

JI DACHUN. Bird Painting Without Bird

True World Art - on the Recent Works of Ji Dachun

In order to approach Ji Dachun's works of the past several years, a selection of which are currently on show in the exhibition "Bird Painting Without Bird" at the Barbara Gross Gallery, I began by sending him a list of questions, which he answered in a very open manner. The work of this artist, who was born 1968 in Nantong (Jiangsu Province) and studied oil painting at the Central Academy for Fine Arts in Beijing, is marked by great diversity. While some of the works more or less speak for themselves, others present veritable puzzles. Because Ji Dachun's answers provide an initial access to his work, I'd like to precede the text with them.

From an email correspondence between Ji Dachun and Uta Grosenick, between Beijing and Berlin, in July 2011.

Uta Grosenick: When I visited you in 2006 in Beijing, the works I saw were small-scale drawings. Some resembled illustrations, while others felt like caricatures with a cryptic, at times macabre humor. Over the past several years, your style has changed; now you paint with acrylic on canvas, and the paintings are very different from the drawings: they're more spontaneous, faster, and sometimes unfinished. How did this change come about?

Ji Dachun: The works of 2006 are very different from the works I'm doing now. The current works give an impression of speed, and some parts seem as though they haven't been finished. Where does that come from? There's always change. That's a question of habit or the fact that a person grows and accumulates experience. For me, it means this: I like painting in itself much more than the finished painted work. I think a work should bring various different kind of information to expression, depending on whether it's a reproduction or an original that is then viewed from a different distance. There is a peculiarly interesting aspect there that only exists in painting.

UG: Are you talking about traditional Chinese landscape painting? What is your relationship to this?

JD: For me (as for most Chinese artists), it constitutes a system of coordinates that both relieves and burdens us. We always make judgments in taste and discover ourselves operating within these coordinates. I measure every brushstroke I do by this tradition, whether I want to or not. Current ideas, standards, and materials used might continually be called into question and keep changing, but in the end individuality and appearance always remain important as unified goals. This is no different with the landscapes of the early 11th-century Chinese artist Fan Kuan than with the 17th-century Flemish genre painter Jan Vermeer or the figures of the South African Marlene Dumas. A Chinese painter who uses western materials has to listen to his inner voice and confront true imagination in a confident way. I believe that Chinese painters tend towards using materials from traditional Chinese landscape painting. Not only because its technique is mature, but particularly because it gives him the sense that his horizon of perception is continuously expanding.

UG: Some of the titles chosen for the paintings seem enigmatic. How did they arise and what do they mean?

JD: Normally, there is a relationship between the image and the title, similar to the relationship between, let's say, a horse and a saddle, or a husband and wife. This relationship should ordinarily be harmonious. Of course there are exceptions. For me, however, the problem is somewhat different: I explore themes that are eternal and that turn up everywhere; we are in one and the same place, just at different times and in different spaces. Besides, a theme becomes filtered when a person investigates it.

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An event not only occurs in its surroundings, but first and foremost in our (spiritual) interior, which is not very clean.

UG: How have your gallery dealers and collectors reacted to the new works?

JD: For me, this thing with the collectors is extremely complicated. A third of my collectors come from China, and they never say what they think. Some of my collectors are not from Asia, and most of these want to see change and to understand it. And then there are other issues, but it would be going too far to talk about them.

UG: Do you think your style will change again in time?

DJ: What direction will my style develop in? I don't know, but what's important is that the paintings should definitely change when my judgment undergoes a change. I see three indispensable factors at work here: scope, knowledge, and the limitations of the mental state.

UG: When I read texts on your works, none of the critics—whether from China or the West—seem truly capable of interpreting your work and making it more accessible to the public. Do you enjoy that your art is so “unapproachable”?

DJ: In China, the critic can talk about you, but conversely, you're not allowed to talk about the critic. Despite this, I respect critics, and sometimes I even understand them to the point that I discover fateful similarities. Indeed, I hope that I as an artist from the Far East can create a natural synthesis on my own in my current situation, where I'm faced with a tradition of western modernism and western materials.

