

## Gong Chenyu: Metaphor of New Idol

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Like parodies of themselves, theological notions are reflected in the triviality of our lives.

- *Slowness*, Milan Kundera

*Idol Series* is what young artist Gong Chenyu has been working on during the past two years. From a sociological perspective, the custom to establish an idol and worship it can be traced back to ancient times and it's a human activity that has long been rooted in our history. Unlike in our childhood, in the contemporary context, it seems idols that used to be worshiped in an uncritical and unconditional manner are gradually detached from fear and reverence that often accompany the mysterious power rooted in totems, sages and heroes in mythologies. Instead, idols seem to have been substituted by politics, enterprises, science, technology, academic research, religion and entertainment. The somewhat awkward situation turns out to become the source of inspiration for Gong Chenyu. In a way, I think it has also laid the foundation for Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*. In Gaiman's work, though the dramatic plot is fabricated, it reflects something fundamental about the belief of this era: the old gods whose late years are pathetic and lonely are almost as feeble and powerless as human beings. But they are trying to fight against, though in vain, the gods of the new time, namely the press, new technologies and the internet. An inevitable fact is that the gods depicted by this American writer undoubtedly fit the notion of "idols" in the most general sense. Compared with the "idols" in Gong Chenyu's work, we'd realize that there's a huge gap between the two in terms of cultural and regional perceptions.

As an artist dealing mainly with painting, Gong Chenyu doesn't put much attention to the dramatic conflicts between the old gods and new gods. The tension between the forlornness caused by the fall of old gods and the pride and arrogance of the new gods will naturally lead to a series of struggles of power teeming with epic poetry and ruptures. To a painter of orthodox academic school who is obsessed with narrative and story-telling, probably it would seem like a good subject matter for his/her work as most of such painters are happy to accept commissions featuring grand historical subjects. Capable as Gong Chenyu is, he doesn't attach much attention to such subjects. As far as he's concerned, idol in itself contains materiality and spirituality. The indivisibility and unity of opposites between the two intrigues him deeply. Different from the dual-opposition perspective in the *American Gods*, Gong's *Idol Series* manages to get rid of the usual approaches to deal with gods in classical religious painting such as the creation of magnificent sense of ritual and the presentation of the strictly hierarchical system of gods. In other words, he endeavors to avoid excessive sense of affected decoration and rigidly stubborn adherence to classical religious painting. In the meantime, he also keeps a distance from the so-called sense of reality characterized by material desires, mechanicalism and indifference of the era of new gods so as to maintain a sense of warmth which is supposed to be radiating from an idol. It seems that Gong Chenyu somehow wanders in between the conflicts between the old gods and new gods, and then manages to construct an alternative world of gods within this

ambiguously atheistic realm – a paradise where human beings and gods co-exist and images of a rich variety of characters come to the fore. Unlike the traditional images of gods giving out an inherent sense of majesty, the idols Gong creates mostly derive from modern behavior, rituals and daily necessities. Rather than making people feel overwhelmed, they give out a subtle sense of amiability. To be more precise, these idols are like a metaphor that is both real and illusory, and people can hardly resist their reliance on them. With his remarkable mastery of the skills and language of painting, Gong Chenyu tries to inspire some kind of nostalgia rooted in human society through these idols. But his purpose is not encourage it, but on the contrary to wipe it off, or say, to keep a distance from such nostalgia, in the hope to propel people to re-think and reflect on the meaning of idols. And hopefully, it would remind and enable human beings to walk out of the lonely grottoes that we are proud of, and open up a richer and broader multi-dimensional space.

Born in Tsitsihar, Heilongjiang Province, in 1988, Gong Chenyu gained his BFA and MFA from the Sculpture Department and Oil Painting Department of the China Academy of Art respectively. The five-year training at the Sculpture Department has imbued him with a signature style that distinguishes him from artists majoring in painting only. His painting works often feature heavy volume and thick structures. The reiterative brushstrokes and patterns with a strong sense of presence, obviously, could be ascribed to the influence of his sculptural skills. *Display*, his first solo exhibition at the Hive Center for Contemporary Art in 2015, attracted wide attention from the art scene right after its opening. Compared with the *Display Series*, Gong's *Idol Series* retains his signature style on the one hand; and on the other further enhances the sculptural elements in painting. Such a trait is seen clearly in his delineation of human figures. It seems as if three-dimensional patterns are inserted into two-dimensional planes and the visual effect is particularly prominent. Moreover, he has also intentionally tuned down the intricate compositions seen in his previous works, getting rid of the all-embracing way of presentation to make his work purer and more focused.

