



The Changing Forms of Contemporary Art in Southwest China in The Process of Urbanization

——Take Luo Zidan as an Example

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Abstract. Since the reform and opening up, China's urbanization process has been accelerating, and urbanization has affected the existence and development of culture and art in a direct or indirect way. This paper analyzes the evolution of contemporary art in urbanized Southwest China from "Local art" painting, to "non-local art" painting, and then to non-easel art, focusing on the subjective and objective reasons for the change in art forms, and examining in depth the contemporary artists and their works in Southwest China. Luo Zidan is a pioneering artist in the transformation of Southwest art from an on-easel to an off-easel form, and his work provides an example of Southwest contemporary off-easel.

Keywords: Southwest Art; Urbanization; Contemporary art

1 Introduction

The city and the countryside, or rural areas, correspond to each other. When talking about local and rural areas, we naturally think of the "local" painting period that characterizes Southwest art. It is interesting to note that urbanization and Western contemporary art trends are not exclusive to the Southwest, while "local" and "post-local" art groups have emerged only in the Southwest region of China, a phenomenon that is very specific to the cultural sphere. The focus and summary of Southwest art historians and art critics on local and post-local is a side reflection of the impact of urbanization on the social experience of art creators. The formal shift from easel to non-easel in the Southwest cannot be simply understood as an intervention of Western concept of formal liberation either. Urbanization, the most iconic change in Chinese society, has also played a significant role in this process. Therefore, this paper will discuss two aspects: the connection between the phenomenon of concern by the local artist of easel painting and the urbanization; and the connection between the logic of occurrence and urbanization in Southwest contemporary non-easel art.

2 Southwest Easel Art in the Process of Urbanization

2.1 “Local” Painting

2.1.1. The Background of “Local” Painting.

Based on artistic spontaneity, Southwestern artists began to select a wide range of subjects and forms. In what was once the Chinese academy education system, a great influence of Soviet realism was exerted on a significant portion of the art students of the time. The life-drawing education model that once served realistic subject matter painting allowed these artists to develop the habit of copying and representing reality[1]. For example, Luo Zhongli's most representative work "Father" is a hyper-realistic work that takes realism to the extreme. The motivation for this work also came from his observations during his "zhiqing" period. Similarly, Cheng Conglin's portrayal of China's minority ethnic groups and times introduced a more emotional and stylized technique. Zhang Xiaogang's portraits of the large family, which portray the unique facialization of the era, are a response to the rebellion against collectivism. At such a historical stage, critical realist creations based on local Chinese experience have a strong cultural identity and an emphasis on the Chinese context[2], and Western templates such as Chuck Close and Freud's painting language can be seen in their realistic strategies. Once the academy placed emphasis on realistic techniques, artists began to have a habit of observing society and memories with realism. At the same time during this period, the social environment of the southwest did not include any urban environment; the previous era and the countryside provided the artist with subject matter and content.

2.1.2. The Significance of “Local” Painting in Our Time.

As Ye Qian said, "local" and "scars" are a rejection of the revolutionary art themes of the previous era, which prioritized thematic content and glorification. Such rethinking is not comprehensive, but from the perspective of China, this step taken by the Southwest is a sign of the end of an era, and even an inevitable response of art creation to the new era. However, from the perspective of global art, "scars" and "local" are not innovative artistic content. There are many excellent artists in the West who depict working people and rural life, such as Miller, Van Gogh, and so on. Although their era and regional significance are indelible, it is not possible to make Southwest art a powerful art group based on global art history by copying, processing or selecting the perspective of the real countryside. French and German art does not stand out among European art because of a particular subject matter or style. The artistic content of realism is not equal to bad. But, when looking at "scars" and "local" painting in the context of the global art history of the same period, it seems that the mere exploration of painting language and the unique Chinese local content is no longer a viable path. From a retrospective point of view, the limitations of Southwest's "scars" and "local" are also commonly shared by most researchers of contemporary art in Southwest China.

2.2 "Post-Local" Painting

2.2.1. The Background of "Post-Local" Painting.

Since then, the phenomenon of urbanization in Southwest China has gradually emerged under the promotion of economic construction. As a binary opposition concept, if urbanization did not appear, would the rural theme still be noticed by Southwest critics and artists? For artists, urbanization is a way to reorganize society, and it also gives artists a 'distance' to observe past experiences and imprints of the times. For art critics, the art of the Southwest also needs to be updated from more perspectives. The lack of rural life experience caused by urbanization makes the limitations of this part of the times and geographical limitations more prominent. This limitation is not only for the impact of the source of inspiration of Southwest artists but also the lack of resonance of modern audiences for oil painting creations of such themes. Therefore, the village population working in cities, the architectural landscape of urban villages, and other concrete ways began to appear in the works of 'post-local' artists. This part of 'local' artists quickly responded to the new phenomenon of semi-urban and semi-rural areas. For example, Zhong Biao absorbed more Western surrealism techniques, boldly combined the architectural elements in the city with popular elements such as urban characteristics and clothing images, and looked for contradictions and harmony. Chen Jian'an also used the teahouse to be demolished as a stage to obscure the relationship between people in the city[3]. The artists are all concerned with different subdivisions, but all are deeply integrated with the urban experience.

