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Traces: The Whisper of Art's Presence

Yu Zhenli

Footprints are the traces of life, which acquire meaning as one walks. The patterns created after serene contemplation are also expressions of the heart's journey. The journey finds harmony in the celestial realm, where the unity of all things is reflected. What indeed remains, echoing the essence of nature, is the subtle whisper of art. It is the encounter after mutual abrasion with the stone.

I

Existence is the birthplace of the art of painting; it emerges from events and is both natural and the essence of existence. It reveals the reality of traces, the “substance” formed from dust accumulation in the chaos-turned-orderly space-time. In the valley of the beginning of chaos and silence, it is the void giving birth to Tai Chi, Tai Chi giving birth to Yin and Yang, and the traces of the Purple River rotating after the initial point is opened. It is the breakthrough, the occasional discovery, hope, signal pointing, fear, dissipating mirror, expectation, extinction, and a series of processes born in the visualization of patterns in time and space. It is not the lyrical sentiment expressed under the brush of literati's calligraphy and painting. It is not the “stream of consciousness”, the dryness of “deep psychology”, the loneliness of life, or the practical emotions of despairing noise from the closed and resistant natural environment found in French and German Expressionism and Neo-expressionism. Nor is the passing revealed by Jackson Pollock and Willem de

Kooning's self-indulgent construction of guided effects. While Antony Tapies approaches it, he still engages in awkward manipulation with ready-made and painting materials as objects, rather than measuring the carrier volume of the painting itself as “All for one and one for all” (everyone works together as a whole), assuming a rhythmic resonance with the environment through “one's own”! It refers to life's “He is full, and not able to stop. (彼其充實, 不可以已。)” as art, “Heaven and earth coexist with me, and all things are one with me. (天地與我並生, 萬物與我為一。)” The surviving function of painting, which communicates with heaven and earth alone, carries the accurate information of the state of traces—observable, touchable, generative of meaning, retentive of thought, evocative of floating thoughts, visible in the profound, and touchable by the divine—this unity of the three elements into one, is the heartbeat, the yearning, and the traces left behind, akin to “The slightest profit is greater than that of the horse. (毫末之在於馬體乎。)” Individual lives are fleeting. In contrast, the cosmic life is ceaseless (from my article “The Ocean's Conscious Choice” in the first issue of the 1987 *Art Magazine*). The truth is that artists cannot get caught up in the “polluted flow” but rather remain impartial, embracing the opening of myriad sounds into one. It is like a vague journey through eternity—moments, strings, absences, darkness, epochs—the subtle mechanics melding everything into one. It is where brushstrokes and colors become entities, transforming endlessly without



Figure 1. Yu Zhenli. *Shadows • Pythagorean • Copy Series No. 7* (《光影 · 勾股玄 · 拷贝7号》). Mixed media, 80×65cm, 1997.

discernible beginning or end, flowing freely like a child's play, the flow of energy unobstructed, the natural

manifestation of the elements in the traces left on earth—indeed, artists are devout guardians of these traces.



Figure 2. Yu Zhenli. *Void Genesis Series No. 7* (《空始系列 7 號》). Mixed media, 90×90cm, 2001.

II

The unity of traces and heart is the essence of Eastern art, where the continuous flow of the heart's traces is like an electrocardiogram of postnatal joy, sorrow, preference, and happiness, manifesting a transparent and illuminated state of mind. It is like discussing the liver and gallbladder of the same body through the lens of different objects, leaving behind sensory perceptions, repeating endlessly, achieving excellence naturally, originating from the place of naturalness without seeking an end, free

from clinging, relinquishing personal biases, returning to the natural state, where one sees without seeing, hears without hearing, and touches without grasping, embodying the traces of the “simple”, “rare”, and “subtle” atoms that fill the vast universe—this is the essence of things. In the realm of existence, there is the existence of non-being; from non-being arises form; from form arises essence; essence arises from nature; nature stems from the soul; soul resides in the celestial heart; the heavenly heart is born from the dimness; that is, the vastness of emptiness generates the essential traces of the divine,

perceivable by the vigilant and law-abiding spirit. The exercise of pushing, pulling, holding, loathing, dwelling, confronting, scattering, splashing, pouring, grinding, rubbing, dyeing, and painting within the framework of “Fangdi (《方地》)” by the artist is an embrace of the Tao, an intimate embrace of the way of heaven. It is the initiation of myriad sounds from the blank canvas, where the three meridians, twenty-eight meridians, and over eight thousand pores converge into one breath—the harbinger of unveiling, the agent of embodiment. The essence of Eastern art, where traces and hearts are unified, lies in “guarding the darkness”—revealing within the extreme of emptiness, the “spirit” of “existence”, the trace of “knowing white (知白)” —traces of emptiness and existence, known as the “Mysterious Feminine Portal (玄牝門)”, traces of “effortless utilization (用之不勤)”, akin to the vast and profound mystery of the universe, is also the self’s perception, not the two-dimensional ink traces of calligraphy, nor the brushwork of literati, nor the various old and new “doctrines” of the world.

