

“Ghosts in the Mirror,” or “Gray Specks in Red”

Lu Peng

Time passes ever so suddenly. As one combs through history, the name Song Ling emerges once again. Just imagine how the artist feels upon returning to a familiar environment to hold his own exhibition. Upon returning to the days of the '85 *New Space* exhibition, of the massive debate between “cold” and “hot” (see *Fine Art Magazine*, 1986, issue 2), of the Chi She (Pond Association) and of his ensuing departure from the group. Exactly what kind of background does an artist require to achieve the meaning he wishes for? Thirty years later, it is as if everything that was once scorching hot has slowly cooled. But with the return of Song Ling's works to the Chinese contemporary art scene, the smoldering coals underneath this cold surface seem to have regained their lingering heat; perhaps they will even catch fire once more. This is a prime opportunity to re-inspect Song Ling's creations.

Song Ling was born in 1961. Just like the Chinese rock pioneer Cui Jian, who was born in the same year, both of these individuals can be called “eggs under the red flag.” However, these children who grew up under the red flag possess a unique system of knowledge, reflection and even rebellion that clearly differs from the generation preceding them. Since 1978, these kinds of reflection and rebellion have been more or less instinctual. It is a revolution, one that a single sentence or an art catalogue can ignite. This is also probably the inherent reason that at the time of the '85 *New Space* exhibition, Song Ling, his friends, as well as other young artists residing in this nation, encountered such widespread criticism. Without a doubt, as people still dwelled within the lingering embers of past revolutionary fires, the revolutionary realism derived from systematic habits still served as the basic artistic criterion for the period. Yet it is difficult for the *New Space* works, including, of course, Song Ling's icy, blue-gray surrealist works, not to stand out from others, “like gray specks in the red” (see the lyrics to the song *Flying* in Cui Jian's album *Balls under the Red Flag*, “like red specks in the gray”) So, perhaps that red that is seemingly ablaze is in actuality a pile of lifeless ashes, while those “gray specks” are scorching-hot coals. They may appear gray, cool and dull, but if you reach out and touch them, you will feel the searing heat concealed within.

I mention Cui Jian here of course not only because he and Song Ling share a birth year. Another reason is that the way in which their works borrow from Western sources as well as utilize traditional modes of creativity is very comparable. Cui Jian's music is a wonderful fusion of ethnic and Western instruments, whereas Song Ling's art is a marriage of the traditional materials of ink art with Western art styles such as surrealism. While their styles inevitably differ in some regards, both are products of their time and background. That was an era in which people fervently looked to the West. The Western influence on contemporary China's young artists was only inevitable. As such, the impact of the West was common and widespread; far from merely transforming the art scene, its influence could be seen in the fields of literature (such as the Today School) and music. If we were to analyze Song Ling's early paintings from the perspective of imagery, the hallmarks of surrealists such as Magritte, Giorgio de Chirico and Dalí are readily apparent, such as the blue sky and white clouds in his *People-Pipelines* series. Although I do not know where Song Ling first saw surrealist painting, I am sure that in those years of the modernist movement they were not at all difficult to track down - in a campus library, from teachers or classmates, or even inside the worn books belonging to a foreign teacher. But was Song Ling utilizing surrealism for the sake of surrealism? His surrealist images and those of his comrades-in-arms (such as Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi) are perhaps more than a rebellion achieved through borrowing. Additionally, they are also an initial, independent reflection and analysis of reality carried out by the individuals and even the era. They are a deconstruction of reality. These works lead myself and other viewers to truly wonder about our own conditions and our own selves.

