

Yuan Yuan — the New Landscape of Contemporary Chinese Art

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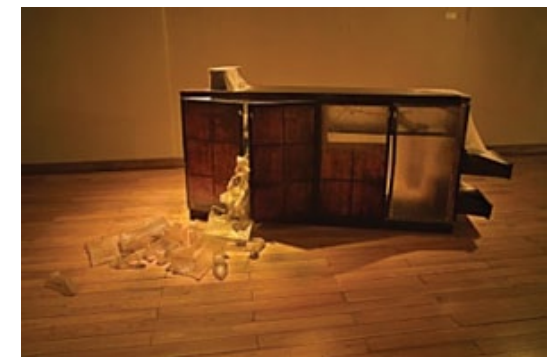
Thirty years elapsed since contemporary Chinese art began to make strides in 1980. In retrospect, the '85 New Wave Movement, spearheaded by the Xiamen Dada group, Gu Wenda and Xu Bing, gave emphasis to experiment, ideology and free style, while the 1990s saw stronger focus on the interrelation between art and society, a motive that prompted artists like Zhang Xiaogang, Zeng Fengzhi, Fang Lijun and Wang Guangyi to draw on portraiture, realism and expressionism in exploring and communicating the emotional state and living condition of their generation, as well as the ethos of the era. Today such notions as experimentalism, portraiture, realism, sociality and expressionism have become the cornerstones, hence also the traits, of contemporary Chinese art as known in the international arena. Nevertheless, just as these styles are getting established and elaborated, the neoteric — and even those born after the 80s — is arduously looking for new direction of development that might steer the next orbit of contemporary Chinese art. Expression in cartoon and anime is one of the very catchy ways adapted by the many 'post-80s' artists emerged after 2000. The art of Yuan Yuan represents yet another innovative mode of expression that encapsulates the inner being of the new Chinese generation.

The themes Yuan Yuan fixed on have been most unusual: the façade of buildings, the interior of living spaces, a serpentine corridor, and, as it happens, the hoary wall and shattered window of a ramshackle structure. The spaces he arrays share in common the apocalyptic aura of bleakness and desolation; a vacant space, that is to say, becomes the pivot of expression. Such a setting is, to me, visually stunning in the first place. 'The person' has been a key and vivid element in the history of contemporary Chinese art: the experimentalist art in the 80s, for example, is often marked by the participation or staging of the artist, and Chinese art since the 90s widely appeal to portraiture as an expressive icon, like the laughing face of Yue Minjun, the masked figure of Zeng Fanzhi, and the comrade image of Zhang Xiaogang. Yuan Yuan, however, sets his sights on a break with his predecessors. He tries to work out a wholly different artistic language and expression — a thoroughly vacant space devoid of 'the person'. His 'space' looks centripetal and cavernous, vested in an all-swallowing gravitation like that of a black hole. It trails your point of focus deep inside the canvas, putting you in mind of a bleak, forsaken space — a bare state of existence that objectifies the air of emptiness and desolation and the sequestered, penetrating ambience. An icon like this apparently carries the emblem of an age, wherein China is undergoing rapid and radical changes and new social phenomenon springs



[Fig.1]
Zhang Dali, *Demolition*, 1998

up: old buildings and old districts are abandoned and knocked down one after another. Real estate development becomes the jewel in the crown which every Chinese city runs after; reconstruction schemes, at the same time, explode in the cause of a more advanced and stylish city image. It is an age when the new supersedes the old. Many architecture bearing the legacy of time are falling apart, like the red-brick buildings and old houses constructed out of the intimate concourse between China and the West since 1911, in a fusion of traditional Chinese and Victorian styles with Romanesque pillars and spiral staircases and Baroque motives. Yuan Yuan's 'vacant' space reflects the ache of what is lost and gone. The abandoned architecture and the forsaken space are reinterpreted as an abstract symbol implanted with strident political and social criticism; they stand for the state of China in transformation and, with this signification, recount how China as an open, newfangled consumerist society is influenced and shaped by the global economic environment. They point up, moreover, the conflicting impetus of the people — the subjects of the city, who dither between acceptance and rejection. In China as in the rest of the world this psychological incongruence or struggle is ubiquitous in the face of national and regional development; it is, therefore, a significant theme to attend to for both Chinese and Western contemporary artists. In China, for instance, Zhang Dali's *Demolition* (fig.1) features the contrast between the majestic forbidden city and the crumbling old living quarter, 'revealing the experience modern Beijing had, particularly in the past decade, of the parallel ventures of "destruction" and "protection" in simultaneity (Wu Hung, *The 'Dialogue' of Zhang Dali: Conversing with the City*).' The same goes to young artists like Ying Xinxun, a contemporary of Yuan Yuan, who are solicitous about the disfiguring city and the perishing living space (fig.2). In the West, Rachel Whiteread, a British artist, sculpted a pallid, concrete cast after a to-be demolished old



