Image, Memory and Tempera

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Before Northern European painters began using oil colors in the fifteenth century, tempera had been the primary painting technique. The term, which means "to temper" or "to mingle," is here used to refer to any painted artworks created using water-soluble pigments and a binder made from egg or other protein medium. It is said that as early as the first century, there were painters in ancient Egypt using this technique to paint portraits of pharaohs, and that it spread as a painting technique to ancient Greece, Rome and medieval Europe, only gradually being replaced by oil paints in the middle of the Renaissance. Researchers have discovered records of oil paint technology dating back to the twelfth century, but art history treats Jan Van Eyck as the inventor of oil painting. One thing is for certain, which is that by the sixteenth century, oil paint was being widely used across Europe.

Compared to tempera, the cohesion of oil paints allow painters more precise control of their brushstrokes, while its slight fluidity allows them to capture certain details that would be very difficult in tempera. Tempera and oil are not just paints; they also determine technique, form and style, and even had an impact in the shifting of the entire system of painting. For instance, the invention of tube paints in the 19th century was doubtless an important material condition supporting the rise of Impressionism. It facilitated painting outdoors and simplified the process of painting, even shortening the time taken to complete a painting. I, however, feel that a more revolutionary change was perhaps in the mid-1940s, with the invention of acrylic paints by American artists. The fluidity and quick-drying properties of acrylic formed a marked contrast to the cohesiveness and slow-drying properties of oil paint, rapidly making acrylic the paint of choice for many Abstract Expressionist painters and Pop artists.[1] This shift was doubtlessly followed by the accelerated development of modernity or the capitalist project. Today, I trust that everyone has strongly sensed that we have entered into a state of existence devoid of time. As described in the bestselling book *Burnout Society* by German philosopher Byund-Chul Han, this is an era without "negativity," where "should" has been replaced by the ubiquitous "can," and our living mechanisms have fallen under the control of desire, efficiency and achievement. Formally, the individual has gained the sovereignty of the gods, but has in essence descended to the level of a self-exploiting "beast of burden." In other words, this is the time that we exploit ourselves.[2]

This warping of time clearly provides an important backdrop for Xia Yu's tempera painting. We can even view his choice of tempera as a conscious temporal or negative act. Through the lens of art history, tempera enjoyed something of a revival in Germany, Britain and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though oil and acrylic dominated the mainstream, a few painters such as Paul Cadmus, Andrew Wyeth, Antonio Lopez, Balthus and Eduardo Naranjo persisted in experiments with tempera. This also happened in China, but mostly within the academy system. Xia Yu is from an academy, but he is not limited to material itself, or by the grand temporal narrative mentioned above. Instead, he has followed multiple levels and paths to provide us with a construct of multiple temporalities, and a more complex body of visual narrative. That is to say, beyond its material properties, the temporal properties of tempera are manifested in the artist's updating of his methods, as well as the forms and styles of painting that result, including the artist's subjects or motifs, to the point that they stand as a certain allusion to art history. For instance, his

series on "hands" is a striking example.

There is no shortage of the depiction and expression of hands in art history. In medieval painting, hands were mainly part of religious rituals. Under the brushes of Michelangelo, Dürer and Rembrandt, hands were more than basic methods and tools, but also a means for perceiving the world. In Xia Yu's paintings, we often see a pair of hands together with a book whose contents, like in Rembrandt's *Old Woman Reading*, cannot be discerned. Aside from intellectual and technical connections to art history, the hands in these paintings are like Dürer's, seemingly markers of memory or emotion, while their relationship to the book resembles that found in Rembrandt, perhaps serving to open a channel to recognition.[3] Compared to oil and acrylic, tempera clearly has more of a handcrafted feel, and in this modern world, the handcrafted feel has become a desubjectification process. Thus, the tactile awareness is clearly also a part of his temporal consciousness. Along the same lines, knowledge has also become a modernizing project. In other words, the disappearance of the hands and the subject is the result of the operations of the modern system of knowledge, and, like painting, has become a part of the modern system of knowledge.

