

**XU XIAOYAN**  
SONG OF THE EARTH

徐晓燕  
大地之歌





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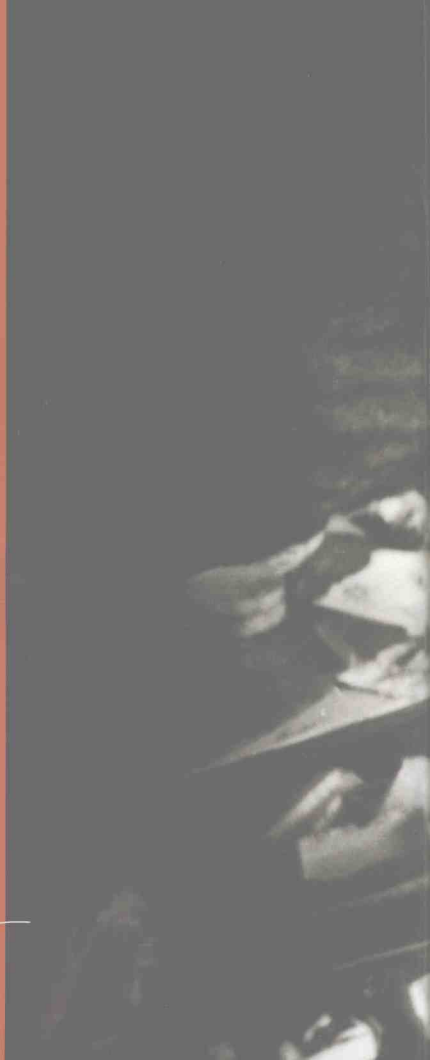
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徐晓燕







## 光色交响中的大地之歌

——徐晓燕艺术述评

袁方舟

### 大地：从马勒、基夫尔到徐晓燕

从90年代初到现在，徐晓燕的创作主题始终没有离开过“大地”。大地不仅是作为自然的一部分，也是与人类生存最相关、最亲近的那一部分，是作为人的生存环境，被人类广泛开发、利用（也包括破坏、糟蹋）的那一部分。《三字经》里曾有“三山、六水一分田”说法，在古人来看，地球上可以被人类所利用的土地只占地球面积的十分之一。大山大水更多地是供人观赏的大自然，只有大地的恩赐，才使人进入农耕文明，解决了人的温饱。因此，大地对于人便是最温馨的存在，是大自然给与人类的最丰厚、最恒久的礼物。

以“大地之歌”作为徐晓燕个展的主题，不仅缘于上述理由，还必须说明的是，这个主题词实际上是借用奥地利作曲家古斯塔夫·马勒（Gustav Mahler 1860—1911）于1908年创作的交响声乐套曲《大地之歌》这个曲名。马勒在一百年前就曾以《大地之歌》命名他由六个乐章构成的交响曲。该交响曲从汉斯·贝特格翻译的《中国之笛》中采用了七首中国唐诗（李白的《悲歌行》、《宴陶家亭子》、《采莲曲》、《春日醉起言志》，孟浩然的《宿业师山房待丁大不至》、王维的《送别》与钱起的《效古秋夜长》——这最后一首专家尚有争议），马勒所以能从唐诗中获得灵感，与他当时的个人经历有关：1907年，马勒遭遇厄运，三岁的女儿去世，接着他又被解除了维也纳宫廷歌剧院院长的职务，此时，当他阅读这些这个古诗时，引起了对人生的伤时感怀，于是选择其中的七首谱写成曲，成为他最著名也最成功的作品之一。1998年德国一个交响乐团来华演出时，曾演奏了这首曲目，引起音乐界和学术界的广泛关注，还曾专门召开研讨会论证马勒的《大地之歌》中所采用的七首唐诗的确切题目和作者。并把马勒的《大地之歌》看作是中西文化交流史上的一次伟大创举，对该作的音乐文化意义和作品价值进行了深入探讨。也是

