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Images in Between: My Artistic Research and Practice

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Abstract

Using images as an entrance, through the historical track of Eastern and Western art, reveals the meaning of “in-between” in contemporary art forms. Using the perspective of Chinese philosophy, we analyze the role of “borrowing and transformation” in contemporary art, emphasizing the importance of the generating state of “likeness and unlikeness” and the changing relationship between one object and other objects. If contemporary art is seeking the maximum expression of the image, then the relationship between one image and the other is the means to reach the maximization of the image. In the past, we have used images in isolation for expression; when the images are expressed as relationships, they would achieve maximum expressive power. In a word, this paper explores the possibilities of expression between images with my personal contemporary art practice!

Key Words

Separation, abstraction, drift, grasp of the void

The title “Images in Between” indicates a relationship in objects with moving, transmuting, and flowing motion. Under this relationship, the image is in a flexible state of openness. The problem is illustrated by analyzing the following cases.

Two cups: The first cup (Figure 1) is a separate cup with a closed, isolated, and single image.

The second cup (Figure 2) is open or that is to say “in-between” cup with an opened loop, but a straight line at the bottom.

Therefore, the second cup can be interpreted in this way: the upper half of the image represents a cup itself placed on the table. The lower half of the image is “the connection between the cup and the table”. If the cup itself is isolated with lines in a closed loop, it will not work. It has to be opened, then the result is unfolded with an “in-between image”. What is this “in-between” mean? It is a relationship between the table and the cup present as the coexisting of two objects within the line (Figure 3).

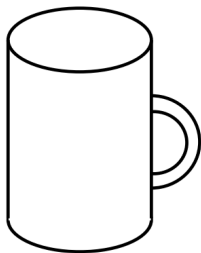


Figure 1. Cup image I .

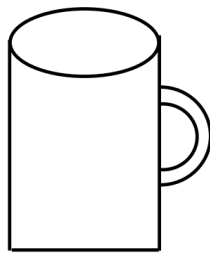


Figure 2. Cup image II .

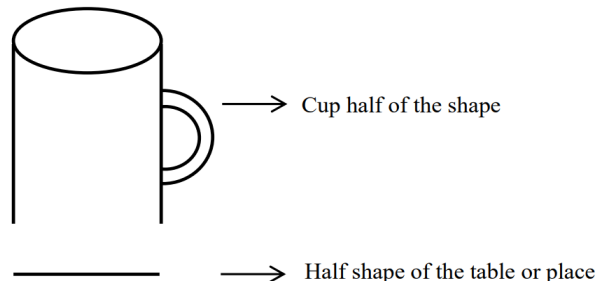


Figure 3. Cup image III .

In other words, one object (the cup) is not a solitary existence. It is linked to another object (the table). Therefore, when the Chinese recognize a thing, they tend to perceive other related existences connected with the thing, and then it can be confirmed and identified.

Zhuangzi's *Qi Wu Lun* (On Seeing things as equal) initialized a cognitive method with associated uniformity of the mind. If the Chinese come to comprehend the cup, the line is also the table representing a connection between the table and the cup. It is a coexisting relationship between the two.

The work *Phase-mother Earth* (Figure 4) from Japanese "Mono-ha" by the artist Nobuo Sekine, is composed of a cylindrical hole dug in the ground, and the soil dug up was heaped in the same shape.

Assuming that the artist created his artwork in a unique state, he only focuses on digging a pit, which is his work. In the context of the Western dualism art concept, the previous state of artistic creation only targets the uniqueness. Whether it is a sculpture or painting on the shelf, the ultimate goal is to accomplish a thing, just like the behavior of digging a pit in the ground, to consider a single and isolated state. The openness of Nobuo Sekine's work is that he makes a sculpture of the excavated earth and the pit left behind together.

The "Soil" and the "Pit" are associated with each other, forming into be a self-consistent and associated uniformity between the two objects to be "paint once", which is the "paint once theory" of Chinese culture. It is the single uniformity that contains multi-beings. So, if we perceive things in this way, we will understand the core of Sekine's work, and the interrelation between Japanese "Mono-ha" art and minimalism art in the West. "Minimalism", a paradigm of image theory reflecting Western analytical thinking, will be discussed later.

