

Beyond the Two Poles of Chinese & Western Art

— Tan's Primitive-Digital Art

跨越两极, 兼并中西——谭力勤的原始数码艺术

As early as 23 years ago, during the 1985 Art Movement, Tan had already expressed a young artist's longing for the future in *A Characterization of Future Chinese Art Concepts* published in *The Trend of Art Thought*. This article was profound and filled with enthusiasm, in which he took "futurity" as the primary goal for Chinese art reform, emphasizing that the "future leads the present."

Beyond Two Poles

Chinese artists who transplant to North America are vulnerable to descending into isolated and narrow corners over the course of their career, but Tan is an exception. He is the kind of unruly character who has found a virgin-land that flourishes between the primitive and the future – a niche that defines a new genre of art.

This new genre of art has become known as "Primitive-Digital Art;" it integrates three-dimensional digital animations and prints with installations. Primitive and Digital, while technically two opposing subjects in terms of chronological time, resemble instances of virtual reality; they two constitute a self-contradictory phrase. On one hand, it manifests the existence of Chinese artists residing in America, while on the other hand it reveals the status of artists as they encounter the permeable global markets. Primitive art is formed through history while digital art exists in a virtual realm. The former is real and stagnant while the latter is unreal and mercurial. In the virtual realm, digital art provides audiences with scenes that may never have been experienced in physical life; such art extends the effective quality of time and heightens the quality of life in ways that make our previous existent — as physical man — seem monotonous, shallow, naive, and ultimately primitive.

For artistic creation, digital technique is like primitive drawing technique; they both serve as the carrier of illusion and inspiration. The tools of traditional Chinese painting are brush, ink, silk and paper; the chosen tools for installation art

consist of material objects; that of performance art are musicians & thespians; image art uses shades and shadows. The delivery of futuristic art will be one of stimulating biological waves in the audiences' cerebral cortex. It is not possible for all the carriers to copy reality intact. Instead, they may capture falsely based on imagination. All these false truths may still be able to move others or oneself as art's message systematically drifts to inanities through vicissitudes.

In his works, Tan has adopted hide, hair, root, lava and cast iron and made them correspond to relevant and symbolic themes. Digital King & Queen, of the rawhide series, comments on historical scenes of solemn burlesques. The series of lava extol the possibilities amongst and fragilities alongside life. Root carvings reveal regrets of life and the series of rusted iron look like sighings about the transience of life. Tan said that his digital primitive art is an open structure because it will settle itself down as a new tradition, become out-of-date and a primitive art in the eyes of later generations with upcoming vanguard art always taking the lead. The primitive digital installation created by Tan has walked into the frontier of this field formally, and has calmly seen the potential of such conceptual form.

As early as 23 years ago, during the 1985 Art Movement, Tan had already expressed a young artist's longing for the future in *A Future Vision of China's Art*, published in *The Trend of Art Thought*. This article was profound and filled with enthusiasm, in which he took "futurity" as

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the primary goal for Chinese art reform, emphasizing that the "future leads the present." This not only shows his brightness and vision, but also subsequently predicts his later artistic orientation and development. Geographically, Tan is from Hunan Province and grew up as an artist emerged in a society that was on the verge of culture even when compared with that of Beijing and/or Shanghai. During China's immediate century of modern development, Hunan is recognized as home to a string of figures and groups that affected China's modern art movement. Such regional traditions that are leading the fashion are vividly embodied by Tan — He looks between the unchanging prime and the ever-changing future for a joint cradle where Chinese artist can go home.

Merging Chinese & Western Art

Tan's digital art does not reverberate within the cutting-edge technical circles and those within Chinese art circle have yet to embrace such digital art workshops. That is, during his previous two return trips to China, Tan has encountered few other digital artists embraced in such primitive digital discovery. Academic art and digital art have always been regarded as two unrelated fields, sprawled out in the plastic art fields of China. Domestically, handcrafted academism still plays a role as the natural enemy of digital art. Admittedly, Tan is not the go-between of the two, but his efforts attempt to demonstrate that the traditional and futuristic can coexist on the same plane — that China and the West can jointly appear on a new art platform. Tan brings people into a strange art realm which he fabricates and asks us to explore. It mobilizes experiences of sense, covering both Chinese delights and Western interests.

