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Li Yang

Abstract

Abstract art is a difficult topic to clearly delineate in the field of contemporary art. In many cases in art history, examining the artist's experiences, creative attitude, and a more comprehensive body of work, combined with relevant historical context, can more realistically reconstruct the significance of an artist's work. Using Zhu Lizige's artistic practice as a case study, an analytical glimpse into current self-directed contemporary art practice may be provided by combining her diverse creative attempts and analyzing the unique perspectives of observation and methods of practice reflected in her works, along with the interplay of ideas with the contemporary era.

Key Words

Zhu Lizige, contemporary art, abstract art, abstract expressionism art, conceptual painting

Introduction

Once a style or school is widely recognized, how does it influence our judgment and affect the direction of individual creativity? We have already benefited greatly from the classification of various styles and schools. In this era, they have provided us with abundant vocabulary richness, but they have also led us to a superficial understanding of some profound aspects through semantics. As T. J. Clark mentioned, that pure and holistic visual experience of "escaping words and entering into viewing and existence" has perhaps become an "ancient dream"¹. When we stand in front of an artwork, the way of viewing it structured by art history and art theory will inevitably influence our opinions. This is how we begin to understand art today and the cognitive background against which we reflect on current art. However, it has never been a fixed, logical, or unquestionable rule. The purpose of discussing the young artist Zhu Lizige (朱離子格), who transitioned from a vague interest in art to its creation, is not to highlight her outstanding artistic intuition but to acknowledge the unlabeled and discussable uniqueness of her case—the richness of her works displayed in a short period. This richness

manifests in the learning, exploration, experimentation, and somewhat obscure yet intuitive visual experiences revealed in her various stages and directions of works.

1. A Unique Way of Viewing

Moreover, a more immediate way to achieve this is to apply communication studies. From World War II to the Cold War, the first generation of abstract expressionist painters advocated by Clement Greenberg gradually gained international recognition, causing the once glorious Paris School of Art to transition into the realm of classics. However, this left many labels and perplexities for the era, imposing burdens on them that sometimes far exceeded what they could bear. In art history, more and more styles and schools emerged and the sphere of criticism constantly manufactured new terms, flooding the market where culture and capital intertwined. Since then, the public has become accustomed to understanding art and artists through labels, rarely able to appreciate art from the works themselves truly. It is more likely to lose sight of the need to verify the truth when the "facts" are easy to see. The constant categorization of genres and styles has led some artists, who constantly strive to



Figure 1. A photo of Zhu Lizige taken while she was creating the installation *Brush Strokes* in Longyou County, Zhejiang Province, 2023.

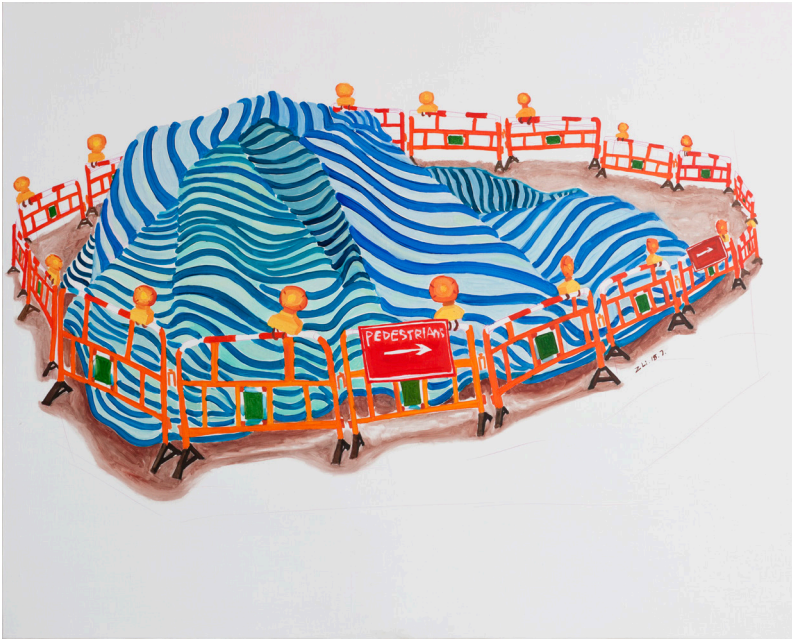


Figure 2. Zhu Lizige. *Rotation without Carousel*. Oil on canvas, 120×150cm, 2018.



