

A Simulation of “Breathe”

Zhao Xiaodan

Qian Jiahua is indeed exploring the feasible paths of modern painting, and Cubism, as the opening where her artistic creation cuts in, has, in one way or another, become a logical origin of her perceptions. This departure point, resulted from her understandings of Greenberg’s words, or from her visual observations over Cubist painting, eventually will be attributed to the intuitive deduction out of her own interest. In addition, her personal experiences accumulated during her art-making intervals, along with the transcendental knowledge of form and structure, continuously integrate into the internal system of her creation. At the same time, the plots and emotions extended by her daily experience provide some special facet into the flatness of canvas.

Previously, Jiahua wrote two pieces of self-statement on this exhibition. One text is about “the perspective of looking down”, another “the logic of perceiving”. She also wrote another small text about the internal relationship between sense-and-sensibility and her artistic creation. First of all, the finding of “the perspective of looking down” delved by Jiahua the viewer should resort to two factors, one the description made by Greenberg in “Collage” in his book *Art and Culture* to expound how the painting school contributes to the ontology of painting. Excerpts are as follows:

By that time (the fourth year of Cubism), flatness had not only invaded but was threatening to swamp the Cubist picture. ...The main problem at this juncture became to keep the “inside” of the picture—its content—from fusing with the “outside” — its literal surface. Depicted flatness—that is, the facet-planet—had to be kept separate enough from literal flatness to permit a minimal illusion of three-dimensional space to survive between the two.ⁱ

Jiahua put it this way: at this stage, Cubism goes beyond how to use perspective to simulate three-dimensional space and process two-dimensional form in three-dimensional space, or how to take multi-dimensional perspective of motion to observe object, and shuttles back and forth between the surface and the depth to create the frontality of bas-relief. Let’s leave alone whether this view is correct for now; personally at least, I think it’s reasonable, so the following discussion will be based on the assumption of this rationality. How Jiahua’s art practice gradually gives life to such an angle of viewing: at first she took the canvas as a reference, and painted full-scale paintings; the language referred to is related with the edge, size, proportion, form of canvas itself. Later, with more contents continuously added to the picture, the emotional factors become more and more prominent; meanwhile when she went on thinking about the inside and the outside of canvas edges, her understanding on horizontal art-making has been extended, and consequently the question about space has emerged during this “looking down” experience that causes perception of “depth”. The solution to the problem of space is related to the issues to be discussed below. At least so far, we can see the artist’s attempts to embody the solution in her works of different interests exhibited in this exhibition. Then what we need to clarify is, in

specific works, how the logic of this “looking down” experience helps articulate and narrate, and how the narrative connects with the solution of the space-problem. In this case, perhaps the existence of narration is just my assumption, or maybe there is really some kind of narration in her works; anyhow, a process of demonstration is needed.

Previously during our talk about her works, we described such an experience: when, for instance, riding a bike, one would have a preset track. Suddenly at an intersection one bumps into bikes moving in some other directions, so the subject rider has to change his or her track, which means a horizontal drift or a vertical move on a slope. Simultaneously, all the other bikes also change their tracks. This experience of track-altering, is like a crustal movement. One even feels inexplicably excited every time after he/she makes a smooth change. Consequently, one got obsessed with such experiences, and started to think seriously about the ideas of “intention” that are related with “inclination”. In between, there’d be lot of questions about various biological and non-biological forces; it’s a process that is intimated and vivid or able to channel one’s nervous system, so as to, at least, somehow meet the logic of viewing and understanding Jiahua’s works. Just as what she wrote in “The Logic of Perceiving”: *In this story, where there seems to be distance, there is space, to be “looked down at”, so there is nothing that can be sheltered, and any traces and marks can make themselves heard and all can be treated equal.*ⁱⁱ Taking the works in this solo show “Breathe” to illustrate: “Moving”, “Open and Close”, “Aggregation” are the follow-ups of her previous works in terms of pure form, though the last two pieces experiment with real object as a replacement for the texture of canvas surface. The works related with Jiahua’s intention-thinking are for example “Gills” and “Bounce and Grab the Night Sky”, which narrate respectively the sense of breath caused by “gills” and how a line releases energy when it becomes an incarnation of strength but gets limited in confinement. Among other experimental works that have a sense of material, “Protect You, Close to Me”, for example, implies an incident about the material--aluminum, where someone got scratched by the piece of aluminum before the artist acquired it. That’s why in this work Jiahua tries to symbolize the situation in the incident with a piece of aluminum surrounded by sponge. Of course, what matters is not the content of the story, but the attempt to protect revealed through the correlation between the texture of the materials. At this point, it can be roughly concluded that Jiahua creates certain concrete scenario in her picture, a narrative or some feeling perhaps, or maybe symbols of reality, yet her presentation of images is abstract. And obviously, Jiahua elaborates a narrative that may be experienced by other viewers, i.e. she builds the structure of pictorial “situation” for certain pieces of work by considering the factors related with painting per se, flatness, lines, colors and space and so on. That is, even though we see abstract forms which are related with object appearance or even realistic concept, or the so-called things about ontological painting language, it’s more like a secret game of hide-and-seek played between the inexplicit narrative inside these forms and the canvas. And the saturated probability of it shows some interest of logic.

