

# Comment On Tan's Artwork

## 略論譚力勤的數碼藝術

As Arthur Danto (1999) has famously observed, a work of art is made up of an object and a text. He claims that one has to make sense of the work in concert with the text that accompanies it. Thus, there is a convergence between Danto's notion of "text and object" (which is a modern aesthetic stance) and the traditional Confucian notion of the relationship of the artwork to the artist. Under ideal circumstances, the excellence of an artists' character is supposed to be reflected in the quality of his work.

For me, LiQin Tan's character and story are the key texts that accompany any viewing of his art work. So, this critical response to his body of work, starts with a sketch of the man. But, over and above Li's biography, there are other texts that make themselves felt as one looks at the images and installations that he has created. Intentionally or not, with his work, Li has entered into a number of perennial discussions in the art world, among these are: The character of the "primitive", The issue of appropriation- i.e. Who may and who may not borrow or reference materials and images from cultures other than his/her own? What may be the future of "Nature"?- What constitutes the natural world and what is the relationship of technology to this beleaguered world? All of these questions point in the direction of other texts that, although unspoken, help to frame our experience of Li's creative work.

I first met Li when he enrolled as an Art Education Master's student at Concordia University in Montreal. I was immediately impressed by his resilient character. He arrived in Canada, alone and with few resources other than his keen intellect, "can-do" attitude, boundless energy, humor and ingenuity. It was obvious that he had been well-seasoned in the turbulent and difficult years that he spent in his native land. He left his homeland with intangible burdens and treasures. His character was first revealed to me on his arrival when he discovered that the black ink in one of his suitcases had spilled, ruining the contents. Li dealt with this problem as though it were a matter of no great moment-even though the loss of clothing and books was quite significant-doubly so, because he could not replace what he had lost. He most certainly had never heard the expression "Get over it!"- but his response to this misfortune was precisely that. He moved on, his eyes fixed on his larger goals.

As I am descended from a people with a long history of displacement- I admired and recognized the practicality and modest strength with which Li adapted

to life in Montreal. It seemed to me that I was witnessing a familiar story-the arrival of an industrious immigrant with great expectations for his future. Canada was Li's "land of opportunity". He opted to live in a low rent district, a place where apartments are cheap and the street life is noisy and unruly. Within months, he had brought over his wife and child, and had started an arts and crafts business. He bought a car, and while working on his Master's studies, he managed to make sales trips to nearby cities. For me, it was an eye opening experience to watch this disciplined man and his family deal so successfully with everything that fate and the world could throw at them. He learned his way around the city, the province and the country itself.

It became apparent that he was skilled in traditional visual arts – both Western academic and traditional Chinese. This knowledge of his own traditional arts was put to good use when he wrote his Master's thesis (Tan, 1993) on the paintings of a contemporary gifted Chinese child, Wang Yani. The thesis is a groundbreaking document as it looks in detail at a representative sample of artwork made by Wang Yani between the ages of four and nine. Li brought as much energy, thoroughness and imagination to his detailed analysis of Wang's brush paintings as he did to the more pressing needs in his life. He continued to paint and draw. One of the memorable images that he created at the time was a traditional ink, brush and rice paper, study of a Canadian hockey player as observed from television. This gesture, where he effortlessly combined the high culture of his own country with imagery from the popular Western media, showed me that Li was a flexible and creative thinker. He was not afraid of "appropriation"-nor of mixing visual and stylistic modalities, and he was, above all else someone who grounded himself in his own immediate situation. He was in North America now: There were new experiences and new sources of imagery–new technologies to be tapped. He was hungry for them all.