Figure 3. Photographic works in Zhu Lizige's studio, 2023.

express their true selves in their work, to feel lost in their creative endeavors. They sometimes try to showcase their diversity through materials or styles, or constantly search for their language, creating a cultural label, without realizing that it deprives them of the richness of their artistic intuition. People are immersed in the torrent of styles, theories, and viewpoints of mass culture, yet finding their way out from within is hard for them.

Looking through Zhu Lizige's various stages of artistic creation, especially in the early period, one can always see the rough and steadfast way of painting which, with a little understanding, can be distinguished as her untrained creative technique. From her past oil paintings, one can see the influence of David Hockney's use of color. The colors in her oil paintings are sufficiently bright, with simple shapes, and each painting seems to embody some new ideas. She has some oil paintings that involve conceptual creation, which directly capture and depict the phenomena of modern societal depression. The leafless, withered trees, the demolition sites covered by dust nets, and those colored steel sheets that have become more familiar to us in recent years represent her early attempts in contemporary art. It is challenging for an artist's works to engage in current artistic discussions about portraying social phenomena without a mature and distinctive independent style. Even more embarrassing is that in today's increasingly insular atmosphere, the type of art subject matter prevalent in China around the turn of the millennium, such as satire and criticism, has rarely

appeared in formal exhibition spaces. Art that aims to raise social awareness or to expose and reflect on social phenomena has become discarded in today's China as if our humanistic society no longer requires questioning.

Her creative work also features another more overt direction—an exploration of scars conducted on paper. Although her paper-based works present a completely different facet from her oil paintings, if one is familiar with her photography, when looking at her oil paintings and paper-based creations, they naturally fall into a framework and give rise to her classic installations. This connection is overshadowed by the vibrant colors in her oil paintings, but the brush strokes and subject matter align with her years of paper-based creations. Her photography always captures things that most people never pay attention to: tangled wires, sunken tiles, and skyscrapers wrapped in dust screens. She cannot explain why it would be those things, but when I saw the intersecting scars on her arm last summer, left from knife cuts during her youth, I knew she was someone who needed to paint to alleviate anxiety—a fervent enthusiast. In her creative work over the following years she repeatedly revisited this early confusion, often unaware of it for a long time and frequently concealing it. Photography, oil painting, paper-based works, installations—for her, these are intertwined with the issue of identity, just like the scars, as they are part of the same narrative approach. The praise for the colors in her oil paintings, the abstract evolution in her paper-based works, the interpretations of ideas in her photographic



Figure 4. Zhu Lizige. *Brush Strokes Series: 2016-01*. Carbon pencil on paper, 120×80cm, 2016.