The subjects Xia Yu chooses to depict all come from what he sees and perceives in everyday life. Evidently, this selection is itself linked to individual experience and the temporality of memory. In works such as *Forehead Auntie Gives Me a Word*, *Mama* and *Ping-Pong Youth*, we see certain real scenes from the artist's everyday experience. Other works, such as *Elder Sister* and the *Hands* series, seem to stem from certain reading experiences, or stand as murky mental allusions to youth. Other works deal with still life and scenery, such as *Winter Melon and Watermelon* and *Hanging Clothes*. These began as simple snapshots, but in his rendering, they take on clear tones of everyday life and individual memory. Here, narrative properties and sentiments seem to be a latent standard in his selection of graphic motifs. The high level of unity between form and atmosphere heighten the narrative style while also highlighting the artist's perceptivity and the legibility of the painting.

Thus, even for these photographs of random scenes, when translating them into painting, Xia Yu renders them in the same grey scale and tone. Even the figures and scenic elements virtually all appear in the same stagnant, "melancholy" atmosphere. Of course, this is first and foremost determined by the tempera, because tempera paintings are created by layer after layer of dried, non-mixing brushstrokes. The resulting sense of stagnation itself compresses the artist's sentiments to within certain limits. This effect is quite easy to find in the tempera icons of such artists as Giotto and Masaccio and those who came before them, in which, aside from the limitations of the religious themes, tempera itself was an important defining condition. If we now turn back to Xia Yu's rendering of the human form, the faces possess the "rigidity" of medieval portraiture. Secondly, the stylistic transformation of these images is also closely connected to the artist. As Xia Yu has said, virtually all of his pictures contain his shadow and expression. In other words, he has consciously projected himself or placed himself within them. This "act" in itself possesses a certain sense of time. Finally, I think that one of the most important factors within is the "entry" of cinema.

In 2004, after graduating from the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Xia Yu considered making films, even spending several months at the Beijing Film Academy. For various reasons, he never ended up making a film, but he did study photography for quite some time. He went on studying and teaching (a preparatory class for the art academy entrance examination) for five years. He decided to return to painting in 2009, but never gave up his passion for photography, instead transplanting the narrative properties and textures of photography onto the canvas. Such an approach is of course nothing new. Even without mentioning animation, there have been quite a few artists in history whose paintings

are marked by cinema, with some even being translated into films. Xia Yu's paintings differ in that not only do they embody the graphic motifs, they have also found the possibility for some form of fusion between the material properties of film, the texture of the painting and the lighting of tempera. Tempera painting possesses a unique sense of light, an effect produced by the stacking of many translucent layers of paint. The formation of each layer of paint is, in turn, connected to the dairy-based emulsifiers used in this form of painting. That is to say, the sense of light in the resulting painting is actually determined by the emulsifier. Meanwhile, film often consists of two components, a photosensitive emulsion and the substrate that supports it. The photosensitive emulsion consists of microscopic grains suspended in the emulsion. In this sense, it is not strange that we perceive a cinematic sense of light in Xia Yu's tempera paintings. Furthermore, the uniqueness of his paintings goes beyond the material level, in that he uses graphic motifs and visual composition to tell a cinematic narrative. The fine bristle marks or light patches produced by his brushstrokes particularly resemble the texture that results from the flickering of film. This is interesting because it appears to be two different temporal dimensions stacked together, but the two are actually not entirely aligned. Cinema is by its nature in motion, while tempera, whether it is its unchanging material properties, or the forms of the figures that emerge from them, is in a static state. For example, the motif of *Hanging Clothes* was dynamic, but this sense of motion has been restrained by the "static" painting technique. We can view this tension as arising from the clash between two different forms of time, and this clash of time is an allusion to the artist's consciousness and anxiety about contemporary time. The graphic motif is about memory, and the image itself is the most primal of memory technologies. Thus, the motion and flickering that are internal to the image, and the tension between them, form into a reflective practice about memory itself.