中国人第一次对100年前西方音乐家接受中国文化的一次具有历史意义的回应。

马勒在西方音乐史上被看作是“最后一个伟大的德国后浪漫主义交响乐作曲家”。“是整个浪漫主义传统……的后裔，他把浪漫主义交响曲和交响清唱剧无限扩展……预示了一个新的时代”。（唐纳德·杰·格劳特、克劳特·帕利斯卡《西方音乐史》681—686页）

我们从徐晓燕的《大地之歌》追溯到马勒，不只是为了对一个乐曲曲名的借用，更在于他们的作品在艺术精神上所具有的相似性特征：在面对大地的沉思中充满着人生的悲愴。马勒为何要把这首交响曲取名为《大地之歌》，我们在现有的史料上还没找到说明，但他从唐诗中所感受到的人生悲愴肯定与他面对大地的沉思有关。再没有什么人间的精神情感可以与大地分离的了。甚至可以说，所有的人生悲愴都与人类赖以生存的大地相关。当我们在谈到大地时，那意象首先是一种广大的庄严，一种可以延伸到历史时空和人生长河之中的宏大情怀，而绝不仅只是一幅赏心悦目的风景。

人们在谈论徐晓燕的作品时，还会联想到德国的基夫尔。安塞姆·基夫尔是德国当代最有影响的艺术家，新表现主义的代表。基夫尔的绘画中有一个不断反复的主题就是大地。但在他笔下出现的大地并不全是来自他对自然的直观感受，而纯属于一种内心体验。因为他画的大地不仅广袤而荒凉，而且还有一种“用战争技术制造”的“焦土感”，仿佛是一幅幅被“烧焦的风景”。基弗尔从不相信能有一种“纯真无邪的风景”，因为它们“总是浸透了历史和战争的痕迹，正如《马赛曲》中所唱的，‘混杂的血冲刷着我们的土地’”。基弗尔总是沉浸于战争给德国社会和德国文化带来的灾难性创伤之中，抹不掉自己对战争的记忆。其实他本人是出生在战后的1945年，并未亲身经历过战争，战争只是经由父辈和历史

记录间接给与的体验。他的作品表现了战争给德国战后一代人留下的精神阴影：有关大屠杀的记忆（意象来自保罗·策兰的《死赋格曲》）、战争的残骸、战后的废墟与生命的复苏等等。为此他的作品被看作是对大自然的一种“哀读而又恭敬的姿态”，被认为是“擅长描绘阴暗调子”的风景画家。他说：“我觉得需要去唤醒记忆，不是为了改造政治，而是为了改造自己”。并为此而创作了许多足以触动这一记忆的作品。

徐晓燕的画所表现的大地当然不是经由战争造成的灾难与创伤，而是大地在深秋季节所呈现的景观给她心灵深处所带来的精神回响。她的成名作《秋季风景》，描绘的正是大地在无私地奉献之后，那种残存于田间的萧瑟景象在她心中引起的怅然若失和人生悲情。这种悲剧意识完全是一种个性化的内心体验，并非作为客体的大地所本有，也正是在这个意义上讲，徐晓燕的《大地之歌》与马勒与基夫尔有着一种内在的精神联系；所以，我们在讨论以大地为母题的徐晓燕的作品时，就无法不将思路上溯到基夫尔和马勒。并且把他们的艺术看作是在同一条精神脉络上的自然延续。

### 风景：从城苑、夏季到秋季

在中国当代油画家中，以风景为主题的画家很多，但像徐晓燕这样十多年来执着于表现大地的艺术家并不多见。在90年代以前，即她从80年代初走出校门的最初十年，是中国当代艺术激烈变动的十年，她虽然还未进入这个变动的漩涡之中，但作为一个初出校门的青年人，已经敏感到85新潮的潮起潮落。我们看她这一阶段的作品《如《建设者》、《神的旨意》、《吻》、《坐着的女人和抽烟的男人》等），会立刻回到那个因渴望新而躁动不安的年代。在这些年中，她除了画油画，还用各种纤维材料做软雕塑。而所有这些探索和尝试，包括她刚走向工作岗位后在前屋后画的那些现在看来有些稚拙的风景，都成为她后来走向成功必不可