2.2.2. The Artist of "Post-Local" Painting.

Southwest China used to be a marginal area of China's political and economic construction. The process of urbanization is not as rapid as that of big cities such as Beijing or Shanghai. Southwest artists will not quickly acquire urban experience and create abstract works like Mondrian's Broadway. Mondrian's abstract painting paradigm is more like a creative method and form for Chinese artists. The fact is that the combination of urban and rural areas has long and clearly been exposed to artists from the southwest society. Although this social scene does not only appear in the southwest, other cities in China are also in the process of urbanization, but there is no phenomenon of 'local' and 'post-local' art groups in these areas. For this phenomenon, I think there are four reasons. Firstly, The discourse power and influence established by 'scars' and 'local' artists in the early 1980s did not dissipate quickly and provided the soil and direction for creation. Urbanization provided 'local' with creative content and gave birth to 'post-local'. Secondly, the creation and criticism led by Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts determine the active atmosphere of southwest creation[4]. Thirdly, the observation habits of realism and the inheritance of painting techniques have enabled artists to respond quickly to topics such as urbanization and rural areas. Fourthly, the special field and environment give more concrete symbols to southwest Chinese artists seeking cultural identity. These reasons also make art critics summarize the particularity of the southwest group in the global context and think that the local is a response to the 'Chinese experience' and cultural identity [2].

2.2.3. The Occurrence Logic of "Post-Local" Painting.

As we can imagine, social changes will inevitably bring about dramatic changes in the content of art, and the attention of artists will change with social experience. But is the content change of 'post-local' works the inevitable result of art's response to society or the artist's personal innovation? This is a very open question. However, if we compare 'post-local' with 'local' painting, it has made great progress in content and painting form. It absorbs the western painting language and logic and also develops its own artistic language, but its occurrence logic seems to have a similar reason with 'local': both have strong realism and local spirit, and have strong artistic conventions as the criterion[5]. At this stage, most artists' works still remain in canvas painting, and there is no type of work such as 'local installation'. And more scholars pointed out that the oil painting creation from the southwest society itself handicraft industry habits and pleasure. Under the dual transformation of artistic labor and social labor, 'Why painting?' Such questions rarely appear. However, these easel paintings suggest to later artists the current social context of southwest China: the combination of urban and rural areas. Then, some new generations of artists began to create new forms in such a social context. Similarly, they escaped from the form of painting and the habit of realism and no longer created works from the habit of techniques[6].

To sum up, the stage of southwest 'local' and 'post-local' easel paintings is based on the dual logic of a localized cultural identity appeal and a realistic observation habit. Southwest art critics and art historians classify it as a return to the native. The word "local" is also quietly changing. The former local is no longer local, and the new southwest of semi-urban and semi-rural is the local of the times. Our emphasis on the local is not in line with the current direction of art criticism.

3 From Easel to Non-Easel

3.1 Analysis of the Causes of the Change of Art

After the 1990s, many non-easel artists emerged in the southwest contemporary art circle. The early works of He Gong, Wang Chuan, and Zhang Long artists did not take the real social experience as the content but questioned the art itself and made many installations based on Western conceptual art. In the other part of the artist's works, non-easel works based on urban modern experience began to emerge. Whether it is a metaphysical content or a metaphysical perspective, the change of form is not a simple problem. However, in a large number of artists and works, it can be clearly perceived that their methods and internal factors do not only come from Western experience.

Apart from that, the West not only influenced the form of art works, the white box was also suddenly introduced into the Chinese environment. Chinese traditional painting does not have such a field. As a representative of the ideology of elitism and superstructure, the white box is far from the field where the works should be at that time. There was no such white box space in the southwest and even in the whole China, and the white box art space will not expand as rapidly as the western trend of thought. Active young artists in the 1990s will not get as much white box space to display their works. It may be a wise strategy to get out of the white box and let the work interact

directly with society. The easel art deeply bound to the white box is no longer a form choice for artists.

As mentioned in the previous 'local' painting section, urbanization has changed the cultural background of the audience and the social experience of the artist. Labor relations and social labor relations in the art industry have changed simultaneously. The artist stood at the turning point of the changing times and became confused about the transformation of labor relations. For 'post-local' painting artists, the focus on content points out the context of urban-rural integration.

