



ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal /Vol.2, No.1 Jan.-Mar, 2024

Touch: Chinese Abstract Morphological Expressionism in Yu Zhenli's Works

Liu Xiaochun

To cite this article: Liu Xiaochun, "Touch: Chinese Abstract Morphological Expressionism in Yu Zhenli's Works," *Art Frontier* 2, no.1 (March 2024): 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.64212/PQSL6974>.

DOI: 10.64212/PQSL6974

ISSN: 2835-5490

EISSN: 2836-841X

© 2024 Frontier Press.

This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). For full license details, please visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

Website: www.artfrontier.org

Email: artfrontier2023@outlook.com

Publishing Frequency: Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



Touch: Chinese Abstract Morphological Expressionism in Yu Zhenli's Works

Liu Xiaochun

Chinese abstract morphological expressionism and abstract expressionism are essentially the same in terms of the direct correspondence between the brushstroke and

the artist's inner emotions, and the process of heaping, scraping, picking, and smearing represents the unfolding of the artist's spirit. The significant difference between



Figure 1. Yu Zhenli. *High Tide* (《高潮》). Oil on canvas, 100×80cm, 1988.



Figure 2. Yu Zhenli. *Dot and Stroke Realism Series No. 23* (《點化具象系列 23 號》). Mixed media, 61×61cm, 1989.



Figure 3. Yu Zhenli. *Birthday Memo Series No. 46* (《生日手記系列 46 號》). Mixed media, 66×80cm, 1990.

the two lies in cultural disparities. The difference is very distinct when comparing Yu Zhenli's abstract art with the representative artist of Western abstract expressionism, De Kooning. The variation is primarily due to cultural diversity. One's works are sharp, intense, poignant and tragic, while the others are vague, distant, ethereal, and transcendent.

Yu Zhenli's exploration of abstract art began in 1981, and in April 1989, at the "Oil Painting Exhibition of Eight Artists" held at the National Art Museum of China, his expressionist works were concluded with *Women at a Wedding Banquet* (《吃喜酒的女人》). Three small paintings from the exhibition—*Schema* (《圖式》), left a deep impression on me. These works extracted a portion of *Women at a Wedding Banquet* and served as a forerunner and progenitor for subsequent abstract explorations, providing a simple and powerful language and spiritual foundation. The distinctive marks of carved

brushstrokes, with a central depression and peripheral protrusions, were already evident. After the transitional period of the *Dot and Stroke Realism* (《點化具象》) series from 1989 to 1990, Yu Zhenli created the *Birthday Memo* (《生日手記》) series from 1991 to 1993. His artistic direction completely shifted towards abstract art. In March 1993, his *Birthday Memo* series was officially exhibited for the first time at a solo exhibition at the National Art Museum of China. It became one of the few abstract solo exhibitions in the country at that time.

Around this transition, Yu Zhenli conducted ruthless self-analysis, calling it "the most important life-death cycle." "The first cycle was to seek guidance from the West, and the second cycle was to seek the way on my native soil independently."

"I chose to take my own life as a means to counter the 'fire (火)' and 'restlessness (燥)' of expressionism with the Eastern concept of profound tranquility and vast



Figure 4. Yu Zhenli. *Birthday Memo Series No. 60* (《生日手記系列 60 號》). Mixed media, 80×100cm, 1991.

vitality.”

“In the first half of 1989, there was still a batch of restless abstract works, but later I became increasingly disgusted with these paintings, and almost all of them were destroyed. Influenced by Laozi and Zhuangzi, I gradually calmed down, discarded all desires, and even abandoned the external ambitions of achieving greatness in art. I started working as a laborer, and as a mason, and I felt that there was a very real and important task to be done there. New life starts from the root, and the root starts from the point. The movement of the point becomes a stroke, so I called it the *Dot and Stroke Realism* series.”

“At the end of 1988, I was injured in all my internal organs, but in the firecrackers on New Year’s Eve of 1989, I got better. My joy was not only in my physical recovery, but more importantly, I removed the root cause of my cancer—‘expression’ by my hand in oblivion.”

This means that it is not only a transformation of the artistic concept towards abstraction, but also a shift in the cultural spirit. Yu Zhenli had been searching between Eastern and Western cultures until this point, when the cultural spirit truly shifted from the critical consciousness and tragic spirit of Western culture to the reclusive attitude and transcendent sentiment of Chinese culture such as the I-Ching, the philosophers Laozi and Zhuangzi, and Zen.

The so-called “retirement from the world” is merely understood as not contending with the world, being content with whatever happens, not being stained by worldly matters, and forgetting earthly troubles, which does not constitute the great retirement. Such small retirements are at the lower physical level, often weak in momentum and declining in vitality. The spirit of retirement accommodated by the orthodox culture of the Ming and Qing dynasties was often of this type. The so-



Figure 5. Yu Zhenli. *Schema Series I-1* (《圖式系列 1-1》). Mixed media, 22.5×16.3cm, 1990.



