

我用身體讀藝術史

文 | 曾建穎，2020

我用身體讀藝術史。

於我而言，歷史不只是佈滿灰塵風化被放在玻璃罩裡的史料，而是一種橫跨時空的被保存下來的運動軌跡，我讀的是氣味，是質地，是七情六慾，是勞動的想像，也是生活的況味。

這種閱讀的傾向和我的學習背景有關，我受的傳統訓練包含了大量的臨摹練習，從近現代到上古時期。除了參照歷史文件與教科書，為了妥善完成臨摹的功課，我必須在大量的模仿練習中，透過身體勞動的臨摹，試圖進入創作者的創作狀態。穿越那些藝術史的典範崇拜與造神運動，古典大師與巨匠，也都曾是血肉之軀，他們只是忠於他們的感官與認知，試圖在時代的座標上，發出屬於自己獨特的聲響。如果說人的生命可以用勞動力與時間來衡量，藝術家便是透過創作將無形的生命力，以勞動轉換為存在的物質，成為時空的錨點，即便肉身已逝，意志猶存。

東方的身體，從來就不是解剖學的，在哲學與醫學的脈絡裡，身體是能量的流動狀態，是意識與物質的介面。在東方藝術史上對於身體與人像的描繪，總是包裹在飄揚的袍衣裡頭，只露出頭臉與四肢的末梢，這樣的表現傾向，受佛教繪畫的圖式影響，也結合了知識份子靈修與禪坐的體驗。身體邊界的模糊，物我界線消融的感知訓練，是東方哲學身體實踐很重要的一環。這樣對肉體與存在的覺察，綿密的交織在文化的各個層面。線條，除了筆墨的運動方式之外，造型也是一種體現這種身體感知的方式之一：你可以從衣紋的畫法，以至於勾勒水流浮雲的動態，甚至是光線落在塑像上的輪廓中，發現出這樣的表現意圖，東方的藝術，都是線條的雄辯，能量的動態。在我的創作中，同樣也帶著這樣的觀念去再現我的所知所感。

我很喜歡宗教藝術。在生命存亡面前，畫師與工匠展現了每一個時代的宇宙觀以及人類存在於世界的想像。關於這些藝術家如何創造，幾乎沒有留下能被史冊記載的方法學。在信仰教義與文化框架下，工匠能發揮的創造力純粹來自勞動，或是對彼岸與現世連接的當代想像。這些能工巧匠通常佚名於時代，他們的養成與生活方式也早就離散於荒煙漫沙中，往往也只能在帝王陵寢旁的陪葬坑發現他們擁擠且凌亂的屍骨；又或是流浪在綠洲與沙漠之間，見過各式各樣異國文化風景的畫工，是如何在描繪佛國樂土的時候，使用他們的遊歷見聞作為想像的題材？這些工作方式如今只能透過有限的考古與觀察來想像了。

他們數十代人建立起來的祭壇與石窟廟宇形制，我把它看成一種圖式脈絡在文化傳播的過程中，所形成的多元光譜。從歐亞大陸的中心向四周擴散，逐漸形成我們現在理解的東方與西方的雛形。我在柏林博物館看到的聖母木雕像與中國甘肅省石窟的菩薩泥塑，你很難忽視兩者的相似性。歷史總兵荒馬亂，宗教藝術最令人動容的，是他永遠像一個妥當的容器，即便把人性中最卑劣與窩齷的髒污放進去，看起來仍像是個發光的希望。

閱讀藝術史需要想像力。

我從來就不真的信仰歷史上知識份子所著述的畫論或是品評標準，於我而言那是史料，是彼時知識分子的品味指導手冊，是時代下特定小眾的美學政治正確，是消費端的收藏家觀點。雖然有其學術價值，但那畢竟與藝術家實踐過程中真正的創造力有距離。我更感興趣的是大時代下折射出來，真實生活與人類面對時代的精神，以及，他們如何演繹觀點。動人的作品往往簡單如日常生活片段，細膩的感知與感官再現，讓觀眾如臨現場。對我來說，面對藝術史不只是知識考古與推理，而是感受的共鳴。

藝術史的推進，是典範與身體的互動過程。

我的創作實踐，便是對於典範的提問。我以一個當代的感官身體，去經驗歷史中藝術家的勞動狀態，進而產生想像與對話。我的作品可以被視為一種閱讀的筆記，或是靈魂附體的感官想像。比起在近代史的藝術想像框架中辯論，我的實踐方法更像是在歷史的尺標中，碰觸到與當下感知相應的節點，並在此往外延伸出一條向斜的維度，去探索另一個向度的歷史想像與藝術語言的可能性。

翻開近現代藝術史，華人藝術家的問題意識，始終是朝向西方的，無論是中學為體或是西學為用，總苦於如何對焦定位。對內則必須向典範交代，急切地把創造安放進古典美學的框架裡。但在當下全球化的資訊社群年代，思潮與美學可以無視地域性差異而傳播，至於當代的身體如何超越方位的想像，進而創造一個更自由的藝術光譜，仍是我有待實踐的課題。

碰觸藝術史帶給我反省：比起迎向時代的迫切，關注變化是什麼，也許更值得探索的，是在時代更迭下，身而為人不變的是什麼。

Reading Art History Through the Body

Written by Tseng Chien-Ying, 2020

I read art history through the body. To me, history is not merely a collection of decayed relics preserved behind glass, but rather a preserved trajectory of movement across time and space. What I read are scents, textures, emotions, labor, and the essence of lived experiences.

