

Visitors from Afar: On Duan Jianwei's Art

by

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Many would find some similarity between Duan Jianwei and the figures in his paintings. Indeed, almost all figures in Duan Jianwei's art over the past few decades can be characterized by oval, even facial lines, wheat complexion and small and long eyes. One dominant and recurrent image in his painting is "farmer" and figures built on it live, work, play games or do nothing, silently, in all seasons. As a matter of fact, Duan Jianwei, from a family of intellectuals, has never lived any rural life immersively; he just goes back from time to time to the rural hometown which was inhabited by his ancestors. But, all along, Duan Jianwei's been keeping watchful distance from the city and insisting on his instinctive affinity for rural life. This is not the only case among artists born in the 1960s, so, along with many peer artists, Duan Jianwei started painting about rural life when still rather confused about the world. Over a few decades, a series of refinements and evolutions have brought great change to something about his art that seemed unchangeable. In the recent decade, particularly, Duan Jianwei's early intuitive selection on rural life has clearly transformed to a space-time view with solid inner logic, which transcends space and time, and form and spirit. And, through proficient and meticulous techniques, his recent paintings provide an ingenious and hardly discernible perspective on reality and history and lead viewers into his autonomous realm which is out of his own hands, feels both familiar and strange and transcends "rural life".

In sociologist Fei Xiaotong's *Earthbound China* published before PRC, he makes a precise analysis of the farming civilization a huge agricultural country practiced for generations before the robust rise of modernization. One can find in it the kind of relationship built on blood and geopolitics and a society ruled by etiquette that values conventions more than legal principles, and may be further reminded of the cultural soil Duan Jianwei has set for the figures in his paintings. What he does, however, is neither imitating ancient cultural tradition nor making simple copies of current rural life; what he paints about is neither a pure rural society nor a modern one coated with rural features; and the figures in his paintings are neither based on concrete real individuals nor made out of pure imagination – they are shadows that reflect some aspects of reality and grow steadily, slowly somewhere along his journey of art.

It's quite obvious that Duan Jianwei takes a naturalist attitude when handling the relationship between people and land. In his *Clouds*, a tall and humble figure is standing between the sky and the earth, and is as quiet and calm as other figures Duan's been painting. With his feet rooted in the earth, the young man in question carries on his shoulder a heavy burden that gets him closer, however, to the freedom in the sky; neither an insignificant individual that worships the God of land in traditional culture nor the embodiment of any modern spirit above nature, he fuses with everything into one and, in a surreal, harmonious and equal relation, emphasizes the dialogue between individual life and nature. In this sense, the land is not simply the external environment but more the core of certain social order, and the relationship between people and land is more about the social relations between people on the land.

In recent years, we can see a refocus in Duan Jianwei's art on the depiction of dual figures, which can perfectly reflect his insights into the blood, clan and intergenerational relationships between the figures. His *Bei Quan Temple I* and *Two Girls* depict respectively a mother and son and a pair of sisters; the former two, each with a package in hand, are walking side by side at a same pace, while the latter two are rambling hand in hand and talking to each other. It's not hard to find in the two pieces many details that show how the figures connect emotionally to each other, and what's important is that it's not intimacy but the keeping of a decent sense of propriety, a close yet self-restraint relationship and the respect for seniority without classifying people as superior and inferior. Noteworthy is that we cannot find any images of old people in Duan Jianwei's work of all the years, despite the children, teenagers, young people and adults that feature in different stages of his art. In a rural society underlain by historical reality, seniors are the embodiment and defenders of local customs and rites, so the absence of this group of people may justify that the autonomous universe in Duan Jianwei's painting unveils a surreal social atmosphere that hasn't been reached but can be recalled.

As far as Duan Jianwei's concerned, what to paint is as important as how to paint, and the two are complementary and indispensable to each other. Over the years, Duan Jianwei has maintained the habit of sketching from nature, and when leaving the metropolis for the countryside in Central China, his perception of time often adjusts to different references. The momentary movements of his figures, in a process of continual accumulation, then condense into postures with a sense of eternity and sense of form, and end up the dominant parts of his paintings. Besides painting from nature, Duan Jianwei also likes photographing some scenes and human movements with more instantaneity, so that such photos and freehand sketches can be his raw materials for later use in art-making. In rare cases, these "prototypes" obtained accidentally would turn directly into models for oil painting. In more cases, Duan Jianwei would disassemble, select, transform and blend the images of these figures and work them into a draft appropriate for the final painting. These preparations, crucial for the making of art, depend on the artist's long-term accumulation of visual experience and literary attainments and, more importantly, perhaps, on his earlier learning from and studying of early Renaissance painting and the aesthetic standards thus developed.

