

WEIXIN

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RUSTY LANDSCAPE, WHITE LIGHT, AND FIGURES

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Xiao Jiang isn't a graduate of any art colleges—he only studied at the China Academy of Art for one year. Therefore, He relies entirely on his talent and a trace of obsession to make a living with art. When it comes to painting, Xiao Jiang always upholds a simple mentality and is seldom affected by changes in the art ecology and his surrounding environment. It is precisely because of this that his paintings are less distracting, relieved from the psychological burden and academic dogma, and remain more faithful to his vision and feelings.

Like many painters of this age, Xiao Jiang never intends to categorize himself into a specific genre, but his painting style is still recognizable. He relies more on instinct to create than on strategy and experience. Among them, the most prominent is undoubtedly his portrayal of the landscape.

The mountains, sky, buildings, spaces, and roads in the picture are all things he sees in his daily life. All these scenes come from his instant eyes capture and mobile phone shooting. In this way, he builds an image library for himself. Before officially starting, he still needs to select and capture a second time among many pictures. This process is also temporary and often depends on the instant feeling at that moment. For Xiao Jiang, these photos are not only the image motifs of the painting but also his cause and momentum. Most of the time, when he starts to paint, he no longer believes or even remembers the original information of the picture and works subjectively.

In depicting these natural landscapes, Xiao Jiang has maintained the basic perspective structure, but the form and texture have yet gone far from the original image. The actual lush, layered, winding mountains are reduced to a superposition of hard-edged planar geometric shapes (mainly triangular) as if they were a landscape installation. In addition to the distinct hard edges of each mountain, the tones are also slightly different. However, the tonal gradation between these mountains can easily be overlooked under strong backlight if you don't look closely. It is hard to say whether the scenic moment is morning or dusk, but they all convey an inexplicable melancholy and gloom. Perhaps, in this way, the artist deliberately

confuses the natural moments in the real world, leading us to the moment in his heart.

This form of painting has its precedents in the history of art. The landscape in the Dunhuang grotto murals seems to be a patchwork stack of planes, but obviously, the stacking here is not derived from the actual scene but based on a specific stylized construction. Similar to the hard-edged form used by Xiao Jiang, the most typical is the late medieval European paintings. For example, Giotto's depiction of mountains and rocks has apparent hard-edged features. Although not as stylized as the Dunhuang murals and is not a portrait, it is still a conceptual mountain. In a sense, Xiao Jiang's depiction of mountains is more like a combination of Dunhuang murals and Giotto's paintings. He combined these traditional forms with a strong contrast of light and shadow (backlight) to form a passionate individual painting (modeling) language.

However, the geometrical methods used by Xiao Jiang do not rely on pure planes. He also values the level and texture of the surface. He did not follow the realistic features of the mountains or landforms but chose a dull, scorched hue, coupled with its mottled brush-strokes, making the whole picture look more like a piece of rusty steel plate. At this time, the entire landscape seems to be an installation made of steel plates of different geometric shapes. This surface texture is more from the artist's personal feeling than his perception of the natural scenery. This is certainly not a rational and objective image-form experiment, nor is it a humanistic lament about nature. Instead, he wants to put himself in a more realistic scene. Because of this, we can still see the sky, buildings, roads, and people in the pictures, even though these objects have been abstracted or generalized to varying degrees.

As the title of the painting indicates, the recent work "Sketch" (2019) depicts a scene of a painter sketching from life in the mountains. The mountains appear to be a landscape installation under his generalization and interpretation while the primary layers are retained. However, on the one hand, a consistent tone blurs the relationship between the different levels. On the other hand, the hard edges and clear outlines deliberately highlight the borderlines between the mountains. This "ambiguity" and its inherent tension create a visual trance, but actually, it is more like a psychological portrayal. The horizon in the foreground is not flat but slightly inclined from left to right. Such a "design" of angle may come from the original photo or a road in the mountains. But at the same time, it is like the artist himself deliberately tilting the figure, thus creating a sense of imbalance or instability and inner uneasiness. The character in the picture faces his back to the audience, his head slightly turned to the left, looking into the distance, holding a frame in his right hand, and an unknown white object, possibly a paintbrush, in his left hand. But in a daze, the painting frame seems to have become a brick, and the paintbrush is like a knife. What we see is not a painter sketching from life but an angry teenager standing on the edge of a cliff seeking revenge.