少的铺垫。

从1992年起，徐晓燕开始沉下心来专注于风景题材。两年中，她先后画两个系列：《城苑》和《夏季风景》。《城苑》画的是市郊的菜地，画面繁密而浓烈，极富田园气息。画家对舒展的大地、向天际延伸的田埂地垄所显露出的浓厚兴趣已预示了她后来在《秋季风景》中的充分展开。因此，《城苑》可以说是《大地之歌》的“序曲”。在接下来的《夏季风景》中，我们进一步看到她未来风格的雏形。所不同的只是，在这个阶段，他的风景画还很生活化，不时有在田间劳动的人物出现，甚至还带着浓郁的地域风情味道。但在此后完成的《秋季风景》中，却出现了一种质的变化：它们不再是一般的风景再现，而是升华到一种精神境界之中。因为她那些以深秋大地为主题的风景已经超越了一般的风景画，她在风景中看到了更多风景以外的东西。如果她画的仅仅是一些美景，仅仅是对自然的一般性讴歌，她的作品就不会具有那样震撼人心的力量。

《秋季风景》（堪称《大地之歌》的第一乐章）是徐晓燕的成名作，也是她经历了十年的摸索之后，在艺术上走向成熟的标志。《秋季风景》让我们感到，徐晓燕在面对深秋大地这一特定自然景物时所产生的丰富联想和复杂的内心体验。我曾在一篇评论中作过这样的描述：《秋季风景》所表现的并非通常所见的那种丰收在望的秋田盛景，相反，累累果实已经被“洗劫”一空，但大地却坦然澄澈，以她博大的胸怀呈现出无私奉献后的平静。然而，当画家面对那些被剥去果实又剩下头穗的玉米残茬，在夕阳下、在风中伫立着的秸秆、枯草，她的心却“长久地不能平静”。她被这些无法改变的现实，这些“不可言喻的美丽动人”所感动。于是，她一再地表现那些残留在田间的秸秆，那些整齐的或散乱的、被剥空、被遗弃的生命群体，实在是对生命的一个意味深长的感叹。这些充满悲剧感的生命意象，在经历了自己的饱满与辉煌之后，显得何等清寂、冷落与伤感，凝重笔触中交织着画家多少复杂的情感纠葛与生存体验。

从母性意识的角度看，女性在本质上更贴近自然。自然孕育生命万物与女性作为生命本源是同义的。因此，女性艺术家观照自然也会使带上从自然中反观自我的特殊涵义。徐晓燕不厌其烦地画“大地”这个“万物之母”，那种创作的兴味与冲动一点也不亚于那些醉心于母亲题材的画家，大地衍生万物又包容万物的母性胸怀，给作为母亲的徐晓燕提供了更为广阔的表达空间。

### 生命：从悲情、怒放到辉煌

徐晓燕的《秋季风景》系列在1995年8月举办的《中华女画家邀请展》中展出之后，受到画坛的广泛关注和好评。接着，她以其中一幅参加于本年年底举办的第三届中国油画年展，得到十几位评委的肯定并荣膺金奖。这一至高无上的荣誉和褒奖给画家带来的惊喜和欣慰是不言而喻的，因为这无疑是对她十多年艺术探索的肯定和认可。但接踵而来的是，在关于作品的收藏问题上投资方对一个无名之辈的无法容忍的无理和粗暴，却带给画家更大的精神压抑。投资方对一件金奖作品所取的不予认可的态度，不仅是对金奖作者的无视，更是对他们所聘请的十几位专家评委的不尊重。徐晓燕在当时那样一种极不成熟的市场条件下，忍气吞声地接受了投资方的苛刻条款，心中的积郁无处诉说，于是全部倾注在她的画布上，这就是《乐土》系列的诞生。《乐土》可以说是徐晓燕几个系列中最具悲情色彩的一个乐章。

