

The Void Enfolds a Myriad of Realms

Ho Huai-Shuo

From the days of art's primitive origins to contemporary times, the intention of making art and the nature of art, as well as its connotations and forms, have endured myriad changes. Regardless of the magnitude of this disparity, there have always been two distinct polarities in the psychological impetus of artistic creativity: The intentional and the unintentional. Or to put it another way, utilitarian or nonutilitarian. The complexities of human behavior entail that there is rarely a single, simple factor. But a comparison of the two different motivations of the utilitarian (intentional) and the nonutilitarian (unintentional) reveals the distinctively divergent directions and realms of art making.

In modernity, intentional artistic creation doesn't shy away from the pursuit of fame and fortune. Fame and fortune may manifest as achievements and rewards, or as vanity and financial gains. The former is above reproach, while the latter is unavoidably vulgar. The need to fulfill a desire for fame and fortune requires being tethered to trends (popular schools of art) and to curry favor with the marketplace. Hence, artists with such aspirations naturally cater to market demands and trends, and are less likely to exude genuine authenticity.

In comparison, creativity that tends toward the unintentional is either for self-amusement (play), or for sustenance. Of course, it may simultaneously be for self-amusement and sustenance. Some "masters" are truly at play, and paint at the level of a child; their work can be regarded as mere child's play. Playfulness has the ability to express joy and please the heart, but elevated playfulness requires strict direction and exceptional proficiency. Throughout history and in contemporary times, the expression of joy and the need for sustenance are often motives behind literary and artistic creations.

"The roles of mother and wife were acquired, but making art is an innate desire, like love or sex. It is a primal instinct that was born within me. Whenever I encounter defeat or distress, the desire to create art gives me the courage and strength to endure. I create, therefore I am."

The young painter Yuan Shu¹ once wrote the artist statement above. Her work is an expression of joy and sustenance, as I've previously described and, as such, are less inclined toward the utilitarian.

Artistic creation is prized for its uniqueness, and a unique artistic style comes from a unique soul. Yuan's artist statement² reveals her to be an anomaly among her generation. Marriage has not placed her in mundane prosperity, but exiled her to the wilderness, away from mortal bustle. Her honeymoon suite is not a cozy apartment,

¹ Yuan Shu is an alias of Yuan Hui-Li.

² Yuan Hui-Li published an artist statement in her exhibition catalogue *Dwell Amidst the Mountain and Inhale From the Valley* in 2000.

but an old house that once housed cremation urns. She revels in this. “The beauty of the surrounding landscape has long obscured any gloomy folklore. It feels like a blessing to live in this old house, nurtured by clouds and mist.”

After years spent in the wilderness, Yuan has come to realize that her true self longs for austerity, simplicity, and tranquility, and that only in austerity, simplicity, and tranquility does beauty bloom. The urge to compose poems and make paintings brewed naturally in her heart during her days in the mountains. “Just like it takes time for grape juice to ferment into wine, or like a chrysalis quietly awaiting metamorphosis,” she says. She seems to have suddenly become a poet, writing excellent poems that she sometimes inscribes directly onto her paintings. On the painting *Dialogue Between the Mountain and the Clouds*, the eponymous poem reads: “You are steadfast as the mountain / I’m ethereal as the clouds / A brief respite on your peak / before departing on the morrow with the wind / You cannot keep me / I cannot carry you away.” These plain, simple, and profound verses inspire admiration.

Yuan has received academic training in painting, but this first body of work has only come into being after a period of postgraduation personal fermentation and rumination. Professional training, tradition, genres, styles, history, and culture — run like undercurrents through Yuan’s work. Her section regarding personal contemplation on painting in her artist statement expresses this with clarity. In full expression, her painting remains faithful to her own nature. “The purpose of painting is to excavate the self, to understand the self, to express the self, to liberate the self, and to complete the self.” This is a definitive and meaningful declaration. There are those who paint to please others, to comply with trends, to adhere to tradition, to flaunt artistic skills, or to vie for fame and fortune. What is art in an age when commercialization reigns supreme? In this age of ideological chaos, aesthetic collapse, and warped values, what is the meaning of art? No one has answers to these questions. The artist must make their own choices and persevere to find their own answers. Besides conforming to trends, one must trust oneself. It is the master of her own artistry that Yuan strives toward.

In recent years, Yuan has replaced rice paper with natural cotton and linen in her work, while still using Chinese pigments, and Chinese brush and ink. This change in media imparts a new flavor to the movement of brush and ink, while her subject matter remains simple. Mountains, rocks, clouds, seas, grasses, and trees are rendered in diffused ink and hues in her modest, guileless compositions. What she strives to paint are not scenes of mountains, rocks, clouds, and the sea; rather she attempts to capture what she terms as “the structure of the heart,” comprising the heart’s realm, the heart’s occurrences, the heart’s reflection, and the heart’s voice.

Nature washes away a myriad of concerns. Only when the heart and mind attain emptiness can an abundance of beauty be contained. Yuan has internalized Su Dongpo’s wisdom that “the void enfolds a myriad of realms.” She finds true amusement in, and hears the voices of, the humble mountains, rocks, grasses, and trees in an attempt to nurture connections and to reflect a multitude of images. Viewing these paintings through the mind’s eye, one may begin to hear the crystal clear sounds of the perpetually eternal, yet still burgeoning, mountains and waters.

Universal and timeless, without motive or utility, flowing free between heaven and

earth, and splashed with abandon on cotton (linen): Yuan Shu's work encapsulates her true self and beckons contemplation.

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