

Scenery of the Human World

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Something that can wrap its tendrils around a person's heart, at first sight, may not be a fierce specimen of raw force. Instead, it may be something dispirited and subdued, with a touch of the insubstantial, that strikes the viewer as ethereal and alluring. Yet such a thing tends to conceal itself, and often due to lack of vigor, it may die away before it can reach true completion. If heaven steers it onto a path where its breath can be husbanded and kept steady, the result may be a miracle. Creators of art and literature who find a place in my heart mostly belong to this type. This is not true of me alone, for in the winnowing of time only certain things can settle out; in society's conceptual shifts of stances and responsibilities, it is such things that can be remembered and cherished. Even among those artists and writers of the past who valued realism, what resonates with us now may not be their standout work. For instance in Lu Xun's extensive oeuvre, *Wild Grass*, with its chillingly remote and poetic tone, has an undying allure. Not long ago we just marked the hundredth anniversary of the film in China, and *Springtime in a Small City* headed the list of favorite classics. The tone of this film is quite somber: against the backdrop of a run-down, secluded provincial city, it depicts matters of the heart in a time of disorder. The lone figure backlit by twilight, walking on an old city wall amid blasts of wind and the rustle of sere grasses, is a soul-stirring scene that makes the breath catch in the throat. This film did not directly confront the interesting times it was set in, nor did it set down an ambitious record of war and revolution, yet with its rare combination of graceful lyricism and ethical questioning, it has proven its enduring appeal.

In Wang Qing's paintings, we can detect the same atmosphere. The work in his one-man exhibition of 2007, held at Dimen Art Center in Beijing, let me hear once again the windswept grass on that distant city wall. From reading his interview I knew he was a film buff, and when we got acquainted he admitted his fondness for *Springtime in a Small City*. Naturally, he had broad exposure to film, art, and literature. His interests were not confined to the Republican era, but in his teenage years he did read widely and hand-copy pictures from woodcut collections of that period work by Xu Beihong, Yu Ben, Guan Liang, Shen Yiqian, Ni Yide, plus Umehara and Yasui from Japan. The glum, end-of-an-era sensibility of the Republican period was revived in the feelings of a lonely teenager who did not fit into his era. His paintings have such a feeling of life at the ebb, of being time-worn beyond one's years, that one imagines them done by a gray-haired youth. In a review of Wang Qing, Mr. Feng Boyi made this point: "His works by and large do not deal directly with social and political topics; instead, they depict scenes from provincial towns. Looking at these pieces often makes me think of scenes and characterization in Jia Zhangke's movie *Young Wu*." Yet in my view, Wang Qing comes off as more tied to the past, more bookish. Worth noticing is Jia Zhangke's eyewitness documentary technique, in which the bleak, weathered look belongs to the objects caught on film. As for Wang Qing, one can see his subjective feelings at work, choosing and reconfiguring his real-life images, making them look older, shifting them back almost to the silent film era.

Sparse trees on cold hills faint in the distance,
Time to realize I can't play along with the times.
(Hong Ren, Not Just Gathas)

Wang Qing's works of that early period present the image of a wistful gazer, or perhaps one should say, this is the pictorial structure and mode of feeling they settled into. For

subject matter, they select small-city scenes or a traveler's slices of observation. The typical motif is that wistful gazer standing beneath a bare wintry tree. He may be examining fallen leaves or a dead bird on the ground, or the water of a chilly pond, or viewing the sights that extend along the horizon beneath a vast sky, usually in the environs of a small city. These sights are a mixture of timeless nature and the fabricated objects of an industrial age; all of these falls under the sway of his bleak, drained-of-color mode, corresponding to his aloof, resigned state of mind. In large pieces of that period, his brushwork appeared somewhat mannered, and his drawing of figures was not as compelling as his scenic depictions. This was probably due to two reasons: first, his draconian standards for perfecting a picture's visual language was all-too-likely to result in fragmentation, since it led him to get entangled in details without realizing it. Second, the image of the wistful gazer was perhaps too closely identified with his own emotions and nerves, causing his brush to address the canvas with too much fixity and strain. In his works on paper, tension and ease are in balance: these seemingly jotted-down renderings show a light touch that allows his manner and talent to come through. The American scholar Svcmla Boyer, in her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, wrote: "Nostalgia is a remembrance of native ground that no longer exists or may never have existed. Nostalgia is a feeling of loss and displacement, but it is also a romantic sensibility that lends itself to reveries." With shifts in time and place, things of the past are lost in smoke. The wistful gaze implies that everything in the line of sight awakens nostalgia. This is a gesture that is often found in ancient Chinese art. For artists who are situated in zones of discontinuity, due to history or fortunes in life, this mode will more than likely be reinforced. Looking back past the Republican era, probing into the depths of the historical record, at the vanishing point where literati painting first began, we can find the collage effect that Ni Zan achieved with space and time. Often one needs only to traverse the landscape from one dramatic feature to the next, and "somewhere among secluded shores and chilly trees, it will seem that something from a past life remains here." The views are bleak and stark in contour; to contemplate them is a dismal prospect. Or take the craggy, forbidding landforms of Hong Ren, where the mood wavers between empty quiescence and oppression. All of these influences seem to make a veiled appearance in Wang Qing's work. Under this, Wang Qing looks precocious, but he also looks a bit too adroit. His formidable learning sets him apart from his contemporaries, but perhaps his attachment to the classics came too early, to the point that his youthful vigor was buried. Delving further for the reason, we may find that the painter was caught up in his sense of the present world's hollowness. For one who gazes from beneath that bleak winter tree, life looks like a chaotic scrimmage. The distant world is not worth an investment of passion: one is left with a few books and poetry collections or a certain state of mind to take comfort in.

