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The History of Ideas in Pioneering Contemporary Chinese Art: Being a History of Self

Changping Zha

Abstract

After having discussed other forming factors of the world-picture logic as histories—the history of language, the history of time, this article points out the third way of exploring the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art is as a history of self. Then, it suggests the reasons why the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art should be a kind of history of self and what are its features. When we talk about the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art as a history of self, we mean to draw attention to the processes in which pioneering artists shape their self, we also do so to research the relationship between the self and artistic schema of language, and what kind of classical images of self that pioneering contemporary Chinese art makes in the past.

Key Words

Self, history of ideas, pioneering contemporary Chinese Art

Previously we have discussed other forming factors of the world-picture logic as histories—the history of language, the history of time.[1] A third way of exploring the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art is as a history of self. In an individual's mental life the question of whether he is first aware of language or of time is one for the researchers of cognitive and developmental psychology. The starting point of a person becoming an artist, however, is almost certainly when they begin to realize the need to form their own artistic language and consider how to make use of materials and media effectively. This is the case irrespective of whether or not they may at this time be unconsciously living among other people in physical time, completely unaware of their own subjective psychological time.

Once an artist becomes aware of their own artistic language they recognize themself as an individual. This is because the artistic language of any particular artist is central to their self and identity, it is the essential thing that separates them from the crowd. If they do not have their own unique artistic language, then they are as generic and faceless as the crowd, and not to be considered an artist at all.

To put it another way, the artistic language and self-awareness of an artist are psychological events that coincide with the mental life of an artist. The signs of this artistic language often initially manifest due to accidental causes, like in the early nineties, when Wang Guangyi was moving house he noticed a visual connection between two objects placed unintentionally next to each other on a table—a pack of cigarettes with the logo for the Marlboro tobacco company on it and a comic book from the Great Cultural Revolution. This spawned the first of many pieces entitled "Big Criticism". Another example is the earliest appearance of Zhou Chunya's "Green Dog" which emerged in the late 1990s when the artist mistakenly mixed the wrong colour while he was painting a portrait of his dog, "Heigen" (Black Root), the subconscious reason for this would have been his dealing with the loss of his late pet, Heigen.

From the perspective of sequential physical time, it's not very feasible to discuss the concepts of language, time and the self present in the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary art all at the same time. For the convenience of our discussion it would be more logical to position the history of the self after the history of

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Figure 1. Pang Maokun. *Drifters No. 2*. Oil painting, 180×140cm, 2005.

language and the history of time in priority. We do this while also acknowledging that it is a subjective self that is the writer of this overall history of ideas, and that the previously posited views of the history of time and the history of language were formed and shaped by such a self, with its own personal history. What gives the history of language the overall priority in the order of the seven forming factors, and in particular precedence over the history of self, is the fact that an artist's artistic language is so fundamental to the process of shaping their self.

As well as self awareness of their own artistic language, an artist's concept of self includes a deep awareness of a particular aspect or moment of a psychological event in their life experience. The latter is what is generally seen as the thematic concern of art. This kind of indispensible personal artistic experience is rooted in an artist's unique perceptions, its object could be a past artistic language, a moment of time itself, different encounters they have had with other people, some phenomenon in nature or reality, incidents in history or possibly even some encounter with a divine presence. Their individuality finally manifests in their means of expression and in the work they produce. The artist has perceived something that others have not before apprehended and has expressed sensations that others have no way of expressing.

"Unique personal experience is the big prerequisite for creative work. Only once you have grasped this, you will truly feel compelled to express yourself. This is one of the reasons why works of contemporary art will always lean towards the personal, and the public value of these works will be dependent upon the extent to which the artist has engaged in self expression. Unlike commercial creative activity, this kind of contemporary art is directed inward, it is not the product of market research but requires the searching within and mining of the heart and soul for creative stimulus, which must then be transformed into something that can be widely recognized and communicated. Art is the work of the heart and not of the brain."[2]

Art is a form of expression for the emotional experiences of living. An inexperienced or immature artist will often shift from one minute to the next between the various forming factors of the world we mentioned above (language, time, the individual person, the natural world, society, history and God). This kind of artist is not yet aware of the connections and interplay between these factors and their own life experience, they don't know where to start in developing a conceptual schema for their personal artistic language. An overly mature or experienced artist, on the other hand, may often latch onto a singular past sensory experience in their life, and expand this into a reproducible, brand-like motif. This is a tendency that many artists cannot normally save themselves from. They use a past fleeting impression to fill in the creative gap in their current mental life, through the repeated production of a particular schema they compensate for their lack of artistic innovation. The proper function of the schema of artistic language, however, is to present an artist's current state of being, which it does through the outward expression or symbolic representation of their emotional experience of living as a self-aware individual. Lovers of art can intuitively grasp from the changing patterns of such schema of artistic language how deep and broad the artist's awareness of themself as an individual is.

