

## Ghosts in the Mirror

Xia Jifeng

The first time I received a CD from Song Ling was about two years ago. It was early winter in Beijing, and the weather was awful. That translucent distance that normally occupies the space between the sky and the earth was lost in a smoggy haze. Indoors, the radiators quietly hissed, as if unable to suppress their dissatisfaction with affairs outside. At the time I didn't know the package was from Song Ling. Inside there was a note on which the name Song Ling was written, but I thought it was from another artist of the same name. So it was with profound disbelief that I opened the CD on my computer only to discover images of those so-familiar artworks. My sense of uncertainty seemed to amplify the noises coming from the radiators into a vacuous echo. I called the phone number on the note, and the person who answered said he was Song Ling. Only after a moment of silence did I inquire hesitantly if he was the Song Ling who had sent me the CD. He confirmed that, yes, he was. The hissing from the radiators seemed to pour into the phone lines, like the sound of a rushing creek. The feeling of disbelief washed over me again, and the entire room was steeped in an atmosphere of the unreal.

To say that my first contact with Song Ling was like history springing to life before my eyes is no exaggeration. When someone who has disappeared for a quarter of a century suddenly reemerges before you, it is impossible not to feel a sense of the unreal. The Song Ling who sent me the CD was indeed the same Song Ling who had been one of the principal artists of the '85 New Wave Art Movement, who was remembered in art history books as the critical art figure of that period. He was a featured participant in the '85 *New Space* exhibition, and a central participant in the Chi She (Pond Association) artist group in Hangzhou. On a certain level, his formal explorations with brush and ink can be said to represent the cutting edge of China's experimentation with pop art during that time. But just as is said in every essay on his work, he left China for Australia in 1988. For 25 years, Song Ling the artist disappeared from public view, becoming one of the best known "missing persons" of the Chinese art world. Of course his works did not disappear with him, and they continued to carry his banner forward for a time, but they were a symbol whose power slowly faded as they were repeatedly carted out like required props in discussions of contemporary art history. Clearly their history had come to a halt, and so did their participation in ongoing development of art history in China. They had become the lonely works that Proust spoke of, unmoored "children of silence."

"To my mind, great works can only be born within the history of their art, and as *participants* in that history. It is only inside history that we can see what is new and what is repetitive, what is discovery and what is imitation; in other words, only inside history can a work exist as a *value* capable of being discerned and judged. Nothing seems to me worse for art than to fall outside of its own history, for it is a fall into the chaos where aesthetic values can no longer be perceived." Milan Kundera's understanding of the relationship between art, society, and history is most likely informed by the pain of personal experience, as the famous Czech author was indeed forced to leave behind the country and language that bore the history of his works. In his view, the mainstream art that followed the Prague Spring (Kundera was specifically interested in literary fiction), was post-historical; it did nothing more than reproduce forms that were already bereft of artistic spirit. Within their obscurity and inability to surprise there was only death.

Song Ling's situation differed from Kundera's in that Song's departure from his home

country was voluntary, innocent, and even a little naïve. In his own words, he only wanted “to see what the western world was like.” His aspirations and the space in which he could carry out creative work were not externally restricted in any way. It is merely that he unthinkingly left behind the place where the history for his works was rooted. He detached himself from his identity as a creator and participant in the furiously advancing world of Chinese contemporary art. Yet with regards to the results of his actions, he did not differ greatly from Kundera. Once he realized there was no way for him to return to his former position, he could only watch helplessly as his art was sidelined by the forward march of contemporary art, as his works were torn from the context of historical time. Like a goldfish who has accidentally leapt from his bowl, there was no way to completely mask the internal pains caused by the separation from his native element. In 1989 the *China / Avant-Garde Exhibition* was held at the National Art Museum of China under the joint direction of critics, artists, and art journals from across the country. The exhibition served as a summation of the '85 New Wave Art Movement, yet Song Ling was forced to decline an invitation to participate due to financial difficulties. The frustration he must have felt could only have been amplified when, soon after opening, the exhibition became front page news for art publications and media throughout the West.

Surveying the history of Chinese contemporary art, one finds there is no shortage of “missing persons” like Song Ling. The whereabouts of a number of extremely talented participants in the '85 *New Space* exhibition, including Xu Jin and Bao Jianfei, are currently unknown. Yet, others who continued to develop within China, such as Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, are now recognized as contemporary masters. It is as if the spirit that governs reality arranged the same trials for each of the artists that went abroad, for their lives unfolded along similar paths. Survival was their first priority, which then became a test of the depth of their aspirations. By the time many had achieved a comfortable life abroad, they found that their lives were completely divorced from the world of art. A number of others were able to pursue both ends, for example Huang Yongping, Xu Bing, and Gu Wenda, and in the process they wrote a new chapter in the history of contemporary art, that of overseas Chinese artists. What is interesting is that so many of them in recent years have flocked back to China, bringing with them secret histories of success or failure, returning once again participate in that history which helped birth their art.

Song Ling is no exception. Unlike the other “missing persons” of contemporary art, he has proven himself a survivor. The historical demands of his art and the strength of his aspirations finally led him to reaffirm certain inner truths. After a few years of settling in and adjusting to life in Australia, he quickly entered the mainstream of the local art world, and was able to make a living as a painter. He is represented by galleries in Melbourne and Sydney, has held 14 solo exhibitions, and has participated in nearly 100 group shows of various sizes. As we would expect from an artist of this caliber, his work continued to display elements of the unique style he had developed in China, while also absorbing influence from Western art. Just like any outstanding artist, he has followed a path of constant self-negation and affirmation to arrive where he is today, and now he emerges once again to remove the cloud of obscurity he had left in his place.

*Ghosts in the Mirror* is the first systematic presentation of Song Ling’s work within China. To borrow Kundera’s words, the goal is not to highlight “great works,” but to reestablish the “history” of Song Ling’s art. The exhibition assembles nearly 200 works from every period of his career, as well as numerous related documents and supporting materials. Within them beats the pulse of the earliest developments within Chinese contemporary art, unveiling one face of the thinking that

informed an art movement of great historical significance. Put another way, the “reappearance” of Song Ling calls for a reevaluation of the legacy of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century’s *New Wave Art Movement*. This complex legacy has alternately been the recipient of ridicule and lukewarm praise, but the questions it raises concerning the independence of artistic production, and the relationship between history and art are still relevant to contemporary artists, and are worthy of further exploration.

The title of the exhibition is taken from Alain Robbe-Grillet’s autobiography, the contents of which wander between autobiography and essay. The original French title of the book, *Le miroir qui revient*, references a “return” or “reemergence” in the mirror. This book’s ambiguous tones, recollections, and reflections on the creative act allow the always hazy image of Robbe-Grillet to reemerge. The narrative style of the work is noted for its polyphonic construction. The “reemerging” subject, the “reemerging” object, and the “reemerging” relationship to time come together to embody the narrator’s unusual artistic ability. As a mirror with the ability to summon images of memory and the past, the work transcends the limitations of conventional autobiography by acknowledging the damage inflicted upon memory by the passage of time, approaching the problem of validating the objectivity and honesty of the narrator from a new angle.

With regard to Song Ling, all of his works can similarly be said to be mirrors which summon both the image of incoherent narrator and the object of narration. These “Ghosts in the Mirror” allow us to see the objectivity and detachment of history and time, and at the same time see the honesty and fertile imagination that inform the spirit of the artist.

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