

Hiding

—Zhang Miao Interviewed by Shi Wei, April 24, 2016

Introduction

“I just love how you handle the two ducks “Razzle Dazzle”, overburdening the bodies, rough white timber to go with color of gold. Gold represent material desire, fame and fortune, multitude of faith, ideal trophy for the social animals. The unfit crown and just the right amount of embarrassment... I like the humor.”

“I didn’t think that far.”

Yes, Zhang Miao seems to prefer silence, particularly in his works, or even tries hard to hide himself. He rejects part of the ready reality and with his works, and he walks his way in the shifting conditions.

Born in Beijing in 1985, Zhang Miao now lives in Heiqiao. He graduated from Oil Painting Department, CAFA. In his sophomore years he started making prints and bought the whole set of equipments. His graduation project for the Painting Department was actually a giant assemblage of prints. The prominent cockscombs motif is a bit abstract. Why cockscombs? He told us it’s about boredom, and there was no reason.

Last week C-space and C5 art jointly organized Zhang Miao’s second solo exhibition called “Razzle Dazzle”. This exhibition is much anticipated after the 2015 “Venice Perennial: Prologue to Zhang Miao’s Solo”. The five sets of works here each have their own rhythms and systems, but by no means contradictory. To Zhang Miao, what is important is “Razzle Dazzle”, the rest are just excuses.

Interview

“Painting is like keeping beads in a pipe with both ends open. The beads must stay in the middle, so you have to keep the balance. In other words, the bead can move but not fall to either end. Otherwise, it is done for, a mess, and a total ruin.”

Zhang Miao gave us a vivid description. Staying with Zhang for only an hour, I found that he liked “grappling with himself” and had rough hands, so I couldn’t help wondering if he was also a craftsman. And he was not very good at expressing himself: during our conversation, “nonsense” and “mess” were used too many times to mean “no” in his vocabulary.

Q: The blue wall is actually a set of works. Let’s begin with the ducks.

A: Let’s come to the two trees first, as the duck is a joke. What is irrelevant to the trees have to be removed. Open my studio door, the tree is there. I had a painting album of “green trees and white sky”. The walls in the exhibition hall were painted blue, and the white sky became the ducks on the left. The two oil paintings (two trees) differed only in focal length, and the leaves were treated in the same way.

Why are there two paintings? “Razzle Dazzle” is a state of constant adjustment, deliberately out of focus. Now you look at it, nothing except the blue sky and the trees, it’s fairly simple.

Human figure is not needed in the painting about the trees because I don’t want to burden the viewer. It’s just two trees, no emotions, nothing said. Otherwise it would seem that something will happen to the trees. It is not a good idea to stay on one side only. If there are only trees, it would be too serious, so there has to be jokes to lighten up the atmosphere. Here come the two ducks.

Q: The ducks make a joke. Anything else special about them?

A: In their former life, the ducks were a thick Korean pine frame that was carved round and put aside there for a long time. Later I fashioned it into the two ducks you see here by cutting in a slanting way. The frame was evenly painted white, leaving no marks or room for imagination, but there were still considerable details. Brass gave a heavy sense as metal. The left duck had such a small head that the beak (or the cap) slipped down to the neck; the right duck had such a big head that the cap covered the eye. The eyes on the two ducks are leveled, put on last with a laser level. No telling of gender, neither show their flippers, no narrative or expressions, either. Don’t say too much.

Q: The stretchers for the two trees were specially made? Was it the only solution?

A: Yes. The two stretchers, one thin, the other thick, I think they look nicer than the paintings even. The edges had been painted blue, intended to fuse with the blue wall. Then they were covered with white some time after I started preparing for the exhibition. It is the only choice, because I had been afraid that they could become two “paintings”. That would be a total failure. I also spent a long time painting the wall, as it should be a kind of blue that was not dark or relaxing, melancholic is too pretentious. In a word, the colors were expected to be unnoticeable. It can’t be an event; otherwise the joke would fall flat. The feel should be just right.

Q: What’s wrong with there being two “paintings”. They are paintings after all, aren’t they?

A: A painting, when hang on the wall, is always a convention, no matter how well it is painted. The edge on the stretcher is reassuring. You have to be very careful with what kind of blue the painting and the wall should be and which part should be blue. Only when everything is in place can it be an object, otherwise it is an ornament. A painting itself has no end or meaning, it’s only an excuse. The two ducks and the two trees seem to be in pairs, but they must not be treated in the same way. Whenever “settled”, things will end in ruin.

Q: Are you afraid that others will get trapped in the details or situation of the painting and add something and stretch their imagination?

A: I’m not worried about others but about myself doing that. I really don’t like to over complicate. The blue sky, the green trees, and the duck would be just fine. One shall never speak nonsense. Otherwise all our previous efforts would be wasted.

Q: All art works are excuses that serve your methodology. "Razzle Dazzle" explains your attitude and "Shifting" tells us about the method you found.

A: It's about right, a permanent dynamic state, as both ends are taken by fraud. A painting ought not to intend for anything; otherwise, it would be junk on the wall. You can criticize and express your feelings, but how does your feelings be better or worse than mine? My works therefore do not involve feelings. When you do not take it as a painting, it is in fact becoming one.

Q: I fell in love with this golden "frame", only next to the ducks. The frame is the protagonist. Is it gilt stone?