[Fig.2]
Ying Xinxun, *Fragments of the City III*, 2009



[Fig.3]
Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993,
internal casting of 193 Grove Road,
Bow, East London (destroyed)

house in East London (fig.3) as a means to grieve over the displacement of the old city and its culture by commercial development. Like all these artists, the strategy of Yuan Yuan is to transform architecture, or space, into expressive icons that articulate a peculiar state of sentiment in a peculiar era. Inheriting the traits of contemporary Chinese art, the artist has a penchant for a subtle issue from personal experience; the overtone of Yuan Yuan's creation, in other words, is still 'the person' and 'the sentiment', which vouchsafe his works a great emotional potency and a spirit symptomatic of his time. What sets him apart from his predecessors is that, instead of revolving around the grand narratives of weighty history, Yuan Yuan returns to the more secretive living space and achieves a more reticent and allusive expression of 'the person' and 'the emotion'. It is this nuance that constitutes Yuan Yuan's unique artistic language and iconic expression.

He has, moreover, the ambition to overstep the bounds of locality, hence his portrayal of architecture in a medley of style: old houses in classical Chinese decoration, Western structure and Baroque-style spiral staircase found in the Shanghai leased territory in the past century, and the tenement houses, with their narrow entrance and dark-green iron gate, common in Hong Kong. An overpowering universality is embedded in his wistfulness for the vanishing space and city culture. The same phenomenon confronts different cities at different time.

Painterliness and Formal Aesthetics

Against his ultra-simplistic and vacant space Yuan Yuan gives prominence to two elements: the texture and spatial structure of the buildings. They are, certainly, the motifs of his works, but more importantly they mark the artist's exploration on painterliness and formal aesthetics, which strings his creation to the global artistic trend, enables dialogue between them and confers upon his works an artistic subtlety more profound than most of his contemporaries'.

A deserted, unoccupied room is pictured in *Museum III* (p. 16-17), where the unbroken expanse of red-brick walls alone form the pith of expression. The artist, with his delicate and tightly-packed brushstroke, colors the bricks red tint by tint, allowing us to discern the different shades of red in transition. In *Ground Floor* (p. 28-29) and *Entrance* (p. 22-23) the color gradient is rendered by the floor and wall tiles in craggy dark green. The mottled, exfoliated wall in *Humid Region* (p. 10-11) and the rotted, fractured wooden window frame in *Fragments* (p. 26-27) manifest not only the coarse texture of clay and wood but also the painterly property of

ink-wash as a spread and oil as a coating of pigment. All these contribute to the intensely expressive quality of the works — one might even detect, at closer look, the movement of the painter's hands when he is drawing a line or applying a paint.

The concept of 'repetition' seems equally appealing to the artist. Yuan Yuan's works is distinctively rich in repetitive, analogous and spatially continuous elements interior to a structure: serried rows of identical windows, edifices, bluish floor tiles, spectator seats, and a series of stair steps, among others. Through this maneuver the artist describes 'repetition' as the general principle by which modern society is constituted, a principle that consumes us and assimilates our living space. The depiction of these repetitive, spatially continuous architectural elements also enables the artist to demonstrate the tonal variations of a single color and, therefore, put across his exploration on painterliness, color and brushwork. His works, which transmute the most ordinary and familiar material onto the level of color expressionism, nestle between the figurative and the abstract, between the realistic and the expressive. This, in fact, is the very idiosyncrasy of Yuan Yuan's creations. In *Entrance* (p. 22-23), for example, the artist deftly manipulates a virtually photo-realistic technique to reproduce the ceramic floor tiles in paramount fineness and scrupulosity. The work looks as true as a photograph, but the touch of a painting and the texture of the pigment remain readily observable.

