

## From 'Conceptual Painting' to 'Conceptions of Painting'

Bao Dong interviews Xu Xiaoguo

Bao Dong: I remember that you adhered to expressionism and symbolism and also had some 'bad painting' tendencies and then changed your style to what it is now. Could you talk a little about how this began?

Xu Xiaoguo: During the early period of my painting, my work had expressionist features and some symbolic subject matter. I made use of the structure of some strongly contrasting colours. These elements might have led everyone to think of my painting as being expressionist or a type of bad painting, but as I see it, the paintings during that period was conception-centered. Such a trend led me to use something like the strong colour systems that is widespread across the field of Chinese folk art and also to apply the brushstroke techniques that folk handicraftsmen used in kitschy dragon-phoenix calligraphy. I did some reworking of these elements, of course, so that they became my vernacular.

Bao Dong: You made deliberate use of Chinese folk culture.

Xu Xiaoguo: Yes, but I did not make total use of folk culture to convey ideas. It was just that it tallied quite nicely with the content of the subject matter I wanted to use. Early in the period, I made extensive use of folklores and stories from various religions as my subject matter. After twisting them around and mythologising them, I came up with a lot of coined things and scenery, so I did use those kinds of techniques and colour systems. They were naturally and mutually connected, and they acted on each other.

Bao Dong: What is your understanding of the notion of 'conceptual painting' in art history? Do you think it is established as a theory?

Xu Xiaoguo: This is something I would actually really like to talk about. If we bring up the subject of conceptual painting, we must bring up concept art. From the 1960s until now, concept art has continually influenced artistic systems, but the conceptual painting we speak of today differs from the concept art practiced by those people in the 1960s. The concept art of that time emphasised the process of how concept went from inception to formalisation. It did not track down the techniques of production and the traditional aesthetic features of the work's ultimate completion. Not centered in technique, concept art is systemically opposite with the former artistic system, and it gave birth to new artistic contexts. Either as an approach or a method, it found a new outlet for subsequent art. It seems now that the conceptual art or conceptual painting we mention was gradually derived from concept art, and when it arrived in China, it was mixed in with our philosophy and gave birth to new forms with Chinese features. In traditional Chinese culture, the term we now use for 'conceptual', *guannian*, can be split into two characters, with *guan* meaning 'view' and *nian* meaning 'idea' or 'thought'. In the process of coming to know our 'view', an 'idea' takes shape.

Bao Dong: Everyone has the consciousness of problem. Whether we are aware of this consciousness or not, it is either placed in the midst of a trend or escapes from it. Back then, there were a few key terms, like 'conceptual paintings' and 'bad paintings'. As I recall, quite a few artists were depicted and defined this way. There is probably no way for us to use a few concepts to epitomise all aspects of an artist's work, but terms from that era like the ones I just gave immediately call to my mind the entire scene of painting at that time.

Xu Xiaoguo: During that time there was possibly also an attitude about modern art that might look strange today, one that was influencing everybody. Many people thought attitude was a very important ideology and that without it, problems would be everywhere. Problems or issues of art were placed on attitudinal context for resolution. So in some respects, my works at that time were influenced by the broader environment.

Bao Dong: From that point of view, in conceptual painting, the 'conceptual' comes first, so we have painting merely as a tool for expressing the conceptual. In talking about the meaning of imagery, painting within 'conceptual painting' is replaceable; one can use photography, imaging and other means to express or convey concept.

Xu Xiaoguo: Right. At that time, everyone thought art had its responsibilities to carry out, including academic responsibility, social responsibility, and even responsibility for modern art with Chinese characteristics, the latter of which contained an element of rebellion. I think it might have been after Joseph Beuys and the involvement of art in politics and ideology and also after many socialist countries became part of the capitalist system that critical art forms were born. Then they were combined into an uneasy mixture with the techniques of German expressionism, and together they influenced the contemporary Chinese painting of that time, creating a very unique landscape. Many messages in China were misread and, on several occasions, repeatedly misread. Perhaps these syntheses and factors led to the birth of those attitudes.

