

Universal: Chen Langmu

By Yang Jian

From Chen Langmu's perspective, it is through human cognition that the real natural world can be projected and for him specifically it is only through painting on canvas that this world can be expressed with a sense of reality. Via pictorial composition as well as the internal operation and shift within his painting, Chen Langmu creates an "editing" effect in his paintings, and narrates about, observes and participates in the real world. Such view coincides with Bertolt Brecht's aesthetic theory that "art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it."

Langmu's painting and a series of relevant practices centered on his painting largely satisfy his own archeology-liked interest in his surroundings, particularly the environment where he grew up, and the interest also results in his anxiety, sensitivity and intuitive responsibility for the embodied things throughout his constructing of his self-knowledge and trajectory.

Such logics of thinking give his works an exceptional charisma of cold rationality, even occasionally, some sense of alienation. Unlike other painters of the same age, Chen Langmu is far less eager to highlight his own subjectivity in narration, still less likely to use trendy techniques and aesthetic conversion approaches adopted by many artists. Instead, he tends to proceed with his painting rationally and meticulously, which is consistent with his usual moderate eclecticism, what he tries to represent in his works is far less tranquil and uneventful than it may appear at the first glance. That may partly explain the bizarre poetry which transcends the artistic forms of his works, only to be occasionally uncovered by viewers' gaze.

With photography and historic pictures, Chen Langmu collects imageries of historic statuses at particular moments and evolutionary processes over certain historic periods. Such historic evidence provides him with some possibilities to construct fields where the artist and the past become mutually open. For the artist grew up in the declining industrial base of North East China, his collection of evidence represents a search for the collective root for himself. This search will help Chen Langmu locate more precisely his own individuality (within such historic context) before organizing and conveying it in the pictorial composition through such personalized treatment as painting, thereby creating his unique visual fruits or in fact forming a method of narrating, participating and occupying. This is in effect his active construction of the present as historic discourse and creation of his own individuality by using history as an entry point

Ever since his debut, Chen Langmu has demonstrated remarkable coherence and continuity in his works, which in fact is an attempt to construct a historic space-time based on his personal judgment and selection. While such space-time may be a fusion of historic truth and subjective fabrication, the artist has demonstrated his consistent interest in the issue of humanity. That explains his desire to construct his own space time where he not only renders everything he explores interesting but also creates rooms for and justifies the intervention of his own subjectivity. It is exactly for this reason that Chen Langmu repeatedly emphasizes, in his paintings of various

stages, the anonymity and facelessness of his represented figures that may not have any specific identity or features, obscure in race and nationality or even with their face omitted or concealed. Those figures only retain their physical memories and abilities of expression, serving as nothing more than the generalization of the human race at large, allowing no room for additional specific identities or characteristics. It is in this way that Langmu successfully guides the audience into a grand, fabricated historic space time where they can observe the commonality of the human race, based on which he creates the “dessert” (his artistic appeals) and comfort zone in his works.

Space time may have always been overlapping, so sometimes history is not a linear process, in other words, history may reemerge before being buried in oblivion. Such overlap contains both the anxiety over the present and anticipation for the future. Chen Langmu’s recent works have been continuously engaged in exploration of the relevant issues. Compared with alteration and editing of historic pictures in his earlier works, his recent works are apparently more accurate and ambitious. As always, Langmu distances himself from radical, subversive and eye-catching reformation, thereby maintaining his consistency in conveying the sense of peaceful mystery and disharmonious tranquility. At this stage, Langmu injects into his works a chaotic mixture of perspectives, sources of light, spaces along with overlapping images of different time-space, creating visual effects resembling that of “flashback” in video editing juxtaposed in the same two-dimensional scenarios. Meanwhile, the artist also introduces into his two-dimensional scenes some trans-space-time overlaps, generating certain visible void and nothingness. More fascinating is that some limited areas of his works feature his extremely subjective use of coloring and brushwork that breaks his own artistic inertia, giving rise to some sort of plastics-like visual texture in those areas. As a result, those specific areas of Chen Langmu’s works appear to be suspending or convey certain sense of absurdity without jeopardizing the visual equilibrium and harmony of the whole work. In other words, Chen Langmu’s experimentation as such does not deviate from his overall tone of calmness and composure in painting. Dependent on his painting language of the irreplaceable visual expressiveness and provocativity, the artist effectively conveys his conception of history and space time as well as his latest interpretation of painting’s expressive potentials, which may also help maintain a sensible observational distance when exploring historic subjects.

Works displayed in this exhibition indicates Langmu’s deepened understanding of his apparently conservative or pro-classics figurative approach to painting, compared with his previous comprehension demonstrated in past exhibitions and projects. Such approach to painting is actually an attempt to wipe out or weaken its connections with the painting context permeated with external fashions or dramatic changes. Well-seasoned and mature approach as such turns the forms of painting into the content itself where narration takes shape; in other words, the content of the painting takes on certain ritualized or canonized visual features. However, as no language of painting is in itself neutral, such apparently conventional approach to painting, if observed in the future space-time, may reveal its exceptional independence and accuracy in expressing the views of the painter. It is also this approach to painting that sets Chen Langmu apart from his peers within the current space-time.

“Universal”, the title of this exhibition is in response to the philosophical consensus definition of

the “Universal”: the universal is composed of conceptions of space-time that is not really existent but a parasite in the interrelations among life consciousness and beings; the so called “self” does not exist except as a concept; the universal itself is nothing but a concept that originates from the emergence of consciousness of living beings. Therefore, the space-time constructed in Langmu’s paintings has defined the “Universal” perceived by the artist. Such space-time involves the scope of life where the world exists, the natural world as well as anything of the human society that is relevant to the artist’s subjectivity.