

H₂O: A Dialogue between Jiang Jiehong and Miao Xiaochun

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Translated by Chen Dezhang

Jiang (Jiehong): Based on the experience of our previous cooperation, I think your works can be divided into two types. One type concerns works like *Celebration*, *Await*, and *Rise*, which were included in the exhibition tour of “Collective Identity” shown in Britain and Hong Kong; the other type refers to your work *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace*, which was on show in an exhibition entitled “View Beyond the Window” in Birmingham. We made transparency boxes for your works, using sunlight from outside the exhibition hall. Its background is an 18th century church in central Birmingham, and the two formed an interesting corresponding with each other. I also wrote a short comment on your solo exhibition of *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* in Australia. *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* differs from your previous works in both creative thinking and route. If your previous works manifest more or less a kind of record of reality or exaggerated “reality of urban material mechanics” that in a sense blur the distinction between “news photos” and “modern art”, then your *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* seems to have leapt across into another space of thinking where you can display your talent freely in as many ways as you wish.

Your new work *H₂O* is apparently an extension of *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* as far as its means of production is concerned. Let’s talk about this *H₂O* from two perspectives: One is its theme and the other is its execution process. Firstly theme. If ten artists are asked to write a composition with water as the theme, they will produce ten compositions with different contents. However, very few artists have ever considered water from the angle of the study of the history of art. Why do you choose water? What does “water” mean to you? And how did you link water with the study of the history of art in your thinking?

Miao (Xiaochun): The question that was repeatedly asked in my last work *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace*, especially in its three-dimensional computer animation version, is “Where will I go?” This question concerns the end of life and is thus very difficult to answer. There were religious answers and philosophical answers, to which I am quite skeptical. Modern science cannot answer the question “Where does life come from and where will it go?” Whatever theory or doctrine one may use, it can hardly convince modern people if it contains the slightest error. But this question about the end of life cannot be avoided no matter how you try to bypass it. There are many problems I cannot solve, but I still try my best to understand them, or to console myself in a comparatively passable way or in a way that can justify itself.

For example water. I see the water I drink every day. Before it enters my body it has been flowing and circulating through countless living bodies. This process has been going on from the remote antiquity to the present, and will go on and on in future. It cannot explain the source or end of life, but it accompanies life all the time, from the very beginning to the very end. Careful inspection of and meditation on such a matter perhaps would enlighten us in a certain sense about life. Besides, the role of liaison played by water between lives is also very touching to me: I have a kind of relation with many other lives because of the matter called *water*. This is a point I also want to express in my work.

As for your second question: Why I chose to link this to the history of art? I think it is because it is a field I am familiar with. I am in no position to explain this question through philosophical or scientific languages as they are not my strong point. So I chose to use visual language and limit it in the range of art history.

Jiang: Of course it is only logical for you to present or express your ideas about water through a visual medium. But there must be another level that needs explanation when you put the theme of water in the theoretical framework of the history of art and reflect on water through existing works of fine arts.

Miao: If I try to express the ideas I just talked about through scientific or philosophical languages, it may be meaningless. Besides, there are things which cannot yet be clearly explained. Of course, it would be best for an artist to have certain ideas when he creates his work of art, but it is also all right if he does not have this little idea. But finally he has to ask himself: Why do I do this? What do I want to express? So in-depth ideas are very important or his work would be a little too shallow.

Jiang: Do you have some complex about the history of art as you studied it when you attended your graduate courses? This complex is somewhat like a trap you lay for yourself, which you enter and try to explain and meditate. Of course we can hardly say whether it is derogatory or commendatory, though it is closely linked with the means of execution we are going to talk about.

Actually the “water” you raised is not the cup of water we are drinking now, it is a “conceptual water”. As a mysterious medium, water links modern men with men of ancient times and men of the future, thus enabling time to continue. This is also a reflection on the unanswerable question of “Where is man from and where will he go?” You could have expressed the idea by using some other means like certain installation or some inter-active medium. The theme is full of material properties but you did not touch on it or make use of it in your visual practice. Is it more that the “conceptual water” gave you a new opportunity to rethink about life? Or you have simply gone back to the cause of “studies on the history of art”?

