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Analysis of Su Yu's Contemporary Oil Painting Style

Ziyu Liu

Abstract

In the early 1980s numerous Chinese artists began to reflect on China's cultural and social situation and express their feelings about life through their work. Thus, contemporary art in China took root. China's contemporary art initially imitated modern art in Europe and the United States, merged it with Chinese culture, and then gradually explored its own artistic traits. Contemporary art has taken root and flourished in China after nearly half a century of growth. This paper focuses primarily on the analysis of Su Yu's oil painting style and the presentation of contemporary art in his works.

Key Words

China, contemporary art, oil painting, combination, collage, re-creation

1. About Su Yu

Su Yu is a contemporary painter who stands out among his peers. Born in Shenyang, he started painting as a child and went on to attend the China Oil Painting Institute. In recent years, Su Yu has participated in numerous domestic and international exhibitions and received widespread acclaim. He is a member of the Russian Artists Association, became the featured artist at France's Bruno Massa Gallery in 2020, and has been repeatedly invited to participate in Russian and French exhibitions. With his distinctive artistic style, he has risen to prominence in the international painting community.

2. Su Yu's Artistic Characteristics

2.1 The Strong Life Breath in the Picture

Professional artists are attentive to life. Numerous artists are skilled at depicting, refining, reproducing, or expressing life in their artwork. In Su Yu's works, scenes are neither rendered realistically nor are they expressions of simple individual emotions; rather, they are filled with the contemplation of reality. He once said, "I intuitively

sense and describe the people and things around me with my eyes; The destruction of the village and Beijing's hutongs...My wife and kids frequently appear in my paintings. My paintings are somewhat sour, and the issues depicted range from my personal situation to social characteristics." His paintings are realistic and brimming with life, and they capture the daily scenes. His portraits are not far from life's emptiness, but contain the truth of flesh, blood, and soul.

The 2020 work *Breathing Heaven* (figure 1) is an example. A three or four-year-old girl wearing a white dress and standing in the lower right corner of the image of a gloomy iron gate is filled with repressed emotions. Behind the girl is her father, who is carrying food and vegetables while wearing a gas mask, but behind him are the ruins of a demolition. A cold iron gate cruelly separates them from what should be a warm setting. The child was separated from her parents before she was able to care for herself. The object in the child's hand is not a toy, but rather an infusion tube, the top of which is a blue balloon. This surreal dreamscape gives the audience a glimmer of hope and retains a trace of humanity. There

are two bats next to the balloon, providing metaphorical hints. The motorcycle on the left illustrates the living conditions of men. This painting appears realistic, but is filled with absurd meanings that provoke endless thought.

2.2 Metaphor and Irony in the Picture

Numerous works by Su Yu are replete with metaphorical symbols. Metaphor is a mode of artistic expression that typically reflects the painter's thought processes and existential queries. As painters are not politicians or philosophers, and many problems cannot be adequately expressed in words, metaphor has become an artistic means for painters to express their own views.

The Weighing Weight works by Su Yu are very intriguing. *A Steelyard* (figure 2) is one of the Weighing Weight series paintings, and the character in the painting is a self-portrait of the artist. The painter wore a white shirt and held a broken, heavy-weighted paintbrush in his hand. People who view this painting are not only perplexed by the use of brushes rather than scales, but also wonder why the brush has snapped.

The weight is a traditional Chinese measuring device

that represents the weighing standard, while the brush symbolizes art. In the modern economic society, art is also evaluated and quantified. This painting reflects the artist's perspective on the art market. Or is the painter evaluating artistic standards in his mind? Consequently, the weight has a metaphorical significance. As for the question's answer, it is not something the painter wishes to pursue. His intention is to reflect the problem and encourage audience thought.

2.3 Reference to Popular Culture and Secondary Creation

Science and technology are advancing at a rapid rate, with new technologies and art forms constantly emerging. In particular, art has undergone unprecedented changes. Prior to the 20th century, court nobles were the primary patrons of painting. At that time, painting was considered "elite art" because it served the minority. After the turn of the 20th century, elite art declined while commercial art flourished and entered everyday life.

Su Yu is not a complacent individual. Although he has excellent modeling skills, he is not limited to traditional painting. He is adept at assimilating the



Figure 1. Su Yu. *Breathing Heaven*. Oil painting on canvas, 360×220cm, 2020.

lessons of various artistic schools. This state can be clearly seen in the work *Twisted Mirror* (figure 3).