Regardless of whether discussing individual artists or the art world as a whole, the history of artistic language schemata is a history of the self. This self is conveyed



Figure 2. Guo Wei. *Friends No. 3*. Acrylic on canvas, 250×150cm, 2007.

by means of the externalized forms the artist gives to the emotional experiences of their individual life. The above statement is based on a creator-centric approach to art criticism (which emphasizes the original artist's intention over audience interpretation). It would not be sufficient to stop there though. A history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art must involve more than exclusively examining the history of artistic language schemata. It must expose the thinking and ideas working behind these schemata and inquire into how at their root the seven factors we have discussed have come to form them (e.g. language, time, the individual person, the natural world, society, history and God).

In the process of writing this history of ideas, it is pivotal that we go beyond the creator-centric approach to art criticism. We must do all we can to absorb the research and interpretations of art critics, as well as do our utmost to engage artists in the dialogue. We must strive to place the artistic language schemata of individual artists into the context of a world-picture logic and discuss them from the standpoint of both relational and event aesthetics. In doing the above, we can set about creating a history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art narrated by the creators themselves as the subjects.

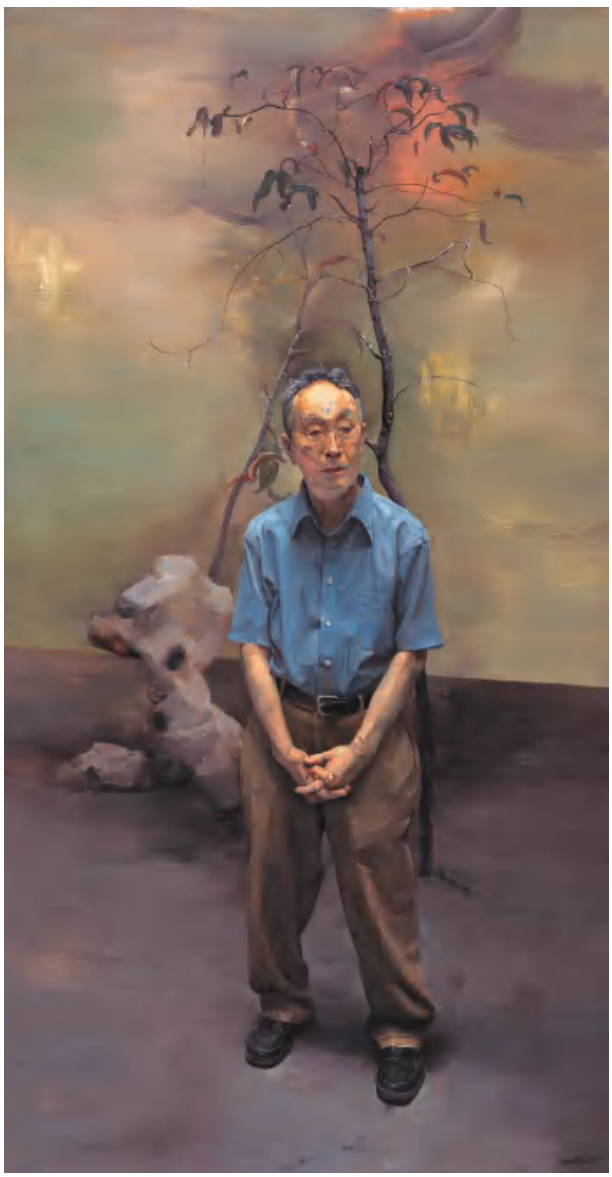


Figure 3. Fan Bo. *Blossom and Fall No. 5*. Oil painting, 230×120cm, 2007.

It may be the case that this history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art goes on to inspire many other histories of ideas in pioneering contemporary art. What makes it unique is the writer's deployment of critical approaches such as the world-picture logic[3], relational aesthetics and event aesthetics. It is also distinct in our diagnosis of pioneering contemporary Chinese art as "mixed modern", a term used in connection to our evaluation of this transitional period in history overall as a "mixed aeon". In light of this theoretical base, a broadly creator-centric approach will become very apparent in this history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art.