The sentiment of modern western art is inclined to pursue sound-picture effects of sensual stimulation, which is not consistent with the gentle style of traditional Chinese art. Digital art is young, so are its engagers and receptors. As a whole, this generation has not encountered great frustrations; lacks life experience that is full of twists and turns; and aspires for gaining mental experience that is full of ups and downs in the virtual world. The related arts always go after freshness, bizarreness, accident and stimulation featuring exaggeration, expansion, variation and distortion. For more than one hundred years, such new art forms as photographs and movies were born successively showing similar characteristics in their early stages to attract attention. Tan retained the styles that are loved by youth when creating digital imagery. The digital art led by America at the cross-century

表达, 也会随着时过境迁而落入俗套。

在谭力勤的作品中, 他采用前人和古人采用过的兽皮、毛发、树根、熔岩、铸铁等材料, 让这些材料对应相关的、具有象征意味的题材。兽皮系列中的数码国王、数码女皇, 似乎在评议历史上一幕幕庄严的滑稽剧; 熔岩系列似乎在诉说人生的偶然与脆弱; 根雕系列似乎在刻画人生的缺憾; 锈铁系列似乎在感叹人生的短暂。谭力勤表示, 他的数码原始艺术是一个开放的结构, 因为它自身会沉淀为新的传统, 会过时, 会变成后人眼中的原始艺术, 而不会是永远领跑的先锋艺术。谭力勤创作的原始数码装置, 在形式上走在了这个领域的前沿, 在观念上又冷静地看到了这个形态的局限。

早在二十三年前, 也就是“八五美术新潮”发生的那一年, 他就在他写的《中国艺术观念的未来特征》一文中, 表达出一个年轻艺术家对未来的向往。在这篇算不上深入深刻但却洋溢着激情的文章中, 他把“未来性”作为中国艺术观念变革的首要目标, 强调“未来引导现在”。这既体现出他的敏锐和先见之明, 也顺理成章地预示了他后来的艺术取向。谭力勤是湖南人, 相对于京沪, 湖南只能算是文化的边缘地区。不过激荡了近百年的中国现代文明, 湖南始终是个不断出现人物和制造兴奋点的地方。我们可以列举一串影响中国的人物与群体来加以论证。这种开风气之先的地区传统, 在谭力勤的身上得到了鲜明体现。谭力勤在不变的原始和变化无穷的未来之间寻找, 寻找一个华人艺术家倾心的接点。这是一个怎样的接点呢?

兼并中西

尽管谭力勤的技术使用还不算国际新媒体技术的顶尖水平, 尽管中国美术界还没有沦为自我封闭的专业作坊, 但谭力勤重返中国的两年间, 仍然很少见到与之对话的艺术家。他不知道中国艺坛究竟有多少同路人, 他们又在哪里? 在中国造型艺术领域, 学院派美术同数码艺术一直被视为两个不大相干的门类, 学院派的手工作风依旧在扮演数码虚拟艺术的天敌。谭力勤固然不是撮合双方的使者, 但他的工作却在努力证明, 传统与未来、中国与西方, 能够在新的艺术平台上携手出场。谭力勤把人们带进了陌生的艺术境界, 由他自己虚拟的、不曾有过的境界, 又能调动人们的感官经验, 包括中国趣味与西方情调。

跨越两极

长期客居北美的中国画家, 大都消失在狭小的个人空间, 谭力勤属于例外。他如同囊中之锥, 只要存在, 就会脱颖而出。他是那种不安分守己的人物, 向往现实中不存在的境界。这注定了他会脱离现实, 寻找自己的舞台, 他找到的是原始与未来之间的一片处女地, 一种新式的艺术。

谭力勤的新式艺术号称“原始数码艺术”, 把三维数码动画同装置艺术加以拼合。原始加数码, 两个在生成时间上前后对立的对象, 同“虚拟现实”这个词一样, 构成自相矛盾的措词, 体现出一位生活在美国的中国艺术家的生存逻辑, 也揭示出开放世界当前面临的生存状态。原始艺术是历史形成的形态, 数码艺术是虚拟的存在。前者是实在的、停滞的、自然生发的, 后者是虚幻的、多变的、因人而异的。在数码世界中, 虚拟空间、虚拟艺术、虚拟现实能使人面临人生永远也不可能真实体验的对象与情景, 延长人生的有效时间, 提高生命的质量, 使得以往人类的生存状态变得单调、浅陋、幼稚、原始。

对于艺术创作, 数码技术同原始绘画技术的本质一样, 都是幻想与灵感的载体。国画的载体是笔墨绢纸, 装置艺术的载体是实物, 行为艺术的载体是活人, 影像艺术的载体是光影, 未来艺术的载体将会是大脑皮层的生物波。这一切载体都不可能原封不动地复制现实, 只能是外在于人或内在于心的假象。这些能够真切打动别人或自我的假象, 都能自成系统地加以



Head Sketches, 构思草稿
(2.5" x 3" 6.5 cm x 8 cm), 2009-10

occasion integrated graphics, text, image, sound and interaction, promoted POP, tiled pictures, sound-picture synchronization, time and space crisscrossing in movie language, and thus expanded traditional sound-picture art language. As new technologies constantly emerge, it makes designs of visual reality possible. Moreover, Tan's work, if compared to his imagination, is only touching on the tip of such an iceberg.

