

The Deep Game: New Chinese Abstraction

In both Chinese and English, the word abstract or 抽象 (*chou xiang*) etymologically means to *draw out* or *separate*¹ which, in art, means to separate the formal dimension of a work of art from its overtly representational function. Despite this transcultural similarity in the derivation of the terms, the reasons Chinese artists have for making this separation naturally proceed from China's own distinctive conditions; and, like most things Chinese, they have indigenous precedents from a remote past.

With birth of the Chinese Contemporary Art movement in the 1980s, two outstanding complementary features distinguished Chinese artistic production and have continued to do so since the movement has entered the world stage. Of these, the first is that Contemporary Chinese Art is socially engaged. When Tang Song was arrested for holding the pistol fired in performance at the China Avant-Garde show at the National Museum of China in 1989, he was photographed laughing, but the next time shots were heard in Beijing four months later, no one was laughing.

If the new art movement had an incipient tendency to social engagement then, the events of June 4, 1989, elevated this tendency to an inviolable moral imperative that recalls that of the writer, Lu Xun (1881-1936), who abandoned his medical education on the grounds that it was more important to use artistic literature to cure the more fundamental illnesses afflicting society.²

"I have no gun, but I can use art like a gun," said Tang Song more recently, "I may not live to see my work change society, but art can live longer."³ With such a history, Contemporary Chinese Art by definition was and remains socially engaged no matter how overt or discreet such engagement chooses to manifest itself. This is no less true of contemporary Chinese abstraction, however subtle its means.

The great Chinese artists are well aware that the risk of artistic social engagement is to fall into the very sort of propagandizing whose manifestations in art their own aesthetic was, among its diverse aims, calculated to repudiate. Perhaps this was one reason why so much of the figurative art associated with the early stages of the movement—e.g. paintings by Yue Minjun, Zhang Xiaogang, Zeng Fanzhi, Yan Lei, not mention countless others—was also readable as a critique of Socialist-Realism. But these works came to prominence at a moment when Socialist Realism, an imposed adaptation of a foreign Soviet style, was still a vivid memory. Now

¹ To many readers it will be obvious that Chinese expression appends the character for *image* (象 *xiang*).

² "Preface to 'A Call to Arms'" in *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun [Lu Xun]*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1960, 1972. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, tr. Originally published as 《呐喊》自序, 北大新潮社, 1922

³ In conversation with the author, Hangzhou, March, 2011.

that this time has passed, artists logically have come to see the potential for abstraction to become a vehicle for access to sources from the distinctive aesthetic necessities of Chinese culture.

To this end, many artists instinctively have returned to the native Chinese medium of ink and brush, often to use the historical associations of the medium in order to inspire new contemporary possibilities. Ink and brush by definition remains associated with Chinese metaphysics on several grounds. Calligraphy, was not only the vehicle for the literary expression of Chinese thought, it was an aesthetic vehicle as well. This is because artist-writers could render the formal aspects of Chinese characters so as to reflect the theme of any written discourse. Most often, no matter what the overt content might seem to be, this theme was metaphysical. Until the Republican era, China remained what Lukács called "an integrated civilization," i.e. one in which there was no effective distinction between metaphysics and aesthetics.⁴ For the majority of important painting and calligraphy until the eleventh century AD, this metaphysic was Buddhist and Daoist. Gradually, with the ascension of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian thought that culminated during the Southern Song and dominated Chinese institutions until the Republic, this metaphysic became Neo-Confucian. To this day, ink and brush retains such a strong association with traditional metaphysical ideas that an artist has only to take up the medium in order to evoke them.

Fundamentally bound to its first feature of social engagement, the second distinctive feature of Contemporary Chinese Art is that it presupposes that art is a representation of reality. Since China had no Modernist tradition, it neither absorbed nor accepted the unifying idea of twentieth century Modernism, that art properly ought to strive only to represent itself, that any referent in reality was extraneous, and that therefore the proper status to which art should aspire was autoreferentiality. This was precisely the idea that coincided with the entire development of Western Modernist abstraction and culminated in its more extreme descendants including most—some would insist *all*—variants of Minimalism, in addition to Abstract Objectivism, Physical Abstraction, Light and Space, many of the language-based "analytic propositions" of early conceptual art, and numerous other designations.

Alien to the experience of Modern China, the aspiration to total autonomy of the work of art finds its efficient cause in Western 19th century Romanticism in which the content of an idea became subordinate to the degree of conviction with which it was held, and therefore began the shift of the center of gravity of Western thought to elevate the self to ultimate primacy without regard to external criteria.⁵ It remained for the inventors of Western Modernism, who, almost without exception, were themselves born in the late 19th century, to extend this notion to every artistic field. And this still accounts for much of Western abstraction to this day.