The image appropriates and combines numerous symbols of popular culture, including Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe image. Regarding this painting, Su Yu stated, "Everything in nature can be incorporated into one's own work, and I believe painting is also possible. Painting can be recreated with other works of art, so I combine oil paintings, images, magazine images, posters, and installations by Western classic masters with anything that catches my eye. This extensive use of misspellings indirectly reflects my feelings about reality! In *Twisted Mirror*, I inserted body paste from a woman into the head of a man, whose head is reminiscent of dollars and money. And the blue-haired girl transformed into Andy Warhol Monroe. This resembles commercial art as well. This money and business-driven art is trampling on genuine art. Just as Freud's fat woman was trampled underfoot and Velazquez's dwarf was bound in a picture book, the soul of artists' independent thought and creation has been trampled and bound by commerce, and the popularity of commercial art has eliminated the space for traditional art to exist. This will have a negative impact on the evolution of art, the pursuit of beauty, and even distort our values! Therefore, I adhered two mirrors, and it is evident that the image reflected by this mirror is distorted. This is without a doubt a wake-

up call for us!" Su Yu's self-report reveals his perspective on contemporary popular culture, which explains why he incorporated this cultural element into his work.

2.4 The Absurdity of the Picture

Su Yu's paintings use realistic techniques to create space and form, but they depict irrationality in environments that appear rational. This juxtaposition contributes to the absurdity of the image.

In his other paintings, *The Iceberg Melts* for instance (figure 4), it creates an absurd effect that appears real. In the picture's foreground is a svelte woman sunbathing on the sand. In terms of character modeling, it fully demonstrates Su Yu's realism. This woman symbolizes the pursuit of material pleasure by individuals. The tiger skin beneath her reflects the slaughter of animals by humans and the destruction of the natural environment by humans; melting icebergs, polar bears floating on ice, and dead penguins reflect the miserable existence of animals as a result of global warming and environmental destruction. The distant volcano signifies the impending arrival of disaster. This type of juxtaposed scene creates an extremely absurd visual effect. The picture breaks the rationality of daily life and causes the viewer to meditate, and this kind of irrationality exists everywhere in our lives.

The absurdity of Su Yu's works is distinct from



Figure 2. Su Yu. *A Steelyard*. Oil painting on canvas, 60×80cm, 2021.



Figure 3. Su Yu. *Twisted Mirror*. Oil painting on canvas, 130×150cm, 2023.



Figure 4. Su Yu. *The Iceberg Melts*.
Oil painting on canvas, 275×140cm, 2022.

that of Salvador Dali. In Dali's works, the absurdity of dreams, which is incongruous with reality, is more pronounced. In contrast, Su Yu reveals the reality of life, not the absurdity of nothingness. Concurrently, this absurdity reflects the artist's humanistic concern for an examination of the world, environment, and people. Contemporary art is not aesthetic in the conventional sense, nor is it evaluated based on whether the image is beautiful or instructive. The value of the work consists of the painter's desire to stimulate the audience's contemplation of social issues via the image.

3. The Formation of the Artist's Artistic Characteristics

The formation of a painter's artistic style is a lengthy process involving their own educational background, aesthetic preferences, personal habits, and other variables. The same is true of Su Yu, who has spent a considerable amount of time transitioning from realism to expressionism.

Su Yu received solid modeling training at the China Oil Painting Institute. In many of his works, there is a reflection of modeling ability. After that, Su Yu witnessed the demolition and construction of Beijing. At that time, Su Yu painted many pictures of Beijing's demolition in a realistic way, while at the same time depicting people's living conditions.

Survive depicts the social reality of this time. Based

on his wife, the artist depicts a young mother carrying her child through a narrow, crowded street. Every character's expression is dignified and emotionless, and they are all engaged in earning a living. The picture is boldly drawn, and the characters are summed up to illustrate the difficulties of people's lives. The title of the painting, *Survive*, accurately conveys the subject.

These depictions of life are extremely morbid. It makes individuals feel heavy. However, this is the original appearance of life and many individuals continue to live in this manner, and Su Yu used a brush to paint the social reality. Regarding the bitterness of life, Su Yu once remarked "The reality I see is tragic". I concur that art cannot alter society, much less the world. However, art resembles a person's pain response at times. "If there is no suffering, there is no soul." Life's suffering inspires artists to describe and express these themes. However, he did not exaggerate the pain, nor did he whitewash the piece, but rather accurately reflected his own feelings regarding the issue.

In *Flowers Are Crying* the author realistically depicts a prevalent social issue: the development and education of children. In China, bamboo has always been a beloved plant, as it represents integrity and gradual ascent. The blooming red flowers in the foreground represent the children's future and hope. In reality, however, parents will enroll their children in a large number of extracurricular classes, which will place them under a great deal of stress. A row of bamboo, resemb-



Figure 5. Su Yu. *No Heroes in Troubled Times*. oil on canvas, 360×200cm, 2022.



Figure 6. Su Yu. *A Silent Elegy*. Oil painting on canvas, 540×255cm, 2022.

ling a cage, encloses the children. Children who are overburdened with schoolwork have lost the time they should have spent happily playing. Consequently, the author uses *Flowers Are Crying* to demonstrate the pressure that family and society place on children.

Shi Liang, a renowned Chinese oil painter, said the following about Su Yu: “All of his works are inspired by the real world and have a credible emotional basis, but they are not cheap and world-famous whitewash and graphic reality. He respects the reality he perceives, views it as the foundation of artistic creation and expression, and controls the tone of his own art with a parallel attitude toward life, searching for artistically moving genes in everyday life.”