徐晓燕本人并没有如马勒那样起伏跌宕的人生经历，她心地善良单纯，在艺术上又十分敏感，所以她面对深秋大地的悲壮情怀完全是从内心演绎而来。但到《乐土》系列以及后来的《大地的肌肤》系列就有所不同，她在作品中融入了更多人生的感悟和生存的体验。构成画面主体的多为田埂、沟壑、烧焦的残枝和灰败“烧焦”是北方农村特有的景象），灰黑色、土黄色和土红色控制了整个画面，使作品的意境更加旷远、深

邃而低沉，更具悲剧感，更多出一些苦涩和压抑。名为“乐土”，实际在画中并无“欢乐”的意象，“乐土”在此只能理解为画家把画布、把画面这件事本身当作她的“乐土”，因为她的情感能够在此得到尽情抒泄。

但这种沉郁的情绪在徐晓燕的生命乐章中并没有维持多久，广袤的大地以她博大的胸怀滋养着徐晓燕的艺术创造，使她的作品不断拓出新疆土，进入新的景域。

《怒放》系列是徐晓燕唯一——一个从表面看离开大地的系列。但她实际上只是将她的视线从全景式的描绘转移到由大地孕育的生命本体的微观关照中来。我们可以设想那就是从她早期的《城苑》系列作品的全景中将镜头推到一个局部的“大特写”。她的灵感显然来自于白菜在生长过程中如花一样从中心不断向外绽放的生命景观。白菜虽然是最普通、最常见、也最廉价的一种蔬菜，但如徐晓燕画中这样一种她烂的生命景观却是我们在日常生活中很难看到的。她以一种好奇的眼光把这一不为人所留意的、微观的生命过程放大给我们，让我们惊奇于这生命的绝丽。在徐晓燕的心目中，这一似乎微不足道的生命过程就是一个奇迹，是大地孕育出的生命之花，她反复用不同色调将它们演绎、变奏，以显示生命的壮丽美艳。

2004年，徐晓燕又用类似手法创作了《辉煌》系列。如果说，《怒放》系列是返回到《城苑》主题的重奏和微观放大，那么《辉煌》系列则可以为是为对《秋季风景》这一母题的二度创造和再阐释。《秋季风景》系列所创造的大地意象是博大的、深沉的和凝重的，是生命在生生不息中的悲壮与悲凉，充满着画家对大地的敬畏、感动与感恩之情，甚至会把观众带到“念天地之悠悠，独怆然而涕下”的境界之中，而《辉煌》系列则完全从这种悲情氛围中解脱出来，画的依然是深秋大田，还是那些伫立在田间的玉米杆，但却被画家从全景推到中近景，并且过滤掉了诸多复杂的情感体验而将画面单纯化，使玉米地里那成片的秸秆在一片

温暖的夕阳普照中，如生育后的母亲，显现出生命在奉献后的灿烂辉煌，将光色交响中的“大地之歌”推向了高潮。从而构成“全曲”中最为明亮、最为激昂的一个乐章。

### 边缘地带：充满忧患的尾声

《边缘地带》是徐晓燕新近完成的一个系列，也可以说是她的《大地之歌》“全曲”中一个意味深长的尾声。当最为明亮、激昂的《辉煌》乐章落幕，一个简短的间歌之后，我们听到的是乐队低音部传出的幽暗低沉的旋律；如我们在《边缘地带—月亮湾》中所看到的那样。但“月亮湾”还只是一个过渡，在接下来的一系列作品（如《聚桥》、《小溪沟》、《断线泉》、《大望京》、《望京街》等）中，我们看着会禁不住痛心疾首，情感突然间从《辉煌》的高亢跌入低谷，我们跟随着画家的思维，进入对人类自身行为忧心忡忡的反省之中。

