



干杯

TOASTING

苏新平作品

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自我的审视与外化的关照

——关于苏新平的艺术

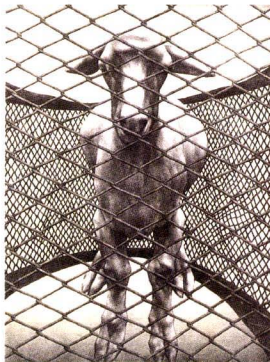
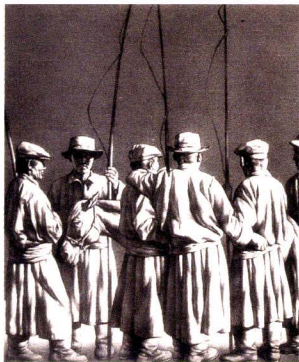
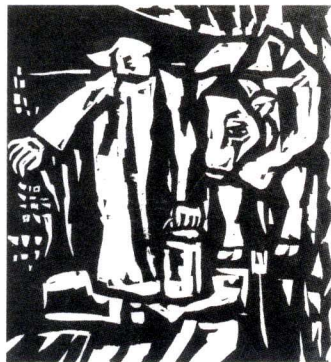
冯博一

春节期间，节日的喧闹一改平日的习惯而难以心绪稳定，只得收拾多日积累散落在地上的画册、杂志等资料打发时光。不期然却发现了我在1992年11月16日上午“苏新平版画展座谈会”上的笔记。掐指算来已是15年的光阴荏苒！那时，苏新平以一系列带有内蒙草原题材的石版画、木刻版画创作而引起画界关注。如今再翻检《躺着的男人和远去的白马》、《网中之羊》、《出生的太阳》等这些版画，依然能从他内蒙草原场景中提示出赋予哲理性思考的画面而备受触动。尽管时代的文化语境，以及生活方式、行为观念已发生了巨大变化，但我们仿佛从自由桎梏的挣脱里又陷入到资本的宰制之中。仍然孤寂，仍然重重藩篱的纠结而无以自拔。

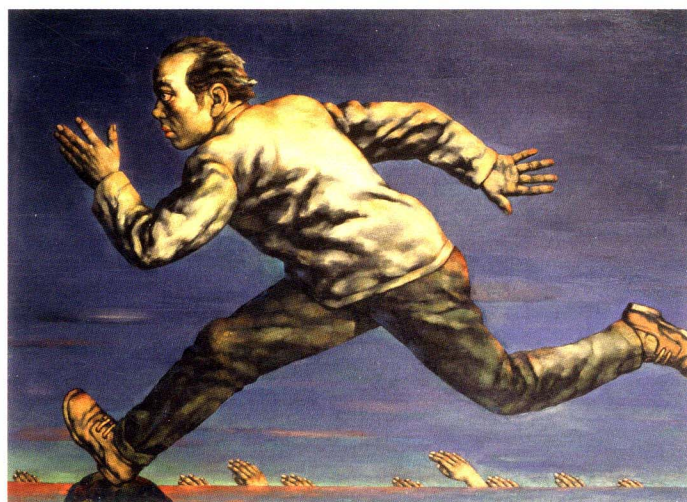
苏新平早期的大部分作品，其基本的艺术特征在于表现出了内心的自我审视品格。他的创作不仅是通过心灵的感应对人生对社会的观照和破解，也是由外在现实环境的冲激而产生对自我的反省。他的油画《风景》系列作品中，大概就是他延续至今的自我审视内心景象的一些代表作吧。风景是借助于他画室周围，或他往返于工作单位与家和画室路上的目光所及。陌生的一个人在一片灰蒙的色调中，注视着苍荒的情景，潜隐出新时代勃勃生机背后萧瑟、危机的暗影，进一步聚焦的则是他生活在都市特定环境所导致的心灵的躁动、性情的无所附着。他以意象风景的手法来凸现他的记忆、他的观察和他所处境的冷

漠、单调和缺乏个性，以及现代化过程所带来的视觉上的不毛与荒凉，从而更深地延伸出他对现代生活无机品质的质疑。就像你置身于他的作品之中，混乱与嘈杂在内心感觉中是那样的惶惑不安，透现出对现实变化的既欣喜，又无奈的感伤。因此，就是在他没有人物的风景画面里，“自我”也无处不在、无处不有。但这种“自我”的塑造，不是融入现实的狂欢和暂时对自我力量肯定而得到的喜悦与陶醉，而是在冷眼旁观地思考中，赋予艺术的想象来构成了他的艺术主观的象征性寓意。同时，即刻又被一种无法挣脱的孤独感寂寞感所替代，于是“我”便希望除了“自我”的声音而外，还有其他的空谷足音。

上世纪90年代中期，苏新平的创作开始有所转变，其动机则主要来自于中国社会转型期产生的市场经济、商业大潮对每一个中国人的冲击与影响，它激发了苏新平强烈的社会责任感和使命感。这种社会责任感、使命感在我看来其实是一位真正社会知识分子对历史进程的态度与立场。艺术家与知识分子是一样的，只不过身份属性或从事的行当略有不同。这涉及到对知识分子概念的理解和界定。我以为知识分子是与整个社会现实的趋向保持一定的疏离关系，从某种角度就是以独立的姿态站立在社会喧嚣的边缘，时时对社会变迁、文化生态以及个人的境遇发出一个边缘者思考、质疑与批判的声音。或者说这正是知识分子肩负的历史使命和社会责任。而作为艺术家就是以一



