ALMINE RECH

Su Xiaobai
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Body of Proof: The Art of Su Xiaobai

"Genuine great works are the combination of the artist and his entire life." – Su Xiaobai [1]

Su Xiaobai's mention of "the artist and his entire life" makes the specific implication that his work and life are still a work in progress. Forensic observation of Su's work cheats the viewer since it is at once intangible, reverberating and eclipsing. In his interviews and statements he is very insistent on the fact that there is no true "intent" in his work... It comes to him not as inspiration but in a state of mind that cannot be truly described. However, the works stand in and of themselves, and it is this presence which commands, which conjures our gaze. The works are evidence of themselves and demand to be considered as such.

In the beginning were the "works." Not ideas, techniques, theories or results. The artist's own words provide the only keys – seemingly hermetic, but meaningful. One must heed his cautionary comments:

"I hope there is some originality of essence in my works, which I pay attention to and am pursuing." [2]

We are in the presence of process, but not "inspiration" in the traditional sense. The works are before us in black-and-white and colour, in form and contour. Their own interactions author their own unicity, and it is Su, the intercessor, who creates context, vision and presence. Putting aside all schools and traditions, we have before us the works of an artist who is foremost that: *not* Chinese, *not* abstract, *not* alien, *not* an outsider. They are here before us to be seen.

As early as the sixth century, the portrait painter Hsieh Ho laid down one of the cornerstones of Chinese art theory. His first principle – "ch'i-yun sheng-tung" – has been reinterpreted through the ages.

"In T'ang, to judge from this passage, 'chi'-yun' applied only to images of living beings in paintings. The mention of trees and rocks seems to effectively remove landscape from this category. The 'ch'i' found in men and animals is like the Greek 'pneuma,' 'breath of life.' It can also be defined as the vitality that is a part of one's own nature. 'Yun,' overtone, here functions kinetically: 'shen-yun' can be translated as 'spirituality,' as in the passage below." [3] "'Ch'i-yun' is something less than this but more than mere vitality, since the makeup of the individual is revealed in it." [4]

This relationship of the artist, his body and presence in the execution of the works is what seems to apply in the observation of Su's work. His own existence, his "entire" or "whole" life is the essential component. Structure and composition exist not only within each work, but also in their dispersal and placement as objects in space, as the artist Su becomes a player in the "game of life."

Much has been said about Su's move to Germany, and in his own words, it was not "wandering", it was an escape. As he has so eloquently stated:

"I abhor vagrancy: art needs a fixed place." [5]

One could argue that the "place" referred to – Germany – was less a choice than a happy solution. The "otherness" of an alien country is only significant as it is elsewhere, another. "Work comes out of work," Richard Serra has stated, and it would appear that the work accomplished by Su is determinate. The balance between the actual execution, preparation, composing and waiting is an equilibrium, a perambulation between matter and space, where the artist's own body is the denominator. Again, the beating of his own heart, his own breath – all is conjoined in an instantaneous "tai chi," where the artist is inseparable from his work.

And in this sense the artist's displacement in Germany takes on its own dimension. Su seems to have entered this new geography with serenity, and he has mentioned that one landscape just replaced the other.

As far as the contrast between China and Germany goes, the human being endures the same contrast in his daily and nightly experiences. What could be more incongruous than the dream world? And how does one truly reconcile the life we live "daily" and the sleep of dreams or non dreams which resides in our consciousness? We are one and the same with our conscious and un- or subconsciousness.

Su's long stay and lasting presence in Europe have placed him securely in the greater family of artists: consider the photos of him in Germany with Georg Baselitz and in the pure, geometrical landscape of his studio. Marcus Lupertz's introductory strophes to his catalogue are moving: "May success and luck and a fugitive genius be given to the artist to enable him to sing the 'high song' of art in his own land." [6]

The entire life which also includes the concept "entire" or "whole" underlines the state of being of the artist as he works. Su has been very clear about his inspiration or lack thereof: it comes from "nowhere." One could venture to say that this "nowhere" is not even the absence described by François Cheng in his studies of Chinese aesthetics: in a word, the work comes from its own fabrication, the moment of its own concoction. Neither form nor colour seems to influence Su's choices; the works exist on their own, as a whole, defined by their own executions. As he has said:

"I no longer rely on description of nature, not restricted in the natural world, but focused on creating the painting." [7]

Chinese art from the early tenth century to the seventeenth century also displays this insistence on the technical execution of drawing, calligraphy and music, placing the subject matter on another level. From the origins in the Northern Song era (960-1127) in the writings of Su Shi (1037-1101) to the theories of Tung Ch'i-chang (1555-1636), several cases emerge. The former defined what he considered the "scholar's painting," whereas by the Ming era, Tung Ch'i-ch'ang described the "literati painting" in its traditional framework [8]. The American scholar James Cahill describes two concepts in literati theory:

1) The quality of expression in a picture is principally determined by the personal qualities of the man who creates it and the circumstances under which he creates it.

