

Artron: 'An Interview with Xiaobai Su', by Baixi, August 5th, 2010

【动态】 An Interview with Xiaobai Su

The Art Works are the Entire Life of the Artist

Baixi: You lived in a former village school near the west border of Germany. I know it is a lonely place. You lived there for over ten years. In such a long time young trees would grow into woods. Haven't you felt a little lonely?

Xiaobai: Yes.

But it is same as everywhere. Moving to a busy place won't make any difference. Anyway, as long as there are books on the shelf for me to read and there are pictures I can paint, I can get used to it gradually. Art creation entails the originator to be self-absorbed and in a relatively close space. A noisy environment is unbearable. Moreover, painting is labor of physical effort and needs a fixed place to hold groups of painting tools. I abhor vagrancy. My soul can be as a vagrant, traveling at will, but my body cannot. You cannot paint with empty hands and no paper.

Baixi: You abhor vagrancy, but you cannot help moving about. In the middle of the 1980s, you left mainland China for Germany. Don't you think this was a major period of wandering in your life?

Xiaobai: That was an escape.

Baixi: Before leaving for Germany, you had just completed a comprehensive, systematic study program at a domestic art academy and created a series of works which could arouse topics about individual art aesthetics. We can say you were making a name for yourself, but why did you choose leaving?

Xiaobai: In my opinion, my leaving was the beginning of another adventure. Going abroad was an issue almost every young person in the 1980s considered.

When people have been shut in a cage and immersed in a narrow life spoken in a single language for a long time, they will surely want to experience another social system and know about another culture. I happened to be one of them, so I resolutely left my familiar environment and a comfortable life for an entirely alien place. Fortunately, the place I went to happened to be the best modern art academy in Europe.

Baixi: “An entirely alien place” sounds poetic, and you’ve lived there twenty years. I guess the sorrow is beyond description. Well, how did you manage to adapt yourself to the German society?

Xiaobai: It’s not much of “adapting”. I lived individually. How could I adapt myself to that society? I lived in a village primary school, and had occasional contact with some colleagues in the art field, with some colleges, associations and cultural fund organizations. I also had friends from all walks of life. We often called each other and had weekend get-togethers. It was my own choice to live in this way and I had nothing to complain. Later, I found many German artists were living similarly. They also lived in areas far away from cities, always keeping personal hobbies when affiliating with others, loving and being loved, looking for people and environments of harmonious nature. They could not bear any bit of compromise. I really made it, so I said it was an escape, and perhaps I am a bit of a coward and little reclusive.

Baixi: Well, did you still know about the society you lived in and the art field of this society?

Xiaobai: No. I just attended only a small part of social activities. I read books and newspapers, watched TV news, and chose to attend a few interesting exhibitions from the invitations. The direct momentum of catching up with the spot was to meet the artists on the opening ceremony. What I cared for was not only the new art works, but also the artists, their working state and environment, and even the extent of their freedom. In 1987 when I first arrived in Germany, I was Konrad Klapheck’s student. As for Klapheck’s works, I preferred his sketch in the same size of original by charcoal pencil on the canvas. My eyes feasted upon his drawing rounds by wooden ruler in the studio. Lüpertz was like boxing when painting pictures. Richter used a block of lath calmly and lets dye flow on the canvas, which was like a game...When I talk about these artists who are still alive, what I take delight in is “creation spot” and their “worktable”, and what I care for is their drawing process as laborers, their habits

of using draft, or their strolling on the door before walking into the studio. The meaning of their art works, if there is, is another topic.

Baixi: Interesting. What has influenced you is not the painting itself, but the painting process, the drawing state and the studio. Why are you so interested in these elements Are you influenced by the painting market?