In the 1980s and 1990s when foreign art resources were flooding into China, the works by some early Renaissance masters intrigued Duan Jianwei in no time because, perhaps, they are products that marry Byzantine Culture and the movement of reviving the ancient Greek spirit in the stage of cultural and artistic transition at the junction of old and new dynasties. Before the maturity of the laws of perspective and the replacement of rather flat figure modeling by bodies in perfect proportion, most works from the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, as they show, are more otherworldly and lofty. Just as in the case of statues from the North Wei Dynasty, they are highly regarded in that they can be traced back to the aesthetic influence from the Western Regions and even Greece. Hybrid cultural fruits are all filled, unusually, with natural primitive vitality and can give later generations infinite room of exploration.

In many ways, no doubt, early Renaissance painting has influenced Duan Jianwei's later practice of art. Indigo and pink - the noble colors of saints' attire are widely applied to the clothing of rural

people; the certain postures and expressions of religious figures can also be altered to depict the daily life of all humanity. What's most important, nevertheless, is that Duan Jianwei has inherited the certain feel of time. The sacredness of religious painting lies mostly in the freezing of figures: a moment is eternal and eternity is the present. In conformity with Duan Jianwei's observation and understanding in real life, the duality of time hidden in classical painting, when imparted to the ordinary figures in Duan's world of painting, can better demonstrate such dual characteristics as momentary and perpetual, worldly and sacred, and down-to-earth and aloof from the world.

Duan Jianwei would often choose to work on some motifs in classical painting and develop a different mood of his era with a personal touch. His *Holding a Baby* can directly remind one of the classic theme of "Virgin Mary". In the piece, the symbolism of the modest, gentle mother holding her baby in her arms is explicit, and the female figure beside who's reaching for the baby can also remind one of saintesses in religious painting. With a sense of ceremony though, the dynamics of the figures adds to the atmosphere with an eternal sense, giving subtle drama to such a daily-life scene. In another work of his, *Three Teenagers*, the three teenagers sitting cross-legged seem to be enjoying the leisure time after labor and, analogically, the time seems to be stretched to a state of eternity. Like the way Duan Jianwei's been taking in modeling, the figures in his paintings seem to be a group of abstract representatives, most with a shapely posture, a medium build, a face without too many expressions and a life that seems never to wither. As Fei Xiaotong puts it, the "present" of everybody not only includes his own "past" projection but also that of the entire nation. In this sense, every figure in Duan Jianwei's painting can perhaps be seen as a metaphor and distillate of a certain national spirit.

Plain or simple though the composition is as Duan Jianwei's painting depicts mostly one, two or three figures, there's never any lack of narrative. Unlike literature, painting should not be reduced to the illustration of or supplement to any text, and what's brilliant about Duan Jianwei is that he can skillfully manipulate the sight of his figure, which, as an invisible bridge, can help construct the visual structure and narrative of a work. His work *Cutting Branches* depicts a scene that features a family of three, which is rare in his art, and the three figures in it are looking different ways: the father is staring at the branch to be cut, the mother looking at him from a distance and the child beside her playing with a branch already cut off with head down. Without dramatic movements or exaggerated expressions, a core of family ties is outlined only by coordinating the sights of the figures, which helps complete the narrative.

This is only one of the many functions of the sight, and it even consists of three dimensions: the viewer before the painting, the figure in the painting and his inner world. Duan Jianwei's *Playing the Flute* is inspired by Manet's *Fifer*, so we can see their postures are the same, and the fifes, like a token that transcends time, can connect two different systems of civilization and art. The boy in the painting is looking out of the painting, and even gently beyond the viewers, which seems to imply that he's immersed in the depths of his stream of consciousness, or an inner universe far away from reality. Whatever direction of the sight, the figures in Duan Jianwei's painting all have a meditating face, as if they had never been trapped in any trivialities and been searching inward for an ideal world that they're longing for.

As Duan Jianwei once described, the process of painting is “like boxing where you should never lavish your power, you should keep it and give it out slowly”. In the case of Duan Jianwei, we can truly see him in his painting, not the kind of similarity on the surface but more the sameness in releasing power slowly outward. Over the past decade, Duan Jianwei has improved his mastery of the distance between painting and reality and been dancing with an extremely subtle nature of existence. No fan of any vividness that aims to please, he cares more about sharing the lingering warmth of his life through art. For this strange and also familiar world of painting built by Duan, everybody else may be a visitor from afar to explore a hometown he’s never been to and which may never exist for real either.