“Traces” are the material of things, the material of the heart, the favored material of the artist, which is transformed into a divine exercise in the square fabric of heaven, as if robbed. It is like seven rising and eight descending, like the harmonization of the five tones, like the cycle of six movements and seven returns, like the return to the beginning from the ninefold. The scene recorded the actual traces of the objects after the natural and tangible calamities—reflections of the calamities where the body’s qi merges with myriad sounds. They are the new objects after the artist’s actions, not abstract objects accumulated from ready-made materials, but purely metaphysical objects derived from actions themselves. It is the substance of worries, anxieties, and ecstatic joys transformed into a tranquil refuge for the heart. It is the solidified shackles of the gathering spirits and souls—a tangible trace of solace for the afflicted heart, possessing the divine essence of closeness, discernment, and touch. The falseness of the artificial mountain lies in its human-made construction. In contrast, the names of the sculptures atop the artificial mountain appear clumsy—the true essence of traces from naturally formed and divinely formed objects is the tangible manifestation of the unity of the three elements. The post-heaven Bagua diagram of King Wen of Zhou is precisely designed with the anxious and worried human as its main subject, with “change” as its essence. For instance, “Three” symbolizes the Three Realms of Heaven, Earth, and Man, with Tai Chi representing “Oneness”. Though unified as “One”, it utilizes “Two” and other “numbers” within the realm of “reason”,

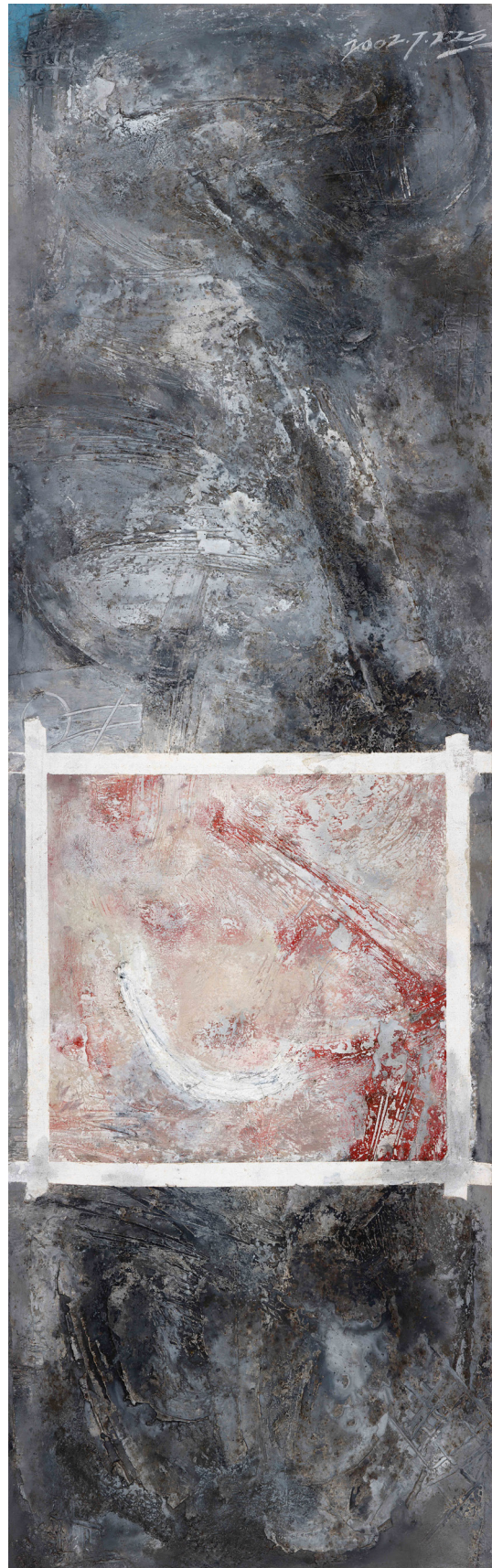


Figure 3. Yu Zhenli. *Water from the Sky No.1* (《天上之水1》). Mixed media, 290×90cm, 2002.



Figure 4. Yu Zhenli. *Changmeng Series II, No. 6* (《暢夢系列之二 6 號》). Mixed media, 120×98cm, 2005.

symbolizing generation, conquest, and fusion—all phenomena are precisely the opportunities generated by artists. Within the vagueness and obscurity, darkness

and dimness, the traces of celestial music, emerging, perceiving, clarifying, and enlightening, free from worldly dust, come into being.