To view the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art as a history of the self allows us to examine what kinds of concepts of the self are to be found in works of pioneering contemporary art, and how the concept of the self within any particular work match up to the supposed concept of self that we believe to be universal. Needless to say, there are many instances of work in pioneering contemporary Chinese art where the self is expressed instinctually as a "no self", where the artists have taken the person to be merely a flesh and blood organism and assumed their survival instinct to be the essential nature of human existence. This is particularly evident in certain works executed in the name of performance art, which have used everyday biological behavior such as vomiting, urinating and hair-cutting as the subject matter of artistic expression. In truth, this sort of expression of "no self" through an instinctual "self" is at the outset a renouncement of the whole project of art. The instinctual "self" is only a part of a larger facet of a person's self—one's "default self". A person's self also has an "authentic self". For an artist, how such an "authentic self" is structured is informed by their individual artistic language.

Even if we only look within the confines of a singular medium like oil painting, we see different artists creating, through the different application of materials, a whole variety of "self-images" in contemporary art. Examples of this are the drifting and lofty self in Pang

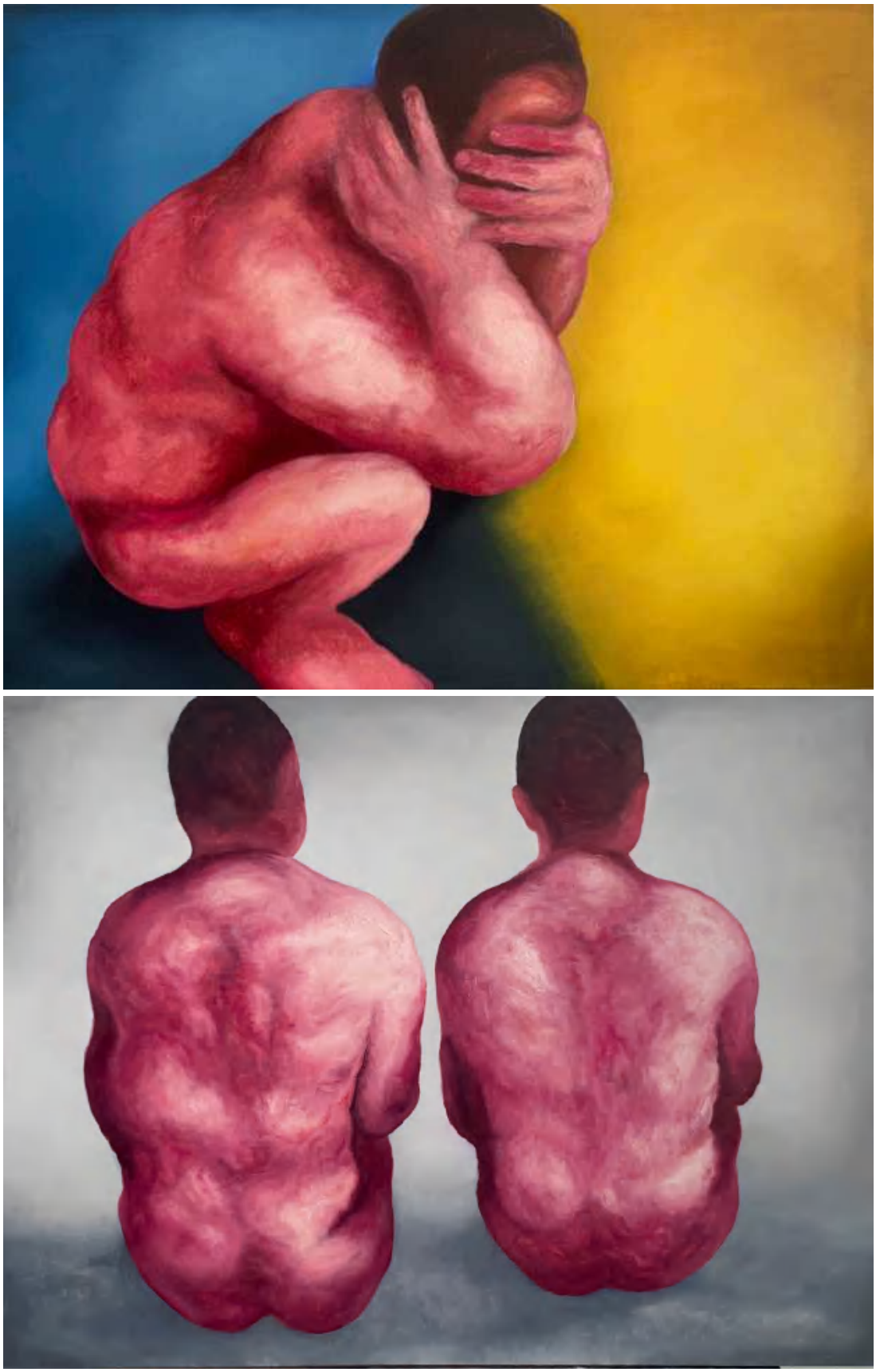


Figure 4. Zhao Nengzhi. *Metaphor of the Body No. 6*. Oil painting, 180×230 cm, 2023.
Figure 5. Zhao Nengzhi. *Metaphor of the Body No. 8*. Oil painting, 200×260 cm, 2023.





Figure 6. Zhu Chunlin. *Diary*. Oil painting, 91×73cm, 2010.
Figure 7. Zhu Chunlin. *Book of Wisdom*. Oil painting, 120×80cm, 2013.

Maokun's work (the 2004–05 series "Drifters"), Guo Wei's narcissistic and self-amusing self (the 2007 series "Friends", the 2008 series "Mosquito" and "Untitled"), the fragmented and incomplete self of Liao Zhenwu, the alienated self of Fan Bo (the 2005–08 series "Blossom and Fall"), the self-absorbed, self-pitying self of Zhao Nengzhi, in Wu Jianjun's work, a self which wallows in sickness (the 2004–05 series "Pictures of the Body", the 2005 series "Small Portraits" and the 2006 series "Non-Human"), Feng Zhengjie's exhibitionist self (the 