

I Can Only Be Here!

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As I put it in my 2011 essay *The Logic of "Low Matter" in Reality: On Ren Xiaolin's Recent Works*, "Ren Xiaolin has been questioning and revealing the twisted and peculiar state of man with 'whether God knows or not that man is sick' as an underlying and thematic dimension of his narrative in painting, and it implies his thinking over and interpretation of life and death, mind and flesh, ethics and desire, etc." I'm afraid my saying back then might have turned into a prophecy. In 2018, sadly, artist Yang Yi, Ren Xiaolin's spouse, died of illness. Before that, he had spent around three years in and out of the hospital looking after and staying with her, worrying, feeling helpless and lonely, praying, etc., which has become a special experience in Ren Xiaolin's life. As his latest solo launched by Hive Center for Contemporary Art (Beijing), "An End in Obscurity" gives us a special glimpse of how he spent the very period.

The exhibits allow us to "see" or, via the mind and the mood, "feel" the artist's sadness or the pathos of his loss. The narratives of these pieces, of course, are mainly composed of his inner soliloquies. Loneliness and upset have arisen as God is taking his love away. That's him being trapped in endless caretaking and waiting and, at the end of a hospital corridor, his world is illuminated only by the dull-red medical lighting and his shimmering cigarette. With the night closing in on him, he has no choice but to look around the hospital hopelessly as far as he can while imagining and amplifying the potential panic lurking in the surroundings, and all this is dissolving his faith. By proficiently organizing and overlapping hard-edge lines and multiple visuals, Ren Xiaolin has made a series of variant images out of the experience, which, to an extent, has also visually renewed our impression of Ren Xiaolin's art. The various characters in these pieces seem to be missing persons that are always ready, ready in a sullen occasion to miss any encounter, and also to have their ego lost. Through every him and her or even every object in the seemingly dim and mysterious light, the artist tries to visualize how she once looked, to imply a past existence with present non-existence, and even to render the weight of her soul through composition and brushwork. These allow us to see the fragmentary moments between him and her in Ren Xiaolin's depiction, as well as his obsession with absurdity – he weaves twisted bodies, twining branches of trees, everyday objects and animals into "natural" scenery which is no different to a nightmare to him. Secretly, perhaps, Ren Xiaolin has been longing for and wondering what if there is another her, another her that will never leave him behind. So that "her" has really come into being. And this "her", reproduced though, is even more "real" than the counterpart in reality. She's the shadow deep in his mind, hence one kind of loneliness for the two versions of them.

It is noteworthy that these new works by Ren Xiaolin provide us with a projection of him and her in the scenery of the world and epitomize his dazzling worries and murmuring fantasies. A series of converted mutual gazes with her, the fragmental images seem disheveled as flowers that are flying off their stalks, but these "chaotic scenes", in rich tonality, can hardly give one any peace. In fact, reality is already saddening enough as it looks straight into those exposed wounds, freeze-frames those lives full of uncertainties, amplifies those absurdities so common in everyday

life to be easily overlooked... In a work of art, this is undoubtedly only a piece of imagination, and such “undoubtedly” is the very “cruelty” of the world. If we pay attention, we can find the recurrent image of a deer in these new pieces by Ren Xiaolin. God incarnate, the deer, with the scent of green grass, can look at the existence of humanity speculatively or biologically, but, with its figures frozen in Ren Xiaolin’s paintings, it’s become a spirit-like existence remodeled by the artist. It’s a fable about a deer or a fable told by the deer, and this very form is itself the renaming of her. In a fable-like manner of narration, Ren Xiaolin gives vent to his perplexity and unease rather vividly and presents a thrill of lamenting and pathos in the special space he’s created.

This is life. In the face of Death, who can stay aloof? What we want, actually, is but to save the deceased in our memory. In this sense, Ren Xiaolin’s paintings add to the obscurity of life which flickers feebly through the contours of some figures, like a dance of light and shadow, so her presence cannot be captured even with the sharpest lens. What he needs is to feel his own way to any traces of the life she used to live so as to detect the existence of eternity. So Ren Xiaolin’s new pieces can renew our impression of his art. The spirit of his painting or the light that draws inspiration to him has always been alive. And this, stemming from the artist’s despair and disillusion as to the inconstancy of life, also makes for the misshapen and twitchy figures he created, and such deformity is a demonstration of our most instinctive desire and feelings.

In another word, Ren Xiaolin has to be this way, he can only be here! In a long solitary period with time frozen and everything around, he can only tell of the time they spent together with various visual vocabularies that defy logic and paint to document past memories fragmentally. However, the existence that can be perceived only by him in this misfortune now only exists in Ren Xiaolin’s illusion or may only be a way of his to unleash his feelings. Life is all about crossing some bridge. She may have gone to Heaven in the end like a plume of smoke drifting away in the blue sky, but what she’s left to us, who are still living, is endless regret and grief, fueling the continual torture brought by our lives that are not always satisfying. Therefore, we have this solo of his that focuses on the life “scenery” of him and her.