

The Coherence of Existence in a Microcosm: On Shen Ling's Pictorial Narratives

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The history of art declares that great painters' drawings reveal the basic elements of and narrative backgrounds for their creative methods, their frequently-employed thematic elements, their personal aesthetic tendencies, or specific aspects of their lives. Drawings can also show some of the hidden personal predilections or emotions that artists see as not entirely serious, or perhaps extremely private. Compared to publicly announced and defined aesthetic standards in the realm of art, drawings more deeply and intensely determine the artist's work, and they may guide his or her life to a very large extent. In this sense, drawing can be considered to have almost autobiographical aesthetic and philosophical notes, or to serve as a guide for how to interpret and explain works of painting. Drawings are never simply preparatory; they are often indispensable in the later painting, and drawings are more often independent, spontaneous, and free. They have cast off the practical obligations of precision, completeness, and grandeur, and they are a way of recording the myriad faces of nature; the compositional elements, thoughts, and observations of themes, modes, and narrative materials, the spontaneous, impromptu creations, and the summaries and collections of microcosmic realities all seem insignificant, but they may be immensely meaningful in the complex structure of a work.

Drawing often has a private, personalized, spontaneous, fleeting, and fragile character, whether physically and visually or psychologically and emotionally. Drawing is akin to text and the act of drawing is akin to writing. Drawing is a record of a visual imagination and an intellectual idea; it captures new and rather unclear yet also unexpected ideas or emotions, ambiances or implications, and it does not pursue clear and unequivocal final forms or grand structures. Thus, drawing often has an extremely personal, delicate, and sensitive quality, but it is also spontaneous, impromptu, indirect, incomplete, and even imperfect. Akin to engaging in discussions using everyday language or gestures, the act of drawing does not require formal precision; instead, more attention is focused on the depth and sustainability of the dialogue.

Painting is both a concept and the presentation of that concept; it is the projection of a vision, the revelation of an essential state of spirit and emotion. Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, a sensitive and self-confident Mannerist art theorist once wrote of *disegno interno*, a natural beauty that was not visible and could not be grasped with or appeal to the senses; it was a spiritual beauty that was intellectual and formless, residing in the artist's imagination. It was the completely free display of the ability to project artistic conceptions. Accomplishments in *disegno interno* reflect the ability to create form from the realm of imagination, from understandable source materials, cultural memories, and metaphysical narratives, which determines the endless vitality and mysterious essence of drawing. Shen Ling's drawing works are rich and refined; they are full of intelligence, humor, and sarcasm, and they express an overwhelming abundance of sensibility, showing why these drawings are immensely significant within her body of work. At the same time, these works present a natural, joyous, and unrestrained autonomy in both the narratives and the internal pictorial compositions.

Generally, Shen Ling's oil paintings have a visual coherence and completeness; these qualities are rare today, but always convincing. Comparatively speaking, her drawings seem to have a free and lighthearted innocence, and a spontaneous sense of chance and fragmentation. The trivial minutiae of everyday life often appear in her drawings. Animals and plants, housewares and studio tools, intimate friends, strangers encountered in a coffee shop or on the street, old photographs, decorative items, home furnishings, birds

resting on branches in a garden, and portraits of her spouse or friends—all of this is layered in a very unusual, fresh way that breaks through genre hierarchies. This infinite array of things is fully incorporated into an extremely personalized, fictional, and almost fairytale micro-universe with an emotional continuity that is, as a result, imbued with a sense of poetry.

These fragile yet compact micro-compositions do not have a basic, fixed structure, nor do they follow an underlying, dominant set of compositional principles. This obvious, poetic coherence stems from the depth and strength of the artist's personal emotional relationships to fast-changing, fragmented microscopic realities. Their specific and perceptual significance in the material world is connected to that essential, vital coherence that lies within their existence.

Shen Ling's painted universe and her keen, empathetic questioning of the small things and the essential meaning of life itself are connected to her satires and critical interpretations of the vague complexity of human nature. This complexity is comprised of the tiny, honest, and seemingly insignificant fleeting moments in everyday life, the drifting relationships between people, and the scenes, hallucinations, and visions that stem from real experiences or psychologies. In this mixed, intense, and slightly strange world, the boundaries between the natural and the manmade, the biological categories of man and animal, and the various unexpected events and unprecedented narratives fuse and interweave within these living, fantastical, and magnificent visions. These pictorial narratives only exist in intricate and resplendent pictorial realities that appeal to the senses. More precisely, they are formed within pictorial realities, so they do not require the viewer to externalize their emotions in a poetic-imaginative narrative.

At the same time, the boundaries between the past and present, between practical, tangible things and visions, as well as intellectual and spiritual phenomena such as music, literature, myth, and memory have become ambiguous and unclear. The interweaving and interpenetration of different real layers and narratives are the spatial zones and strata in the structure of a painting, representing different dimensions and imaginative forms. Shen incorporates all of this into a constantly shifting, complex yet confusing, detailed yet substantial assemblage.

The highly intense layering of scenes and events full of vitality and perception, which are spatially and temporally unrelated or have multiple narrative levels, weakens the structural limitations of a fabricated pictorial reality. Foreground and background—the fabricated depth of pictorial space—create a sense of space through intense illumination. The center and the margins of the picture bring the depiction of different events into a single overall experience, while the perceptual implications of the exterior surfaces echo the drifting, nearly hallucinatory relationship between individual pictorial elements.