种所谓艺术家的身份和视觉的方式来表达他对现实变化的思考、判断与探究。而对当代文化的敏感与敏锐将导致艺术家在方法论，以及媒介、语言方式的改变。我们从苏新平1994年后创作的《欲望之海》、《假日系列》、《世纪之塔》，以及最近创作的《干杯》系列油画和版画就能略见一斑。《干杯》系列作品，基本上都是以一群没有明确身份的人像来展开的。作为芸芸众生的他们，在“宴会”饕餮中“干杯”的状态和处境，或许在苏新平看来这是最具有追逐物质欲望，享受生活的典型形象。他对其形象的处理，一改往昔众生贫穷、苦涩的饱经风霜模样，而在或红或黑的背景中呈现的都是一个个自足的笑脸，有着盲目可笑的意味。当我们面对他的作品时，他创作的形象、符号、色彩等等构成了他所谓的现实针对性——对虚假辉煌的揭露，对欲望无所抑制的批判。但这种反讽更多的是以一种严肃的态度与方式来给予呈现的。相对于上世纪流行的“艳俗艺术”而言，将暴发户“艳俗”的视觉形象、生活方式中器物符号的象征，运用波普的语言方式、民间传统的媒介手法和流行文化的样式，形成了艳俗艺术的潮流。而形象与符号不断地累加，以及符号之间象征性的相互作用，反映并强化了这些暴发户生活趣味的关联性，即通过真实的模仿和夸张的处理来达到对这种社会现象的讽喻，这是“艳俗艺术”在绘画语言上最凸显的“反讽”特征。而苏新平在造型上却有意虚饰了形象身份和符号的象征性明喻，剔除了简单模仿和极尽能事地夸张，以重复性的正面或侧面的一致性人物形象，提示了其中的纯粹感，并虚构了其中的感性色彩，重构和超现实地再现了他曾经的视觉观察，纯粹而有力地强化了他的绘画语言方式。从这个角度来看，他的油画艺术既是他思考的现实显影，又是在其形而上的超验表现。这种表现性因素当然得益于他多年的版画艺术创作——他是在用版画复数性、印痕性的语言方式从事着油画创作的实验，同时，又将油画转为黑白木刻版画，语言方式与媒介材料不同的相互转换，实验



和寻求着一种带有个人话语特征的绘画性感觉。也来源于他与现实主义艺术的血缘关系，从中还可以捕捉到他多年学院教学的经验。严格说来，艺术的创作也是一种绘画语言的尝试与实践，而艺术家找到自己的语言方式却相当艰难。苏新平语言的实验和转换，自然而然也包含了他的个人化追求。所以，看他的作品在语言感觉上能与他那副朴实的形象联系起来。而他的这种现实针对性也是昭然若揭的。就中国当下来说，传统文化处在中空状态，政治热度和敏感早已降温，中国人现实生活的经验已经相当西化，在精神上却缺乏皈依与寄托，追求物质化、娱乐化占据着我们日常生活的所有空间。他简化单纯地运用了图像的联想和明喻，创作出单纯而丰富的感觉形象，于是苏新平所反讽的欲望不再仅仅局限于金钱的功能，而成为生活在其中人们对生活无限形式的欲望，成为气派与华丽、成功与高贵的欲望，成为和影响到人们的日常生活想象和对时尚生活方式的追求之中。因此，欲望所带来的消费文化在当代消费社会无疑是一种生活方式，即将个人发展、即时满足、追逐变化等特定价值观，合理化为个人日常生活的自由选择，它构成了欲望的不间断流动，更像是20世纪以来社会自身发展的历史与逻辑在目前中国的显现。也许在苏新平看来，只有在这样的

稀薄的想象和臆造中才能阐释整体的真实性和意义。因为，真实是带有主观性的解释，即重新建构现实和用虚构补充现实，强调以创作主体的角度来表现、阐释隐藏在内心的真实，一种在内心折射的抽象现实。现实中的人与整个生活世界原是一体，艺术却把人与生活世界分离开来，人便站在比生活世界更高的位置上，去冷眼看待生活世界的形式与问题，于是他不仅认识了世界，也认识了自己。获得这种审美意识中的主体超越，正是艺术家要做的事。

我一直很喜欢苏新平从2005年开始创作的系列肖像。仰天的形态和手势总让人与“悲天悯人”或“祈祷”联系在一起。那种总是等待、在等待中消耗了生命的惶惑不安，时时萦绕心际。“他”或许在反诘自己一生中的所作所为。痛苦自责之中，又确信未来的岁月里还不能放弃人生

价值的追求。也许，重要的不在于作者运用了这种传统的表现形式，而是作者在主体与对象之间的那种艺术方式。它恰恰体现了苏新平“自我的审视与外化的关照”。看起来，“我”在创作中始终处在他艺术表现的焦点上，内心的自我审视也好，责任义务和态度立场的重新发现也好，“我”是出发点，也将是苏新平艺术与人生的归宿点。



Self-Examination and Externalized Concern

— On the Art of Su Xinping

by Feng Boyi

During Spring Festival, the clamor of the holiday disrupts ordinary routines making it difficult to stabilize one's thoughts so that all one can do is tidy up the accumulated catalogues, magazines and other printed matter scattered about the floor. In doing so, I unexpectedly come across notes taken during the "Symposium on the Prints of Su Xinping" from the morning of November 16, 1992. In counting the time, how quickly 15 years had passed! At that time Su Xinping's Inner Mongolian grasslands lithograph and woodcut series garnered much attention from the art world. Glancing through such works including, "Prostrate Man," "White Horse in the Distance," "Sheep in a Net," and "Birth of the Sun," the philosophical reflections embedded in the imagery are still deeply moving. Despite the cultural context of an era when lifestyles and behavioral habits have changed dramatically, it was as if we are still confined by the control of wealth even after casting off the shackles of liberty. We are still lonely, yet barricaded together without a way to free ourselves.

