

A Return to Humanity and the Natural World

— An Introduction to Chinese 'Abstraction'

Gao Minglu

In the past decade, 'abstraction' in mainland Chinese art has garnered much attention in both the local and international art scenes, as its history, major artists and representative works have greatly developed and flourished. The exhibition at Pearl Lam Galleries Hong Kong, Chinese Contemporary Abstract, 1980s until Present: Mindmap, features seven mainland Chinese painters whose works represent over three decades of the development of 'abstract art'. The show includes the artists' early and recent works and contextualises their development for the audience. With the exception of the emerging artist Li Xiaojing, the participating artists in this exhibition were born in the late 1940s and '50s. By the Cultural Revolution, they had already begun to explore modern art, and in the 1980s, they emerged as the representative figures of the Chinese avant-garde.

The exhibition's title, 'abstraction', is derived from a notion perceived by the audience. However, the 'abstract' art referred to here is not the same as typical examples of Western abstract art. Recently in mainland China, much discussion and attention has attempted to qualify the essence of Chinese abstract art—so much so as to include a number of Western experts and curators who have published articles and organised exhibitions on the topic. So, what is abstract art? What is considered abstract art in China? What are the distinctive characteristics of Chinese abstraction compared to modern Western abstract art?

To answer this question, we must first understand that 'abstraction' became a mainstream form of modern art in direct response and critique to the painting style of the Western realist tradition. In Western modernism, against the backdrop of the classical realist tradition, the development of abstract art elicits extreme conflict and antagonism. In ancient China, even before Western modernism, such separation, antagonism, and revolution did not exist—they were not an issue. That is to say, abstraction is a product of Western modernism. The core of modernism is the essence of freedom of the individual spirit, which is the ideological core of the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. It regards ideas and thoughts as the highest privilege, able to conquer and master the external world, including the natural world (including the human body itself). As such, art critic Clement Greenberg asserted that modern abstract art evolved from the philosophy of the Enlightenment. In short, abstraction is a reflection of the external and conscious world. It can be defined scientifically and rationally, described by geometric abstraction or intuitive generalisations, resulting in what is considered abstract expressionism. Because abstract art is a direct manifestation of the artist's state of mind, it is therefore regarded as the highest realism of fine art. This is actually the underlying principle of modern Western art since the Enlightenment.

Therefore, many Western scholars regard abstract art as a reflection of human alienation in a capitalist society. For example, Adorno believed that Western

abstraction resulted from industrialisation and its resulting division and alienation of humanity. Modern art was in trouble. However, this dilemma still continues in today's era of globalisation, and is even more critical.

Before modern industrial society, mankind, nature, and the external world were in complete harmony. Asian culture especially advocates equality between man and nature, and harmony among all things. This philosophy informs the development of Chinese landscape painting. The purpose of painting is best described by Guo Xi's philosophy on landscape painting aesthetics (不下堂筵、坐穷泉壑 buxia tangyan, zuoqiong quanhe), wherein the highest realm of the landscape ultimately expresses the similarities and differences between the natural and spiritual world (可游可居 keyou keju). The tradition of venerating nature subtly influences the development of Chinese contemporary abstraction. All of the artists included in this exhibition, more or less intentionally or unintentionally, have incorporated this awareness into their work. The past three decades are witness to an important phenomenon of Chinese contemporary art, where all developmental and natural changes inform the activities and history from the '80s to today. This 'Yi Pai' phenomenon is like a kind of great music desiring sound (大音希声 dayin xisheng), a silent protest against the political and capitalist reality of our contemporary society, and a means of preserving the self. Few scholars both in China and abroad are interested in this emergence. Through my research and analysis of this movement in recent years, I've defined it as 'Maximalism' (极多主义 jiduo zhuyi) and a 'School of Notion', or 'Mindmap' ('Yi Pai'). The simple use of the Western term 'abstract art' to summarise this movement in contemporary China would certainly be inappropriate.

I

First, 'Yi Pai' (beginning with these works) does not advocate the separation of principles, concepts, and realistic compositions of artwork, nor does it identify with Western concepts of art, abstraction and realism. Although 'Yi Pai' artists have individual means of cultivating their artistic practice, they all attempt to reconcile these issues. A partial explanation is that in China, traditional poetry, calligraphy and painting all advocate togetherness, not differentiation. Therefore, art is not a reflection of the outer world, but is a restoration of a shared idea.

