

A New Series of Dragon Painter: The Inner Logic of Gong Xu's Painting

Yang Jian

With his latest series, Dragon Paintings, based on the study of dragon painting in the Southern Song Dynasty, Gong Xu attempts to work out a fusion with the current public culture, or to pursue a strong connection to the public while furthering his previous logic in art-making, so as to stimulate the combination reaction of a cultural symbol in different times by mobilizing and using the cultural reserve of high public recognition, and to make possible the marriage between current public culture and traditional painting. The dragon was given a concrete image instead of merely being a mythological creature after Dong Yu's description in the Song Dynasty that the dragon has the head of a bull, the mouth of a donkey, the eyes of a lobster, the horns of a deer, the ears of an elephant, the scales of a fish, the whiskers of a human, the belly of a snake and the feet of a rooster. However, when we appreciate the dragon paintings exemplified by Chen Rong in the Song Dynasty from a contemporary perspective, what can be first detected by us seems not its ferocious bloodshot eyes, flying brown whiskers, smoking scales, mane and elbow wool or its spittable claws and teeth, but a good many humorous and whimsical visual elements, which, as a misreading and an aesthetic difference caused by the gap between two different times, has also become, in Gong Xu's eyes, a brand new entry point to blend with contemporary visual elements. Judging from his previous repertoire, Gong Xu has long been influenced by the modeling elements of unorthodox artists like Muqi Fachang in the Song Dynasty, and, by working in the ACG (anime, comic and games) logic of thinking from his personal experience, he's developed a highly personalized painting style that violates the conventional rules and even boasts of wildness and blatancy.

Still flourishing is the ACG culture in the context of a cultural policy tending to neutralize subcultures, and it'd be too arrogant of us, considering the quantity of its followers, to still call ACG a subculture; the prefix "sub" here serves not as a muffler but an amplifier. Together with a mature set of narrative logic for history, culture and society and the inner exquisite hierarchical structure, the integrated worldview has imperceptibly formed a solid fortress for ACG culture, making it impossible for any "anime and comic" products with a mission to penetrate into the core of the ACG world, which is why the independence of widely influential ACG culture and the highly purified folk and democratic nature behind it are so valuable in the current cultural environment of China. Since his important solo exhibition at OCAT in 2015, Gong Xu has been enabled by the protection of the "dimension wall" in

his personal experience to drift away from the always elitist-wise mainstream vision of contemporary art, and it's also very remarkable that he's developed a set of art-making logic that keeps a distance from the current trend of painting. Plus, he's also one of the very few Chinese contemporary artists who are truly devoted to studying the folk part of current Chinese culture.

If we pay attention, it won't be hard to find that the thinking logic of the ACG world is excellent at sealing some historic figures, objects and even events in some adorable stylized characters, personified animals or newly created creatures, and characterizing or internalizing the real background information already studied and refined into these characters, as a way to accomplish logical self-consistency in the ACG context. Besides, highly tolerable as it is, the ACG logic of thinking allows stylized painting techniques and highly creative worldviews to dissolve some themes originally filled, probably, with power relations or the stares of the subjects of some themes at others, so that many narrative possibilities can be realized when the real world would only fail them. Such an approach to art-making can not only enrich a work but can also create more room for discussion and attract the audience to the historical information involved in the work. It's a very transitive way of cultural popularization and also the main reason why ACG culture can reach more and more demographic groups. Being an insider of the ACG world who's into studying Chinese traditional culture and art history and excellent at painting, artist Gong Xu is accustomed to expressing his ideas through the art of painting, and it's an important purpose of Gong Xu's art practice to restore the appeal of the various essences of culture and art history and of humanistic fruits by re-polishing these traces buried in the dust of time for the public and to help the public break away from the simplified social orientation by staging a historical review in the current cultural context. For example, his Dragon Paintings series in 2018 revisited the dragon-painting style whose folkness has ruled it out of the pedigree of orthodox art and made it impossible to be inherited systematically, and the folkness thereof happens to agree with the cultural attitude Gong Xu's been working with all along. In his Six-Ear Macaque series created in 2016, Gong Xu employs the ink and wash techniques for the fan-fiction pieces about the most controversial chapter of *Journey to the West*, and has imparted to them his cultural aspiration and attitude. In 2015, he explored the folk topic of the "twelve Chinese zodiac signs" with an extremely explosive painting technique and liberated it from its fossilization and stereotype with his artistic creativity; in addition, he also planted "stingers" in the paintings to underlie a most classical game with himself as a painter and expected them to be figured out by the audience.

A keen textual researcher though Gong Xu is, we can't construe his painting practice purely as a study of art history, since he doesn't intend to clarify any historical facts in art or construct a historical narrative of art; as a matter of fact, what Gong Xu's excellent at in painting is falsifying, fabricating or altering the classical or directional resources of art history or packaging them with a narrative layer. This working procedure of his takes apart the histories of Chinese traditional painting and Western modern and contemporary painting, or, more specifically, some major questions in these histories that intrigue the artist, like the Song-dynasty art of dragon painting explored in the new works he presents in this exhibition, and they are restructured under his extremely personalized and somewhat fortuitous reasons. We can also find some Dadaist touch in Gong Xu's painting, like his piercing and purposeful frankness, and, most importantly, he's not doing this dully or seriously but dramatically just like playing games. If I try to explain every detail of his work to the audience, I would definitely be held back by Gong Xu, as it's not enough for a game to merely look good; you have to be a player, and the folk part of Gong Xu's art is about how the audience's engaged with his painting and game with their own knowledge.

One thing worth noting is that Gong Xu's art has been based highly on his experience all along, but not on the dissemination of some knowledge. In this sense, we as viewers should not be content with exploring his restoration of objective knowledge or his alteration of images and materials in the theoretical system, but should try to perceive and reach the artist's genuine perceptual expression of his personal experience above the knowledge and painting theories involved in his work. Through such persistent expression of experience and painting perception, the audience can find from Gong Xu's painting an experiential symbiosis and a sustainable vitality among his works and series. But the most experiential and individually painterly is usually slight, peripheral and implicit, so, in our attempt to learn about Gong Xu's painting, we can focus more on the details of his work to experience how he arranges his details in seemingly rough but actually elaborate and progressive ways.

It's been an anxiety for all painters in face of modernity how to find an allegedly personalized language of painting. Today, with the weakening of local and cultural awareness, it's become very difficult to find and have one's own way of expression. In his art practice, Gong Xu has been trying to touch upon the missing parts of Chinese traditional aesthetics from the current culture and relevant aesthetic misinterpretation in the process of China's modernization, and it's very difficult for these questions to have any direct answers. Instead of creating a language of painting or commenting on and judging the evolution of culture and art history, Gong Xu paints merely to signify, expose and reveal something,

with a consistent focus on the truthfulness and thrill related to subjects, and all these have also become the fun he has found in painting or his gateway to the most basic happiness for a painter; in another word, they can be reduced to the introspection and self-reference interwoven in the process of art-making.