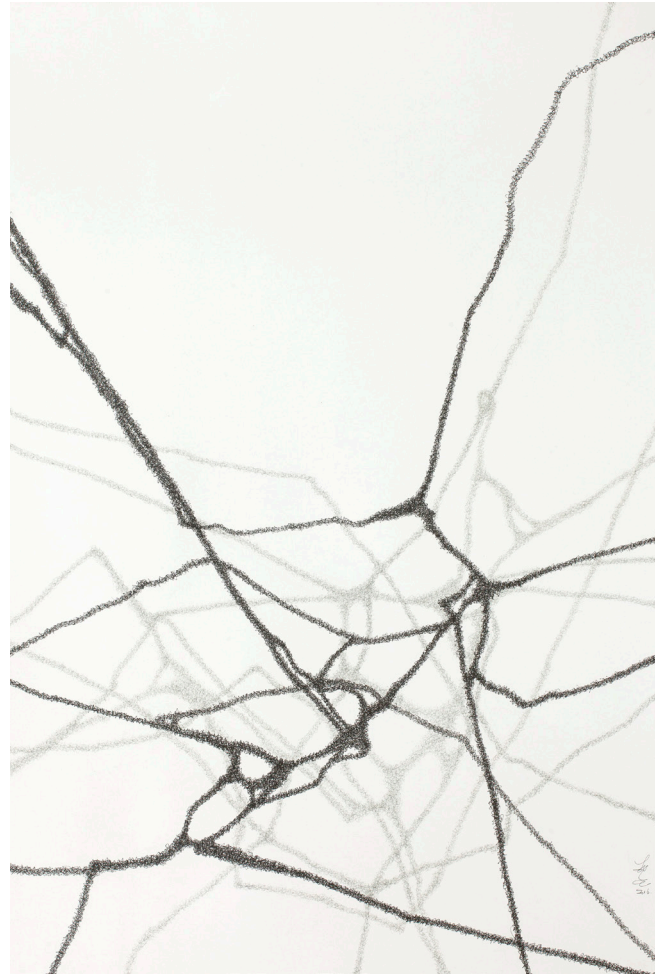


Figure 5. Zhu Lizige. *Brush Strokes Series: 2016-02*. Carbon pencil on paper, 120×80cm, 2016.

works, and the categorization of her installation pieces as reminiscent of female art may all be subject to one-sided misunderstandings, creating a diffuse mist.

In 2023, Zhu Lizige recreated her classic installation artwork using steel wool in Longyou County, Zhejiang Province. The initial attempt at this artwork took place in 2016, as its first realization occurred in an abandoned building in Beijing. She tears and entwines a mundane object in space, allowing highly monotonous industrial products to grow in a sinking state in corners or crevices of buildings, gradually blending with the surroundings. Under different weather conditions or lighting, the steel wool often refracts some mottled glints, showcasing various transitions and contingencies in the creation process. In terms of the overall experience, the series of installations and paper-based creations are only different in terms of material and creative space. They share a common visual narrative, continuing her ability to capture the immediate sensations of distortion and scars

through organic shapes imbued with vitality.

In this respect, occasionally avoiding preconceived notions and abandoning labels of style or genre, viewing an artist's creations through their personal experiences and a comprehensive body of work can provide us with a better understanding of their mature works; this should be a window of value, especially with abstract paintings that often ignore the world. Allow them to gradually transition from their monologue to an appropriate context rather than relying on an exclusive formal language repeatedly entangled in a certain style.

2. The Focused Realm between Brush Strokes

It is challenging to discern the sentimental ideas of abstract artists solely from a few meticulously perfected works. They have gradually abandoned all representational and imitative schemas, repeatedly depicting and weaving their intractable or unconscious



Figure 6. Zhu Liang: *Spines*. Installation, steel wool nail gun, 2022, Longyan County, Zhejiang Province.



Figure 7. Zhu Lizige. *No Title*. Carbon pencil on paper, 88×114cm, 2017.

sensations within a space and combining them with forms of beauty. Even the words they use to describe their works are often filled with fluid streams of consciousness. However, the existence of artists and their works is real, implying that the creative processes and backgrounds often denied access to display spaces constitute the artistic interest within the frame. It should be repeatedly emphasized that, in the value assessment of contemporary art, an artist's creative attitude partially determines the meaning of their works, especially for those works that abandon realistic imitation.

Zhu Lizige's early sketches exhibit a clumsy focus, with a few portrait works displaying a touch of Egon Schiele's expressionist interest, yet sometimes leaning towards a more abstract style. In her artistic journey, she gradually deconstructs specific images and focuses more on seeking a sense of form. Moreover, her brush strokes can be seen everywhere, from mirrors, cards, and photographic papers at home to even hamburger boxes in

fast-food restaurants. Painting has become a part of her daily life and allows her to concentrate more on the brush strokes. Uniquely, her works on paper are increasingly concerned with matters beyond conventional images, with the compositions gradually showing elements of tangled and twisted chaos that are hard to decipher. From 2015 to 2017, she created dense circular patterns on paper, depicting the interplay of lines and shadows; perhaps she was searching for a focused emotional projection within those artworks. On the other hand, these objects are more concrete than tangible reality because they lack deliberate construction. We can see many related scenes in her photography, paying attention to corners, shadows, stray wires, and even everyday negated objects that can be refracted into a landscape of emotions. She gradually covered up the sense of clumsiness in her previous formal explorations using a more focused, repeating brush stroke technique. This was not an intentional concealment, but rather she finally



Figure 8. Zhu Lizige. *Brush Strokes Series: 2019-12*. Carbon pencil on paper, 77.5×108cm, 2019.

moved towards a comfortable style throughout the process, with a large number of works undergoing trial and error.