人类自进入工业文明时代以后，由于对自然资源的疯狂掠夺，环境污染日益严重，人与自然的和谐关系荡然无存。人对自然的不尊重，已经危及到人类自身。人的生存环境的日益恶化，已经构成当代人的精神困境，从而使人不得不对自身的行为反省，对未来命运的担忧。画家在画这些作品的时候，深深为一种忧患意识所驱动，不忍心看着这些美丽的风景被糟践，但又无奈于这残酷的现实，也正是站在这样一种精神批判的立场上，画家才在观念上与当代人的精神生活发生了密切联系。

徐晓燕的《边缘地带》所揭示的是一种随处可见又让人触目惊心的现实，被都市化了的现代人正是如此地生活在自己的产品和垃圾的包围之中。都市人口的密度愈来愈大，人与人之间的关系却愈来愈隔膜，与自然的距离也愈来愈远。他们失去了自己精神的避难所。在此，画家所触及的不仅是人的生存环境，更是现代人普遍存在的一种精神危机，也是现代人灵魂深处时时浮现的一种无家可归的状态，这种精神的漂泊状

态，使他们游离家园，找不到“在家”的感觉。画家对自然的关注，实际上正是对人身命运的关注，并由这种关注引发出对人类行为的自我反省和批评，这便是徐晓燕在《大地之歌》的尾声中所发出的意味深长的慨叹与警示，也是她的艺术所取的当代视角与当代立场。

2006.7.17 于北京京北上苑三径房

# THE SONG OF THE EARTH IN LIGHTS AND COLORS

## ON XU XIAOYAN' S PAINTINGS

JIA FANGZHOU

### **The Earth: From Mahler, Kiefer, to Xu Xiaoyan**

Ever since the early 1990s, the earth has been a consistent theme in Xu Xiaoyan's artistic creation. As part of nature, the earth is the most close and relevant to human existence; however, this homeland of humanity has been ruthlessly developed and exploited, or hurt and damaged, by its intelligent inhabitants. In "Three-Character Verse", a time-honored classic of Chinese literature, it is said that only a tenth of the earth should be used to grow crops while the rest remains mountains and waters as it is. While providing breathtaking sceneries for humanity to marvel at, the earth has also been bearing ample amounts of fruits to feed human beings ever since the beginning of agricultural civilization. For humanity, the earth is a most generous, enduring gift from Mother Nature.

It is not simply for this reason that Xu Xiaoyan's solo exhibition was called "The Song of the Earth". The title is borrowed directly from "The Song of the Earth" (Das Lied von der Erde), the massive six-movement song symphony created by Austrian composer Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) about a century ago. The gigantic musical composition was inspired by Hans Bethge's translation of seven Chinese poems from the Tang Dynasty ("A Sorrowsful Song", "The Banquet at Tao's Pavilion", "Melody of Gathering Lotus", and "Upon Waking up on a Spring Morning" by Li Bai, "A Visit to the Mountain House" by Meng Haoran, "The Farewell" by Wang Wei, and "An Imitation of Old-Style Autumn Song" by Qian Qi, there's a dispute about the last one). Gustav Mahler was touched by those Chinese poems after a series of misfortunes. It was fateful year for the composer in 1907; shortly after the death of his beloved daughter who was only three years of age, he was forced to resign from the post of director at the Vienna Court Opera. It was under such circumstances that he read the translation of Chinese poetry, the pathos of which moved him profoundly and inspired one of his most successful works. In 1908, a visiting German orchestra performed the work in China to draw wide attention among the country's musicians and historians. A number of seminars were held to locate the exact sources of the seven poems behind Mahler's Song of the Earth, which was described as an immortal feat in the cultural exchanges between

China and the West. The extensive discussions and research activities was the first time that the Chinese nation has made a response of historical significance to the European composer's acceptance of Chinese culture a century ago.

In the gigantic History of Western Music by Donald Jay Grout and Claude Palisca, Gustav Mahler was described as the last great symphony composer of Austrian-German late romanticism, the descendant of the whole tradition of romanticism, who has infinitely expanded the genres of romanticist symphonies and symphonic cantata, which heralded a new era in serious music.