But what Yuan Yuan tries to represent is more than the texture of architectural material. He is also keen on showing the intricate, criss-cross structure inside of a building — with his formal aesthetics. The orderly arrangement of the stairs, the windows, the rectangular wooden doors and wardrobe, as well as the square-shape motifs on the wardrobe door all play to render the canvas into different abstract, geometric forms. The artist even goes for a close-up of a room in



[Fig.4]
Yuan Yuan, *Door I*, 2011

Door I (fig.4), in which we find the floor tiles, alternating in two different colors, and the light-yellow wood door and the dark-brown wardrobe stand as a contrast, and convergence, of geometric patterns. It calls to mind the contrivance of Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) as he extracts the geometric structures of the New York streets and buildings and turns them into creative elements (fig.5). It seems, in this regard, that Yuan Yuan has indeed set out to discourse with Western artistic philosophies like constructivism and abstract formalism. In Europe and America the quest after pure artistic expression — the representation of abstract philosophy and symbolic concept by means of color variations and spatial arrangement — had preyed on the minds of two

袁遠 — 中國當代藝術的新生風景

鍾嘉賢

中國當代藝術從1980年發酵，至今已走過三十年的發展歷程。概括而言，80年代的「85新潮」強調實驗性、觀念性和自由風格，這方面可以廈門達達、谷文達及徐冰等為代表；踏入90年代，藝術家則側重藝術與社會的連結，以肖像、寫實、表現主義的元素，探討和呈現一代人的情感悸動、生存狀況，甚至是時代精神，這方面可以張曉剛、曾梵志、方力均、王廣義等藝術家為代表。而不論是實驗性、肖像、寫實、社會性或是表現主義，都已經成為中國當代藝術的基調、特徵，為國際藝壇所普遍認識。但在這些風格奠基和深化的同時，中生代、甚至是80年代後出來的新生代都致力另闢蹊徑，探索中國當代藝術的下一個路向。2000年以來接連出現的「80後」藝術家群體，他們的卡通、動漫表現方式便是其中一個十分突出的路向。袁遠的藝術，正代表另一種嶄新風格，特別是中國新一代的精神面貌。

袁遠往往以建築物外牆、室內居住空間、轉折過渡的迴廊、甚至是舊建築內的灰牆破窗為題創作。所有的空間呈現，都有一個共通點，都是寂靜無人，空蕩的空間成為表現的主軸。這種場景設計，首先帶給我巨大的視覺衝擊。「人」在中國當代藝術的發展歷程中，一直是十分突出和主要的元素。80年代的實驗藝術常常以藝術家的介入和表演為標誌；90年代以來，「肖像」更是最普遍的表現圖式(icon)，岳敏君的笑臉、曾梵志戴面具的人像、張曉剛的同志肖像等。袁遠卻有意要突破前輩藝術家，建立截然不同的藝術語言和表現圖式，把「人」的元素抽去，呈現完全虛空的空間。他的「空間」更彷彿有一種內向深入、像黑洞的吸食力量，把觀察的視點一直拉往畫面的深處，也因此讓人深刻意識到空間的荒蕪、被棄置，是一種孤零零的存在狀況，可以被擬人化的解讀為一種虛空、孤寂的氛圍，幽獨深邃的情景。這種圖式帶有明顯的時代印記，從另一角度隱喻著中國當前城市急速變化，舊建築、舊城區被遺棄、甚至被一批批遷拆的社會現象。中國各城市爭相開發房地產，也有為了建立先進、新潮的城市形象，於是出現各種重建項目，新的代替舊的，很多從民國(1911年)以來，因為華洋雜處而建立，帶有維多利亞風格、羅馬柱、旋轉樓梯、巴洛克樣式、中國傳統式的紅磚樓、老房子都趨向破敗。空間的「虛空」折射了一種失落和消逝的情緒感受。荒廢的建築和空間，被袁遠重新詮釋成帶有強烈政治與社會批判含義的抽象符號，象徵著一種變化中的中國狀況，呈現中國作為一個新型、開放式的消費主義社會，正如何被世界性經濟形態所改變和影響，也強調城市的主體——人們所生起介乎接受與抗拒的矛盾情緒。這種矛盾情緒和心理掙扎，正是當前中國、甚至是世界很多地區在發展時會面對的精神寫照，也因此成為中國、甚至是西方當代藝術的一個重要議題。在中國，就有張大力(B.1963)的《拆》(圖一)，以平民老城區的殘垣敗瓦與皇家紫禁城的金碧輝煌作對比，「表現了北京在現代，特別是過去十年裡所經歷的『破壞』與『保護』的雙重進程」(巫鴻《張大力的〈對話〉：與城市交談》)。與袁遠同一輩的年青一代藝術家，也有如應歆珣等，也關注城市、生活空間的傷逝(圖二)。在西方，就有英國藝術家雷切爾·懷海特(Rachel Whiteread, B.1963)以倫敦東城區一所行將被遷拆的老房子為模，倒模成一座蒼白的豐碑(圖三)，表現舊城、舊文化被商業發展所消滅的傷逝。袁遠和上述這些藝術家的策略一樣，把建築、空間轉化表現圖像，表達一種情感狀況和時代感受。「人」和「情感」的元素，