Regarding the "in-between", actually, we apply flowing theory in all aspects. When we view the duck and rabbit game, sometimes we would tend to identify a duck image on the left, and imagine the right side as a rabbit occasionally. The Chinese people consider it as "between similarity and dissimilarity", and it is the essential spirit of "in-between". The picture below illustrates the meaning of it.

"妙" in Chinese between similarity and dissimilarity, is a relationship among images. Why should it be in the middle of similarity and dissimilarity? A Duck or a rabbit? To grasp the openness of images is important, so that the consciousness will be enriched afterward. Once a duck is also a rabbit, "in-between" is generated emerges. It is comprehensive and flourishing, but not simply. In a contrast, before the twentieth century, isolation of object-image was the only pursuit of the West, so that the



Figure 4. Nobuo Sekine. *Phase-Mother Earth*. Japan, 1968.



Figure 5. *Lady Bird Johnson*. Photograph.



Figure 6. Photograph.

Minimalist art was generated.

Let's review some cases in daily life:

In the picture (Figure 5), it is hard to tell whether the head belongs to the woman to the left or the one to the

right. The two become one in the state of “you in me and me in you”.

The photo (Figure 6) was taken by accident, is a smiling face composed of three birds in the sky just in the right position to accomplish it. According to the “Convergence” of objects, if the “lucky moment”



Figure 7. Drawing.

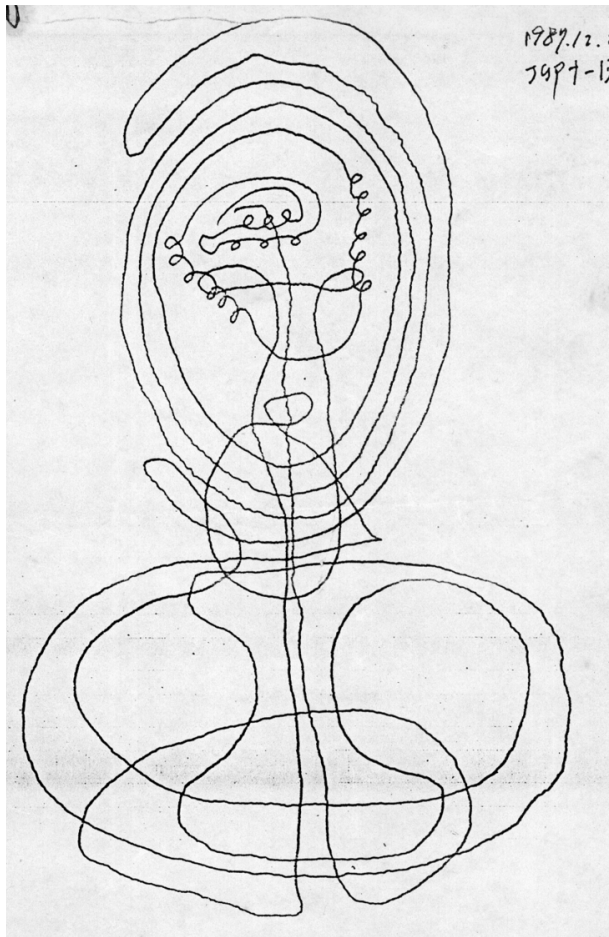


Figure 8. Anonymity. Drawing. China, 1989.

had been not fulfilled, and then the interesting icon of a smiling face would not emerge, and as a result, the meaning would not be delivered. Everything happened and consisted in the appropriate moments, and accordingly the image generated naturally and luckily. Thus the emergence is formed. In fact, it is a relationship, the relationship between images and events in daily life, which can be called “生意”¹ and “创意”².

The concepts are formed during my continuous thinking and exploration, which are the basic difference between “抽象”³ and “控象”⁴ in Chinese. It is generally believed that people in the West used to apply abstract method in art processing; on the contrary, the Chinese uses the imaginary. However, I think it is more appropriate to use the word “控象” instead to describe this unique Chinese way of comprehension, but why?