Miao: In the first place, this series is related to the means I had tried in my previous works. Secondly, it is very personal for me to use the element of water to reflect the origin of life, the link between different lives, and the end of life. It is thus a partial and personal method which contains my own experience. It is also partial and personal to use the transformation of a number of representative works in the history of art as a means to meditate on this question., because for me it is a means I am familiar with and unique in

my own way.

Jiang: Now let's talk about your means of execution. To a certain degree the work *H₂O* is attractive as a means of execution because it is more apt to form a certain logic. The theme of water may be something which touched on your creation, not an object to be shown. I always hold that the imagination of any artist is always limited, though the way of limitation varies with different people. An artist may be restrained by the medium and the existing equipments he has been using, or by the techniques he has mastered. He just cannot throw away such restraints. There are many cases like this. Thus the most difficult self-challenge for an artist is to think of some new ideas within such restraints. For you the restraint may be your complex of the history of art, particularly for some masters or famous works. All this is manifested in your works. If this is case, the theme of "water" may be no more than a pretext.

Miao: It may be so. It may take many years of efforts, or the efforts of decades or one's whole life, sometime the efforts of a batch of people or the efforts of generations, to reach certain heights and to form a mature style within a certain framework.

Jiang: In your *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* you have taken up a very modern model of practice to replace the traditional concept of *linmo* (imitation). You are still doing *linmo*, but you have cast away the original means of such imitation in both the media and way of thinking. Formerly *linmo* also contained a concept of progressing, though there are many debates about this in history, including people's view on the painting of the "four Wangs" (Wang Shimin, Wang Jian, Wang Hui, and Wang Yuanqi, four famous Chinese landscape painters of the early Qing Dynasty). Are their works simple imitation of earlier works or do they show a progress in the visual language? The medium they used remained unchanged, but their copying contained new pursuits in the depiction of the painting and the spirit of style of drawing, that was intended to produce a more wholesome and purer scholastic space. Theirs is not a simply copying but an unique model of practice that has a touch of modernity. What you have copied is not Chinese art but Western paintings. This

is itself a big leap as far as the medium is concerned. Then you have also made great efforts from the angle of viewing, in turning graphic or two - dimensional works into three-dimensional images, and thus changing the manner of looking at paintings of the audience, including artists.

Miao: Besides the change of concept, medium also played an important part. If you imitate the works of our predecessors with the same medium, it is very difficult to jump out of the restraints of the original technique or style. But it is very different if you use it as source material and re-narrate it in detail by using modern language, or in other words, to divert the original works. The result may even be poles apart from the original.

I also find, the larger the gap in time, the bigger the possibility to make some recreation. The Renaissance tried to resurrect ancient art. But you can see the difference if you put the works together. Similarly, the pre-Raffaello school tried to imitate the style of works before Raffaello, but they are obviously different if you put their works side by side. It is quite dangerous to imitate the master like an apprentice as you may come into the shade of the master without knowing it because it is not distant enough and the difference of techniques are too trifling. You can shade your master only if you are strong enough and really talented. Raffaello's paintings, especially the earlier ones, have much resemblance with those of his teacher. However, he learned much and became able to dwarf his teacher. So later generations only know Raffaello and his teacher fell into oblivion. The advantage I have is that I am far distant from them. So there is no restriction in the content or technique to restrain me from expressing myself freely.

Jiang: Your works are far from them not only in time. You have a different nationality and cultural background, which form great separation of time and space. According to your opinion, a master can impart things he thinks marvelous to his apprentices. But there may a case that the things he didn't consider marvelous might unexpectedly develop into something very brilliant. Time seems to be capable of flattening the superior and the inferior to the same plane and reshuffling the cards.

Miao: This impartation and inheritance between the master and his apprentice can lift the development of certain techniques and styles of painting to a very mature peak. Without such an inheritance no school can reach a really high level. But of course such development could also drown some people.

Jiang: You are right. Such inheritance is a linear process of development. But your linmo has broken this rule by being non-linear. When you are confronted with so many elements and subject matters all at once, they become something second-hand no matter how familiar you are with the history of art. But it is all this that forced you out of the circle to become a cool outsider and watcher.

Miao: Some people in ancient China also raised the idea that “painting must contain ancient senses to be really valuable”. What does “ancient” mean? Usually people think something “ancient” and desirable only when it belonged to people several generations ago. But it is just because the separation of generations that makes him discover something different from the works of art in front of him. He will feel that different something as something very valuable and wants to dig it out. This is the feeling about things he craves even though they were years and years apart from his own time.