A quality that is natural, dexterous and sophisticated is admired in the interest of classical Chinese art. Tan adopts carriers such as root carving, rocks, hide and hair as the substitute for primitive art materials. Such substitutes feature the old, the weak, the sick and the disabled. China has been a society under the reign of the old since ancient times. Officials at different levels in charge of education were called Sanlao (literally meaning three olds). Sanlao at the national level was called Sangong (three councilors of state), namely, Taishi (Grand Tutor), Taifu (Deputy Grand Tutor), and Taibao (Assistant to Grand Tutor) who were tutors of the crown prince. An emperor who ascended the throne would ask for advice from Sangong. In China where the tradition of ancestor worship has been passed down until now, "old" is the embodiment of classics and perfection. Chinese painting and calligraphy pay attention to being laola (skillful but unscrupulous) and admire old artwork and old artists. Chinese painting lays stress on Cun method. The original meaning of Cun refers to wrinkle, which demonstrates the characteristic of old man. The Chinese root carvings and rocks adopted in Tan's work are old and shaky in terms of shaping. Since the Song Dynasty, "wrinkled, thin, leaky and limp" rock shapes have been pursued. "Wrinkled and thin" corresponds to the old and the weak, while "leaky and limp" correspond to the sick and the disabled. *Xuanhe Shipu* recorded sixty-one rocks inscribed by Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty, in which there was a personified stone named Old Man Stone. However, apparently Tan does not make old and deformed root carvings and rockeries to praise, but to sigh over the limit of life instead. In his works, primitive art becomes a stage where digital images are phantasmagoric, resembling the so-called bed overlapped by bed and house built in house by ancient Chinese.

To merge Chinese and the Western arts and go beyond the two poles is a goal that is at the present vanguard of Chinese artists overseas — a destiny they have longed for together. As to this goal, Tan has obtained unequalled achievement in his new art.

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西方当代艺术情调偏重追求感官刺激的声画效果，同中国传统艺术的平和作风不同。数码艺术作为一门年轻的艺术，它的从业者与接受者也是年轻的一代。这代人从总体上还没有遭遇重大挫折，缺乏跌宕起伏的人生经历，渴望在虚拟世界获得大起大落的心理体验，相关的艺术往往追求新鲜、离奇、意外、刺激，带有夸张、膨胀、变异、扭曲的特征。一百多年来先后诞生的摄影和电影等新技术样式，在早期都有过类似的特点，以期引起关注。谭力勤在制作数码影像，也保留了年轻人喜爱的这些作风。跨世纪之际由美国引领的数码艺术，集图、文、影像、声音以及互动于一体，把电影语言中的画中画、多层叠画、声画同步、时空交错加以推进，扩展了传统声画艺术语言。随着新技术的不断出现，它将使任何构思都可能成为视觉现实，因而谭力勤的作品相对于他的想象，只是冰山浮出水面的部分。

中国古典艺术的趣味推崇自然、娴熟、老到的品格。谭力勤采用根雕、假山石和兽皮毛发之类的载体，作为原始艺术的替身。这类替身的特征是老弱病残。中国自古是老人执政的社会，负责教化的各级官员名叫三老。国家级的三老号称三公，即培养皇太子的太师、太傅、太保。帝王即位，首先要向三公请教。在祖先崇拜贯穿古今的中国，“老”是经典与完美的化身。中国书画讲究笔墨老辣，赞赏人书俱老。中国画讲究皴法，皴的本义是皮肤起皱，体现的是老人特征。谭力勤作品采用的中式根雕与假山石，造型老态龙钟。宋代以来，假山造型追求“皱瘦漏透”。皱瘦对应老弱，漏透对应病残。《宣和石谱》记录宋徽宗题名的假山石六十一块，唯有一块拟人石料，取名老人石。不过谭力勤制作苍老残缺的根雕与假山石，显然不是礼赞而是对人生局限的感叹。他的作品，原始艺术成了数码影像变幻不定的舞台，形同中国古人所谓的床上叠床、屋中架屋。

兼并中西，跨越两极，是当今海外华人前卫艺术家共同憧憬的目标。这一目标，在谭力勤的新式艺术中取得了无出其右的成果。

2008年10月於西安
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Opening Speech 开幕式致辞——中华世纪坛谭力勤个展

Dr. Liao Xiangzhong, 廖祥忠博士

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中国传媒大学副校长、动画学院院长

Ladies and gentlemen, and friends:

On behalf of the show co-organizer, Animation School of Communication University of China, I would like to congratulate Prof. Tan on his largest solo digital-art exhibition in China, "Digital-Primitive," which opens today. In the last decade, digital art has swept the global art world, but in this field we do not often see many Chinese faces. Prof. Tan is an outstanding example among the few top Chinese digital artists and educators who hold international reputations.

