

## Painting of a Contemporary: Ren Xiaolin

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Over the past thirty years or so, Ren Xiaolin has been passively in and temporarily out of the Chinese world of contemporary art, and what's special about him is that, to steer clear of the two extremes, he vacillates frequently between his gift and experience of life, thanks to which his art was not eulogized hastily in "good times" and no new meanings were imposed on it in "bad times" to reflect upon the previous undue haste, so, with a touch of re-enchantment, his painting features thinking that goes against the times, making an undercurrent of the history. Just as it's famously put in Giorgio Agamben's *What Is the Contemporary*, "Those who are truly contemporary are those who neither perfectly coincide with their time nor adapt to its demands." This may be the very reason why Ren Xiaolin is viewed as a flaneur that has been defying easy definition in the contemporary art history of China.

It isn't hard for one, if he pays attention, to discover that there was a melancholy worship in the entire circle of Chinese contemporary artists around the 1990s; by worshiping the loss of the valuable, they were also worshiping the loss of the very present, which has to do with not only the historical background of the period but also the romanticism that was permeating the whole circle of art and culture at the time. The experience with art history which artists of this generation were accumulating and aspiring after is a continuous process of approaching the established classical art forms of Western modernism, because of which those artists always appeared stagnant in the visual aspect compared to the West and lexically simple and deficient in the contemporary international context. Fortunately, as pioneers in the contemporary art of China, they were all very introspective, particularly over politics and history, and also willing to highlight it in their art as an always conspicuous contemporary characteristic and reflection, implying politically the desecration of things that ought not to be desecrated. This also turned out to be the overall characteristic and identification code of Chinese contemporary art at the time. The tide of the times is influential overwhelmingly, and, despite all the many significant art movements and events in China's art history that have happened around or to Ren Xiaolin, his observation every time could only add to his determinedness in deepening his practice of painting which he loves and has developed a connection to. So he repeats in painting the most ancient intentions, tries to analyze the worldly images of current times specifically, and, led by the Faulknerian narrative motivation, blends his learning from the rich and long history of art and culture into his depiction of things that are related to his real personal growth. Over 20 years or so in highly individualized work, the peace and fragmentation with an Eastern flavor and the general illusory, worldly ghostlike feature have become the signature of Ren Xiaolin's painting, fueling the train of his art toward classic aesthetics of eternity.

There always seems to be a touch of primitive animism in Ren Xiaolin's art, which haunts a sensitive image in combination with things, images and words, and, along with each subject's experience and free expression of its feelings, his art features ghostlike vividness all the time. And every piece of his

is full of complicated and rich symbolism, which has shown an evident change in preference in his works made in recent years, from personal and poetic to mystical and religious-ish, as in quite a number of “fixed patterns” of his, like, in a Renaissance case, a picture of a woman with a baby in her arms can always remind one of the Virgin and Child. The interlacing form and structure of the symbolisms abundant in Ren Xiaolin’s new works are particularly demonstrated by his “fixed patterns”, which has equipped his paintings with a religious sense that is inexplicable, vaguely-referred and primitive, but, just as similar “fixed patterns” would be interpreted differently in the contexts of different historical periods, Ren Xiaolin has planted in these personal paintings a sense of time to retain a form of polysemy and openness for interpretation in the clearly religious-ish “fixed patterns”, so the obscuring of the over-definitely signified in religious forms makes his art impossible to be coerced by form.

The sense of time and the fresco-like sedimentary texture in Ren Xiaolin’s paintings are the products of his long-kept approach which makes time part of the making: he would have his work, unfinished, put aside for an amount of time after a period of intense work, so, for the making of most his pieces, the process from the start to the completion is stretched to a span of two to three years or even longer. By the time he gets back to an unfinished painting, he might sometimes even forget in what mood he was working on it last time or what put him in a trance. Such repetition allows him to go through the whole painting, like every time he has to face a present moment of disorder and convert his interpretation instead of reality onto the canvas. This may be why we can see in Ren Xiaolin’s paintings some thrilling settings that transcend daily experience, like his employing the wild subject matter of human body and sex. The artist needs to actively create some stimulation for himself, govern a space-time relation of his own and to mobilize his profound perception.