Examination of the inner-self characterizes the essential themes in the majority of Su Xinping's early works. His creations not only manifest an intelligent response to the social analysis and concerns of humanity, but also produce self-introspection due to external conflict within the circumstances of reality. His "Landscape" oil painting series continues to display such scenes of introspection, where images are set amidst the surroundings of his studio or sights encountered between his workspace, home, and studio. Unfamiliar lone figures rendered in dim and dusty hues gaze upon desolate and grey landscapes that conceal the thriving vitality of the new era in the shadow of crisis. Through this, the artist displays a psychological restlessness derived from his urban surroundings with an attitude of detachment. He renders his memories, observations, and his situation of cold detachment through using conceptual landscapes. He creates a scene lacking in character and one of monotony to visualize the barrenness and desolation of all the processes that modernization brings, thereby greatly emphasizing his questioning of the inorganic quality of contemporary life. If one were standing in his works, the inner feeling of chaos and noise would be confusing and unnerving, penetrating the full joys of transformed reality and the grief of helplessness. Therefore in his figure-less landscapes there is nowhere the "self" is not. But the portrayal of this "self" does not merge with the intoxication and joy obtained from revelry nor the temporary affirmation of the power of the self in reality. Instead, with a critical eye, he endows each image with the symbolic allusions of his artistic subjectivity. At the same

time it is immediately replaced by an inextricable sense of loneliness, whereupon the "I" wants to hear the unexpected and to be found beyond the "self."

In the mid-1990s Su Xinping's work began to transform. Principally motivated by a period in Chinese society when the emerging economic market and great tide in trade affected each and every Chinese person, it deeply influenced Su Xinping's sense of social responsibility and mission. This sense of social duty is the way a real intellectual is positioned to approach the course of history. Artists and intellectuals are one in the same, where only the attributions of their social status or the roles they play are different. This questions the definition of an intellectual. In my understanding, an intellectual must be estranged from the set tendencies of the overall social reality. They should step back from the societal clamor with an independent attitude and issue thoughts, challenges and critiques on social changes and cultural tendencies from the sidelines. This is exactly the social responsibility and obligation to history that intellectuals have borne. To be an artist is to express musings, pass judgment and engage investigation in the changes in reality from a so-called artist's status and vision. A sensitivity and acuteness towards modern culture result in changes in the artist's methodology, medium and language. We see this idea emerge in Su Xinping's oil painting and print works created after 1994, such as "Sea of Desire," "Holiday Series," "Century Tower," and the recent "Toasting" series. The 'Toasting' series features a group of figures whose status in indiscernible. They raise their glasses gluttonously at a banquet where perhaps Su Xinping sees this as the model image of the hedonistic pursuit of material desires and enjoying life. Using such imagery, he exchanges the poor, bitter, and weather-beaten forms of before with smug, boisterous figures laughing in front of red or black backgrounds, signifying a sense of ridiculousness and excess. In these works, his forms, symbols and colors are the focus of his reality, exposing a sense of false brilliance and a critique of unrestrained desire. But this satire is more about rendering appearances in a serious manner and method. This is a response to "vulgar art" popularized in the last century, where artistic trends react to the crudeness of nouveau riche visual imagery, the objects symbolizing lifestyle, the methods of using pop language, traditional folk craft methods, and the styles of pop culture. Continuous accumulation of these forms and symbols, as well as their interaction, are all reflected and emphasized in the interconnectivity of these nouveau riche life interests. Through the imitation of reality and the process of exaggeration, a "satire" of these social phenomena

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is achieved, becoming the most prominent characteristic in the painting language of “vulgar art.” In his compositions, Su Xiping is inclined to gloss over the symbolic nature and metaphor of identity and signs, rejecting simple imitation and sparing no effort in exaggeration. With repeated imagery of forward-facing forms or profiled figures, he extracts the purity of emotion within them and in the reappearance of his visual observation he perceives a reconstructed and surreal landscape. His oil painting art develops through his consideration of reality and is displayed in a metaphysical transcendence of experience. The elements of this expression in his experiments with oil painting naturally benefit from his many years of printmaking where he adopts the serial nature and the language of imprinted form. At the same time his oil painting is transformed into a black and white woodblock print. The continuous change and reciprocal experimentation with various linguistic forms and materials represent a search for an individually characterized painting language. This search can be traced to his early realist art works, which testify to his years of academic experience. Strictly speaking, the creation of art is an attempt and practice of a pictorial language, and the artist's search for his own language form is equally difficult. The experimentation and changes in Su Xiping's art naturally includes his own individualistic pursuits. The linguistic feeling in his works recalls forms of his early realist series and his focus on experimentation becomes abundantly clear. Presently in China, traditional culture is regarded in a shallow manner. Political fervor and sensitivity have cooled. The real life experience of Chinese people is assimilated to the West, and their spirits lack a sense of belonging and hope where the pursuit of materialism and amusement consumes every moment of daily life. Su Xiping simply and purely employs the association and metaphors of images to create simple and richly perceived forms. Consequently, all of the desires that he satirizes are no longer limited to the function of wealth but become manifest in humanity's passion towards the infinite forms of life. These imposing and magnificent desires of success and privilege influence the fancies of people's daily existence in the pursuit of a fashionable life. The desire of all consumer culture in contemporary society is certainly one way of living, but it is a rationalized choice made for one to pursue individual development, immediate gratification, change and other set value systems. This creates an uninterrupted flow of desire, one especially present in the historical development and logic of culture within 20th century Chinese society. Perhaps from Su Xiping's perspective, only through this kind of diluted thought and fabrication one can interpret the entirety

of truth and meaning. Truth is part of subjective interpretation, a reality that is newly constructed and emphasizes creation displayed from the perspective of the subject. It is expounded and concealed in the heart of truth, a sort of abstract realist refraction of the heart. In reality, people and the entire world of life are originally one. Yet art separates man and the real world. He stands higher than life with a cool, detached view on the problems of this existence, whereupon he not only understands the world but also himself. To acquire this kind of subjectivity surpasses aesthetic consciousness and is exactly what an artist attempts to do.