As her exhibition has borrowed the title of the symphony of Gustav Mahler, the works of the Chinese painter also share certain features in artistic spirit with those of the Austrian composer; both are filled with pathos of life. We are not sure why Mahler has titled the song symphony "The Song of the Earth", but it is certain that the pathos he perceived in the Chinese poetry corresponded with something in his reflections about the earth. After all, no human emotions could survive when kept away from the earth; it is no exaggeration to say that all pathos of humanity is derived from the earth on which we live. While talking about the earth, the image that first comes to our minds is one of vastness and grandeur; instead of a mere spectacle that pleases the eye, the earth tends to inspire the most profound thoughts on history and life in general.

Another artist that Xu Xiaoyan's paintings often reminds us of is the neo-expressionist painter Anselm Kiefer (1945-), one of the most influential figures in the contemporary art of Germany. In Kiefer's works, a recurring theme is also the earth. But in his case, the earth is not simply a representation of his subjective feelings of nature, but something about the experiences buried deep in his heart. In his paintings, the earth is depicted as vast and deserted and has the "sense of scorched soil" created by "technologies of war", looking like "burnt sceneries". Kiefer never believes in the possibility of a kind of "innocent sceneries". For him, the scenery is "forever displaying the ravages of history and war; that reminds us of a line from "La Marseillaise" which goes "let impure blood water our furrows". Obsessed with the disastrous traumas that the war had bestowed on the society and culture of Germany, Kiefer can never get rid of the haunting memories of war. In fact, born in 1945, Kiefer only had

vicarious experiences of the war through historical records and the memories of his father's generation. In his works, however, the war's shadows are still lingering in the spiritual outlook of his generation, who are burdened with the memories of the Holocaust (with imagery taken from Paul Celan's poem "Death Fugue"), the debris and ruins, as well as the recovery of life force. As a result, his works feature an attitude that is "blasphemous yet reverent" to nature, and he himself has been described as a landscape painter specializing in the "dark subject matter". Kiefer once said that he felt it necessary to awaken the memory, but not to change the politics, but to transform the self; many of his works were effectively created for this purpose.

Instead of an earth severely savaged by war, Xu Xiaoyan's paintings represent the spiritual echoes that the spectacles of the earth in late autumn have made in the recesses of her mind. The "Autumn Scenery" series, which won her wide fame as an artist, is a depiction of the sorrow, pathos, and sense of emptiness in her heart inspired by the bleak view of the crop fields after the earth has yielded its fruits to humanity. Such a sense of tragedy is purely a kind of personalized experience deep in one's heart, but not a quality of the earth, which is only an object. In this sense, Xu Xiaoyan's "Song of the Earth" shares certain spiritual qualities with the works of Mahler and Kiefer; as a result, it is inevitable for us to involve Kiefer and Mahler while examining those Xu Xiaoyan's works on the motif of the earth, and thereby discover the spontaneous continuation from one artist to another.

#### **Scenery: From Urban Garden, Summer, to Autumn**

While quite a number of contemporary Chinese oil painters focus on landscapes, few have been single-mindedly dedicated to the subject matter of the earth like Xu Xiaoyan. Over the decade following Xu Xiaoyan's graduation from an art academy in the early 1980s, China's contemporary art were undergoing a series of drastic changes; though not yet involved in the stormy vortex, she sensed the shapes of things to come in the New Wave of 1985. A review of her paintings from that period, like "Constructors", "A God's Decree", "The Kiss", and "Female Sitter and Male Smoker", will immediately bring us back to the restless age when people were craving for novelty.

During the period, she painted in oils as well as made flexible sculptures with fiber materials. All these tests and explorations, including the landscapes painted near her residence that now seems somewhat clumsy, have been necessary preparations for her later success.

