

The Inspiration from Fire: Regenerated Images – Xue Song’s Art

By Jiang Mei

The meaning of image looks so intricate and profound in Xue Song’s art, that from a certain perspective, he is both the terminator of the readymade image as well as the creator of the regenerated image and its meaning.

In the realm of Chinese contemporary art, Xue Song’s artworks are unique. The uniqueness is apparent in two aspects: first, a creation method different from the majority; and secondly, the cultural tolerance, criticism and metaphorical colour of his works. The creation of the former is like some kind of divine enlightenment, while the latter is like the consequential extension of a lush, pictorial scene after the divine enlightenment.

Readymade pictorial images and texts go through a process of selection, disintegration, burning, restructuring, collage and drawing, to eventually produce a new image which meets Xue Song’s requirements in both the creative process, as well as the necessary process for us to read and understand his works. The production procedure, which seems like pipeline to outsiders, includes, in each of its steps, the historical thinking and judgment of the artist, based on current culture and reality. Through this process, Xue Song’s sensitive grasp and clever creation of complex images, all kinds of old, new, Chinese and foreign elements are embraced. It is precisely this kind of creative process, in which meanings are generated from the production method itself, that makes Xue Song’s art an integral part of the Chinese contemporary art scene since the 1990s.

As a painter, the formation of Xue Song’s artistic style carries certain extraordinary colors. It seems that it is a creation of God from behind the scenes.

Xue Song’s early art experiments started in the latter half of the 1980s. At that time, the modern art movement in China was flourishing like a strong fire. The idea of establishing something new or different and creating new art, were burning hot in the hearts of many young people who were eager for art reform. Xue Song was no

exception. From the prints he was able to access at that time, which provided a very limited introduction to Western contemporary art, he searched for nutrients to fuel his creativity. He kept close relationships with his comrades in art, and through mutual encouragement, explored different methods of expression. In 1985, the solo exhibition of Rauschenberg, the American Pop art master, was shown in National Art Museum of China in Beijing. It was a big event for the Chinese art sector at that time. Xue Song made a trip to Beijing specifically to experience the exhibition. It can be said that during the period from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Xue Song was searching hard for his own art language. By that time, he had begun to experiment with the modern Western method of collage. Xue Song said that he instinctively preferred this method, hoping to combine this foreign art form with his own Chinese experiences. It was a reflective and experimental stage during which Xue Song had not yet found his own ideal way of art creation.

At the end of 1990, the crucial moment to Xue Song's creation finally arrived. What happened was like a divine enlightenment--- it unexpectedly came from an accidental fire in his day-to-day life.

In an interview, Xue Song described in detail the impact of this accident on his artistic process. He said, "The use of this method to produce works originated from a fire which occurred in the dormitory where I lived. If that big fire in 1990 had not occurred, my art journey would probably have taken another form. The fire burned a lot of my belongings. These physical things embodied all of my footprints within a period during which I moved from a small place to big Shanghai. The fire burned my joy and pain, as well as my depression and dreams. All of these, accompanied by the memories of my yesterday, were gone with the wind. What remained were the burnt traces and the burnt smell. I discovered some kind of 'mark' from this fire, I found a language form that enabled me to speak... I found some damaged books, bed sheets and art pictorials at the scene after the fire. There were all kinds of messy odds and ends. I took these residues back and studied them patiently and started to put them into a collage on the canvas....This was the initial experiment. It was quite exciting similar to an experiment of a scientist to some extent. I felt in meditation that something new was going to happen, so I could not help often working overnight."

Obviously the "fire" accidentally opened the valve of inspiration for Xue Song's art creativity. Fire is such a magical element: when it is burning, it is magnificent and intense; when it burns out, it becomes deserted and desolate. For Xue Song, although the fire buried the footsteps of his past life, through the process of collecting

ashes and residues and making them into a collage, the memories seemed to emerge again. They interact, struggle and mingle with present feelings, to form a new face laden with complex connotations.

Whether in Eastern or Western culture, fire has dual implications. It is the symbol of Purgatory or hell, whilst it is also the glorious medium of the sacrifice of the saints: the Phoenix Nirvana. For Xue Song, fire's dual characteristics of destruction and regeneration embody a potential worthy of exploration. The fire was an accidental event, but it brought Xue Song a series of predictabilities to his later creations. Through this process he gradually formed a mature, personal, creative methodology and mechanism through which to present his artistic metaphors.

