

Interview with Yang De Yu

Pixel Art Space Solo Exhibition 2015

Xing Yuan

Xing Yuan: You said that your paintings are based on Impressionism. Why did you choose to use this technique instead of others?

Yang De Yu: Maybe you can understand it like this. I chose to use the technique of the Impressionists mostly because I prefer their understanding of light. They use brush and color freely, and they are loose with the rules. The colors they use are vivid and ethereal. These are all qualities that I hope to attain in my paintings. Also, given the impact of Professor Zhong Ding Qiang as my mentor, it is natural for me to use this skill set. There is not much premeditation or deliberation before I start painting. The paintings are a manifestation of my thoughts at a given time. They are very arbitrary. As for other techniques, I experimented with Classicism, Cubism, Futurism, etc. They are all very good methods, and they've impacted my works, but they are not suitable to me. Classicism has especially impacted me. My understanding of line, form and body mainly comes from Classicism.

Xing Yuan: Cheng Cong Lin had an exhibition in Sichuan University in 2012. The name of the exhibition is *The Direction*. One of the directions that he means is the Chinese style. Now that the Chinese style is popular, do you think your work belongs to this trend?

Yang De Yu: Actually I am always closed off from these sort of trends. My works perhaps coincide with the current trend, but it is only accidental. The artist friends I get along well with do not belong to the “trend”. They are free people that are only interested in painting for art’s sake. I do not consider myself a professional artist. I do not depend on art to feed myself, so I do not need to follow the trend. As long as I don’t have a great desire to sell my works, it doesn’t matter. Chinese Literati painting has already separated itself from professional painting. The purpose is not to make money. Instead, people gather together writing poems, making paintings, and proposing inscriptions, which are all fun things to do. My life is similar as well. Friends gather together or go out with their families. The wives and children play together and we sketch together. Hanging out in name of painting is more my lifestyle. I cannot do things like rent a big studio and work diligently in it everyday. Painting is closely related to my life and completely integrated in my life. Painting must always come together with life.

Xing Yuan: Your recent works are very Chinese from genre to color. I noticed that even the perspective is the scattered perspective in Chinese painting. How did you determine this series’ direction?

Yang De Yu: This question is hard to answer. For one the timing is difficult to determine. For example, when did I become interested in Chinese painting? It is hard to be sure.

Perhaps because I have some friends and teachers who are influential Chinese painters, I have more opportunities to see, listen and learn. Then I have more thoughts about the subject. Also, I've recently seen some traditional Chinese landscape painting and still life works that incorporate flowers and birds, especially from the Song, Yuan and Ming Dynasties. This has seemingly opened a window for me to let my mind flow into a quiet and remote place, which is refreshing and elevates the mind. The other reason is because of my loose personality and my love for freedom. I do whatever I want without seeking benefits and achievements. This coincides with the philosophy of Chinese Literati painting. I naturally paint like this, and I am not sure how long it can last as it is random and entirely by volition. Painting is for people to enjoy the process and result. You do not need to care a lot about it. As for the direction, it is difficult to say. Painting to me is not absolute. I paint mainly from my own sincerity. Maybe tomorrow I will not paint in the same way. Because I strive for sincerity, I must follow my heart. People should not always take the direct route, sometimes taking a roundabout way may be more exciting. It's true for all of us.

Xing Yuan: Does this desire to take the indirect route relate to your use of Impressionist technique? What is the most difficult part of translating the Chinese Literati feeling to the Impressionist artistic language?

Yang De Yu: I think that this question can be illustrated like this. I cannot translate any masters from other countries and eras. These masters cannot be translated or copied because they are too unique. I cannot define myself without mentioning others. What I

can do is create my work and try my best to express as much as possible. I do not create works with a specific goal.

Xing Yuan: I can feel endless power in your previous works. It is a tension that bursts out suddenly in the moment full of enthusiasm and passion. It is different from your current works and they convey different artistic meanings. Now there is a more quiet and calm feeling in your works. How can you explain this change?

Yang De Yu: I answered previously that I do not create works with a specific goal. Although I paint a certain way today, I may change entirely tomorrow. Everything I do is just to follow my heart. I do not start with a preconceived notion. Previously my works were wild, unrestrained, and full of tension to give some sense of impending tragedy. But that was during that period. Now these feelings have gone and my heart is not there any more. So I no longer paint like that. Maybe one day I will paint like that again, but it is impossible to say. Now my works have calmed down a lot and this is the same as my recent living situation. This is no coincidence. Life is like the sea. There are moments with big storms and there are moments of tranquility. But at a person's core nothing can be changed. You are ultimately immutable in the end if you are true to yourself. Your work is also like that. When you calm down you can draw something peaceful; when you are angry you draw something wild. After drawing you become calm again.