UG: What do the “Landscapes” mean that drift in the sea like remote islands? Are there precursors to these paintings, or associations to other artists?

DJ: You mean if the current subjects in my paintings are inspired by the outside, or if they spring from an inner need? Basically, the themes of landscape and landscape painting can be understood as an idea to try and expand the inner horizon. Besides, acrylic paint is something fundamentally different from the paints used in traditional painting. The fascinating things about it are the unusual things, like its transparency and opaqueness, for instance. The character of the brushstroke is also very different than with oil paint or ink. The materials can't be interchanged, they have something of the free market about them. I'd like to experience as much inspiration as possible from a wide variety of sources, and this includes all artists that inspire me. I want to take this inspiration in, into my own personal horizon. I'd like to add to the idea of the horizon that I believe there's hardly another Asian artist working the way I do. But of course I don't know if you can agree to this claim.

This statement by Ji Dachun leads to the second part of this text, in which I attempt to contextualize his highly individual paintings. When one looks back over the past two decades in contemporary Chinese art, one sees that many artists—at least in some of their works—have approached landscape painting in various ways.

Even while the interest of the international art scene has tended to focus on the provocative paintings of “Cynical Realism” and the garish colors of “Political Pop” in the assumption that these artists are processing not only the history of their own country in them, but also Western art history, there are also many examples of landscape painting among the works recording the tumultuous changes that followed the opening of the country. The first paintings of this genre, the so-called Shanshui paintings, were made in the 5th century and usually depicted a mountain (shan) at their center. In old China, mountains were holy places close to the heavens and the site of the immortal. Water (shui), the second syllable, describes the awakening of a philosophical interest in nature and its mystical connotations, and would thus offer an explanation for the origin of landscape painting. An essential component is the limited choice in motif.

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Mountain, water, and tree are not represented mimetically, but arranged on an open ground according to a stylized sensibility that has always granted a great degree of leeway to the ideas of the individual artist. Thus, Shanshui also offers contemporary Chinese painting a multitude of possibilities, and it's not always clear whether a reference to this tradition is intended by the artist or is interpreted in this context after the fact. In the final analysis, "landscape" is an artistic subject that can hardly be narrowed down.

Titled "Shanshui," a 2011 exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Luzern juxtaposes 36 international artists from the Sigg Collection, including Ji Dachun, with 12 historical painters from the 11th to the early 20th century. Peter Fischer, curator of the exhibition along with Ai Weiwei and Uli Sigg, writes in the foreword to the catalogue: "Based on the artistic genre of landscape, we investigate the way Chinese artists approach tradition. What initially seems placid turns out to be highly relevant in view of China's broken relationship to its own history and culture." (1) Is the exhibition maker saying that artists still subjected to government surveillance and possibly sanctions for non-conformist behavior have withdrawn to less dangerous terrain?

This clearly does not apply to Ji Dachun; although his works occupy a special role in a Chinese context, he has created his own personal aesthetic in a seemingly playful way. The past and the present that interest him refer to the experiences of the individual and not a society's political situation. With his bizarre, primarily figurative scenes, he has invented an inimitable pictorial language, while his figures embody a new brand of the traditional literati painting that attains to the Asian ideal of a spiritual image of man. During his studies, Ji Dachun closely investigated western modernism and contemporary painting, including Piet Mondrian, Pablo Picasso, and Georg Baselitz; he was also fascinated by Maurizio Cattelan and Robert Gober. Despite this, to this day he is in no danger of imitating western contemporary art. In his new paintings, he unites Chinese tradition and western modernism. Bernhard Fibicher, who showed Ji Dachun and Liu Ye in 2007 at the Kunstmuseum Bern, discerned two different "styles" in their work: "a drawing style derived from the traditional literati painting and reminiscent of the 'scribbling' technique of a Twombly, and a painterly style roughly in the manner of Picasso and Philip Guston." (2)