Since the fire in 1990, Xue Song has found his own art language and creation method from the ruins. Through the restructuring of, and the making of collage from the residues collected from the ashes, Xue Song created the first batch of experimental works with individual color. Composed of the fragments of personal life memories, these works seemed on one hand to be a certain kind of liberation and farewell to the artists past yet also foretold a new start to Xue Song's artistic style.

Later, he began his long, thorough process of collecting, rearranging and reconstructing pictorial images.

Since the 1990s, the pace at which China opened up accelerated and the nation soon entered into a period of rapid development in its market economy. The desire for consumption began to spread through society and fashion, advertising, entertainment, press, film and television were produced and imported on a large scale. The pictorial information gradually appeared everywhere and encroached on people's vision. The education of heroism and idealism from the past appeared pale and outdated in the face of the flooding material desires. Xue Song was sensitively aware of these changes and the variation of culture and spirit emerged behind them. He adopted an artistic approach from the perspective of his own observation and thinking and attempted to reveal in his works the spiritual confusion and ambivalence brought on by this huge cultural change.

In the early 1990s, the "Mao" series was the most outstanding of Xue Song's works. Xue Song was born in the 1960s. He spent his childhood and adolescence in an environment of a heavy political atmosphere and the experiences during those ages would be branded deep on one's memory forever. However, unlike their fathers

and elder brothers, the majority of them did not have real experience and understanding of the political lives of that era because they were still too young at that time. Therefore, for them, most of the memories of that era are more matters of outer form: for example, leader portraits, model operas, big-character poster (*Dazibao*), Red Guards and the collective life centering on units. In the “*Mao*” series, Xue Song, through burning, painting and collage (composed of the newspapers, historical pictures and text data he collected), formed sharp and embracing images of “*Mao*” with colors of Pop art. In the “*Mao*” series images are composed of many layers of information from the modern time. It is because of the ideological connotations carried by the images themselves and the “plurality” and “diversity” in sociological terms, shown by the details of the pictures, that the images have such complicated implications. In Chinese contemporary art, there are many representations of “*Mao*” image due to the complexity of a whole generation. Xue Song is therefore unique in producing “*Mao*” image in such a way and in providing a level of interpretation which enables the viewer to explore the many connotations.

Since the mid-1990s, Xue Song’s art vision has expanded. In addition to the appropriation and conversion of the typical symbols of the Cultural Revolution period, urban fashion, the symbols of Pop culture and digital technology have also become the subjects of his expression. Pictures of movie stars, Coca-Cola bottles, Arabic numerals and so on were composed through a process of burning and collage. The vast background and history of urban development and worldly varieties became the ‘flesh and skin’ of these subject images, while the black ashes became strikingly deep, heavy profiles. All the ruthlessness and ridiculousness of history, the fast passage and mutability of time and the pleasure and suffering of life are quietly stated by these colorful fragments of pictures and typical images.

The humanistic theme is an important aspect of Xue Song’s creative process. Particularly in recent years, the explorations on this subject have become increasingly significant. In his expression of this theme, Xue Song usually proceeds with a light, pleasing aesthetic. Yet the selection of materials and the artistic operation are so distinctive, we can begin to read the emotions of criticism, ridicule, warmth, mercy, humor or expectation, all from the busy and complex information within the pictures. The creator’s own attitude and position obviously loom there.

Reviewing his works of the 1990s, the works of Xue Song focusing on cultural themes are just one of many

branches. In the typical works such as the “Dialogue with the Masters” series, he wittily and humorously re-presents the famous works of the Eastern and Western masters in his own style. In Xue Song’s ingenious layout, the classic works of Magritte, Xu Beihong, Picasso and Mondrian emanate a different atmosphere. The external appearance and the meanings portrayed within the pictures make an interesting comparison in a playful tone.

Observing Xue Song’s works after 2000, we find that the works with a focus on the Chinese literal materials beginning to increase constantly. In the series “Calligraphy”, “Ancient Poems and New Paintings”, “Symbol”, and “San Mao”, Xue Song borrows images and words full of lyrical color and warm emotion for use as the subject images of the pictures. These possess the Oriental aesthetic connotations with which Chinese people are familiar. For example, freely rolling cursive strokes, Feng Zikai’s cartoons: which are filled with literati sentiments, the optimistic, the kind ‘bitter child’ Sanmao and natural, quiet literati-landscapes are all used. Meanwhile, he expresses a cultural psychology arising from the convergence of a wide variety of feelings; through the collage of debris from the burning of prints such as copybooks, pictorials, books and fashion magazines, through subjective bright colors, and even through such affirmative or negative symbols as arrows and crosses. While these works convey a deep sentiment for Chinese traditional culture and aesthetics, they also show our burden when we face the huge cultural fault between history and today.