Xiaobai: I'm only influenced by people and more specifically the people I paid attention to. Those getting my attention are in my thought and will jump out of my mind from time to time and get involved in my life. My life needs such complex dialogue. I have been once obsessed with Duchamp's art theory, for there is a tinge similar to "inaction" in oriental philosophy which surprised me. Therefore, I tried my best to find all the books about Duchamp. That obsession made me stay in the studio day and night, sitting still but upset. Another time, I was captivated by British artist Francis Bacon. He was still living and in good health in 1990 and was a friend of my mentor, who introduced me to visit his studio in London. I was shocked by the disorder of the studio: a small but unrestrained room, an out-of-order environment with works of order. Bacon's studio has a new special place now and been displayed in the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (IMMA). At that time, I could not talk to him much, not just because of the language obstacle. Bacon stood quietly beside the door frame with both hands down and there was no space of a single foot, and a careless step would ruin the folded, bloody wet pictures.

Baixi: Your description is more vivid than his paintings.

Xiaobai: The ordinary way to know about an artist is to look at his works. These works are often displayed in art galleries. Going to the gallery is the best way to understand the artist. However, I think there is a more direct way. That is to go to the artist's studio. What I mean is a live studio in use. If we can see the artist's originals, we might as well see what they look like at the easel. One cannot realize this unless he goes abroad. When one is abroad, he will have chances to realize this, but of course he must have this interest. Genuine great works are the combination of the artist and his entire life.

Baixi: I often heard about your stories when you were studying in Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts. You recalled with emotion the people, artists, teachers and classmates... at that time. Quite often I heard you mentioning stories your experience

in Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, and your teachers and classmates who became your friends. I believe these two famous art academies played a special role in your life. Could you say something about the two schools and make a comparison of them?

Xiaobai: If one often recalls a school he ever attended with emotion, such a recollection is just temporary. Both Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts and Kunstakademie Düsseldorf are very good art academies, though their cultural structures and teaching approaches are very different. However, differences are not bad, and cultures do not have superiority over each other. If possible, one would better attend both. I myself had different art experiences in these two schools. In simple words, what I tried hard to learn in the first school was also what I tried hard to throw away in the second school.

The Central Academy of Fine Arts is a place for you to learn knowledge and skills. In the U-buildings of XiaoWei Hutong of the school, we were anxious to learn, like a dry sponge thrown into water. We spared no efforts to learn sketch, coloring, modeling, composition of a picture, conception and ideology. After leaving Central Academy of Fine Arts, I soon went to Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, expecting to further my studies of better sketch, coloring and modeling. But I gave up this dream soon, for this was not a school offering knowledge about sketch or coloring. It was more like an experimental processing factory of comprehensive materials. I had to stop pursuing better sketch, coloring and modeling, and give up what I had learned. That is to say, the Central Academy of Fine Arts is a place where I acquired knowledge and culture. I learned all the possibilities to be used when drawing, while in Kunstakademie Düsseldorf I learned to eliminate all the possibilities. It is a place where I shook off what I had learned. I said “shook off”, not “forgot”.

Baixi: These words sound surprising. But I still like your ways of describing.

I suppose many interesting stories happened here. I have heard you say that there were three notable public classrooms in Kunstakademie Düsseldorf: a workshop for processing frame and canvas of board painting, a studio for shaping models of metal, wood or stone, and a room for keeping general painting materials. These three studios were crowded almost all the time. Those coming and going like Josef Beuys in the 1970s, Anselm Kiefer in the 1980s, and Gerhard Richter in the 1990s, gained great benefits there. You set up a workshop for shaping models of wood or stone in your large yard after you left the Academy, and you worked in it all

the time. I remember once I tried to visit you, but I could not find you in any of the studios. Finally, when I pushed open the door of the carpentry room, I saw you in parings there. But you did not even hear me when I yelled.

Xiaobai: For a time, I painted nothing. I could paint nothing because I felt my soul was empty. I could not get rid of my seemingly outdated knowledge, while new knowledge constantly impacted me. People of the time were profound in mind, with a fashion of traditionalism and succession. But I had no chance to inherit the traditional culture, which was only a symbol or a segment of memory, a frame of reference between the reality and me. What's more, does the tradition which had been carried forward still agree with the original idea? Even if it was so, I was actually living in another cultural tradition. I was in such a dilemma.