After years of exploring different styles through paper-based creations, there was a complete breakthrough in her art in the special three-year period that began at the end of 2019. She often secluded herself at home for several months to create, and the new series of works became more diverse and profound than before. Moreover, all the images have disappeared from the composition, leaving a more richly textured focus behind. The traces that helped create the image became the main body, enriching the most minor parts of her past works into the image itself. This has always been her way of finding images, creating the most expansive “scenery” in the most easily overlooked narrow spaces. Without understanding her works from various periods, I might not have grasped the clues in her current works initially, and might have hastily assumed that what was presented was rich in humanity, instead of recognizing the instinctive emotional power and unique way of viewing reflected in her works.

When rejecting representation, the subject matter does not necessarily have to reflect specific current content, and the self-narration itself is a form of modern writing. Zhu Lizige repeatedly delves into her own phase emotions, and the process of painting has become more focused and intricate than before. Moreover, one can observe distinct evolutions and changes within it. However, some abstract artworks seen today are simply copies of a factory-style production, becoming pure forms of decoration or even some clever and flashy tricks, showing a lack of artistic creativity or attitude. Artworks are meant to be shared with others, and artists should strive to avoid solely focusing on the material aspects of art. It is especially crucial in an era overwhelmed by materialism and such social order. Today, very few people can read the artist from the artwork itself. Most of it is framed within a pre-selected social class system or is often pulled from a grand historical perspective, lacking judgment of the artwork’s value from the inside of its unique form of life.