I quite admire the series of portraits that Su Xiping has created since 2005. The form and gesture of the figure facing the sky communicates both a sense of “prayer” and “bemoaning the state of things.” This is the waiting and waiting that consumes life and creates confusion and unease often lingering in the heart. Perhaps “he” is refuting the actions and behaviors of his own life, suffering self-reproach, but firmly believing that he still cannot abandon the future pursuit in value of humanity. The important thing is not that the artist is using a form of traditional expression, but it is the artistic device existing between the subject and the object. This coincidentally reflects Su Xiping's “self-examination and external concern.” The “I” is continuously expressed as the focus of his art, which is both good in terms of internal self-examination, as well as in the new discovery of duty, obligation, and perspective. “I” is the origin, but it is also the point to which Su Xiping's art and life always returns.

空寂的生命

——苏新平近期作品分析

易 英

对于艺术家来说，艺术永远是形式的，即使他觉得有需要表达的内容。苏新平就是这样，尽管他的画已经不能用现代主义的传统形式来分析。苏新平说：“我骨子里还是学院的”，当然不是说西洋的古典学院主义，而是说一个学术的、知识的孤岛。在商业的、波普的浪潮中，他坚持自己的思考。我用波普来泛指当前的绘画潮流，学院就显得很孤独。但苏新平面对学院和波普的时候，还是显得矛盾。苏新平理解的学院还不是我说的“孤岛”，他主要是指自己的训练和教育的经历，这种经验明里暗里决定着他的绘画方式，使他很难找到真正属于他自己的形式。他认为绝对的波普是一种摆脱，绝对的抽象也是一种摆脱，但他都做不到。对于前者，那是一种利益和诱惑，不是他的目的；对于后者，又失去了形象的依托，也怕自我迷失在其中。看来，苏新平是为自己的绘画设定了一些难题。

在苏新平的画中有很多抽象的成分，因为他的画幅很大，平涂的面积也很大，很多地方看上去就像抽象的拼贴。局部地看，很有一些极少主义的味道，但是没有极少主义的颜色，因为他的大部分作品都是用的比较灰暗的颜色。简要地说，在当代艺术中，单纯的颜色（广告性的颜色）倾向于集体的经验，而灰色调（学院的传统）倾向于个人的经验。苏新平的颜色不是出于极少，而是版画的经验。一般人难于理解苏新平的动机，既是画油画，为什么不发挥油画在色彩上的长处，让色彩更加强烈，或利用补色的对比。苏新平其实不是追求油画的效果，即使是现代艺术也成了一种套路。一种个人的方式怎样在当代艺术中显现出来，是他思考得最多的方面。他的长处在版画，但不能直接把版画放大来取代油画，油画的巨大空间适合他亲身体验的需要，但必须经历版画语言和叙事性的转换。对于苏新平来说，形式寓于观念，版画语言的转换却看不出版画的影子是他的制胜之道。他把套版的经验用于油画，关注的不是版画的效果，而是强调两种颜色之间的过



渡。由于中国美术教育的特殊性，每一个画种的训练都特别强调专业的技术和效果，画种之间的转换总是带上浓厚的原有画种特征，尤其在版画家进行油画创作时，大色块的对比、强烈的明暗反差、单纯的构图和造型，总是比正统的油画显得更有现代性。苏新平对这一点知道得很清楚，表现直接的视觉效果并不难，因为别人已有成功的经验，难的是表达自己的观念。套版只是一个观念，不是用油画来复制版画，两种颜色的过渡和衔接意味着一种生命的状况和身体的体验，实际上，苏新平的形式只是一个表象。在巨大的画面空间，衔接成为画面的焦点，苏新平说，如果把握不住，这张画就完了。除了个别作品，在“风景”系列中，大多数作品几乎都是邻近色的过渡，大面积的背景和前景，过渡之处形成锯齿形的交叉地带。在画背景和前景的时候，都是用板刷大面积地平涂，他没有刻意考虑笔触的表现，背景几乎把笔触完全掩盖起来，前景则利用笔触和颜色流淌的痕迹自然形成的肌理，不仅在视觉上拉开前后的距离，在质感上也形成对比。笔触的作用在过渡的地方显现出来，笔触的摆放和擦抹使得两种颜色融合和交汇，偶尔有形象穿插其中，笔触又显得理性和坚实。两块颜色的交接线，也就是过渡的线，

实际上是一条生命线，这一条线灵动起来，整个画面就有了生命力，即大而不空。生命线不完全指形式的关键，而是身体的体验，从表面上看，苏新平是在关键的部分寻找一种把握，实际上是在动态的过程中把握一种感觉，这种衔接的关系不是预设的，也不是为了实现某种概念，而是要用个人长期形成的感觉和习惯去把握。在这一条衔接线上，感觉、经验、思考和记忆都通过笔触发挥出来。

一种生命的体验是无法用理性来分析的，苏新平如此强调套版的意义和两块颜色的过渡，应该有其内在的原因。苏新平的创作从一开始就有某种神秘感，他将形式赋予生命，生命又存在于一个漠大的空间。他早期的石版画就是这样，人物虽然占据了很大的画面空间，但在一个辽远而似空无的背景空间中，生命又显得很渺小。他的那些人物都有些变形，那种变形并非单纯的形式，而是他对空间感觉的结果，主体与客体共享一个空间，客体在空间的压力下变形，实际上是主体的空间感受在客体上的反映。这种空间的意识从来没有离开过苏新平，在近来的“风景”中，虽然人物去掉了，但空间的压力依然存在。这种空间的意识是由两部分构成的，一个是生命的经历，在辽阔的环境中成长形成的空间记忆；一个是生命在这个空间