Nowadays, however, the relationship between the construction of individual artistic voice and the systemic constructs of Western art is comparatively close. We return to the issue we started with: systemic structure. I think the work of individual artists and the construction of individual artistic voice have had linking and renewing effects on the structure of artistic systems to an extraordinarily meaningful extent. As in the progress of constructing a new system, the reference standard we follow is the key to the way out, or a reliable piece of evidence. The existing system is, however, the ground we are about to break or the reference we can follow.

Bao Dong: What do you mean by systemic construct?

Xu Xiaoguo: Taking painting systems as an example, let's go back in time to the period of modernism -- say, for example, to Henri Matisse. In Matisse's paintings, I have seen his inheritance of the colour layer in Classicist painting, his understanding of aesthetics and

composition. In his system, we see that the quintessential elements and structures in the former system is, instead, kept or even strengthened. He took some unnecessary things and trimmed them away while strengthening the things he did need. Having spoken thus far, we can take the conceptual painting and the painting conceptions we were just talking about and regard them as one issue for discussion. In the process of painting, we often encounter those two issues, and often these issues will interlock or crisscross.

Bao Dong: The distinction between 'Conceptual painting' and 'conceptions of painting' is good and clear. Painting itself has not escaped from conception. How to look, how to portray, what to paint, how to paint -- these are all basic questions and behind the scene of most basic question is always a conception. Even the concept of 'painting' is something born of conception. Art is not a self-evident thing that requires no explanation. For painters, conception and feeling are inseparable; painting and conception are actually parts of a whole thing.

Xu Xiaoguo: Right, because painting and all other art forms form relationships with individual artists. From the first time a particular material is used until the time we gradually become familiar with it and then to the time when we can release and control its energies -- all of these stages are related to the individual. I think there is an aesthetic distance between materials and artists -- you look and I think -- within this distance relationship exists.

Bao Dong: Your understanding of painting will gradually undergo changes, and my impression is that you are changing step by step.

Xu Xiaoguo: Right. I deliberately take changes of style in my painting. These transformations are all resulted from rethinking and reflecting my previous systems. During that period of time, I had doubts about the function of conceptual painting and the images within the painting. You might say I had my doubts about painting that put attitude first and then went to the use of conception and image. So, during that time I developed deep research interest in the relationship between images used in the painting and the painting itself. I took this research as an assignment to be developed. I attempted to use the process of painting to weaken the image itself and the function it brought along with it. During that transitional period, I often took an image and made it into many different styles of painting. I took feeling and experience during the process of painting very seriously. My experiences with each painting were greater than the content conveyed by the imagery.

Bao Dong: Was it interesting to separate 'image' and 'painting'?

Xu Xiaoguo: At the time I chose very strongly ideologised images. I searched out the covers of many old Soviet and North Korean magazines. These images were all particularly stereotypical political tools, and their interference with the production of paintings was extremely serious. During the process of painting these, I discovered individual is highly initiative in controlling colour structures and also changes in shapes. It

could have a piece of political propaganda turned into a painting that bore individual experience.

Bao Dong: Is this because you feel that painting has a special nature independent of image?

Xu Xiaoguo: Right. Since I feel that painting can depend on image for its existence, of course it can also be detached from the meaning born and sustained by the image. Because painting itself is just that -- painting -- it possesses an independent personality. Therefore, good paintings can be enjoyed and can be brought into dialogue with image.

Bao Dong: Do you think that image is greater than painting or that painting is greater than image?

Xu Xiaoguo: I think painting is greater than image. For example, say that I entered into a contextual system with a conception-centered image. Because of its separation from the movement, the original meaning of the image is gradually lost and is replaced by a newly produced painting. The process of this change would allow me to believe even more strongly that painting is greater than the things the image itself embodies. Historically, of course, there have been many artists who have used images to express what painting does. **Gerhard Richter**, for example, used photographic images and the psychological distance from the real world to produce a very veiled, painting-style photography. Viewers who saw his work were taken into the border regions between photography and painting to think about their visual experience.

Bao Dong: Well then, what part of painting is greater than image?

