



Ambiguity of time and space in Wang Zhibo's painting

by Ricko Leung

*With her 'anthropologist' approach of collecting
quotidian fragments of life Wang Zhibo believes in
the pleasure and ineffability of art.*

Wang Zhibo paintings are puzzling. They make people ponder and wonder, drawing them to think and imagine, while feeling a bit confused. The surreal juxtaposition of objects and body parts in her paintings is on one hand almost disturbing, but harmonious on the other— urging one to search for meaning or links among those seemingly random subjects, as well as their hints on the ambiguous time and space.

The 'anthropologist' approach

Wang Zhibo once stated that one of her working methods is similar to that of an anthropologist. When asked why, she replied: "In my imagination, digging up clay artefacts from primitive tribes in some part of the world can be in some ways similar to me walking into a vintage store in Berlin to discover a tooth-brushing cup without any trademarks or origin. If one of the anthropologist's working methods is field study, then it seems there are even more mysterious and unknown corners on the internet; and these not-yet-solved enigmas are exactly the starting points of my work."



Wang Zhibo, Untitled, 200 x 115 cm, oil on linen, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery.

We do not know if all anthropologists like this comparison, but one can appreciate the emphasis of this approach on the act of observing, exploring, discovering, collecting and investigating. The clay artefacts are as important for an anthropologist as images are for an artist like Wang Zhibo. She explains: "I am curious about the power of images in conserving and transmitting messages... And then in the painting process, the power of these images may disappear or transform into an explosion of passionate light and colours; and this stage of transformation should be regarded as the power of painting."

Performing these "anthropologist's acts" through travelling as well as learning from pictures and words found on the Internet and books, the artist later combines these findings with elements from her daily life. "I believe that the traces and details of daily life are as central to the system of human culture as the original social tools, ornamentations and architectural styles researched by anthropologists. Most important is the relationship between these traces and details, which can be traced meaningfully in time and space, where time refers to the past and now, and space refers to the here and elsewhere." Wang Zhibo once noted [1]. Yes, time and space is the main field of study of this anthropologist-minded artist.

Distortion of time and space

More accurately, the distortion of time and space is the main thread that runs through Wang Zhibo's art. In *Untitled (Springs)* (2012), artificial fountain structures are placed in a natural landscape. A part of tropical forest in *Rise, Fall* (2016) is juxtaposed onto some white and grey shades in the background, resembling snow mountain while planet-like spheres are falling. One can also see feet and fruits unsettlingly put together in the composition of *Untitled* (2018). Wang Zhibo claims: "I try to explore the tangibility and complexity with the distortion of time and space."



Wang Zhibo, *Untitled (Springs)*, 150 x 113 cm, oil on canvas, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery.



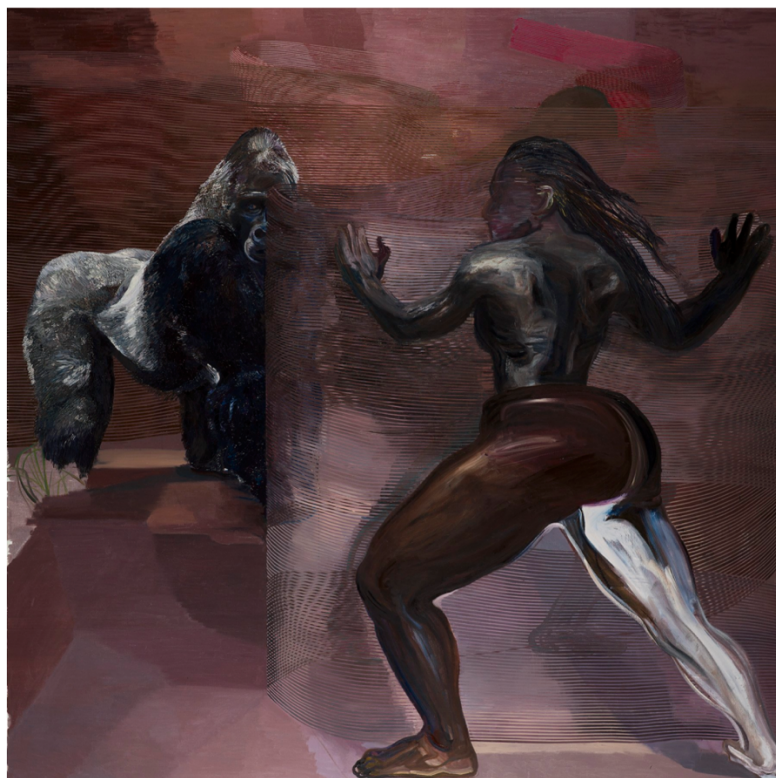
Can it perhaps remind us of Paul Gauguin's playing with the ambiguity of space? For instance, in *Family* (2015), a tribal family co-exists with some people practising yoga — one may recall Paul Gauguin's *Arearea* (1892), in which the background is composed of ambiguous space and mysterious, religious figures. Similar ambiguity or even distortion of space can also be seen in works by Francis Bacon, or more lately, Jonas Wood. These artists confound our temporal and spatial notions as well as our rational and analytical understanding of objects. Wang Zhibo explains: "Objects cannot exist on their own, being free from space and time. This is what I conceived as the 'temperature' of objects that are given by their situations. Such states of objects emerging with their situation are what I wish to keep, also representing the feelings that are infused within them. I call this process the 'sketching of the objects'." Perhaps all these modern and contemporary artists are just trying to capture certain sentiments and temperature that are contained during an instant. Zhibo then described herself as follows: "I am a complex creature, and at the same time the subjects under my brush are also a compound; I realise that I am not able to simplify them. I am just a capturer." The result is a kind of otherness in her paintings — an otherness so well staged so to intrigue the most versed viewer.



