



Deconstructing the Abstract

by Ding Yi, 2008

Position and concept:

The creation of the 'Appearance of Crosses' series began in 1988. At that time China's contemporary art, like Chinese society as a whole, was undergoing a process of transition involving the assault of contemporary Western culture and reflection upon traditional Chinese culture. I needed to rid myself of both the burden of traditional culture that I was carrying and the influence of the pure painting style of early western modernism. To go back to the starting point of art, to start again from zero. I remember that my first work at that time was in the three primary colours of red, yellow and blue. I chose crosses precisely because they are a symbol with a diversity of meanings, and I had used cross threads countless times in my work to mark precisely the coordinates that had to be observed in the process of 'binding colours'. It's both a technical term from the printing industry and a symbol; there's no space for using symbolic techniques that are able to capture associations. I wanted to filter out all practicality and take painting back to its innate quality of form, the form being the spirit.

The existence of the 'Appearance of Crosses' visual symbols, where the first impression is the important thing, carries with it the human awareness of commonality; it connects with humanity's basic symbolic experience, a logical connection. But for me, 'Appearance of Crosses' is just meaningless crosses and nothing more than that. The systematic layout is only brushstrokes as in painting; the symbols are used to inhibit the inert meanings from experience. Crosses lined up close together in a kind of rational way, exploring the relationship between superficiality and space in painting. The distribution of coloured lines or fragmentary shapes makes the space of the painted surface produce a richer randomness in a limited, constant relationship. In addition, the essential quality of the art is a symbol that appears in the painting before your eyes and, by means of brushstrokes transformed by symbols, models a comprehensive spiritual power with reference to the current times.

Tradition and reflection:

The integrated nature of traditional culture is currently under challenge from the real meaning of contemporary society. Traditional culture's connotations are changing and being deconstructed by internationalized lifestyles, globalised political systems, competition of economic interests and networking patterns that are reorganized in the ordering of the surface layer of society. And these elements are bringing about an unreality in modern life, and are also changing it into a kind of spiritual memory or material trace. My work in charcoal and chalk attempts to focus attention on the idea of traces of traditional non-mainstream culture. Cutting into the objects,

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implements, remnants and so on of history, such as cultural relicts, from the standpoint of today's archaeology. These are either dug up from underground or have been repeatedly washed over by rain and wind, and what they manifest today is a damaged, faded, broken, fragmentary current state. My work attempts to initiate reflection on these undecipherable material meanings.

Colloquialism:

This involves two aspects: the repetition of simple symbols, and a leveling out and directness of technique. This method of working has limited prerequisites, that is limitations on content and limitations on colour. I have called the time when I drew with chalk on a blackboard and drew with charcoal 'colloquialisation'. There was no process of mixing colours; there was a situation of direct writing, and the work was very coherent. At the same time, the elements of chance and randomness were effectively retained.

Marginality:

Making art a marginal discipline. In other words: making art unlike art. Making it have some components of art and other components as well, whether they be industrial, design-related or practical. When art and other fields combine, they can produce a new energy. For an artist, an 'individual attempt' is actually always something like a 'danger'; it can easily result in repetition and empiricism brought on by making attempts in a static way. Repeatedly seeking out marginal painting methods reduces the painting factor, and makes one keep returning to the border between art and non-art. The artist has to adjust this boundary line in their work. The fields on the margins of art have a kind of latent energy; it gives art a broader field of vision and meaning, and spurs the artist to have some distance from the values and habits of artistic tradition. As a result of revising habitual methods, the attributes of art are constantly broadened, invoking new artistic questions. The marginality of art has another special quality: it poses an unremitting challenge to the possibility of art as a *fait accompli*.

Materials:

I have always been curious about new kinds of colour products. These colours have broken through traditional colour systems. So I am interested in painting with for example fluorescent, metallic, glittery, phosphorescent, or pearlite colours. When these colours are combined they can produce strange visual effects and can directly involve a contemporary everyday feeling. At the same time I am also very interested in using materials that are not to do with painting – oil markers, ballpoints, fountain pens, the chalk that teachers use, charcoal, spray paint, linen cloth, corrugated paper, ready-finished fabrics. But the use of these materials in my work doesn't establish the surface texture of early modernism in relation to the skin texture of the materials. Instead, the sense of their inherent nature is put to use. They are just intermediary media that adapt to the painting concept, raising the possibilities of exciting the visual sense in an experimental way, with the visual sense being stimulated and the solid transformed element forming the condition, reflecting light, and not being easy to preserve. Another aspect: these materials have inherent limitations: when you're using things like classroom chalk, ballpoint pens, phosphorescent colours, there are 7 or 8 kinds at the most. Without a doubt, you need to face the limitations on the colours when working with them.