Figure 12. Yu Zhenli. *Touching the Sacred Image No. 5* (《觸摸聖像 5》). Mixed media, 180×162cm, 1994.

called great retirement refers to what Wang Guowei (王國維) called “not truly retiring from the world.” Wang Guowei’s statement comes from *Collected Works of Jing’an, Continued Compilation* (《靜庵文集續編》), where he believed that before the Spring and Autumn period, there were two schools of thought in the Chinese intellectual community: the Northern and Southern schools. “The former was the school of engagement with the world, while the latter was the school of retirement from the world. The former was characterized by passion, while the latter was characterized by indifference. The former focused on the state, while the latter focused on the individual. The former reached its peak with Confucius and Mozi, while the latter reached its peak with Laozi.” Wang Guowei provided a deep explanation of the retirement from the world school, stating that “it was not a true retirement from the world, but rather a recognition that their ideals could not be fully realized in society and thus they retreated from it... Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Liezi were exemplars of this school.” He further explained that the ideals of the Northern School were placed in the society of the day, while the ideals of the Southern School were outside the society of the day. In other words “the ideal of the Northern school was about

transforming the existing society, while the ideal of the Southern school was about creating a new society outside of the existing one.” The so-called great retirement refers to this powerful, metaphysical, and transformative spirit of retirement.

When discussing Wu Wei (non-action, 無為), misunderstandings about Laozi and Zhuangzi stem from this concept. Laozi and Zhuangzi, like Nietzsche and Heidegger, were deeply concerned with the fate of humanity. They were proactive and progressive; it’s just a matter of yin (陰) and yang (陽). Wu Wei is a condensed form of non-action, yet anything is done (無為而無不為), and its essence is following the natural way (道法自然).

Wang Wei (王維), Ni Zan (倪瓚), Shi Tao (石濤), and Zhu Da (朱耷) constitute the tradition of “Non-Truly Retiring from the World (非真遁世)” in Chinese painting. This kind of Non-Truly Retiring from the World is an extreme pursuit of enlightenment, a detachment from worldly attachments, a recognition of the limitations of personal endeavors, a profound engagement with the world while transcending its emptiness, and a realization that all aspirations are ultimately empty. This paradox can be understood as awakening over time and a state of

outward tranquility and inward dynamism in the present.

There are now quite a few painters in China, India, and other East Asian countries aware of the differences between Eastern and Western cultures and who pursue the cosmic atmosphere and the imagery of heaven and earth. However, most are generic, with a uniformity of simple, elegant, ethereal, and vague styles. The key to Yu Zhenli's escape from generality is that he uses his own methods. Art should be practiced through methods to reach the Dao; speaking of the Dao without methods is deceitful. The so-called generality (泛泛) refers to a hollow, conformist, and talkative painting that lacks a unique style and claims to represent the union of man and nature.

Yu Zhenli's starting point for establishing his style is touch—emphasizing the materiality, solidity, and tactile sensation of the brush and oil paint as they are applied. As he said “I call my dots and lines ‘figurative (具象)’ and ‘traces (跡)’”, which means just that. Expressionist art sees the brush and knife as an expression of the soul, but I view the brush and knife as a tangible reality. My works are a form of realism with a different meaning. Traces are objects, psychophysical objects, real and tangible objects that embrace the heavens and the earth, transformed from worry, anxiety, suffered, and ecstatic joy.” This concept is not unique to Yu Zhenli. In the mid-to-late twentieth century, there was a trend in Europe and America called material painting. Material painting accepted the idea of material autonomy. Still, it did not fully shift to mixed materials. It existed on the edge of painting, with an artistic concept based on the dual autonomy of form and material. It emphasized the spiritual perception of light, color, points, lines, planes, volumes, and spatial structures and a deep understanding of integrated materials, existing items, use of brushes and oil paints, heaping, scraping, picking, and smearing. Artists such as Jean Fautrier (France), Philippe Hosiasson (France), Emil Schumacher (Germany), Al Held (USA), Jules Olitski (USA), Larry Poos (USA) and the most familiar one, Antoni Tàpies (Spain), advocated for painting as a tangible object or asserted their realism, emphasizing their objective authenticity. Yu Zhenli's technique of using plaster, talc, marble dust, starch powder, and white glue to create raised textures, using both water and oil to create blotchy marks, and repeatedly painting, sanding, and scraping is something that many of these artists have experimented with. The difference between them is that Yu Zhenli added ink.

The biggest difference between Yu Zhenli and the material painting movement lies in his stronger emphasis on the painterly quality of his works. His style can be seen as a Chinese abstract morphological



Figure 6. Yu Zhenli takes a photo with his own artwork at the exhibition in 1994.

expressionism based on materiality. He calls his works *Birthday Memo* because every mark created through heaping, scraping, picking, and smearing is a personal record left by his inner self. Each artwork has a distinct appearance with different moods, and each series of works represents a different stage. In his view, drawing and painting on the canvas is like writing a diary—a concrete and authentic record of life. As the form becomes more solid, the spirit becomes more lively. Therefore, he states “From nothingness comes existence, form gives rise to life, essence emerges from form; essence is born from nature, nature is born from the soul, the soul exists within the celestial mind, and the celestial mind arises from the subliminal. The heart and traces merge into one, manifesting the grand Dao. The artist is a devoted custodian of these traces. Genuine traces can be observed from a distance, touched closely, contemplated in the vastness, evoked in meaning, perceived mysteriously, and stored in thoughts.”