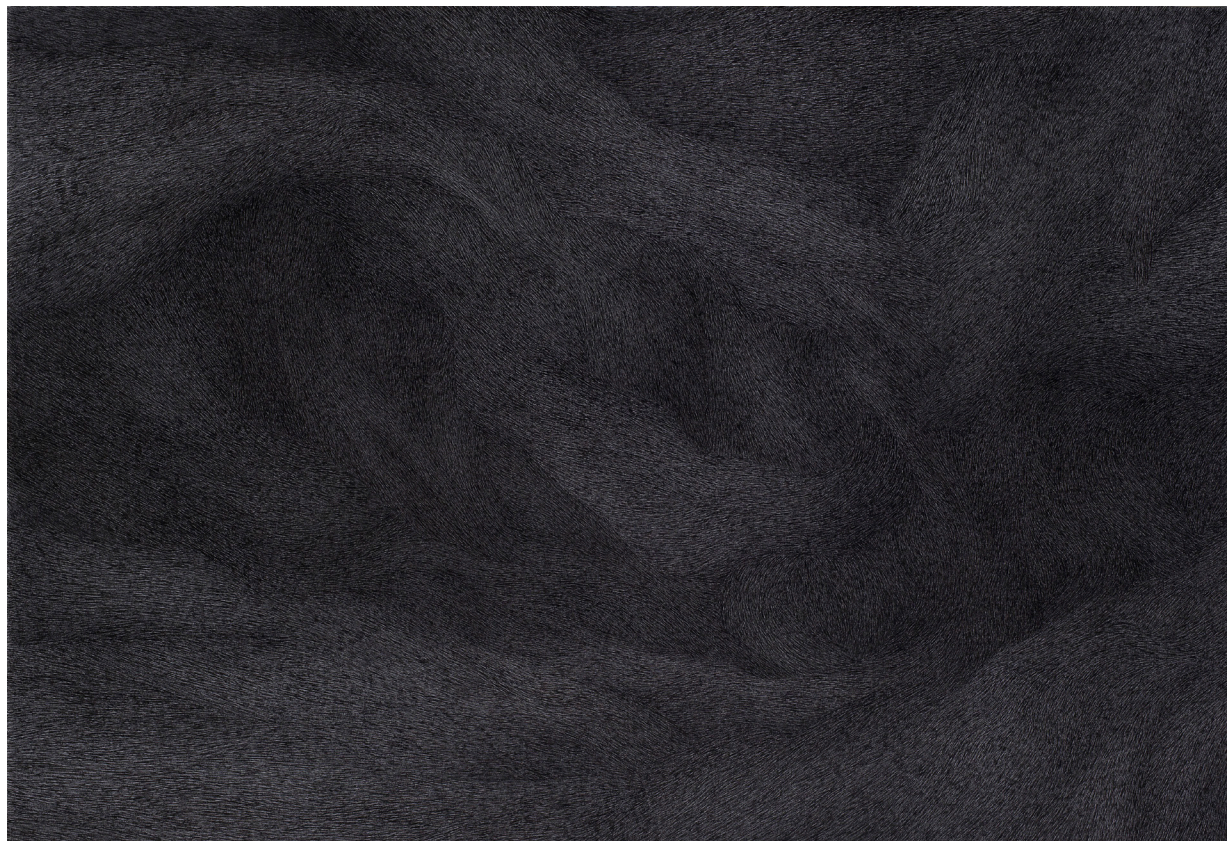


Figure 9. Zhu Lizige. *Brush Strokes Series: 2020-08*. Carbon pencil on paper, 70×98cm, 2020.

Figure 10. Zhu Lizige. *Brush Strokes Series: 2020-10*. Carbon pencil on paper, 70×98cm, 2020.



Figure 11. Zhu Lizige. *Brush Strokes Series: 2022-06*. Carbon pencil on paper, 145×106cm, 2022.

