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# Black Invasion, Grey Twist

**A Probe into the Patterns in Zhao Yang's Works** *Author:* Lan Qingwei/ Wang Yalei *Translator:* Wu Chenyun 2009

A twisted grey path is like a grey wall.

Dawn sits right in the center of the wound. Gloom, I guess, is glittering in the middle of darkness.

At three o'clock in the morning, at least there are a few people, each with their own sadness, coming to the boundary tablet. From here to there and from the east to the west, there is a huge crack lying in between.

The depressingly dark sky looks just like a numb egg.

- Zhao Yang

## Story

Zhao Yang's work demonstrates an apparent interest in literature. It seems as if each of his works tells a story that is deprived of any specific reference. In this regard, *Shared Destiny 1* (2008) differentiates itself from others as it features a specific story –Legend of the White Snake. The White Lady snuggles close to Xu Xian and behind them is the picturesque view of the West Lake. But if you take a closer look, you'd feel a sense of absurdity: the pale and fatty figure who is depicted as Xu Xian looks more like a flirtatious monk than an educated young man. The exposure of part of his thigh gives out a sense of lust. On the other hand, the White Lady is not that fairy-like either. Just like a brainless sweetheart, she indulges herself in the flirtation. Right beside their feet there lies a green snake whose neck has been severed. Moreover, Xu Xian holds a piece of white snake in his hand. It's like a mysterious suspense. If the White Lady is the white snake in Xu Xian's hand, then who is the girl snuggling to him? And who killed the green snake? Why would Xu Xian and White Lady look so happy? Is the White Lady the real White Lady? Is Xu Xian the real Xu Xian? If not, who are they?

The only two things that we could be certain of are the Gem Mountain and Baochu Pagoda right behind the two human figures. Those who are familiar with the view of the West Lake would know that in reality the Leifeng Pagoda and Baochu Pagoda are erected opposite each other across the lake; and seen from the Leifeng Pagoda, the Baochu Pagoda is indeed built on the right wing of the Gem Mountain. Such a discovery offers the bemused viewers some condolence. Nevertheless, the white smog coming out from the earth indicates everything you see is nothing

more than a set stage. The newly-found sense of “reality” is therefore declared as “fake”.

The more certain the viewers feel, the more wrong they find they are. In other words, the more familiar something appears to be, the more likely it would turn out to be a trap.

Thanks to his years of experience working as an editor at the Zhejiang Juvenile and Children's Publishing House, Zhao Yang's ability to deal with stories based on images is unquestionable. Hence, the deliberate absurdity in his works seems like a revenge for life, a kind of understated stubbornness. The story is somewhat transformed – transformed into the story of his own.

Those who want to listen to bedtime stories will be disappointed. The painter has no intention at all to tell you the ending. Even if he keeps on for one thousand and one nights, it means nothing more than a woman continuously getting old in the course of time.

## Iron

Metal and flesh are two eternal topics of the modern society. The relationship between them is far more complex than that between metal and metal, man and man or animal and animal which are things of the same nature. So far sociologists have not yet expounded fully the human being's dependency on and hatred of machinery. It is not Zhao Yang's intention to give a clear explanation. In his works, you'd see automobiles, weapons, tractors as well as human figures, beasts and unknown souls. But you would not be able to tell whether they love or hate each other. In Contagiosity, people greet each other with their fingers radiating cone-shaped beam just like car lights. In his other works viewers would realize these are indeed car lights rather than some finger magic that we often see in science fiction movies. Apparently, what the painter is obsessed with is the texture of genuine light beam rather than the running light rings created on the films by the directors.

Zhao Yang often resorts to the technique of “writing” of Chinese painting to delineate cars and other machinery that are metallically cold and never seen in traditional Chinese painting. Such a technique is brought into full play on the blue car featured in his Grey Twist. It makes sense. The grass and trees are something growing naturally in the real world. But in Chinese landscape painting, they become something grown by the hands of the painters and delineated by texture strokes, whether they like it or not. If that's the case, then what does it matter if the car that is produced by casting turns to become a car that is produced by “writing”?

As to the title Grey Twist, it doesn't have much to do with the content of the work and gives viewers the freedom to associate it with either the depressive feelings that overwhelm the concrete jungles and the era of machine or the somewhat dreamy monologue written by the artist at the beginning of the text. It is just a feeling. Liuyang River can make a twist. Color can make a twist. In the hi-tech era, nothing is impossible.

