

Order Reconstruction

By Ping Jie

Innovators of ink often have two orientations of value: look inward and look outward. People who look inward pay attention to traditional subversion and innovation, while people who look outward pay attention to the connection and achievements within the history of contemporary art. Inward looking artists disregard Western art, and their works exhibit an oriental aesthetic mood that the literati is fond of. Outward looking artists, on the other hand, try to seek consensus and resonance from an international art stage while their works present both the purity of artistic body and the mystery of Oriental charm. Although the two are not completely disconnected, an ink artist's value orientation has a consequential impact on his artistic direction.

Whether it is looking in or looking out, innovation of art always encompasses a lineage of heritage and reconstruction. The former triggers a leap of the Chinese art history, whereas the latter integrates with contemporary art history. Most importantly, the artists are always sticklers of their own ideas and never become 'the others' (losing themselves). We can see traces of appropriation and reference in the works of contemporary art masters, but they are not indeed 'captured' by those elements they looked into.

In mid-1980s, New York minimalist master Brice Marden's style suddenly turned in favor of abstract expression. He created the piece <Han Shan Research 1-35> (1988-1990) based on his study of the Chinese Tang Dynasty poet monk Hanshan's work. In this piece Brice Marden uses calligraphic strokes at liberty in regard of the cursive script. He has been engrossed and working tirelessly in this style. Critics of New York note that the influence of Asian calligraphy on abstract expressionism has been prevalent from the 1940s to the 1980s, referring to the writing style of Marden, in "Marden, Michael Mazur and Pat, and the works of these artists illustrate that East Asian art persisted to inspire this new spiritual abstract painting." (1)

Among the artists of the New York School of Painting, only Marden is an abstract master of both rationalism and emotional painting. His explosive and reserved abstractions represent opposite ends of his art spectrum from different periods. The pattern of Marden shows the Western culture's logic, clear structural frame and strict schema tendencies. His

two styles cannot be confounded. The former is rational, solemn, precise and perfunctory; the latter is emotional, passionate, fluid and spontaneous. The greatness of Marden is that, forty years after the abstract expressionist movement has passed its heyday, the spirit of his work still enlightens us to discover and innovate.

In 2009, the Chinese artist Zhang Zhaohui entered the ink art scene with a refreshing style that distinguished him from the usual academic circle. Compared to other artists, Zhang Zhaohui's early art training was enriched by multi-disciplinary studies and experiences that afforded more cultural substance (noted by Xu Bing as a process to cultivate an artist's 'nutritional background'). Although he aspired to study Chinese painting and calligraphy as a young adult, Zhang Zhaohui went on to study Museology at university followed by eight years of working in the China Art Museum and three years of art curatorial studies in the United States. The immersive experience included perception, extraction, and inspiration from the Western contemporary art and traditional art, which lays an important foundation for Zhang creating new art.

During his earlier phase, Zhang attempted to produce a sequence of landscapes, with different levels of grayish curvaceous lines used to describe traditional landscape. Yet, his real evolution is the use of a series of central stroke sequences to conjure minimalism and light effect. It is meaningful that he picked up both ends of Marden's spectrum, and combined the emotional linear writing with the rational sequence laws to carry out order reconstruction. In the logic of Western thinking, these two approaches seem impossible to be integrated as they are from two different worlds and each embodies the purity of its own creative realm. In Zhang's work, both elements are bound seamlessly, an invigorating development in abstract art. Contrary to Marton, Zhang successfully brought abstraction back to ink by melding Eastern form and Western concept. His works break through the traditional spheres of ink painting and abstract expression.

Take a comparative look into the orders established by these two artists. We see that both occurred during deliberations of infusing and integrating different cultures.

For Zhang Zhaohui, the inspiration originated from lines reflected by a mirror (Zhang has used mirror materials to do human behavior arts, inspired by flowing lines reflected by external reflections on surfaces).