The technical realization, however, brings about a break with tradition. Instead of using ink on paper, Ji Dachun paints with acrylic on canvas. The materiality of the paint and its pastosity open up new painterly possibilities. The acrylic paintings, in which figures or objects are placed in the middle of the canvas on a white ground, convey the artist's dry wit: the painting "Cadillac" from 2008 portrays a horse with an elongated trunk that looks like a stretch limousine, "Fire of Richter" (2008) gives us Gerhard Richter's famous candle, albeit with an extinguished flame, and "Mao Boob" (2009) depicts a female breast wearing a Mao Tse-Tung hairdo. At the same time, over the past several years he has also made works with a very different approach to color and subject matter. In some, individual branches stick out from the side of the picture, as in "Bird Painting Without Bird" from 2008, which depicts, in the style of traditional flower painting, bamboo leaves on an otherwise dried-out branch on which, instead of a songbird, a cut-off ear rests.

Let's take a closer look at this painting, which has lent its title to the exhibition. Animals and plants have always been a part of the repertoire of Chinese calligraphy; depending on the species, a bird can stand for wisdom, beauty, and long life, or for misfortune and death. With his hallmark humor, Ji Dachun leaves things open when he titles the work "Bird Painting Without Bird." The symbol remains ambiguous in terms of interpretation. Instead, a beetle crawls over a branch like a person on two legs; it will shortly pass raft-like rods, a cocoon shaped like a brain, and finally reach the ear. This, of course, stands for a desire to be heard, but also, perhaps, for a "having to hear" that is not always voluntary. And who wouldn't think of Vincent van Gogh in view of the painting with a single ear, the artist who cut off his own ear in a rage, or of Martin Kippenberger, who remarked laconically: "I can't cut off an ear every day ..." in an allusion to the public's expectations.

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In "Ellen's Book" of 2010, strange spherical forms, strings, and tiny wheels are hanging from a branch. The dark paintings "Brain Juice" and "Plastic Landscape, Plastic Park," both from 2010, contain a cliff, a brain with barren trees growing out of it, and all kinds of other weird things. Like remote islands, they are adrift in a black expanse. In "Plastic Brains" of 2011, brains are hanging from trees together with ticks fattened with blood. Connected to these are horizontal boards that resemble steps reaching up to the treetop, which is not in the picture. Finally, in "True World Art" of 2011, seven brains of varying sizes are spread across the surface, held together by scribble-like marks that have led critics to compare Ji Dachun with Cy Twombly. The spherical organisms are patterned in various ways, offering hints at other painters including Sam Francis, Jasper Johns, and Robert Ryman. Several small-scale canvases in the exhibition, all of which are titled "Landscape" and were made in 2011, depict amorphous rocks and islands painted in an abstract manner and always in twos, arranged one on top of the other.

In formal terms, it can be observed that none of Ji Dachun's works contain central perspective. As in traditional Chinese painting, the viewer is invited to enter the picture and let his or her spirit wander freely without being bound to any one fixed point. According to Ji Dachun, this undefined quality is not a question of form, but a very concrete and subtle life experience. Thus, he surprises the viewer on his journey with many minute details, confronting him with inconsistencies and contradictions. Yet just as in traditional Chinese painting, Ji Dachun never presents the viewer with a single moment, but rather an entire span of time. The Chinese curator, critic, and gallery dealer Pi Li calls Ji Dachun's paintings "fables of contemporary spiritual life" that have sprung from a series of mysterious stones. "In his paintings, countless possibilities have remained open through overpainting and corrections. In this regard, his works always show us the process of their making, and even in the finished work, the creative act merely seems interrupted, while painting itself remains an eternal, never-ending process." Finally, the artist himself should have the last word here: "Painting in every last detail and leaving no room for explanation are undesirable exercises for me. The parts of the canvases that are left untouched invite viewers into the realm of imagination."

Uta Grosenick

(1) *Shanshui—Poetry Without Sound? Landscape in Chinese Contemporary Art / Landschaft in der chinesischen Gegenwartskunst*, ed. Peter Fischer, Ostfildern-Ruit 2011.

(2) *Ji Dachun*, ed. Kunstmuseum Bern und timezone 8, Beijing 2007.