Baixi: What a depression! And how did you get over it?

Xiaobai: In my memory, at first it was the obstacles of language and thinking that took away my confidence. At one time, I became extremely conceited and especially aggressive, which was actually another symptom of lack of confidence. I remember that I said in front of a portrait to a classmate of the Academy, "A dinner for me, and I will paint a real portrait for you to copy." Isn't it ridiculous? In such a way, I covered my panic in the environment. Fortunately, I didn't get lost in depression for long. After the depression, I had a self-reflection in general, adjusting myself in mind, and also in the form of knowledge, I made a new estimation of my previous experience, including my painting art. That was my experience of felicitation, more than a shadow. The days without tradition were fine with me, even in a shock of culture. I could clean up my jammed brain. I knew the days ahead would be tedious, not dynamic any more, and I should get used to facing myself and learn to spend so much leisure time all of a sudden. Then I felt at ease, without any burden.

Baixi: Fine! You got rid of the outdated cultural background, as well as the burden of painting experience, and started afresh.

Xiaobai: Yes. Dusseldorf is a sensible city without any circumvallation, and so is Dusseldorf Academy of Fine Arts, in the center of the open city, clung to the Rhine, where the surroundings, light, quality of air, combination of colors and even the different smell of turpentine in painting material, or the aisle of teaching building, form a particular shape or format. All those were different from what I had experienced for

my survival, and also different from the old customs, which had affected my apperception and estimation of painting art. Painting is absolutely a course of touching and probing into the third dimension. I no longer took delight in talking about my former painting experience, and I felt my previous works slack, weak and regional. I rented a studio to start my new paintings. I never hang out my works on the wall. I am never narcissistic in the taste of art.

Baixi: Where do your works hang? And where do you wish them to hang?

Xiaobai: My works are in art galleries, halls of parliament, banks and private collection. But that means nothing, they only tell my existence in Germany as a professional artist. According to my observation, they collect my works only because my works are believed to follow the Chinese style. That's absolutely a blow to me. I don't expect my works to be a kind of ornaments, or anything good-looking for hanging on the wall as decorations of living rooms. There was an old lady who had inherited from her uncle some oriental porcelaine from the Eight Allied Forces and she always collects the works created by me, a Chinese artist with oriental style. It's a distinct tragedy for an artist. Another German, a private collector, preferred collecting paper works, among whose collection for 19 years there were more than one hundred paper works of mine. When I visited him, he allowed me to open his drawer by myself as an unusual exception. Wearing white broche gloves and shivering on the jig, I thumbed through my works, folds of dyed papers of coarse edge, which I had touched over and over before. I was delighted to see my works valued but I do wish Su Xiaobai's works hanging on more and larger walls, evaluated and commented on by spectators. But I never expect the super nationality to be deemed as internationality. I hope there is some originality of essence in my works, which I pay much attention to, and am pursuing.

Baixi: This tendency exists for sure from the means of your painting expression. There are many differences between your works of nowadays and those of 20 years ago, especially in the paintings, concrete images and structures have appeared in another language. I wonder if they can be called abstract paintings. Do you mind such an expression?

Specifically, I always feel you are gradually shaking off your previous language style in your recent works. You make the paintings simpler and easier, and the combination of coloring is pushed to the extreme and approaching the category of

simplicity. I wonder whether you are shaking off speaking responsibility of the society or some cultural burden in your paintings. You no longer permit concrete images or some content to appear in your paintings, do you?