Figure 5. Yu Zhenli. *Mengliu Series No. 3* (《梦留 3 号》). Mixed media, 90×90cm, 2011.

III

Traces subtly whispering—the entropy of matter—the state of fire overcoming wood returning to earth—art is the kingdom of metal—witnessing the trace of the embodiment. On the table, a box of cigarette ash and a photo of the ancient city of Jiaohe, fragments of shale collected from the Hongshan, hanging on the wall, a tanned leather, soaked with ink, in a state of empty stomach and lost appetite, unable to grasp the footprints of the past, the razor blade, with its head broken and rusted, all reveal themselves silently amidst the wander-

ing of the divine past. It is a panoramic view of the cycle returning to unity, an occasional trace of the virtual body in regeneration. Its tranquility guards the truth, elucidating the five elements of existence: birth, death, passage, superficiality, and life. That is, the beginning and the end lie in the earth, the existence of traces, the structure of the universe formed from countless dust particles, the transformation of “one qi (一氣)” permeating through the pores of dust, and the “the benevolent virtue’s countenance” as the way. This way is precisely the wandering of the human heart’s trace of qi. Moreover, the Earth is just a speck of dust in the



Figure 6. Yu Zhenli. *Blossom No. 6* (《綻放6》). Mixed media, 90×90cm, 2013.

grand scheme of things. This unchanging dust allows the universe to thrive endlessly. Why shouldn't I wander within it? This wandering is precisely the embodiment of wandering; in what form has the self already wandered? It should be said that this wandering is the momentary transformation of five thousand years of past and future into one instant; it is now, wandering among things, i.e., with things—rather than between being and non-being, it is it, it is already, it is the embodiment of the virtual traces of all things. In traditional Eastern art painting, “guarding emptiness” pursues emptiness and vacuity. On fragile paper, with simple ink, it aims to achieve an ethereal and free-flowing appearance akin to the contemporary expressionism of Germany and France. However, it only reaches surface appearances rather than embodying the essence of the traces of reality, as mentioned earlier—those tangible traces that one can truly see, hear, and touch—traces of things with thickness, quantity, and substance, resembling soil that can be grasped. For thousands of years, literati have discussed “tranquility” and “spiritual elevation” without fundamentally understanding the spirit of the art of joyous land, represented by Laozi, which embodies the concept of “the great Dao”—the greatness resembling distance and the distance corresponding passing away, leaving behind the tangible traces of transformation into divine essence. Although it does not manifest in the grandeur of a roc spreading its wings nine thousand miles wide and three thousand miles long, it is by no means a demeanor of a sparrow or an appearance of an insect! Western watercolor painting cannot compare to oil



Figure 7. Yu Zhenli. *Blossom No. 7* (《綻放7》). Mixed media, 90×90cm, 2013.

painting, mainly due to its smaller size and scope (here, referring to the volume and magnitude of the artwork). Although the “bone and brush technique” in literati painting embodies objects and forms, it focuses more on depicting the subjects’s spiritual essence. In contrast, it fails to fully utilize the physical materials and their potential expressiveness in art, thus unable to leave behind substantial tangible traces like Western oil paintings do. “Emphasize the substantial, not the superficial; dwell in the essence, not the embellishments.” Emphasizing the powerful, the real, the presence of tangible traces in material beauty within the realm of art is the true essence of artistic works, which represents the ultimate expression of Chinese art and is the “blank space” of Eastern art.

IV

There is no communication, no separation; things meet things—the illusion of traces from the time of primordial chaos—“when the primal breath blends as one. (冲氣以為合。)” The “qi” and “things” connect, recognizing that to respect humans is to respect things, which is to respect oneself, the beginning and end of playing with oneself. The seventy-sixth chapter of Laozi speaks of “the soft and weak in life, yet strong in death (人生之柔弱，其死堅強)” which stems from the reverence and playfulness expressed earlier in “softness conquers hardness (柔克剛)”, respecting the natural existence of strength, overcoming strength, being harmed by strength, and harming oneself. The principle of subtraction and addition



Figures 8, 9, 10. Yu Zhenli. *The 12 Solar Terms 1-1, 1-2, 1-3* (《十二節氣 1-1, 1-2, 1-3》). Mixed media, 270×81cm×3, 2021.

lies in preserving the essence, leaving behind traces as thick as flowing water and as dynamic as fire, with the interplay of Yin and Yang, the rise and fall of forces, and the harmonious blending of sound and silence. Here, the “process” and the “substance” are precisely the subject’s on-site recording in reverently playing with materiality. Therefore, art is the realization of self in reverence and playfulness. “Playing with materiality is respecting materiality; respect is inherent in play, inseparable from play; respect and play are one, and no one is inherently

separate” (words from a letter by Liu Xiaochun). The nurturing of heaven and earth occurs within the strokes of the brush and the strokes of the pen, in “playing with materiality to find joy, to find oneself, to find the divine.” As Confucius wisely said, “The skilled swimmer often forgets the water. (善遊者數能, 忘水也。)” In reverently playing, one forgets body and mind as if gliding effortlessly.