The character “抽”⁵ means “control” from Chinese etymology, in which the left part of the character is represent a hand. So controlling indicates the process of taking things away from the subject gradually, and the object will be drained off after this, which is the concept of “抽象”. On the other hand, the Chinese character “控”⁶ is composed of the left and right parts. From the Chinese hieroglyph point of view, the left part represents the hand, and the right part is an individual character that means emptiness. The two parts of the character-forming together imply the fact, which is utilizing the hand to control the void. Using the hand to control emptiness, ultimately getting nothing, but the hand does everything in the process of controlling the void. For the question of “抽” and “控”, please read my other article “what you see is not what you see”.

The Western modernist art has completed a result of western abstraction from artists Cezanne, and Picasso, to Malavic, so the first cup (Figure 1) from an abstract perspective of view, is a completely separate image. Establishing an image with “separation” would result in pause and inconsistency. If it is a continual loop cycle, it would not be isolated but unified.

Picasso’s Cubism attempts to achieve the unity in two-dimension space, such as the front and side faces of character presenting together in one plane at the same time. It is a continuous and unified method that the West is willing to achieve, a method that entails hard spelling, resulting in an inorganic method of assembling interstitial images.

The composition of the image (Figure 7) is fundamentally different from Picasso’s mosaic and splicing artistic method: the mouth and nose of the character in the image exist in both front and side view at the same time to consist the entire portray. Actually, the nose is not composed according to the subject’s point of view, but is totally drifted and decentralized, which is like



Figure 9. Anonymity. *Crouching Tiger Stone Carving*. 200 cm long, 84 cm wide. The tomb of Huo Qubing in the Western Han Dynasty. Collected by Maoling Museum.

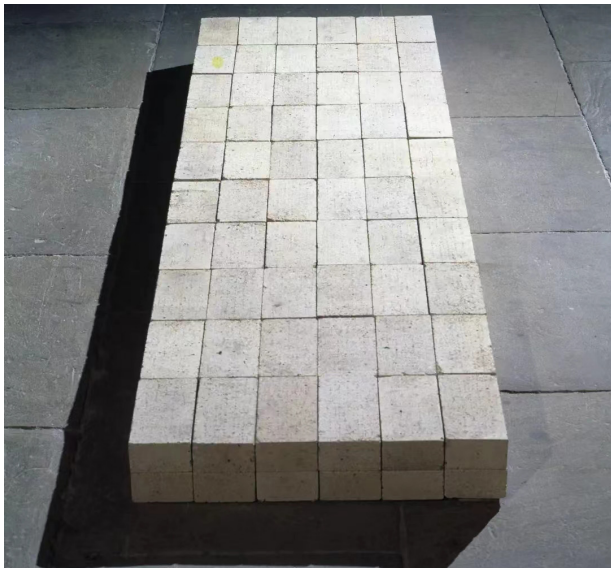


Figure 10. Carl Andre. *Equivalent VIII*. The United States. 1966.

the cognition of traditional Chinese medicine. It is believed the heart in our body is not in the physical position, but located in an uncertain position according to our senses.

This drawing (Figure 8) is one of the paintings by a person who was engaged in Qigong practice. I remember it was in the 1980s when I interacted with him (Qigong is very popular in the 1980s in China). I asked him how those paintings had been drawn, but he said he didn't know how, and what he did know was that after practicing Qigong the painting has been automatically finished either. If we analyze those interesting paintings, we would realize that it is intersubjective and decentralized, shifting away from the subject. The method is really important, that is, drawing the center with no center.

I saw a Westerner who wrote a Chinese character, and

he did not write this word in the order of a Chinese character's stroke. Instead, he started so freely from a random stroke to finish the character out of conventional order. It inspires me that it is the essential way of generating images, and the Westerner who saw the figure of the character is an object itself. When we write the characters according to the regular order of strokes, we are under the control of a certain ideology, which is the source of centralization.

This painting requires us to carefully interpret: drawing the nose is actually accomplished by finishing the foot. It is similar to the traditional Chinese medicine method. If you want to cure a disease, you have to do it in the order from foot to head. The facial features he painted are staggered. Drawing the head is also painting the eyes; whereas painting the eyes is also drawing the feet, and then coming back to the eyes again. The kind of free-forming graphic constitutes the scattering structure of the image, which is "in-between". It only appears when the mind stays in the psychedelic and unconscious state which surpassed the body to transcend centralization and uniqueness, which is also called Western Logocentrism.