3.2 Analysis of Works of Non-easel Artists

3.2.1. Analysis of Luo Zidan 's Works.

In terms of early non-easel artists in the southwest, Luo Zidan's works can be seen in the inheritance and continuation of the previous "post-local". In 1996, "Half White-collar and Half Peasant" provided a model for contemporary art in Southwest China by directly intervening in the urban environment.



Fig. 1. "Half White-collar and Half Peasant"

Luo Zidan combines the clothes of Chinese rural farmers with shirts and trousers with Western and urban characteristics (figure 1). Half of them make up the dark skin of the working people, and half of them show the whiteness of the urban people. One hand holds a new hundred-dollar bill, and one hand holds crumpled change. The rough collage creates a strong visual contrast. On Chengdu's bustling Chunxi Road, interacting with the city in a unique image, such as going out into the street and letting a cobbler dry one of his shoes; sitting on a tricycle as a driver; trying on expensive watches in a luxury store, and a series of other acts. Every act seems to be inconsistent with the role

he designed. The audience is confused about the strange shape of his gaze, the confusion of his real identity, and the confusion of the performance art itself. The rich details in the whole work show the artist's detailed observation and experience of the two groups. It not only reflects the field contradiction between urban and rural areas but also reflects the collision between China and the West.

Unlike painting, the performance artist is no longer on the canvas but puts himself into the work. Although the form of performance art is not a new art form for the West, the Western experience only provides options for Luo Zidan's artistic practice, and he also innovatively makes more designs on the clothing of performance art. In that era, a class was described with a costume feature. The connection between clothing and identity is directly related to public cognition. This linguistic connection also gives clothing innovation to his performance art.

Selecting this form makes the work more intense and clearer, showing the confusion of cultural identity as a small individual in this furnace. The expression of society as a stage provides a richer reading level for this theme, and the audience no longer needs to walk into the gallery to watch this work. The change of Luo Zidan's form also has its spirit of resistance to the western white box. Observing its core, the resistance to the art of elitism and the question of the discourse power of Western-centered art. Luo Zidan mentioned Boyce and Andy Warhol's view of 'life is art' on his social media. At the same time, it has also, to a certain extent, escaped the discursive atmosphere of the academy pursuing painting in southwest China. The city not only provides content for Luo Zidan but also provides a perfect container for his works. As a pioneer of performance art, it provides an example of contemporary non-easel in the Southwest and is a connecting point for the transformation of the Southwest art form.

3.2.2. Analysis of Other Non-easel Artists.

The later young artist, Wang Yanxin's work 'Raising wicker in the traffic-free highway isolation belt', is not only a copy or participation of the social status quo in form. He also provides more reflection and questioning of cities and nature in the works. Not only the expression of experience but also the question of feeling. It seems that southwest artists are gradually getting rid of western information, which is mainly reflected in the deeper connection between the content, form and context of the works. Their works seem to be to a certain extent for this repeatedly discussed question 'Why must painting?' 'What is the relationship between form and content?' provides a practical answer. When we see the creation of contemporary art in Southwest China, isn't the non-easel performance itself based on social experience the resistance of traditional realism? Isn't it a question of the standard answer to the West's 'going to the non-easel'? Every artist gives the reason of Chinese non-easel form through his artistic practice. Although the market review of this part of non-easel artists did not achieve the same excellent results as the Southwest School, their creative logic entered a good context. Their creations helped to provide a perspective and inspiration for the later transformation of Chinese contemporary art forms.

If we arbitrarily assume that the artists of southwest China were merely unscreened receivers of Western ideas, then the artists of southwest China must also have been

completely influenced by the West when they began to create non-shelf art. But obviously, the reasons and logic are not only due to the trend of Western art. Local art is an attempt of the southwest. This attempt, relative to the global art history, is only a theme of innovation. However, this innovation has very strong limitations of the times and geographical limitations. For the audience born in my same age (90s), this kind of work is no longer a resonant image for my generation. And yet, the non-easel artists, who are situated in the midst of urban issues and China's unique social experience, provide convincing answers to the transformation of Chinese contemporary art forms. These artists not only reflect the change of Chinese art judgment values but also respond to the necessity of non-easel art in Chinese context. When we put Luo Zidan in the early southwest art and the current southwest art, his connecting position is obvious, as one of the earliest performance artists in Chinese contemporary art, he is a pioneer.

4 Conclusion

The urbanization in this paper is not the urbanization in the traditional sense but specifically refers to the unique urbanization phenomenon in Southwest China: the critical state of semi-urban and semi-rural areas. The urbanization of the southwest characteristics in this evolution acts as a catalyst to enrich the artist's modern experience. For non-easel artistic creation, the complexity of content promotes the exploration of creative forms other than painting and no longer only stays on the surface of the canvas. The changes in the field of urban and rural areas make artists aware of the objective existence of contextual changes and turn the environment into the most suitable stage for the presentation of works.

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