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Situated Emotional Ontologies: A Review of *Global Painting (La Nuovo Pittura Cinese)* at Museum M.A.R.T.

Sophia Kidd

Abstract

This review of *Global Painting* exhibition, recently opened at Museum M.A.R.T. in Rovereto, Italy, addresses the ways in which this exhibition is situated within a Chinese arts ecology, being then presented outside of China, for non-Chinese audiences. Through an 'emic' lens, we describe these artworks in the context of China's internal elements, looking at how paintings function within a Chinese ecosystem of forces. Developing an affective geography approach to analyzing art, this paper explores the Chinese notions of situatedness (qingjing, 情景) through the lens of the "idea-image (yixiang, 意象)" and "emotional ontology (qinggan benti, 情感本體)", arriving at a better understanding of "situated emotions (qingjing jiaorong, 情景交融)". Exploration focuses upon two of *Global Painting's* artists, Zhang Zhaoying and Meng Yangyang, at the ways their subject, artistic praxis, and exegesis situate their work within a Chinese arts ecology, situating emotions and idea images within Chinese tradition and contemporaneity.

Key Words

Global Painting, Chinese arts ecology, affective geography, idea-image, emotional ontology, Zhang Zhaoying, Meng Yangyang, Lu Peng

"No language of modern painting or genre can fully explain their particularity and richness of form."

—Curator and art historian, Lu Peng, on works in *Global Painting*

Global Painting (La Nuova Pittura Cinese) recently opened at Museum M.A.R.T. in Rovereto, Italy. This exhibition, curated by Southwest China-based art historian Lu Peng, lends itself particularly well to an 'emic' perspective on Chinese painting, describing these artworks in the context of China's internal elements, looking at how paintings function within a Chinese ecosystem of forces. Of course, *Global Painting's* Italian audiences, along with any other audience outside of China, will employ an 'etic' approach, reading paintings from a perspective directed by Western art history, logic, and markets. What is interesting about this body of work, however, is the nuanced display of interaction between what is *inside* China, and what is *outside* of it, which serves as the premise of this collaboration between China's Yinchuan Art Museum and Italy's Museum M.A.R.T., to examine the ins and outs of a "new Chinese painting", featuring artists whose careers have

flowered post-1993, that is, post-Chinese artists' integration into global art markets.

Global Painting's timely post-COVID appearance, as China emerges from its most inward period since just before Deng Xiaoping initiated Opening-up and Reforms in 1978, examines the ways in which Western social, cultural, political, economic, as well as artistic narratives and representations are internalized by Chinese artists to then be mapped onto the painting's surface. All 24 participating Chinese artists were born in the 1980s and 90s, and with only three having studied art outside of China. These three include Chi Ming, who after studying at Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, went on to study at the University of the Arts in London; Wu Qian, who studied first at New York University in the School of Social Science and Culture and then at Columbia University's Institute of East Asian Studies; and Zhang Zhaoying, who first studied at Sichuan Fine Art Institute's

Department of Oil Painting before going on to Brussels Royal Academy of Fine Arts. Both Chi Ming and Zhang Zhaoying incorporate their Chinese foundation of realism into large scale narrative paintings. Wu Qian, on the other hand, who received a double dose of formal training outside of China, paints quite differently, with a focus upon abstract form and color, in which he imbeds poetry, philosophy, emotion, and Daoist precepts, aiming to, “reach the extreme void and maintain rigorous tranquility.”¹

Opening on December 6, 2023, it was a sunny northern Italian day. An Albrecht Dürer exhibition featuring the work *Melancholia* opened concurrently at the Museum M.A.R.T., mixing Dürer fans with Chinese art enthusiasts. Members of the Italian public I interviewed expressed surprise and a positive outlook on this extensive survey of middle-aged Chinese painters, saying in one instance, “I did not realize the Chinese were painting like this. I do not think an Italian painter could have come up with paintings like this.”² Indeed, curator Lu Peng and Li Guohua, director of the Chengdu Lumiere Gallery, spent six months of the total preparation period for *Global Painting* touring artist studios throughout China, negotiating this large-scale survey of next-gen Chinese artists, selecting what they assessed as the best representation of what Chinese painting has to offer the world today.