This looming narrative violence complements the hard-edged mountains and rusty texture of the picture, creating a quirky atmosphere. The two earth-red irregular geometric figures in the middle view of the mountain on the left may be the remains of a landslide or building behind the mountain or may just be two unidentified objects. Similarly, the light blue triangular plane in the lower part of the middle view of the mountain on the right looks like a corner of a reservoir or another unknown object. In contrast, the most natural thing in the picture is the sky in the distant scene and the characters in the foreground. The floating clouds in the distance form an intertextual relationship with the characters' movements, clothing folds, and dynamics. Meanwhile, they generate an obvious tension and conflict with the overall rigid texture of the picture. The most absurd point is the three white spots on the character: the white hat, the white shoes, and the white paintbrush or knife in the left hand. It seems that three independent white lights are shooting at the place where the character stands, which constitutes a thorn in the whole picture. Interestingly, we can find that this kind of white light appears in almost all of his works, such as the white gloves in "Slowly Walk Down the Mountain" (2019), the white blocks in the middle shot of the "Valley" series (2020), the white rectangular in the far distance in "Construction Site in the Mountain" (2021), the pink and white building in "Real Estate in the Mountain," and the white wall lying in the middle of

“Beside the Reservoir” (2018), etc. These white blocks are not so much from reality as they are a psychological portrayal. It’s hard to say what this means, as it has different orientations in different work. Or maybe it has no meaning, but just an empty form?

We might as well divide Xiao Jiang’s recent works into two parts: outdoor landscape and indoor scenery.[1] Coincidentally, this inside and outside constitute a whole, and the artist did not deliberately make this. The windows in “Inside Room” (2021), the illuminated canvas and sketch paper in “Sketch Practice” (2021), the white light reflected by the mirror on the wall in “The Room” (2021), etc. On the one hand, these white lights constitute the daily space, and on the other hand, they seem to be trying their best to escape from the original scene in the picture. Since the white light here is opaque, it blocks the possibility of the indoor space extending outward. The shadows of furniture, furnishings, and figures also imply the existence of external space; that is, it is not absolutely closed, but it blocks the possibility from the inside out. In contrast, there are also architectural elements in his works about outdoor scenery, but they are also shrouded in white light; that is to say, it also blocks the possibility of looking indoors. In this sense, white light not only penetrates the inner and outer spaces but also blocks the inner and outer spaces. Xiao Jiang has created a time and space that is transmissive and unknowable.

When depicting these white lights, Xiao Jiang also chose the hard-edged form. On the one hand, this is based on the characteristics of the windows and the building itself, but on the other hand, the opaque hard-edged geometric form just responds to his depiction of mountains. With this regard, aren’t those mountains also blocking the eyes of the people in the painting or the viewers in front of the painting? It works like the characters in his paintings, either the back or the hidden face, blocking the possibility of viewing, intentionally or not. It can even be said that the reason why he withdrew his gaze is to bring the viewing and perception back to the psychological dimension. What he paints comes more from his personal feelings and inner thoughts rather than what he sees. In my opinion, it is precisely because of the awkwardness of narration that he prefers to express his rich spiritual world and true feelings through painting.

In portraying indoor and outdoor scenery, the characters in the painting play a vital role. In other words, they are the dominating character of the psychological atmosphere and spiritual temperament. Although the character always appears in an inconspicuous place or just as a supporting role, such as the half-profile female in “The Kitchen” (2021). The left half almost merges in the shadow and for the right half, he uses the strong light on the clothes and the clear contour lines to shape the sense of volume trying to highlight or peel her out. How to shape the characters may be the biggest challenge to Xiao Jiang in recent years. But from his recent works like “The Lying Man” (2020) and “Portrait in Front of the Mountain” (2019), it is not difficult to see that he has made many bold attempts.

Xiao Jiang disdains to reproduce a photo faithfully; he is more concerned about the relationship between the form of the character and the space. In “The Room” (2021), the color of the sofa and the clothes respond to the dark green tones of the painting on the back wall; the skin color is consistent with the color of the floor and the stool on the right. (In fact, such a tonal relationship almost runs through this series.) The shape of the character complements the shape of the sofa. Instead of using hard-edged geometric shapes, he uses arcs to give the whole body a sense of movement—even though the character is in a quiet sleeping state. This does not violate the harmony with the surrounding and conveys a trace of estrangement and loneliness. It can be said that the whole scene is a dream of the person in the painting. And this kind of emotion permeates almost all the portrayals of indoor scenery. In contrast, “Sketch Practice” is one of the most “absurd” works.

