

Sexuality and the Works of Wei Dong

By Jia Fangzhou, March 1998, in Beijing

Chinese contemporary art in the 1990s has witnessed the rapid rise in the number of artists who look for inspiration from within themselves. In this sphere of purely personal experience, artists have finally touched upon the most basic subject of human nature—sex. This preoccupation with sex and with explorations into sexual awareness have led to expressions of sexual diversity. These explorations from various perspectives by artists of different sexes have proven to be very interesting. Not only have female artists explored their inner selves to express a unique female perspective, male artists have also looked within to articulate a distinctly male point of view. Accordingly sexual diversity has become the basic sphere of this kind of art, while presenting the real state of human nature by expressing different perspectives of sexuality can be considered to be its fundamental direction. Wei Dong is one of the most representative figures among the group of male artists of this genre.

Looking at the paintings of Wei Dong, it is not difficult to acknowledge that the core subject of his work concerns male sexual awareness. His basic pictorial style is the casual arrangement of strangely attired women in a traditional landscape. He also employs costumes and props from various historical periods as symbols. Even more importantly, in his expression of the male visual experience, he does not limit himself to a narrow and private space, but places himself against two large backgrounds. One is the historical milieu of traditional culture (symbolized by the traditional landscapes); the other is the reality of a political society (signified by the dress and adornments as well as by Chinese characters and other symbols in the paintings). These backgrounds endow his human subjects not only with historical depth but also with a sense of reality. At the same time, it also allows the explorations of male sexuality to rise above superficial biological clichés, into a more profound culture of male vision.

Traditional landscape painting epitomizes China's male-dominated society. It is a genre created and appreciated by men. Women, who in the past were confined to the home by their bound feet, have never shared such a relationship with China's great mountains and grand rivers. Wei Dong directly borrows the style of traditional landscape not only for its culture significance, but also because it is a symbol of male culture. Arranging his meticulously painted subjects before such a background is in complete harmony with his own male perspective.

Although Wei Dong searches for inspiration from within his own personal sphere of experience, he is unable to separate himself from the real environment around him. Hence, the political symbols or icons of the times in his work are responses to his own social background. He has experienced the extremities of the Culture Revolution, the reforms and liberalizations of the 1980s, and the transformation of a political society into an economic one in the 1990s. These marks and symbols from various periods, rather than endowing his figures with social status, are more likely symbols of power, suppressing the boundless vitality of female life.

Although Wei Dong emphasizes these two backgrounds in his paintings, they are nevertheless nothing more than backgrounds. To create a strong sense of culture as well as overtone of "satirical pop" are not aims the artist cares to pursue. The origin of his works is not in culture or politics. His real interest lies in life forms that can initiate sexuality or desire, in figures imbued with tension, and even in flesh itself. Among Wei Dong's paintings,

nothing is more evident than naked bodies or exposed parts of bodies. It is as though he uses a magnifying glass to enlarge his illustrations, feature by feature. He is sensitive to the contours of supple flesh, to the flow of thick blood through the veins, and even to the respiration of the pores. Through his painting he seems to experience the rhythm of female life. The female figure occupies the most important position in Wei Dong's world; it is also a true source of inspiration.

However, Wei Dong does not illustrate the female form in very common circumstances. His figures are far removed from the aesthetic norms of the academic school, and are placed before a cultural and political backdrop both real and fantastic, resulting in the confrontation of refinement and vulgarity, and the co-existence of sex and politics. The discordance between sexual life and the falseness of social roles creates a sense of life's absurdity. The assembly of bizarre images makes it difficult for viewers to understand what they see, or what the artist is ultimately trying to express. Only one thing seems clear: the temptations of sex are evident everywhere—the exposed breasts, thighs and buttocks—pushing voyeurism from fantasy into a process of visualization. As the artist himself has admitted, in expressing his imagination during the painting process, Wei Dong becomes overwhelmed by a kind of spiritual and physical joy.

By undressing his subjects without any qualms, Wei Dong takes on a huge risk. The female figures he creates completely become products of the language of male power. Modeled into symbols of desire, losing all their dignity as women, unequally participating in the same culture, they become merely the objects of male visual experience, exposing themselves in order to satisfy men's needs. Although this affront to female dignity is commonplace in real life, as an artistic style it can lead to misconceptions. I expect that Wei Dong's art will be criticized by feminists; it is something that will happen sooner or later.

In his artistic style, however, Wei Dong is undoubtedly in a class of his own. Not only is he able to extract what he requires from his native culture, adopting in his painting the landscape style of the Ming and Qing periods, he is also adept at drawing from the vast legacy of works by the Old Masters of Western Art. It is not difficult to perceive in Wei Dong's paintings the influence of masterpieces by Ingres, Rubens, and even Dürer. His talent lies in using traditional materials to fuse the expressive technique of the Old Masters. Although his illustrations forcibly embrace two contrary culture values—refinement and vulgarity—it can also be argued that this is the case in life itself. Hence in this sense, his art becomes, yet again, real.

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