Participating artists came from three main areas of China. Eight artists from China’s Northeast/Central region included Chi Ming (b. 1984 in Yantai, Shandong),

Feng Zhijia (馮志佳, b. 1989 in Tangshan, Hebei), Bi Jianye (畢建業, b. 1985 in Dandong, Liaoning), Ge Yan (葛彥, b. 1984 in Anhui), Qi Wenzhang (齊文章, b. 1981 in Laiwu, Shandong), Meng Xiaoyang (孟曉陽, b. 1987 in Henan), Qiao Xiangwei (喬翔偉, b. 1983 in Xi’an, Shaanxi), and Zhai Liang (翟涼, b. 1983 in Huoma, Shanxi). Participating artists born in Southeast China include: Chen Xuanrong (陳軒榮, b. 1991 in Zhangzhou, Fujian), Ge Hui (葛輝, b. 1983 in Jiangsu), Lin Wen (林文, b. 1989 in Fujian), Shen Muyang (沈沐陽, b. 1994 in Huzhou, Zhejiang), Wu Qian (b. 1991 in Xiamen, Fujian), Huang Qiyu (黃啟佑, b. 1987 in Nanning, Guangxi), Xu Dawei (徐大衛, b. 1980 in Wenzhou, Zhejiang), Zhang Zhaoying (b. 1988 in Xiamen, Zhejiang), and Zheng Mengqiang (鄭孟強, b. 1987 in Fujian). Artists born in Southwest China include: Fu Meijun (付美軍, b. 1989 in Dali, Yunnan), Liu Yuanyuan (劉媛媛, b. 1995 in Deyang, Sichuan), Meng Site (孟思特, b. 1988 in Hunan), Meng Yangyang (孟陽陽, b. 1983 in Chongqing), Tang Dayao (湯大堯, b. 1984 in Hunan), and Wang Yilong (王一龍, b. 1968 in Yunnan), Xiong Tao (熊韜, b. 1987 in Yueyang, Hunan).

Situated Emotional Ontologies & Idea-Image

Tracking where in China these artists were born helps to develop a sense of aesthetic nuance and tradition arising in different regions of the world’s third largest country, particularly when followed up with an understanding of where an artist studies, travels, produces, and exhibits.



Figure 1. Chi Ming (透明), *While There is Life, the Fight Continues* (《生命不息，戰鬥不止》). Oil on canvas, 430×210cm, 2022.



Figure 2. Zhang Zhaoying (張劍瀛). *Life Props: Gleaning After Work* (《生活道具：下班了再拾麥穗》). Oil on canvas, 200×200cm, 2021-2022.

The ‘situatedness’ of an artist’s practise provides material, sociological, historical, and aesthetic context for their work. This context, then, helps audiences to develop an ‘emic’ approach to analyzing and appreciating Chinese art. Although we do not have the space to develop so much context for *Global Painting’s* artworks. I mention situatedness to extricate this body of work from global, or rather Western, discourses, then recontextualizing these works within relatively unknown (if only because they have not yet been translated outside of sinology departments) discourses arising from within China to which these canvases respond. To understand what makes these paintings ‘Global’, we must first understand the Chinese situations from which they arise. Chinese aesthetic tradition emphasizes the situatedness of art and literature, contrasting sharply with a Western aesthetic tradition of a god-like genius creating ‘ex nihilo’.

We will examine situatedness (qingjing, 情景) through the lens of the “idea-image (yixiang, 意象)”, and “emotional ontology (qinggan benti, 情感本體)”, arriving at a better understanding of “situated emotions (qingjing jiaorong, 情景交融)”.³ The idea-image is a key aesthetic component in Chinese literature and art, fusing the word-image binary prevalent in Western aesthetics, into a fundamental unit of representation consisting in the word-as-image. Emotional ontology, then, examines how the material world is imbued with subjective feeling, both arousing and reflecting psychological states in the artist, who is rooted in time and place. The situated nature of this emotional ontology is illustrated

by Zhu Zhirong’s as yet unpublished text on Chinese literature, *Introduction to Chinese Literature* (《中國文學導論》), “The merger of feeling and situation, of the self and the environment, serves as a kernel of truth at the heart of the idea-image. Indeed this possibility of reconciling self with one’s surroundings is what the idea-image has to offer.”⁴

I focus here on two of *Global Painting’s* artists, Zhang Zhaoying and Meng Yangyang, who joined the exhibition’s roundtable discussion on December 7th in Rovereto, Italy. Zhang Zhaoying’s works, as pointed out above, lean into realism, tending towards historical narrative, either of large-scale events or smaller, more subjective events. His at times gargantuan canvases lined the walls of the exhibition’s entrance as well as its first spacious hall. *Mysterious Party* presents a Hopperesque composition, the street corner window obscured by handfuls of party-goers in tuxedos and evening gowns. These party-goers stand in groups of two or three, one group speaking with a bell-hop, while a valet leans towards the driver’s seat window of a sleek 1950s automobile in which the driver, sitting next to a glamorously dressed woman, leans back to speak with another women sitting in the backseat. As with much of Zhang Zhaoying’s work, an otherwise realistic scene is disrupted by one or more incongruous elements. Such incongruous elements can occur as figures which don’t fit in with the rest of the scene, or they can be brush strokes which don’t coincide with other brush strokes. In the case of *Mysterious Party*, it is the former, and occurs along two registers. The first register sees a man standing alongside but not interacting with other figures on the sidewalk. He is not dressed as a servant (bellhop or valet) or party-goer (in evening wear), wearing instead a pair of dark trousers with dark brown shirt and no jacket. His head is turned away from the scene, gazing directly into the viewer’s eyes. A second incongruous register occurs along the adult/child and real/unreal axes, with puppets Bert and Ernie from the US children’s television show *Sesame Street* approaching the passenger seat window of the car as if to speak to the woman seated there, who is not looking at them. Hopper’s *Nighthawk* was painted in the 1940s, Bert and Ernie come from the 1970s, and everyone’s dressed as if they came from the 1950s and 60s. Aside from the appearance of these puppets, everything and everyone else in the picture, in subject, brushstroke, line, and color, are realistic.