一九九九年奧思爾·丹托 (Arthur Danto) 曾有一著名論述：藝術是由一實體與一文體(text)構成，其藝術實體必須協同文體為一。為此，在奧思爾·丹托的“實體與文體”觀念 (“Object & Text” 一種現代美學概念) 和儒家“作品與藝術家”傳統倫理之間有一聚焦點。按照此理論，優秀藝術家的品能會在他的作品中呈現，對我而言，力勤的個性和人生經歷是分析其作品的關鍵之處 (Key texts)。因此，本文將以素描手法來描寫和分析力勤的人生和藝術。但是，除了力勤個人經歷外，還有其他人文因素 (other texts) 能更深刻地體驗力勤創作的圖像和裝置。有意或無意，就其作品而言，力勤介入了藝術世界持續討論的一些主題，例如：“原始”的定義，文化交叉的挪用等。藝術家是否能挪用除他自身文化之外的圖像和材料？什麼才是“未來自然”的特徵？什麼東西構成自然世界，以及什麼才是科技與世界困擾的關聯？所有這些問題的指向與其他人文觀念 (other texts) 的方向一致，儘管并未闡明，但能協助我們概括出對力勤創新作品的感受和體驗。

我們的初識是在力勤到蒙特利爾康戈迪亞大學注冊美術教育碩士生時，我立刻被他富有韌性的性格吸引。他來到加拿大一無所有，但卻有中國人特有的敏銳與智力及“能做”(“Can-Do”)的氣質，蓬勃的朝氣和天性的幽默與靈活。顯而易見，他擁有在母國艱難歲月拼搏奮鬥的豐富經歷，他扛着此種精神財富和無形的解脫離開了中國。力勤倔強的性格首次展現於我時，在他下飛機後處理行李箱中，所有衣服和書籍作品被中國墨汁浸毀一事(飛行高空氣壓所至)。個人財產是何等珍貴和無法更替，而力勤則泰然處之。他在此時肯

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The very title of this body of work “Digital Primitive Art” raises questions, because it uses the vexed term “primitive” (See Rubin, 1984) and because the artist uses materials and techniques from the craft work of North America First Nations.

When responding to Li's choice of a title, Western audience members with PC sensibilities need to keep in mind that Li sees himself as a member of an Asian First Nation- one that has been in place for several thousand years- and one that, quite possibly has links with North American First Peoples. Thus, when he applies the term “primitive” to North American First Nations work, he is applying it to his own origins in ancient China as well. Thus, the intention behind the use of this term is that these two cultures are original- foundational, basic to the developments that followed.

Additionally, Li makes the optimistic point that in comparison with the technological marvels to come, the present level of technological accomplishment might well be labeled “primitive”. He tries to stretch the term so that it applies not only to the low-tech aspects of the show, but also to the very high tech elements such as the animation software (Animo) employed to make the images we see.

The question of appropriation is also interesting when posed in the context of this show where traditional imagery and technology are both imported and manipulated by a non-Western artist. Eyebrows might be raised when an artist of European descent (such was the case of the Canadian painter Emily Carr) reproduces images from Native American life, but does one question the legitimacy of a non-western artist “appropriating” Western technology for artistic purposes? The high tech processes and equipment which Li has learned to handle as skillfully as a sable brush and ink, are largely Western inventions, yet it would seem preposterous to speak of appropriation when a non-Westerner uses these tools. It may not have been Li's intention to raise this question, but it is there nevertheless. Western technology was made to be appropriated and spread across the face of the earth. This is not the case with the cultural practices embodied in the more particular technology of stretched skins and bent wooden artifacts that Li includes in his show and that are clearly derivative of Native American culture. Because of their spiritual and religious connotations, unsanctioned appropriation of this material is a much more delicate matter.

What formal features characterize these works? The colors are saturated and deep, the forms tangibly plastic. The images are all at some remove from abstraction, yet, paradoxically, even though the forms are somewhat abstracted their natural textures are easily identified: stone, straw, wood, metal. Li presents us with a richly lit and textured visual universe made up of “sampled” surfaces and forms. In some cases, as in the Burl series, the forms are themselves sampled and set aside for our contemplation. In other cases, there is clearly an attempt to show a central image in the context of a cultural narrative. The images of the King of Earth and the Queen of Fire are derived from Native American imagery but their titles refer back to Taoist inspired alchemy. The work “Digital Horse and Sun” refers to Han dynasty carvings of horses, while the method of display again references the First Nations in terms of its materials and use of stretched skin. In all of this work it is evident that Li strives for unity in spite of the diversity of