2) The expressive content of a picture may be partially or wholly independent of its representational content. [9]

Cahill develops an argument which seems to describe the "process" of Su Xiaobai in that the "artist's thought or feeling should be expressed through the brushwork and forms of painting itself and not through the subject represented." [10]

We, the viewers, are left to our own devices, but if we are true to ourselves we merely let the works penetrate us, our vision, our senses, even our sense of smell.

As Su has said:

"The artist needs to accumulate emotion, grasp a special moment, maintain existing harmoniousness, and stimulate the confrontation which comes out gradually."

In fact the mystery would still be intact if it were not for the imposing presence of these works: their reverberation. They interject, intone, and basically interfere with our own consciousness; the *there* is definitively *there*.

As described by Teng Ku, the artist becomes something other than the traditional "master." He becomes – is becoming, in his "entire" life – a working part of the huge physical world around us: his relationship with his works is fluid, growing, becoming.

"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 colouring saturation." [11]

Su pursues by describing the special milieu, the moment of tension where the artist's body and hand collude with the surface.

"In form, this is the macro environment where artists live, which is very important." [12]

Another artist, his revered predecessor Shi Tao, approaches a sense of this:

"To assume one's qualities (Chapter XVIII). The work of art does not reside in the Brush, which permits it to transmit; it does not reside in the Ink, which permits it to be perceived; it doe not reside in the Mountain, which expresses immobility; it does not reside in Water, which permits it to express movement; it doesn't reside in Antiquity, which permits it to have no limits; it doesn't reside in the Present, which permits it to exist without blinders. Also if the succession of ages is seamless, and the Brush and the Ink reside in their own permanence, it is because they are intimately penetrated by this work of art. This state is based in truth on Life Discipline: by the One, to master Multiplicity, from Multiplicity to master One. It doesn't resort to the Mountain, or to Water, or to the Brush, or to the Ink, or to the Ancients or the Moderns, or the Saints. It is in fact the veritable work of Art, that which is founded on its own substance." [13]

In Greek art between the seventh century and the fifth century there seems to be no real term for "art." It is rather a definition of the "techni" which were the actions of "demiurges," metalworkers, carpenters, etc. "Techne" also includes the magic of Hephaestus in his forge, or Proteus's charms, where beings are enchained by physical or imaginary bonds. [14]

In the classical period, however, techniques became more secular, and a distinct separation appears between the more ancient source (finding its roots in prehistoric shamanistic and magical practice) and a less religious, more natural source, "physis." [15]

It follows from the same that the professional's success resides in his technical skill, acquired through apprenticeship. This furthermore establishes his role in society. [16] Power in this context is concentrated in the hands of he who wields this mastery.

The lacquer technique, the ''physis'' of Su's painting process, embodies the double existence of its origin, one of those derived from Asian sumac (*Toxicodendron vernicifluum, or Rhus verniciflua)*. Here media and format merge. As a mimic of nature this technique serves to remind us of the core substance of art, that no matter how far one goes into the future, its roots penetrate the earth and its surrounding atmosphere, so sublimely portrayed by Bernini in his *Apollo and Daphne* in the Galleria Borghese in Rome. And man, the artist, whether he uses wood, linen, cloth or paper, has yet to escape this grounding. As an argument, photography is tied to light, and electronic arts are inseparable from physics. What we have here is presence and essence. Moreover, the artist is a moving part of the world around him, and thus the microcosm he creates is volleyed into a particular vantage point which allows him to transmit this essence to the viewer.

Li Bo expresses this fusion of man and nature in his poem “To a departing friend”:

Blue mountain caressing the northern ramparts

Clear water surrounding the eastern wall

Here we will part

You shall be grass, roving across ten thousand li [17]

Su seems to have entered this world in stealth mode. His choice of media and its final form become nuggets of truth. They are objects in space, but each one interacts with the other to create a private cosmos: objects in stasis and motion at the same time. The works are an exercise in time and time passing. The application of lacquer demands supreme patience. The passage of time becomes part and parcel of the final work. Layers of colour, traces and remains of colour interact on the surface so that the viewer is confronted with a new dimension: X-ray vision. This forensic vestige creates a novel force field: we become observers of events taking place in the distant past, just as one contemplating the night sky.

