

Peculiarities Growing out of Historical Breaks:

The History and Art Ontology of Kong Qian's Drawing

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History has shown us that one's drawing practice can generate an epoch-making kind of polysemy, exemplified by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Dürer, Grunewald, Rubens, Rembrandt, Ingres, Vrubel, Vincent van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso, Dix, Freud, Baselitz, etc. Kong Qian, as an artist of drawing (and not just drawing), also deserves a position on the list, but to discern the uniqueness of his drawing practice, we must start with the ontological characterization of drawing, which is no longer limited to the areas within art. Nowadays, apart from artistic autonomy, heteronomy may have also been very important in art practice, and the ontology of art should be construed as a variable structure built intersubjectively, instead of the closed simple system as in the past.

I. Born at a Break: The Development and Self-Awareness of an Individual View on Drawing

The uniqueness of Kong Qian's drawing consists first in its birth at a "break" of the artist's life.

During his years in the affiliated high school of Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts and undergraduate years in the Academy, he was receiving training in mainly Soviet realist art with his peers. That was a time when TAFE was deeply influenced by CAFA, so we could see its similarity with CAFA in curriculum design and assignment requirement. The foundation education in CAFA is centered on the Soviet system, in which the good many teachers who used to pursue further studies in the Soviet Union and be students of Maksimov's Oil Painting Training Class have played a very important role; their teaching emphasizes precision in spatial expression and modeling, the capture of light and shadows coming from a single light source, the representation of the shape structure being depicted, as well as the knowledge of anatomy. Apart from such highly rational approach to modeling, a broader sense of Soviet-Russian art and culture also had influence on Kong Qian. For instance, we can find in his early drafts some imitations of Vrubel's drawings, and considering that Vrubel was a very singular figure in the history of Soviet-Russian painting, it's quite possible that Kong Qian was already pursuing something different from the mainstream in art those days.

During the training, he also got skeptical about the stylized teaching built on the Soviet system of art education – since drawing is about training the ability to describe the structure, the goal for a trainee should be to transcend the limitation of light and shadows on an image and to find some more stable and intrinsic formal relationship instead of limiting the form to some temporary and special effect out of a single light source. Though the doubt flourished in his mind while he was drawing from life in class and some of his early studies show some signs of this reflective attitude of his, it didn't stop him from all his efforts to explore drawing all along. For example, we can find traces of his hard work in studying anatomy and the human body structure all the way back from his school-time studies and drafts to his drawings today. He's never questioned the expressivity of drawing but only the fossilized, monotonous and dogmatic academic system. As academic criteria became a clear antithesis of his thinking and breakthroughs or a road sign that

points to an opposite direction, he figured out his own way to go.

In 1982, Kong Qian graduated from TAFE and began teaching at the School of Architecture of Tianjin University, but he never stopped studying drawing and became more and more inclined to draw human portraits in nonacademic ways. The entire 1980s is a very special historical period from today's point of view, as it put an end to the former era of revolution and witnessed people transitioning from the collectivist ecosystem that features excited groups and silent individuals to a new lifestyle where one has to face a diversified world alone and being liberated from the past old-fashioned and stagnant form of life. Out of fear and alert for the violence and chaos brought by the previous social movements, perhaps, people in the 1980s were extremely resolute to get rid of revolution and longing very much for freedom of various forms. Thanks to China's reform and opening up and the subsequent influxes of modern cultural products, thoughts and capital from abroad, people were activated by the times in their longing for new knowledge and a new modern life in the future. In this torrent of freedom, openness and introspection in the 1980s, Kong Qian was given various opportunities to learn about the texts and images of modern and contemporary art and culture from the West and inspired by the social atmosphere at the same time. Embracing the spirit of the age though, he stood aloof from the '85 New Wave Movement to observe life and art independently, planting in his mind a seed of spontaneous thinking about the history of his homeland. As a witness and observer of a serious social event provoked by new social problems in the late 1980s, Kong Qian had his historical sense developed in the drastic real environment and started to work his reflection on and questioning of history profoundly into his art practice, drawing included.

