

Tang Contemporary Art

You Yong: Breakthrough Journeys

2023.9.2 - 10.9

Curatorial Statement

Breakthrough Journeys: 2022-2023 New works by You Yong

Renowned art critic Chen Danqing once commented, "You Yong is near-omnipotent, he can paint portraits, figures, landscapes, still life, large-scale pieces, small pieces, on canvas, and on wooden boards. He is also near-omniscient, knowing from the Fayum portraits of ancient Egypt to the various exquisite works of contemporary figurative art, including, of course, traditional Chinese aesthetics. He has them in his eyes and in his heart." You Yong's past fascination with traditions and classics helps him constantly delineate historical coordinates upon his paintings, and has led to the versatility and diversity of his stylistic expressions. Although we rarely see in his works how historical and societal changes throughout mankind history can bring about cultural conflicts and social anxieties, an indisputable fact is that he possesses a clear and determined subject consciousness and trajectory of action. In this exhibition, a series of new works created by You Yong from 2022 to 2023 demonstrates a clear watershed—a breakthrough beyond the visual logic of classical oil painting language, while absorbing and transforming the context and conventions of traditional Chinese painting. From my perspective, this shift is precisely the method by which You Yong examines and refines his own painting language and logic.

You Yong has an inherent sensitivity to the technicality of art, enabling him to master its language and utilize the method of painting for conveying powerfully his observation and contemplation regarding contemporary society. For him, achieving technical accuracy has never been a challenge. During this summer, You Yong created a series of portraits in Xinjiang, such as "Gazing", "The Color of Peaches", "Rose", and so on, which seem to deviate from his previous painting habits and language logic. Firstly, he set a higher level of difficulty for himself in terms of the dimensions of the artworks, opting for elongated formats of 120x50 cm and 80x30 cm – formats that are not commonly seen in realism portraits. This prompted him to reevaluate the overall composition and spatial layers. In terms of visual representation, he abandoned the spatial relationships dictated by focal perspective and the large extents of negative space. Instead, he employed concise colors and flat painting techniques, relinquishing to some extent the depiction and rendering of the tactile quality and volume of the figures. This allowed the figures, backgrounds, and environments to form a unified and simplistic flat space. The four-panel painting "No. 777 Xin Hua South Rd" exhibited in this collection follows a similar approach, presenting a scene of multiple people gathering within a flat space while boasting a sense of fluidity. He no longer fixates on spatial relationships, and has replaced meticulous brushwork with a mood-focused flat application. He intentionally subtracts from the language of painting: paradoxically, this simplicity and directness of the imagery is what precisely strikes at the soul of one's being.



Gazing, Oil on canvas
120 x 50 cm, 2023

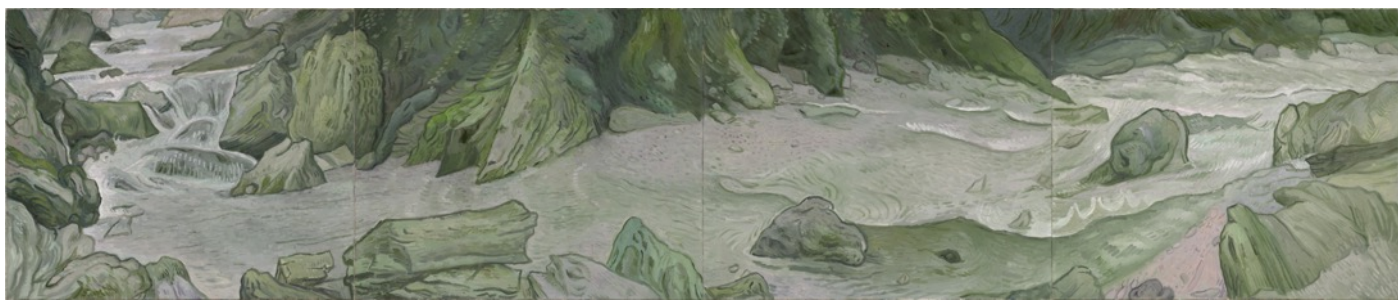
When faced with different themes, You Yong always seems to find a way to connect his awareness of the issues with individual experiences. Works such as "Home at the table", "Stay alone together", and "Drawing of restless and whimsical" were reference to