Xu Xiaoguo: I think it is a function of two points working together. One part is the aesthetic system and the power that painting carries within itself, as left behind by the former greats who constructed the system of painting. For example, in the academy the point, line, and surface of our depictions all have their own significances in and of themselves. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres and Eugène Delacroix pestered and disputed with each other over the aesthetic system for line-and-colour paintings. The other part relates to the initiative of the individual artist. This is because historically the standards and aesthetic appeal of painting have been pushed by certain groups or their representative members. One era will have a group of people who drive the evolvement of a new aesthetic standard, so individual artistic practice is an important link in deducing the history of painting.

Bao Dong: Can we say it like this? Such a thing as the history of 'painting' does exist.

Xu Xiaoguo: Right.

Bao Dong: So we should still place painting within a context before we look at it.

Xu Xiaoguo: Right. There is a contextual relationship. It appears today that bad painting also has aesthetic appeal as painting. Regardless of the attitude or style of your work, it should be placed within the larger structure of history before we make the judgment. If not, bad painting would not be taken up repeatedly and discussed by the commentary system. This is because bad painting is not just an issue of attitude; bad painting has its rich standards of action, and they do not pertain only to attitude.

Bao Dong: Right. In bad painting itself, appeal is taken as content. But a change in your work will gradually emerge in the midst of using ready-made products carrying this appeal.

Xu Xiaoguo: Right, because I think personal experience is very important. But the construction of the system of oneself must be placed within the context of fine arts for it to be meaningful. If not, it is nothing more than a piece of self-comforting affectation. During the course of my work there were some gradual changes in how I see things. After the 'Small Country' series, my sensory organs had new experiences, or perhaps I could say that the feeling of my body underwent some changes. I could sense the organic connection between works from that period as they came in one by one. The space, colour gamut, and structure between material objects aroused my interest. What is more, this very personal visual experience led me to use cages as carriers and develop a new research system. Because painting is done on a flat surface, when I build my own visual structure on it, what other people see and feel is all different. When other things such as social things or conceptual things get involved, personal feelings actually assume a secondary position, then construction of a truly individual painting is impeded.

Bao Dong: Then is the painting of Piet Cornelies Mondrian individual or non-individual?

Xu Xiaoguo: I think Mondrian's work was experiential when he started it, but then he led the order of phenomena into an ultimate form. This form carried with it his own individual judgment and choice-making. During the early period of his research, Mondrian had a batch of paintings in which he depicted and delineated trees. The relationship of positive and negative forms between the leaves of the trees and the structure of the painting among them were the focal points of his research, and this batch of paintings also influenced the work of his later period. In his later period he deliberately strengthened the way we see in our everyday lives, allowing this way of seeing to be situated in a perfected structural form. These were achieved by selecting from his early rational research. Abandoning superfluous information was a judgment of his personal aesthetic structure. In other words, it can be seen as the minimalist expression of his personality.

Bao Dong: Is that batch of works where you gradually shaken off image content inspired by Mondrian's early works?

Xu Xiaoguo: During that time I was very interested in that batch of Mondrian's paintings of trees, but I did not have very much interest in the abstract works from his later period.

When I encountered problems in painting the positive or negative forms of cages, I would go outside and do sketches of a grove of trees from life, doing some watercolour paintings presenting the space relations between large leaves and branches.

In entering the new system I was influenced by Jasper Johns. Some works on paper resulted from his early research on the works of Cézanne as well as his use of oblique brushstrokes to weave space were greatly inspiring to me. When everyone looks at my works from the Cage series they might be guided by the symbolic context of real cages, but narrating the real meaning of cages was exactly what I was NOT doing. Cages were only used as carriers. The core of my work was entering within the two dimensions of painting and giving a new lease on life to research on space.

When I face the nature of the flat surface, I am actually facing the issue of space within the noumenon of painting. Many great masters at different points in history were all resolving the problem or issue of space in painting. After getting to modernism, I think the reconsideration of the nature of the flat surface once again was constructively meaningful. In the practice of painting, when facing once again the nature of the flat surface (something that has no innate logic), a new way of looking at space was opened up. This new way of seeing was not the spatiality we see in classical period painting. For example, Picasso did not revert to reality but created a new way of looking at space. After this process, the relationship between artists and painting underwent great change, and artists became freer in doing their painting.

