

They say that the poet and painter Su Tungp'o left the following poem written on the wall of his host's home:

Buds sprout from my dry
intestines/moistened by wine/And from
my liver and lungs grow bamboo and
rocks./They flourish with such life that
I cannot contain them/and so I write
them your wall, as white as snow.

This was in the 11th-century, when the movement known as Literate Painting had reached its height within the southern school of Chinese painting. Su Tungp'o — an intellectual and an aristocrat, as were most of school's members — often worked while under the influences of wine and the erotic dance of a female companion, which accounts (at least in part) for the peculiar rhythm of his draughtsmanship. The result could be a poetically-charged painting, heavily influenced by calligraphy, or a “graphic” poem that might describe a mental landscape, engendered by sensitive individual experience and free from the restrictions of representation.

The use of inebriation as the ideal creative state by some of the school's leaders formed part of a larger conception of art as the capturing of the spirituality of things. This spirituality did not reside in the thing itself but rather in its image, the image as constructed by the human mind. One of the basic principles of this type of painting was that the concept precedes the brush. This was why Lin Yutang used to say that to produce a drawing in China was nothing more

The Tip of a Plumtree Branch

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than the writing of a concept, thus alluding to two key points within that artistic tradition: the constant relation between poetry and the visual arts, between writing and painting, and the image's freedom from external reality [1].

The word is *lyricism*. According to the Asian philosopher, it was achieved as a result of the two revolutions that took place in Chinese art in the 8th century. The first was the revolution against the domination of the artist's lines over the objects painted (thanks to the influence of calligraphy). The second was the revolt against exact representation of material reality, thanks to the influence of poetry. What is interesting is that both revolutions occurred 12 centuries

before they were to occur in Europe, and what is ironic is that after all this time has passed, Chinese artists find themselves yet again faced with the responsibility of solving both dilemmas.

Hence are derived two of the main paradoxes within the evolution of Chinese art unto the present day. The art of the feudal era would shame any European avant-garde leader.

Nevertheless, it was toward those avant-gardes that Chinese artists turned in search of formal and conceptual models that might allow them first to reject their own aesthetic tradition and later to rise in opposition against social realism. Yet in recent years most of the paintings produced in China that attempt to criticise and renovate social realism are works in which realism persists as a code to be parodied within much more imaginative, subjective and individual styles of painting.

The imposition of Revolutionary Realism (the name that Social Realism wore during the Mao Zedong's period of leadership) was accompanied by a rejection of traditional Chinese painting, which was at that time characterised as elitist and retrograde. This, however, was not a new phenomenon in the history of Chinese art. Even before 1911, the decline of the empire had been accompanied by a loss of faith in national cultural models and by a growing interest in the paradigms of Western culture which had been penetrating China forcefully since the 19th-century, sometimes by

means of violence and humiliation. In art, ink and watercolour landscapes in the traditional style were replaced by a new generation's taste for Impressionism and Expressionism as well as for other artistic styles.

Beneath Mao's government, these tendencies were also considered decadent, and the official criteria did not change during Deng Xiaoping's government despite an increased receptivity to Western advances in the fields of economics, science and technology. Deng Xiaoping's policies seemed to be unaware that it is impossible to isolate a culture's spiritual expression from its material expression. This is why the Chinese leader was so surprised when, together with certain economic models and certain technological and communications advances, new ways of thinking also infiltrated the country and were well received within artistic and intellectual circles. In scarcely a decade this movement would take Chinese art from the restrictions of Social Realism to the freedom of artistic options provided by Western aesthetic models.

For Chinese art, the 80's seems to have begun in 1979. In that year, various exhibitions were held which included both experiments with traditional subjects and techniques as well as works Cubist, Impressionist and Expressionist styles. These exhibitions served as a bridge between the earlier assimilation (essentially formal in character) of the first European avant-gardes by Chinese artists during the first republic and a more recent conceptual assimilation of post-modern art toward which the newer movements advanced.