"Digital-Primitive Art" explores the relationship between the primitive concepts in ancient human civilization and the most cutting-edge technology available. His work is neither obsession nor reactionary towards digital skills — something that is very rare. In his works, we can see a balanced harmony between primitive spirit and modern technology. Also, his work is not just aesthetic, but inspires an audience to think more deeply about human nature.

There exists the collision and fusion of Chinese and Western concepts in Prof. Tan's installation work. His creative ideas contain both the essentials of Chinese art and philosophy and Western technological investigation. The West and East, the original and modern, the technology and art, all cohered in his work seamlessly. Prof. Tan's works provide a model of digital art and education in China.

In addition to being a tenured professor at Rutgers State University, Prof. Tan also served as a visiting professor at our school. The teachers and students from CUC have learned and benefited a lot from him. Our students work "Time Gene" was completed under the guidance of Prof. Tan, and it won second place from SIGGRAPH's Student Animation Competition this summer. Therefore, I would like to on behalf of the Animation School of Communication University of China to express our gratitude to Prof. Tan for his hard work and contributions.

While working with Prof. Tan, I often feel the pull of his artworks' attraction, emanating from his personality and accomplishment. As a Hunanese who works in United States, he possesses both a Chinese-scholar-style modest character and Western-style innovative attitude, and more importantly, retains the spicy personality of Hunan people.

I am honored to be a friend, but also a colleague, to participate in Prof. Tan's solo exhibition opening. I believe that through this exhibition, Prof. Tan's art will impact and affect Chinese art and the animation industry. We are standing together today to witness an important moment of China's digital art development.

Finally, thanks Prof. Tan, curator Mr. Wu Hong, and Mr. Liu Libin for the speech opportunity. Once again, we wish Prof. Tan's solo exhibition "Digital-Primitive" a great success!

女士们，先生们，朋友们：

今天，我非常荣幸，能够在谭力勤先生的动画装置艺术大型个展《数码原始》开幕之际，代表本次活动的协办单位中国传媒大学动画学院，向谭力勤先生表示祝贺。

十多年来，数字媒体艺术的风潮席卷全球艺术界，但在这个领域里，我们不常见到华人的面孔。在少数具有国际声誉和水准的华人数字艺术家和教育家中，谭力勤先生是极为杰出的一位。

谭力勤先生的“数码原始艺术”，探索我们这个时代最前卫的数字技术和人类文明原始观念之间的关系。在这个数字科技无处不在的年代，谭力勤先生思接千载，提出对人类文明的思考。他的作品既不是对数字科技的执迷，也不是对数字科技的叛逆。非常难得的是，在他的作品中，我们可以看到人类文明的原始精神与当代数字技术的完美平衡及和谐。这使谭先生的作品不但极具审美意味，也引发观众对人类精神的思考。

谭力勤先生的作品中，我们也能看到中西艺术的碰撞和交融。他的创作中既有中国传统艺术的韵味，也有对西方数字技术的研究和开拓。西方和东方，原始和现代，技术和艺术，在谭力勤先生的作品里水乳交融。从这一点上来说，谭先生的作品为国内的数字媒体艺术界和教育界，提供了一个再好不过的范本。

谭先生除在美国新泽西罗格斯州立大学任教外，也是中国传媒大学动画学院的兼职研究生导师。在与这位艺术家和教育家共事中，我们的教师和学生，获益良多。由谭力勤先生指导的我校学生作品《时间基因》，在今年夏天的美国SIGGRAPH大会中获得了二等奖。在此，我也想代表中国传媒大学动画学院师生向谭力勤先生为我们的辛勤付出表示感谢。

在和谭力勤先生的交往中，我常常感到，他作品呈现的无穷魅力，确实来自于谭先生的个人素养。作为在美国工作的湖南人，谭先生既有中国文人的谦和气质，也有西方式的开拓和创新精神，更重要的是，保留了湖南人不怕辣的个性。

今天，我非常荣幸能以一个朋友，同时也是以同行的身份，参加谭力勤先生个展的开幕式。相信通过这次展览，谭力勤先生的作品一定会为中国的数字艺术领域，乃至整个中国艺术界、动画界，带来重要的影响。相信我们正在共同见证，飞速发展中的中国数字艺术的又一个重要时刻。

最后，感谢谭力勤先生，感谢策展人吴鸿先生、刘礼宾先生，给我这个表达对本次展览祝贺的机会。

再次祝愿谭力勤先生个展《数码原始》取得圆满成功！