

A New Bolshevik Youth: A Decade of Drinking Icy Water, Hardly Cooling Down the Hot Blood in His Vein

Xue Danqing

“Masters are rare in this era,” said the artist Gong Chenyu who was about to turn 30. At that time he just inaugurated his second solo exhibition. The expensive exhibition with sparkling spotlights and huge paintings implies that Gong Chenyu is no doubt a blessed general who has won the battle in a single-log bridge while defeating thousands of other rivals. However, behind his glory lurks a sigh which is like an awkward antagonism with ambiguous signans but clear designatum. Beyond our expectation, Gong Chenyu, unlike other rising artists who are confident about their prospects, seems to be enveloped in a desperate depression which can be reflected on those pervasive mysterious pictorial symbols in his paintings: smart leopard, an entwined squid, floating hearts, clustered heads, dying sea fish, meditating Buddha and so on. Under the circumstances, it is of significance to explore the inherent driving force for him to maintain a stable state of artistic creation.

After finishing “Goddess” (2016), the last painting of his well-known “Display” series, Gong Chenyu devotes himself into his new “Idol” series. When we go back to appreciate the “Display” series, we can find a trace of the language paradigm belonging to Neo Rauch, a representative of the New Leipzig School. However, nowadays, the development of contemporary painting is no longer limited to simply exploring painting language. And the choices facing artists are both diversified and extremely simple—whether they should continue to update painting language or to change their attitude? In fact, the masters in the past were also caught in such a dilemma. For example, even Picasso, such a rebellious painter who had greatly innovated the painting languages, was still restrained by the conventional Western idea that separates an artist from his objects described. By contrast, Marcel Duchamp chose to quit the well-defined world of art and blur the boundaries of art. His attitude was similar to that of Zen, a Buddhist School focusing on harmony between man and nature in Eastern culture. In fact, painting language and attitude are the two sides of a coin. As a Chinese oil painter immersed in both Eastern and Western cultures, Gong Chenyu is a magician who has had the coin since the very beginning. The success of the “Display” series has brought him a sweet burden which is only shared among geniuses—how to prevent from endlessly consuming and abusing his talent and from being a mediocrity in the end? It is more appealing to such a talented artist to be unique and irreplaceable than just to be successful, and thus he chooses to innovate both his attitude towards painting and his painting language.

Therefore, the “Idol” series is not only a questionnaire but also an answer sheet. As an artist exposed to the extremely kitsch environment, Gong Chenyu has established a hub based on his interpretations on “Idol”, which is not aimed at purely explaining Totemism in various cultural contexts, but providing multi-level, including image level, deconstructions and reconstructions of this universal phenomenon. More importantly,

through repeatedly depicting those idols in his “Idol” series, he tries to rediscover and reconstruct himself in reality. Besides, his obsession with idols can also be related to a warning to illusions. Such illusions are first described in the Four Idols of Francis Bacon, the British philosopher: Idols of the Tribe, Idols of the Cave, Idols of the Marketplace and Idols of the Theater. When the ubiquitous illusions throw people into various fallacies and fantasies, people’s access to truth will be blocked. To some degree, idols, as the opposite to illusions, are like the light at the end of cave, reminding people to live prudently and soberly so as to keep away from “The True Man Show”. When it comes to the artistic innovation, Gong Chenyu has not only integrated the language of painting and appropriation, but also combined multiple painting methods such as mural, sculpture and installation. What’s more, he has given full play to his outstanding capability of creating volumes for his paintings—he breaks the traditional way of creating an illusion of deep space by Perspective, and instead, he creates a real sense of substance by exploiting the physicality and texture of pigments. Of course, such achievements can not be done without his five years of professional sculpture training, but at the same time we should not neglect his gift of painting.

The works of “Idol” series such as “Tamer”, “White Elephant in the Dream”, “Hero”, “Cowboy” (2017) and “Fishing”, “Ice Chiseling”(2018) all reflect that Gong Chenyu is a charming story teller of the narratives with masculinity. He puts all the seemingly unrelated elements together to form a kind of co-existence similar to the “quasi-stratigraphic coexistence at the designatum level” put forward by Giorgio Agamben. Gong Chenyu’s other paintings with unconventional themes such as “SM”, “Footwashing” (2017), “Eden” and “Valley of Fragrance” seems to highlight the function of painting “as a cautious stratigraphic record for the relationship between potential and reality in works.”¹ The interpretation of the paintings with unconventional themes is challenging. The content of such paintings is just like what Paul Thomas Mann expressed in his book *Death in Venice* (*Der Tod in Venedig*): “We are born with a drive towards the abyss; intoxicated and unable to elevate ourselves, we are led, ineluctably, towards horrible transgressions—to love, that is, our lust and our disgrace.” While for Schopenhauer, “willing”, and craving cause suffering or pain. A temporary way to escape this pain is through aesthetic contemplation (a method comparable to Zapffe's "*Sublimation*"). Aesthetic contemplation allows one to escape this pain—albeit temporarily—because it stops one perceiving the world as mere presentation.

