

Forgive Me for Being Immature

Xia Jifeng | Gong Chenyu

Xia: We know you are from Qiqihar, so what does northeast China mean to you in your journey of art? Besides, did you grow up with any other art lovers in your family? Or what brought you into the fascinating world of art when you were little?

Gong: My dad. He used to have the dream of being an artist. There was this popular book called *Human Anatomy* in his younger days, and I'm really impressed that he copied the whole book down, including every image and every character. I feel like my pursuit has been a continuation of his unfulfilled dream.

I remember I was kept away from painting for almost a year after I started senior high, because my parents decided that I should give up on art and concentrate on my school courses. But when I almost broke into tears smelling again the fragrance of pigment, I realized that I loved art for real, and had no intention of using it as a way of or a tool for getting into college. So I made up my mind about becoming an artist and creating my own pieces of art.

Xia: Did you receive any relatively strict art education for children, like training courses in the Children's Palace?

Gong: My first painting teacher was Mr. Wang Jinjun from whom I learnt traditional Chinese painting. Then I learnt Western painting from Mr. Zheng Xinmin and Mr. Zheng Naibin, drawing and color-painting from still life included, and I think that was when my creative consciousness was awakened. Inspired by my teachers and their peers, I created the leopards and the woman in my work *Idol-Eden*. The modeling of the figures works for the form of the painting and shows a traditional European touch, which was one of my teachers' favorite approaches to art-making.

Xia: Traditional, folk, wealthy, auspicious, and all the other themes about good wishes.

Gong: You're right. Basically themes with figures and the beauty of nature. Mr. Zheng Xinmin's legendary history of learning painting alone in Russia has had quite an influence on me and also added to my desire to learn traditional European painting and make independent art. I think it's fortunate that I received very orthodox education in painting, as I've learnt to look at the world in my own way instead of being stuck with the concepts of things when I paint; most of my artistic experience were accumulated little by little in the process of my learning.

Xia: It seems that all artists are similar as to how they started their journey of art. One thing I'm curious about is why you, as a northeasterner, didn't go to nearby schools like Luxun Academy of Fine Arts but chose China Academy of Art in Hangzhou which's so far away from home?

Gong: When I was little, I was always trying to get wild, and being wild to me back then was getting away from home as far as possible. I didn't think it was any complicated at the time. Now come to think of it, when you've stayed in a place long enough, you might not be so sensitive to everything around, so you need a vastly different environment for a contrast which can help you discover a lot of new things about how you live your life. Unable to find anything different and new about my surroundings, I would suffer from mundanity every day, as the sense of difference is a channel of inspiration, and I think that's what I really mean by getting wild. Hangzhou gave me the sense at the time. It's a place of brilliant minds and marvelous sights.

Xia: I find it quite an interesting process that, in China Academy of Art, you were first a sculpture major and then you switched to painting for your postgraduate years, so what does this process mean to you, especially to your painting? As I see it, you made a sudden switch from sculpture, a three-dimensional form of art, to a two-dimensional one, so has this been of any help to you in creation?

Gong: My experience in sculpture has been a very big and even decisive help. I think there might be a misunderstanding caused by a collective consciousness as everyone shows a pure passion for oil-painting despite their lack of a full understanding of creative mediums when they start college. In my case, however, learning sculpture enhanced my sensitivity to materials, space and concepts, developed my love for handwork, and has even been influencing how I give my painting a sense of volume and existence.

Xia: So can I take it that you can find more possibilities in two-dimensional painting than in three-dimensional expression?

Gong: I would still go for sculpture if I find an idea more suitable to be expressed in the language of sculpture. I'm not relying solely on the language of oil-painting. The pigment of oil-painting to me is a material of unique texture, and I like to explore its materiality when practicing the art.

Xia: Your earlier works, especially the "Display" series, seem to have something more direct to do with your sculpture experience. You were not only working on the very form of painting, but also tried to relate to the materials, such as the division and application of the plank. I think this is one of your most distinctive characteristics. Your recent pieces are quite different from those back then. Could you illuminate the connection in between or what change has happened?

Gong: First of all, please forgive me for being immature. I have to keep making progress in my journey of art. I consider style harmful to painting in a way. If your style gets automatic, then you would have a book to play by and certain standards for your perception, which would definitely keep a world of diversity from you. I care about my abilities to think and perceive, and I wish to keep them updated constantly.