⁴ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge:MIT Press, 1971) pp.29-40

⁵ See Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism: The A.W. Mellon lectures in the Fine Arts, Bollingen Series XXXV:45*, Henry Hardy, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001)

It would be naïve to imagine that Chinese artists are unfamiliar with these ideas. The time is long past when Chinese artists worked with little access to the comprehensive body of art history, art theory, and to current international exhibitions of which many of them are now protagonists. In view of their frequently greater access to developments in Asia besides those of the West, they often have more a more international view of artistic developments than anyone. The fact is that they are not unfamiliar with the ideas of Western Modernism and its subsequent offshoots, they simply reject them on the grounds that art presupposes representation in order to be perceivable, that the autoreferential tendency is not a fertile ground for continued artistic exploration, and it has neither to do with Chinese tradition, nor the urgencies of China's current condition.

But when it comes to abstraction, the reader accustomed to most Western categories of the genre may well ask whether abstract art is Chinese at all. In this regard, it is useful to recall that there are three broad categories of abstraction, of which autonomous or autoreferential abstraction of the sort aforementioned is but one, and rejected by the mainstream of Chinese Contemporary Art for reasons we have seen. But the two other broad categories of abstraction are of direct relevance to recent Chinese artistic production. This relevance has a longstanding precedence in Classical Chinese art and history. In principle, it allows the viewer to imagine that these works set forth an agenda for society's future by using a contemporary visual idiom in order to reassert aspects of the Chinese past that artists consider society to have all but lost. And the traditional values they assert, while not necessarily limited to China in their current extent, are certainly Chinese in origin.

Of these two remaining categories of abstraction, the most immediate and intrinsically functional in origin is the reductive representational abstraction of the image sign. On the one hand, the invention of this sort of abstraction coincides with the earliest known Chinese proto-characters of the Shang bone inscriptions that date from ca. 1200-1050 B.C., but which were probably in use much earlier. These established the precedents of Chinese characters as both pictographic and ideographic abstractions that persist to the present day. But as expression developed, Chinese cursive script adopted ever more abbreviated and synthetic versions of the written character that evolved naturally from the demand for speed and expressive spontaneity with ink and brush. In this sense it is possible to speak of the apotheosis of Chinese calligraphy in the grass script (草书 *cao shu*) of the Tang and Song periods, as abstractions of abstractions. In this sense, grass script characters overtly approach pure form, but the viewer can never entirely forget that the characters rendered in this way, even in continuous lines from one character to the next, are still discrete semantic units that continue to function as image-signs or linguistic signifiers. It is precisely the tension between pure abstract form and communicative function that invests grass script calligraphy with a distinctive evocative power that continues to inform contemporary Chinese abstraction.

An example of this sort of tension occurs in a series of works by Qin Feng. In these the artist fixes real wooden doors and even a bed frame from traditional Chinese houses to purely formal elements of his enormous trademark brushstrokes in black ink that, but for their large scale, evoke calligraphy, but which are not Chinese characters, and could evoke a figurative element such as a couple engaged in lovemaking in *Door of Desire*. These occur in underlying environments evocative of traditional Chinese paintings, but always in a way that allows the viewer to imagine that these could be abstractions as well. Removed from its functioning environment to a layered abstract formal situation entirely contrived by the artist, an antique wooden door or a bed frame also begins to acquire the purely formal character of an abstraction. This oscillation between abstraction and figuration in a composite of three discrete visual fields establishes a complex of mutually reinforcing tensions that evokes a world whose own historical past has become like a mirage in which we can only see the fantasies of our present desires.

Unlike Western Physical Abstractionists who use a thick application of pigment in order to reinforce the idea that pigment and its texture is the only appropriate subject matter of a painting, Zhu Jinshi uses an extremely thick application of pigment and an overtly abstract formal aspect in the service of a representational aim. His *Fei Jia Village in the Morning* insists on this fact by the very choice of such a title, and the painting would seem to exhibit a concern with the everyday that is characteristic of many Chinese abstract painters. As we might imagine of a morning scene, there are dominant reds and orange fields the viewer might associate with a low morning sun; there are greens and yellows also characteristic of a rural setting, and dark fields of blue and black that could evoke storm clouds or the displaced night. But this is no idyllic pastoral. The colored and textured fields are penetrated and even, to a degree, surrounded by flat fields of white. Here it is worth noting that *Fei Jia Village* is not an ordinary peasant village, but a village of artists' studios at Beijing's northern limits, a area of furious and unpredictable property development, and municipal zoning changes that artists often viewed as a matter of municipal complicity with speculators. The 2008 date of the painting not only coincides with the Beijing Olympics, but also with a period where entire artists' district around Beijing were bulldozed for new development. Here, the precariousness of an extremely thick application of pigment vulnerable to collapse should it fail to solidify quickly enough to resist the pressure of gravity against its own weight, might well evoke the precarious survival of such artists' districts.