Xing Yuan: I saw the work from your early period while you were in university when I visited your studio. The works from this period were derived from Abstract Expressionism and Cubism. However, it seems completely confined to that time.

Yang De Yu: Actually this isn't entirely so. At that time He Gong taught us so I was greatly influenced by him. Because I was young, I tried many different things. So I learned something from these experiences. But now when he mentions me, he would say, "It's a pity." (Maybe because I am unknown to the public. Haha.) It's true that I'm an unknown artist. I have not made any news these past years. My teachers with strong styles taught me a lot. He Gong did installation. Zhong Ding Qiang is artist from former generations. He was part of the Soviet group but his Impressionist works are also very good. Another teacher I had was Feng Ming. It is a pity that he passed away at the age of thirty. He did Classical painting, so I also did Classical painting during that period. Of course, there were also Professor Duan Qi Ding and his wife Professor Shang, who were our class advisors. We have very good relationship, and I always eat at their place. Professor Duan often shows his long scroll to me. Maybe these experiences didn't have a great impact on me at that time but they gradually impacted me. During that time I spent much time and effort to try different ways to express myself. Even though I don't use these styles anymore, this period of trying different styles still is very valuable to me. Modern society is similar. If you take a plane, then you quickly reach the end. If you take a train, you are able to appreciate the scenes along the road. But, if you walk, you can experience the most. Then the question is, whether the modern people experience more or less than in the past. I think it is less. The plane can only connect some unrelated

points like using a ruler. You're unable to gain a very deep level of thinking about the world. The painters in our generation benefit more from taking the train rather than the plane. I am happy that I've experienced more so I am less superficial even though I paint directly without premeditation.

Xing Yuan: Do the figures in your paintings have some particular reference?

Yang De Yu: The figures in my paintings tend to be rural and belong to the lower class. It gives me more space to express myself. I am very satisfied with the figures I paint and the feeling they give to the audience. I feel comfortable when I paint these figures. There is a comical sense in it, that is, irony about life. I do not like to be an actor in the scene but rather part of the audience with certain distance. I use a lot of imagination in my manuscript paintings. I paint my own thoughts and they naturally come out. Since I like Michelangelo and Ingres's elegance when painting the body, I try to show this in my work as well. I take care to depict the image, the line, and the body. But undoubtedly, compared with the masters' works, mine is still not very vivid. I always believe that the painting cannot be without life. The combination of line, image, and color is not static. I did research on the Old Masters' works, and no matter how serene the image is, it is not static, even the statues in ancient Greece. They are all trying to express something. So I insist on letting the image move, even if I'm depicting solemn and quiet things.

Xing Yuan: How many years have you been painting?

Yang De Yu: Thirty or forty years. There was amateur class in school when I was eleven or twelve years old. There were more than a thousand students at school but only a little more than ten attended the amateur class. But there are four or five that still paint now. Everyone loves painting from the bottom of their heart. Even now we still get together to paint. If I paint well I'm very glad, otherwise I will be upset. This is maybe a way to encourage us, and that is also fun.

Xing Yuan: Have you thought about how to appear to the public for your first solo exhibition?

Yang De Yu: There is no strong finality when I do things. That might also be the reason why I am not successful. The exhibition to me is more like inviting friends to come and criticize my works. Maybe I'm more interested in entertainment than longing for success.

Xing Yuan: What do you think is the best way to teach painting?

Yang De Yu: The best way is to have the teacher take us outside to paint, and whether it turns out good or bad, we at least all face real and vivid objects. It is confused to try to learn from a book. The only way to learn properly is to experience things for yourself.

Xing Yuan: How do you define a complete man?

Yang De Yu: Following the Existentialist line of thought, then one day when you are no longer here, others can judge whether you were a complete man. Whether it's me, you,

or some famous person, we are all not complete. As humans, we become interesting because of this incompleteness.

Xing Yuan: Do you think that there is an internal force or energy that makes you continually work hard at painting?

Yang De Yu: No. I realized this when I was in college. Everyone is searching for eternity but it can never be reached. It is only imaginary.

Xing Yuan: What do you think is more important, the future or the present?

Yang De Yu: The present. If you cannot do well in the present, how can you talk about future?

Xing Yuan: What does painting mean to you?

Yang De Yu: It means joy. It is the opposite of pain. Because I received enjoyment through painting during my childhood it consoled me on a visual and spiritual level. If I cannot attain these things, I refuse to continue painting.