【圖一】
張大力《拆》1998年作



【圖二】
應歆珣《都市碎片III》2009年作

理質感與建築物的空間結構，這兩者不單是他的繪畫主題，同時分別標誌了藝術家對繪畫性及形式美學的探索，能與世界藝術潮流接軌、對話的同時，也使袁遠呈現中國年青一輩藝術家中少見的豐富藝術層次。

《美術館III》(第16-17頁)描繪了空無一人的荒廢房間，表現的重點放在一塊緊貼一塊的整面紅磚牆。藝術家以細膩、綿密的繪畫技巧，一筆一筆點染紅磚色彩，讓人看到紅色單一色彩的層次轉換；《底樓》(第28-29頁)及《入口》(第22-23頁)則以為地面、牆面上的瓷磚鋪陳，表現荒澀青綠的色彩層次變化。又如《潮濕》(第10-11頁)斑駁剝落的牆壁、或是《碎片》(第26-27頁)被蝕裂的木頭窗框，既表現泥石木材的粗糙質感肌理，同時又包含了水墨滴染、油畫堆疊的繪畫性特質，賦予畫面極強烈的表現風格。看得更多一點，你甚至可以感覺到在畫一根線條或一種色彩時，畫家的手是怎麼動的。

仍是袁遠作品的底蘊，承續了中國當代藝術一直以來的特質，從當前個人生活經驗出發，發掘問題，因此賦予他的作品一種時代精神和情感力量。所不同的是，他不再囿於前一輩藝術家的宏大敘事與沉重歷史，他回到更秘密的生活空間，對「人」和「情緒」的表達更為幽微曲折，建立了他本人獨特的藝術語言和圖像形式。袁遠更有意的超越中國本土，使這種對城市文化、往昔空間的懷緬呈現更深刻的普世意義，於是他描繪的既有中國式的佈置的老房子、也有上世紀上海租界的西洋式建築、巴洛克樣式的旋轉樓梯、甚至更有香港常見的入口走道狹隘、墨綠式鐵閘的舊唐樓等。不一樣的時間、不一樣的都市，卻都面對相同的現象。

繪畫性與形式美感

在極簡和虛空的空間中，袁遠強調了兩個元素：建築物料的肌



[圖三]
雷切爾·懷海特《房》1993年作



[圖四]
袁遠《門 I》2011年作

與此同時，袁遠彷彿著迷於「重複」的概念，集中繪畫建築物內部各種重複、相類、連綿鋪排的元素，如：一排緊貼一排，形狀相同的窗戶、高樓、地板的藍色方磚、觀賞台的座椅、一級又一級的樓梯階梯等。主題上，袁遠揭示「重複」為現代社會的普遍構成原則，貫注到各種生活空間，包圍著我們。而透過描繪重複、連綿鋪排的建築元素，藝術家得以表現單一色彩的變化遞進，表達他對繪畫性、色彩和筆觸的探索。作品把日常生活最常接觸的物料提升至色彩表現主義的程度，穿梭於具象與抽象、寫實與表現。事實上，袁遠作品最能抓緊我們目光的是他遊走於具象與抽象、寫實與表現的這個特色。以《入口》(第22-23頁)為例，藝術家採用近乎攝影寫實(photo-realism)的細膩技巧，一筆一筆描繪地面上的瓷磚，製造了如攝影相片般的真實，但仔細看，又能看出繪畫的特性和顏料的質感。

