

The Empty-Full, Light-Heavy and Transparent Tempera

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In the history of art, academism was an object that modernists who prided themselves on their avant-garde souls resisted and rebelled against, and it was even despised by formalists like Clement Greenberg as the very incarnation of triteness and conservatism. The same is true with China where most artists, who have taken systematic training in art academies, are reluctant to associate themselves with “academism” although the ever expanding and evolving connotation of “the contemporary (art)” has long reconciled with academism, the old “enemy” of contemporary art.

Academism, once abandoned and deprecated, has never been absent from the scene of “contemporary (art)”. Today the boundary between contemporary art and academism has been increasingly blurred, not to mention the constant evolution and regeneration of academicism itself. It is during such evolution and self-regeneration that many anti-academics avant-garde artists were drawn to the camp of the so-called “academicism”. As a result, academicism is not only an enemy in theory or a supposed opponent to contemporary art, but more importantly the foundation and source of nutrients for the practices of many artists. This is particularly true for the world of painting as many artists who adopt paintings as their major medium of artistic expression apparently become increasingly indifferent to their own categorization, whatever “contemporary” or “academic” it may be. Their attitude to art no longer precedes their practices but has been instead habitually internalized in their own system of discourse. A case in point is Xia Yu.

While a graduate from the Third Studio, Department of Oil Painting, the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Xia Yu had a brief desire to be movie producer and actually spent some time studying movie directing and photography. He, however, gave up movies and returned to his own career path in painting which, in his own comments afterwards, “has greater appeals to me”. After a brief initial period of confusion and uncertainties, he opted for tempera, and the option was, to some extent, out of realistic strategic consideration as experimentations that appeal purely to paints are still rare. Meanwhile he was also keenly aware of the necessity of finding the path less traveled in order not to become a counterpart or an uncreative follower of such masters in use of oil paints as Liu Xiaodong, Yu Hong and so on, even tempera was then a totally new subject for him. Besides, seen from the perspective of aesthetics and style, the mystery and symbolization of tempera techniques has also been attractive, which remains a space of possibilities to be delved into. Even so far, he still cannot figure out where such an attempt will lead to— to a dead end perhaps. Nevertheless, the way the Third Studio teachers observe daily life and shape their forms does exerted some influence on Xia Yu, and spiritually the teachers and the student are congenial. That’s why, what Xia Yu describes are usually the scenes and corners of mundane life or the memories and life caught in old photos. He distinguishes from his teacher-generation artists (like Liu Xiaodong) in that he never intends to resort to a specific concept or a grand project but has always been fascinated by the medium-perceiving itself, or more exactly how to capture and sculpt the moment of viewing and feeling in daily life. This draws him closer to the early Liu Xiaodong.

Tempera is not an ancient technique lost today, nor a paint that has been totally superseded by oil, acrylic paints, etc. Instead, it's still one of the necessary courses especially within academic systems to impart knowledge and skills, as well as a technique taken by some artists. Two years ago, I made a brief analysis and review on Xia Yu's painting of tempera in the article "Images, Memories and the Light-and-Shadow of Tempera", without rendering the fact that the First Oil Painting Studio of the Central Academy of Fine Arts has established tempera, this classic technique of painting as a compulsory course. Although tempera has been studied and practiced by few students, it's still certain that the practice of Chao Ge, a teacher of the First Studio has indirectly influenced and inspired Xia Yu in one way or another. Of course, Chao Ge's works are classical obviously, while Xia Yu's interest seems have been mostly drawn to the application of technique and medium. Even to me, what Xia Yu, whose paintings have apparently been touched by the Giotto's and Masaccio's classicism, has been wary of or trying to get rid of is precisely the classicism and opacity seen in Chao Ge's painting.

If tempera can be seen as an origin of Xia Yu's practice, ink and its transparency must be another source of his style. This explains the most fundamental difference between him and classical tempera painters, and also the difference between him and Andrew Wyeth, Antonio Lopez, Balthus, Eduardo Naranjo—a small number of Western artists who started their tempera experimentation very early and still hang in there today. At this point, we can date back to Tian Liming, professor of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (now serving at Chinese National Academy of Arts). Regardless of whether Xia Yu has directly followed the suit of Tian Liming, at least the mottled light-and-shadow changes and the transparency in his images—such as the new work "Youth" (2017), "In the Forest" (2017) reveal a style relevance to and an aesthetic similarity with Tian Liming's works. But for Xia Yu, the key issue is how to reconcile the relationship between tempera's materiality and ink's transparency.