Let us see the ancient Greek sculpture *Venus de Milo*. The Western want to make a sculpture, so as to start to chisel a rock. The original shape of the stone has its unique feature which may look like something else, but the characteristic of Venus is the goal to achieve. So how to handle those processes? The western method is to knock off everything useless and left the usefulness that can reflect as the feature of Venus. As a result, an isolated and precise Venus appears.

But the Chinese method is to polish the desired features in according to the original form of the stone, preserving the simultaneous existence of the stone and the newly polished image on the basis of the original stone. This constitutes an "in-between" approach. It is quite obviously observed that the carving stone of Huo Qubing's tomb reflects this feature (Figure 9).

The West is the one that has taken away all the original features of the stone, and the "in-between" is gone, and then it becomes an isolated image. Therefore, the West necessarily generates Minimalism. Minimalism isolates all the features of images, turning to a single, isolated man-made stone block (Figure 10). The Chinese method is to merge this stone with the original features so that the image of the *Crouching Tiger* and the original features of the stone coexist. This is how the Chinese way of leaving white space or blank space in the painting reacts in sculpture. So, leaving blank space in China represents another image that is not white and empty. The white space that we see would be imagined as a cloud, an image, or some hidden object; while the

white space is left, another image of the subject does not disappear but exists. However, the Western oil painting shapes the canvas into the only center, gradually removing that image (the white and the empty) completely and turning it into an occupied image shaped by the painter's subject. This is due to the Western method of analysis (partial, delicate, fragmentary).

The "Minimalism" in the West, a brick or a block, is derived from the flat square of the Russian artist Malevich (Figure 11). With "the Square", the West has constructed all the elements, but needs to be solved at

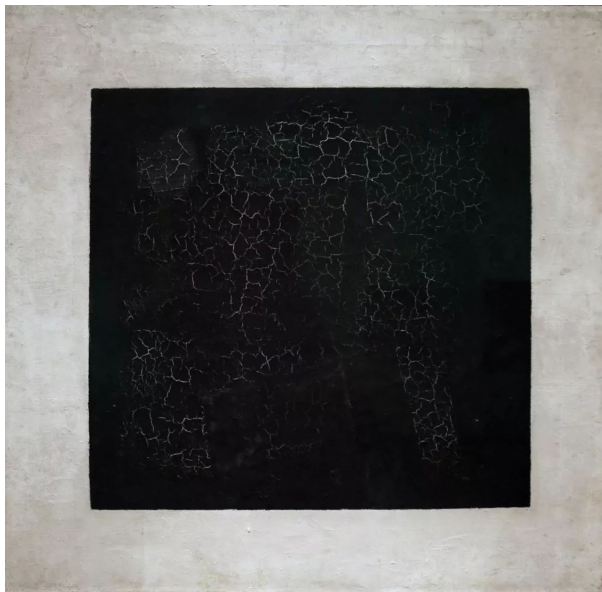


Figure 11. Kazimir Malevich. *Black Square*. Linen oil painting, 79.5×79.5 cm, Russia, 1915. Collection by Winter Palace.



Figure 12. Lee Ufan. *Relatum*. Installation art, copper, rock. 1990. National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan.

last by the Western modernism. In this way, the partial image is completely independent, abstracting a square from an object, or a stone. Western modernism completely makes the image a thing that exists apart from the relationship (as a whole), where "painting is only concerned with painting itself", and "what you see is what you see" eventually to be the zombie of Western abstract art.

In response to the issues of Western modernist art, the Japanese Mono-ha has connected isolated objects to a "relational item" of thinking. For example, Lee Ufan has put the stone on a piece of glass, the glass has been crushed by the gravity of the stone (by natural force), and the stone has undergone an unexpected transformation. The Mono-ha is no longer concerned with the uniqueness of objects, but with the relationship between them—that is a "relational term" resulting from the relationship between objects and images (Figure 12). The importance of the Mono-ha is to restore the connection between objects and images, to release the isolated objects, and to consider how to move forward even to surpass the basic concept of it, which is the cut point for Chinese contemporary art.