定沒聽過英式俗語表達 “Get over it!” ——但他的行動和反應則很類似。他的眼睛盯在更大的目標上，繼續向前走。

作為一位具有悠久移民歷史猶太民族的我，敬佩和認可力勤在適應蒙特利爾生活中顯現的實用性和質樸能量，因我親眼目睹了一位滿懷期望而勤勉的移民故事。加拿大是力勤“充滿機會的大地”，他開始選擇居住在低租金區，街道喧鬧，道路難于駕駛。數月之內，他克服了各種阻力，先後辦理妻兒移民到身邊，并開創一種新的工藝美術商業。在美術碩士學習和研究時，他購買了車輛，并設法在附近城鎮銷售藝術品。對於我，這是一種難得的親身經驗——觀察一位刻苦耐勞的中國人家庭如何及其成功地立足於異國，以至於命運的一切和世界的目光都能投擲於他們。他足跡遍及市、省和國家之間，用他自身方式探索和積累經驗。

毫無疑問，他精通於傳統視覺藝術的觀念和技巧——西方學院派和中國文人筆墨。自身傳統藝術知識和技巧被很好地使用于他的碩士論文之中——論天才兒童畫家王亞妮的現代繪畫（譚1993）。此文在美術教育中是一篇具有開創性論文選，他詳細并專業性分析了王亞妮四歲到九歲每張代表性作品。力勤如同他生命需要更多能量一樣，把他的無窮的朝氣，一拼到底的精神和無限的想象力帶入他精確而詳盡的研究之中。當然，他繼續從事他的繪畫。此階段我深為吸引的是一幅使用傳統中國畫大寫意手法繪制的“加拿大冰球競賽者”（形象從電視中觀察而得），此人物造型有機地匯集了他深沉文化和西方流行的媒介形象，其中也顯示出力勤是一位可塑性強并富有創造性的思想家。他不憂慮“挪用”——也不回避文化和風格形式的混合——儘管他曾經有過，最為重要的是他將自己的理想和信仰建立在當時實際可行的基礎之上。他現立於北美之地，面對嶄新的人生體驗與生活，需掌握科技工具和獲取更多的藝術源泉。他迫不及待。

爭論術語“原始”的使用（參看Rubin, 1984），使“數碼原始藝術系列”作品引出一些問題，因力勤採用的一些材料和工藝是從北美印第安人手中而來。當對力勤的標題選擇作出反應時，帶有PC敏感性的西方觀眾需了解——力勤認為他自己的祖先數千年前是亞洲先民之一，并與北美先民有着血統和文化的聯姻。為之，當他使用術語“原始”於北美印第安的藝術作品時，他同時理解是對他中華先民藝術起源的稱呼。因此，使用“原始”術語的涵義為：兩種文化都可作為人類最初起源，伴隨着同樣基本發展原則。此外，力勤持有科技樂觀論點并與未來科技奇迹相比，認為今天的高科技也許被明天標為“原始”。他試圖以發展觀來看待此術語，其涵義不僅適應於昔日所展示的低科技，也適用於今天所使用的高科技因素，諸如電腦動畫軟件 (Softimage) 等。

“挪用”也是一個有趣問題再次討論，特別是傳統形象和現代科技非常重要地被非西方藝術家所掌握時。當純歐洲血統人種（例如加拿大畫家Emil.Carr）復制北美印第安人生活形象時，人們就會嚴肅質疑，但是否有人質疑非西方藝術家“挪用”西方技術進行藝術制作的合法性？象使用筆墨一樣，力勤掌握的高科技與設施則絕大部

the materials and references. Although his tools are state-of-the-art (programs, software, computers and animation screens) his aims are very much in the traditional artistic mainstream. Li seeks beauty and the elements and perceptions (and in this sense the "primitives") that constitute the basis for an artistic image. He reverences Nature. And, like the Romantics and the Pre-Raphaelites, Li looks to the works of the artists who went before him - (like the Native Americans, and the artists of the Han dynasty). He hopes that they will give him an inkling as to what the true sources of art might be. This nostalgia for a purer more grounded past and his obvious concern with making a powerful, moving statement identifies Li as an artist who can be assimilated to the Western Romantic tradition.