The more valuable part of his journey seems to be the discovery of the huge difference between the academic system of drawing and his own view on the art, instead of the experience in TAFE of taking in basic knowledge and skills of drawing. When developing our abilities of observation and description, we should also start to realize that the study of drawing aims not at some perfect form or effect but real discoveries, as drawing is not playing out some pre-designed program, and such active exploratory attitude is particularly needed in the most fundamental study of form and structure in the regular academic drawing. In comparison, form is stable relatively, and a common existence closer to essence, while the specific tone in miscellaneous ambient light is fortuitous, evanescent and unstable. No in-depth understanding of the essence of modeling can be achieved through these random specific visual effects which can only serve as building blocks of stylized assignments that meet the academic aesthetic preference. A drawing artist can only start to take root in the art with the arousal of antipathy to and skepticism about the fossilized mode.

Apart from his criticism of the academic values on art, Kong Qian also had his horizon broadened in the spectacular 1980s and started to actively work the formalist or expressionist sense of form into drawing. Many of his undergraduate drawings have shown his absorption from the modeling interests of modernist masters like Picasso, Matisse and Gauguin as well as some senses of form inherent in some traditional Chinese folk art. He'd also resort to the modeling language of New Year wood-block print, decorative patterns and ink and wash, and, along with the influence from, perhaps, the modeling features of the then popular comic strips and Chinese animations, he also created some images that are both constructional and humorous. So, clearly, our artist had a very

good “appetite”, as he was ready to embrace visual resources both inside and outside the system of “art”, and, also clearly, he became more and more inclined to stop drawing to practice his own skills, but to treat it as an open medium full of possibilities for profound expression.

II. The Road to Peculiarity: Life Consciousness and His Construction at the Start

The drawings he made right after his return to the TAFE Department of Oil Painting as a teacher (circa 1985) show that he had rejected part of the system of representative realist drawing and his modeling language based on subjective experience and experiments on form had taken form. First of all, he threw away the conventional approach with the three surfaces and the five tones, and then tried to dig into the mental state of the depicted figure. It's still a figural interpretation of the character through facial expressions and contours, but bold deformations had been put in play, and their main function is to enhance the subjective sense of the image in the artist, as it's a re-created brand new image. An elaborate job done to these portrait drawings though, he chose to steer clear of the convention that takes care of every single surface, mass and tone, and flatten the image to create a relief effect. The basic shape looks rather square and neat, and, plus the very stiff lines used at some twists to hugely reduce the roundedness of the body, gives the figure depicted, even with eyes wide open and a vivid facial expression, a sense of solidification, which adds to the faint gloom of death in the picture. Such subtle insight into the meaning of life has transcended the technical level of precise depiction, suggesting that, to the artist, drawing is a very serious medium or tool in artistic expression.

After the drastic openness in the 1980s hit the wall, a hard brake was put on it in the 1990s when social changes could be reduced to the decline of humanism and the thriving of market economy. The whole country was readjusting their focus onto economic construction, and the power of market and capital started to dominate every tangible corner of people's living space. Kong Qian was uncomfortable with the rapid changes; no artist obsessed with the essential value of art and culture could adapt to them – the cool-off of the humanistic passion that started and lasted for quite a period in the 1980s and the abrupt stop put to some important social exchanges and discussions, hence the natural growth of helplessness and frustration. The weight of his historical sense allowed him to gain a profounder understanding of life out of the changes from the 1980s to the 1990s and his experiences of the cruelty of life and history. In the practice of drawing, the timing of the rise of life consciousness is basically decided by mental frustration. In Kong Qian's case, his life consciousness stems from his subtle observation of his own life, and his drawings are the embodiments of his worries and introspection through some implicative images. In the early 1990s, he drew a series of rotten fruit and fragile insects as a response to such life consciousness, which kicked off the development of his modeling language with eccentric expressivity.