里面的成长方式，一切奋斗、挫折、困惑和追求，一切生命的不适和狂欢，都会在这个空间里面寻找归宿。两块颜色的过渡如此重要，因为它分别代表了生命的过去和现在。背景空旷而寂寞，一切笔触都被掩盖，似乎是非常遥远的过去，就像草原上看到的天地一体。近处则是现实的，那不是想象的场景，就是他画室前面的土堆，土堆好像隔开了两个世界，前面是繁华的都市，后面是荒寂的村落。每天傍晚他都会去土堆上转悠，无意中感受两个世界之间的孤独。虽然大画是一种趋势，但控制大画却不容易，苏新平的画越来越大，就是要紧紧抓住这难于处理的关系，把过去带入现在，把现在存于过去。当身体的动作紧张地处理两块颜色的过渡时，也就是把生命的两部分拼接起来。苏新平说，现在阅读美术史不是向美术史学习，而是寻找历史的缝隙，那些是别人没有做过的，没做过的东西才值得自己去做。生命的经历都不一样，怎样找到适合表现自身经历的方式，可能才是真正的历史缝隙。

与低沉的“风景”不同，“干杯”是非常热烈的红色，这种方式可以追溯到他在90年代的创作，如《年轻人》和《世纪之塔》。几乎同时创作的“风景”与“干杯”却反映了他的创作历程的两个阶段，却是很有意思的事情。90年代确实有些乱了方寸，对于苏新平来说，“草原”虽获成功，但个人的资源也接近枯竭，从记忆向现实转移有一个过程，现实必须沉淀为记忆才能进入艺术，苏新平是属于这种类型的人。因此，苏新平在90年代的创作，主要是对于现实经验的记录，而且过多地注意油画的记录功能，旁落了自己的长处。版画不仅意味着工具和手段，还与个人的生命历程紧密相连。如同“风景”的土堆不能细化为具体的现实，“干杯”也不是题材的抽象和现实的影射，和“风景”一样，也是在套版中回溯往事。往事的意义是双重的，版画是附着于生命的，在现实的题材中回归版画意味着过去的自我在现实的存在；

现实是被沉淀的记忆，惟有如此，才能在版画的方式中抽象出来。“干杯”的套版不是两块颜色的对接，而是几块颜色的重叠，在红色上复盖黑色和白色。与“风景”相比，“干杯”更加版画，尽管他以油画的程序完成作品，但整体效果却似黑色直接压在红色上。生命的记忆不是抽象的，“风景”的空寂来自生命的早期，“干杯”的红色则是对90年代的灯红酒绿的抽象，这同样是一段生命的经历，对于从空寂走出的人来说，更是一种深刻的记忆。不过，只要有形象，就离不开形象的身份和身份的属性。干杯的人虽然没有具体的所指，却还是反映了画家内心的感受。苏新平的画始终有一种现实性，除从他的画中体会到作为现实的人而存在之外，还在于他从90年代开始的对现实的观察。他认为这是他的学院本质之所在。更重要的是他个人本质的所在。在他的早期作品中，当他与牧民共享一个空寂的空间时，把空寂的自我投射于牧民。在“干杯”中，空间被经验化了，黑色的形象叠加在焦虑的记忆

之上，仍然是共享一个空间，但主客体却是分离的，没有衔接与过渡，只有现实对记忆的撕裂。苏新平肯定会认为他没有这么想，他仍然是在寻找一个缝隙。除了红色与黑色的叠加外，白色则是光线的暗示，完全不是油画的画法，显得生硬而苍白。白色附着在形象上面，使形象浮出记忆的水面。这确实是苏新平的矛盾之处，也是他的优势之处，当他观察现实时，形式召唤他拉开现实的距离；当他固着于形式时，现实又以各种方式透过形象进入他的画面。不过，即使在“干杯”这样的作品中，我们还是感到了他的深沉和孤独。对他来说，形式总是依托于形象，而形象又依托于社会，他置身其间而又无法逃避的现实。这种矛盾在他的历史记忆和现实体验中产生活力。



A Desolate Life

—— An analysis of work by Su Xinping

by Ying Yi

For an artist, art is always about form, though he believes it must express meaning. Su Xinping is this way, although his paintings cannot be analyzed through the traditional lens of modernism. He says, 'In my bones I'm still academic,' which does not refer to the academic tradition of Western classicism, but to the pedagogical, isolated island of knowledge. In the midst of this pop and commercial tide, he persists in a solitary island of reflection. By using the word 'pop' I refer the general trend of painting before now and allude to the notion that academia is reclusive. When Su Xinping confronts academia and pop there still seems to be a conflict. The academia that he understands is not what I define as a 'solitary island.' Rather, he draws upon his solo experience of training and education, one that has clearly molded his painting form. He believes that pure pop is a form of replication, and yet he himself cannot create it. The former is profitable and attractive, but is not his goal. The latter loses reliance on the image, and is one where he is in danger of losing himself.

There are many abstract components of Su Xinping's paintings where due to their large scale, the expanse of surface area may make parts of the canvas appear abstract. His works on the whole exude elements of Minimalism, but lack the rich colors as the majority of his works employ a murky palette. Concisely, contemporary art colors (often used for advertising) appeal to the collective experience, whereas grey hues (referring to an academic tradition) tend to recall the individual experience. Su Xinping's palette does not arise from the minimal but from his experience in printmaking. Most find it difficult to understand Su Xinping's motivation in his switch to oil painting. But why not develop his forte in the colors of oil painting to grant them more intensity or use to the contrast of complimentary colors? Su Xinping does not directly pursue the effects of oil painting but explores the facets of modern art that becomes a kind of skill set. He largely reflects on ways to express an individual manner in contemporary art. As his strength is in printmaking, it cannot be directly substituted by oil painting. The broad visual surface provided by painting on canvas allows him to reveal his firsthand experience but also reveals his process of changes from printmaking language into narrative form. According to Su Xinping, form resides in concept and his signature characteristic is the transformation of the printmaking language where the shadow of the print is not longer visible. He uses the process of multiple register printmaking in oil painting, paying close attention not to the printed result but emphasizing the transition between two layers of color. Through the course of Chinese art education, the training of each painting type lays particular stress on professional technique where transitions in painting have the pronounced characteristics of the original painting