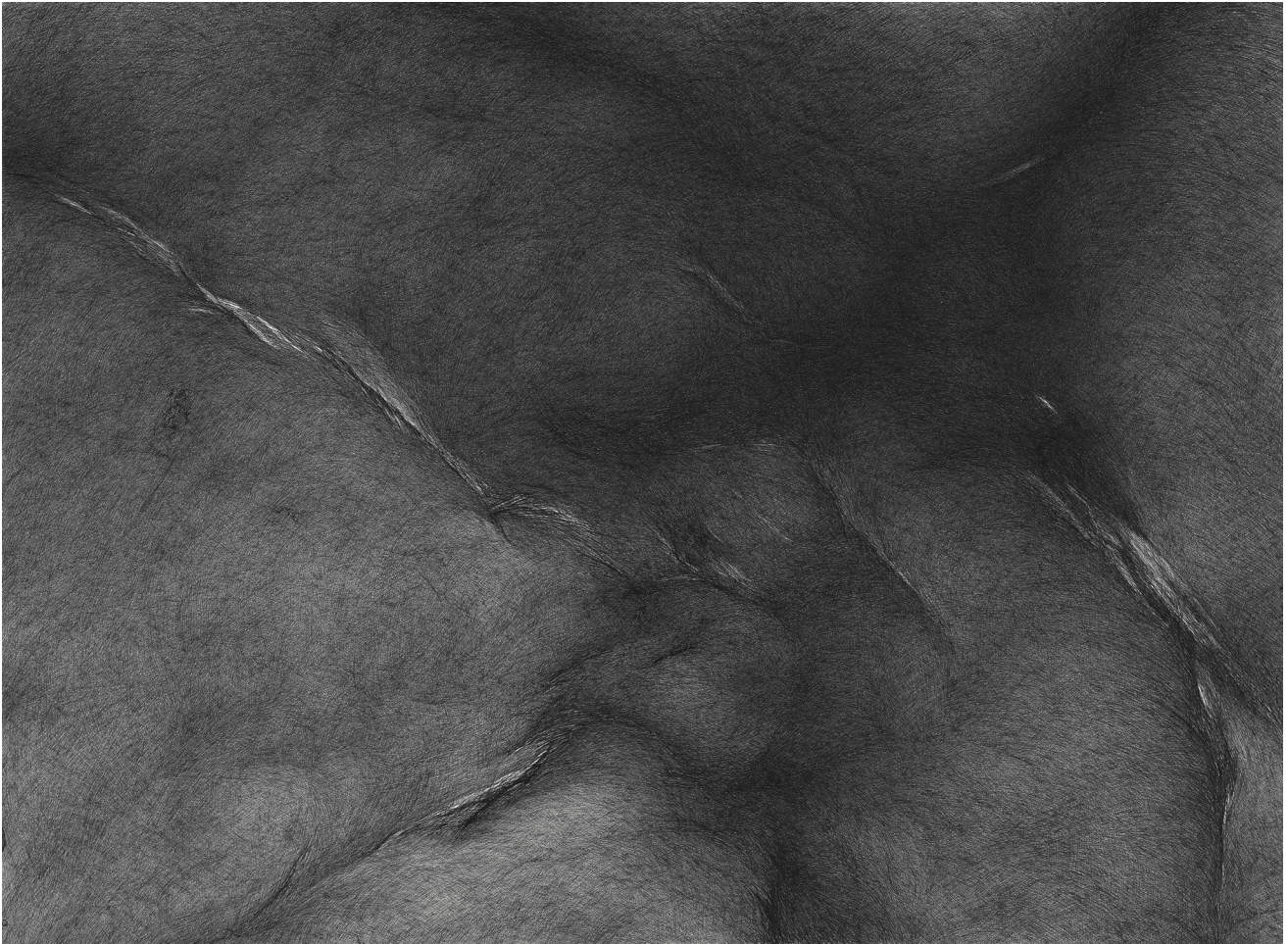


Figure 12. Zhu Lizige. *Brush Strokes Series: 202208-2*. Carbon pencil on paper, 100×145cm, 2022.

3. Return to Richness

When discussing modernism, Clark saw two clues of modernist repeated revival from Neo-Realism and Neo-Expressionism, namely “the continuing duality of modernism—its internal structure and external extension, its purity and opportunism, its centripetal and centrifugal forces.”² We will continue to see outstanding works that reflect the current social landscape, with artists using appropriate or provocative methods to expose or challenge the ills of society. However, there is still a need for some artists who embody the contemporary human existence from an introspective perspective. They create art that showcases their authentic and pure selves, reflecting the traces of being compelled, helpless, and authentic in the present. It also serves as a main symptom of the social ills that exist. Moreover, the transformation from personal preferences and self-expression to a proposal related to history is not something that has never occurred before or is unimaginable.

Nowadays, what everyone encounters and commu-

nicates with daily are those fleeting “tides”, which include rapidly iterating products, entertainment, and fashion. Slavoj Žižek referred to these as “the sublime object of ideology”³. In addition to providing us with a safer and more monotonous life, the tides leave behind the erasure of traces of time and a new way to discipline the public’s way of seeing. The general public increasingly lacks a life worth savoring, the kind of rich life that can be engaged in, commented on and reminisced about in various ways. In Zhu Lizige’s life, there are also abundant tides of fast-selling items, even more so—countless blind box dolls, various fancy decorations, toys, and glowing lights scattered throughout her home. These objects without substantial value are indispensable to her way of life, forming a sharp contrast with her silent *Brush Strokes* series of works. Furthermore, these elements of her daily life have never appeared in her artistic creations. In her view, toys are used to console oneself, while on the other hand, creation is a serious aspect of life. The overturned and layered brush strokes in the artwork do not have any specific references. These expressions of negation



Figure 13. Zhu Lizige. *Brush Strokes Series: 2023-04*. Carbon pencil on paper, 198×145cm, 2023.



Figure 14. An interior view of Zhu Lizige Studio in Beijing, 2023.

derived from the introspective world are “no less vivid than those who advocate that art should intervene in society”⁴. But it also seems to reflect an undercurrent of the era’s landscape—it is indescribable yet vividly present.