Qiu Zhenzhong is an important Chinese contemporary artist and experimental calligrapher. In the 1980s, Qiu Zhenzhong, Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, and Wu Shanzhuan were regarded as the four leading Chinese contemporary text-art artists. In 1988, Qiu used text inscriptions from Shang and Zhou dynasty bronzes, which had yet to be authenticated, to produce his Waiting to be Deciphered series. Just as Xu Bing created fake characters, Gu Wenda produced miswritten words, and Wu Shanzhuan re-contextualised different Chinese phrases, Qiu Zhenzhong revitalised words not even publicly known. However, his intent is not the words themselves, but his works are endowed with the significance of the future where meaning is derived from the pure beauty, form and composition of line. In the absence of semantic distractions, we are able to appreciate the purity of form in the characters. So this form of 'abstraction' is not artificially constructed, nor does it employ deconstruction and destruction, typical of works by Xu, Gu, and Wu; rather, the words and calligraphy themselves possess an essential quality. Although Qiu's later works no longer use words as his medium, he continues to explore this restorative method. Through his use of lyrical lines, he restores an essential act of humanity—in its pure image.

Yan Binghui is representative of the 1980s avant-garde art movement in China, as well as the 1990s 'experimental ink' movement. For years, he quietly continues, not according to fashion. Following the literati painting tradition, his calligraphy manifests one's transformation into the spirit of the natural world. Since the mid-1990s, Yan has been using dry brushstrokes and richly layered ink textures to compose repeated square and round forms suggestive of the eternal presence of the heavens and earth, days and nights, as well as water and stone. The irregular geometric forms suggest a relationship of balance and perfection (天圓地方 tianyuan difang) and the thickly layered ink is reminiscent of the perpetual significance present in ancient stele inscriptions.

In the 1980s, there was a similar trend developing in painting and other media. The 'totality' of Chinese aesthetic culture regards the relationship between humanity and the origin of the universe as a specific genre of art called 'Rational Painting'. Zhang Jianjun is one of the most influential representatives of this genre. Zhang's 1986 oil painting titled *Humankind and Its Clock* features different people simultaneously looking up at the stars, representing the mystery of time and space—a painting that greatly influenced his generation. In the 1980s, Zhang created his *Noumenon (Existence)* series, which are typical Rational paintings.

The Rational paintings of the 1980s can be considered as Chinese 'abstraction'—the term 'rational' referring to the concept, contemplation and meditation embodied by each work. For the Chinese artists and scholars of the 1980s, this is an essential component of the modern exploration of Chinese culture.

Li Xiaojing is a young artist born in the 1970s and an emerging contemporary Chinese artist whose work has been actively followed both in China and abroad. Her work encompasses the universe a thousand times over—heaven, earth, humanity, universal forms, and still lives. But in contrast with the narrative of the 1980s artists, her works are micro-focused and closely linked to individual thoughts and feelings. Her diverse compositions do not create strict hierarchy for what is accepted or marginalised. Her paintings create a relationship between 'painting outside a painting' and of the 'voice beyond a painting'. Sky, water, tree, and stone are all part of Li Xiaojing's everyday life, for which she manifests a relationship between 'painting for the self' and 'painting within the self'. Li Xiaojing conceals the philosophical meditation of the 1980s in the form of personal diary.

II

Secondly, 'Yi Pai' artists often reveal a close relationship between their artistic practice and the everyday. In each work, we see the constant repetition of the brushstroke, line, and form. Any work is by no means more important than another, nor cherished as unique by them. These artists practise mirroring the everyday, incorporating their own personal perspectives, employing different materials, current events and worldly interactions, which all naturally fuse together. As the traditional Chinese saying goes: "Writing mirrors the writer, words mirror the speaker, painting mirrors the artist".

Since the Cultural Revolution, Su Xiaobai has explored modern art forms and his paintings have won numerous awards. His recent large-scale lacquer paintings are neither considered solely of the handicraft tradition nor of abstract painting. On the one hand, his process of applying many layers of lacquer and paint contribute to his

role as an exceptional traditional artisan. Every day, Su and his team explore a variety of methods for using and applying lacquer—never bored with the process. His studio is a contemporary version of traditional artisan studios. On the other hand, Su is not concerned with exploring the differences in representative and abstract painting; rather, he is interested in discovering the essence of the lacquer medium itself, absent of the artist's expression of the individual and any attempt to express a universal significance. With each day of focusing on the material (lacquer), he grows closer to the medium. This natural dialogue is absent of the hypocrisy and duplicity of current art trends. In this way, Su quietly presents his own critique of the extreme narcissism endemic to today's global and industrialised society.