This approach stems from my traditional training, which involved extensive copying exercises ranging from modern to ancient periods. Beyond textual research, I engaged in bodily labor through replication, attempting to enter the creative state of past artists. Stripping away the grand narratives and deification of artistic masters, I recognize that these figures were once flesh and blood, responding to their sensory experiences and attempting to articulate a unique voice within their temporal context. If human life can be measured by labor and time, then the artist transforms intangible vitality into material existence through creation—anchoring their presence in time and space, allowing their will to persist beyond their physical demise.

In Eastern philosophy and medical discourse, the body is not anatomically defined but perceived as a flow of energy—a liminal space between consciousness and matter. This principle extends into the representation of the human figure in East Asian art, where bodies are often veiled in flowing robes, revealing only the extremities. This aesthetic inclination, influenced by Buddhist pictorial traditions, resonates with the meditative and introspective experiences of scholars. The blurring of bodily boundaries and the dissolution of subject-object duality form a crucial part of Eastern bodily practices. Such an awareness of corporeality is intricately woven into cultural expression. In art, beyond the gestural qualities of brush and ink, line itself becomes a manifestation of bodily perception, whether in the depiction of drapery, flowing water, or the contours of light on sculptural forms. My own work embodies this philosophy, seeking to reframe my sensory knowledge into contemporary artistic expression.

Religious art has always captivated me. Confronting mortality, painters and artisans of different eras have articulated their cosmologies and envisioned human existence within the universe. Yet, little is documented about the methodologies behind these creations. Within the constraints of doctrine and cultural frameworks, craftsmen exercised their creative agency through sheer labor or by imagining a metaphysical beyond. These artisans, often anonymous, have long since vanished into history, their lives scattered in burial pits beside imperial tombs, or dissipated across deserts and oases as wandering painters. How did these itinerant artisans, exposed to diverse foreign cultures, integrate their experiences into depictions of Buddhist paradises? Today, their working methods can only be reconstructed through archaeological fragments and speculation. Their multi-generational efforts in constructing altars and cave temples reflect a dynamic spectrum of cultural transmission. Spreading outward from the Eurasian heartland, these artistic traditions gradually shaped our contemporary understanding of East and West.

At the Berlin Museum, I encountered a wooden Madonna sculpture that bore striking similarities to Buddhist bodhisattva statues in the Dunhuang caves. Despite the turbulent forces of history, religious art remains an enduring vessel—absorbing the best and worst of human nature, yet continuing to radiate hope.

Reading art history requires imagination. I have never fully subscribed to the art theories and evaluative standards formulated by historical intellectuals. To me, they serve as documents—taste manuals dictated by cultural elites, aesthetic dogmas reflecting the political correctness of their time, and perspectives shaped by collectors. While academically valuable, these texts often distance themselves from the raw creative processes of artists. Instead, I am more interested in how human experience, refracted through historical currents, manifests as lived reality and spiritual resilience. The most profound works are often rooted in everyday moments—where sensitivity and sensory reconstitution transport the viewer into an immersive experience. Art history, to me, is not merely an intellectual excavation but an empathetic resonance.

The evolution of art history is an interplay between paradigm and embodiment. My artistic practice interrogates these paradigms. Using my contemporary body, I engage with the laborious processes of past artists, generating new dialogues and imaginative reconstructions. My works function as reading notes—embodied reflections, a sensory medium of invocation. Rather than confining myself to modernist debates, my methodology operates within the historical continuum, identifying resonant nodes that extend outward into alternative dimensions of art historical imagination.

Modern Chinese art history has always been framed in response to the West—oscillating between the integration of Western methodologies and the reinforcement of classical Chinese aesthetics. Domestically, artists feel compelled to negotiate with tradition, attempting to reconcile their creations within canonical frameworks. However, in today's digital and globalized era, ideas and aesthetics transcend geographical boundaries. How contemporary artists can liberate themselves from spatial constraints and generate a more fluid, transnational artistic spectrum remains an open question within my practice.

Engaging with art history leads me to a deeper reflection: rather than simply reacting to the urgency of the times, perhaps the more meaningful pursuit lies in uncovering what remains constant in the human condition, even amidst historical flux.