In his remarks made at *Global Painting’s* roundtable discussion, Zhang Zhaoying said, “in my artistic creation, I incorporate classic figures and scenes from Western art history into my paintings through methods



Figure 3. Wu Qian 吳謙 . *Tribute series* (《致敬》組畫) . Mixed media on canvas, 180×130cm×3, 2023.



Figure 4. Edward Hopper. *Nighthawk*. Oil on canvas, 84.1×152.4cm, 1942.

such as borrowing, moving, and deconstructing.”⁵ While other of Zhang’s exhibition works illustrate the hybridity of cultural images as they move between China and the West, in this canvas we see only US cultural images, but with ‘movement’ between times and paradigms. We also see a deconstruction in affect, with the singular figure facing the viewer and therefore exiting the scene within which he is situated. The disorientation of the man facing

outwards and away feels different from those around him, who are engrossed in their situation. Bert and Ernie come from the world of fantasy, conveying the intrusion of a childlike feeling upon the scene, while a valet and bellhop serve to help everyone arrive and get settled. The emotional ontology of the idea-image here points to nostalgia for an idealized America, to a childlike curiosity and desire to mix reality with fantasy; underlined by a



Figure 5. Zhang Zhaoying. *Mysterious Party* (《神秘的派對》). Oil on canvas, 370×570cm, 2017-2018.

confusion caused by cognitive dissonance in mixing realities, trajectories, and time periods. As with Hopper's *Nighthawks*, this scene takes place at night, but in *Mysterious Party* the background is much darker, so black we cannot see anything. All that emerges from this absolute black is another car, identical in make, model, and color to the one in front of it, as if subsequent iterations of nostalgic dissonance will replicate and reproduce, ad infinitum.

Exactly what is Zhang Zhaoying painting here? What representations of the US is he responding to? Out of which situation does this painting arise? It cannot be the 'real' US, as Zhang grew up and was educated outside of the US (China, Brussels) with his studio now in Chongqing. His understanding of US culture has been mediated, a reality which is suggested by the lack of visibility in the background of Zhang's image. Thus, the feeling and situation out of which this painting arises is Chinese, consisting in how Chinese society and media mediate US cultural images and ideas. Thus, what is Global about this this painting consists in the China-situated emotions at play in Zhang Zhaoying's *image-in-nation*.

Whereas Zhang Zhaoying's focus is upon tampering with and detaching images from their original contextual relationships, bent upon the theatrical and spectacular; Meng Yangyang concentrates upon the mysteries and ineffable aspects of the human psyche, painting from a tension between isolation of individual consciousness and growing complexity of relationships in contemporary human society. Her restrained, minimalist style

renders her abstract and gestural studies in muted colors. Each of her canvases in *Global Painting* present at least one human figure against an either pale color wash or plaid background. The figures are rendered in long carefully chosen strokes of color, without lines to separate the figure from their impossible background. Meng's work is less 'idea' than 'image', with emotion serving as the root, trunk, branch, and leaf—that is, an overcoming ontology—of the image. The ideas at play are extremely conceptual, as in the slightly Mondrian or Rothke-like painting *Two Intersecting Lines*. A warm white square is populated with a cool grey smaller square superimposed upon its lower left third. One of the red lines is actually two with an apex, the vertical leg of which is bisected by a third horizontal red line. While the first two lines with their apex extend from the left and bottom edges of the canvas, a third horizontal red line is disrupted and discontinued at knee-height by the legs of a tall figure's profile. This figure is facing a cloud-like fantasy character seated at the other end of that same horizontal red line, hands behind it on the ground, its triangular head turned upside down so that it smiles and looks towards the ceiling while simultaneously returning the gaze of the tall and extremely thin standing figure rendered in dark reds, purple, and brown. Different from Meng's other canvases are the shadows cast by these two figures, one onto the warm white background, and the other onto the cool grey, alluding to a light source emanating from the space within which a viewer stands. The feeling is that of curiosity in interaction between the two figures, a playfulness that casts off a sense of desire or accountability. The situation in which the figures find themselves cannot be tracked, aside from the most likely accidental or imagined (by me) references to Rothke's emanating color squares or Mondrian's red lines. The figures are cosplay-like, pure emotions in interaction with no known past or future, weaving past memories with future fantasy. The emotional ontology of Meng's work weaves interrelationships between her earlier and later works, with the former populated with a greater proportion of children and fantasies, and the latter populated more by an adult world of sophisticated emotions. The situatedness of her work may speak to Shanghai's world of commodity and fashion, as the different colored plaid backgrounds foreground female figures stylishly dressed and standing in vogueish gestures, albeit with great emotional depth. In remarks made at *Global Painting's* roundtable discussion, Meng expressed that, "The cultural blend brought about by globalization has been integrated into our daily lives. Artists of our generation are faced with the challenge of using these resources to once again deconstruct