After the exhibitions of 1979 (*New*

Spring, Twelve Artists and Stars), an expanded series of shows followed in the mid-80's. Known as the Artistic Movement of 1985, it was made up of young people dealing with Surrealism, Dadaism and Pop Art. This movement culminated with one of the most famous exhibitions in the history of Chinese art: *China Avantgarde*, held in 1989, five months before the events in Tiananmen Square. Working beneath the slogan "No Return," a confluence in modern



Wang Jinsong, *The Big Chorus no. 2*, 1992.
Oil on canvas.

Chinese art was struck; at the same time there was evidence of new aesthetic positions derived from the assimilation of postmodern trends. This show included installations, performances, happenings, photography, surrealist and expressionist paintings and drawings as well as experimentation with techniques and materials. It attempted to bring together the different developments of the entire decade. Most of all, it served to summarise the movement's utopian spirit that tried, by acting within the system, to change its rules.

Perhaps the failure of that utopian socialist art led to the change in attitude in the 90's. Newly-emerging artists, and even some from the previous decade, adopted a less ingenuous approach; they no longer tried to act in such a direct

manner within the political context. The Chinese critic Li Xianting characterises the 80's movement as a group of idealists who tried to create a new Chinese culture with assistance from Western culture, and he contrasts it with the new styles of aesthetic parody which he calls "Cynical Realism." [2] Within this cynical posture we can see the place occupied by realist iconography and its re-semanticisation through appropriation and ironic suprealism.

This change in attitude reveals a peculiar situation in contemporary Chinese art. In the 80's, the dominant type of art was one that approached modern styles in order to exhibit them in gestures of protest that did not diverge greatly from the marxist thesis of art's social function. At the current time, what is more prevalent is art that pursues the conceptual rather than the stylistic aspect of the Western postmodern experience, thus revealing a profound skepticism toward the dogma of artistic activity's social purpose. It might be said that in the 80's there was socialist art that rejected realism, which has found a parallel in the 90's with the development of realist art that rejects sociologism. This new outlook is seen most of all among painters who create work in which an interest in individual psychological situations is predominant, together with personal philosophical and perceptual positions when confronting the nature of reality.

New Chinese painting even shows some evidence of a revival in traditional painting: for instance, Jianjun and Song Gang, participants in the *China Avantgarde* exhibition, or Ma Desheng, a founder of the group *Stars*, or even the use of calligraphy in the work of the



Liu Wei, *Father watches TV*, 1991. Oil on canvas.

well-known artist Gu Wenda. However, the true measure of the changes in artistic mentality that have occurred in recent years lies in suprealist painting. This is figurative art, executed with a maximised attention to detail and in most cases marked by an allegorical nature. The mimetic dependence between image and referent is completed by a breaking of the link between the referent and conventional reality. Thus a dialogue is established between the realism of the representation and the negation of its value as truth. And as in the work of Magritte, each painting seems to be proclaiming 'This is not what it seems'.

Certain fundamental contradictions of two generations of artists are concentrated in this art. These are artists who were educated in the mimetic vision and propagandistic function of Social Realist art and who now desire to escape the conceptual and morphological limitations imposed by

dogmatic cultural regulations. It should be kept in mind that most of these artists were educated in academies with institutional models of representation. An artist such as Yan Pen Ming, although he has lived in France for 15 years, continues producing work marked by his visual experience of China. He admits that even in his current work there is a great debt to his education in propagandistic art. However, he is not one of the Chinese painters taking realism to its final consequences. Ming's work is more expressionist in style, using brush work that leans toward traditional painting and calligraphy. Using this as his means, he paints portraits of unknown figures as well as of Mao. What is interesting about these portraits is that they are executed in an extremely large format, so that from close-up one can only make out blotches of paint composed in abstract planes. One must distance oneself from the painting in

order to identify the subject's features.

