

Zhu Jinshi “Boat”

By Philip Dodd

Painting is not a natural activity, not like spitting, said the British artist Frank Auerbach. Looking at art is not something natural, either. It is difficult to engage fully with the seventeenth-century French painter Nicolas Poussin without knowledge of Greek mythology and the grammar of seventeenth-century French court painting. In equal measure, if for different reasons, it is difficult to engage fully with the art – both painting and installation - of the important Chinese contemporary artist Zhu Jinshi., without a sense of the art and cultural resources in which his art is marinated.

Zhu Jinshi is a profoundly ‘rooted’ and equally ‘routed’ artist, to use a homonym. He is clearly rooted in the culture of China: consider in 《船》 <Boat> his use of Xuan paper with all its rich connotations in Chinese culture; or his naming of one of his early abstract painting White Calligraphy which some lazy critics might otherwise read as an example of a Chinese artist using the language of western abstract art.

But Zhu Jinshi is equally a ‘routed’ artist, one whose resources are wider than China’s. Look at the way that in an apparently Chinese marinated installation such as <The Tao of Xuan Paper>, Zhu Jinshi takes the grammar of western minimalism and plays with it.

Zhu Jinshi is very much not an ‘either/or but a ‘not only but also’ artist. Undoubtedly, this has something to do with his own history: he was born in 1954 and was an important member of the Stars Group - he showed in the seminal Beijing exhibition of 1979 – but later settled in Germany, in 1986, where he encountered the work of artists such as Joseph Beuys. Like so many of the interesting Chinese artists of his generation he found himself wrestling with two traditions (although this is not something limited to artists from the ‘east’. Where would the work of the US abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell be without the artist’s engagement with Chinese calligraphy?).

The work that Zhu Jinshi showed in public after his encounter with western art in Germany was in some ways different from his early work. His chosen language became that of installation - although it now appears as if he never abandoned painting, rather it became for a time a ‘private’ matter, something he made but did not exhibit.

But Zhu Jinshi’s routedness is more than an issue of biography, of his moving between ‘east’ and ‘west’. For a time, Zhu Jinshi taught in the Architecture Department, in Berlin Technical University and his movement between the disciplines of art and architecture seems manifest not only in his installation work - there is no fixed position from which to view 《船》 <Boat> - but also in his abstract paintings which yearn towards three dimensionality.

But his ‘routedness’ can also be seen in the piece 《船》 or <Boat>, whose title has resonances for western and Chinese cultures. For a westerner, a boat has many connotations, from Homer’s The

Odyssey to Nostromo (in Ridley Scott's film Alien where the spaceship is named in honour of the novel of Joseph Conrad). Boats in western culture always conjure up space and time.

In Chinese, 《船》, the character for a boat, generates resonances unavailable in English. The character combines the meaning of vessel, person or mouth and the number 8 – conjuring up the Ark with its eight participants. There is also the matter of the material which Zhu Jinshi chooses to use. In 《船》 <Boat>, there is no rusted steel as there might be in a work by Richard Serra. Rather the work is made with traditional Chinese materials such as Xuan paper, not as something to be worked on as it was by classical Chinese artists but as a material itself, with all its resonances of tensile strength and resistance to corrosion or mould. Paper, burnt, is also something that is used in ceremonies in China to honour the dead, as they pass from living to the afterlife – something that a Chinese viewer or someone with a knowledge of Chinese culture could not fail to remember when faced with 《船》 <Boat>.

In my conversation with Zhu Jinshi down a line between London and Shanghai, he spoke eloquently of how far the interpenetration of western and Chinese culture had gone and how complex and multifaceted it is. He also said how much 《船》 <Boat> was involved with the issue of time – both subjective time as well as time in a cultural sense (where, he said, the longevity of Chinese culture gives time a different impress from that it can have in culture such as Britain's).

Zhu Jinshi mentioned to me that 《船》 <Boat> was made in two parts symmetrically (one part in Beijing and one part in Shanghai) and that he could also imagine one part exhibited in Beijing, another in New York. As he did so, I could not help but be reminded of the great myth of Plato's Symposium, where the human, once whole, now broken in two, pursues their other half to make themselves whole again.

Whether my thought was pertinent or not, it is a testament to the quality of Zhu Jinshi's work that it has the capacity to tease us out of all thought, including those complex and interpenetrating categories of 'west' and 'east'.