Starting in 1992, Xu Xiaoyan began to focus on landscapes. Over two years' time, she produced the "Urban Garden" series and "Summer Scenery" series. In "Urban Garden", the imagery taken from the vegetable fields seemed dense, bold, and idyllic; the deep interest displayed by the artist in the land stretching into the horizon would come to dominate the "Autumn Scenery" series years later. In this sense, "Urban Garden" is the overture of Xu Xiaoyan's "Song of the Earth". Next came "Summer Scenery", in which certain elements of her future style began to manifest themselves. In this stage, however, the composition of her landscapes were still quite lively; there were farmers working in the fields and the local colors were visibly presented. As the "Autumn Scenery" was completed, however, a fundamental change had set in: her landscapes were no longer the simple representations of natural views, as a quality of spirituality began to permeate throughout her art. Her works themed on the earth in late autumn have transcended landscapes in the common sense of the word, as she began to perceive something buried deep underneath the scenery. Her paintings would never display such overwhelmingly visceral power if they were mere celebrations of nature itself.

The "Autumn Scenery" series, which turned out to be the first movement of Xu Xiaoyan's "Song of the Earth", made a name for the young woman, who began to mature as an artist after ten years of explorations. The "Autumn Scenery" conveys the diverse association and complex psychological experiences of the artist while gazing upon the earth in late autumn. In a review, I once gave the following description: what the "Autumn Scenery" represents is not the conventional spectacle of crop fields promising a bumper harvest in autumn; instead, the theme is the frankness and calmness of the earth after it has yielded all its fruits to humanity in an act of "robbery". Before the beheaded corn stalks and the yellowing straws swaying in the breeze, the artist found it hard to "calm her troubled mind" and she was touched by the irreversible truthfulness and "the kind of beauty that beggars description".

The recurring images of the crop stalks and straws, which are scattered in the fields like a host of exploited and then abandoned lives, are the artist's lamentation about life itself. These tragic images of life, after a brief period of maturity and glory, seem so dismal, lonely, and pathetic, which is perfectly captured by the artist who shares similar emotions and experiences of existence.

In terms of maternity, the female is closer to nature in essence. Nature in its role of the origin of everything is synonymous with the female as the source of life. Therefore, a female artist's contemplation of nature inevitably leads to a reflection on her own existence. In her persistent depiction of "the earth", or "the mother of everything", Xu Xiaoyan has been displaying the kind of zest and impulse like the artists obsessed with the subject matter of motherhood. The maternity of the earth, which embraces and provides for all kinds of life, has given Xu Xiaoyan as a mother a broader space for expression.

#### **Life: From Pathos, Blooming, to Glory**

Put on display at the Chinese Female Artists Invitational Exhibition in Aug. 1995, Xu Xiaoyan's "Autumn Scenery" series received wide acclaim in the country. At the end of the same year, she entered a piece from the series for the Third Annual Exhibition of Chinese Oil Paintings; the work won recognition of the jury and carried away the golden award. Seeing her devoted artistic explorations over the past decade recognized at the nationwide show, the artist was genuinely delighted. However, the excitement turned out to be short-lived as the sponsors refused to include her work in the official collection on the ground of her lack of previous fame. Such an act of rudeness both affronted the authority of the jury and the endeavor of the artist. With no one to turn to at that time, Xu Xiaoyan was forced to pocket her pride and accept the unreasonable request of the sponsors. The depression later found an outlet on the canvas in her "Paradise" series, which has proved the *adagio* movement of funeral march among Xu Xiaoyan's works.

Different from Mahler, Xu Xiaoyan's personal life has been calm and smooth. The pathos she experienced standing before the earth in late autumn has been generated purely out of her kindness, innocence, and sensitiveness as an artist. However, things began to change with the "Paradise" and "Skin of

the Earth" series, into which she infused her thoughts about life and experiences of existence. With the visual elements of earth mounds, canals, burnt crop stalks and ashes depicted in colors like black, dark yellow, and red, her paintings began to create a far-away atmosphere and convey a sense of tragedy, depression, and bitterness. In the "Paradise", there is no joy; it is the canvas, or the act of painting, that provides a paradise for in which the artist can express her true self.