Bao Dong: Using perspective (in drawing) as an example, perspective resolved the problem of how to take three-dimensional projection and put it on a flat surface. That is to say, Renaissance artists early on knew all about the fact of the flat surface in painting, but they did not make active use of the flat surface. It can be said that the flat-surface nature of painting did not function as positive experiential participation within the perception of painters and that it was only a negative fact. It was only later in the subsequent course of artists' work that efforts were made about flat surface, especially when colours gradually emerged as independent. For example, in Impressionism the earliest objective was the reproduction of nature, but it partook of colour array consciousness (for example Seurat). As far as you are concerned, when you repeatedly paint trees or cages, the colours themselves function as a 'linguistic array' and emerge as independent. The colours in your painting change from colorful insignia of meaningful cultural symbolism into pure colour relationships.

Xu Xiaoguo: With regards to the process of evolving the colour system, what I actually did was bring my research focus back onto the modernist period because painting had been marginalised during that period and remained in a static state as far as providing solutions to many of the problems then was concerned. I felt that I could be able to find a way out for myself there. I began to apply myself anew to learning about the function of colours, and I began to experience the inherent power of colours in painting, their

dynamism as well as emotive qualities. I feel that personal sensory perception is an important focus, be it in research or the development of artistic genres. Ultimately, these things will have to be brought out by people with well-honed sensory perceptions, and it's not so much something driven by reason or rationalism but more by a certain sensuality. Let's take Impressionism as an example. There were so many artists during that period, yet those who were able to express their own unique personal identity were only tip of an iceberg.

Bao Dong: The creation of a painting needs to have some starting point. You can't simply say, 'I want to paint this!' with it happening right there. Every artist longs to be one only after they have seen someone else's painting. What questions were you most aware of when you wanted to free yourself from your former ways of working, to make painting itself, elements such as colour and form, your core preoccupation?

Xu Xiaoguo: At first, it was space; then I felt that it led to questions of construction of psychological space. So I painted the "Spherical System" series as a way of dealing with some of the personal issues that I was facing.

Bao Dong: Psychological space of visual meaning?

Xu Xiaoguo: It's something which was gradually and slowly experienced during the process of painting. This process was completed via the act of viewing.

Bao Dong: And so the act of viewing itself had become an object of research?

Xu Xiaoguo: That's right.

Bao Dong: The viewing which painting constructed.

Xu Xiaoguo: Right, because the use of spherical system. It's also my intentional act of doing away with image, a conscious entering into painting without image.

Bao Dong: Why was there a need to do away with image?

Xu Xiaoguo: Because during that period of time, I felt that image was my barrier to entering into the painting of psychological space. 'Cage' had image; 'Cage' gave me a kind of freedom. During the construction and configuration of space, the boundary between the positive and negative forms possessed a kind of power for change. A useful illustration to explain the kind of power in the intermediate would perhaps be the example of the flats and sharps found with the black keys of the piano or the transition between the positive and negative imprints of woodblocks.

Bao Dong: Actually, 'Cages' is a case in point for you to talk about this problem. There

are principles behind the examples, but remove the concrete images, and what you have left to deal with will be the principles.

Xu Xiaoguo: The removal of image has given me even more freedom, allowing me to enter directly into the process of my self-construction of psychological space. As the basic element in painting, a dot can either form a single point or in group, make up the so-called image. From my point of view, this image, however, can hardly impede my entering into painting process. And at the same time, it carries no meaning at all. I just want to make it simple.

Bao Dong: In other words, you no longer require images for your examples.

Xu Xiaoguo: Yes.

Bao Dong: Won't that make your points less articulable, since the points we wish to make for a lot of things become more persuasive with examples as our starting point?

Xu Xiaoguo: That's because I feel that painting, in and of itself, is something very powerful. Letting go of image will enable one to enter that kind of power and also cultivate it. Just like that moment when we bring down our first stroke of the brush on an empty canvas, power already starts to be generated. There are two aspects to this dynamic. The first is human thought. When a person thinks, there is constant movement in his or her logic, and one moment will be different from the next. The next aspect is the inherent movement that is generated in the production of a painting. Changes will be brought about even between whether the next brush stroke is included or not. When a painting is in a state of being in the intermediate, the dynamism of its power is the most unstable.