This one depicts a corner of the studio. The figure in the painting (maybe the painter or the viewer) is sitting in front of the canvas (or drawing board) in the middle, facing the viewer outside with his back, while looking at a white rectangle from the front. Perhaps as the title

suggests, it is a piece of sketch paper pasted on the drawing board, but it may also be a shape on the canvas—the object depicted by the painter (or viewer) is a set of illuminated rectangle frame reclining in the corner of the wall. Even for an instant, we feel that the characters in the painting are not facing the drawing board and sketch paper, but a small window. The artist is deliberate. In a sense, it can be said that he is trying to disturb the eyes and visual experience of the viewer so as to overflow a heterogeneous imagination. At this time, the seemingly shaking shadows (including brushstrokes) on the ground and the shapes of the characters created a kind of potential kinetic energy, making the whole picture in a state of anxiety. Perhaps this is what the artist really wants to express.

The counterpart is the painting “Noon” (2018). The picture strictly follows the law of perspective, depicting an ordinary street scene. At noon, two people walk along an empty street under the scorching sun. It is obvious that such a solid composition comes directly from the photo. However, as always, during interpretation, the artist removed a lot of excess information, except for the trees on the left that still retain the basic form. Meanwhile, the buildings on both sides of the street are abstracted into geometric planes and blocks. The most prominent feature of the picture is the shapes and movements of the two characters, which clearly reveals a hint of faint anxiety and irritability, as if something has happened or is happening. Perhaps due to the backlight, the faces of the characters are still hidden, especially the shadows casted by the characters under strong light, adding a mystery and absurdity to the whole scene, as if two ghosts are walking in a “barren city”. These two figures, like two ghosts and two beams of flames, form poles with the symbolized or conceptualized clouds in the sky. It is worth mentioning that surrounding the figures or the “flames” is the rising brushstroke, resurrecting a silent dead road; the yellow band extending from the lower left to the upper right is objectively the center line of the road, but here again, it is like a mysterious light. Regardless of whether it is a road that is on fire or a road that is lighted by the sun, all these make the whole picture in a strange “uneasiness”.

The “uneasiness” here is not an agitation, what Xiao Jiang strives for is the solid, stable, quiet, and calm atmosphere of the painting. Therefore, most of his paintings are still based on a dominant perspective structure. In individual parts or some details, he will make some “tricks”, which does not lead to the overall “destruction”, but it is enough to loosen the picture. However, it is the brushstrokes, color, and the overall texture of the picture that really give the picture vitality. Almost all his paintings maintain the same hue and saturation, and even the thickness of the canvas is an important parameter. Only that kind of coarse-grained canvas can (automatically) generate brushstrokes and coatings that transcend (rational) experience, and (automatically) generate various “symptoms” outside the structure. In the words of Georges Didi-Huberman, this is “a tremor of the mind and a fatal excitement—something we can call a trauma, a blow, a splash of color”.^[2] In my opinion, this is also the difference between him and the general frame-cutting depiction. Although both of the pictures appeal to the creation of atmosphere, the latter pays more attention to the narrative. In Xiao Jiang’s case, the image is only the base, while emotional fiction is his focus.

or Xiao Jiang, there is no difference between the inside and outside scenery. Those rusty landscapes, those indoor spaces shroud in white light, and those figures trapped in it are, in the end, the artist’s imagination and fiction. Xiao Jiang is unwilling to provide an exact explanation and conceptual orientation for every work. In some sense, the reason he obstructed viewing (such as wiping out the characters’ faces or always facing the audience with their backs) implies that this is ultimately an enclosed world, and there is no need to explain anything to the outside. Just like Xiao Jiang himself, he rarely discusses his creation of art. What he wants to express is already in his painting, and there is no need to say anything. The so-called “mountain beyond the mountain” ultimately refers to a position inside it, and this is a fable.

References

[1] In June 2021, Xiao Jiang's personal project in Room 314, Building 7, Lianhua Apartment, Lane 314, Tongren Road, Shanghai, was named "Indoor Scenery".

[2] Didi Huberman: "In Front of Images", translated by Chen Yuan. Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2015, p.351.