About thirty years ago, Song Ling exhibited his *People-Pipelines* series of paintings at '85 *New Space*. Because he had studied a different major from Zhang Peili and his other collaborators, Song exclusively used the traditional medium of ink on paper, albeit with surrealist techniques. Compared to any of the contemporary expressionist artists of southwest China (such as Mao Xuhui, Zhang Xiaogang, Ye Yongqing), the *People-Pipelines* series followed an entirely different key. The arrangement of *People-Pipelines No. 1* is extremely calm and still: within the pipe is a bright blue sky, a place that seems to have been accepted as heaven. The workers have donned hard hats; in their hands they each carry a set of work gloves. Together they march toward the viewer at a unified pace, more likely than not gazing upon the same fascinating scene. If we extend the possibilities of the painting, then we should be able to understand it thus: they are about to exit the pipeline and reach a new world. An era is about to reach its end, and the designers inside an ideological pipeline realize that in reality their world is a cold and desolate one. All is gray, the clouds bleak and the earth barren. Nothing else occupies the ground, save for row after row of pipes. The narrowing ladder on the painting's left side is also a metaphor for the ideological road whose ideals its travelers may not even reach. Looking at this patch of gray, desperate, deathly still space, one cannot help but think of Cui Jian's song "Here in this Space" from his album *Solution* and its lyrics "Here in this space, you can't open the sky or pierce the ground; but at least freedom isn't prison." As those individuals trapped inside the pipe are walking out from it, perhaps the massive disparity between the pipe's internal and external environments causes them to clearly see the space that they were unable to see clearly in the past. "Only after walking in and out of it do you see that it's an infinite emptiness, just like this space here." This can probably be seen as the disappointment and awakening of a generation who came of age in a disenchanting era.

This fits the logic of viewers of that time: as we once again observe the "pipeline" works that followed this one, we can gain a clearer knowledge. At first glance *People-Pipelines No. 2* can easily remind one of Magritte's *La Belle Captive*, but the frame and easel that serve as expressive borders in Magritte's painting are replaced in Song Ling's work with the massive edges of the worker's black body. This worker becomes the border between the external and internal worlds of the pipeline. Every single conflict and awakening occurs here, within the space of the worker's body. We might say that this person is the painter Song Ling himself; just like the figures to first emerge from the pipe in *People-Pipelines No. 1*, painters are prophets. Their goal is not at all to complete their paintings, but rather to use the completed paintings to allow the viewer to attain the same breakthrough in knowledge that they themselves have achieved. The Chinese saying "using one's own awakening to awaken others" is very apt; in this phrase we can find Song Ling's appeal for enlightenment. Song Ling's current retrospective exhibition is titled *Ghosts in the Mirror*. It borrows its title from a novel by Alain Robbe-Grillet, one of the vanguards of the Nouveau Roman movement. A painter is indeed like a mirror, but if we were to make a connection to another of Robbe-Grillet's works (Magritte's famous work *La Belle Captive* is used within Robbe-Grillet's film of the same name; in the film the individuals in the painting and reality are blurred together to such a degree that it is difficult to distinguish between dreams and reality) we can also view Song Ling as a frame, just like the worker in *People-Pipelines No. 2*. From this figure we can see the great tension that exists between art and reality, just as we can see the ambiguous relationship between reality and illusion within Robbe-Grillet's film.

All manner of surrealist elements emerge in *People-Pipelines No. 2*. Within the body of the worker holding a gas welding torch is a world of pipes. He does not need to hold the torch from its body; he need only grasp the cable, and the torch will automatically weld the massive pipe below it. The light source is also askew (on the painting's left side the shadows of the iron hooks and worker slant to the front-right; on the right side, the shadows of the worker and the roller he holds slant to the rear-right). These surrealist elements are more than playful imagery; they contain a deeper meaning: while the makers of the pipes and systems are producing an external pipeline, they are also producing an identical system of pipes inside themselves. Each person is a part of an ideology, and every one of them participates in erecting and solidifying of this ideology. At the same time the pipes that they construct press against their own bodies