A: No. It's brass. Solid, about 250 kg. I never hung it at home. I spent lot of time welding the brass parts. I re-cast the frame quite a few times, wood at first, then fiber glass, and now brass. I treated it as a sculpture. Why brass? Because it is bright but not too golden, a bit on the white side. So much energy was spent on the frames. One with mental disorder would choose a golden frame for a painting. I feel quite ridiculous.

Q: Ridiculous? So is it an irony?

A: Not exactly. I was thinking about and trying to skillfully avoid something. If I fail, I would continue in that wrong path. I have been doing things the wrong way for a long time even though I was well aware of the mistake.

Q: Do you have a fancy for frames? Does it mean that you don't care much about the painting itself?

A: Not knowing what to paint, so I start with the frame. Take the two ducks for instance. Together they had been a round frame. When it had been there for some time, a so-called inspiration would strike. Not knowing what to paint is not that terrible, but it is really important that one know what way should be abandoned. Because I care for it, I won't be casual about what I paint. Later I chose making prints to begin.

Q: So painting holds you in awe?

A: It's not awe. I know when and how a work ends, so I try to avoid, avoid turning the painting into something like that. Painting can be divided on the basis of routine feelings, hot spot, symbol, and techniques. There are people who have produced lots of painting in their lives, but to me, he has done only one painting. I don't think those junk worth my time.

Q: How many paintings have you produced during these years?

A: They are all here almost, six with images. This red one took me something between three and four years, during which time I had modified it a dozen times. The two cat eyes are also an excuse to paint. The pupils should not be treated realistically. Seen from some distance, it is cat eye; see closely, it is abstract inside. You may understand it as a landscape, but I do not want to say any thing. The brass, when reflected by the lamp in the hall, becomes the cat's eyelashes. The wall opposite the cat eye is

“Bud”, a brass work that can be easily neglected. The cat casts its eyes at that spot. A set plan itself is a mistake. Cat eyes were there in the beginning, but in the end they did not matter much. Only then did I know it worked. The pair of cat eyes took me as long as three years.

Q: What are you trying to avoid? And what are you looking for? How is painting related to you?

A: I avoid them because I don't accept them. I don't think they should be painted that way. They should not play any role. Otherwise all the works are identical. I don't want to fool myself, paint according to trade standards, or become a label. There are many ways to paint, so when you look at a painting, only a glance is enough to tell you of the techniques, the content, and the project. At this moment, I think I have to keep detaching myself from it, even if sometimes I got a bit familiar with the painting. Only in this way can I make progress, though I know nothing about the destination. Say nothing and keep going, to me, is the best part. Painting and I rely on each other to move. We have to separate and at the same time wait for each other, either to give a push or a helping hand, as everyday painting can drive me into a dead corner, unable to believe in myself. I never know when I can do with the painting or when the painting will be ready.

Q: Did you have a hard time doing this big red painting?

A: Every step. Think about the cockscomb image in the painting. The painting was like a space, and I didn't care much about the image. I painted it because I wanted to take everything away from me, including the brush strokes, the ideas, actually everything. It's the most difficult. This painting is one of my favorite. The house had been white, then yellow, then red... It had been changed many times. I had to change it every day. It was a nightmare. In the end, nothing mattered to me. What was needed, what to add, and where it should go... I don't think I can do it again.

Q: What bound these works?

A: When does a painting ends? To persevere is one way, and then I found a second way: formation. If it is too serious, I can put in a joke, so that they can stand in formation, regulating one another. It is the same with the painting and the frame. What effect should the painting in the golden frame have? It is the right one if it can put me at ease. With the red wall as background, this single work became a large piece. Those rebar-like “tentacle” and “hair” are carved out from a room-full of lumber just like making sculptures. Each strand cut out from a single piece of wood, then shaped, dyed, and fastened to the aluminum or brass base.

Q: A wall fully occupied with water polo ball is a real sight. Each piece produced the effect of a relief. The two metal boxes below are very quiet in comparison.

A: It started with a random thought, I did it to pull away from somethings. There were 144 intaglios altogether. There were as many prints as the different angles to capture a moving ball. As you know about color in prints, there were exactly as many intaglio plates corresponding for each blocks of color, so all together I was cutting close to 2000 plates to different sizes and shapes, then carefully fitting them together to form the illusions of a three dimensional ball. The boxes were solid metal when you fit all the

steel plates inside, just shy of 200 pounds, looks like a sculpture. It is the process being put in concentrated form, a false effort in the end. (Ha-ha, forgive me for being sentimental)

Q: Sculptures, welding... you are a craftsman, aren't you. Are these "folding windows" welded?

A: My skill is much better than an ordinary welder. To weld brass is no simple task. Think about the ducks' beaks. The round parts were all welded. Nothing on that was cast. When folded, the windows became a building; when extended, they made a livestock farm. They were also made in the way a sculpture should be done, with carefully planned dimensions, inclinations and parallels. When I fastened the piece to the corner of the gallery pillar, the pillar becomes a tree trunk, this work becomes a soft branch in the wind.

Q: You've changed considerably during these five years. The appearance of the works in your solo "To Myself" 2010 (the chapel-like frame) is a preparation for now, purer. What you are thinking now seems to be more richly embodied.

A: I cannot say "richly embodied". I used to care too much about myself, but now I put myself behind the works.