Since the 80's, Ming's work has signalled the breakdown of the realist criteria which are still official in China; he is one of the most important artists to do so. Social realism stems from preconceived, inflexible and uselessly-idealist ideas about reality on which the artistic image must uncritically rely. When not parodying these representational schemes, contemporary Chinese painters use them to demonstrate alternative realities that had not been included in official planning. In the case of Yan Pen Ming, the dissolution of these concepts is related to the actual dissolution of the features of the subjects he portrays, thus conditioning identification on mechanisms of representation and perception.

This penchant for placing the subjects' identities in crisis is found in contemporary Chinese painting through different paths. All lead to the anonymity of the personages, the banalisation of official icons and the acceptance of an entirely imaginary sense of the absurd and the senseless.

Another artist who has been important since the 80's is Fang Lijun. The work is known for its personages, all of them similar, that display ambiguous expressions and alienated attitudes. The repetition of a single face and a single gesture throughout an entire group of people alludes to the loss of individuality in a society that has been excessively collectivised. The fact that in general the face being represented is quite similar to the face of the painter serves to reveal his interest in referring to himself through these

images. Fang Lijun composes his paintings by working with photography, which is a common procedure among young Chinese artists. However, a surrealist atmosphere predominates in his work, emphasised both by the presence of the subjects in a dream-like space as well as by the attitudes and actual appearance of the subjects portrayed. It seems that the author avails himself of photography not as a guarantee of a true likeness but rather as a distancing element between pictorial representation and reality. In their hands, the photographic image becomes an ideal substitute, an intervention between reality and painting. After the experience of the North American photo realists, a tendency to concentrate on problems of representation in itself rather than in the reality being represented has been common among painters who reproduce from photographs. Inherent in this attitude is a conception of art as an act laden with subjectivity. Unlike Social Realism, which considered representation as a way of legitimising reality, Photo Realism presents it a method of criticising notions of a single reality, and even as a form of self-criticism. Representation is no longer a reproductive exercise; it has become an interpretive act.

Yu Hong's method of working with spatial references is completely abstract and conventional. In this way the artist reinforces the idea that we are facing a representation and not an extension of reality. The contrast between those ideal spaces and the meticulous treatment of the human figure is what lends the paintings their surrealist quality. In a work such as

Young Pioneers (1990), the contrast is accentuated by the foreground placement of grey figures whose faces are in shadow, a new variation on the dissolution of identity that we have seen in the work of Fang Lijun and Yan Pen Ming.

Meanwhile, Zhao Bandi turns to the instant photograph in order to present scenes from personal worlds utterly lacking in epic stature. Generally



Liu Wei, *The New Generation*, 1991.
Oil on canvas.

in his paintings there are references to a way of life or to an aspect of contemporary Chinese life that is not included in official propaganda. These scenes are captured from a photographic point of view, from which two significant features of the work are derived: the intrusive scrutiny into an intimate world, and the fragmented representation of that world. The final result is an apparently banal version of reality, which is related to a loss of interest in the explicitly-politicised works of the 80's. Even Yu Hong, who represents collective scenes, has said that

what interests him are the relations between people but which have no relation to society.

Perhaps this also explains the tendency to reinforce the pictorial nature of the work. Colour plays an essential role, whether creating almost theatrical relations between figure and ground, or creating symbolic spatial references, or constituting an index of the individuals' level of reality and identity. Colour is also an important element for reinforcing the lyric character of new Chinese painting. It is clear that this is not lyricism along the lines of the medieval style. The Chinese artist will not return to the role that Lin Yutang described as "...a man at peace with nature....whose spirit is deeply immersed in mountains and rivers..." [3], but there has been a revived interest in beauty, now based in contemporary concepts. Much of current Chinese painting displays a particular poetic attitude. A woman dancing at the entrance to the Forbidden City with a portrait of Mao forming the background in a painting by Zhao Bandi. A scene of naked adolescents in a painting by Liu Xiaodon. The play of mirrors in a beauty parlor, painted by Li Tianyuan. The paintings of Wang Jinsong.