Tan Ping's paintings are equally representational forms of abstraction in that they assert a narrative in a color of subtle variation that evokes an emotional state, in tension with the narrative element that follows an indeterminate linear course. As in the triptych, *Life 123*, the artist's work often evokes cells whose rendering on large format canvasses generates an immediate tension with their microscopic reality, and implicitly correlates the paintings with immense magnifying lenses that compound the emotions associated with such images, since cells, for Tan Ping, are associated with the artist's confrontation with his father's mortal illness, and, by extension, with his own mortality.

In an unexpected way, these works call to mind the second broad category of abstraction that makes the method indispensable beyond its role as a conveyance of the image-sign. This second role of abstraction has to do with the representation of that which is intrinsically invisible through any other means. Examples of this sort of abstraction would represent the metaphysical world, mental states, energy, the spiritual, emotions, and other invisible aspects of reality.

Lei Hong's images, for example, often employ square forms that, in the West ever since Malevich, have come to suggest autoreferentiality because the square is self-contained in its implicit denial of an identification with horizontal or vertical. But in Lei Hong, squares become vehicles for the expression of an emotional trajectory of the artist in the course of a narrative time period.

Zhang Jianjun is also an artist concerned with subjects invisible except by means of abstraction, since his consistent thematic preoccupation has been with time, for which he sees the fluidity of the ink medium as the perfect vehicle for representation. His rigorous early training in traditional Chinese calligraphy, itself suggests an evocation of the past that also refers backward in time in his own biography, and thereby generates an implicit temporal dynamic with the abstract ink works he currently makes. In this sense, time, otherwise visible only through its effects, is both a theme and a dynamic operating principle of his work.

Wang Dongling, formerly a protagonist of the Modernist movement in Chinese calligraphy of the 1980s, is an even more extreme example of an artist whose obsession with the aesthetic potential of Chinese calligraphy brought him to use ink and brush finally to segregate Chinese calligraphy from its linguistic signifying aspect altogether, in order to conduce it to a purely abstract realm for the expression of feeling. This progression stems from the artist's life long fascination with grass script cursive technique. By taking the final step of liberating the calligraphic brushstroke from its semantic link, the artist invests it with new formal possibilities that intensify the immediacy of its expressive power. The implicit prescription for society is understated, but precise: genuine respect for the past requires not stasis, imitation, and repetition, but does mean to advance its premises to new potentials.

When it comes to ink painting, it is useful to recall traditional *shan-shui* landscape painting may have been overtly figurative, but it employed a very abstract conception of space by integrating three contrived projection systems successively in the same image, masking the transitions between discrete perspective fields with "abstract" empty volumes of clouds and mist. This sense of an abstract treatment of space is not lost on Zheng Chongbin, who, by dispensing altogether with the figurative component of such painting, has explored an immense range of its spatial possibilities, while simultaneously heightening its evocative power. At the heart of his work is an improvisational method that generates a tension between accident and intention inherent in the manner of the application of the ink. In this sense Zheng uses a more extreme and spontaneous spatial abstraction to segregate Chinese landscape painting from its figurative aspect in order to expand its expressive

range. This is an operation that finds its analogy in the rupture between calligraphy and its semantic component we have seen with Wang Dongling and others. But unlike calligraphic abstraction, its origins reside in a conceptual renewal of the abstract space of traditional *shan-shui* landscape. Zheng admits that his work is socially engaged in the sense that it researches the values associated with the traditional medium while investing them with new formal language to set against the spurious ideal of autonomy that has predominated in much of Western art in general, and in abstraction in particular.

Despite a richness of formal variation that rivals—some would say *surpasses*—that of the figurative image, it is often the case that, due to its subtext of social engagement, Chinese abstraction prefers a tension between its formal and conceptual aspects, rather than to employ its formal aspect as a direct expression of its conceptual aim.

In the slang of spy fiction, a “deep game” is an operation one allows to be uncovered only in order to effect a more profound operation the very discovery of the first would both conceal and empower. Clearly, this can also occur with artistic strategies. Long after his forced retirement as the American chief of counterespionage during the Cold War, James J. Angleton responded to journalist's speculation about a deep game operation in this way: “Sometimes events, even events far in the past, have a way of projecting themselves into the future.”⁶

—DREW HAMMOND

⁶ Ron Rosenbaum, “The Shadow of the Mole” in *Harper's Magazine* (October, 1983):45-60