type. It is especially clear when a printmaker creates an oil painting. The oil painting always appears more modern than orthodox in the contrast of large color fields, in the stress on contrast, and in the simple composition and modeling. Su Xinping unmistakably understands this process, where expressing a direct visual result is not the point because other people have already succeeded with that in this medium. What is difficult is in expressing one's unique idea. Multiple register printing is only one concept and is not meant to employ oil painting to copy printmaking. It highlights the transition between two colors and the concept of connectivity implying a state of the human condition and bodily experience. The forms created by Su Xinping are only representative. In the large space of the painting surface the focal point of the canvas are multiple links, which according to Su Xinping if you cannot notice, the painting is considered finished. In the Scenery series most of the works have nearly the same color transition. The transition areas in large parts of the background and foreground are formed in jagged intersecting zones. The underlying base of the painting's surface is applied by a scrubbing brush providing an expressive technique without expressing painstaking brushwork. The application of paint to the background is layered to the point of completely concealing the brushwork, while the foreground features forms of natural texture and dripped traces of brushwork and color, thus creating a visual and material contrast in the canvas. The use of brushwork is revealed in these transitional spaces. The arrangement of brushwork and smeared strokes allows the two colors to harmoniously communicate so that brushwork seems both rational and substantial. The connecting line between two sections of color is also the line of transition, and is a living line. This line provides a spirit such that the entire painting possesses a vitality that is large but not empty. The living line does not point solely to the crux of form, but is an experience of the physical. In all ways, Su Xinping is searching for a way to capture this crucial juncture, which indicates a groping for sensation in the results of this active state. This relationship is not presupposed and is not meant to achieve a particular rationale, but is meant to be understood through the individual's long-term formation of feelings and habits. On this line, feeling, experience, consideration and memory are all emitted by the brush.

There is no clear way to use rationality to analyze a living practice. If Su Xinping stresses the meaning of multiple register printing and the transitions between two colors, then these are his internal reasons. Since his early days of creation, Su Xinping has embodied a sort of mysterious feeling, and this endows life with form. Life exists in the expansive spaces of his works, but life appears paltry in the distant and seemingly void-like background. The figures all have some distortion, and they are

changed in a manner that is not evident but is a result of his feeling of space. The body and object share a space that exudes a pressure to alter the object's form. The consciousness of such a space has never left Su Xinpeng even though figures are absent in his recent 'Scenery' series. In the space of his canvas, such consciousness is formed from two parts: one is the experience of life, a spatial memory shaped in an expansive environment; the other is the manner of life's maturation in this space, a life spent competing, becoming defeated, confused and one seeking a life not suited to revelry. The transition between two sections of color is important in this respect because it differentiates between representation of the past and the present of life. In the lonely and expansive background, the brushwork is concealed as if in a very distant past, like the horizon seen in the grasslands. That which is nearer is real. It is not an imaginary site, it is the area in front of his studio. It is as if the land is separated into two worlds, where the foreground is a flourishing city, and the background is desolate countryside. Each day he takes a leisurely stroll around this land, unintentionally feeling the loneliness between these two spaces. Although large paintings are consistent with contemporary trends, controlling them is actually not easy. Su Xinpeng's paintings are becoming larger and larger in order to close in on this difficult relationship, one that places the past in the present, and vice versa. When the transition of these two sections of color is tensely manifested through physical action, then the two sections of life are connected. According to Su Xinpeng, the art history we now read is not directed at the study the history of art but the search of the cracks in history, the ones that no one has dealt with, only those things left undone worth doing yourself. The experience of life is the same, and the process of finding a suitable method of expressing one's experience is perhaps the only true crack in history.

In contrast to the graveness of the Scenery series, the vivacity the Toasting series in its animated character and red tones can be traced back to works from the 1990s such as "Youth" and "Century Pagoda." Perhaps the Toasting and Scenery series are created simultaneously, reflecting two phases of his work process. The 1990s period was chaotic for some, and in Su Xinpeng's opinion, although Grasslands was successful, he was personally drained of creative resources. In the process of shifting from memory to reality, where reality precipitates from memory in order for it to enter into art, Su Xinpeng is considered one of these types of people. Therefore, his work from this era emphasizes a record of experience in reality and painstakingly records the function of oil painting, in keeping with his own strengths. Printmaking not only signifies instruments and methods, but is also closely linked with the

course of an individual's life. Similar to the way that the grounds of Scenery cannot be refined to a concrete subject, Toasting is not an abstraction of the subject and of a counterfeit reality. As in Scenery, it also reflects on his past of multiple register printmaking. The past events are twofold: printmaking adheres to life and the return to the subject of reality signifies the past self in the present reality; furthermore, reality is precipitated by memory, only as such can it be abstracted in the methods of printmaking. The multiple register prints of Toasting do not feature the linking of two sections of color but superimposes several layers. Compared to Scenery, Toasting is more like printmaking, even though it is a work completed with the processes of oil painting where the overall result is of black impressed directly on red. The recollection of life is abstract, and the desertedness nature of Scenery is from an early stage of life, whereas the reds of Toasting abstracts of the excesses of drinking and feasting in that era. In this period, from the vantage point of the deserted the experience is even more deeply embedded in memory. However, if all that is needed is form, then it cannot be separate from the identity of form nor the qualities of that identity. Although the figures drinking a toast do not have a specific reference, they reflect the feelings of the artist. The paintings of Su Xinpeng begin with a realist form, and aside from understanding real people and existence from his paintings, they are also derived from his observations of reality beginning in the 1990s. He believes this stems from an academic nature, though what is more important is his individual nature. In his early work, when he shared a desolate space with herdsmen, he projected his desolation of the self onto these figures. In Toasting, the space is changed through experience. Black figures stacked on worrisome memories still share a space, but the guest of honor is disconnected, without transition or link, only with the rupture of reality on memory. Su Xinpeng will certainly say that this is unintentional because he still is searching for the cracks. Aside from the red and black stacking there is white, acting as a hint of light—a method not used in oil painting where it appears rigid and pale. White color adheres to the forms making them emerge from the waters of memory. This is actually the area of Su Xinpeng's contradiction as well as the area where he excels. When he examines reality, forms call on him to draw out the distance of reality. When he consolidates form, reality penetrates his painting in various ways. Furthermore, we in fact feel his reserve and loneliness in works such as the Toasting series. According to him, form always depends on image, and image then depends on society. And as he is involved between the two there is no way to escape reality. His contradiction produces vitality in his memory of history and experience of reality.