There is another venerable tradition that Li's work references, that of the medieval alchemist. We see the ways in which Li literally creates life, and brings vitality to inanimate things. Alchemists claimed to use arcane knowledge and secret formulae in order to create magical potions and living beings (homunculi). Li is doing something similar - in a collage-like manner he is able to make creatures that seem to live. Stones and other inanimate things light up, bubble, smoke and melt. The parallel to an alchemist is reinforced when one considers that there could hardly be a better substitute for the wizards books and incantations than the complications and knowledge involved with programming computers. Looking at Li's works bears some resemblance to a walk through an Alchemist's study - filled as it is with mysterious biomorphic forms - and all of them the product of modern alchemy.

Then there is the theme of de-naturalized nature: This notion pervades Li's work. He explores the possibilities for producing images which appear to represent natural objects, but in some cases these natural objects are pure artifice - a tissue made up of mathematical formulae that mimics solid matter. What does it mean that we, the observers are not able to tell the "real" rocks from the artificial ones, or the "real" wood from the artificial? As a child of our times the artist finds it impossible to avoid the questions that hang over the relation of human activity to the natural world. Will we have to re-invent Nature once we are finished destroying it? Did the first peoples live in Edenic harmony with the natural world, or were they as careless and shortsighted as we moderns are - the only difference being that they lacked our powerful tools to destroy the balance? Artists such as Goldsworthy (1990) seek a non-technological, minimalist solution to the relation between humanity and nature, one that frames the natural world, and one that tries to make as little impact as possible on our long-suffering planet. Li's approach is perhaps even more minimalist than Goldsworthy's as Li invents as many natural objects as he uses real ones. And Li's creations are in a sense even more ephemeral than Goldsworthy's - as Li's virtual images are made up of electrical charges only.

What we have then with these works is a materialization of the key traits that characterize their maker. Li is a dynamic poet of light. He seeks big connections, between his own ancient culture and that of the Native People in this hemisphere. Li is a devotee of meticulous discipline, technique and technological progress. He has become familiar with technical skills at the level of the handcraft involved in

份為西方所發明，但顯然荒謬的是沒有人去質疑非西方人使用了此工具。也許，力勤無意提出此嚴肅問題，但它已存在。西方科技的產生被用來“挪用”和傳播了整個地球。這並不是一種文化實踐——象力勤藝術展覽中嘗試較多的綑獸皮技術、彎曲原木工藝，而是由於他們的精神宗教的內涵而清晰派生出的北美印第安人文化一部分，此未經特許的文化資源挪用是一非常敏感微妙的問題。

是什麼樣的嚴肅特性使其作品具有個性？——色彩飽和深沉、外形切實、透明而具有可塑性。主體圖像全部都凝固性地偏離視覺中心，儘管其外形是從自然結構中提煉而來，但石頭、木墩、原木和金屬還是易于辨別。力勤用他創造形體和表層肌理式樣向我們展示了豐富光源和肌理視覺的宇宙世界。例如：在“Burl”系列作品中，物體外形自成品樣并凝固一側引起我們沉思。在另一系列作品中，明顯在嘗試展示出與文化內涵相關聯的代表形體，土國王與火皇後造型源于印第安人，但標題則參照於道教術語。“數碼馬與太陽”中的馬的造型的靈感來自於漢代畫像磚，同時其展示方式則借鑒於印第安人的材料和獸皮綑紮。承上所述，顯而易見，力勤是在努力爭取一種統一的藝術效果，盡管其文化背景資料和創造靈感來源的多樣化。縱然，力勤使用的工具是最新科技（電腦軟件、程序和動畫屏幕），但他所追求的則是傳統藝術的主流意識。力勤在尋求構成藝術形象的基本因素，例如，美元素和悟性（如對“原始”的感覺）。他尊重自然，象十六世紀拉斐爾前派畫家和浪漫畫派一樣，力勤借鑒前人和古人作品（象印第安人藝術和漢代畫像磚），他希望他們能給與啟發和暗示——也許這才是真實藝術的源泉。這種純情的逆向回歸和其鮮明的關注點，以及引發有力運動的概念都可把力勤定義為：能被西方浪漫畫派同化的一位藝術家。