Hidden valley, the frosty wind blows stiff,
Subtracting leaves from a high branch,
The cold clouds, looking like nothing in this world
Keep company with my wishes,
which keep their own time.
(Hong Ren, Inscribed Poems)

It is worth noting that Wang Qing has tried mightily to keep the two chief ills of modern painting from creeping into his work, namely foreign modishness and political iconography. However, he has his kind of shell. Whether one calls it conceptualism or emotionalism, it is there in his paintings, precluding anything that belongs to this era. His *dasein*, having been made to look old, resists the noisiness of present reality; he evokes his own moody, rootless sensibility, yet it strikes one as indifferent and contrived as if lacking the true flavor of an individual life.

In *Blooming Flames*, he identified the root of his affliction. In this rare piece that survives from a period of self-doubt, though he adheres to his preferred motifs, colors, and mood, there is an intensity not seen in previous works. The two burning piles, one near and one far, carry an implicit apprehensiveness. The turned-away figure standing still beside the pond reminds me of *Man in a Washroom* by Rene Magritte. In that painting the male figure is turned away from the viewer, facing himself in the mirror, but the image in the mirror also shows him from behind. The pond in *Blooming Flames* is reminiscent of that mirror. The painter stands near the water gazing at himself, brought to an agonizing pass by his self-knowledge; as hopelessness tugs at him, he wonders if he would not be better off consigning his past self to flames.

Cutting the Gordian knot will bring relief for a moment, or perhaps such an act can only be proclaimed ritualistically, symbolically in a picture. Over the long term, the self that attempts this needs to be aware of fixed patterns in one's feelings. For Wang Qing, perhaps the problem lay in an overly vitiated, beaten-down attitude into which he fell and could not extricate himself. This was a far cry from actually revealing one's spiritual homesickness or the wounded human condition. That would have required him to give up excessive brooding and narcissism, to transcend the past through transformative acts. By doing so he could allow different objects to speak in different modes, instead of subsuming them under a grayish color scheme. To a certain extent, this change would amount to an acceptance of the world's objective character. The scenery is not merely an indicator of mood, and it would begin to tell the story of its existence, to speak of what makes up the present human condition.

Fire is a symbol of rebirth. Unlike Narcissus's self-obsessed drowning, fire suggests a resolve to break with the past; for Wang Qing, it signals a new push forward. His newer works have a variable color scheme, and he replaces his habitual fussy brushwork with patches of color, allowing him to present images with a strong emotional effect. The huge slope along the highway is lit by the hazy yellowish light of sunset; on the flanks of the slope are cracks that suggest that the world itself is marked by exposed wounds and wrinkles. In a corner of the city, a tableau of figures shows under red lamplight in a dramatic reference to our memories of a red-colored childhood. At a higher spot where night has fallen, one group has a chance to look up at stars twinkling in a glimmery cerulean sky. On this side of a stream, across from a water tower on the other bank, a man is stooping to pick at something between the tracks. The moment has an expansive calm, and one can almost imagine the sigh of wind blowing across the picture. His treatment of snow is no longer completely dismal, for now, the sun's rays give it an arresting glow. Like these new pieces, it has palpable volume and admixed elements that can carry and relate more content of memory. Thus we can see that Wang Qing has changed. The wistful gazer is perhaps still there in the painting, but he is no longer a reflection of the painter himself. Between the gazer and the painter, a distance of feeling has arisen. The latter is more composed, less given to display; his view of the gazer is like an observation of his past self. Moreover, his line of sight looks past the gazer and fixes on the human world that was once blocked by this turned-away figure.

As for composition, Wang Qing has always had a penchant for capturing slices of observation. The picture may be fixed like a zoom shot in a movie, or it may be a passing glimpse caught by a sweeping lens. He finds source images and details in real-world scenes, mixes them with memories and fantasies, and then reconfigures them into a picture. This reminds me of Antonioni's film *Blow-Up*, in which the male lead repeatedly magnified scenic photos of a park, trying to get to the bottom of a case. For each of us, life is genuine but at the same time hollow; life's meaning is like a riddle waiting to be solved, or perhaps a riddle that cannot be solved. However, only through the ceaseless process of magnifying, of coming closer, can we gain true insight into its genuineness and hollowness. In the end, we may find that the solution to the riddle may lie in the

scenery on the riddle's surface. In one recent piece, Wang Qing presents a memorable scene. From a downward-looking angle, he depicts a monkey island in a park. This magnified corner of the park is like the unfathomed, puzzling labyrinth of life itself. Within it, a few monkeys move about and seek each other in a lowly yet steadfast tribe.

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