In particular, it is worth noting the exploration of the theme of ‘landscapes’ developing in his recent works. Between the images of the traditional landscapes and the background collage of debris of prints in the past, there is a relationship of comparison, but no conflict. However, in his new works, this peaceful relationship is completely broken. The modern high buildings, cars, yachts, even warships and warplanes, openly invade into traditional landscapes which have been tranquil and elegant. They appear in the wooden bridge, streams, slopes and clear sky and seem strange, unexpected but interesting. These symbols of modernity look like they have incautiously fallen into a time tunnel and accidentally arrived at this scenic and peaceful “Peach Blossom Land”. Here, Xue Song appears to use a cunning, or even mischievous, way to rehearse a scene of one sci-fi film for us. In these comic and dramatic scenes, the aesthetic collision and cultural conflict from the temporal and spatial dislocation bring irresistible amusement to the audience, and yet at the same time immerses them in deeper reflection.

Shanghai is the city where Xue Song has lived for many years. Its history and real face have long been the key points of his concerns. In fact, the numerous images about the past and the present of this city consistently appear in Xue Song's works. We can even say that Xue Song's thinking about the various issues on modernity and tradition, come mostly from his emotional experiences within this city. For those works which take directly the movie stars and the cultural elites of the 1930s as their subjects, and for those which reflect historical memories, urban changes and the life spectacle of consumption, these images and documents about this city are there to serve as their background and cushion. From Xue Song's works, we can seemingly listen the breathing of this city through different ages and touch the inner pulse of its development.

In Xue Song's new works on the theme of people and cities, such as "Jump", "Rising", "Joyous" and "Flying Over", we see Shanghai's past and present. This is a group of works with similar composition: at the lower part of the picture is a group of forest-like high-rise modern city buildings. The sky is composed of many densely packed historical pictures reflecting the various lives during the previous regime of the National Party; and single or multiple men and women floating over the city in the posture of walking, jumping or dancing. Since they are out of context, their behaviors look quite incredible. What do they want to express in such an action? Do they want to escape from this city or to land on this city? Or they are caught in the emptiness between history and reality? It seems that Xue Song poses many puzzles for us in these pictures.

Similar to the method of viewing ordinary paintings, it is necessary to complete the viewing of Xue Song's works through looking them at a distance and very closely. The difference here is that for general paintings, the observation from far to near is for the purpose of capturing the vivid strokes and the colors in subtle changes, while for Xue Song's works, the target of such observation is the suspense and puzzle he poses in the details. The macroscopic and microscopic views see two worlds respectively, the contrast between such pictorial images resulting in semantic supposition and a deepening of connotations.

Since the twentieth century, following the ups and downs in the development of Chinese history, Eastern and Western cultures and arts have encountered several rounds of collision and integration. In the materialization process for the establishment of Chinese cultural value with contemporary attributes, several generations of Chinese artists have made unswerving efforts and explorations through a variety of means and approaches. Now in the twenty-first century, following economic globalization, the contemporary art wave, led by the

European and American cultures, begins to sweep across the world. In such a trend, China, as a third-world country, was facing an extremely big challenge. How to build up the confidence and contemporary value of Chinese art and culture has become the key issue that Chinese intellectuals and artists are facing.

Xue Song has travelled 18 years on his personalized journey of art creation since he was inspired by the 'fire' in 1990. Facing our vast history and numerous worldly scenes: society, politics, tradition, culture, fashion and aesthetics, Xue Song either interprets history from the viewpoint of reality or uses history as a metaphor for reality. Borrowing the power of 'fire', he explores the reality and illusion of art from the destruction and regeneration of pictorial images. Here, on the foundation of a foothold in the reality of China, Xue Song's artistic themes and content are continuously deepened and developed. And, in a long-term process of refinement and absorption of new elements, his artistic style has grown to exhibit distinct characteristics, which possess both Chinese character and international colour.