Let's take some more examples of design to illustrate the relationship of the images in between: instead of designing a complete product, it was designed to produce only an approximation of a bottle cap (Figure 13). This cap can be combined with the normal water bottle. After drinking, once screwed on, it becomes an alternative tool for watering flowers, at the same time a squirt gun for children to play with. It is to generate an intermediary, to shape an intermediary, is the production of a "relational item".

Why is important to produce this cap? Because empty bottles are everywhere, everyone used Coca-Cola, Master Kong, or Wahaha, who screwed it on the bottle that achieve new function of pouring water, and children can switch it to play with. This is especially critical because it does not need to produce the bottle again, so it is a "relational item" of production, but also the production of the relationship of "images in between", which are not disposable products. This can be derived from the fact that artists and designers cannot fall into the place, in which their designs and creative works entirely under their absolute own control wills, but should add external factors to constitute the production of works together.

We can see that the Heineken bottle is in the shape of a brick, so why does it produce a bottle that is not just a bottle, but a brick? When people finish drinking Heineken, the bottle is left behind and can be used as a brick to build walls and houses in different places around the world. It considers the production of "relational

items”, the two-way extension of a single object, which leads to the circulation and regeneration of the thing, escaping from the destination of “death” as the waste products, to avoid the formation of a central destination in our daily life.

This case also illustrates that the end of the sole object (what we ran out of) becomes garbage (useless object). If it can be avoiding to be the garbage, we have to introduce a new function of the object to convert its energy. The transformation from a wine bottle to a brick is the handover of two functions, thus regenerating it.

This pair of shoes (Figure 14) can be worn on both sides. We encounter trouble caused by the singularity of design in daily life, such as going to the bed and getting out of bed with inconsistent directions of shoe problems, and spending time adjusting the direction of the shoes. This pair of shoes solves the problem of the one-way direction. It is the problem of the “relationship”, the “simultaneous relationship” or the “one side and the other relationship”. That’s why a sentence happens a lot in Chinese daily conversations, we say “it’s all right anyway”. It is only when the relationship between the images is recognized that “anyway” is possible, and “anyway” indicates multiple directions happen at the same time.

There also has such things in nature. Such as Cordyceps sinensis, i.e., worms in winter and grass in summer, it is the conversion of the object between one side and the other, and therefore is endowed with remarkable energy.

The Chinese calligraphic character “山”, meaning

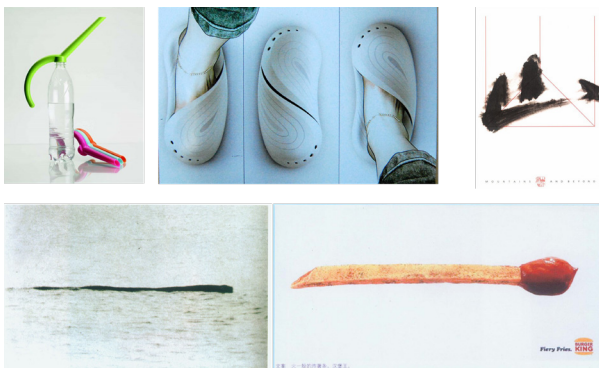


Figure 13. Nicolas Le Moigne. *Verso Diverso*. Design.

Figure 14. Zhang Xun, Li Cheng. *Double-Sides Slippers*. 2008 .

Figure 15. Kan Tai-keung. *Mountains Andbeyond*. Chinese Character’ International Poster Exhibition-Taipei. Kan & Lau Design Consultants.

Figure 16. Image.

Figure 17. Saatchi & Saatchi Singapore. *Fire-like French Fries*. Burger King advertisement.

the mountain (Figure. 15), reflects the complexity and richness of “one stroke with multiple twists and turns”: there is another distant behind the mountain peak, and underneath is water. Although the character for the mountain is written, the actual landscape appears here with water in the blank space, some small islands, and so on. Some folk artists draw a bird with one stroke, and this is the “one stroke painting”, which is “painting” once. However, the West cannot do the “one stroke painting”. The Western oil painting brushes cannot complete this stroke because the method of oil color stacking cannot generate the whole way of imagery painting. The Chinese “one” is seen as a whole, the equivalent of a holographic thing. The Chinese “one stroke painting” is related to the holographic comprehension of things.