Cultural framework: Chinese philosophy and ink culture

Educational and intellectual background: History of Chinese and Western Art

Vision and personal preference: Minimalism, Western Modern and Contemporary Art.

For Brice Marden, the inspiration originated from Asian Calligraphy (in 1983, he was dazzled by “Japanese Calligraphy Masters of the 8th to 19th Centuries”, an exhibition of Japanese imperial court culture, literati and Zen calligraphy, held at the Asian Museum and the Japanese Museum in New York).

Cultural framework: the logic of Western philosophy, and Minimalism

Educational and intellectual background: Eastern and Western Art Culture, and Music

Vision and personal preference: Asian art and cursive calligraphy.

This analogy is set to illustrate that the premise of triggering artistic variation is the ability artists possess to accept and appropriate cultures, as well as adding depth to their visions. This instantaneous collision of information (thrusted by accumulated energy), propels these artists to see new lights in art creation.

Among the artists of the New York School of Paintings I studied, many of them are influenced by Asian art, but they tend to focus only on the flow of ink structure, which is called “calligraphy strokes” by William Seitz. (2) The rhyme of gray ink was largely neglected; and as a result, the artists' will for deep learning in eastern ink traditions had been compromised. Modern art focuses on the impact and black and white effect of visual form. Although these artists use ink and brush, very few experimented with handmade paper, which is a medium that often leads to unexpected and fascinating results, when used in connection with brush and ink.

Even if they use ink, New York artists used it as appetizers (sketches, small works, brushstrokes), never as entrees. It is surprising that by merely lending strokes, Asian calligraphy became an important source of nutrients and inspiration to abstract expression in the 1940s and 50s. Each artist takes what he needs regardless of reference or diversion. When they decide to utilize ink, they can immediately find their own styles of art (differed by each artist's background and evolution). They successfully composed a spectacular chapter in the history of modern art, which became the second peak of the abstract

movement since Kandinsky and Mondrian.

The black-and-white effects and brushstroke structure that New York artists learned from calligraphy, is consistent with minimalism's hard edge principle and visual impact, which left a vast gray space for successors of abstract ink to explore.

In Zhang Zhaohui's oeuvre, water is the protagonist: it determines the level and halation of the color gray. Ink is divided by water into 5 colors (N-color). Water is given by nature spiritually, and is the main source of energy to connect a painting with the infinite space beyond the frame. In Zhang Zhaohui's realm of new order, the kinetic energy of reconstruction lies precisely in the development and utilization of water as an art medium. "In my opinion, 'water' is the most essential factor in ink painting. The performative nature and aesthetic value of water can be effectively perceived only when we view ink paintings from a metaphysical level." (3)

Compared with rational perfunctory lines, Zhang Zhaohui's use of central brush strokes are emotional, orderly and rhythmical. They are expressive of the feelings in Eastern tradition and devoid of absolute rationality or sensibility. Zhang's work presents a world of light with intricate gray color gradation, resonating with structure in a true Eastern rhyme. Zhang Zhaohui expanded this oriental character that was neglected by the Western art world, evoking feelings from people in different cultures through a space of gray.

The balance of space and light in Zhang Zhaohui's work introduces a new order to abstract art. The brilliance, however, lies in neither sensibility nor rationality, but in the artist leaving space for the magic effect to form where gray lines intersect on xuan paper.

If we reduce Zhang Zhaohui's work to minimalism's hard lines, even if it keeps the purity of gray, it becomes a third party, indifferent from lacking its spiritual and emotional components. Zhang's works have built an entanglement of divinity and humanity, an integration of sensibility and rationality, and a convergence of abstract space and inner world, transcending the consensus of culture, geography and race.

Compared with the optical effects of rational light, that is often straightforward, dazzling,

solitary and stimulating, Zhang's light is richer, more delicate, multi-dimensional and Oriental. Look at its modality: sometimes as solemn and silence; sometimes as flying between construction space; sometimes as lingering gentle; sometimes as sharp and direct; sometimes as a meteor passing by; sometimes as undulating ripples.