and those of their workmates. The worker on the left who assumes an Atlas-like pose as he lifts his pipe is clear proof of this. We can also call this quotation from myth a metaphor, one stating that the pipeline of ideology already makes up the horizons of people's lives. At every moment people must persist in supporting and maintaining it. Otherwise, if it were to fall, this man-made world would collapse. This is very likely the true cause for many strange phenomena of the early 1980's. People chose to safeguard things because if these things were to crumble their outlook on life and their worldview would utterly collapse. On the right side, the worker carries whitewash with his left hand and holds a pail in his right. This is a superb instance of sarcasm. It is a metaphor for the whitewashing that the individuals of that era were certainly more than familiar with, for that which made them unwilling to leave the pipeline, for that which made them unwilling to examine themselves from a different perspective or to reflect upon their plight or that of society. However, some things have already come apart, just like the crane hook in the left side of the painting. Once it separates from the crane and plummets to the ground it becomes a heavy and massive question mark that must be confronted. Art is a form of self-examination and self-questioning; it is an about-face, a way to use one's own paintbrush to restore the truth after it has been whitewashed.

Several familiar elements emerge in the unlabeled work *People-Pipelines No. 3*, such as a ladder identical in structure to the one seen in *People-Pipelines No. 1*. Additionally, the heart of the painting consists of the same kind of massive iron hook featured in *People-Pipelines No. 2*, resembling an inverted question mark. This portion utilizes beautiful colors; the ladder is red and white, and the section outside the question mark in which this same ladder lies is dull and colorless. It seems as though this is tell the viewer that this ideal world is nothing more than a mirage inside a pipe. All of it is suspect; it is a massive, twisted inverted question mark. The worker on the painting's right side is enthusiastically engaged in his welding work, doing his part to contribute to the efforts to construct the pipeline. On the left side, however, the worker has ceased his work. With his hands clasped at his back he gazes into the background. Examining this image, we can see this as a playful homage to the famed German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. Just like the very wanderer within *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, this worker stands with his right leg behind him in support; his left foot is bent as he steps toward the edge, and he gazes in the direction of the distant source of light. The figure in Friedrich's painting, however, is situated over a precipice. Might Song Ling be revealing to viewers that this seemingly fine world is actually a dangerous precipice with ambushes waiting at every turn? Are the letters "COGAS" marked upon the pipe a faint hint? Could they be telling us that these pipes are filled with noxious carbon monoxide, and that without extra caution we may be fated to sink into deep slumber or even death?

White Pipelines makes use of layered gray tones. The red arrows that were seen on the pipes within the bodies of the workers in *People-Pipelines No. 2* emerge this time in the extreme left side of the painting in a much larger form. But rather than the red of the earlier painting, they are now a deep gray. Even more interesting is that the worker is not gazing in the direction the arrow is pointing, but rather against it, facing the viewer. One could say this is a natural result of *People-Pipelines No. 3*. Facing the source of light and focusing on the foreground might cause some people to reflect, to realize, and to go looking for another path; it will also cause them to examine themselves. Unlike the preceding several works, this work no longer features the surrealist painting style of the first installments in the *People-Pipelines* series, but rather constructivism, or a blend of constructivism and expressionism. The style of *White Pipelines* is extremely appropriate for the themes that Song Ling deals with. Originating in Soviet Russia, constructivism is an important art form for socialist countries. But more than just an art form, this rationalist model of planning also spread its guiding influence to areas such as architecture and social planning. In the exalted light of a certain state of consciousness, man's limited intellect seemed to have no limits; it could map out a plan for the world for the next five, ten or fifty years, or even an entire century. However, this kind of planning and rational calculation is, after all, an expression of the modern self. Constructivism is a symptom of technological dominance. Ultimately, art responded to this method of calculation and planning with a large and heavy question mark. Art forced it to answer and it called upon all viewers to answer their own questions.

People-Pipelines No. 4 and *People-Pipelines No. 5* are a transition. The figures inside the painting appear either static and still or moving with large steps, machinelike and unthinking. However, *People-Pipelines No. 4* also contains several uncertain factors, such as the worker on its right side. The hard hat that his companion is wearing resembles a steel helmet; it is fastened snugly as the man stares firmly ahead, his eyes unseen and hidden by his hat. The strap at his jaw is not fastened with a tight buckle but actually resembles a dog leash, stretching beyond the range of the viewer's sight. His gaze and the road upon which he is walking both seem to be waiting for the viewer to lead the way.