“The magic part lies between similarity and dissimilarity”. What is it in the picture (Figure 16): is it a drifting wood? Or a big fish? The image in between will give you a sense of mysticism, and the image of Eastern mysticism is such a “in-between” thing with endless possibilities. From the image of the totem, we can know that the totems of the West are mostly based on the image of strong certainties as an icon— Britain is a lion, Russia is a polar bear, the United States is an eagle, etc., while China is a dragon with nine animals’ mixtures merging as a whole. It is not a real certainty, but a virtual object of various natural objects, which is the image of “in-between”.

This advertisement of Western fast food is also using the concept of confusion: is it a match or a French fry (Figure 17)? The sliding nature of the “in-between” the infinite sliding of the “signifier”, tells you that it is neither this nor that, that there are many possibilities. Therefore, in everyday life, Chinese people often use slang and homo-phonic to warn about things.

I think this object is the classic representative of



Figure 18. Photography.



Figure 19. Ren Jian. *Traces of House Leakage-Series I "Rag" # 04*. 2014.



Figure 20. Ren Jian. *Traces of House Leakage-Series I "Rag" # 07*. 2014.



Figure 21. Ren Jian. *Traces of House Leakage Series II: Wood - Tengger*. 2014.

Chinese styling in the way of creating things, which is Yuanxiao.

The traditional way of shaping a Yuanxiao is to throw a sugar cube (black sesame and sugar) into the middle of a dustpan with glutinous rice flour inside, then to shake the dustpan, and soon the Yuanxiao is done. In fact, this is one of the best ways to “control” the shape. It is never directed at the definite object, without touching the sugar cubes and the flour to form the shape; it is an indirect process of making Yuanxiao, but super-efficient and perfectly wrapped out in shapes. If we follow the Western logical, partial, splicing, and analytical logic, we must use our hands directly touching the sugar cubes and wrapping them by hand, and that is how abstraction does. In China, we do the other way of circulation. When shaking the dustpan, the sugar cubes are always in motion rolling around to shape automatically without touching of hands to control it. It is the Chinese way of “控象” the object.

The Western way of forming an image is: one image must be destroyed or replaced by the other. However, the Chinese way is to generate a new image by combining the two images together—the image of “中”⁷.

The West is a splicing culture, and the East is a brewing culture. We know that we pickled a lot of Chinese sauerkraut in sauce jars, which is called “sauce jar culture” by Bai Yang Taiwan. All these things are formed in this way. What’s more, dumplings are also in all the similarities to this way of generation.



Figure 22. Ren Jian. *Traces of House Leakage Series III: Cloth - Westward Journey*. Oil on canvas, 150×100 cm, 2015.

Preserved egg is the result of a typical sauce-jar generation: such as duck eggs, water, lime. The traditional way is to put them in a jar, adding lime, straw, and water, and then just leaving them there. After a few days, it turns out a whole new image that eggs also can be eaten, so the new image is still a duck egg. No! Then what is it? Is it a creature?

So, the image of the Chinese dragon is a similar theory to the brewing culture. Also, the way of modeling is especially important if we continue to explore, and it will generate our new way of working and prototyping paradigm.

When the Western culture handles an egg, it will be in a cooking way, breaking it, and cutting it following the gesture of drawing a cross, which is a result of the “cross culture”, so Western Christianity chose the cross



Figure 23. Ren Jian. *Traces of House Leakage Series III: Cloth - Demon Movement*. Oil on canvas, 70×80 cm, 2014.



Figure 24. Ren Jian. *Traces of House Leakage Series II: Wood - Taklimakan*. Serratia, Aspergillus Niger, wood, ink, 29×36 cm, 2020.



Figure 25. Ren Jian. *Traces of House Leakage Series II: Wood - Open Source*. Serratia, Aspergillus Niger, wood, ink, 28×20 cm, 2020.

figure—the cross; China uses the “S” pattern, which is a form of brewing culture, a flowable and “in control and out of control” shape. The two patterns represent the different ways of culture.

Around the concept of “控象”, I have made a series of works in practice, named *Traces of House Leakage* series.