Su Xinping: Allegories of Loss

by Jonathan Goodman

In many ways, China has permanently changed. The materialism of capitalist striving has overwhelmed a country that not so long ago was physically as well as psychologically attacking its intelligentsia for supposed right-leaning tendencies. As a result, Chinese intellectuals—its writers and artists, journalists and activists—face a classic double bind; they can neither forget nor not forget the past, the damages of which linger on. In light of the super capitalism now embraced, references to the problems of the Cultural Revolution, or the more recent troubles of Tian'anmen Square, seem like distant memories, so that it would be bad taste—or bad politics—to take up such subjects. Yet the troubles that beset China are still well within living memory, and it remains hard for artists to remain uninvolved with the country's vast economic transformation, even though wounds inflicted a generation ago have not had the chance to publicly heal. And while it is up to China's sculptors, painters, and performance artists to raise doubts about the greed accompanying the new affluence, it is hard to do so when they take part in the current comfort: their privilege places them in a position where they are between a rock and a hard place, in the sense that it is hard to criticize what they themselves belong to.

China's booming economy seems to eclipse any individual initiative. So, then, what is it that the artist can do? Does he or she make peace with a society moving evermore efficiently into what has become a worldwide acquisitiveness, which in plainer terms may be called greed? Or does the artist make a stand, no matter how hopeless or unaccompanied, in which the value of introspection is offered as a way of offsetting the mindless enjoyment seen in so much of contemporary life? Because of the role the artist takes on as witness, his or her place in social norms inevitably becomes fraught with the consequences of a moral observation that seems innate to the practice of visual art. One hesitates to sound too conservative by claiming art is inherently ethical, but it seems certain that China's mid-career generation, including the likes of Cai Guo-Qiang, Xu Bing, and Su Xinping, have kept alive a sense of moral purpose by referring to and reiterating classic, and classical, questions of independence, authenticity, and virtue. Given their popular as well as critical success, it seems to me possible that these artists document the ups and downs of their society with more than a small share of truth, which is what Chinese mores are greatly in need of at present. The current turn towards materialism notwithstanding, it appears that Su Xinping's generation, old enough to remember both the Cultural Revolution and the democracy movement, sees current social change for what it

is—an embrace of things for sale.

That having been said, it isn't much progress to repeat, in increasingly distraught terms, the truism that Chinese society is succumbing to its very success. The three artists mentioned above remain exquisitely aware that their position is public, that is, they exercise their art in circumstances that render their political and social concerns transparent. But just as they shoulder their responsibility for what they intend to or actually say, so must their audience meet the obligations that understanding this art bring about. It is true enough that we are all enmeshed within an economic system that has toxic consequences for ourselves and the earth we live on; yet the situation appears to negate broad change. Indeed, this is one of the implied points of painter and printmaker Su, whose prints and canvases refer, even if only allegorically, to a kind of moral and ecological crisis in China. In his work, he is not only referring to the universal isolation we all face through the course of our lives as individuals, but also to the inevitable alienation the intelligentsia incurs as people for whom ideas—and not objects—are powerful.



The blasted allegories Su returns to again and again in his paintings shed no real light on whatever corrections might be made to better the environment, mental as well as actual, that Chinese people are heir to. Being a painter of psychic truth enables Su to reflect on his views regarding the way people are; the situation is overtly allegorical. Indeed, many of his paintings consist of a single person, recognizably Chinese in descent, standing in a devastated landscape that is, even so, beautiful to look at. The correlation between Su's tropes of desolation and survival do not necessarily offer more than a hint of hope, but that is what turns his allegorical stance into something more than symbolic. It is a raw but accurate truth that we don't have much to hold on to, that our despair is in every way an accurate gauge of the extent to which we are slipping in sand. Rather than manipulate these forces, as Cai does, or comment drolly upon them, as Xu does, Su offers his audience the resolute position of someone to whom catastrophe has already happened; his sense of apocalypse, so central to his sensibility and theme, is linked to an optimism whose persistence carries him ever so slightly beyond despair.

In essence, then, Su relates a tragic viewpoint, one muted by the troubles of his time. He does not present resistance so much as he comments on the unfortunate nature of the environment, which is in collision with the grand, more likely grandiose goals of the Chinese. While it seems unfair to deny or lecture about the enveloping contemporary pleasure of cash the Chinese are so attracted to, it seems fair to remark that the phenomenon of twenty-five-year-old artists driving Mercedes Benz sedans makes a mockery not only of the artworld, but of culture and society in general, whose values are trivialized. And sadly enough, the art made by the generation following Su's is profoundly lacking in the very qualities that have made Su a major painter—a sense of purpose, concern for the environment, and the quest for individuation in a society that values the group over the single person. Su builds an allegorical model because expressing these issues directly would have little effect on the affairs of the general culture; yet he cannot simply remain isolated or reclusive because he himself belongs to a generation bent on interpreting the society at large.