the propositions in a painting variety show he has attended. In terms of narrative strategy, he chooses to ritualize and decorate everyday life, imbuing it with a sense of transcendence. Through metaphors and symbolic techniques, he creates an unfamiliar and alienating visual experience and aesthetic perception. "Home at the table" depicts a family dinner from an aerial view, showcasing a variety of dishes arranged across a large table, accompanied by six people, three dogs, and two parrots. However, in this feast, the relationship between humans and animals seems closer than that among family members, subtly hinting at the contemporary challenges faced by families. "Stay alone together" portrays a gathering on a lawn, with gently rippling water in a riverside park, lightly brushing, drooping willow branches, and white table mats, altogether creating a cozy atmosphere. However, the seven men and women participating in the gathering are all engrossed in their own activities, not communicating with each other. You Yong skillfully incorporates his reflections on contemporary life into his depictions, using a calm brushstroke to contemplate moments of everyday life and reminding us of the alienation among people in today's society. In "Drawing of restless and whimsical", You Yong fully demonstrates his painting skills, effortlessly creating the stage space while employing symbolic metaphors. The traditional landscape in the background then adds another surreal dimension to the work. After years of immersion in Western artistic traditions, You Yong seems to have realized the importance of researching Chinese texts and historical contexts as well. Although he still starts from a "Western" grammar and premise, You Yong proactively brings the artistic coordinates back to Chinese painting traditions. Looking back at his work "Marine Creatures" created in 2021, it still follows the approach of sketching, but the composition and the title of the artwork draw inspiration from traditional scroll paintings. In "Conch sailing", from the composition, brushwork, and color scheme to the ambiance, one can discern the influence of Ma Yuan, a Southern Song Dynasty painter. This is also an attempt by You Yong to express the ink painting ambiance using oil painting materials. As for "Rhythm hearing among the forest spring", exhibited this time, it clearly blends Eastern and Western artistic forms. The strong male figure juxtaposed with the ink-like lines delineating the forest stream and scattered rocks in the mountains creates a stark temporal and spatial contrast, resulting in a stylistic work with a touch of surrealism. It is evident that You Yong does not simply seek to understand tradition or to copy it, but rather aims to place Chinese traditional culture within the context of world civilization to gain a deeper understanding of it and internalize it into his own painting system and language expression.



Stay alone together, Oil on canvas, 180 x 320 cm, 2023

These constant experiments in his creations have also brought significant changes to You Yong's painting of Zhongnan Mountains this year. Liberated from the constraints of the traditional one-point perspective, he observes objects dynamically and then categorises them, finding a new logic for landscape painting and a more pure and preferred way of expressing himself. Evidently, this approach is not solely driven by our visual senses, but rather relies heavily on the artist's conceptual guidance and selection. Compared to his previous works, this new batch shows considerable adjustments in composition, brushwork, and color. It lacks some of the striking brushstrokes, vibrant colors, and flashy details, replaced instead by an overall harmonized atmosphere, subdued color tones, and simplified, concise details. In works such as "Rocky creek", "Mountain stream", and "Between creek and rocks", the canvas is enveloped in muted shades of green, while various scenes composed of semi-abstract color blocks intertwine on the same plane. You Yong no longer pursues the "truth" of what is seen with the naked eye but rather expresses the depth and continuity of time and space through a dynamic observation and understanding. He combines the artistic techniques of Cubism with traditional Chinese painting methods, with the shaping of light, volume, and shadows giving way to the accumulation of flowing lines and irregular forms, creating a sense of shifting perspectives and atmosphere. At present, it is difficult to determine which stage You Yong's experiments have reached, but from this collection of works, we can perceive a young artist who is not complacent, daring to break new ground with determination and attitude.



Rocky creek, Oil on canvas, 50 x 240 cm, 2023

I remember in my initial conversation with You Yong, he expressed a firm dedication to classical techniques and language. Later, when I visited his studio, I saw the diverse array of works he had accumulated over nearly a decade. There were copies of artworks from European and American museums, landscape paintings depicting various locations around the world, and a multitude of stylistic practices. Among them, there were the serenity and sacredness of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the Romanticist language of freedom and passion, the Realism in portraying institution campuses, and the Modernist reverence for the vitality of life and color. If You Yong had not ventured away from Western painting traditions, he might have still managed to create excellent works. However, his current shift in artistic language and his reevaluation of certain new and old issues have already sparked a different kind of brilliance. While the contemporary transformation of traditional resources is not a novel concept in today's art world, You Yong's practice uniquely display vividly the trajectory of an artist's thoughts. I recall Xu Bing discussing the criteria for judging art, stating that a good artist can express their ideas through artistic means or explain them through their actions. The ability to transform existing art methodologies and present them in an artistic manner is what humanity needs, constituting a vital part in intellectual exchange.

Tang Yu
August 2023