Zhao Yang started to learn Chinese painting since he was a kid and his good mastery of Chinese painting skills is evidently seen in his recent oil paintings. Take the backdrop of Grey Twist for example. The ruins seem both thick and flowing, like Chinese ink painting. He graduated from China Academy of Art which is known for its strength in teaching Chinese painting. More than ten years ago, he studied figure painting under the instructions of Wu Shanming, Liu Guohui and Liu Jian, and was later accepted as member of Zhejiang Artists Association and Zhejiang Figure Painting Research Society due to his attainments in figure painting. Unintentionally, the artist was actually practicing a kind of contemporary consciousness – concept was deemed as the embodiment of a “little universe” that was boundless and open-ended, teeming with infinite possibilities. After graduating from the academy, he was engaged in video art for a while and participated in Mantic Ecstasy: Digital Image and Video Art in 2001 together with Chen Xiaoyun and Yang Fudong.

Speaking of his video works, they also have something to do with machinery. Not every modern man is particularly interested in machinery, but it's probably fair to say that every “true man” of the modern society is, in one way or another, quite into machinery.

### Visual Sense

The sense of contemporaneity of Zhao Yang's practice is also shown in the fact that his works put an emphasis on visual sense. It seems quite cliché to say that since the importance of forms has already been analyzed so thoroughly and repetitively by insiders of the art world and is no longer a topic worth discussing anymore. However, Zhao Yang was born right in the middle of the decade-long Cultural Revolution. It wouldn't have seemed strange if he had chosen to put an emphasis on theme or ideology. But fortunately, he didn't. He didn't pay attention to those kinds of things. Sometimes “no attention” is really for the best.

Sportively speaking, the spirit of “copycatting” could be seen in his practice. He would pick up a random book in his studio, browsing it through, and all of a sudden stared at a picture that touches him. Then he would draw it onto canvas. In a way, it sounds like that he goes back to his previous profession – editing. The smiling lady with a flashlight in hand featured in Shifting towards the Left (2009) in fact was a “copycat” of Hilliard John's photography X. Such a method sounds a bit dubious. But as a matter of fact, artists throughout the history and all over the world all

take reference from previous patterns. It's legitimate to create something original by the appropriation and accumulation of previous patterns as material. Though the visual pattern is a readymade, the visual effect still waits to be created.

Some say, jokingly, Zhao Yang's work radiates a sense of magic realism, reminding people of works such as *The Lord of the Rings*. Actually the "magic" feeling comes from the dislocated relationships contained in the paintings and Zhao Yang's somewhat literary way of dealing with the images. The magic atmosphere is not the painter's intention and "realism" is even more far-fetched. It's not a hard choice for painters today to represent abstract imagery through concrete symbols and signs. What intrigues viewers is the visual sense embedded in Zhao Yang's works. The several paintings produced between late 2008 to early 2009, in particular, demonstrate an increasingly sophisticated visual structure and more open-ended visual contents. The works produced in early 2008, on the other hand, seemed to put more emphasis on "telling stories". But the uncertainties of the images made the stories so fragmented, like broken posters dancing in the wind.

Speaking of the sense of violence overwhelming his works, Zhao Yang sees it nothing more than a visual product. He has a liking to draw cone-shaped items and flesh. Hence plump thighs and severed big fishes are often seen in his paintings. The fish in *Burrow* is so real that it kills all appetite. He is a master of drawing lines – another trait that should be ascribed to the training of Chinese painting. As a result, he is able to experiment with the comparative effect of an iron car and the car lights in his work. Moreover, in works such as *Helplessness* and *Purely Nonsense*, he even delineated a snake spirit that was soft, flexible and soul-like. In his recent practice, an obsession with sections could be perceived. Almost in every of his recent works viewers would see severed human heads, horse heads or thighs. If we take a closer look at the *Screaming Mandala* and *The Ubiquitous*, we'd realize that the painter's attention is concentrated on the sections rather than the severed parts per se. To differentiate the sections from other exaggerated shapes appearing in his works, Zhao Yang would resort to the use of shadows or deliberately draw the section parts more smoothly. As to the blood, it is just a byproduct of the sections.

Zhao Yang started to learn painting since childhood, spent years studying at the Affiliated Middle School of China Academy of Art, and then gained his BFA from China Academy of Art. After graduation, he participated in many major exhibitions. He has been dealing with painting for over ten years. But to work on oil painting was quite a recent shift he made and by then he had been accustomed to his previous way of working for many years. Such a shift imbues the patterns of his work with more senses of freshness and possibilities. Moreover, a great mastery of skills facilitates such a shift, giving him the confidence to deal with oil on canvas which is larger in size. The images appear open and rich, radiating more senses of freedom compared to works of many other professional oil painters. That's possibly why Zhao Yang's work is more appealing to viewers who aspire for freedom and are full of dreams. In other words, it is his work that picks viewers for him. It's a bit aggressive, which can be counted as a kind of invisible invasion.

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