Methodology:

This is a very individualised method. How, in an individual style system developed over a long period, does an artist maintain self-discipline towards their work? I often use technical tricks to make managing the experience and the techniques of the work become something unfamiliar. For an artist, the biggest obstacle to the development of art is perhaps skill. I often use slowed - down methods to increase the difficulty of the work: such as painting cross symbols as a basic motif, reducing the units, first painting white symbols as a background and then covering them with fluorescent colours and so on. My objective is only to make it more unfamiliar to my hand, and to slow down my own judgments of my work. Apart from that, one also needs a kind of monitoring process. When the surface of the painting is getting more and more loaded down with trivial details, and the

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colours are getting more complicated the more they are piled up, then I have to return to a simple state or the beginning state, from simple to complex and then back to simple again. Sometimes that means going back from colours to black and white. This is a kind of self-filtering method; it's succinct. A pure painted surface can enable us to clearly see the true nature of many issues. Perhaps that's the best way for an artist to continue to preserve clear-headed thinking.

Cultural misreadings:

In Europe, the patterns and colours of Scottish tartans are a cultural symbol indicating a particular traditional Scottish clan identity. But in China tartan is a very common kind of cloth and has no cultural symbolic meaning. The checked patterns are manufactured in large quantities by factories and are available for consumers to choose in fabric shops. Choosing a checked pattern printed by industrialised printing on cloth as a substitute for canvas as a base for painting is to do with the formal relationship between its pattern structure and the individualised cross symbols. This kind of question of mutually intervening forms is a case of non-cultural meaning covering cultural meaning. The repeated individualised symbols hide the original form of the factory-produced cloth. Filling in the base pattern blurs the practical meaning of the cloth and also dispels the characteristic understandings of Eastern and Western cultures. This points to another way of deconstructing social culture or a strange visual state.

Perspective and space:

The perspective relationships in my work are based on the spatial conditions inherent in the network structures themselves, a kind of constantly undulating limited depth of field that creates a kind of superficial metaphysical perspective relationship, producing a network egalitarianism with no centre. And it is not a traditional focal point or pointillist perspective. In addition, the space where one exhibits the work has an influence on the effect of the work, as the relationship between the flat work and the surrounding space seems to gain in importance. By means of the design of the distribution and colours at the base of wall, the paintings make the whole space cease to be static and fixed, bearing the heaviest load in the whole corresponding visual concept. In the relationship between exhibition-style traditional museum works and the surface of the wall, there is already no way of using inherent methods of containing the relationship of mutual dialogue between contemporary art works and the space and the audience.

The times and the market:

These are times of competition and noise. Information is complex and confused, and there are constant powerful stimuli, particularly characterised by the diversification of cultures and extremely trivial exchanges. The spread of cities is advancing rapidly, and inner cities are full to the brim with competition – between people, between things, between new and old, between commerce and human nature, emotion and reason, noise and silence. Cities are free; but that is also an exaggeration; the city exists in between reality and illusion, but the various experiences of artists in the city are also wide-ranging and abstract. There must inevitably be some relationship between the new movements of city expansion, which symbolise nationalisation, and new art and new times. How does everybody's existence make this period in the history of the city leave traces of its times? How, can one record, from a macro standpoint, the boastfulness, the superficiality, the chaos, the disorder and the stimuli, of city life, the fashionable parts, as well as the fascinating unfolding and competing visual show of neon lights, floodlights, the city that never sleeps, the flow of people, the flow of cars, advertising, the clusters of buildings, the small commodities, the screens displaying share information, all the city lights?

The artists and their work:

The importance of the work, including the quantity and the quality, taking into all the important factors of individualised style: quality is always an instrument under challenge, and quantity is a full display of the stamina of the will. The works make the qualities of the artist's personality and spirit become specific, and they also project the artist's field of cultural vision and the right or wrong of individual skills. At the same time, the works

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form one factor in the artist's comprehensive self confidence. The works constitute a constant challenge to the artist. Finishing a work is not very difficult; the difficult thing is for works to continually make new breakthroughs, and to have absorbed the common spiritual characteristics of contemporary culture, fused with artist's independent artistic language, transcending limits, expanding both inherent aesthetic judgments and understanding of the whole imaginative power of the works. Only this can produce excellent artists and works.

The artist and the work space: Artists originally dream of their home having a harmonious and quite large room that can be used as a studio, so that they can connect with family life and can spend all the rest of the time working, and never actually have to go out. What the space is like is not important; the important thing is that you can create, and produce works. For the artist, the size of the studio or the kind of space doesn't really influence the quality of the work; it's just a matter of your own impressions and needs. But one thing is certain: all artists want their studio to be as big as possible. And once you have used a big space it's hard to come back to a small one. Many artists nowadays are renting old factory buildings and warehouses and turning them into studios, or are building studios, so as to give themselves a new feeling of 'going to work', and to achieve a reciprocal echo with sites handed down through society and history. In a spacious studio you can get into a state where you gather impressions directly from the space, getting a true and real experience of what the form of the exhibition will be when you exhibit the works. The interaction of the work space and the exhibition site enlightens the artist's understanding of the exhibition space

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