So if now we review her earlier works, we will find that it’s reasonable to say that the latest works present or extend the same lineage. The old works are closer to purely formal construction, such as “Second” and “Delution” series. In addition, she concentrates on how facets dig into the gaps of a work, or on sculpturing the relation between one plane and another, so the problem of dimension would be solved during this process. Meanwhile, the texture of facets and gaps has been carefully treated, for example the works “Blue Sky Everyday” and “Pink”. Indeed, at this

stage she is well versed in achieving an overall harmony by placing different grey colors in the same color scheme, and she also has well processed the liquidity of gaps, see her “Coast” and “Overflow”, and such a method also has extended to this exhibition, see her work “Melon Skin and Pulp”. The priority of this brief review is to grasp the line running through Jiahua’s art practice, thereby better examining the question of “situation” in her new works in “Breathe”. The factors involved in this “situation” and the related narratives have been mentioned above. Then to enter into this “situation”, we must have an interface of perceiving.

What should be emphasized is that the state of “immersion” is not exactly the same as the empathy effect, just like the bike-riding process mentioned above, perhaps the subject may generate an empirical concept out of repetitive actions, yet the formation of such an empirical concept has to be guided by senses, past experience and intentional thinking. After these processes, the subject may gain a sense of “floating”. However it still requires some real path in order to enter this “situation”, some path related with the language of the work. The above-mentioned topic of Cubism has not been finished yet. How Cubist painters abstract images of specific objects? An analysis of the early stages of Cubism leads us to the nails kept by Braque in his work “Violin and Palette” and the letters and words put on “Ma Jollie” by Picasso. Obviously, what they painted can’t be discerned, but how they painted leaves some interpretable clues. In Jiahua’s art system, she indicates the clue in the names of her works, but the titles of her recent works cease to focus on implying “objects” anymore, but instead they suggest the “inclination” and “situation” of the works, like “Grills” indicates a sense of breathing, and “Moving” the shifting of facets. In this way, “immersion” emphasizes a personal experience, that is, a methodology of how to enter into a scenario set by herself or by others. Rothko asked his viewers to stand 1.5m away from his paintings in order to feel the “existence” of them; similarly it’s inevitable and necessary to briefly control viewer’s vision and thinking, so that, in the situation of “full-scale” painting, how vision swims and perceives becomes the only way to understand the original meanings of the works and generate new narrative that can be applied to each individual viewer.

So the intention of this article is clear; it’s to explicate the logic of how the artist’s personal experience turns into the experience valid to others. Obviously, the text has extracted some phenomenological concepts of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, including the term “inclination”, which is appropriated from the idea of “intentionality”, such an inclination resorts to a certain force, and needs to be specified in a certain “situation”. It also explores the concepts of feeling, experience, existence and perception, and even it can be said that it tries to simulate these concepts. For Jiahua, to make art is to create guidance for experience-able existences, which, in her case, is also based on her own feelings and experience. So when viewing her works, we find the texture, the lines, the viewing angles of being the observer and the colors that project emotions are all subject to the creation of the situation. It seems that this has produced a cycle for a thing-in-itself, where feeling, with the inevitable involvement of reality and perception, condenses into experience. And in such a mixture, or in the gaps of interpreting these narratives of “situations”, we can also peep at the overall direction of Jiahua’s artistic creation. In fact, as Jiahua said, in the “situations” of these works, the ideas about bodily symbols have been added. Among which, there are an input of the bodily concepts that are based on similarities and the output of the intention concept that directs towards higher. Like her attempt to simulate the sense of “breathing” in the works, she has mobilized a lot of intentional thinking in specific

“situations”, to set the nerve endings as free as possible and to produce more unique narratives of different individuals.

ⁱ *Art and Culture*, 1961, 1989 by Clement Greenberg, Simplified Chinese Edition, Translated by Shen Yubing, 2009 by Guangxi Normal University Press, Page 86.

ⁱⁱ Quoted from the artist Qian Jiahua’s relevant expositions on this solo exhibition.