

Visual Archaeology

— Study LiQin Tan’s Digital Art

视觉考古——读谭力勤的数码艺术有感

Tan's unique art forms and creativity, through the use of digital technology in the virtual world, reveal and present forgotten and archived history. This means that the fascination with ancient time and the reflection on rheology constitute Tan's characteristics of conceptual thinking. This feature makes Tan reject contemporary time and space and to adopt it as exceptional creative sources for his artwork. This is a dialectical method used by artists to express their basic attitude towards diverse cultures and perceptions. It is especifcally expressed in Tan's attraction to ancient civilization and centuries-old agricultural development.

Tan has constructed a completely different visual world from today's civilization, with objects of prehistoric and primitive times, wild images full of style, primitive symbols with animal skins and digital rawhide-prints, rough shapes and powerful people modeled with artificial sculpture materials, and the use of multi-materials completed with agricultural implements, such as windmills, grindstones, and scales. Obviously, Tan has raised his art forms and concepts to the level of methodology, which is demonstrated in his solo exhibitions in Beijing. In this sense, Tan looks like an archaeological visual artist — digital technology for him are tools and media with its main role of understanding and expressing ancient civilization. In my personal opinion, Tan's concern for the human spirit spans far beyond technology and science.

If I grasp the main point of Tan's digital art accurately, then the important question for me is: what is Tan's reconstructed motivation on ancient civilization, culture and agriculture? Remember a scholar once said: In the history of human thought, there is always a tendency to deliberately distance the past as the golden age, and to use it for criticizing reality as well as to accept the future. Confucius respected the Zhou Dynasty, Lao longed for a small bag of people, and Marx imagined a primitive communism. All these great thinkers had

similar concerns. Parallel with this is that in the visual arts, in almost every time period, there are respected golden ages of the past. For example, Plato admired the art of ancient Egypt, people in the Renaissance appreciated ancient Greek art, and modern art copied prehistoric and primitive skills. From this perspective, Tan, as a contemporary artist, especially as a post-modern artist with new media practices, has carried on such a great historic tradition.

Another question is: why did Tan inherit such a tradition of considering the past as the golden age? My guess is that even though he lives in Canada and the United States, he still has maintained (from 85 New Art Trend) a movement in which he was actively involved in China: idealistic, philosophical and historical. A revolutionary passion, wild aesthetic interests, suspicion and questioning are all parts of the critical spirit—the continuous questioning of ancient Chinese culture and reflection. This guess comes from two examples: First, just like Duan Lian and other critics pointed out, after Tan moved to North America, he has had strong interests in Native Indian civilization with effects in his art since. This also reminds me of the emerging “Roots Seeking” trend in the mid-eighties of the last century in China, in pursuing hot roots in Chinese culture itself. An African-American

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writer Alex Harry wrote a novel “root”, then adapted it for a television series, which has powerfully impacted the cultural roots movement in the “85 New Art Movement” period. Second, Tan utilized four treasured tools of Chinese art for new installation materials and elements to create a famous installation work “Zen”, which represented Tan's thoughts on Chinese cultural roots in the “85 New Art Movement” period.

May be I am misinterpreting Tan's art. At times, I may be obscuring his contributions to new media art. But I think no matter in what medium the artist applies, it still moves us to the power of the spirit ultimately. Tan's primitive art, especially his “visual archeology” through digital skills, still holds profound significance in today's globalization — it is to go beyond national and regional cultural traditions to question and reflect on universal “raw roots” of human culture and human nature. In fact, the digital installation titled “Refraction Brain Therapy” in the Songzhuang Art Museum, encompasses years of Tan's insightful reflection on the issue and is the result of years of constant experimentation on animation installation. The difference between his past work and current exhibition is that the latter focuses on the methodological process of visual archaeology to “brainwashing.” His artistic approach is to dip large digital, metal-printed products into water tanks directly, allowing the refraction of light through the water to render a kind of medical therapy in the digital brain, through audience participation and interaction. Although Tan borrowed from medical terminology, and compared the refraction of water and the brainwashing technique to physical therapy, it is clear that Tan is more concerned about brainwashing in the ideological sense. This is undoubtedly a new way to visualize the phenomenon of the control exercised by the ruling class and the behavior of unifying human thoughts in our society. In fact, visual performance on this phenomenon is also exposed in Tan's other animation clip “Black Sun and Red.” My point of view is that, when humans actually move toward (so-called) democracy and freedom, perhaps Tan's “Refractive Brain Therapy” is no longer about mind control and brainwashing, but only about modern technology and academic (such as medical) tasks.

