezanne, the heir of the unique spirit of classicism. Cezanne thought the essence of the world lay in geometry and interconnection; however, true care for essence, order, and formal structure allowed Cezanne to become the father of modernism and build the artistic model of modern formalism, opening a new artistic space. I think that even if Han Yuguang wasn’t directly influenced by Cezanne’s art, he is still quite similar. He said, “Vertical and horizontal lines are techniques that I use often. On canvas, they bring stability and balance. I choose objects with similar geometric lines to construct a harmonious and wholesome feeling.”

Meaning

Without a doubt, Han Yuguang is an artist with unique pursuits. In his oil paintings, we can see that while he boldly draws in the heritage of Western classicism with its emphasis on rationality, order, structure, and harmony, he purposely leaves out the ideological bias of classicism toward large-scale narration and determinism. This deliberate choice has allowed Han Yuguang to be like Chardin, who was influenced by the Enlightenment, in that he deeply cares for and depicts everyday life, but at the same time avoids the didactic, moralistic overtones in Chardin’s paintings. Of course, just as I mentioned earlier, Han Yuguang is an artist who interprets Western classical painting from a completely modern standpoint; therefore, the high focus of the form and structure, subjective expressions of color, and fine application of brushstrokes in his work all reveal his emphasis and attention to the language of the canvas and the essence of form. In addition, from the impression of his works, it is clear that he has a strong grasp of artistic culture and measured linguistic control.

But we must note that Han Yuguang is not one of those artists who do art

just for the sake of art and form just for the sake of form. From his works, as the viewers we can see once again the unique sentiments artists have toward society and culture. If we look at it from an artist's viewpoint, Han Yuguang's depictions of and attention toward indoor scenes like kitchens and dining rooms are a reflection of the rapid changes of modern society, and they express his attitude and perspective toward these changes.

It is true that in the 90s, the rise and development of Chinese society through market economics led to many fundamental changes. For instance, on one hand, the consumerism brought about by market economics lifted the suppression of individual desires, the ideology of freedom, and the rigid standards of ideals and morals, allowing Chinese people to enjoy the liberation and freedom brought about by another kind of control that they had not fully experienced before—the system and principles of the market. On the other hand, this kind of liberation and freedom came at the cost of augmenting people's desires, expanding the power of profit, and adding to the fear, vanity, and anxiety of life. If we use this standpoint to look at the implications concerning society and culture in Han Yuguang's works, we will see that the kitchens and dining rooms, as unremarkable areas of domestic life, actually express the artist's affirmation of the basic mode of human existence, because the kitchens and dining rooms are not like living rooms and gathering halls; they are not places for performance or grandiose narration. Han Yuguang's attention toward marginal, non-central living spaces address the fact that since the 90s, after people got rid of all kinds of grand suppressive narratives, they entered a more relaxed and comfortable state. At the same time, the ordered structure of Han Yuguang's works, the natural and soft rays of light, laid-back cat and young girls, have allowed him to successfully construct a silent and peaceful living world. In a certain sense, this world, in an artist's eyes, is like a barrier, blocking off noises of the crowd, the flow of materialistic desires, and the crisis-ridden society of the modern day, leaving those things outside this tranquil world. In my opinion, this is Han Yuguang's ideal life world and worthy state of life, and it is also the deep meaning that runs through his works.

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