Jean Baudrillard, in discussion with Jean Nouvel [18], comments on visible objects, which “know how to make themselves invisible.”

He adds: “a successful object, in the sense that it exists beyond its own reality, is an object which creates a dual relationship, a relationship which can be created by ‘derailment,’ contradiction, destabilization, but which in fact confronts the world’s assumed reality with its radical illusion.” [19]

The post-phenomenological school of philosophy posits “Speculative Realism” as expressed by the philosopher Graham Harman. [20] He insists on the direct relationships or connectivity of objects. These relationships, which have been extended to aesthetics and artwork, shed some light on the relationship of the artwork created by Su Xiaobai. It gives a certain material power to the works and their interconnected existences.

The artist therefore becomes the “hand” that executes whereas the artworks take on characteristics of their own material essence: in this case, wood, paper, linen, flax and lacquer. [21]

One recalls Matisse’s memorable phrase: “Fig Tree, every leaf cries Fig Tree!” [22]

Each work interacts with the other, and the whole becomes an entity which must also be regarded as another “planet,” another strange land where as viewers we seek and find ourselves. Graham Harman would describe this interaction as “vicarious causation.” [23] He situates himself in a post-Heideggerian realm, where, as objects become real, “two entities influence one another only by meeting on the interior of a third where they exist side by side until something happens that allows them to interact. In a sense the theory of vicarious causation is a theory of the molten core of objects – a sort of plate tectonics of ontology.” [24]

As this author has sketched in previous papers, it seems that the natural vocabulary of animate and inanimate objects is simple: everyday life and gestures, fingerprints and footprints, all convey us down the path of appreciation, of assessment – they signify. A temporal “quantum of species,” [25] where rhythm dominates (the Greek “rhuthmo,” a characteristic arrangement of parts in a whole). Composition and style in Su’s work jump off the page and become the spatial distribution of his groups of works: there is no determinate order, but the works themselves find their own scansions, articulation and order.

The artist’s hand and his medium are drawn into this dance with nature, as is the viewer, ceaselessly.

A mere peephole into this microenvironment sends us sunbeams, the vivid light of sensation shimmering, beckoning, folding us into the passage, the ongoing flow. But the mystery persists, entire.

Sydney Picasso, April 2014

[1] In conversation with Baixi, in: Su Xiaobai, *"Intangible Greats." Works by Xiaobai Su*, Düsseldorf, 2007.
[2] Ibid.
[3] François Cheng, *Vide et plein : Le langage pictural chinois*, Paris, Seuil, 1979, p. 72. He translates the "ch'I" as "breath" and he is also the author of a volume entitled *Souffle-Esprit : Textes théoriques chinois sur l'art pictural*, Paris, Seuil, 1989.
[4] Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting*, Hong Kong University Press, 2012, p. 16. Quoting Chang Yen-Yuan, p. 14, note 25 (translation by the author, based on François Cheng in *Souffle-Vie*).
[5] With Baixi, op. cit., 2007.
[6] Ibid., 2007.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Bush, op. cit.
[9] From T'eng Ku, *T'ang Sung hui-hua-shi*, Beijing, 1958, quoted by James Cahill in Bush, op. cit., p. 2.
[10] Ibid., p. 2.
[11] Translation by the author: it would be necessary to consult the Chinese original.
[12] Op. cit., p. 161.
[13] Quoted by François Cheng, *Vide et plein*, p. 101.
[14] Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, Paris, 1965.
[15] Ibid., p. 303.
[16] Vernant, op. cit., p. 303.
[17] Li Bo, quoted by François Cheng, *L'Écriture poétique chinoise*, Paris, Seuil, p. 207.
[18] *Les objets singuliers : Architecture et philosophie*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2000.
[19] Op. cit., p 21-22.
[20] In France, Quentin Meillassoux has proposed this theory in pure philosophy regarding the relationship between objects and their immediate connections.
[21] André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le Geste et La Parole: 1. Technique et Langage, 2. Mémoire et les Rythmes*, Paris, Albin-Michel, 1964-1965.
[22] In *Jazz*, Paris, Verve, Teriade, 1947.
[23] Graham Harman, "Vicarious Causation," *Collapse II*, March 2007.
[24] Ibid., p. 190.
[25] "Quantum of Species," in *Fish Hooks of the South Pacific*, Hirmer, 2012.