In the end of 2017, Xia Yu's show "Orchard" was held at Hive Center for Contemporary Art, making it his third show held at Hive, after 2014's "New Youth" and 2015's "Narrative". As always, Xia Yu carries on his "unique" technique of tempera, takes the transparency of ink as reference, striving to hone a particular aesthetic framework sitting between image and form as well as between vision and medium. From the choice of the object depicted, to the painting method of tempera, he gives his pictures a unique sense of materiality and substantiality. Although he deliberately has flattened the image in his description, the physical and non-transparent attributes of tempera make it difficult to dissolve the layers and structures of the image. That's why he boldly refers to the surface qualities of ink and experiments on a sense of transparency and of ethereality. For Xia Yu, it is undoubtedly challenging to combine these two incompatible. It needs to be explained that by taking ink as a reference, I mean that he uses tempera materials to deliver an ink-like effect and texture rather than that he directly applies ink medium. That is to say, what he draws from ink is not the parts related to brush-application or brushwork, on the contrary he even intentionally removes the marks of brushes.

An important distinction needs to be noted here, Xia Yu doesn't paint human figures in the exactly same pictorial style as he paints materials. His sculpturing of humans conveys an obvious style of Medieval portraiture. The stiff, mechanical and dull portraits, or the whole body, and the figures depicted, are mostly with small eyes, little mouth, big nose and large face, just like what shown in his new works "Sister and Brother" (2017), "Two People Series" (2017), etc., with facial expressions, emotions and sense of flesh taken away, but leaving blank yet hesitant eyes to betray possible secrets hidden behind. The images reconciled in light gray tone are different from the tempera paintings created in the Middle Age and early Renaissance since no clearly-defined contours can be found in the former, but even so the figures' structures are still legible. The sense of ink does not completely penetrate the tempera, but at least a sense of translucency has been rendered. In contrast, when creating items, buildings and landscapes in the works such as "Peanut Shell" (2017), "Watermelon" (2017), "Apple Orchard" (2017), etc., where most modellings are made by himself without quoting any counterparts in art history, he demonstrates a "self-poised" expression more smoothly and freely. Whether the background and the objects, or the paints and the shapes, all combine into an integrity, so the paintings appear like a semi-abstract plane or a visual complex that somehow also retains the basic structure of the image motif.

Driven by the materiality of the medium, or by his own inclination, Xia Yu abandons the smooth textures and layers in his description, where the "homogeneous" masses have become the basic modules of the images and the shapes. This undermines the sense of pictorial depth, highlights the textuality of the images, and gives life to a subtle distance between the seen/or the seeing and the real-life scenes. As mentioned above, Xia Yu's paintings usually depict the ordinary scenes and corners in mundane life, and the distance as well as the strangeness between the figures just mirror the same case often encountered in life. However, it's precisely this sense of distance and the sculpturing of tempera and the symbolization of objects produce a clever isomorphic relation. As a constant technique adopted by the artist, "rubbing" cancels the purity of paints and tempers them into the composition of shades, emptiness-and-fullness and "grayscale", which guarantees the unified integrity of the painting and implies a special quality, (semi-opaque) transparency and a light-and-shadow system. It has followed the typical structure of form-analyzing, and reconstructed the demarcation between "contour" and "painterly" in a dialectical method. Just like in most cases, painterliness doesn't dissolve the contour, but sculpts a new kind of contour based on "space-leaving" or "negative form", which simultaneously has been built into a different system of light-and-shadow that esteems light as the contour, and it's the light-and-shadow that shapes the figures and materials in the painting. Obviously, this "light contour" further highlights the sense of ink and transparency. Thereby, it has not only followed, but also broken the framework of form-analyzing that differentiates "contour" from "painterly" or "diversity" from "integrity".