Why is it called *Traces of House Leakage*? This example is used in both Chinese painting and calligraphy

to illustrate: water leaking from the corner of a house gradually stains the wall, forming an interesting image of trace (Figure 18). Once the painter happens to see this mark, he may imagine Zhong Kui, a dragon, or some other images in his mind. It is what we often called “seeing a ghost” in our daily experience—seeing a feature of an object that we seldom see under our subject’s consciousness. And the image can bring and unfold extraordinary meanings. In this way, my work was created with the help of something else, the traces of the roof leaking, and the painting process was continually adding my new drawing to the previously inked traces of the roof leak according to my own feelings at the time. Finally, the two images merged together naturally. This method allows the artist to use something else to create the subject, adding directly to the actual image of the “ghost”, and together forming a new image. Each rag here uploads functional data information about my routine working activities, such as wiping the car, wiping the ketchup stains on the table, and wiping the floor. The process of my work (wiping the car, table, and floor) is not painting but doing work, ruining the rag for the cleanliness of the car, table, and floor. If the rag had been thrown away then it becomes garbage, but I have found the stain on the rag was a beautiful landscape painting, which became a work of art after decoration with acrylic framing. Painting is a result of the control of an artist. The artworks generated through my daily work in life are also a way of writing and painting process. This way of painting allows the artist’s subject to interact with the external objects of things, so that the writing and drawing of art are reopened.

Painting is a gesture (painting with a brush), and working with a rag is also a gesture of movement that ketchup has become a kind of painting color. My hand is also gesticulating, and this gesticulation establishes results under the executing function. So the image I get is “its”, not something that my consciousness can even try to control, but something that has nothing to do with me in a completely unconscious state. But the routine work I do is meaningful and functional, which from my perspective of view is also the spirit of West Pop Art trying to achieve. So, I think if there is an art movement here, I call it “Eastern Pop” temporarily, it is by no means that equal to Western Pop in terms of its functional realization which is the daily labor engaging. Andy Warhol, for example, was making an image simple and popular for everyone to enjoy. But the problem is that this act is still an aristocratic one controlled by the artist’s subject. If it is a real act of life, it does not work this way. Life is a general act, such an operation, writing, and drawing is a casual, natural occurrences. Then how to realize it? We need to find the “relationship item”, and

this “relationship item” is: how to form the “rag”? If the rag is the only image, it will become garbage when it is finished, and the garbage will be thrown away. But how can it be resurrected not “die”? It is through a “relational item”: when I use an acrylic and clip it up, it is very much like an ink painting, an image, a pattern that I endow unconsciously through daily work. At this point, it turns from a function of garbage to a function of appreciation, from garbage to a work of art.

The transformation of this relationship makes this only thing not become garbage. It becomes a painting without dying, and this is like the art of “turning stone into gold”, transforming two unrelated objects and making meaning between images. When I was studying the Mono-ha, I thought that such a way was an

advancement, which may be pushed it forward.

By planting trees in the pit of Nobuo Sekine’s work *Phase-mother Earth* and sharing the soil of the sculpture as soil for flower pots, then the work will not end but be re-grown. Bringing function into art is the possibility of recreating the artistic approach.

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ENDNOTES

1. 生意: Generating a new meaning.
2. 创意: Innovation.
3. 抽象: Abstract.
4. 控象: Grasp of the void.

5. 抽: Control.
6. 控: From the Chinese hieroglyph point of view, the left part represents the hand, and the right part is an individual character that

- means emptiness. The two parts of the character-forming together imply the fact, which is utilizing the hand to control the void.
7. 中: In the middle, in-between.

圖像之間——我的藝術研究與實踐

任健

摘要: 以圖像為切入點，通過東西方藝術的歷史軌跡，揭示當代藝術形式中“之間”的意義。運用中國哲學的視域，分析“借力與轉化”在當代藝術中的作用，強調“似與不似”生成狀態的重要性以及物與它物的變化關係。如果當代藝術是在尋求圖像的最大表達，那麼圖像與圖像之間的關係就是解決圖像最大化的手段。以往我們都是在孤立的使用圖像進行表達，當把圖像作為關係來表達時，圖像就會達到最大化的表現力量。最後本文以個人當代藝術創作實踐探索了圖像之間表達的可能性！

關鍵字: 間離；抽象；游離；控象