另一令人尊敬的是力勤的藝術借鑒於西方中世紀的煉金術。我們可見力勤怎樣真實地建立新的生命，怎樣把無生氣的物體轉為具有生命力。中世紀方士宣稱可用神秘知識和配方創造出魔藥和生命物（矮人），力勤創作過程則非常相似。在加拿大大學時期，他能象方士採用秘方般地拼貼出新的藝術生命——石頭和其他無生命的物體被亮起來，沸騰并且熔化。方士們不得不平行比較，特別是當某人認為使用電腦複雜程序是巫術和咒語最佳替代品時。力勤的作品帶有明顯的方士的研究步驟——通過使用神秘生物形式來裝滿其全部現代的煉金術產品。

其次是非自然性的自然主體，此觀念遍及力勤的藝術。他探索了以一種虛擬的物體來代替真實自然的可能性。但在某種情況中，這些自然物體是純粹人造的一種無可非議的數學方程式組合問題。此觀念的涵義為：我們欣賞者無法區別自然和虛擬岩石，或者不能分別真實和數碼原木。在我們孩童時代的藝術家都無法回避能否轉換人類和自然關係問題，一旦我們摧毀自然是否可重造之？第一位生活於伊甸園的人類是否與自然協調，或者他們象我們一樣也粗心大意、目光短淺——而唯一不同的他們并無強大工具摧毀之？諸如藝術家Goldsworthy(1990)尋求非技術，最低生活方式來協調人類與自然的關係。一個在虛擬自然世界，一個在嘗試對長期破壞地球盡可能不給予影響。力勤的嘗試可能比Goldsworthy對地球的要求更低，因為

brush painting and at the level of technical wizardry capable of creating moving rocks and branches that can grow hair. He has approached this project of his with the sort of courage and energy that characterized that first long step to the Brave New World of North America. And, as he has the character of a creative and enquiring artist, it is not surprising that his work, in addition to presenting its viewers with a rich feast of light, colour and movement, also forces the viewer to consider some of the questions that human beings have to answer for themselves: And these questions run the gamut from, How long will Nature as we know her survive? To, What do we lose when we turn our backs on the origins of our own cultures? And, What might be the subterranean connections between the aboriginal peoples in the West and those in the East?

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他創造了許多自然虛擬物體來代替真實的。相對而言，力勤的創造物甚至會比Goldworthy的短暫——因其虛擬形象是電子控制之。

最後，我們需對力勤藝術的關鍵特徵具體闡述之，力勤是一個光式動態詩人。他在尋求自己先古文化和另半球的本土原居民之間的關聯。力勤是一位嚴于律己，深奧技術和科研進展的獻身者。如同他使用中國畫筆墨一樣，他已熟練掌握了現代科技。同時他已達到巫師技術水準，能使制造的岩石、樹木長出毛發。以其驚人的能量和勇氣，他已接近自己目標——成為第一位長步跨入英勇的北美新世界的人。同時，作為一位具有創造和追求個性的藝術家，不僅祇是使他的藝術感人，更重要的是能提供欣賞者豐富多彩，賞心悅目的光和顏色及動態，進一步促使大家嚴肅地考慮人類必須自己回答的問題。從：以自然全部生命而言，我們知道的自然還能生存多久？到：當我們反歸自己的原文化根源時，什麼東西已丟失？和：什麼是東西方土著居民之間可能而未知的聯系？

二零零五年十二月

BurlHairBody, Draft Sketches; 樹結人體, 素描草稿, 2005