From *People-Pipelines No. 6* through *No. 10*, Song Ling used ink and wash to extreme results in terms of materials and expressionistic content. These works indulged the artist's professional level of ability and expression. Man and pipeline blend together, and it is now that we can better understand the message in the title of this series. People are pipelines, and pipelines are people. People are the makers of systems as well as parts of them and the systems themselves. Therefore, once they become part of a system, even if it is for their own self-preservation, people will also unconsciously take action to preserve the existing system. People will let the pipeline continue to extend forward, and they will let themselves shut their eyes as they and everyone else are overcome with carbon monoxide, even if in the end they all succumb to a deep and incurable sleep. The responsibility of the painter is to reveal these absurd circumstances in which all of us reside, to make ourselves and other viewers open our eyes and see the precipice before us.

Of course, the pipeline itself may be borrowed from a memory of a special experience that the artist cannot shake (we know that in 1985 Song Ling and several friends from art circles traveled to Shanghai to experience life there; see the "photographic material" section of this exhibition). It may be just like the influence of Zhang Peili's saxophone, except that any object, image or symbol could possess the power of words; he used and modified their meanings.

A prophet is never understood by his contemporaries. He is fated to suffer the same misunderstandings as the Trojan princess Cassandra, often only because they see those things which others are unwilling to acknowledge. When Song Ling and the whole '85 *New Space* as well as the entire '85 New Wave group of artists were called into question by their contemporaries, this ancient chapter repeated itself once more. Perhaps we should rejoice. If people back then had immediately understood what it was those artists wished to remind them of, perhaps the artists would face the same horrifying fate as the eponymous proclaimer in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

In 1986, Song Ling, Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi and others formed the art collective known as the Chi She. Over the following years he created his *Meaningless Choice?* series of livestock-themed ink paintings. His portrayal of livestock can be viewed as anthropomorphic. In an era of industrial technology and machine cultivation, man and livestock share the same fate. Both are controlled, confined and slaughtered. From birth until death, they do not experience a single moment of freedom. Cui Jian's lyrics "at least freedom isn't prison" also seem to be a sarcastic retort; society may just well be a larger, more imperceptible prison. Signs of Song Ling's observations, reflections and critiques in these regards emerge in an earlier ink work.

The work *People-Café* was created in 1985. The painting is a dull, slightly grayish blue. This work follows the same tune as several of the earliest works in the *Meaningless Choice?* series (*Meaningless Choice? No. 1* to *3*), and we can say that these several works possess a strong continuity. *People-Café* contains an extremely simple image. The café is painted in a minimalist style with only three men inside. The most important man is the one seated within the depths of the painting's left side. He leans his back against the wall, more or less facing the viewer. In the viewer's direction, his body casts a shadow like that of a domestic animal (a pig). Reason states that since the wall is behind his body he could not cast this shadow. Perhaps the artist consciously blurred the possibility of this truth. Therefore we can say that this is

a projection of the man's soul rather than a true shadow. This pig-shaped shadow may be a metaphor: just like household livestock, modern man lives under control. The ancient Greeks divided the soul into three parts, the nutritive soul (all life possesses this, including plants), the locomotive soul (all animals possess this, but plants do not), and the rational soul (only humans possess this). Within Song Ling's painting, modern man exists like a domestic animal. People only possess the instincts to survive and to move; they have lost humanity's unique reasoning and judgment. We can say that half of Hegel's "master-slave dialectic" has been achieved; domestic animals have not become masters, but humanity's existence has already transformed into that of its "slaves." This kind of analysis is somewhat subjective, but nonetheless, in these times of "free reasoning" any modernist art will trigger endless explanation. Its purpose is singular: to express freedom.

