

## TRANQUILITY

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ZHANG Jian is one of the early risers among the artists born during the late 1960s and early 1970s. His early works between 1994 and 1996 depicted some sunny Yard Scenery series that were mostly the views of a little courtyard (where his studio was located) and the scenery nearby, and had attracted quite an extensive attention in the art world. In those years, while painting was still a mainstream art, *contemporary tastes* and dazzling painting techniques, after the "85 New Wave" and "Guangzhou Biennial", were considered the key for the success of artists. The reason Zhang's plain *impressionist* paintings got widely recognized in such a context, in my opinion, must be the genuine and invigorating poetic experience of daily life overflowing from these pieces. The refreshing and unadulterated elements of youth in his works were what made his art so outstanding in an era full of heavy or depressive, bustling or insincere, absurd or bizarre atmospheres.

Roughly around 1999, Zhang experienced his first creative crisis. As he put it, "every corner of the courtyard and even everything within the 400-meter radius has been painted"<sup>1</sup>, he felt like he was drawing the same things every day. He was very fed up with Yard Scenery series and the impressionist style. Therefore he left his small yard, "deliberately moving to an apartment, away from all the greeneries"<sup>2</sup>.

In 2000, Zhang started his art making around two distinct *public landscape* series: *Chang'an Avenue* and *Houhai*. For Zhang, the most direct cause behind such style change probably came from his reflection over language of expression. That was around the same time Zhang was deeply influenced by Gerhard Richter, a German painter. An artist once made an overstatement about Richter's influence in that era, "Everyone wanted to be Gerhard Richter". Zhang was different – he had his own

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from *Apparently More Beautiful* between Wang Minan and Zhang Jian

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from *Apparently More Beautiful* between Wang Minan and Zhang Jian

reasoning for his admiration for Richter. The shift from the use of *light* and *shadows*, *strokes* and *emptiness* in impressionism to that in Richter-style, represented the inevitable internal transformation from sketches which he now hated to the minimalistic two-dimensional visual representations which he adored. Both the quiet and empty *Chang'an Avenue* and the peaceful and simple *Houhai* were some obvious subject matters that worked very well with his new art language.

The more in-depth reason, however, was the shift of the artist's inner experience. His *Houhai* series originated from his "underlying solitude at the time and how he enjoyed being a lone wolf"<sup>3</sup>. "Therefore I felt very connected to those tiny and insignificant subjects. At Houhai, often I saw a tiny figure crawling around slowly in the distance, and that could be me... There was always a sense of sorrow when I painted these pieces, as those were all something I wanted to express and share," he explained. On the other hand, his *Chang'an Avenue* series drew on the unique political atmosphere observed in the art scene at that time. Yet different from the mainstream bustling and insincere tone and the alienated and deconstructed fashion, Zhang's *Chang'an Avenue* adopted an elegant relaxing tone penetrated with the haunting emotion of confusion and nothingness.

Entering the 21st century, contemporary art replaced painting as the dominant genre in China's art scene. There were two main strands, intertwined, observed in China's contemporary art community at the time: a generational spiritual evolution from the cynical realism and political pop, gaudy art and the cruelty of youth, to the once very popular new cartoon art, and another language of expression evolution featuring visual, performance, video, and conceptual art. Zhang's *Chang'an Avenue* and *Houhai* series without a doubt were some borderline cases for both strands. Yet they managed to impress many people including some key art critics – whether it was the bright, subtle, and youthful sights one could find at Houhai, the lonesome swimmer floating and vanishing in the lake, or the mystic dream-liked avenue. The critics did not only observe in his works how people from that generation wanted to survive and the way they lived their lives, but also the warmth and humanity embedded his artistic languages that are as elegant as breeze under moonlight. Looking back, Zhang's *public landscape* paintings obviously were born out of the particular spiritual syndrome in that era. Yet contrasting with the unique sense of boisterousness and disturbance at the time, with his own grace, tranquility, and solitude Zhang

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<sup>3</sup> Zou Yuejin, *Weight in Purity, Zhang Jian – Historical Reality*, 2007, P166

expressively communicated the deep and unspeakable spiritual tension between *humble individuals* and *the modern mechanism*.