Kong Qian's drawings made around 1990 show obvious difference from those in the 1980s. Take for example his head portraits from the early 1990s, which had strayed further away from realism, exemplified by his very subjective distortions of the basic form of the head and the facial features and his highly geometrical treatment of the shape of the brain, but, with no obsession with loose

structures or purified planes, he took an approach different from the way modernist masters like Cezanne, Picasso and Matisse would do with geometrical modeling, i.e. they tended to separate or loosen the forms by working on the dot-line-plane structure. In Kong Qian's drawing, however, he would deal with the form in a very practical way, also enhance the sense of volume for every shape at the terminator area, and employ the shape and connective function of every contour more subjectively, and we can also find a more common use of stiff lines and pointed turns and his recurrent elements such as large eyeball, protruding cheekbone, conical skull, long face and springy beard. Some portraits are rather weird, and some betray a very strange sense of humor in the gloom of humanity. In comparison, the heads he drew in the 1980s are "milder" and more "credible"; also many subjective deformations though, they are still acceptable to the academic world or the circle of professional artists. They may not favor Kong Qian's value preference in the modeling of his drawings, but they still recognize his technical excellence in the art. Those drawn in the 1990s, however, surpassed the 1980s ones thoroughly in strangeness and eccentricity. The earlier pieces are more delicate and exquisite in detail modeling and contour treatment (perhaps the very reason why they are still acceptable to the academic world), but the 1990s portraits are much better at liberating the expressivity of drawing and exploring its spiritual profundity. As all these suggest, his own modeling system with eccentric expressivity was just established, actually a bit prematurely.

III. Extended Ontology: The Evolvement of Form, Theme and Viewing

A. Form in Two Relevant Senses

It's around the early 1990s when Kong Qian had the characteristics of his drawing developed and the language and grammar of his drawing systemized. More notably, this individual system came to stray further and further away from the official and academic system of drawing. A special set of formal logic was built upon his bizarre interests, fierce shapes, experimental approaches, thick and firm masses, convulsive lines, fragmented looks, anti-lyric atmospheres and anti-efficiency actions. Started in the late 1980s, solidity, meticulousness, fullness, robustness and dullness have long been Kong Qian's preference in modeling, can be viewed as his aesthetic expectation of his drawing, and also make up the inner core of the artistic ontology of his drawing. For artists today, it's been a real question whether the ontology of art exists. As we know, the Ontology of art has become a typical discourse system in modernist times; it presumes that every work of art has its ontology, which is the intrinsic basis for its artistic significance and aesthetic value. In the art of painting, such ontology is form itself, which is given loftiness and independence by the ideology of modernist art and culture; the autonomy of art determines its significance and attributes, and the medium the autonomy can rely on is an artwork's perceptible form, or simply form per se. Ideas that used to influence the study of art history and the mainstream practice of art criticism, including the inherent originality of form, form's independence from social reality, the decisive role of form on artistic value, and the logical consummate position of formal innovation in art history, collapsed under the impact of a series of post-war new movements like post-modernism, and even the artist's subjectivity is no longer trustworthy. Superstitions about Ontology may've been taken care of theoretically, but it's a different case in the practice of art. For, on all accounts,

it's mostly the obsession with visual forms that can keep a painter digging into the traces and effects within the limited space of a canvas. To Kong Qian, drawing has long been an expressive tool. When he experiments on form, he'd also try to work some heteronomous factors of art into his drawing. Not only are the forms he created products of formal logic, they are also the visual feedback of physical experience and reflection on reality.

Reversely, when he expresses himself with drawing, he's also exercising his own experience and understanding of "form", the most essential element of drawing. And, as the category closest to the inner ontology of drawing, "form" brings together his lines, masses, composition and spatial study. There are mainly two ways to explore "form", one being to take the chances of in-class drawing exercises at school to experiment on form with specific subjects such as a certain human body or figure. Exploration like this, with a specific subject, can achieve something substantial. Even though Kong Qian's portraits and life drawings have strayed away from realism since the mid 1980s, the concrete perceptible subjects still have given him solid opportunities to dig deep into form and structure and to study complicated forms and structures gradually with an aim. Thanks to drawing from life, his modeling language managed to evolve on rather solid concrete bases, so that exaggerated deformation wouldn't deprive his lines and masses of sensuous standpoints and make them hollow abstract symbols, and that his eccentric vocabulary in modeling can be traced back to those in-class life drawings. The other way is what he calls "casual" drawing, i.e. to give a visual to some of his whimsies. Somewhat like creating cartoons, comic strips or original drawing, it's an unconventional imaginative type of art-making that can give the artist more liberty and flexibility in tearing, restructuring and transmuting the subject and allow him to express his new feelings about form more freely, hence a number of rather stunning forms of his, which happen to prove his "uncongeniality" compared with his peers. In terms of originality and fantasticality in modeling, these works of his topped the art of drawing in China for a time and are available for deep viewing experience with the lingering charm in modeling and the ingenious composition of lines and planes.

