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# Zhao Yang and His Fabulous Creatures

Source: CoBo Social Author: Loïc LE GALL 2017-09-20

In Latin, the word ‘fabula’ means a story or myth without any historical basis, and also a fable. Nowadays, ‘fabulous’ also includes the meaning of something being ‘great’, in a quite commonplace sense. The works of Zhao Yang combine these two meanings because, on the one hand, his art is imbued with legends, and on the other hand, with popular art that reveals contemporary visual culture. These alternative worlds have been under construction since the artist’s earliest years.

He began to draw at a very young age, when he was only three or four years old, according to him. He followed in his father’s footsteps, who also painted. As a result, studying art came naturally to him, particularly figure painting (人物畫), which is one of the three great genres along with landscape painting (山水畫) and birds-and-flowers painting (花鳥畫). He was a shy student and admits that he found it difficult to copy the masters. When he did, Zhao Yang always reinterpreted the original model in his own way.

He did not become an artist immediately after finishing his studies, but became a book publisher instead. For almost fifteen years, Zhao Yang produced illustrations for children’s books. He was deeply affected by this first career, with literature continuing to inspire his paintings thereafter. It became more than just a style for him, it was a world of dreams that infiltrated his work.

Zhao Yang knew the codes of traditional Chinese painting and felt the need to bring it face to face with the contemporary world. You could call it a sort of digestion – a process of transformation and maturation – that created a combination of styles and eras. It was as if he was creating a new type of cuisine, by taking and mixing the ‘ingredients’, such as the repentance of Western painting, which is unknown in Chinese where error is forbidden, or the outline of contours that directly suggest traditional technique.

His painting method is also rather unusual. He does not hesitate to impulsively repaint his own paintings or erase parts of them. This is sometimes done after a period of several years. By erasing sections of the image, he explains that he is not seeking perfection, but trying to transform himself into another painter.

Through his art, Zhao Yang imagines the end of industrial civilisation and seeks a return to what he calls “paradise lost”. The themes of ruin and the obsolescence of technology have both become recurrent subjects, especially in his

early paintings, in which factories and buildings seem to both self-destruct and destroy each other (Overexposed, 2009). More recently, there has been a return to nature, as in sometimes violent scenes, such as the hunting parties in *Heavy Rain* from 2015. This activity symbolises a primitive and essential need for survival, whose roots go back to the origins of humanity. Indeed, many of his figures evoke a wild man turning his back on cities, in the same way that Christopher Johnson McCandless did. McCandless was an American adventurer whose story is told by Jon Krakauer in his work *Into the Wild*. At the beginning of the 1990s, this idealistic student decided to escape the modern world and live alone in nature. Zhao Yang's characters behave in a similar way, as they seek authenticity away from modern life and technology. They are like model men who display a primitivism that is as philosophical as it is pictorial. Nature is an obvious symbol of equality and liberty; in fact, the notions of good and evil do not exist and are only perpetuated because of the presence of humans. This natural life appears not as an out-of-date myth, but more like a utopia that is becoming increasingly necessary. Although we are not obliged to go back to living in the wild, it is nevertheless an essential personal question for the artist, as he himself spends a lot of time exploring nature and hiking. Moreover, the physical appearance of Zhao Yang's figures have a tendency to evolve. They crossbreed with animals, for example, recalling even more the world of legend and fairy tales.

For this artist, reality and dreams are intimately intermingled, which allows the boundaries of the fantastic to become blurred. The paintings are inhabited by fabulous creatures who have escaped from a bestiary that is common to many cultures. Zhao Yang takes back the iconography of legends for himself, referencing the centaur, the qilin (麒麟), the yeti and the mermaid, as in *The Blue*, 2015. The question of the crossbred animal in Christian tradition, which is taken from a very literary world, embodies the duality of human nature. Although the spiritual context is, of course, different from Zhao Yang's, this Western definition seems to find an echo in this ever-changing work.

The artist draws his legendary references from ancient works that are as diverse as *Shan Hai Jing* (山海經), the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, which dates from the Warring States period (戰國), and the *Odysseus*, attributed to Homer towards the end of the eighth century BC. In *Common Fate*, from 2008, he clearly references the very popular *Legend of the White Snake* (白蛇傳). By setting the scene in an indeterminate place, he reveals the story through a number of clues, such as the iconic white snake and a flooded landscape. Modernising the subject, the artist enacts the importance of tradition, which is reinvented every day. Any analysis or understanding of the themes that the spectator may have of the painting are fragmented, like the multiple influences on the artist. Some of the compositions and subjects are reassuring, recalling known realities and identifiable objects, while many others plunge the onlooker into a strange feeling that is somewhere between attraction and repulsion.

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