In multi-colored forests, animals, feral cats, birds, fish, and snakes are faintly visible behind the trees and flowers, disordering our spatial perceptions and confusing their position within fictional pictorial reality. This interference is further magnified by concentrating on and emphasizing multiple dimensions of these strange animals, making them seem even more unrelated. The different dimensions of the animals' bodies make their temporal and spatial existence ambiguous, and these unrelated times and spaces make their presence and role in the entire fictional pictorial reality even harder to define. Moreover, due to the intensification of the sensory surfaces in the image, the latent imaginative pictorial space becomes much more meaningful, a mysterious event or site of encounter that is awakened by vitality. This fictional, concentrated, seductive, magnificent, mysterious, and unpredictable pictorial space attracts the viewer when presented as the accumulation and layering of various motivations and events against different temporal or spatial backgrounds.

Latent imaginative pictorial reality involves these temporal levels and spatial settings in a process of layering and accumulation, but all of these layers are retained, creating a harmoniously meshed entity without clear rankings or temporal sequences; she has created an unstable spatial system.

Shen Ling shapes a confusing, concentrated painted reality; here, various narrative elements with irrational or fairytale aspects and different layers of intellectual reflection (often expressed as satire) that extend from life essentially connect to a vital, perceptual, and pulsating coherence of existence. This layered coherence admits and occupies all of the experiences and phenomena that have been layered in thriving, disorderly existences, all physical or spiritual realities, and all chance events and processes. Thus, these multicolored coherences of existence were developed in parallel, then imprinted with various independent events and processes. They become the subject through a lighthearted, casual innocence and purity, as well as a vegetal vitality and tangibility, because they do not follow an absolute sequence with a strict order established in advance.

This playful delight and colorful liveliness come from the infinite vitality of the coherence of existence, which is vitality that you can perceive in any narrative or small thing. Shen Ling achieves depth when presenting small things in a perceptive way, filling her works with vitality, even though she avoids making any literary or spectacular representation of a story or linear narrative process. Her work does not contain any visual narrative that can appeal to the viewer through pictures, thereby generating from painting itself a series of pictorial events that are constructed through pictures and compositions.

Within extraordinary discussions of painting, Shen Ling relies on unusual painting methods to build an essential, current pictorial reality that also has critical and satirical elements on a psychological-literary-emotional level; her work is similarly directly related to metaphors of lived entities that are experienced, realized, and internalized. Although these entities are no longer understood or heard, read, and seen through direct discussions and everyday actions among small groups or between individuals. In this sense, Shen's work seems to bear faint traces of a Romantic aesthetic, but it does not include the solemn and lofty moral reprimands or nostalgia that so often permeates Romantic pieces. Her views on the world are more often expressed as a joyful affirmation of the trivial, heterogenous, and diverse facets possessed by all things in this tangible, miniature reality.

So that her painting methods reveal this immensely poetic, vital, and essential entity, Shen Ling developed a metaphorical narrative method that seems to naturally unfold in her perceptual and imaginative modeling, giving the pictures an overwhelming vitality that cannot be resisted. The buoyant vitality and essential energy contained in these intricate and resplendent microscopic realities permeate fragments of things in everyday life to create a tumultuous, mixed vision comprised of single realities. Thereby, she gives the viewer the impression that all things are one and all rivers meet as one, and that everything is incorporated into a flowing, fresh, and nurturing whole. Among the living realities that already exist, the perceptual infusion of a festive joy and vitality unfolds on different layers and against different backgrounds, creating a stimulating and tangible yet also detailed and compact pictorial reality; it can be understood as a metaphor for the profound mysteries of living entities, or a metaphor for the experiences of and references for lived entities.

The internal coherence of this metaphorical narrative can be attributed to the revelation of the single-minded pursuit of an entity's essence. Here, Shen's creative intent is certainly not to preach about moral philosophy to viewers, and when faced with the coherence of existence, she takes an instinctive, positive attitude. Her paintings convey a sustained, naturally-occurring infinite joy, a continuous and flourishing vitality;

they absorb viewers into the events in the painting, fascinating them through exaggerated and concentrated visual forms. These pictorial events are simply the passionate and feverish encounters that feel like a baptism of the soul, which take place within fated, intense, and unavoidable foundational experiences; experiences such as these are represented in these miniature realities. At the same time, these narratives about interior worlds, spiritual independence, and the brevity of life do not build dogmatic or determinative pictorial systems; instead, the works reflect a happy, free, varied, natural, and very tangible pictorial poetry.

Through single pictorial realities, this visual coherence is made persuasive by strengthened perceptual density; it is built on a vivid, enchanting, but also specific coherence of existence, as a deeper, internalized image that is the product of intellectual ideas and spiritual experiences. In other words, in constituting singular, perceptual, tangible, and short-lived realities that extend from life, she finds a specific, material form, creating connected, compact, confirming, and harmonious narratives. Her work can simultaneously be understood as a living form and pictorial reality, or as a perceptual-tangible metaphor for living entities. The microscopic narratives refracted from our complex experiences and spontaneous feelings, memories, and psychologies make metaphorical charm specific and material as existing entities. In this, there is no dramatic or guiding intent or goal, which serve as rules or guidelines for events.

Therefore, the hazy, chance, passing, insignificant, and marginal moments that already exist in reality—which also include our illusions, desires, recollections, psychological projections, hallucinations, and visions—obtain a fundamental meaning that plays a decisive role in the overall narrative. The poetry contained in the tangible, vital materiality of microscopic reality is elevated to its greatest extent.

The motivations in Shen Ling's pictorial world are reflected in private and fragile, but also incomparably intense, microcosms in which flowers, plants, animals, people, interior and exterior spaces, gardens, houses, courtyards, and rooms merge with and penetrate one another. The pictorial compactness that this produces blurs the latent boundaries between compositional elements of pictorial realities in her imagination, so these pictorial realities can only be explained in the overall visual contexts of pictorial metaphors and narratives. The irresistible smallness of the coherence of existence is embodied as the lively, harmonious, and poetic essence of Shen Ling's seductive yet innocent and natural images.