It’s obvious that the way Ren Xiaolin works on the human body, a subject he’s so excellent at depicting, in his painting has also been changing constantly. It’s commonly known that nudity on canvas is the depiction of human bodies and can represent the concept of humanity from the most tangible and visible perspective, so, presented through different circumstances and environments created by artists in different manners of expression, it can thus reflect different doctrines of man. This agrees with every school of philosophy, every collective and every individual in their metaphysical understanding of the nature of man or “what is humanity”. As to Ren Xiaolin’s depiction of the human body, we can sense in his recent works a return to the Garden of Eden: his earlier works are filled with furiously confronting human bodies with a strong erotic touch, hence the triggering of some traditional obscene imagery as well as poetic imaginations, but the evolvement over the years seems to have gradually put the “garment of grace” on his paintings which thus are no longer sheer desire-driven images. We should know that Adam and Eve had been living a naked life with each other before they were enticed to eat the forbidden fruit, and that they were unaware of their own nakedness for the only sake of God’s grace, hence the “garment of grace”, but their taste of the forbidden fruit ripped it off and replaced it with depravity. As he’s getting older with the enrichment of his life experience, Ren Xiaolin has developed a profounder understanding of totally naked lives, transcended the most basic expression of humanity and refocused on the physical state brightened by divinity. His visual gears

such as the everyday objects he's good at setting secretly in his paintings are also gradually transcending their normality in daily life, along with the involvement of more divine religious animals and plants. These changes also prove that the artist's understanding of man has already been in the attempt to transcend the definition of man in the worldly sense, eliciting more metaphysical and profounder questions and room for discussion.

Another noteworthy point is that, in the past, however he overlapped color layers repeatedly, Ren Xiaolin's painting always featured a light, ethereal and ghostlike feel and the overlapping process could make the color layers vividly rich and subtle but not thick and heavy. Such an excellent mastery of this approach seems to be the artist's signature technique that can never be easily copied by others. In these new pieces, however, he has blatantly changed it as if to take the initiative to abandon his most proficient signature technique for an approach that can better match his mood for current practice. Constrained by his real life, the artist has become uncontrollably irregular at work, as he no longer has enough time for the review of the whole picture, so oftentimes his repetitions for a work would focus on certain parts of the painting, just like some part of the entire space-time concept overlapped to transcend other parts in the sense of time and the density of feelings, and they are usually the most symbolic parts which, therefore, can boost the artist's passion for such repetition in painting. So the artist is not only taking care of what's in the painting but also adjusting his own emotions, as if to escape the annoying real life through the outlet of painting. And, compared to such intense and concrete depiction, the backdrop of the painting and the accessories around often turn into intransitive clamor that punctuates everyday gossiping, generating a sense of transcendence of the gist of the painting. Personally, I'm very fond of such compositional unbalance because it's not only closely related to the life experience of the artist but has also been a rare breakthrough for an established artist with proficiency in his practice.

Take a look at his painting over the past three decades or so and the part of history of Chinese contemporary art he has witnessed or experienced and we can find that Ren Xiaolin has never failed to see the times for getting too close, just like no one can keep his gaze firmly upon the times. In more cases, he just tried his best to wield art as the most reliable medium to present views and feelings that epitomize his true experience in life. From the 1990s up to the current times, different historical periods have been giving different possibilities to the interpretation of such persistence, and, as this is an era where naked life is seen growingly as pure biological data owing to technological advances and man defined again as an existence which, primitive though, is endowed with divinity, Ren Xiaolin, as an artist who has been a contemporary with a history of refusing to play ball with the times consistently, persists in responding with his relatively weak but most personal theories to the times, a leviathan that can devour anything. For artists like Ren Xiaolin who are contemporaries limited frequently by contemporary times, they seem to be all "trying to get to a must-miss party in time", so, part of the times though, they are beyond time.