In fact, his life drawing has undergone some very big changes in form. The general features in the 1990s, such as dryness, dullness, troublesomeness and stiffness, have been transitioning to a preference for wholeness, fullness, thickness and roundedness since 2000, and yet two remain unchanged: the intense inclination for non-rationality and the horror of his shapes. He becomes more and more inclined to deconstruct and reorganize the original form and structure of a figure into a recognizable new set, but, instead of mechanical addition, it's a form of reconstruction about actively and resolutely taking and letting go and pulling and pressing, which is no doubt attributed to the inspiration he got from modernism, particularly cubism, but, clearly, we cannot find any modernist dimension in the space he reconstructed since, different from any rational, mathematical formal space, what he's built is a product of non-rational power and pure spiritual elements, as in expressionism. In his casual and theme-specific drawing, he'd adopt a bolder and livelier approach to processing or expressing the experience and fruits he's harvested recently from his practice of life drawing, and a certain narrative theme and skeleton can certainly add to the expressivity of the approach. Drawing like this features non-everyday, non-representational narrative, and eccentric forms can conform perfectly to the changeful meanings of an image. So eccentric or peculiar as Kong Qian's modeling ideas about drawing appear, he has also shown a very solid attitude to

research. Revolving around the modeling pedigree, from Cezanne to Picasso to neo-expressionism, that emphasizes active construction, his sense of form and structure has helped unveil a programmatic clue hidden in modern figural painting. In addition, as “adjuvant”, Chinese traditional folk modeling and modern cartoon modeling have also managed a fusion that involves both China and the West and both the ancient and modern times, so that form, in both relevant senses, can be more interesting and diversified.

B. Themes and the Image Sense

This part of Kong Qian’s drawing can most easily get to the viewers. From the mid 1980s on, there are basically such themes as follows:

Portrait and the human body.

This major category is a very important part of his drawing, as his practice under it has never ever stopped since the 1980s, and it has covered the biggest proportion of his repertoire so far, among which many are indisputable masterpieces and have earned him most of the respect from China’s academic system. For most academic artists and the general public in China, these pieces can be quite comprehensible and acceptable, even though the accepting process entails quite a mental struggle. From the 1980s to the 1990s, in Kong Qian’s attempt to liberate himself from the past academic conventionality of painting and to create his own language of the art, portrait drawing played a very significant role, justified by his depiction of the spiritual worlds of contemporary Chinese people and his effort to work a high density of spiritual legacies and memory fragments in history intentionally into those contemporary faces. The facial expressions are so complicated that it’s hard to tell how these figures are feeling, and yet we can boil them down to a depressed and retrained “mediocre look”, with a tinge of grumpiness from time to time. Such an unnamable look embodies Kong Qian’s reading of the spirit of Chinese people (not only contemporary, but of the entire modernized period since the start of the second millennium) that his countrymen have suffered a lot of spiritual oppression and torture but not yet truly awoken. After 2000, he started to employ thicker contour lines for his portraits and human bodies, while diminishing the detail exquisiteness of the inner contours and organs, to strengthen the sense of vigorous wholeness. It seems that the artist have become more determined to leave out many functional details and to concentrate the work on the most crucial part he believes in (differences or expressions that can deliver spiritual messages, or the most important salient points or twists in form or structure). The body parts featured by some of Kong Qian’s drawings, like the severed fingers, broken feet and private parts he drew in the 1990s, give us a sense of disability and sacrifice, and the pain in question, amplified and spread by bodily impairment and exposure, also suggests a distress deep down. The liberation of any feeling is closely related to a certain circumstance in reality, which, as Kong Qian sees it, reveals the pathological symptom of his countrymen’s collective unconscious.