Here is the soul-returning diagram of Eastern abstract art—reverence arises from playing with things, and



Figures 11, 12, 13. Yu Zhenli. *The 12 Solar Terms 1-4, 1-5, 1-6* (《十二節氣 1-4, 1-5, 1-6》). Mixed media, 270×81cm×3, 2021.

playing is being within things yet transcending them. “Existence and non-existence blend harmoniously; The universe is born from the eternal void. Silent, solitary, standing alone, Unchanging, circulating endlessly, It can be regarded as the mother of the universe. (有無混成，先天地生，寂兮寥兮，獨立而不改，周行而不殆，可以為天地母。)” Further illustrates that the profound accumulation of traces is boundless. What kind of Dao can produce corresponding works? The painting of the

pure and pristine virtual body inherently remains unaltered. Birth and extinction are natural, and solidifying within the void is precisely the manifestation of the dissipation of “qi”. Eastern ink paintings can embody thick traces—the true traces of material forms, while Western oil paintings can also attenuate forms to depict the traces of the true materiality, integrating the essences of both water and oil. Few rare masters in the West, such as De Kooning, come close to the true essence of Eastern

art, which can be likened to the “mother of heaven and earth”. Those who attempt to ignore the inherent materials and instead twist them into various patterns on the “independent and unchanged realm” of painting are akin to playing a different game—not one of reverence, but somewhat akin to attempting to play volleyball and soccer simultaneously on a soccer field.

V

The light traces, as described by the literati, are elegantly depicted as “light ink” or “faint marks”, reflecting the ethereal essence of the subject’s inner traces. I refer to light traces as the subject’s immersion in tranquil silence, the sudden burst of light in a fraction of a second—a manifestation amidst profound enlightenment; it is the altar of cultivation and nourishment, the simplicity and purity of immersion. The state of lightning traces is not the moment of mundane time but rather an indication of the cyclical nature of all things, with the burgeoning and passing of myriad sounds and the space-time continuum. It is the simple and innocent revelation of one’s self, appearing amidst astonished and clear-sighted conversations—a subtle insight into the solidified traces of the heart, brush and pen, and materials, where tools and materials such as washing, scattering, dyeing, combining, gathering, and wiping gently emanate smoke

under the host’s lightening of intentions. Under the simple and plain execution that “interacts alone with the spirit of heaven and earth (獨與天地精神往來)”, the pent-up and fervent spirit is unleashed into the strokes of the brush. However, simplicity and plainness do not imply the dullness of the work; it refers to the subject forgetting oneself, forgetting one’s soul, the lightness that harmonizes with its surroundings, the simplicity of “Harmonize with its light, coexist with its dust (和其光, 同其塵)”, the gentleness of “The depth of containing virtue is likened to that of a newborn. (含德之厚, 比於赤子。)” It is precisely in the tranquility of the subject’s mind and the cultivation of spirit that art finds its manifestation. Like a clear mirror, it would naturally encounter obstacles yet penetrate through all things, breaking through the barriers of myriad things. This is my abstract yet concrete painting, a shallow insight acquired later, left as a “birthday gift” for friends—of course, the artwork itself is the main gift.

Jinnan Road, Dalian City
Yu Zhenli’s *Handwritten Diary*
November 11, 1991

[Yu Zhenli Art Museum provides the article]
Translator and editor: Li Yang

Editor’s Notes:

Before Yu Zhenli created his last expressionist work *Women at Wedding Reception* in 1989, he had already begun to create some abstract art. In the following three decades, he persisted in exploring his unique style of Chinese Abstract Morphological Expressionism. This issue features a commentary written by Liu Xiaochun, alongside an early philosophical reflection on art by Yu Zhenli, complemented by classic abstract works created by Yu Zhenli at various stages, further presenting his comprehensive artistic exploration.

編者按:

于振立自 1989 年創作最後一幅表現主義作品《吃喜酒的女人們》之前，就已經開始進行了一些抽象藝術的創作。在之後的三十餘年中，他一直堅持探索其具有獨特風格的抽象寫意主義創作。本期刊登劉驍純撰寫的一篇評論文章，和于振立早期寫就的一篇藝術哲思感悟，並搭配于振立在各個時期創作的經典抽象作品，進一步呈現其全面的藝術探索。