

## The Iron Age

Text/Wen Fei

“Iron Age” according to ancient Greek poet Hesiod is one of the five stages of human existence on the Earth; and the metaphor reveals that in this age, gods have long been gone and only poets on the Earth recall the departed good old days. Chen Langmu doesn’t directly discuss the situations of mankind, instead he blends his memories and feelings on time into the “rusty” era.

Chen Langmu was born in the Northeast China, whose industrial relics and roaring aircraft propellers have subtly made some influence on the quality and texture of his visual works, so the imageries seem to have been frozen in time and space and formed the abandoned “spectacles of time”. In his works “Immortal”, “The Box Forgotten” and “Anatomy”, animal specimens seem to become the “punctum” of the painting. “Specimen” itself indicates the meaning of “freezing time”, and it’s even so when the specimens that are long dead yet still appear life-like have been placed in the old and strange environments, forgotten in the corners of time. In fact, both animal specimen and the dusty background are generated only by some kind of nostalgic assumptions or romantic sentiments since reminiscence and imagination can never be divided. In “Anatomy”, the tension-charged scene of anatomy, where two persons in white coat are dissecting the body of a deer and the wall of deer heads behind almost drown their faces, seems to have deprive these two persons’ identities and melt them into deer’s bodies. Chen Langmu also juxtaposes the living animals and their heads together, and puts them in the context symbolic of industrial, urban civilization. In “Thinking after Anger Dies”, Cheng Langmu sets an indoor home environment, the extremely messy space may suggest the drama of “anger”, but its bizarre sense of stagnation also tells it’s logically unreasonable. Chen Langmu paints in the foreground a monkey thinker, and in the room, the background the mammoth skeleton. According to the logic of perspective, the mammoth’s huge skeleton simply cannot be contained in a small room. Chen Langmu’s endeavor of placing the extinct mammoth, gorilla inside the modern space compresses time in the twisted space, and in a sense, “specializes time”.

Chen Langmu is also devoted to exploring the relationship of painting, image and time. Owing to the prevalence of photography in contemporary era, any artistic presentation based on the principle of accurate “representation” will inevitably be severely battered. Relying on “oil on canvas”—the traditional medium and “figurative” painting though, Chen Langmu tries to discuss the so-called “reality” of photography. His series “The Non-Decisive Moment” features an array of historical photos collected by him, and the image details have been distorted through painting. *The Decisive Moment*, an idea proposed by the great photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, is to capture a precise image on the spot at a second, but the case is that when people decide to take a photo, the so-called reality has been distorted and time suspended. Chen Muslang’s series is to reflect on this very idea. In addition, in the work “The End”, Chen Langmu appropriates the patriotic propaganda photo taken by Alfred T. Palmer during the Great Depression of the U.S. The foreground where a worker concentrating on making an airplane, probably implies the attempt to “conceal a crisis under the disguise of peace”, and the background where the metal wrecks of Nancy Rubins’s installation have been juxtaposed with the unfinished, constructs a dialogue

between generation of destruction, thus the so-called “reality” has been totally deconstructed by the game between the historical photo and the modern art.

Perhaps, Chen Langmu’s works deliver the romantic nostalgia, and the nostalgia becomes precisely the way to understand time and to intervene in the present. Chen Langmu’s recent practice has seen him bringing his personal experience as always into his painting and has conveyed his contemplations on art and time, without any hint of making judgments on the times. Perhaps the “Iron Age” is the worst of times, and also the best of times because it is the time we are living in.