Animals

Not many pieces of his fall into this category, which, after all, isn't the mainstream of his drawing, but, among them, many are still worth digging into. The recurrent animals in his drawings include insects (mainly locusts and cicadas), birds, fish, horses and dogs, which are also very common in traditional Chinese painting, so it makes one wonder if his engagements with these animals have anything to do with his knowledge about ink paintings or literati paintings. His first try was with the cicada, which happened to be at the turning point of his art about life consciousness. The fragility and tininess of a cicada stimulated a resonance within the artist who had just survived the suffering of a time, so, since the cicada, his interest in the traditional images of birds, fish and insects has begun to grow, but his pointed, sharp and annoying strokes shattered the delicateness and pleasantness of literati painting, and what took the place instead is the unrestrained bravery in facing up to life for what it is, so the lives, depicted naked in Kong Qian's drawings, always give a sense of quietus or being on the verge of death. Of all his animal drawings, the most important series is his "locusts", a subject that might have found its way to Kong Qian's art by chance or just out of the inspiration he got from some painting by Qi Baishi, and, after a series of explorations of the subject, he managed to break his locust gradually away from its deep-seated prototype in art history and from its natural properties as an insect, and to make it a symbol that harbors his historical sense and perception of reality. A lone locust is insignificant as a bug and can be easily terminated, but, once there's a swarm of them, it'll be a nightmare for peasants. Throughout the long history of China, a locust plague has always been an extreme horror and can even influence politics directly like a response of what the Chinese believe in as the "way of nature" to a certain political environment. The breakout of a locust plague is deemed a terrifying, mysterious warning and the wrath of heaven. This personated symbol seems to have developed a social identity like a human being who can reason and act of his own free will, and, be it single or in swarms, the bug has become a carrier of the artist's historical interpretations. Involved with such historical mood consciously, the artist likes to surround his locusts with ramparts and put them in a huddle or a fight against each other, and their usually obscure facial expressions and dynamics suggest his pessimism about history.

Scenes

This category can be divided mainly into architecture scenes and scenes based on human figures. Very special already in terms of subject matter, drawings of this type can neither be classified, in conventional senses, as landscapes nor as story drawings, since they can neither dominate the core content of the picture. Moreover, the artist would try to sabotage the narrative built on our common senses with bizarre images, so, when we seem about to get the gist of a work through our life experience, the irrational image sense and the irregular combination of the symbols make conventional interpretation very difficult. Quite a number of drawings under this category may be very small in size, but cannot be seen simply as drafts or experiments for some large paintings or, in other words, as adjunctive studies or sketches, considering their integrity in form, precision in language, potential in inspiration and so on. They are very independent and complete works of art. In fact, these works of Kong Qian have improved the expressivity of drawing or created a new expressive type of drawing which integrates theme diversity, narrative and a scene, goes beyond the training objective of academic drawing and the role in serving any creation – as it's also

creation in itself, and, artistically, unnecessarily weaker than large paintings. In his portrait and animal drawings, we can surely sense his attitude to reality and his historical consciousness, but we first have to decipher his implications and symbols which, obviously, are implicit or indirect, while his scene drawings allow us to approach his worldview in a more direct, complete and comprehensive way and, therefore, are a more thorough tool for him to express himself or pour out discontents with. In a single drawing as such, we can find a rich variety of sensuous fragments toughly blended by him; for example, he can present brutality, ruthless violence and carnal desire directly, design a thrilling gloomy atmosphere, disrupt the convention of spatial dimensions, put together images from different places and times, impart more humorousness and harmony to a scene, or highlight the absurdity and chaos in the world of the scene. In a word, his most honest spiritual imagery about reality and pre-reality is composed of his eccentric strokes, expressive of either a sense of speed or one of weight, and his insane figures in the drawing.

