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Constantly Searching

Shui Tianzhong

Yu Zhenli is an artist who keeps exploring and progressing. While he developed an alienated attitude from the dominant fashion of Chinese art, he always remembered the changing environment where he found himself as an artist. Artistically, Yu Zhenli is interested in the changing social structure and he contemplates the trends of cultural development. Although the ripples of his thinking often manifest in highly individualistic and metaphysical forms, his ongoing reflection and response to artistic trends and his artistic state of mind are quite robust. The breadth and depth of Yu's thinking are also remarkable among contemporary Chinese artists.

In the 1970s, the initial step in Yu Zhenli's artistic

career was the creation of political propaganda posters. These paintings, not signed by their authors, had no merit in terms of emotional content and political orientation, which was also represented in the common style of all artworks of the time. Yu Zhenli's propaganda paintings are characterized by their ability to find and exploit the contagious power of the painting language in an extremely limited artistic world. He dealt with dull political tasks using artistic vision and contagious means. For example, his usage of the overall tonal variations of the painting, his focus on the terminator, etc., were distinct from other propaganda works at that time. Many artists who lived at the time did not know the author of



Figure 1. Partial view of the installation work at Yu Zhenli Studio. Polaroid 600 film, Photographed by Zhu Lizige, November 5, 2023.



Figure 2. Exterior view of Yu Zhenli Studio. Polaroid 600 film, photographed by Zhu Lizige, November 5, 2023.



Figure 3. Exterior view of Yu Zhenli Studio. Photographed by Zhu Lizige, November 6, 2023.

these propaganda paintings but were impressed by the forms and effects in them.

Calligraphic abstract paintings indicated the intermediate stage of Yu Zhenli's art. Before his abstract paintings, other painters had experimented with abstract painting. However, most of them were inspired by early Western abstract painting or American abstract expressionist painting. Yu Zhenli investigated the rhythms and imagery of Chinese culture in abstract forms. The hazy symbols, dark colors, and thick textures of the materials recalled the world's most ancient monuments. Yu Zhenli's living nature inclined him to movement and strength, while his immersion in the metaphysics of Laozi and Zhuangzi gave his abstract paintings a calm and secluded atmosphere. In the secular world, his cultural attitude was apparently at odds with the circumstances of the socialist market economy. This is exactly what Yu Zhenli did.

The construction of Yu Zhenli's studio in the suburbs of Dalian demonstrated the transformation, deepening, completion of his artistic vision; it marked the completion

stage of Yu Zhenli's art.

Some have described Yu Zhenli's studio building as a social sculpture, but I think it goes beyond the realm of social sculpture in terms of form and cultural connotation. Since the artistic trend in the twentieth century, artists engaged in creation, architecture, or construction realized their aspirations and ideals about the environment, which was a way of life and an attitude. This attitude and way of life are different from the mundane and are often a challenge to it as a way of showing adherence to one's artistic beliefs and ideals. Chinese and Western thinkers have suggested how one should live and experience life. Familiar Chinese thinkers such as Lao Zhuang, as well as Confucianism, had a kind of approach they preached but failed to put into practice. We know well Tao Yuanming, for example, who returned to his long-existing but alienated home; Bai Juyi and Su Dongpo who asked someone to build their houses in the strange land and endowed them with a certain poetic feeling; Fan Kuan left the city and entered the mountains to observe the landscape. The views of late Western thinkers in this



Figure 4. The bottle installation on the hillside of Yu Zhenli Studio. Photographed by Zhu Lizige, November 6, 2023.

regard have been focused on by modern Chinese, i.e., Heidegger's "Poetically, man dwells on this earth" and so on. This is historically related to what Yu Zhenli was doing, yet different. He integrated the construction of his flat on the Dahei Mountain into his series of artistic creations. The studio, which stands on the mountain, represents a new face and phase of his artistic creation.