Wang Zhibo, *Family*, 170 x 158 cm, Oil on Linen, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery.

The eternal interest in the body

From Michelangelo to Henri Matisse to Francis Bacon, there has always been an incessant interest in the human body among many artists — Wang Zhibo is certainly one of them. This cannot be more directly seen by looking at *Female! (Self-portrait)* (2018). Instead of painting her own face, in which the main subject is a gorilla and a strong and muscular body that is other than hers.



Wang Zhibo, *Female! (self-portrait)* 200 x 200 cm, oil and acrylic on canvas, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery.



Wang Zhibo, *Swaddling*, 210 x 170 cm, Oil on Linen, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery.

Most interestingly, bodily forms can be seen even in her still-life paintings, such as the deliberate associative distortion of some unidentifiable objects in *Summer Kitchen* (2016) and the apparent bodily association with the various wrapped vegetables in *Swaddling* (2016). The unreal placements and intentionally distorted proportion of food and objects in both *Hocus Pocus* (2015) and *Mead's Dilemma* (2015) can hardly escape one's attention and imagination of body parts— there is no lack of symbolism here.



Wang Zhibo, *Hocus-Pocus*, 180 x 135 cm, oil on linen, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery.



Wang Zhibo, *Mead's Dilemma*, 190x150cm, Oil on Linen, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery.

Wang Zhibo beyond the two dimensionality of painting

Wang Zhibo asks for the possibilities of these artistic concepts "not only within the two dimensional space, but also with the viewer's perception and participation with the work," as she describes her own approach. It has been commented that "the path that Wang pursues is a third dimension beyond 'good painting' and 'bad painting': absurdism disguised in classical techniques and images" [2]. Undeniably, the above-mentioned ambiguity opens up some space for imagination, interpretation, as well as connection with our own memories or experiences — all these are beyond dimensions.

Discussing painting as her major medium, Zhibo claimed, "You can say it is very limiting — always calculating on a 2-D surface of several feet square; but at the same time, I think painting, as part of human nature, is almost indispensable. It may not be the mainstream anymore, but it will not die. In my view, painting is much similar to another ancient form of human intellectual activity, that is poetry; its simple but powerful form does not change much throughout, but it is indispensable like water — reflecting our outlook in front of the time of any era."

She continues: "Time changes, but the inner silence and the noisy outlook of life may or may not change — all these can be found in painting as a form of expression." This statement seems to summarise her artistic practice.

With her "anthropological" approach of collecting quotidian fragments of life, Wang Zhibo is an artist who believes in the pleasure and ineffability of art, which moderates our thoughts and emotions, offering us a space to be at peace with the world.

1, 2 Nikita Yingqian Cai, "[The Innocent Post-Internet Anthropologist](#)", 2014.