Such a dismal mood, however, didn't last long in Xu Xiaoyan's art, as she set out to explore the vastness the earth for a new territory.

The "Blooming" is the only series in which Xu Xiaoyan has seemed to leave the motif of earth. However, she was only turning from the depiction of the big picture to the individual lives thriving on the earth. The "Blooming" is like a close-up shot of a certain visual element from her early "Urban Garden" series. Apparently, her inspirations have come from the process in which a Chinese cabbage matured like the blooming of a flower. In Xu Xiaoyan's painting, the cabbage, a most ordinary and cheap vegetable in China, displays a splendid spectacle of life phenomenon that is rarely beheld in our everyday life. With a curious eye, the artist has brought into our sight the microscopic process of life for us to marvel at. For Xu Xiaoyan, that seemingly insignificant phenomenon of life is a miracle; it is a flower of life springing from the earth, which is interpreted and presented in different hues to display the magnificence of existence.

In 2004, Xu Xiaoyan employed the same techniques in producing the "Glory" series. Just like the "Blooming" is a microscopic variation on the "Urban Garden", the "Glory" series can be regarded as a reinterpretation of the motif in the "Autumn Scenery" series. In the "Autumn Scenery", the imagery of the earth is broad, profound, and dignified, with an enduring sense of solemnity and tragedy; the respect, fear, and gratitude on the part of the artist tends to move the spectators to tears and make them completely forget themselves. In the "Glory" series, such pathos is nowhere to be sensed; while the subject remains the farmland in late autumn full of corn stalks, the wide shot is replaced by a medium one. As the complex emotional experiences are filtered in the process, the imagery is purified; in the corn field, the bare stalks stand in

the warm sunlight like mothers newly delivered of their babies, bathed in the glory of offering new life to the world. Here "The Song of the Earth" reaches its climax amidst the lights and colors, in the brightest and most vigorous movement of the composition.

#### **The Fringe: a Finale Filled of Worries**

"The Fringe", a recent series of Xu Jiaoyan, can be seen as a meaningful finale of her "Song of the Earth". Following a brief respite after the last note of the most bright and vigorous movement of "Glory", we are hearing a dark, low melody played by the bass part of the orchestra, something like what we see in the painting "The Fringe—Moon Bay". But after the transition of "Moon Bay", a series of works like "Jade Bridge", "Little Brook", "Butterfly Springs", "Great Wanging", and "Wanging Street" arrive one after another to break our hearts. Falling from the brightness of "Glory" into despairing darkness, we are forced to join the artist in her worried reflection on the behavior of humanity.

Since the beginning of the age of industrialization, the frenzied exploitation of natural resources and ever-worsening pollution of the environment has ruined the harmonious relationship between humanity and nature. The human irreverence for nature is beginning to endanger humanity itself, as the deterioration of environment poses a spiritual predicament for humanity and forces us to reflect on our own behaviors and worry about our future. In creating these paintings, the artist was driven by overwhelming worries; she suffers from seeing those beautiful sceneries being ruined while she can do nothing about it. It is such a stance of criticism that allows the artist to connect with modern people on the spiritual level.

"The Fringe" by Xu Xiaoyan is revealing a common situation that is startling, in which the urbanized modern man is living in the midst of the products and garbage of his own creation. As the urban population keeps swelling, people are getting more and more alienated from each other as well as from nature. Humanity is losing its spiritual refuge. Here, the artist's subject is not merely the environment of human existence, but a spiritual crisis common among modern people. The crisis is the feeling of homelessness that

often emerges in the recesses of the souls; such a state of mind has deprived them of the feeling of "being home". The artist's concern for nature is actually a concern for the destiny of humanity, which calls for self-reflection and criticism on what humanity has been doing. The meaningful lamentation and caution made by Xu Xiaoyan in the finale of her "Song of the Earth" is the artistic stance she has adopted in the modern world.

July 17th, 2006

Shangyuan Sanjingju in the north of Beijing



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