

Looking for _____

Text by Leslie Dong

We seem to have taken a step forward - we have passed the end of questions such as "What does art do?" and "what is the origin of the artwork?". But they can't make the questions any less or even disappear. They are still there and they are wider, just as the shepherd who crosses the valley and finds a vast sea. On the one hand, this is the end for the sheep. However, on the other hand the richness of the sea is fresh. For artists, "looking for _____" is a problem in itself, but also a passive, "resisting" action - especially when they are in a reality in which the diversity of values are being reined in, from opposing authority to perpetuating it, deconstructed and reassembled. Therefore, it is such important for artists to be vigilant, they should be difficult to be categorised, and try to avoid being the darlings of those who are at art fairs or high class parties - "Hey, she/he's popular and everyone needs one hanging in their bedroom or living room."

"My point is not that everything is bad but that everything is dangerous."

Art always emphasises the question of identity. Resistance arises when an artist wants to leave an honest mark on ambiguous and uncertain times - *"to be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments; it is to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration... Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself."* From a narrower point of view, there are only two ways of constituting modern man's identity, apart from the one who endeavours to create himself, as mentioned above, the other is the one who has been wilfully erased by society from its diversity, and who has progressively lost the ability to question it in generating a homogenised pretty face.

"Looking for _____" as a practice can help artists anchor their identity. It should be emphasised that this process is not entirely random, it is a presentation of the artists' own ways of seeing. The four artists in the exhibition, who can hardly be categorised either in terms of cultural background or age, show a rare consistency - a search for ways to confront the reality of the times.

Colour and material are particularly important modes of expression for Manon Steyaert and Ni Zhiqi, whose visual language, at once blunt and ambiguous, evokes the viewer's perception of spatial concepts and concrete images. Some of their works lie between painting and sculpture, and in resisting the process of traditional painting, they complete highly personal creations. It is worth mentioning that Ni Zhiqi's early collage works present a unique perspective, in which the memory of Sicily becomes the artist's "exclusive place" in time. Richard Dean Hughes also focuses on the relationship between object and image. In combining sculpture and painting, he explores traditional methods of production in relation to contemporary methods of cold production and materials. Self-defined as a conceptual artist who primarily uses painting as a medium, Yu Aijun's "painting as installation" seems to be in conceptual conflict with Hughes' complex sculptures (no need to draw a distinction here). There is a strong attempt at dialogue in his works, a murmur that can be heard with an ear to the ground - but that's about it, as Yu Aijun's small, hidden worlds of his brushwork, on paper and in poems, suggest the impossibility of dialogue. But this is not a bad thing, his creations are like old billboards on the street, or you could say unswept plastic bags in a park or rags locked up in a utility room, announcing their persistence in a disobedient way - *"Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler"*.

The title of the exhibition "Looking for _____" is not artists' quest for an exact answer, but in fact, for the viewer, it implies an orientated mode of viewing: there is no need to intentionally search for the deep meaning behind the works, but rather to overlap your own field of vision with that of the

artists', to look with the artists' eyes, to think with the artists' brain, and to practice with the artists' hands - a childish experience of "what is the artist looking for". In this process, we may discover how realistic and confronting the artists' works are, and how much it corresponds to/contrasts with our own experiences.

寻找_____

我们似乎朝前迈进了一步——我们越过了诸如“艺术在做什么”、“艺术作品的本源是什么”这类悬于尽头的问题。但令人头疼的是，这并不会使得问题减少或者消失，问题依然存在且更加宽泛，就如同翻过山谷的牧羊人发现眼前是广袤无垠的大海那般窘迫，一方面，对于羊群来说这是尽头，在另一方面，丰饶的海域是新鲜的……对于艺术家而言，“寻找_____”本身是一个问题，同时也是一种被动的、“负隅顽抗”的动作——尤其是当他们处在这样一个现实里：多元的价值取向在被收束，从反对权威到延续权威，被解构的再被集合……因此，艺术家非常有必要保持警惕，他们应当难以被归类，尽量避免成为那些在艺博会或者上流宴会中的宠儿——“嘿，她/他很流行，人人的卧室或客厅都需要挂上一件。”

“我想要说的是：并非一切都是坏的，但一切都是危险的。”

艺术总在强调身份问题。当一个艺术家想在模糊不定的时代留下诚实的印记的时候，抵抗就产生了——“做现代人就不能接受自己在流逝的时间之流中的身份；而应该把自己视做一个复杂、艰难的阐述对象……就波德莱尔而言，现代人不是去发现自我、发现关于自己的秘密和隐秘真相的人；现代人是那个努力创造自己的人。”从较为狭隘的观点来看，构成现代人身份的途径只有两种，除了如上所述努力创造自己的人，另一种就是被社会肆意抹除多样性，在生成同质化的漂亮面貌中逐步丧失质疑能力的人。“寻找_____”作为实践，能够帮助艺术家锚定身份。需要强调的是，这一过程并非是全随机的，这是艺术家本人观看方式的呈现。展览中四位无论是从文化背景角度出发，还是在年龄上都很难被归于一类的艺术家们难得表现出来一种一致性——寻找与时代现实对抗的方式。

色彩和材料对于 Manon Steyaert 和倪志琪是尤为重要的表达方式，既直白又暧昧的视觉语言可以唤起对观众对于空间概念和具体形象的感知；他们的一些作品都介于绘画与雕塑之间，在抵抗传统绘画的过程中完成了高度个人化的创作。值得一提的是，倪志琪早期的拼贴作品更是呈现出独特的面貌，西西里岛的记忆在时间中成为艺术家的“独享之地”。Richard Dean Hughes 同样聚焦在物体与图像的关系上，他在雕塑和绘画结合的过程中探讨了传统制作方法与当代冷酷的生产方式以及材料的关系。自我定义为主要使用绘画作为媒介的观念艺术家，于艾君的“绘画作为装置”与 Hughes 制作复杂的雕塑似乎产生了某种观念上的冲突（在这里无需分出高下）。他的创作有着强烈的对话的企图，耳朵贴着能够听到喃喃自语——但也仅限于此，于艾君隐没在他笔下的小世界，纸上和诗里明示了对话的不可能。但这绝非坏事，他的创作像是街边的老旧广告牌，你也可以说是公园里无人清扫的塑料袋或是被锁在杂物间里的破布条，用一种不顺从的方式宣告自己的顽强存在——“人人都是艺术家”。

展览标题“寻找_____”并非是艺术家对确切答案的追问，实际上，对于观众而言，它暗含着一种定向的观看模式：无须刻意寻找作品背后深刻的含义，而是将自我的视野与艺术家的重合，用艺术家的眼睛去观看，用艺术家的大脑去思考，用艺术家的双手去实践——稚拙地体会“艺术家在寻找什么？”这一过程，我们或许就可以发现艺术家的创作是多么的现实且充满对抗，同时发现那些作品竟然与自己的经验是相符/相反的。