Xiaobai: For a long time, I did not care for concrete images on the paintings, images of some objects. If I had to use the word “image”, I had different understanding about images and structures. Art is of expression, but what is expressed does not always have to be with stories to be accepted. The art of painting itself should try to express what cannot be expressed in other ways. For example, coloring and block structure in painting can work as the painting language itself and become the content to be expressed by the painting . Some friends tried to find elements of abstract painting from my early works. There are articles saying abstract painting is the development in the painting art history. But in my opinion, as for the phenomenon of art, there is no saying about development or something. All paintings are real, and responsible for their existence. Can you say impressionist painting lags behind impressionist painting? We can only say some works of art are good and others are bad.

Baixi: What do you care more for?

Xiaobai: Painting methods.

What I care for is the possibility for painting methods to exist independently as the painting itself. I care for the visual wallop when the painting appears. A painting can only show us a thin husk at most, and future explanations are derived from this husk. My task is to make this thin husk perfect. Just think how many natural scientists and social scientists are studying and discussing this husk. In form, this is the macro environment where artists live, which is very important. However, it is only the environment, not the object. My object is the surface layer presented on the painting. It is a layer of texture, which needs a drying process and content, the thickness of the dye grain directly refracting the coloring saturation.

You can let philosophers, politicians, historians, connoisseurs, anthropologist and everyone of them tell me what art is and how it is created. But this is macro concept. Don't you want to listen to an artist's view? He really hopes to spend some afternoon in his studio using a thin brush to dye and transit the edge of top right corner of the wet work still on the frame from Kumquat red to Silver Orange Red.

Baixi: I guess this artist means yourself?

Xiaobai: Maybe. But what I mean is that we often care most about the technical problems of the art creation process as technical period, not in the least a number of detesting art terms. Those new concepts, ways of generation stop and missions fabricated out of mind won't be helpful for our painting. In our creation, no special things need new words to explain. Make your paintings nice and tidy. Spare some time to stroll in the store of painting materials, and do not miss the new ones.

Baixi: So you choose lacquer as the medium of paintings on the new frame, for lacquer itself has special light and color gamut.

Xiaobai: Yes. Coloring is the point.

Painting is to find the way of handling colors, the most direct route to soul vision. To make this route smooth, I can give up my old way of painting and choose another measure of expression. You can find in my works frank curve, edges of color gamut colliding, but nothing of an object, no explanation or narration. What I want is just handling colors in the imaginable surface layer, no symbolization or concept.

Lacquer is used in my painting as dye, and it has no special connotation in terms of material intermediary characteristics and no relation with promoting traditional Chinese soul treasure. It is just coloration in the painting process. Using lacquer to color is not from any innovative idea, but one of my experiments about how to better handling colors in painting.

Baixi: How did you manage to do that?

Xiaobai: I make use of the fluidity and smoothness of lacquer when besmearing and brushing, and the arbitrary altering between lacquer colors. Different lacquer qualities have different degrees of transparency. All these help me create a variety of ways for using colors which is impossible with other waterborne color qualities. More importantly, I hope every painting is a new beginning, with wonderful new experience. I no longer rely on description of nature, not restricted in the natural world, but focused on creating the painting. Moreover, I try every way to pursue smoothness,

simplicity, palpability in the painting, and also subtle change of colors, pure beauty and dramatics.

Baixi: I love these works of smoothness and simplicity. Do they have names?

Xiaobai: They are called "Paintings" together, but each with a different title. I seldom use "No Title" as the name of my paintings. Once without a title, the works will never have one. With a title, the works will grow up with it. The works titled "Halved Blue and Red" is really a painting with two blue and red parts. "Disappearing Blue" tells directly the color on the painting. "Three Bars of Red" is clearer at a glance. Simple description.

Bai Xi: It seems plain but actually is full of emotion, like the works itself.

Xiaobai: The distribution of colors is a pure painting space, and there is the conflict between order and confusion, passion and apartness, commonplace and smartness. The artist needs to accumulate emotion, grasp a special moment, maintain existing harmoniousness, and stimulate the confrontation which comes out gradually. The bounding of color gamut edges in the works had better be random and natural, not stiff. But this also needs luck and good mood as well.

Baixi: What a Utopia in the field of painting art.