Yu Zhenli's studio is reminiscent of the apartments built by the Austrian artist Baishui (Friedensreich Hundertwasser; Baishui is the translation of his name by the Austrian Chinese), not in form but in intent—both are designed to break the general rules regarding architectural function and practicality, and to put individual artistic style and personality into it. Many original, objective, or traditionally established architectural rules were broken, making the most commonplace dwelling of human beings, the house, become strange, and turning the living space into an artistic act that can be viewed, reflected on, discussed, and even criticized. This is also the case with the Sagrada Familia Church in Barcelona, designed by Gaudi. The builders were heavily and excessively decorative, and the excess decoration turned a functional building into an artwork with more style than content.

Another curious building in Vienna is the church designed by the Austrian sculptor Fritz Wotruba—the Wotruba Church. He built the church on a hillock on the outskirts of Vienna in the form of stacked prefabricated panels. Wotruba used one hundred and fifty huge stone cubes to stack it up. On the day of the church's consecration, there was a national outcry that it was a

waste of national resources and a desecration of sacred religious culture. Now, decades later, the building is a fascinating attraction in Vienna and many people come from far and wide to see it. Locals believe it shows that "as Austrians, we are not dull, we have our creative side".

The Hundertwasser (Baishui) apartment in Vienna is not the same as Yu Zhenli's studio, which is an artist's studio compared to a private apartment. The Baishui apartment is rich in form, as is a painter's habit, putting different colors into each window, dwelling, and door. It sacrificed the convenience and practicality of the building for the sake of showing the painter's artistic personality. Baishui makes slopes out of what would otherwise be very flat ground, pads out the height of a porch that could go straight in, and plants trees that should grow outdoors indoors. He sacrifices the convenience and practicality of the building for the sake of showing his artistic personality. The commonality is the excessive ornamentation of the building façade, which is covered with various patterns. The artist always wanted to give his buildings more decoration than the usual architectural forms, like treating his work. The architecture from Baishui is more plastic and artistic with blocks of vivid color and sculptures (or quasi-sculptures) of all sizes inside and outside the house. Yu Zhenli blended the colors of his painting into architecture. Standing outside his studio in Daheishan, I feel as if I am confronted by Yu Zhenli's abstract paintings, rustic, brutal, and richly subtle, with a great intensity of expression that does not hinder the subtlety of artistic sense.

Yu Zhenli introduced environmental issues and abuse of the earth's resources by people in this building through waste items and discarded building materials. He used the collected waste building materials, industrial waste, and everyday packaging materials as masonry to bring attention back to what people have discarded. In this way, questions occurred. What right does man have to corrupt natural resources in such a way? Is the reckless squandering of natural resources a necessity of our existence?

Yu Zhenli's building merits discussion on several points. First of all, it is a protest against the Chinese people, against the reality of the situation that contemporary Chinese people have lost their living space. Some time ago we read in the newspapers that the authorities announced that people bought cemeteries with only twenty years of use, not to mention your own house! Yu Zhenli's building is located deep in the mountains away from the city, and at the moment seems remote. But at the rate at which China's cities



Figure 4. The bottle installation on the hillside of Yu Zhenli Studio. Photographed by Zhu Lizige, November 6, 2023.



Figure 6. Yu Zhenli's painting studio. Photographed by Zhu Lizige, November 5, 2023.

are developing, I'm worried for him, not knowing when any of the city leaders, or any of the developers with the ability to do so, will inform him that his Daheishan studio will only provide twenty years of use for him, counting the time to relocate. Something as discouraging as this is entirely possible, and that gloomy possibility is what makes the socio-cultural significance of his artistry all the more apparent. For several years, his lonely labor in the mountains was a protest against the realities of the Chinese environment, and this is something that deserves our attention.

Secondly, his architecture is a warning and a salvation to the deterioration of the whole environment in China. The original act of the artist does not help the deterioration of the environment as a whole, but after all, he has raised it and made his voice heard.

Furthermore, this represents a major step forward in his artistic development process. Yu Zhenli has stepped out of the realm I was once familiar with, with a spirit of perseverance. Not only has he taken Chinese contem-

porary art a step further but he has also raised a big question for Chinese architects and urban planners. The peculiar studio he built with his own hands will be a boundary marker around which those who come after him will not be able to go.

[Yu Zhenli Art Museum provides the article]

Editors: Li Yang, Liu Kexin