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Zhao Yang - Lie Between Order and Chaos

Interviewer: Art Frontier/Wang Wei Translator: Zeng Licheng 2019-03-25

ShanghART Beijing is presenting a solo exhibition "Roma Is a Lake" by Zhao Yang, which features his new body of work. By drawing inspirations from Roma Lake, where Zhao's studio used to be, the exhibition offers a chance for the artist to look back on his past. Through a process of continuous reduction, Zhao's work often lies between order and chaos. He is exploring a kind of reality that is dynamic, uninhibited, contradictory, absurd, and poetic.

1. Your current solo exhibition at ShanghART Beijing is named after "Roma Lake". Though not realistic depictions, the works on display reflect that you have drawn inspiration from a real place. Can you first talk about the general idea behind this series?

In 2009, at around 40 years old, I resigned and came to Beijing with uncertainty. My studio has moved five or six times, almost every two years, which might be the norm for migrants in Beijing. This city is so vast, in which I felt like I was being swallowed. My third studio was beside Roma Lake, where I stayed for more than two years. When it's getting dark, I often walked around the lake alone, both relaxing and thinking. Roma is neither a city nor a lake. It is something I can rely on, a destined trip. For me this exhibition is not only about reliving my life beside Roma Lake, it but also brings me face to face with what I've made for the last decade.

2. You noted that your art-making is a process of continuous reduction and you are trying to find a sense of collapse. What do you mean by "reduction" and "collapse"?

Beautiful things tend to be simple. The word "collapse" is a descriptor for an artist's self-struggle on the way to minimalism; it also refers to the process of self-affirmation, rather than manifestation or construction. Having no relation to modification or occlusion, it specifies the reality of the moment and the process from something to nothing. It is dynamic, uninhibited.

3. If your art is created through a process "from nothing to something and then back to nothing", does it mean that you don't control the outcome? How does your practice move forward?

This is a good question. I think an interesting artist should be an unity of opposites - both intense and loose, as often written at the gates of the military. Presupposition signifies vapidness, as if people play game with themselves,

making themselves trapped and everything prosaic. Yet without rules it leads to a flood of dreams, like the moving love stories of two people who feel lost. Powerful works often lie between order and chaos. They are framed dreams, freedom under self-discipline, dances on the tip of the knife and battles between masters who are absorbed but powerless. The true powerlessness is a favour of divinity. It is difficulties that push me forward.

4. Although your paintings are seemingly figurative, they are not necessarily thematic and narrative - there is a blurring relationship occurring between your work and the real life. Do you think that the reality shown in your work departs from individual experience?

The painting we are talking about is not just painting itself; it presents the artist's own perspective. I pay more attention to the connection between the contradiction and coordination of poetry and misunderstanding, regardless of language, plot, subject matter, and beauty, all of which reach the greatest degree of complexity. Failures are also clues, correction is bonus. Anything is possible. I see it as a labyrinth as well as a scene that can be covered up. Hidden metaphors, secrets of *deja vu*, and simple contexts are spreading in a whimper.

5. By creating ambiguity on the canvas, you seem to be deliberately producing a barrier to viewing and cognition. In other words, it is ineffective for viewers to use their inherent thinking pattern to "understand" your painting. What do you think?

People can only see what they want to see. I think what stops them from seeing more is the strong emotions they feel when unable to find the starting point and that results in the silence between viewer and work. To some extent, I don't expect to be understood. I prefer misreading.

6. The colour relationships, shapes, brushstrokes, compositions in your work are all impressive. Are you consciously looking for and developing a pure language of painting that is not linked to any specific object?

Painting has entangled humans for so long that we are both familiar and unfamiliar with it. It is in fact both simple and complicated, but its future is full of possibilities, like an old man back from the dead again and again. You chase, it escapes; you avoid, it follows - this is also why painting is so fascinating. It always comforts and warns us when we're disheartened, so that we always desire to deconstruct it again.

7. Does your academic background in traditional Chinese painting influence your visual language?

Of course. Eastern art focuses on spirit, atmosphere, and movement like smog or flowing water. The important thing is how we use it - that needs a high level of localisation. The art school has taught me how to watch and judge from the oriental angle, and especially present in my work is the technique I learned from Chinese brush painting, which I