Beijing Wangjing Garden, June, 2010
(Published at *World Art*, v094, p82-83)

表明思想家把遥远的过去视为黄金时代的事实。与此相平行的是在视觉艺术领域，几乎每一个时代，也都有自己过去的黄金时代：柏拉图对古埃及艺术的推崇，文艺复兴时代对古希腊艺术的敬仰，现代主义艺术中的原始主义对史前和原始艺术的追摹等。从这一角度看，谭力勤作为当代艺术，特别是后现代艺术中的新媒体的实践者，无疑也继承了这一视遥远的过去为黄金时代的伟大传统。

另一个让我思考的问题是，谭力勤为什么会承续视遥远的过去为黄金时代的艺术观念？我的猜想是他去了加拿大和美国之后，仍然一直保持着他曾积极参与过的“八五美术新潮”的精神：理想主义，哲学和历史的深度，革命的激情，野性的美学趣味，怀疑和质疑一切的批判精神，以及对中国古代文化的持续追问和反思。我的这一猜想来自两个例子：一是正像段炼等批评家指出的那样，去了美国之后的谭力勤，对印第安文明产生了浓厚兴趣，并直接影响了他的艺术创作。这使我想起中国上世纪80年代中期出现的“寻根热”，而谭力勤则通过对印第安文明的追摹，对中国的寻根热本身进行了寻根，这是因为美国黑人作家阿历克斯·哈利创作的《根》，以及改编的电视剧，曾经影响了“八五美术新潮”时期的文化寻根。二是在“八五美术新潮”期间，谭力勤用中国传统文化中的文房四宝作为现成品，创作过一件装置作品《宗》，显示了谭力勤对中国文化之根的思考。

也许我这样理解和认识谭力勤现在创作的艺术是一种误读，甚至在一定程度上会被认为遮蔽了他在新媒体艺术方面所作出的艺术贡献。但我认为，无论艺术家使用何种媒介，最终感动我们的仍然是其精神的力量，而谭力勤艺术中的“原始”和“古意”，特别是他用数码技术所进行的“视觉考古”，其深刻意义仍在于在全球化的今天，它以超越民族和地域文化传统的立场，进一步追问和反省人类所共有的文化之根和人性中原始本真的问题。事实上，这次在宋庄美术馆举办的以《折射洗脑》为题的数码装置艺术，就是谭力勤多年以来对这一问题深刻反思，对数码艺术予以反复实验的结果。而此次展览的作品与他过去作品的区别则体现在对“洗脑”进行的视觉考古上。他采用的艺术方式是把印制品直接浸置入水体中，通过水中光的折射来呈现数码印制大脑的疗变，其中数码动画装置作品则体现大脑锈变过程和镜子反射效应。尽管谭力勤用医学术语，把折射、水疗洗脑看成是一种理疗术，但很显然，谭力勤更为关注的是洗脑在意识形态方面的意义，这无疑从一个新的角度把一个统治阶级控制和统一人类的思想和行为的现象视觉化了。其实，关于这一现象的视觉表现也体现在谭力勤的另一件动画作品《黑日红色》之中。从我的角度看，当人类日益走向所谓民主和自由之时，也许正如谭力勤的《折射洗脑》所警示我们的那样，洗脑已不再采用思想控制头脑的方法，而是现代技术和学术（如医学）的任务。

2010年6月于北京望京花园
(发表于《世界艺术》2010年总94期 82-83页)