Bao Dong: With a ball on a canvas (concrete) and a spherical shape (abstract), if they happen to look the same, would there be any essential difference?

Xu Xiaoguo: I feel that there is a difference in their essence, and I intentionally left out the physicality of the balls, as that wasn't the process that I was looking for.

Slowly and gradually, I begin to feel Matisse and Mondrian and how they have been harnessing and communicating the power of space inherent in their canvases. Painting is full of movement. In Duchamp's 'Nude Descending a Staircase', he was making use of three-dimensional dissections and reconstruction to complete the movements in painting which he had in mind. The artist had helped to rekindle in us that sense of movement through that painting. In the process of my series, 'The Spherical Organisation', I was also intentionally bringing out the relationship between the ascent and descent. I made use of wrongly arranged formations to engender movement between them. This kind of movement is not a static psychological feeling but an experience which can only be fulfilled through the act of viewing.

Bao Dong: This 'movement' that you talk about, are you referring to the process of the eyes reading a painting?

Xu Xiaoguo: Right, say for example, insight from classicism, it's also about creating this illusion of reality, which is also at the same time about attaining a kind of psychological reality from an optical illusion. In truth, a two-dimensional painting does not move; movement is just a metaphor. It's just that when you are viewing it, your perception has been disrupted by an illusory placement of spatial arrangements controlled or put together by the artist, and thus you are able to feel a movement brought about by this placement.

Bao Dong: Speaking of which, artists work under a different consciousness of various problems. Under what kind of context would you place your paintings when you are discussing them? We are continually discussing about modernism. While modernism is important, would it be able to explain all that you are doing? What do you personally think, or conversely, what would you differentiate it from?

Xu Xiaoguo: Being able to view modernism does not mean that I can go back in time to that period to deal with the problems engendered by that period. The problems faced and the methodologies involved would be different for every age. I feel that the relationship of a context is effective to me. Taking a look back on modernism is not meant with a desire to relive or repeat it but to use it as a sort of reference. Modernism recognises an ultimate order: centrism of the highest order. I think that the epistemology and approach to viewing a painting should not exist to solely serve this ultimate order. The purpose of painting is not as simple as providing a good conclusion; it has movement. When such movements occur, even the art viewers would have to make adjustments to their personal viewings in order to complete their appreciation of the painting. The artist is not just a creator or a participant in a process. I am more concerned with the feelings and observations of a personal nature in this process.

Bao Dong: If modernism is not a period, is it then an epistemological method and appeal to certain values?

Xu Xiaoguo: There is still a perennial problem. When we view a painting and think that it is good, it is actually devoid of the barrier of any time period. For example, when we view a work belonging to the Classical period or a piece of contemporary art, if it is good, all the criteria for a good painting would be present, and it would not be restricted by any time period. We may perhaps have a feel of the particular time period or the problems of painting faced by that age from our view of the canvas, but these would not affect our enjoyment of a good piece of work.

Bao Dong: You just mentioned that a good painting has certain standards. What would be these standards be for you at this stage?

Xu Xiaoguo: I feel that, where a painting is concerned, when we are cognizant that it is

two-dimensional, what takes place within and without the painting is actually the same. When its power has been set free by the artist through his or her careful concoction, it becomes a good piece of work. It is not just a matter of good brush strokes or good spatial composition. These are all simply technical issues. A painting which is good is not just so in its technical aspect only. With regards to my works, I do not have a sense that they are right or good in this period, because when one enters into a state of freedom or borders on it, it is very hard to form judgments such as whether it is good or bad, very difficult to adopt a particular standard or to judge it according to what we are familiar with. Even for myself, I find it very hard to judge.

Bao Dong: What about when you work on a painting, when will you consider it to be completed?

Xu Xiaoguo: I feel that when it's power has been generated and I no longer see the need to make any more adjustment to it, the painting is then completed. Sometimes it is very fast and sometimes very slow, as slow as several months.