Like you just said, I've been changing my focus these years, and there is certainly a connection between the pieces I made recently and those made much earlier. The Display series highlights my search for objects that represent my personal tastes and for some fragments of my memory, like making myself into a section. The Display series cancels or converts one or several functions of objects commonly seen in everyday life, so the chain reaction thereof is diffusive infinitely. Yet the "idol" is just a twisted superficial image of the essence of something, and also a type of translation of everyday objects. The way I see the topic of idols, the "image" is identical to the entity depicted while the "idol" is what's in one's mind that hinders him from understanding the "image" of the objective world appropriately, so the two are contradictory to each other. The Idol series is a review of the "images" that have influenced me and shaped the way I perceive. And the existential sense of things is a big technical emphasis of the painting series.

Xia: In your latest series, you adopt some symbols or scenes from Hollywood westerns for some paintings but images about Chinese traditional folk culture for some others, making it difficult to call them one single series. But, as you put it, the subjects of this series are actually part of your collection of images based on worldly standards and also embody a system constituted by worldly imagery and symbols. So what do you want to share with the world through this series?

Gong: My interest in the word "idol" had me set out to categorize the various idols, like "national idols", "theater idols", "political idols" and "mass media idols", and connect them with individual repression and constraint. Repression puts one in a state of passive labor, and the idol is the desire destination of such labor, so an individual would create imaginary fantasy in accordance with the idol. From time to time, I would look back into my past memories and communicate with my past, which forms a closed loop, and then I would trace every memory to what I initially felt about it so that I can have it converted and reconstructed.

Xia: The localization of foreign culture. Similar topics have also been explored by Chen Yinqu who's attitude to such phenomena was that things should be differentiated in terms of cultural identification instead of race or origin.

Gong: The symbols adopted in my work, like the portrait of a great man, the cowboy in the West and the naked woman in the forest, all derive from different foreign cultures, but China has them localized. If there's no barrier to dissemination, it'd also be possible for the rebirth of cultural symbols localized. All these localized symbols make up my worldly perception of the world.

Xia: The shaman is an idol or, in another word, the messenger between divinity and humanity. Their individual bodies can be used as a bridge between humanity and the world of benevolent and malevolent spirits.

Gong: Right. Shamanism is part of the survival law of nomadic groups, as their everyday life has to rely on mystical consciousness and power. Etymologically, “shaman” refers to a person wildly dancing in a trance state. Nomads rely heavily on their shaman in many aspects of survival. For example, when they need to decide the direction for their migration, the shaman would roast the shoulder blade of a sheep or a cattle with fire until gossamer-like cracks appear at the socket. He would then interpret the cracks in his way, like pointing out that it’ll be warm in a recurved corner so they should take a rest there, or that what’s ahead of them will be a piece of wide open land, which means abundant animals and that they should get ready for hunting.

Xia: What’s depicted in your paintings may not refer to anything anthropological or social in the conventional senses, but, by hiding them underneath your work, you actually focus more on the discussion of the very images in the paintings. Especially topics such as, like you just mentioned, *Ice Chiseling* and *Fishing*, may have to do with man’s awe and wishes in ancient times, as it was after all difficult to live a relatively primitive world. It seems, however, that your painting aims not purely at restoring mythology or childhood memories.

Gong: For the “Idol” series, I tried to make the content more special by, perhaps, diminishing and restructuring information based on my personal experience. Depiction of some everyday behavior though, most of the paintings carry epic or mythological implications. By marrying the everyday with mythology, I intended to approach the everyday and some inherent peculiarities of things in a mysterious and poetic manner, to make the everyday more colorful and interesting. In *Fishing*, for example, I painted a wood-carved head of a snake at the upper end of the fishing spear, trying to relate to the legend of Fuxi teaching people to fish with nets as Fuxi is said to have the body of a snake and the head of a human. Fish are flocking out of the ice hole as if they’ve been somehow mesmerized, which looks like a mysterious phenomenon one might come across in life.

Xia: So, perceptual as painting is, a touch of reason is also needed?

Gong: Yes. You need to control and organize your intuition and inspiration. Painting is a very traditional art. All artists are equal in front of a canvas, but they vary in their control of reason. Art-making is a rather painstaking process, because the artist has to keep fighting himself to make wounds based only on which can he push ahead. It’s an endless process, somewhat like the loop implied by the “∞”-shaped posture of the eel winding itself around the ice chiseler in my painting *Ice Chiseling*. “Ice chiseling” is a type of labor. The word “chisel” feels violent, but what I actually want to express is repeated digging and rethinking through such a simple act.