We can view all of this as part of the artist's awareness or understanding of art history or the history of painting. But if we approach them from the perspective of the history of painting, it will perhaps touch on his various experiments in pictorial form itself. Unlike traditional tempera techniques, Xia Yu uses an emulsion of methylcellulose and resin. The stickiness and quick-drying properties of this material make it impossible to create sharp brushstrokes; it is more suited to the shaping of soft shapes and colors. The resulting paintings do not have clear outlines, as the repeated coatings act to dissolve them. According to Heinrich Wölfflin, this aspect heightens the sense of unity and motion in the painting, but it also serves to weaken the painting's structure of depth, thus highlighting a sense of flatness. In fact, tempera tends towards flatness in form, but the flatness in Xia Yu's paintings does not stem from his uniform color tone or his uniform techniques; he does sometimes employ certain tricks to allude to the complexity of the visual composition. For example, in *Mama*, the artist blurred the boundaries between the lower left corner of the clothes on the figure in the foreground, its shadow and the ground in the background, with this blurring serving to confuse the overall spatial relationships. In *Elder Sister*, the green wall apron in the indoor space cancels out the structure of perspective, clearly compressing the sense of spatial depth. These details may have been unintended, or he may not have had the time to "clean them up," but they certainly add depth and vibrancy to the layers of the picture, keeping them from growing dull.

If, at that time, this contradictory visual structure was not completely clear, in his most recent works such as *Sending Off*, *The Agent Brings Good News*, *Mom and Dad are both Old Party Members* and *Off to Work*, it has been fully exposed and magnified. Here, he is obviously emphasizing the unity and narrative properties of the paintings, with virtually every painting a scene or setting. In the painting process, tempera tends to weaken the formal structure, connections between motifs, and

spatial order of the base image. On one hand, the repeated applications of paint flatten the structures of form and lighting. On the other, the texture revealed by the parts that are not completely covered enrich the layering and texture of the painting while also highlighting the painting's sense of materiality and painterliness. On this foundation, Xia Yu has also employed "applique" to "piece together" certain absurd, out-of-nowhere image motifs or baffling blocks of color—we cannot help but to see these as fragments of memory that flatten the visual structure of depth and scramble the narrative logic of the base image, thus creating a montage atmosphere of uncertainty. At this time, the stacking of multiple spaces and interaction between multiple dimensions of temporality lends more depth to the narrative of the painting.

We can see that though Xia Yu has mixed many elements of cinematic motion into his paintings, the shifts in the overall linguistic approach and visual system are established atop a relatively classicalist foundation. As a result, the overarching structure of the paintings is pulled very taut. As discussed above, the spatial order and relationships between figures in the painting possess the traits of cinematic narrative, as seen in repeated emergence of shared gazes and the background shadows' refusal of the viewer's gaze, as well as an odd sense of estrangement between the figures. Meanwhile, the tempera's delaying of the time in the painting, the inner tension of the visual space, and even the scattered nature of the structure of light and shadow are telling us that there is a certain irreconcilability or fissure between painting and film. In other words, the mutual provocation between the two hints at ways we can rethink and understand painting and film. As I see it, this is not so much painting possessing certain traits of film as it is painting becoming all the more painterly for the intervention of film. What the painter aims to release is, after all, the energy of painting.

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[1] Michael Bird, *100 Ideas that Changed Art*, Wu Lijun, trans., Taipei: Faces Publishing, 2014, pp. 131, 163.

[2] Byund-Chul Han, *Burnout Society*, Zhuang Yaci, Guan Zhongqi, trans., Taipei: Locus Publishing, 2015, pp. 32-26.

[3] Svetlana Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: the Studio and the Market*, Feng Baifan, trans., Nanjing: Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 2014, pp. 20-30.