To express his critique of a "cultivated society" of mechanical reproduction, Song Ling himself used a mechanical reproduction technique. Respectively, *Meaningless Choice? No. 1* through *No. 3* consist of the images of a lamb, cow and dog. Three additional paintings numbered *Meaningless Choice? No. 58* through *No. 60* respectively feature a horse, pig and elephant. Each frame is split evenly into upper and lower halves. Above are three small identical profiles of an animal, and below are three repeated profiles with inverted colors. The effect is like that of positive and negative film. It also seems as if some kind of beam, like an x-ray, could have inverted these animals. This method reminds one of Walter Benjamin's art critiques and his criticism of an age of mechanical reproduction, but if Song Ling's reflection and critique were to be seen in the light of *People-Café*, they take on another interesting flavor. Not only is he reflecting upon art; he is reflecting upon the circumstances of man's existence. At this time, Song's colleague Geng Jianyi wrote an essay entitled *Upcoming Paintings from the 'Chi She'* (1987) explaining a trait of "a new kind of on-canvas painting." Geng used "the principle of economy", "directness", "lack of commentary" as well as "repeated features" to explain the "theme engineering" that they used while painting on-canvas. He wished to tell them that color requires restraint and careful use, and that if used correctly it can abandon a cheery "easy chair" ("principle of economy"). Whether Song Ling upheld this kind of discipline is unimportant, but similar modes of implementation distinguished these young artists from the tides of expressionism in other cities.

Meaningless Choice? No. 4 through *No. 7* form a kind of "record of transformation." Cows, lambs and other docile, grazing domestic animals become fierce dogs, and it seems as though Song Ling has still chosen a type of freedom. In *Meaningless Choice? No. 4* we can still see the familiar arrow symbol. These symbols appear on the forehead of the lamb transforming into a dog. This hints that the change gradually revealed may have been brought about by the system and by the pipeline. Over his next several works, this kind of change emerged in a tangible form: bulls and lambs grow sharp and doglike teeth, their faces begin to transform into those of fierce hounds. Image and metaphor still hold Song Ling captivated.

Meaningless Choice? No. 11 through *No. 29* return again to single portraits of animals. Some are ordinary livestock, others are strange transformed "dog-featured" creatures. However, these works share one common trait: each painting features a large postmark stamped upon the bodies and heads of these animals, as though each of these works were a postcard or envelope. Song Ling also painted different times onto each postmarks. The one in *Meaningless Choice? No. 11* is marked Shanghai, 1966, at the time of the beginning of the Cultural Revolution; *Meaningless Choice? No. 14* is marked Beijing, 1976, at the Cultural Revolution's end. The time of the postmark on *Meaningless Choice? No. 18* is 1956, during the period of the One Hundred Flowers Campaign. Additionally, the postmarks on several other works are dated 1988; seeing as Song Ling created this group of works between 1986 and 1987, this is his way of pointing to the impending future. As a result these works are not records or expression of a personal nature, but rather more of a public collective memory, a letter written to recipients either in history or in the future. There is one detail that should be specially noted; every postmark includes the character "zhi"(sub-branch), an old form of postmark. Examples include "Sub-branch No. 6" and "Sub-branch No. 8." Anyone with even a cursory understanding of the postal system will know that Beijing's famous "Sub-branch 17" postmark

denotes Zhongnanhai, the headquarters of the Communist Party and State Council. In this subtle parody Song Ling mocks power. It is as though he wields special authority over historical records and writings, as though he is a truthful historian armed with a paintbrush. We have seen recently that many authors like to compare their writings to messages in bottles sent to later generations, as if their works are modern, difficult-to-find letters from a soul mate, whose readers wait in the future. This kind of belief in the “future” and “posterity” carries strong overtones of the “Age of Enlightenment” (concerning this belief in the “future” and “posterity,” please consult Carl L. Becker’s writings on the history of thought in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*). Therefore Song Ling’s works possess a rather obvious “Enlightenment” touch, which is expressed in this belief as well as in the tendencies toward “edifying” and “recording history” which he carefully kept among his artistic ideals. Song Ling is not an artist who “makes art for art’s sake” or concerns himself with problems of reality and society. Instead his works “participate,” in his own special manner, and “become involved” in the world in which we exist.