Xia: From the perspective of my experience in writing, *Dream of Red Mansions* is my tradition, so is Franz Kafka. Regardless of any regional difference or be it Oriental or Western, experience from our predecessors can be tradition to me so long as it’s useful and nutritional for my writing. Besides, there seems to be a grand narrative framework in your painting, but it’s not the major historical type of

subject matter in the good graces of academia, so does it have to do with where you were brought up? As we know, northeast China, the part you're from, is a vast piece of land and has always been a base of heavy industry, which is obviously different from the situation in southern China.

Gong: I've been struggling all along to get rid of the influence of the mainstream ideology. The Northeast or collective industry, as you mentioned, would shape a collective personality by which I mean a person's dependence on his work in a factory where he spends his whole life. It should also be possible for our generation to escape perfectly from collective ideology and be skeptical about the world. I make my own paintings and determine my own way of thinking.

I think my paintings are all intuitional for viewers who are free to search them for anything, and what's most important is to feel the aftertaste and the viewpoint of every work. We are different in our "encounters" with people, objects and incidents, so we vary in our selection, orientation and narration. There doesn't have to be just one answer for perception.

Xia: The technological development has been diversifying art mediums. Many artists who used to make art with traditional mediums have also started experimenting on new mediums in their work. Do you think that painting will be seriously challenged? And what do you make of all the many inescapable dilemmas painting is currently trapped in?

Gong: I think different minds have different answers to these questions. Oil-painting uses very genial materials, such as the brush, pigment and the paint binder, all naturally genial. I don't think we should treat painting as a tool. Painting will surely die once required to serve something, since functional things will be replaced anytime. But perhaps it'll never die as long as you treat it as a natural and conscious action of your body.

We have to admit that painting materials have their own limitations, but it doesn't mean that new mediums can replace painting, and I don't think there'll be less and less room for painting with the continual emergence of new mediums. If the situation looks that way, we can only be sure that the artists haven't done a good enough job and failed to reach the due irreplaceable height of the art of painting.

Xia: I agree. Compared with classical painting, many of your works are actually quite different as you've involved not only language, techniques and concepts but also installations and new media, giving more room to your creation. Apart from the material and technical levels of painting, we can find humanities to be another potential component of painting.

Gong: There are certainly some inspirations from humanities in my paintings. For instance, I was curious about the scripts of myths and legends some time ago while in the current stage I've been interested in religious sacrifice art and science-fiction literature, so my focus has been changing all the time. I would follow the lead of my heart and let it grow out of its natural course. Most of the influence

from humanities would be internalized, as I don't want my paintings to be notes of philosophy, science and literature. I just wish that humanities can stimulate my imagination and thinking.

Xia: Does this time of ours or particularly the status quo of Chinese society have any impact or influence on your art? Different people may be influenced in different ways, but for artists who work on major historical themes encouraged by the authority, this may just be an exciting era. So what do you think?

Gong: Historical themes have been a great attraction for me. I've got this very thin booklet called *Vasily Surikov's Approach to Art-Making*. It's a very interesting book about how painter Surikov composes a painting in an organized way and chooses from the multifarious material. As I see it, history painting can also be very contemporary or closely related to current times in the selection of subject matter, and should definitely not be stylized. Fossilization is actually the very cause for the failure of so many paintings on major historical themes in China. Don't you think *A Burial At Ornans* by Courbet is also a history painting? Although it records a funeral in his birthplace, the painter has worked many interesting details into the work, such as the drunken red-nosed bishop and some kids who are running happily around, and we can surely find tight connections between these and the artist's personal experience in art-making.

Xia: In a society developing so rapidly, you can easily get dazzled as if you were being pushed forward by everything around you.

Gong: The current social situation has me worried that I can get washed out anytime. It feels as if painting had been neglected by this age for quite a while. And apparently the current rising star has become the development of science and technology.

Xia: There's usually no escaping anxiety of a time. Painting is perhaps a dose of comfort, for both artists and the others.

Gong: Anxiety always sticks around, so what? I'm still going on painting at my little spot. Maybe I'll be needed again by history a while later. We don't know yet.

Xia: You don't have to be needed by the entire society. At least it's forever a fact that you crave for painting deep down.

Gong: That's why I persist in painting. I'm like a farmer who's putting every bit of his effort into his own field and expecting harvests. Like Ah Cheng says in his book *The King of Trees*, "That big tree proves what heaven has done." So I also want to grow a "tree" to prove what I would've done, and that is my greatest "ambition".