The work of this last painter is an example of how the intense exploration of realist codes can be used to place the codes themselves in crisis; in other words, it reveals the way that Chinese Surrealism is based on representational codes of the Social Realists. This is why I have preferred to speak of Suprarealism, because it deals with an amplification of figuration's mimetic character until a degree of absurdity is reached. Wang Jinsong combines this

figurative process with ironic intentions. The absurd is much more sarcastic in his work than in the paintings of Fang Lijun, Yu Hong or Zhao Bandi. Drawing on publicity, comics and store manikins for his figurative models (just as was once done by Pop Art), he succeeds in imbuing his personages with an aura of inhumanity, as if they were automatons. In a work such as *The Great Chorus No. 2*, the bringing together of all those smiling figures summarises a world of false appearances and artificial conduct, characterised by homogeneity. In this painting as in others by the same artist, we again find faceless individuals or characters represented by nothing more than silhouettes; it is as if, were they to lose their disciplined smiles, all traces of them would be erased. This artist stakes out a specific art historical position. He approaches it as if someone might approach an archive of formal codes, and he employs them without discriminating between Western and Asian or between modern and traditional. Thus his paintings are filled with subtle references to the world of painting as well as to the world of the theatre. What is really happening is that Wang Jinsong represents the world as if it were a stage (similar to the methods of advertising and propaganda art) but without trying to conceal the theatrical nature of the representation. He does not try to suspend disbelief nor to impose it as real. Instead he is content to reveal its irreality, and in so doing criticises the stereotypical forms of realism.

With this cleansed subjectivity, the new Chinese painting continues to provide a means for understanding its own complex cultural context, where the



Fang Lijun, *Water Serie I*, 1994. Oil on canvas. Artist collection.

same contradictions between traditional values, capitalist modernisation and socialist discipline and control are now coming to a head. A painting by Liu Wei eloquently displays this simultaneity of cultural realities. The work, entitled *Father watches the T.V.* (1991), is a portrait of the artist's father dressed in a military uniform; with an almost scornful, sideways look he watches a telecast of the Beijing Opera on a modern colour television. The uneasy way in which the artist's father is portrayed also reveals the question of generational conflicts, a subject which the painter addresses in other works such as *The New Generation* (1991) in which we are confronted by two deformed babies seated with their backs to a splendid portrait of Mao. The children are painted in a style that falls between realism and expressionism, while the leader's portrait preserves all the conventions of Social Realism, including that of a background landscape that has nothing to do with the traditional concept of landscape.

This has been the precise stylistic evolution of Chinese painting: from the search for a spiritual link between man and nature through pictorial gestures to a reflection of the new society,

summarised in the figure of the leader, and from there onto the representation of the individual in confrontation with society or preferably with his own existential conflict. The first stage of this evolution is defined in an example put forth by Lin Yutang: "At times the concentration in the object at hand is so intense that only the tip of a plumtree branch is shown in an entire painting, and thus it comes out perfectly." [4]. Continuing with this sort of visual synecdoche, what Social Realism did was to substitute a portrait of Mao for the tip of the plumtree branch. While in some ways the new painting's level of conceptual synthesis approaches the lyrical abstraction found in traditional landscape painting, what is clear is that artists now prefer to paint the entire plumtree, adding a portrait of Mao in the background whenever possible. And thus it comes out perfectly.

NOTES

- [1] Lin Yutang. *Mi Patria y mi Pueblo*. Ed. Sudamericana. Buenos Aires, 1942.
- [2] Li Xianting. "An Introduction to the History of Modern Chinese Art". Catalogue from the exhibition *China Avantgarde*. Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 1993, pp. 44-49.
- [3] Lin Yutang. op. cit. p. 344.
- [4] Lin Yutang. op. cit. p. 356.