袁遠不單呈現建築物料的質感，在整個畫面空間佈置上，也特別強調建築物內部的縱、橫交錯的結構層次。方整的樓梯階梯、窗只、長方形的木門與衣櫃，櫃門上的方形紋飾，也在畫面上呈現為抽象、幾何的形式美感。甚至於《門 I》一作(圖四)，把房間一隅作局部大特寫，地板上雙色交錯的地磚、淺黃色木門及深棕色衣櫃，莫不是幾何圖案的輻輳和對比，令人聯想到蒙德里安(Piet Mondrian, 1872-1944)把紐約城市街道、建築結構中的幾何元素提煉為創作元素的手法(圖五)，表現袁遠要更多與西方構成主義、抽象形式主義等風格作對話的意圖。貫穿1920-1950年代，歐美現代藝壇有整整二代的西方藝術家致力探索純藝術元素，以色彩變化、空間組合來表現抽象的哲理、象徵概念，終極的探索目標在於完全脫離描述、故事、造形、敘述性，轉為以色彩、線條來表達情感。整套藝術實踐偏重於理論、抽象化、概念性。但袁遠對形式美感的探索，是始終結合了寫景主題，保留了情景、老房子的情感氛圍，又在圖面中隱藏各種幾何形式。幾何形式、縱橫線條，在蒙德里安或康丁斯基(Wassily Kandinsky, 1866-1944)的西方抽象形式藝術中，都帶有一種理性和冷峻的形態，彷彿帶有機械式的美感，深刻反映了西方工業社會、現代化進程的文化內涵和精神面貌。袁遠的表現則剛好相反，他同樣從現代建築—工

業社會的產物—提煉出的幾何形式，但在表現上，卻同時結合他對色彩變化、筆觸形態、繪畫性的探索，於是呈現更多抒情性、畫家的感性及表現性的特質。這種特色，又不期然令人想到袁遠自杭州中國美術學院而來的藝術承傳。袁遠畢業於中國美術學院油畫系，於該校完成了他的學士及碩士課程。中國美術學院前身即為杭州藝專，由蔡元培所創辦，林風眠(1900-1991)、吳大羽(1903-1988)等統領，成為中國現當代藝術重鎮，他們的教學及創作示範，即奠定了在寫景寫物中提煉、探索形式美感的藝術路向。林風眠的花卉、仕女、京劇，畫面構圖隱藏了不同的幾何形態，仕女的婀娜多姿構為曲線、弧線、背景的窗簾為直線、花瓶為錐形體等，各種幾何色塊組合，彷彿塞尚立體主義的變奏和轉換(圖六)。林風眠的形式美感又始終和他對人物、靜物的描繪緊緊扣接，以靜物的主題來呈現抽象性、幾何美感，沒有落入一種呆板、枯燥、過於理論思辯化的窠臼，常能保留中國藝術傳統中對故事性主題及情緒意境的追求。這正形式中國美術學院的傳統，影響了幾代的藝術家，從林風眠、吳大羽開始的抽象與靜物，一直到趙無極(B.1920)及朱德群(B.1920)的抽象與山水，再延至較近代的許江(B.1955)的抽象與風景，都有一脈相承的藝術追尋。袁遠的創作走向也都可被歸納於此藝術脈絡之下。

從袁遠的藝術特色一直思考下去，他對普世社會議題的關注、他對色彩表現主義、繪畫性、形式美感的追求，代表了中國當代藝術在年青藝術家群中逐步形成的一種創作風潮——「去中國化」，逐步超越了



[圖五]
蒙德里安《灰與淺棕色的構圖》
1918年作



[圖六]
林風眠《茶花》1940年代作

純中國本土的情境及議題，追尋具普世意義的年青一代成長記憶、精神狀況，同時更多借鑒西方現代派的藝術風格和方法，在美學形式上有更多層次的探索。這種風潮無疑有別於1990年代中國當代藝術的主流路向，在承續中又有個人嶄新的演繹，預示了中國當代藝術下一波更多元、更豐富的藝術風景。