

## Offshore: A Turn of Li Changlong in Painting

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In 1918, Le Corbusier and Purist painter Amédée Ozenfant had their Purist Manifesto, *Après le Cubisme* (After Cubism), published, marking the founding of Purism, an architectural style on Le Corbusier's part in pursuit of simplicity and clearness. Later, the theory was further discussed in *Vers une Architecture* (Towards a New Architecture) which dismisses the trend of eclecticism and art deco and stresses the functional medium of architecture. But rather than just remember him as a revolutionist in history, people prefer to acclaim Le Corbusier as an artist, considering his inexplicable arrangement of windows in la Chapelle de Ronchamp, "Le Corbusier's cabin" – the cube dominated by his rigorous life logic and Villa Le Lac – the little house he built for his mother. Through this example, we notice that Le Corbusier's resort to the functionality of the medium of architecture eventually points to the inner certainties of the artist, such as his political and historical standpoints, his narrative that reveals himself to the audience and his sensitivity deep down.

Starting somewhere in 2014, Li Changlong no longer firmly believes in any one-off feelings in painting, or, as a seasoned painter, he's inclined to reject the mature picture effect acquirable in a single practice of painting only after a long time of experience accumulation and repeated exercises. His study of color layers and the boundary enables him to work the inner structure of a painting out of the tug between the overlapping of color layers and the squeeze at the boundary, equipping the rest of the picture with intense complementary and correlative relations, as in the structural significance of each relation therein between form and color due to certain functionality and the connection between the modeling and coloring illustrated by the disassembled shapes and the interlaced visual channels of the painting, which also concerns the outward extension of the painting as to space and extent.

Thoughtfulness and strictness are shown this time in his new attempts which deal with self-awareness and situational reflection, in contrast to the rash pursuit of confrontations in his early works filled with drastic visual conflicts and expressions that blatantly signify political and social realities. So Li Changlong's art-making is similar in intentionality to the above-mentioned quest of Le Corbusier for the inherent functional signification of a medium and they can both trigger the same question behind. Every work of art is constituted by some personal incidents of the artist, as these incidents can provide evidence of his identity and make possible various other ways of re-expounding the identity retrospectively, allowing the work to be more than what it originally expresses. The very act of making art has long been considered the most subjective part of artistic creation, and the subjectivity herein contains a sort of dialogique. Work, in any form,

can lead to some social intercourse, and even our most private work, the so-called “subjective” kind, is also social in a sense. It involves either the internalization of sociality or the socialization of internality. To be particular, this is similar to what Sartre once wrote: “Man is a social existence, and a social existence that experiences the entire society in his own way.” So as long as one paints what he’s all about, he’s becoming an incarnation of society. In this very sense, the shift of Li Changlong’s focus from images to the structure of painting, or his embrace for the ontology of painting, hasn’t actually done any damage to his reflection on social issues, and gives an overall introduction of his art-making methodology through his personal clues. So it’s a response to his previous art practice which is now the very foundation and justification of his current transition.

Therefore, a more effective way to understand Li Changlong’s painting would be to take an overall review of his personal clues. Before the current stage, he’s been through roughly two other stages in art: the one of academic legacy and the one of images and spectacles. During the two stages along with the evolvement of Chinese painting, it’s very important that he has developed a clear-cut political stance and artistic outlook and earned his position in artistic expression through his works with a textural quality and full of power, despite his inevitable ideological similarities with other peer artists. The pure self, obscurity, repetition, sentiments deep down and full of mutters, etc., constitute a personal history with depth, a stance as well as individuality and have given useful support to the transition into this new stage. As early as Li Changlong’s embarkation on his journey of art, his works started to acutely and clearly present what he felt personally about society and politics, such as *Chinese Spectacle* and other works from the same period. Later, the montage type of nonconsecutive juxtaposition, as in modernist films, was employed in his works to create collisions and construct significances, reflecting the spectacle of social reality, one representative being his *Plan of Painting from the Spectacle*. Even from the very start, this language of his conformed to the then effective ways of expression in the art world of China, and, not only expressively effective, it has also been an important part of his accumulation. With the passing of time and the improvement of his perception, however, the artist has been unwilling to smear such emotions and hormones on the plainly seen surface of a painting, but instead to blend them into the structure of the work, so it’s like he’s had them sealed with a spell he created, and turned the straightforward and specific image messages into something mystical and symbolist, such as the construction of image clusters and restrained lyricism, hence a poetic atmosphere never seen in his paintings before. By releasing some signals selectively and with no expectation of them to be perfectly deciphered by anyone, he’s actually interpreting the current situation and content capacity of painting in a concrete manner, and going in the direction opposite to the exuberant expressive desire in this age.

Li Changlong continues and develops in his current painting his most important personal legacy, i.e. transplanting a structure with a different logic into the structure or “form” of painting. The

most distinct such “different structure” is his stage and installation language. In his painting, there’d always be some compression of physical space: the theatricality of the stage and the corresponding physical space are appropriated repeatedly and pressed on the main content of a painting or the part of denser information and power above the concept of space, and it often integrates a number of artists’ views on space and time on the base. In his works such as *Perfect Model* (2018) and *Thucydides Trap* (2018), Li Changlong has created a geometrical “convexity” which gives a sense of form to every piece’s surface. Apart from the functional role in the structure of a painting, this would also lead to a two-way extension of the concept of internal and external space from the surface of a canvas, which can help make obvious the multi-layered space in the painting and get engaged with the physical space. But, as we know, painting is not the best form of art in mobilizing physical space, so this is more like an attempt to cast the illusion of a handrail into the minds of the audience in the physical space through vision, so as to make it easier for them to fall into the stage “trap” prepared by the artist.

The concept of “offshore” for this exhibition is borrowed from British novelist Penelope Fitzgerald’s novel, *Offshore*. Instead of a passive decision, it’s an active concept, active in choosing to keep a little distance from the efficient, secular and utilitarian life in reality; however, it’s no lofty life in seclusion or anarchist revelry but the keeping of an effective distance for careful thinking about all the wants and musts. The shore Li Changlong wants to escape is the part of art fairly familiar to him and other peer artists. In this sense, the nature of contemporary art consists in the unwillingness to live in the secluded ivory tower unaware of the changes in the world or in science; it should be the other way around, contemporary art should be soundly dominated by neo-liberalism. It’s important that an artist makes art and reveals himself consciously. Li Changlong is reflecting on the evolvement of modern painting in the Chinese context, and the important part here is his overstepping of and thinking over the boundary of painting as well as his touch on and revelation of the state of being engaged in painting. In terms of artistic mediums, he’s fighting against and critically surpassing himself in the employment of mediums and his artistic generation.