After experiencing a longer period of epidemic prevention than other countries, we still face a common situation: how to cope with the boredom and depression of today. Even though society seems to offer us more and more options, the choices available for relevant life decisions are scarce. This is especially true in the realm of art, where engagement has been limited. In modern China, art has never truly entered into a dialogue with the era; it has always remained a peripheral presence. When artists want to use art to contribute something to society, they often feel more like being caught in a dilemma, and can only depict or interfere with certain phenomena. Boring, monotonous, and powerless are real, but also powerful, as we all experience it constantly, and all of our creativity comes from the “imprint of time on our

feelings”⁵. In terms of emotions, Zhu Lizige’s works manifest the richness precisely emerging from this monotony. The overlapping strokes and the exhalations of the cracks evoke experiences of loneliness and scars, which are repeatedly replicated. Seeing the creation time and reflection of the *Brush Strokes* series reminds us of the three years that halted everyone’s progress. The creation centered around experience is a most effective demonstration of the historical essence. Her works occasionally transport me to Andrei Tarkovsky’s film *Solaris*, a movie that switches between the grand and the minuscule, where science, emotions, and the universe are poetically intertwined, leaving the questioning of the so-called past or the future, the history or the current state, in an open-ended narrative that transcends specific references, and makes all previous absurdities insignificant.

Approaching problems with a developmental perspective is often invalid in an artist’s personal history. Various factors structure the representation of the

individual and is a bidirectional process of growth and decline; the individual does not become increasingly rich, but only experiences a process of existence, extinction, and instability. An artist's beneficial value to society sometimes lies solely in completing their current state in the most proficient way possible, pursuing a quality and is a bidirectional process of growth and decline; the individual does not become increasingly rich, but only experiences a process of existence, extinction, and instability. An artist's beneficial value to society sometimes lies solely in completing their current state in the most proficient way possible, pursuing a quality of life that can be chosen, perhaps crying out for justice, or seeking answers alone. Just as Paul Feyerabend said: "Whether they are good or bad, beneficial or destructive, depends on what kind of life a person expects."⁶ When one strives to complete themselves as much as possible through experiences, they also accomplish the presentation of richness to society. Likewise, they fulfill the individual's writing of richness in art, culture, and history.

January 21, 2024

ZHU LIZIGE, was born in Zaozhuang City, Shandong Province in 1988. Her works involve painting, installation, photography, etc. She has traveled to various countries and regions, including South Korea and the United States, for artistic visits and studies, and currently resides and works in Beijing. Some of her major solo exhibitions include *Growth Formula: Kouzi×Zhu Lizige* (2022, Beijing, Mstudio) and *Alienated Landscape: Zhu Lizige* (2018, Beijing, Art International Art Museum). She has participated in several major group exhibitions, including *Concentration and Controlled Release: commemorate Rosary Beads and Brush Strokes* (2023, Beijing, Tokyo Gallery), *Myriad Growth: Longyou Liquid Threads Art Festival* (2023, Longyou County, Zhejiang Province), *Potential Actors: Zhu Lizige's Beijing 6.5 Ring* (2019, Beijing, Songzhuang Contemporary Art Archive), and *Common Denominator—Sympathy: 2018 China and Korea Exchange Exhibition* (2018, Beijing, Korean Cultural Center) among others.

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ENDNOTES

1. T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, trans. Xu Jian (Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Fine Arts Publishing House, 2019), 409.
2. *Ibid.*, 628.
3. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ide-*

ology (Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation, 2017).

4. Shen Yubing, *Art Criticism in the 20th Century* (Hangzhou: China Academy of Art Press, 2003), 12.

5. Charles Pierre Baudelaire, *Selected*

Essays on Baudelaire's Aesthetics, trans. Guo Hongan (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1987), 486.

6. Paul Feyerabend, *Farewell to Reason*, trans. Chen Jian, Ke Zhe, Lu Ming (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2002), 28.

暗湧與潮汐：朱離子格與她專注的筆觸

李洋

摘要：抽象藝術在當代藝術中是一項較難分述的議題。在諸多的藝術史案例中，考察藝術家的經歷、創作態度及較全面的作品，並結合相關的時代背景，可較為真實的還原一個藝術家的作品意義。以朱離子格的藝術實踐為案例，結合她綜合的創作嘗試，將她作品中體現出的獨特的觀看視角、實踐方式及其與時代互文的觀念進行分析，也許可以為當下自為的當代藝術實踐提供一個可供分析的側影。

關鍵詞：朱離子格；當代藝術；抽象藝術；抽象表現主義；觀念繪畫