C. Way of Viewing

An artist's drawing can give the most explicit clues as to how his art should be viewed, because it allows the artist to pour his perception directly onto a paper. In the modern and contemporary context of art, the creativity of an artist actually lies not in whether he can create a new style, but in whether he can provide an inspirational way of viewing; it has to be able to renew a viewer's approach to a painting or other visual images so as to change his fundamental logic of accepting visual art. In Kong Qian's case, there's a "prose-poem" type of narrative that dominates every one of his drawing, be it a portrait or a scene, and subverts the pre-determined representational logic that used to dominate the mainstream figural art for a long time. He's thrown away the way of viewing based on an eye point, a vanishing point and a formatted stare and long been relied on by artists, and replaced it with one based on the marriage of the eye point and one's feelings, so the fixed reference viewing point is gone, and, as the artist captures images on the move while observing the subject or imaginary subject with his eyes and senses from different angles and in different directions, we can find in every such drawing a composite atmosphere with multiple spatial dimensions and motion tracks, where there's a hidden condensation of time or, in another word, the viewer has to spend more and yet an uncertain amount of time in either changing the eye point or simply moving the eyes. Usually, a painting shows a clear conformity between time and space, but Kong Qian's drawings, with a sense of motion and uncertainty, presents a more complicated dimension of time and space, so their viewers no longer see the figures and scenes in them as the representation of reality but as components of a heterogeneous world which has strayed quite a distance away from everyday experience. This methodology about deconstructing, displacing and reorganizing is no doubt a product inspired by modernist masters like Cezanne and Picasso, but it also has to do with his understanding of traditional Chinese art and culture. Take for example Luo Yusheng's Dagu storytelling whose narrative edits "scattered points" or, in this case, concurrent incidents and scenes into a cyclic sequence that defies the definitude of time, while, in Chinese traditional landscape painting and temple fresco, occurrences at different times are often given a synchronic logic in a single depiction. Clearly, these two types of narrative logic have great influence on Kong Qian's art. Like he'd also sketch from what he sees on TV sometimes, but

his target is never the completeness of some figure or story but the exciting possibilities in assembling experience fragments. His visual mechanism, however, is not modernist, nor as loose as in traditional art, but of a nearly insane perceptual mode. Shaped by the troublesomeness, turbidity, barbarity and dullness in the depths of his sensation, the processed figures and spaces present more a magical world to the viewers, and give a glimpse of an infinity of possibilities through a perception-versus-reason collision between the built-in feel of mystery and dullness of his perception and the orderly multi-spatial structure. And, as his recent drawings suggest, he's still in quest of unfamiliarity in both narrative and modeling, and constructing an exclusive way of viewing his drawing that integrates a sightseeing-like visual logic, a multidimensional composite narrative logic and an eccentric and defamiliarizing modeling logic. It's safe to consider it as Kong Qian's unique contribution to Chinese contemporary art, as it lives on his individual experience so cannot be easily intellectualized and programmed.

4. An Era of Peculiarities: How to Interpret Kong Qian's Drawing

In a way, Kong Qian has managed an update of the art of drawing by boosting its expressivity substantially without adopting any new material or tool and adding to the validity of drawing as an independent genre of art. Thanks to his practice, drawing is no longer disregarded as just the making of studies, drafts or sketches, but has proved itself to be a complete, self-contained and rich type of independent creation, on a par with any other mediums or genres of the visual arts. He has also proved the nearly infinite potential of drawing in expression and that it can be just as capable as other forms of art in expressivity. As a matter of fact, the lasting false dichotomy in China between drawing and creation consists in the popular notion that drawing is simply a tool for foundational art education. Many believe that one's artistic ability can only be developed by following the conventional procedure from foundational training to independent creation, which also happens to be a fixed notion of China's academic system for a long time. Given that drawing has long been positioned as a "foundation" or the making of "studies", many have failed to see the point of digging into the innate expressivity and possibilities of it, which makes Kong Qian's drawing practice even more valuable as to the enlightening and exemplary role he's been playing in the art world of China – even though it's just out of his own needs for research and expression.

Until recent years, in fact, Kong Qian's achievements in art were never truly noticed. He's lived a long life out of the spotlight, and, despite all he's achieved as an artist already in his sixties, he's never been given the attention he deserves like other noted artists of his generation (no doubt a lucky generation), for which there's actually also a historical reason. They were a generation born in the 1950s and rose to fame in groups with more or less to do with the New Wave movement in the 1980s (mainly its climax in the 1985), a decade that witnessed the start of the modernization of Chinese art and that special historical value was attached to these fortunate artists' work. Kong Qian surely had also developed some very personal features in his art at the time, but he was still a nobody who didn't receive any recognition from the academic system nor had any substantial influence on the New Wave art movement. As all systems saw it in the 1980s and 1990s, his art was a very marginal type, but being marginal means that he could stay loyal to himself in his art exploration, develop a peripheral stance and vision, stand prudently aloof from any art trend and