and create our own art.” Although Meng was born and formally trained in Chongqing, in the ‘frontier’ Southwest region of China’s art world, she has chosen Shanghai for her artistic practice. Shanghai is the location of China’s earliest and largest contemporary influx of Global cultural and economic influence, with Shanghai still today leading China’s fashion index. The social, cultural, and economic forces at play in Meng’s canvases, however abstract and gestural, do indeed reveal points of interaction, within the artist’s psyche, between China and its trade-partners, past and present.

Conclusion

As *Global Painting* prepares to move on to other museums throughout Europe upon its conclusion at the Museum M.A.R.T., we can expect that Western critical discourses on contemporary Chinese art will continue its trend away from pure ideology, such as we have seen in

the endless touting of artists such as Ai Weiwei, whose critique of his mother country support Western cultural political economies. A new focus upon cultural hybridity as well as an exploration of diverse representational models in this new generation of Chinese painters persuade Western art critics and historians that Chinese art is interesting, not just rebellious.

Dr. Sophia Kidd is a scholar, research-based curator, art critic, translator, author, and poet. Kidd was born in 1973 and is currently Associate Research Fellow at Sichuan International Studies University. From 2009-2016, Kidd obtained an MA and PhD at Sichuan University (SCU) in Classical Chinese Literature and served as Associate Research Fellow at Sichuan University (2018-2021), as well as Visiting Master Class Lecturer at Ruhr Universität Bochum (2017) and Göttingen University in Germany (2017—Present). Kidd is founder and CEO of Yan Er Lu Arts International.

Editor: Gao Pengfei

ENDNOTES

1. *Global Painting (La Nuova pittura Cinese)* Exhibition Catalog. This exhibition was conceived by Vittorio Sgarbi and Silvio Cattani; Curated by Lu Peng and Paolo De Grandis; With Carlotta Scarpa and Li Guohua, 2023.

2. Unpublished interview by the author with Isabella Rainieri Bamber, 2023.12.12.

3. Cf: Zhu Zhirong, *Chinese Aesthetics in a Global Context* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2013). In this book, Zhu Zhirong discusses Chinese theorist in aesthetics, Li Zehou’s notion of ‘emotional ontology’.

4. Cf: Zhu Zhirong 朱志榮, *Introduction to Chinese Literature* [中國文學導論], (Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 2009). 所謂

“景與意相兼”，其中的意，在審美的意義上是指以情感為核心的情意。因此，在一般意義上，情與景的關係，實際上是指意與象的關係。

5. From transcriptions of the *Global Painting roundtable discussion*: “在我的藝術創作中會通過借用、挪移、解構等方法，將西方藝術史中的經典人物圖像和場景編排進我的畫面中。”（張釗瀛）

基於情感本體：對 M.A.R.T. 美術館 “全球性繪畫：中國新一代藝術家” 展覽的評論

康書雅

摘要：最近，“全球性繪畫”展覽在義大利羅韋雷托的 M.A.R.T. 美術館舉辦，本文探討了這次展覽在中國藝術生態中的定位，以及如何在中國境外向呈現給非中國觀眾展示。通過一個“主位”的視角，我們描述了這些藝術品在中國內部元素的背景下的情境，並觀察繪畫如何在中國的各種社會需求當中發揮作用。本文擬探討採用一種“感知地理”學的方法來分析藝術，通過“意象”和“情感本體”的視角探討了中國的“情境”概念，以更好地理解“情境情緒”。探索聚焦於全球繪畫的兩位藝術家張釗瀛和孟洋洋，探討他們的繪畫主題、藝術實踐和闡釋如何將他們的作品置於中國藝術生態中，將情感和觀念圖像置於中國傳統和當代之中。

關鍵詞：“全球性繪畫”；中國藝術生態；感知地理；意象；情感本體；張釗瀛；孟陽陽；呂澎