Needless to say that owing to this "particular" painting technique, the modelling of figure-and-material remains sculpturally solid, steady and heavy, and forms with its ink-like pale, light and ethereally transparent lights and shadows a visual contrast and a harmonious compatibility. It really doesn't matter whether the ink-like effect here has been influenced by Tian Liming, as it may be something accidental, plus the intention of the artist doesn't lie here, or I'd rather put it this way that these two practices are the

two sides of the atheistic idea or tonality that praises handling the weighty in an easy manner. It's also worth mentioning that, much of his time has been worn away by running and polishing his images, which may be taken as a kind of weight, and, not the parameter the artist really concerns though, does form a contrast against the abovementioned visual perceptions. That is, the seemingly light images actually are loaded with weights (including the physical properties of the mediums like paint and panel or canvas) beyond imagination. His recent images especially, which feature objects (figures and materials) interspersed with the background, have become much more sophisticated, and while resorting to flatness has opened more interweaving dimensions of space.

In "Swimming" (2017), Xia Yu depicts the side view of a pool—derived from a picture perhaps, water ripples, human bodies in water and have been smartly integrated into the faces of tempera, and on this basis, he collages and overlays several dark green blocks against the original perspective space, breaking the integrity of the painting, pulling our gazes out of the real life, and generating a visual disturbance with this abstract formal dislocation. In "Sunset" (2017), the light-and-shadow seen in between the head of the left woman and the sun-like yellow round mass behind her is another smart design. Moreover, this area, together with the semi-circular gray mass on the left and the green ball in the lower right corner conceals a triangle, to guarantee the stability of the internal pictorial structure. It is worth mentioning that, the left women's clothing and the lower left corner of the footpath, have been constructed with similarly color hues and patches, and the path alone looks like the shadow of the human body. Such a visual choreography includes both deliberate arrangements and unexpected surprises.

In another interesting piece "Tiger Mountain Park"(2017), image motifs maintain a unified visual and spatial relationship, but a closer glance will suggest that they may have been "collaged". The ocher boulder in the foreground and the distant mountains in the background have been symbolized by the artist, and it's almost impossible to identify the tallest peak in the front out of the wall if there were no hint of the curved green roof tiles. The same structure has also been applied in the wall with text reading "虎山公园"(Tiger Mountain Park) and the mountains connected to it. Among the more prominent and more surrealistic light-beam-like white bars, the largest one parallel with the left wall forms an empty-and-full relationship with the wall, while the two white bars horizontally scattered on the right can be seen as a metaphor of light, and as intangible counterparts of the steps in lower left corner. Another related work is "Two Tigers" (2017), where shadowy light patches and the spots of tiger and of tree trunks have created the same structure of emptiness-and-fullness, or it can even be said that the diffused light beams and the light columns and patches dominate the painting. Interestingly, in "In the Forest"(2017), "Seeing the Mountains I"(2017), the emptiness-and fullness relationship between the floating clouds and the tree trucks have been reversed as the clouds become some substantial entity while trees have been blurred into light straps. Comparatively speaking, the most typical work that almost exerts this idea to the extreme is still "Apple Orchard", where we can hardly identify the image motif. Even so, the painting is still charged with vitality in calmness. Perhaps this visual and aesthetic structure grounded on the difference between emptiness and fullness, between brightness and darkness as well as between lightness and heaviness has

precisely been inspired by ink painting (Tian Liming's ink paintings for instance). It is also at this point that he has distanced himself from Lopez and Balthus.

As shown in “One Family”(2017), “Sunset”, “Spring Tour II” (2017), “Summer in Heiqiao” (2017), etc., not all images fit or “adapt to” this consistent painting technique he gets accustomed to, so the choice of image motifs or the option of the scenarios depicted become particularly important, and in these cases through his capture and reconfiguration, the motifs and scenes release a natural, tranquil and desirable temperature in memories or in dreams. These works continue the artist's realistic approach, but the recent pieces (like the abovementioned “Swimming”, “Sunset”, “Tiger Mountain Park”, etc.) demonstrates an obvious change, where the steady order of viewing and the stable schematic logic start to loosen, or almost get disintegrated in some images (“Apple Orchard” for instance). Just in the process, Xia Yu begins to try some more subtle visual grammars and perception sentence patterns, making the inherent pictorial structure more sophisticated. At this point, it seems that tempera is no longer the factor dominating the aesthetic structure of his painting, and he is also reluctant to be labeled as a pure medium experimenter. Therefore, on the one hand, he is still using the physical properties and symbolization of tempera—this special medium, and on the other hand, he turns to the sense of ink or transparency, or the exploration in vision and schematic rhetoric to get rid of the shackles of the medium. Or, at this stage—or even in a long time in the future, the confrontation with the medium has been and will be one of the subjects of his experimentation.