make progress in his individual exploration in calm solitude. The “peripheral” stance planted in his art the precious seeds of wildness and liberty, so his individual exploration, pointed as well as independent, can be impervious, to the full extent, to the coercion and stimulation from the art industry. And he has shown persistent uncooperativeness in both his paintings and drawings in an anti-efficiency, anti-success, anti-popularity, anti-aestheticism, anti-perfection and anti-harmony way. In the face of both power and capital, his peripheral stance can equip his art with a pricking force, so, like a sharp-pointed nail, his decades-long methodology has thrust into the underlying structure of the history of Chinese contemporary art with sharp criticism against art practice that has forsaken its independent stance. As the fight over the discourse power has been dominating the reviewing and studying of Chinese contemporary art for a long time and many “academic judgments” have lost their credibility with the penetration of various interests, false academic systems built on utilitarianism have started to collapse, while, tenacious as they always are, those peripheral, alternative, marginal and in-depth explorations in art have started to shine in the new context with a world of excellent artists who never give up, and Kong Qian, without a doubt, is one of them.

The irreplaceable importance of Kong Qian’s drawing lies not only in the inherent charm of his art language but also in the solid source for his narrative – the close link between the ontology of art and the history and reality of China. His drawings are probably the most “Chinese” creations, but it doesn’t mean that his drawing has achieved any success in “nationalization” or “localization”, because these are grandiose hollow terms built on political discourse and hardly have anything to do with the hermeneutics based on the ontology of art. Kong Qian’s art is “Chinese” in the blood; very active though in learning from the modern and contemporary art and culture of the West, he likes to do his thinking by looking into the complicated practical situation of a problem and then express the pang of his thinking with art. Greatly interested in China’s historical logic of the modern times onward, he has profound compassion feelings for the tragedies that keep recurring in the long history of China, and is rather sensitive and pays much attention to the specific life of different historical periods. What he cares about most is the individuals’ entanglement with the mainstream values and public systems in the social environment of a particular age. Unlike any other modernized countries in development mode and process, China has shown the world a historical miracle over the last decades of drastic development, an extremely unique period that has incubated many eccentricities in aesthetic experience and been stimulating the citizens to imagine and find something new from their real life. But, interestingly, we just have, so far, a very limited number of Chinese artists fully dedicated to expressing individual Chinese experience, and Kong Qian happens to be a rarer case among the rare cases because, not only does he keep observing and experiencing real life at close quarters, he can also approach the complicated and dramatic situations in contemporary Chinese history with acute and concentrated expression and is even brilliant at perfecting and innovating on his art forms. Thinking over and representation of reality aside, his modeling consciousness is a mixture of traditional Chinese literati’s psychological factors such as slyness, humor, detachedness, self-mockery and stubbornness, and, in his drawing, he would also impart these multiple facets of a traditional Chinese personality to his figures and stories, and vividly reveal the embarrassments and variations this personality would encounter in the process of modernization. Not only is this important image production for the history of Chinese art and culture, it also proves to be of unique research value and aesthetic

significance to other civilizations outside China.

These significances, already tested by history, are not yet fully fulfilled – at least Kong Qian’s still exploring new possibilities for the ontology of his art. Not yet satisfied with his drawing practice in terms of intensity and profundity, Kong Qian often reflects self-critically on his own drawing and painting practices, and alternates between bringing up new topics continually and dealing with his unfinished missions in art. To him, many choices and judgments concerning the ontology of art are still up in the air, and he has to hesitate at almost every step forward. On the one hand, his may have to drag himself forward with his art so overloaded, and, on the other, the risk that his personal artistic experience may be routinized anytime is also staring him in the face, so he can just get himself fully prepared with the belief that hardship helps survive and thrive. Obsolete today is the historical view that an artist’s work value can be assessed by the narrative logic of art history through stable, fixed and monotonous system-theory discourse. As the context evolves with time, the work value of an artist may have to face the challenge of reassessment constantly, so, however important Kong Qian’s drawing is in Chinese contemporary history, its significance cannot stay manifest unless its practice can keep on being invigorated in the future historical frameworks. For a serious artist who believes in the ontological meaning of art, no change in the form of art can strip him, at the start of every attempt at a work, of the psychological need for a solid reason to push ahead with the experiment, so, even just to stop the reason from dissolving, he has to carry on exploring and working, regardless of any difficulty.