For many decades, the landscape paintings by Li Huasheng have garnered much attention and he is recognised as one of the leading traditional ink painters of Southwest China. Since the late 1980s, Li's departure from early landscape styles of traditional literati painting and move towards contemporary 'abstract' art has been the focus of many scholars. In the 1990s, Li stopped using visual references and began drawing each day to focus on the line on Xuan paper, the flow of ink, and the transformation of painted lines into words that ultimately contribute to a unique style of 'writing'. There are no words, only lines. The meaning of such 'writing' cannot be directly read; nevertheless, it forms a kind of personal diary because of the implied feelings that are perceived. Li associates his paintings with time, often referring to the seasons or a specific date to name his works. Repeated lines and grids may seem 'uninteresting', but are exceptionally elegant. Traditional Chinese painting embraces a kind of simple line painting (简笔画 *jianbihua*), such as the meditative painting by Song dynasty painter Liang Kai, *Li Bo Taking a Stroll*. Although each brushstroke by Li Huasheng is a simple one, the considerable amount of time and accumulated effort required to complete a painting is like an unattainable meditation.

III

Finally, 'Yi Pai' artists deconstruct rational logic. Western abstract art practice generally follows a linear course with a beginning and end. Each painting adheres to strict compositions, which can be roughly divided into three types: from concept to concept, from concrete to abstract, and from external to internal. But this kind of linear logic does not define what I refer to as Chinese 'abstraction', a concept that is derived from Asian philosophy that embraces synthesis and simultaneity. As in traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, literati impressionist painting pursues spontaneity through simultaneously expressed feelings, ideas, and techniques in order to effectively captivate one's attention.

For example, Zhu Jinshi's 'abstract' painting is not derived from a purely logical composition; rather, he captures a complete picture of each moment and feeling of everyday memory. *Death Row* (1985) and *Drawing Exhibition* (1985) may seem quite 'abstract' at first, but in fact possess narrative content, referring to a specific time, location and story. This is Zhu's ability to effectively capture the experience of a certain character or a moment in time. This experience is all encompassing and accentuated with uninhibited delight on the canvas, a delight that is accumulated in the everyday, an expression manifested by the notes made under the painting or behind the canvas by the artist. During the Cultural Revolution, Zhu Jinshi was an active participant in underground cultural and literary activities and, in 1979, emerged as a member of the renowned 'Stars' avant-garde artist group. Zhu began

creating abstract painting in the early 1980s and has continued without interruption for the past three decades. His works include installation and performance art, all of which maintain focus on issues of the everyday. For example, his installations often feature ink soaked Xuanzhi paper crumpled by hand. His installations transcend the ordinary and flat qualities of paper to penetrate a profound spirituality and temporality.

In this exhibition, the selected artists and works are highly representative of the above-mentioned three aspects. In fact, there are many similar artists working in China today. What is worth noting is that while each artist has his or her own merits, and embodies different perspectives and philosophies, new paths are forged. Thus, their respective paths naturally become a part of the Chinese contemporary 'abstraction' narrative.

Chinese 'abstraction' (or 'Yi Pai') attempts to define a new culture in the 21st century. This culture transcends the inevitable destruction of humanity. It also attempts to contribute to the aesthetics present in everyday humanity. Therefore, 'Yi Pai' and Chinese 'abstraction' are not meant to reflect the aesthetics of the outside world; rather, they are restoring the aesthetic relationship between man and the world.

Gao Minglu

Gao Minglu is a distinguished scholar of Chinese contemporary art and, notably, the curator of China/Avant-Garde, National Art Museum of China, Beijing (1989), the first contemporary Chinese art exhibition to be mounted in China. He brought the first landmark exhibition of Chinese contemporary art to the USA with *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, which was first shown at the Asia Society Galleries and MoMA PS1 in New York (1999). Gao served as editor of China's leading art magazine *Meishu* in the 1980s, and received his Ph.D. from Harvard University. Currently, he is a research professor in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh.

His major publications include *History of Contemporary Chinese Art 1985-1986*, (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1990); *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); *A Century's Utopia: Chinese Avant-Garde Art* (Taiwan: Artists Publishing House, 2000); *Chinese Maximalism* (Chongqing: Chongqing People's Press, 2003), *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York and Beijing: The Albright Knox Art Gallery and China Millennium Museum, 2005), *The No Name: A History of A Self-Exiled Avant-Garde* (Beijing: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2007) and *Yi Pai: A Synthetic Theory Against Representation* (Beijing: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2009), and *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011). He has organised several major exhibitions, including *China/Avant-Garde* (1989), *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (1998), *Harvest: Contemporary Art Exhibition* (2002), *Chinese Maximalism* (2003), *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (2005), *Retrospective Exhibition of the No Name Group* (2006), *Yi Pai: Thirty Years of Chinese Abstraction* (2007-2008), *Yi Pai—Century Thinking* (2009), *Mind Space: Maximalism in Contrasts* (2010), and *Window in the Wall: India and China—Imaginary Conversations* (2011).