Additionally, those several works in which “blood drops” appear should be paid special attention. In *Meaningless Choice? No. 25, 26, 27, 28 and 29*, what appears to be the postmark’s thick red ink is dripping. These are Song Ling’s records of the blood that he witnessed or learned of, and they also constitute a warning to the viewer. Just as Lenin said, forgetting the past is equal to treason. Song Ling has chosen his own method to record the past. He is like an entity that can transcend time and return to the past or leap into the future; he records the spiritual condition of himself and all society as though he were recording everything that lay before his eyes. These works reveal the difference between Song Ling and his compatriots: he still cannot extricate himself from reality and its related themes.

Just as Magritte consistently maintained: the artist is not a mirror to reality. Therefore, this grand retrospective exhibition is titled “Ghosts in the Mirror.” It seems as if we should use Robbe-Grillet’s method to understand this mirror rather than see it as a simple reflection of reality - Song Ling’s paintings have always resisted this type of simplified “reappearance.” Robbe-Grillet’s semi-autobiographical novel is extremely complex. What “reappear” in the work are words (here we should understand the term “word” as it is used in Sartre’s autobiography *The Words*), images, as well as every kind of person and object. These things reappear through the mirror of “I.” While observing itself the subject, “Self,” brings the entire world into its subjective scope of view and consciousness. This becomes the subject’s “object,” as well as the painter’s own “object.” Yet this book also reveals the difficulty of autobiographical writing. If we were to transfer this question to Song Ling, then it would concern the possibility of autobiographical painting: can painting reveal the painter’s “self”? How can it do so? Of course, we cannot see Song Ling’s “self” directly through these paintings. We may not even see the mirror itself. This differs from many Renaissance-era paintings, and it also differs from the descriptions in works like *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* by American poet John Ashbery, who himself was no stranger to painting and art criticism. With no mirror, there is also no image of the painter’s self; what exactly can we see in these paintings? Why do we need to compare Song Ling’s paintings to a mirror? Although Song Ling’s paintings do not directly express the external image of the painter and contemporary society, they actually reflect a deeper, hidden spiritual reality. This spiritual reality differs from and transcends external image, and so emerges in a surreal or transformed manner; it may even often appear absurd or bizarre to viewers.

A mirror has the particular characteristic of splitting things in two. It is like the story of Zhu Bajie from *Journey to the West* looking into the mirror and seeing an “inside” world and an “outside” world, but Song Ling’s situation is much more complicated. The artist’s “self” which is observing and painting, the “self” which is being observed and the “self” that is painted during or after observation form three “selves.” During the process of painting, these three “selves” do not remain very faithful to their original forms. This may be one way to analyze and understand *Meaningless Choice? No. 1* through *No. 3*, as well as the series’ three other unnumbered works. If one were to call Song Ling’s painting a mirror, it would also be a fabricated mirror, and the method and relations of reflection within it would be more complex than those of a mirror in reality.

Mirrors have a strong playfulness about them. This playfulness is not very prominent in Song Ling's work, but if you take into account the artistic activities of the Chi She, of which he was a founding member, this playfulness becomes more apparent. The three Chi She actions that Song Ling took part in during his early years created three respective works: *No. 1 - Yang Style Tai Chi Series*, *No. 2 - Stroller in Green Space* and *No. 3 - Wrapping up-King and Queen*. The last work is an homage to Henry Moore's masterpiece *King and Queen*. At the time the members of the Chi She revered the man, and so the third work was intended as a tribute to him, but it should be said that Henry Moore's influence extends far beyond that one piece. A shadow of Henry Moore's works is also present in the prior two. The shapes of those Tai Chi figures are quite reminiscent of Moore's modeling of his sculptures. Additionally, in the first work, the names of each posture and movement were written upon the flat paper used to construct the figures. The second work has already dispensed with words and has instead chosen to express itself with a purer, more direct language of form.