Under the over-arching theme of “idol”, if we take a closer look, we'd be able to figure out several sub-themes which give us clues to understand the artist's taste, interest and vision of what is worth depicting. As a matter of fact, the way Gong Chenyu acknowledges idols is not unconditional. But on the ideological and conceptual levels, it shares similarities with the general public's worship towards gods. In his work, idols do not need people to believe in or worship unconditionally. The figures in the paintings are merely an analogy of the “us” in a different dimension and an illusory projection of the idealized vision of the general public.

As a result, we see that the idols under Gong Chenyu's painting brushes are teeming with joy and banter. Solemnity seems to be offset by solemnity, and grandeur is deconstructed by grandeur. And in the meantime, the figures haven't fallen into the trap of “pop art”. What viewers perceive from the work is the artist's innocent memory, poetic perception and wild imagination. For instance, the big “political idols” were born out of the portraits of the greats that we often saw in our childhood. It seems the artist has made a prank that he would have done if he had the courage when he was a kid. He gives the majestic Khrushchev a corn crown; and makes leaning Lenin grasp a snake in the manner of grasping a sickle while the snake is about to attack the hand that

grasps it. Years later, the boy wanders among the tottering “idols” as if he is inspecting a battle field and counting the achievements made by his imagination, making it hard for people to guess who the real idol is ( *Goddess*). The armored Egyptian prince stands on his resplendent chariot with his right hand pointing directly at the earth as if he is trying to tell people his divine rights are authorized by gods. But after a closer look, viewers would see that his truncheon is replaced by an ordinary sheephook and a sheep wraps around his neck like a piece of scarf, which forms a perfect irony to the admonition in The Bible: New Testaments that “the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep” (*Egyptian Prince*). In “pop idols”, Gong Chenyu presents sunny and enviable images of west cowboys (*Cowboy, Cowgirl*), reshapes bodybuilders who shamelessly show off their biceps and hip muscles on screen (*Bodybuilders*), and casts light on the secret beast cosplay and SM-like binding scenes (*SM*). Behind the seemingly gorgeous idols there are constant competition between looming desires and self-restraints. The driving force of the hidden desires is also the acting force for desires to be restrained. When plumpy blonds are inserted into the traditional Chinese painting patters of lofty mountains, dancing waters, flowers and birds, people feel it harmoniously approachable rather than bizarre. Probably that’s the comprises, renewals and variations that “folk idols” have to make in order to stand up to the portraits of the greats and ancestors as an equal and to strive for a place on the walls of the families of the bottom of society (*Fragrance Echoing from the Valley, Eden*).

In the *Idol Series*, Gong’s depiction and interpretation of the primitive and mysterious Shaman culture are impressive. Heilongjiang Province, his birthplace, is located in the northeast frontier of China, close to the polar region. Nowadays traces of nomadism can still be perceived in that place. Despite the harsh conditions, the artist reckons it as place where unimaginable miracles could take place all the time. If we drill a hole on the iced river, fishes would leap out of the river in a gush (*Fishing*). The tamer in the dense forest is training no ordinary animals but groups of dinosaurs (*Tamer*). Though the distant mountains seem to give the ice-breaker a pair of angle-like wings and the shape of ice-breaking tools reminds people of crucifix, the big and ghost-like sea eel is not deterred at all and keeps entwining through the hardworking man’s body. From his eyes, we realize that the ice-breaker doesn’t sense the presence of this creature and he just focuses on his work. The sharp ice piton, heavy ice and sense of entwining are merely virtual symbols. The sea eel in the shape of a Mobius Strip functions like an obscure metaphor, suggesting that people living on this land, positive and hardworking as they are, will inevitably be trapped in endless working – and the artist is no exception (*Ice Chiseling*). Gong Chenyu hasn’t intentionally complicated the “Shaman idols”, but the paradox and deviation in his imagery makes it hard for people to tell whether the worker is “idol” or miracle in itself is “idol”.

In *American Gods*, Sam said: “I can believe things that are true and I can believe things that aren’t true and I can believe things where nobody knows if they’re true or not.” I think Gong Chenyu may want to say the same thing. To him and to his audience, truth is not important. What matters is believing, like the incredible faith the secular society puts in idols. To the artist, the ancient art of painting is his “idol”, and his ambition is to create works that can become the “idols” of others.

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