2006–08 series "Portrait of China", the 2009 series "Gaudy", the 2012 series "Noble Maidens of Modern China"), and finally, Zhu Chunlin's serene and composed self (the 2008 work "Daisy", "Diary" 2010, "Book of Wisdom" 2013). In photography, Hong Lei's 1998 work "Tears at the End of the Century" created a series of classic images of a self going through some inexpressible grief.

On the whole, the concepts of the self that one comes across in works of pioneering contemporary Chinese art nearly all possess a somewhat "in and for itself" quality to them. The attitude the characters in these pieces convey to the audience is: "Regardless of what you think about us, our lives have their own meanings and we will go on living these lives!" They all to some extent carry with them the egocentrism of postmodern society, and mistakenly see the "default self" as an "authentic self", interpreting humanity's essential existence through the lens of the survival instinct. As a matter of fact, the concept of the self that presents itself in some contemporary works possesses a certain uniformity, all of which are uncertain and hybrid. This is all an apt and genuine reflection of the "mixed-modern" time in which everyone in China, including these artists, is living. Of course, the creation of a person's ideal concept of the self arises from the awakening of their authentic self, which is reached through the building of proper connections between the self and the other forming factors of the world. What this means is a person needs to relinquish this instinctual "self", otherwise the authentic "self" is not likely to emerge. As it is with art, so too with life (Translation by Lance Pursey, Translation Proof by Changping Zha).

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Editor: Yao Xiao

ENDNOTES

1. Changping Zha, A History of Ideas in Pioneering Contemporary Chinese Art: Being a History of Language and Time, *Art Frontier* /Vol. 01, No.3 & No.4 Jul.-Sep., Oct.-Dec. 2023, 1-10.

2. Cissy: "Ye Jintian: Beyond the Fame, Fanatsies of Remoteness" in Wang Jing, Cui Junxia, eds. *Crossing Boundaries: Multi-disciplinary Practicioners and Their Thought in Contemporary Art* (Beijing: New Star Press, 2010), 34.

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中國先鋒藝術思想史——作為自我史

查常平

摘　要：在繼藝術語言史與藝術時間史後，本文回答中國先鋒藝術思想史為什麼是自我史及其特徵。藝術家如何形成自己的自我、它與藝術語言圖式的關係、先鋒藝術中塑造了哪些經典的自我形象，這構成了作為自我史的中國先鋒藝術思想史的引論性的內容。

關鍵詞：自我；思想史；先鋒藝術