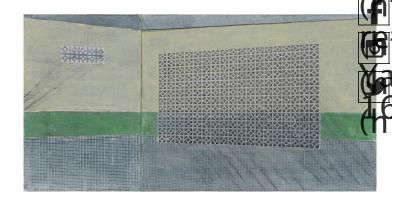∨

Zeng Hong

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[Featured Column] Zeng Hong | The Order of Form: Image, Gaze and Discourse

By Lu Mingjun   2015

Like many artists, Zeng Hong is wary of being defined or categorized. Though images are the foundation of his painting, he always sustains his resistance against various vulgar or misread discourses of images. "Anti-image" hasn't led him to formalism and abstract aesthetics, for he never believes that it is possible to extract art from living experiences, or the existence of the so called "pure painting" or "pure art" constituted only by brush, color, and modeling. He insists that art always contains reality. As he put it, art needs a tail of reality.1 Nonetheless, he has no intention of treating his practice as a kind of "practical art." In reality, he has doubts about this very concept. He doesn't like revealing his stand, but the truth is that he finds himself uncomfortable on the scene and for performance, and unable to accept the explanatory method of "oriental spiritual practice", which is rampant nowadays.

Art history is not a "burden" for Zeng Hong, and direct historical connections of theme, form and idea are rarely seen in his works. This comes exactly from his understanding of the history of art. Consequently, the logics within the history of art have not become conditions for his painting, and more of his concern is on the implicit synchronic connections between practice itself and experience of reality (the system of contemporary art included). It's difficult to explain his painting by resorting to some case in history of arts. It seems that Zeng Hong has set up for himself a "self-sufficient" practical system different from modernism, and has been going forward step by step inside it.

One close to Zeng Hong knows that the original images of all his paintings come from "the third line state-owned corporation" located in a remote southwest mountainous region, a subsidiary of CNPC. Between being born, growing up, and working for 8 years, he has spent over 20 years there until his departure in 2000. For him it was not a period of "shining sunlight"; his feelings were rather about being disciplined, a sense of stiffness, oppression, and constantly tight nerves. Later on, all these slid into memory, and undoubtedly became more alien to him after his arrival in Beijing. Upon this time, his vision caught not only some individual life experiences, but also the political culture of an era. Zeng Hong did not "represent" those social scenes abundant in realistic atmosphere, neither went to deliver some infatuation for "cruelty of youth" and "being hurt"; instead, with an exceptionally restrained and prudent attitude he picked some forgettable spacial corners and building elevations as his themes. One might see that there is an apparent characteristic: most of them are highly repetitive and dense, mechanical and abstract. As mentioned above, the abstraction here is not the aesthetic aim of modernism, but a kind of order of form full of sense of reality.

Nonetheless, one can't identify the practice of Zeng Hong and its meaning by distinguishing ideologies. Being mechanical and repetitive, a typical trait of division of labour in modern society, liberates the subjectivity of man yet degenerates man into an abstract individual without qualities. And the lifestyle Zeng Hong had expe

rienced was rooted in the soil of socialism and collectivism. Thus his practice shuttles to and fro between two opposing ideologies. This "ambiguity", however, does not blur his vision. On the contrary, he is very certain about his destination. One may say, that the extraction of a planar and abstract elevation from experiences of reality is his reaction to and representation of the logics of modern industrial mechanism and collectivist life. The truth is, that he separated himself from that memory abruptly and violently, and as an "other" calmly scrutinized those experiences which may not be universal; the truths his works reveal has surpassed the objectivity in his original eyes. One might say, that this truthfulness comes from the squeeze exerted by the tension between the intimate individual depiction and the public experiences in his memory.

Of course, however abstract a form is, it could be developed into some feeling and enjoyment. But that was not Zeng Hong's choice. Essentially, his works, especially those before 2012, were not purely formal constitution; it's not difficult to discern their original images, for they look just like the outlines of themes extracted from images. The key point lies in the fact that in this process of decomposition, Zeng Hong adopted methods of rule and compass, repetition, machinery, and high density, which is, in my view, a reaction to or "continuation" of the modern industry and its mechanics of power. And it is easy to see that the form of picture doesn't fully correspond to the original image; he emphasized the sense of plane and visual balance by changing the relations of spacial perspective - even deliberately moving or changing the position and visual structure of theme such as window - and by intensifying the density of modeling and constitution. That is, there is an implicit dynamics of viewing in the invisible part of the picture. A viewer before such dense lattices would feel a strong visual sense of pressure and tension. In the mean time, we could gauge the height and width of the wall from the "design" of the window. Evidently the picture cuts off a small part. The window is open, various perspective structures implying various viewpoints of viewers, yet there is no natural differences of time and color outside the window, but a thorough darkness. Here the darkness might be imaginary, or it is simply the truth in his eyes and cognitive consciousness. So it

opens and seals the space at the same time. And it jumps out as pressure and stare onto the viewer as well. We could even imagine that Zeng Hong repetitively paints and paints over not on a canvas, but on a real wall. Of course it was not his infatuation for brush and painting, but a silent resistance to the suppression. Just like the mechanical and repetitive drawing methods as mentioned above, it aims at the mechanics of power of socialist industry.