Often in Su's paintings, we see people raising their glass in a toast, and as a visitor to China, I can comment that this is a ritual enacted again and again. In one affecting work, two Chinese men, both bare-chested, make their toast in what can be read as a post-nuclear landscape, which is detailed as a dark red environment. The sense of desolation is always present in

these large works; they belong to a reality that is utterly current but which also refers to the literati landscape that is so much a part of the Chinese cultural tradition. While Su has denied that he is joining with traditional painting, it matters little whether he paints consciously or not his debt to the Chinese art tradition. The legacy of Chinese painting infuses itself into his work even though it makes use of Western materials such as oil paint and canvas; indeed, the very ambition of Su's conscious attempt to render a treatment symbolic of his present-day circumstances strikes me as classical. The anguish of his lonely figures, cut off in their remoteness, cannot be denied. Yet, interestingly enough, these paintings cannot be regarded only as Chinese—Su's reading of his situation, its tragic ecological devastation, is increasingly a globalized problem.

Earlier in his career, Su was far more specific about his influences and sites. Trained as a printmaker, first at the Tianjin Institute of Fine Arts, then at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where he received a Master's degree in 1989 and where he now runs the print-making department, Su first gained recognition making black-and-white prints that documented his childhood in Mongolia. These works come close to being anthropological in their documentation of Mongolian culture; but, at the same time, Su paints parables of psychological and spiritual meaning. In one work from 1995, a central figure is portrayed as diving above the profile of a man with oversized eyes and an extended left arm; behind the two, in the background, we see a group of hands, all of them pointing to the composition's right. The viewer may feel hard pressed to read the specifics of the print, but it appears true that each element fulfills a symbolic function, even if we remain unsure as to its actual purpose. There is a sense of darkness and foreboding that reappears in Su's art, lending it an atmosphere of grief. His often-present sense of loss remains key to our understanding of his work, which asks questions as much as answering them.

Sometimes Su beautifully renders horses, a theme he returned to regularly in his career. They seem to be far more innocent than his portraits of people, who, after all, must face their responsibilities in regard to nature. Su never directly judges, but his moral qualms concerning China's brave new world are nonetheless conveyed. Still, even though it is easy to construe desolation in his work, one does not sense that the artist is specifically judging a class or individual; the general situation appears frightening, but at the same time inexorably fated, so that a sense of uselessness accompanies the greater

awareness brought about by his art. The sadness of this state of affairs is not lightly presented; however, they may be read as generally troubled as well as referring to the particulars of Chinese society now. The moral quandary in Su's art remains unresolved; the group who toasts to a greater health does so in a miasma of polluted air, a real problem in Beijing, where Su lives. As a Westerner, I cannot but react to the part of Su's work that possesses international overtones, and while I remain deeply aware that Su is a Chinese artist making Chinese art, part of his strength comes from the way in which all of us may participate in his records of abandon, since all of us face similar difficulties.

In fact, unlike the work of Xu and Cai, who imbue their modernist, mostly Western processes with direct references to historical Chinese culture, the art of Su negotiates, in its iconography of loss, a transcendently resonant vulnerability that extends beyond his culture. Certainly, Su cannot be explained as belonging to Western culture, but his imagination is large enough to include a generally human, as opposed to a specifically Chinese, sense of trouble and demoralization. In one of the prints we see, in the foreground, a man lying down on his side; behind him we see the large tail and flanks of a back of a horse. Their disconnected relations are intensified because of the long shadows thrown by the horse and poles between which it stands. The man may be asleep or simply resting, but the ambience is melancholic, asking questions of the viewer that seem impossible to answer. The loss of faith, an existential fall, seems to be central to Su's dark, atmospheric scenes, that appear to reference humanity in the broadest terms.

Su's findings seem resolutely pessimistic, in the sense that the



world is lost despite the harmony and prosperity the people who toast each other are supposed to bring about. When a toast is made in a gathering at a restaurant, for example, it carries its participants toward an optimism that is communal in nature. Yet the people inhabiting Su's imagery hardly feel happy or determined to include others within their point of view; instead, they embody an isolation that expresses a discontented view of life. For many of us who belong to the intelligentsia, no matter Asian or Western, Su's doubt strikes true because it fosters a realistic awareness of the sadness of change, in part because it is so difficult to effect change. However hard, we try to rise above and beyond our fate, even if the mortality we face lends itself at the very least to melancholy if not abjection. When I asked Su whether the landscape in his paintings was globally oriented, in the sense that he was referring to a post-nuclear world, he demurred and said that he was referring to China's imminent environmental catastrophes. Inevitably, being a Chinese artist originally from the steppes of Mongolia, Su looks to the local for his inspiration. Yet viewers from other landscapes may reason that their situation mimics Su's, a reading that Su in fact suggests by making his paintings as allegorical as possible.

In Su's more recent work, the pessimism becomes more explicit as we experience the desolate landscape that he sets before us. In one long horizontal painting, Su's audience comes up against the ghastly appearance of hills that seem to be part of a strip mine; we follow its ups and downs and fences, as well as an atmosphere that has lost any sense of cohesiveness. It is hard not to read the view as symbolic; however, part of its power is that Su seems to be pointing at an actual scene, combining his allegory with a graphic report based closely on an actual site. This painting is particularly free of cultural allusion; it may be seen as a fierce comment on what we do to the face of the earth. As a site of disastrous ecology, the landscape might be anywhere. Yet we know that the problems are particularly Chinese, who face irreparable harm because of their industrial advances—this despite their exquisite knowledge of and sympathy with nature, as imaged in the Chinese painterly tradition. Su implies, but does not state explicitly, that the changes occurring in China have a price; the cost may well exceed the benefits being incurred.

Works like this beg the question of efficacy in the struggle against ecological catastrophe. It is beyond the power of any single person—especially an artist—to put right the devastations now being visited upon China; at the same time, however, it is up to the intellectual class to call attention to