In 1994, Shui Tianzhong hosted the “Annual Nomination Exhibition of Art Critics (1994 • Oil Painting)” at the National Art Museum of China, where Yu Zhenli's work *Touching the Sacred Image* (《觸摸聖像》) was showcased as a representative piece. This



Figures 7, 8, 9. Yu Zhenli. *The Semantics of Brush and Ink Series No. 1, No. 2, No. 3* (《筆墨語義 1, 2, 3》). Mixed media, 162×60cm×3, 1999.

work was based on a small painting, measuring 22×28 cm from 1993, and was enlarged to create five identical paintings measuring 162×180 cm (four of which were exhibited at the time). The paints used were primarily gray paste powder, mixed with others, resulting in a gray tonal scheme; the brushwork often involved scraping and smearing, causing the center to be concave and the edges to be raised; the paste powder was like mud and was often applied with arm movements, thus creating a harmonious and rich texture with speckles; the composition often utilized large brushes as the basic framework, seeking richness within simplicity.

His unique mud-wall plastering work style not only forms his unique artistic style, but also shapes his unique artistic concept—touch. When he said “touch, clarify, feel, and interact (觸澄摸親)” in 1993, he referred to the touch sensation of the paintings, the affinity for the material properties during the creation process, and the state of clarity in the integration of self and objects. In

1994, he used *Touching the Sacred Image* as the title of his painting, indicating that Yu Zhenli was further obsessed with the state of self-object integration and entered a state of reverence for the unity of heaven, Dao, mind, and matter. His use of heaping, scraping, picking, and smearing is a way to touch the oil paint and adhesive powder, creating an image through pushing and smearing. This image is neither a reproduction nor a simulation, so the elephant is invisible but exists with substance, qualities, faith, and truth. As Laozi said, “The Dao that becomes a thing is always elusive. Elusive and obscure, within it, there are forms; obscure and elusive, within it, there are things. Deep and elusive, within it, there is essence; the essence is extremely true; within it, there is faith. (道之為物，惟恍惟惚。惚兮恍兮，其中有象；恍兮惚兮，其中有物。窈兮冥兮，其中有精；質精甚真，其中有信。)” It is difficult to name this state, so it is called “Touching the Sacred Image.”

“Learning from the external, finding the source with-



Figure 10. Yu Zhenli. *Rainbow Series* (《彩虹系列》). Mixed media, 45×45cm, 2000.

in the heart (外師造化，中得心源),” this also applies to abstract art. His paintings’ sense of ancient walls and ruins is derived from the resonance between his heart and the objects. He said “Whether it is natural objects or ancient relics, after being immersed in nature’s forces for many years, they evoke many emotions in people. I once painted a portrait of a deceased person, and upon seeing the empty furniture and old walls in the vacant home, I felt an indescribable melancholy and emptiness. When I was 20 years old, I dug burial pits for a class education exhibition, and the soil pits, coffins, human bones, and remnants of hair all shook me to the core. The

urinal alkali in the bathroom is natural; it also records life and is so real. My father lost his eyesight and relied on his hands to feel and explore. His spirit greatly influenced me, and I deeply experienced the meaning of walls to him. I emphasize the tangible reality of my works as if they possess my father’s spirit. I feel that the remnants of the soul in the artwork are the most authentic. Besides, we do not know much more than the blind.”

Chinese culture and Western modern art have many similarities. The modern exploration of artists like van Gogh, Matisse, Hofmann, Sourassi, Mathieu, Bichel,



Figure 11. Yu Zhenli was creating works in the *Rainbow Series*, 1999-2000.

Toby, Tomlin, and Tapiès was once inspired by Eastern culture. Some were extremely fascinated by calligraphy and Zen Buddhism. There is no reason not to develop our modern art from our roots and the land. I pin my hopes on modern Zhuang-Zen philosophy because it has great potential to complement Western modern philosophy; it can be seen as a form of modern or natural religion.

Yu Zhenli has established his independent artistic concepts from self-expression to touching icons. His series of works such as *Shadows•Pythagorean•Copy* (《光影·勾股玄·拷貝》) in 1997, the *Rainbow* (《彩虹》) series in 2000, the *Turning Stone into Gold* (《點石成金》) series in 2003, and the *Rising* (《昇華》) series in 2007, as well as his recent creation of the *Five Elements* (《五行》) series, are all extensions of his

Chinese abstract morphological expressionism with the concept of touch as the independent idea.

LIU XIAOCHUN (1941-2020) was born in Luoyang, Henan Province. He graduated from the Art History Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1966, and graduated from the graduate Department of the Chinese National Academy of Arts in 1981 and 1985, with master and Doctor degrees in fine arts. He was the editor of the *Art Magazine*, editor-in-chief of the *China Art Newspaper*, Member of the Theory Committee of China Artists Association, Researcher of Fine Arts Research Institute, Chinese National Academy of Arts.

[Yu Zhenli Art Museum provides the article]
Translators and editors: Li Yang, Gao Pengfei