Among these paintings, “Eden” and “Valley of Fragrance” are quite special in the sentiment of images—their composition and source materials are as vulgar as those traditional decorative paintings in sitting rooms, sneering at the aesthetical criteria of contemporary art and the novelty-hunting mentality of common audience. In fact, Gong Chenyu’s special way of seeking inward happens to comply with the world’s trend. It’s easy for audience to relate his works to the African-American artist Kehinde Wiley’s paintings which have the same Rococo-style gorgeousness and theatricality. Both of their works have made use of the strong tension between the present vulgarity and the absent elegance. On the one hand, it

¹ Excerpted from *The Studio Is Absent*, by Giorgio Agamben, Italy

challenges the latter's authority in art and aesthetics. On the other hand, it suggests that there is an infinite grey zone with a variety of possibilities between the former and the latter. It is worth noting that, unlike the predecessors who paid tribute to masters by copying their language paradigms, Gong Chenyu has made an innovation with a stable inherent driving force. As an outstanding artist, he has grasped the spirit of our era, reminding those onlookers that the gilded life is probably just an illusion.

The most intriguing part of the exhibition goes to the juxtaposition of "The Prince of Egypt" and "SM" (2017). The image of "SM" is consistent with its title while "The Prince of Egypt" displays a span from personal narrative to national narrative. As we all know, the Jewish people regard Moses, the Prince of Egypt, as their sacred idol, and they go to great lengths to sanctify him, showing their tendency for mental SM. Sigmund Freud pointed out in his book—*Moses and Monotheism* that Moses was murdered by Jewish people in the wilderness, putting a heavy psychological burden on Israel people. Therefore, their frantic worship for Moses actually shields a complex of patricide. In "The Prince of Egypt", Gong Chenyu seems to express a feeling of disillusion at the end of people's desire. He has overthrown people's blind worship for morality in the conventional narration, unconsciously bringing people to a desperate nihilism in the conflicts between morality and instinct. However, the French writer Albert Camus who advocated Existentialism held a more positive opinion—given that morality was a part of instinct, a sensualist must also be a moral man.

Through the "Idol" series, Gong Chenyu has innovated the art language and attitude. On his journey of art, he presented his virtuosity, rebelled against the authority, made innovations, demonstrated his secret thought and suffered from disillusion, and such a process just precisely coincides with the three life stages for a man's self-development written in Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: Getting rid of the dependence on authority and masters; fighting for freedom (passive freedom); establishing one's own values (positive freedom). Gong Chenyu's sigh—"it is hard to find a master in this era" implies his own final goal. In this era, with a lack of idols and masters, the top-down charisma of classicism is replaced by the bottom-up character setting based on consumer economy. Almost all young artists including Gong Chenyu are wading across the river by feeling the way. They have to recognize the reality, accept that masters are rare in this era, and make every effort to coexist and contend with the conventional painting system so as to tame it and form their own rules. Even if they were holding the gun of Schopenhauer, singing the songs of Epicurus or cleaning the glasses of Baruch de Spinoza, they would have to lose the battles ahead again and again and to wait patiently before achieving the final success.

In the late 1900s, a young Chinese named Liang Qichao returned China from overseas. He named his study studio Yin Bing which meant drinking icy water (going through sufferings). It was in that study where he wrote works that inspired millions of Chinese people. He also encouraged the young Chinese: for someone who is determined to be great, even a decade of drinking icy water could hardly cool down the hot blood in his veins (aspiration for success). Ten years has passed since he was admitted to the Department of

Sculpture of China Academy of Art in 2008. Over the past decade, the two sole exhibitions of Gong Chenyu has demonstrated that he has already exploited his unique way of painting. What's more, he has become both a game player and an outside observer of painting, leaving others far behind. A Chinese writer says that once the golden unicorn leaves the pond and flies into the sky, it will change into a Chinese dragon. The past decade hasn't changed this idealistic man's dream. Instead, he remains a painter who is obsessed with pigments and painting canvas. Being stubborn, in the slippery passage towards capitalism, he sticks to those ancient and wild prides. The painting "Hero" hanging in the entrance of the exhibition hall is undoubtedly an apparent embodiment of his inherent driving force. In the center is an image of a calm and charming young man surrounded by the Bolshevik symbol. He is leading all the courageous young men in pursuit of light to go upstream and establish an ideal kingdom.