Su Yu has been lauded as a genius. Artistically, there are those who can make up for a lack of genius through diligence, and there are those who can reach out and grab it; he is equal parts of the two. Two years ago, Su Yu sketched at a demolition site, and that painting was completed in a single breath, his expressions both open and loose. His brushwork is smooth, the colors throughout the painting are open, and it is clear that he has become very skilled. In recent years the breadth and depth of his artistic thinking have vastly improved, as have the power, practical significance, and connotation of his works, which now encompass all aspects of life. His ability to communicate through his paintings has improved naturally due to artistic thinking and self-development, demonstrating great vitality and exuding the power of life and the vitality of hard work. Su Yu possesses faith, emotions, ideals, and a sense of duty.

He is well aware of the pitfalls and temptations on the path to art, and he has the courage to abandon current secular pursuits despite everything. He is a rare and positive active force in the current social art ecology.

In 2019, a solo exhibition of Su Yu's works depicting real life opened in Beijing to widespread acclaim. Following the solo exhibition, Su Yu reflected deeply. Once he wrote, “I can no longer paint in this manner. It remains realistic. A true artist must have his or her own face. However, I do not deny the preceding paintings in any way, only when art is recognized in a new era will it change. I am extremely confident in myself, and my talent should not be limited to merely reproducing reality.”

In recent years, Su Yu has gained a deeper comprehension of the “realistic” situation in painting. Reflection has inspired his breakthrough in painting, which has resulted in outstanding works such as *No Heroes in Troubled Times* (figure 5) and *A Silent Elegy* (figure 6). These works represent a significant departure from previous realistic themes. There have been significant shifts in the artistic cognition of artists, and confronted with the hopelessness of reality Su Yu began to use collage, misappropriation of images, and other forms to express and imply the current social problems in his work.

In *No Heroes in Troubled Times* the artist completely shattered visual relationships such as space, comparison, and conventional perspective, thereby rendering the image more liberated. On the left is a famous painting by Velazquez depicting a man riding a white horse,

and on the right is an adaptation of Michelangelo's masterpiece *Rebel Slave*. The girl in the middle wearing a long skirt is from a magazine photo, and the building in the background is a typical structure in many art districts today. These irrelevant images are combined into a single almost absurd and humorous image, but if you look closely you will notice a connection. Are the slaves wearing red shorts closed-minded or do they harbor unspeakable thoughts? Do fashionable women in art areas and magazines represent the prevalent culture of fast food? Do the distant nobility and white horses suggest the demise of classical art? In response to this series of problems, this combination of images and collages expresses the artist's inner feelings. Underneath the painter's refined exterior is a rebellious spirit in art.

Su Yu once stated that he desired to make his painting "flat performance art" and expand the possibilities of concrete painting. Instead of staying in the category of sketching and representing objective things, people and things familiar in life are rearranged and combined, and self-perception and imagination are integrated to make the picture more expansive.

In *A Silent Elegy*, the artist combined images from world-renowned painters such as Rubens and Manet with images of television sets and presenters to create a new representation. The image left a large expanse of white canvas without background color, suggesting that it is unfinished. Nonetheless, this incompleteness increases the picture's temporal and spatial breadth, and there are lingering connotations.

After extensive contemplation and artistic exploration, Su Yu's artistic style has gradually shifted from a realistic focus to an absurd and playful expression.

4. Conclusion

Su Yu's artistic creations reflect not only his individual artistic behavior, but also the exploration and efforts of contemporary art groups in China. Since the 1980s, Chinese contemporary art has been full of constant experimentation and improvement. Appropriation, mixing, and other forms have existed in European and American art circles for a long time, but this does not imply that these forms are no longer extensible. Especially in China, and in conjunction with the reality of China, these art forms have taken on new life. The vitality and innovation of contemporary Chinese art are revealed in the works of Su Yu. These issues depicted in Su Yu's paintings are issues that each of us must confront, as well as the harsh reality that humanity cannot escape. Therefore, contemporary art reflects not only the artist's personal attitude and artistic perspective, but also social responsibility, and this sense of responsibility enhances the significance of art.

SU YU (1987-), Graduated from the Chinese National Academy of Arts. Professional painter, member of Russian Artists Creation Committee. He is now the main contracted artist of Bruno Massa Gallery in France.

Editor: Wang Jingyuan

蘇宇當代藝術油畫風格分析

劉子興

摘要: 1980 年代初期, 很多藝術家開始對中國文化及社會現狀進行反思, 把對生活的感悟表現其中。由此, 中國當代藝術在中國生根發芽。中國當代藝術最初模仿歐美現代藝術, 到後來融合中國自身文化, 逐漸探索出自己的藝術特色。經歷了近半個世紀的發展, 當代藝術在中國生根發展。本文主要分析中國油畫家蘇宇的油畫風格, 探討當代藝術在其作品中的呈現。

關鍵詞: 中國; 當代藝術; 油畫; 組合; 拼貼; 二次創作