Every action the Chi She held seems like an instance of performance art. For their first one, they pieced newspapers into large sections three meters tall and one meter wide. After doing this they painted figures and wrote the corresponding terms beside what they had painted, and finally glued the paper figures to a wall of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts overlooking the West Lake in Hangzhou. The entire process needed to occur without the knowledge of workers or security personnel. They were all taking a risk; in the event that any of them were caught they may have had no way to complete the work. In the end they mounted the figures without a hitch, but in the morning some passersby tore pieces from the lower parts of the work that were within reach and sold them as scrap paper. The uncertainty of this result is precisely what the members of the Chi She sought. They wished to shatter the myth of the "work" and the faith in "results," and so they elevated the "process" of art to the position of highest importance. This kind of artistic behavior is certainly very close to performance art; their actions also testify to this point. For their second action, the Chi She switched locations to a small forest. Although there were fewer observers in this instance, its effects were perhaps even more shocking. Because there was no text to explain the "postures" or "movements," and because the material had been changed to white card paper, quite a few viewers thought they were seeing ghosts. These elements of game- and trick-like playfulness embody the "holy" resistance that the Chi She has consistently held toward "on-canvas painting." They wished to use play to shatter every last halo of the official art establishment.

The "pond" in Chi She(Pond Association) implies immersion. This refers to the "immersion" of the art itself that the subject enjoys when creating an artistic work, and also the "immersion" of art that a viewer enjoys during the process of viewing. As a result the work is closer to a medium; through it "immersion" is achieved. Yet the work itself is not in fact art's ultimate goal. Rather, the *work* should serve *art*, in order to facilitate the different levels of "immersion" and existence that the creator and observer both experience. This artistic position stressing "process" and "realization" is extremely philosophical and extremely Zen. Or one can call it extremely Daoist. Just like Zhuangzi's story of "catching the fish and forgetting the trap," the way to "immersion" is extremely important. This is the "fish" that the artist pursues; the work itself is only the "trap" created to catch the "fish." If one places more emphasis on the trap than on the fish, this is only putting the cart before the horse.

As a result, the Chi She attached great importance to film and video recording. This is a part of the process, and at the same time it is also a record of the process. On some level these records are also works in their own right. This is yet another one of the details that Song Ling has considered in regards to this retrospective exhibition. All activities of the Chi She were artistic actions that, like this, emphasized the process over the work produced. While it is impossible to display the works produced during that time, it is also unnecessary. The records from those times possess greater meaning as well as a stronger identity as a "work." As a result this exhibition has specially prepared a great amount of photographs of Song Ling from every period in time; these include pictures with the "Chi She," in which we can see how Song Ling and other members of the Chi She prepared and created their works, as well as how they completed each work

by placing or attaching it at a pre-selected location. These photographs of the *85 New Space* exhibition and Chi She activities give the viewer a sense of the atmosphere of each period. Although a single action is only performed once, photographic records grant these works the potential to be viewed repeatedly.

Among the photographic materials is one especially interesting picture, of when Song Ling's *Meaningless Choice?* series was featured in the Zhejiang Painting Academy's annual exhibition in 1987. Here we can see the uniqueness of Song Ling's works; they look nothing like the nature and landscape works being exhibited alongside them. Even though '85 *New Space* gave these young artists a common exhibition space, very few were able to travel the same paths. In the end the Chi She also died a peaceful death. It should be said that ultimately art returned from the group to the individual; each person could only walk the path that suited them.

Song Ling continued his *Meaningless Choice?* series through the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, but its colors grew increasingly varied. At first Song used several colors rather than pure "red and black." One can say that these works then strode from China to Australia. When Song Ling later worked on his *Beyond Cure* series, he began with traditional ink, water and paper, but later opted for mixed-media collages. These works also serve as a link between the past and future. Because Song Ling's prior works were almost exclusively executed in ink, his experimentation with collage work at the time also led to his *Domestic Products* collage series. At the same time, these works will cause one to think of the works of Chen Zhen, another expatriate artist. Chen Zhen always paid attention to the questions of illness and death, and so several of his on-canvas works are depictions of the veins and organs inside the human body. Upon these pictures are written the names of the organs or illnesses, but Chen Zhen used Chinese to write these descriptions; Song Ling's works use English. From this difference one can very much see the disparity in the ways in which the artists deal with personal identity and the viewer's comprehension.