In his works since 2012, especially recently, traces of original image has been getting vaguer, and pictures more abstract. In such works as "Mosaic - 3"(2012) and "Mosaic -4"(2012), one can hardly discern the origin of form and the image basis. Yet Zeng Hong has not since divorce from his logic and foundation. Still, he partitions and superposes the picture in the simplest way, an artless way even not short of awkwardness, not caring about the completeness of picture, while the marks of "tailoring" implant a dimension of time into picture. The continuous repetition here does not so much claim the process of drawing as cancel out the labour time of the subject in the socialist industry. In fact, one of his new works, "Sequence"(2014), implicitly "explains" this point. It is a group of 3-screen videos about the surveyor's rod on machine-running tracks in a workshop of the corporation where he had worked. While shooting, he let the machine go, and replaced it with his camera; after editing, the rod moving along the track is all that remained. As in the case of the window in "Mosaic - 4", one is unable to see its beginning and end, nor any up and down or change, neither any trimming or editing; only an experience of continuation and rotation of time in the simple and repetitive mechanical sliding. And the absence of person or laborer in video amounts to the absence of subject.

When confronting the collectivist buildings, Zeng Hong had a feeling of humbleness;2 in a similar way, he has gradually recognized the absolute spirit or fascist-like power will to which the objectification of man in modern society is subjected and irresistible. Thus, while many artists reclaim the subjectivity of man, Zeng Hong goes the opposite way trying to reveal the hidden controlling system by the method of self-objectification. Paradoxically, now this abso

lute spirit seems to be supporting his painting. This means that what he wants to "recover" are not those physical facts of collectivist building which carried the ideology, neither the natural and free state of man in the physical sense; but an implicit correlation between man and ideology. In his recent works, however, this correlation and self-consciousness has been getting dimmer. He was wavering inside, and because of the sustaining self-doubts about his established way of practice, the ideology his original images carried seemed to have become a psychological sustenance and support for his painting. Apparently he wanted to "emancipate" himself from his in-hand structure and order. And an obvious fact is that his later works didn't rely on the original photographical images any more, but mostly furthered his experiment on the basis of his early works; the themes of picture were not the public space in the living experiences any more, but his own works.

All these works—"Block on White" and "Block on Red" ("Block" series) from 2012, "Red on Green", "Still Life No.8", and "Still Life No.14" from 2013-14—were "born out of " the 2011 work "Public Laundry". Actually "Three Pieces of White", "Shape of White" series, "White Squares" series, and "Still Life" series all come from that painting. We may argue that they have not got rid of the reality basis of "Public Laundry", to be sure, but we have to admit that here is a "fracture" from the works before 2012.

A viewer of "Public Laundry" could clearly discern its original image. Its theme is a corner of public space. Its basic structure comes from obvious perspective principle, and he only emphasized the sense of plane by canceling the relation of light and shadow. As to the coloring and local pattern, he deliberately intensified the metaphor of reality by method of "misappropriation" and reconstruction of form. "Block" series, "Red on Green", "Still Life No.8", "Still Life No.14" directly comes from the right half of the wall in "Public Laundry". He changed the original perspective structure, making it like superposition of two different perspectives (window and wall) on the same plane. He still adopted the methods of mechanical composition and repetitive painting, but seemed to be getting aw

ay from the discourse system of "Public Laundry". If the bold fresh break in color application are also considered, these works look like an experiment on "pure form" and "pure visuality".

It originates in a concrete window, of course. Matter is complicated by his reluctance to see it as a result of abstraction from a real object, or to admit that it is a sort of pure form. Now the change is clearer: something was obviously added to the old one-dimensional narrative. By the time of "Still Life No.8", even squares were replaced by vertical lines and strips; the picture looks a little "week" because the layers of superposition were not emphasized. Modeling and structure also ceased to be tense, making the picture slack. "Still Life No.9" comes directly from that part, replacing grey with blue, on whose picture, the key point is, only abstract strips and faintly discernible brush remain. Besides, "Still Life No.14" comes from our old friend "wall of square pattern", replacing "solid" white and grey with "weak" blue in the same way. The change of color here was a very important sign: it achieved a visual effect like screen, which was different from the experiences and feelings in his early works.3 But, not so surprisingly, screen and window, both of which are some interface of discourse, forms a pair visually and functionally. And we can't directly reach the anxiety and thoughts deep inside his experiences. It seems that the picture could be effectively explained only by being placed in his whole practical system. And the pressure of picture was much relaxed, while his old mood and desire gradually faded off. This shows that though "form" opens an unknown space, it could push oneself into another "impasse". However reliable its reality basis is, still it could not avoid the same doom as minimalism meets, and would at last "degenerate" into a blank canvas. Yet, since Zeng Hong's system has come loose, we are unable to foretell where his discourse will go to.

Now, I want to remind the reader of the fact that Zeng Hong's approach is not rare in the history, in spite of his not emphasizing the direct connections between his works and the history of art. For example, there was an implicit concrete image behind the series of formal variations in Picasso's later works, into which Leo Steinberg made profound researches. 4 According to Meyer Schapiro, the

abstract works of Mondrian have pretty concrete image basis, even containing a viewer's gaze 5.... The difference is that Zeng Hong relies not on established images in the history of arts, but his own experiences and practices. As he puts it, abstraction is not presupposition and design, but a result of thoughts and experiments.6 In this sense, it doesn't matter any more whether it is abstraction or not. And it should not be forgotten that form itself is impossible to be not attached to some reality basis. In the same spirit, there is no so called pure visuality or pure eye, and any viewing can't evade the ethics of gaze.

Footnotes:

1,2,6 Zeng Hong, Correspondence with Friends in Oct. 2013, provided by Gallery Yang, Jan. 2015

3 Zeng Hong, Account of His Own Works in Jan. 2015, provided by Gallery Yang, Jan. 2015

4 Leo Steinberg, Other Criteria, translated by Shen Yubing (and others), Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 2013

5 Meyer Schapiro, Modern Art, 19th and 20th Centuries, translated by Shen Yubing, Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 2014, pp. 275-307