This is not deliberately showing or depicting light, but a sequence of gray and a spatial trace that different rhythms and dimensions left behind. In respect to aesthetic characters of Chinese art, it is necessary to have both water and brush in the gray. Water marks by a brush are essential elements to a painting's structural frame, structure is not ink, but strokes. In the New York school of painting, strokes and ink (black) are confounded as one; in Eastern ink, light ink (gray) strokes can alone become the mainstay of a picture.

Zhang Zhaohui's visual language has evolved along with his exploration of pureness and essence. "Ink innovation should present the classicality of contemporary art, while classicality is necessary for cultural accumulation and variation. Ink innovation is adhering to the source of both Eastern and Western civilizations. It converges with the global movement of conceptual art and living experiences of the Chinese people. Ink, therefore, has the chance to be used for creating contemporary art classics."⁽⁴⁾

In the history of abstract art, Malevich and Mondrian's experimentations were to continually summarize, reduce, compress and simplify the object, eventually deducing the minimal and limit of geometry. Zhang Zhaohui has brought suppleness in the hard-edged territory of minimalism. He unfolded the gray area of minimalism's color gamut layer by layer, using traditional and classic strokes to write every line. Conquering the unyielding with the yielding, stacked gray through the light, he makes gray lines to exude a pure spirit and temperament. As Suzuki Roshi's introduction of ink lines in New York pointed out: "It mysteriously wanders in the dark side of the points, lines and different structures, as well as in the rhythm of its breath."⁽⁵⁾

Zhang Zhaohui's order reconstruction has a connection with another modern Chinese painter, Liu Guosong. Liu brought up the slogan, "revolution against central brush" in the 1960s, which made a great impact on traditional calligraphy and painting. That is, to no longer use traditional central strokes to draw the landscape, and start using homemade

straw pulp paper to draw mountains by the blank texture left when lifting the paper's grass tendons. For Liu Guosong, it is undoubtedly a dead end to continue using traditional brushwork and xuan paper. Indeed, Liu Guosong's revolutionary change made his work refreshing.

History moves in a spiral. The traditional paper and brush that Liu Guosong distained from, gain vitality in Zhang Zhaohui's hands. Zhang upholds traditional central strokes and adheres to traditional xuan paper. By the reconstruction of ink order, Zhang Zhaohui's series of ink works of light effect convincingly constructed a purely abstract and rational world of gray ink. Liu Guosong is an inward looking artist, Zhang Zhaohui is an outward looking artist; they position differently thus hold completely different views on art.

Hence, we face the proposition anew: is ink innovation a challenge for the ink and brush or for the conception?

If we look outward, we will find that the writing of contemporary art history has changed dramatically since the 1990s, and because of internet, the flow of information is no longer impeded by geography or time. Interaction and immersion of different cultures has become a part of our lives. It is no longer important to categorize artists and works by schools of style. Artist individuals, art conception and innovation of art language have become the protagonists of art evolution. More and more minority artists join the center; they do not represent any particular country or culture but are international artists with their own cultural blood. Their work is a visual language that can be read universally. No one cares if you have just revolutionized against 'central brush'; people only care if your final solution can be shared and accepted. Contemporary art creation comes with a nature to transcend national borders. It does not regulate tools and materials but only concerns about the innovation of conception and art language.

In the past few years, Zhang Zhaohui's works have been exhibited from Japan, to Europe, to the United States. What has touched the hearts of audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds is the contemporary spirit of oriental charm evident in Zhang Zhaohui's works. No need for translation or explanation, contemporary art is a consensus based on sharing of material, technology and culture. It belongs not only to individuals, but also humanity.

2017.6 finished in Hovey Garden

Note: 1.2. "Frontier of Contemporary Art Theory: American
Avant-Garde Art and Zen" P71

3.4. Artist notes

5. (Cited from "Chinese calligraphy to stimulate the
germination of modern art?" Modouyu, Web Article 2016- 11-26)