Song Ling in his early years had already attempted collages. His *Plum in the Golden Vase* affixed modern Western gender relations onto an embroidery pattern of *Plum in the Golden Vase*. In contrast, his *Beyond Cure* and *Domestic Products* series superimpose Chinese objects over Western objects. In several years, the characters changed but the setting remained the same. Changes to one's external environment will lead artists to different judgments and choices when considering what is innate and what is learned.

After his brief collage period, Song Ling returned to the familiar world of ink painting in 1995. His series "Dreamtimes" was completed during this period. Song Ling's theme here was still profile images, the one that so intrigued him, but now he had returned from profiles of animals to those of humans. However, we can still sense that these human images still contain animal-like transformations. His later *Qi Gong* and *Tai Chi* series show that although Song Ling was living abroad, the *Qigong* and *Tai Chi* exercises then fashionable in China still reached him and compelled him to create these two sets of works. As a result these two sets of works both possess characteristic traits of transformation and abstract lines. At the same time Song Ling also produced many works in his *Masks* series. If one were to say that in his early period Song Ling was greatly influenced by surrealism, then in this stage we can see quite a few shades of Picasso; those thick daubs are a characteristic quite unlike any seen in his earlier works.

After 2000, Song Ling returned to an even more traditional theme: flower-and-bird painting. His *Botanical Garden* series and *Flowers and Birds* dealt with traditional subject matter, yet Song Ling's methods of expression were still unique, including no small amount of transformation and abstractness. His later *Interference* series contained several experiments. Song Ling used proplylene for the painting's surface, and the faces in the work were no longer solely Chinese; there were yellow faces as well as black and white ones. Australia is a land of immigrants, and in Song Ling's paintings a mix of men and women emerged one by one. Certainly, the persistent changes of this language environment had an influence on the artist's work.

Thirty years of creativity have molded a special artist: we can see that the young artists' resistance against the establishment's singular aesthetic standards and artistic norms created a true time in which "one hundred flowers bloomed." Of course, these artists explored and utilized a great deal of Western and Chinese artistic resources, such as Song Ling's drawing from surrealism and pop art. Whether one is discussing *Meaningless Choice?* and its pop-art influences or the wish to "return art to the people" from the Chi She days, both reveal his and his contemporaries' defiance of official artistic norms. "Meaninglessness" did in fact contain meaning. This was a revolt against "meaning above all" and government-decreed "wholesomeness". "Meaninglessness" represented a search for other, not-officially-approved kinds of meaning, in this case referring to other artistic pursuits, knowledge and understanding. This is also the reason the Chi She was founded. Back then those young artists wished to truly "intervene" in historical and societal life, rather than rely on standard, safe and official methods to create their works and live out their lives.

To speak of "mirrors" now—Song Ling's works and his entire life truly are a mirror. Perhaps we can not only quote Robbe-Grillet but also the Northern Song-era reference work *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*: "With copper as a mirror one can straighten his clothes; with the past as a mirror one can view the rise and fall of ages; with man as a mirror one can understand gain and loss." With Song Ling as a mirror, we can, to a certain extent, see the gains and losses from the past thirty years of new art in China—his expression of the deeply hidden spiritual realities of self and society. There was no way to use traditional or, at the time, orthodox realist methods to express these things. Song Ling and his contemporaries needed to blaze a new trail. Some made other choices, but Song Ling chose to fuse ink painting with modern schools such as surrealism to create unique works. To understand that era and its art, we can follow photographs and writings back to their sources (just as can be done with the valuable materials specially prepared for this exhibition), but we should perhaps also return to the works themselves, and return to those particularly creative works. If we were to paraphrase a passage from *Mencius*, we could say that a gentleman does not see his reflection in water but in people. As a mirror, water only lets us see surface appearances, but with a person as a mirror we can see the zeitgeist of an era embodied. Song Ling's retrospective exhibition is just this kind of moment. From here we can return to those past days, or in other words, make those past days come to life before our eyes and tell us about those excited, emotional moments—and of course the artist's special inner circumstances.

Friday July 27, 2014