## II

Soon after 2010, Zhang encountered another art crisis that was even more radical. Now that he had worked on the *Houhai* series for more than a decade and the *Chang'an Avenue* series for five to six years, he felt like he had exhausted all the psychological and linguistic and formal potentials related to these themes, and was bewildered about what and how to paint next. In fact, it was more than a personal art crisis that Zhang was facing. At a deeper level, it was actually a general crisis happening in China's entire contemporary art scene like never before. Upon the depletion of the energy from the two previously mentioned intertwined main strands and related evolutions, contemporary artists faced the issue of not sure how and what to express in the face of a society, culture and spiritual landscape that was much more complex since 2008. Under such circumstances, every single sensitive artist, especially the major ones born between 1960s and 1970s like Zhang, would need to again deal with the challenging self-transformation.

In the long-time indecision, bewilderment, and persisting exploration, a new type of scenery, namely scenery along the journey, gradually aroused the desire of Zhang Jian's artistic expression. Every time he went on a vacation with his family, the busy crowd in the tourist areas and the beautiful yet seemingly unreal scenes often struck him hard. With repeated attempts of putting and stirring layers of paint to create the expressionist sceneries, Zhang rediscovered his passion for artistic creation. By continuously kneading with brushes and paints, the picturesque view and the relaxing crowd in these paintings transfigured unwittingly, blending elegance, traces of anxiety, glamour, and the latent uneasiness together in a natural approach. More importantly, comparing with the sensitive and rigorous artistic language used during the Houhai period, this type of casual and extemporaneous "written" language acquired richness of inner strength which grew along with age.

To those truly sensitive artists, whenever their experiments with different themes and language collided with their indescribable complex inner feelings, it often meant the reemergence of their artistic creative abilities. Walking through the "scenery along the journey", Zhang gradually improved and regained his own Tranquility. The

artistic themes of his works in recent years, be it the *Spring Chill* (2016) and *Autumnal Tints* (2016) portraying the quiet valleys with no travelers, the illustration of the leisurely scene in *Skiing* (2016), *On the Beach* (2013-2016) and *Open Air Concert* (2015), or the floral-themed *March* (2016) and *Flowers* (2016), has already shifted from the original *scenery along the journey* to the common *daily life objects*. What was happening behind this change of themes was actually the development of his inner experiences, moving from the unique spiritual syndrome of *one generation* or a *particular period of time* to a more concealed spiritual dialogue between himself as an individual being and the more complex world. Through his free, meticulous and fresh style of painting, once again he found the tone to communicate with the world that excited him – a spiritual tone that arose from the interaction between broad and profound life experience and the simple and ingenuous inner self.

Zhang is an artist who is extremely sensitive to the concept of “beauty”. However, it is easy to overlook the fact that extraordinary perceptions of “beauty” must come from extraordinary inner experiences. Once the inner source of spirituality dies out, so will the corresponding “forms of beauty”. Zhang's internal shift and personal transformation from *Yard Scenery* and *Public Landscape* to today's *Daily Scenery* was a reflection of his profound evolution from a simple youth disposition, to the collision between his lonely individuality and the spiritual landscape in a modern society, and then to his care for life-related matters based on profound social experiences. In fact, the challenges of finding the appropriate language to express oneself through art in China's contemporary art scene, first and foremost comes from the critical perspectives between the two core concepts of *individuals* and *modern mechanism*. This indicates how the Chinese contemporary art scene is also facing a profound transformation from social poetics to poetics of life, with the former based on the tension between individuals and the modern mechanism and the latter on profound social experiences. For all artists, the deep-rooted integration of personal art exploration and theme-setting in a particular period of time without a doubt will greatly stimulate their artistic creativity, and perhaps this is also the internal source of energy behind Zhang's recent rapid emergence of his “expressionist forms of beauty”.

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