Jiang: So let’s come back from the way of execution to the theme of your creation. Is water just a pretext or a central topic in the way of execution?

Miao: It is indeed a very important centre. I changed many details of the original works. Such changes may need my own comprehension and thought about water. So it is not just a pretext.

Jiang: The concept of water runs through details, but your work does not show water—water as a matter. The works you imitate do not contain water neither, except as “represented water”. You meditate on water in your works and borrow the water depicted

in previous works without really “using” water.

Miao: And that’s why I prefer to name it H_2O , as a more abstract element. I attach more importance to those works that seem to have nothing to do with water directly. I used some forced or somewhat far-fetched analogy to make people realize there is water or they are actually related in some way with water. Only then will the link become clear and the concept of water can be better presented.

Jiang: Please give an example.

Miao: *The Martyrdom*. St Sebastian in the original painting looks like a hedgehog because his whole body is covered with arrows. There are no arrows in my work. I turned his body into a transparent crystal with water dripping out. Our body is very vulnerable as seventy percent of it consists of water. Life leaves a person when the water in his body is lost. It is the same for all bodies of the living no matter what covers the body. Thus my roundabout explanation links water in a more profound significance.

Jiang: So we come back to the theme of life again.

Miao: Right. Life is closely related with the matter of water. The common thing that is wrapped in different clothes and skins of different colors is water. It may be more meaningful to push aside things on the surface and work on more essential meanings.

Jiang: After Jesus breathed his last, a soldier poked his side rib with a bayonet to see if he was really dead, “then blood and water seeped out”. So, like the mark of nails on his hands and feet, the wound at his rib has also become a witness.

Miao: Such a description is very interesting. What comes out of his body contains not only blood but also water.

Jiang: In a sense your work is a recreation of original masterpieces, but in another sense, the theme of water reflects your pursuit of the question of the essence of life. You are seeking the unification of the two and making another deduction on the basis of such unification. Actually water always plays a very important role in the Bible. It can be said safely that water is the medium most closely linked with life and the symbol of the Holy Spirit. There are many stories about water in the Bible, for example in the case of Moses striking the huge rock, or John baptizing Jesus. Jesus says: "If people drink the water I give them, they will never suffer thirsty. The water I give them will become fountains in their heads that will flow forever till eternity." And you have put in many of your own visual language elements, such as the "transparent man". Why?

Miao: "Transparent man" is an extreme way of expressing my ideas. You can take off his clothes, his appearances, and his skin, and thus it is easier to depict and present the fluid that flows in his body. Comparatively speaking, it would be more difficult with other media, for example to draw a person as a sparkling transparent body. Three dimensions can be an adept way to depict things as transparent.

Jiang: This is the advantage of three dimensional medium. You haven't touched upon the reason of your creation yet.

Miao: Well, it is to do with the theme of water. It is easier to express the theme of water when people become as transparent as water. The audience can easily see vividly when water flows out of transparent bodies. This is a new visual language of the new digital age.

Jiang: We will come back to the concept of linmo. Good imitation do not necessarily look genuine but should have some modern characteristics. For example, the four Wang's pursued previous painters like Ni Yunlin and Huang Gongwang. They could effectively purify their own techniques in the process of imitation, and express their own cultivation, character and taste through the form of interior brush texturing. Or to take another example, Chou Ying added green when he imitated *The Festival of Pure Brightness on*

the River by Zhang Zeduan. There is no lack of modernity in the imitation copy as it established some individual angle of expression though it can hardly be said to have surpassed the original. Your practice not only makes use of today's wonder of digital medium, thus creating something new of visual effect, but what is more important is perhaps the extension of the medium forms a different view of criticism and multiple ways of thinking.

Miao: I wanted to inherit and create in another way. The development of modern art in China in its first two decades always looked up at Western art, and so there was always a psychological pressure: In the orderly aligned troop, in which every school has its position., where should I squeeze in? Now such psychological pressure has been dispelled: I can refuse to recognize such an order. I can break this file and dismiss it. Every possibility is open to me. A troop can form a file, it can also form a rank, or a line in an inclined or even an up and down direction. So I am free.

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