

About Truthfulness and Reliability

(Written by Liu Xiaohui, translated by Fiona He, 2018)

In the recent phase of my painting, the question I am most concerned with, trying to approach, and constantly pondering is, “what is truthful and reliable?”

1. Subject Matter – About Truthfulness

In choosing the subject matter for this series of paintings, rather than taking the “choose a subject” point of entry, as it’s been done in traditional painting practices, I arbitrarily selected the action of a figure getting dressed, or perhaps even undressed, from my earlier narrative line drawings. By appropriating this action, it serves as the parameter to unfold my painting experiences.

The appearance of the mirror grew naturally out of my painting practices day in and day out . It’s not a pre-planned motif. At the same time, the specific form of the mirror in the painting gradually resonates with what I understand as “truthful” and “reliable.” (The reality from an artist’s perspective is entirely different from many others, in my opinion. Even among painters of the same genre, with their disparate points of inception, goals and worldviews, one can claim that they are engaged in entirely different professions.)

The function of the mirror is not only to reflect, but also to project an alternative scene. It projects “truth” or “falsehood”, in my paintings. It’s analogous to a “frame”, a “confinement”, a “setback”, and the figures handle various actions within this “mirror” or “frame” to establish certain relationships with it.

To call it “handling” is because of our position in this world seems to demand us to adjust our actions at every moment to be effective. The use of “form” in the painting no longer “functions as the underpinning construct of figuration”, where “form” is not aimed at depicting something verisimilar, or something that looks like an actual object. Instead, “form” should be rationally examined and investigated in the structure of my painting. The positional, reflexive and refractive relationships of the figures with the mirrors are what I logically placed at the beginning and middle phases of the composition, to a point that I can’t decipher the inside from the outside, front from back, real from false, which ones are the actual subject and which ones are illusions. The canvas and the image on it become my counterpart, with which ongoing mutual reflections and investigations take place.

2. Ways of Experiencing Painting – as a “Layer” of Experience

Throughout the course of painting, everyday, every layer, every brush is replete with affirmation and indecision, attempt and negation, which affords me a more open-minded notion of “completion.” (Even though my aim is to operate rapidly towards “completion.”) However, even until the last phase of the painting, the image continues to present

points of judgment. The essence of the painting gradually becomes a delineated framework, rather than a framework of a set image.

My goal is to stimulate, rather than present a model or motif. In other words, I hope to present the transformations that engendered from judging what's been put down on canvas and covering up the unwanted. I believe that in the visual experience every layer addresses something, and they are replete with questions: what is the relationship between the layers (formal relations, color relations, the impression released from the subjects, stylistic variations of the brushworks, and mélange of all pertaining relationships within one particular work)? They suffer from an excess of experience or the lack of experience, and are excessively correct or overly aloof. The approach of anxiously culminating the layers and covering them up on canvas is for me, a path towards reaching the "reliable", because it's visible and tangible like the traces and physical senses that inform the body.

3. The Additional "Things" – the Intervention of Factors, Quantity and Quality

For the works from the recent period, I actively used a large number of unmixed colors: white, black, yellow, turquoise blue... rather than mixed ones.

I want the colors to act as "factors" (or otherwise called "pigments"). They should not be considered as the "color of false impression", but as the building blocks for an architectural construct. As they are dissociated from aiming at being the mediator for "verisimilitude", the use of any color would become more proactive and "confined". When I render a form, I only use black and white to layer and compress upon each other; when I paint with colors, I use those that have certain "weight", for instance, green, yellow, blue and etc., to aggrandize its quality. I make a lot of effort in pushing out a borderline, and then placing a large stone into it. The course of repetitiously layering over gives me the sense of generating infinite sectional layers. These unidentifiable and infinite layers allow the colors on canvas to embody the qualities of "cement" on canvas.

When I paint, I am always imagining the unexpected to happen, certain things would enter into the image, so I could get to know what they are. Yet they are out of the realm of my experiences, or are forever existing within my wishes and beyond my understanding. As this series comes to its later stage, the shape of plants became point of departure, and brushworks of spherical, triangle and square forms also appeared, as if they've grown naturally into the paintings as the final layer. (But in fact, they are build on top of the previous layers, mixed and meshed together, organically, rather than disconnected.)

Painting should be a state of contradiction, one in which there is an attempt to strike a balance, to mediate and compromise, naturally; on the contrary, one has the desire to mix in "quantified" materials. In other words, one hopes (or even welcomes) certain "things" to be introduced, or even to forcibly intervene, by which one questions whether there are possibilities of a quality beyond the ins and outs of logic? I think, this is like stirring up what's been off limit. Then, the reliable devices are not the control of the body and mind, but it is perhaps the arbitrary occurrences that constitutes the real "body".

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With these three aforementioned notions, overlapped, mixed, fermented, afforded by objects, quantity, factors and layered samples of dense sensibilities, lend to the emergence of these indecipherable “lumps”. They are neither certain, nor confirmed, and remain questionable. I hope they can become the “false impression” of something truthful, or can continue to be the impetus for a kind of judgment.