

Estrangement, Disorientation, Return

The Humanistic Perspective of JianJun An's Drawings

To a large extent, the problem of modern art lies within how it reflects the constant changes of human nature. Through careful analysis of the rigid structures of modern society, the fragmentation and dehumanisation of humans have become not only a societal but also a cultural dilemma. Modern lifestyle often maintains a singular focus towards one aspiration in which the existence and individuality of each person are slowly homogenised. In the artworks of Jianjun An, he observes how and why people distance themselves as well as the unique aestheticisation of everyday life to build and design their return. Going from a humanistic perspective to reflect on reality and the shortcomings of human nature, the thorough investigation and post-explanation of this topic has become the aesthetic aspiration and objective of An's artworks. The distinctive experimental nature of his creative works introduces the topic of appearances, provoking the introspection of each individual and simultaneously revealing the several facets of humans, both visible and hidden.

It could be said that between the philosophy of rationalism and technologism, they both not only determine the fundamentals of the era but also heavily influence the details and flaws of modern aesthetics. According to Heidegger, the reality of modern people being in a state of homelessness is the equivalent of them forgetting their own existence. This is, without a doubt, the societal and cultural symptoms that An wishes to point out. In the inescapable day-to-day reality, humans have gotten farther from being themselves but closer to becoming the one and the same. This is the harsh, unavoidable reality that leaves many lost with nowhere to return to. While it is true that there are many who roam the streets with no house to return to, this sense of "homelessness" does not necessarily point towards the lack of a place to live. More so, it represents the fundamental loss of the existence of a person. At the same time, the observation and artistic portrayal of humans, in general, are always intrinsically associated with the societal, historical, and cultural context.

As the inevitable fate of the world, the state of homelessness has caused humans to lose all that they have ever been. In theory, this state leads to the person in question to distance themselves and lose their sense of direction in life, thus encountering the problem of how they should return to the place they once called home. In An's eyes, the creativity behind art comes from each level of the social hierarchy, through careful observation and experience to thoroughly investigate human nature, as well as understanding the topic of human nature in regards to society and culture. In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche emphasises that what is worth the recognition of human nature simultaneously targets the imperfections and weaknesses of that nature to go

through the scathing remarks of irony and sarcasm. From the image of the artwork, a hint of thoughtfulness and admiration can be detected for the unfavourable situation of humans. With the use of realism, the current state of modern society and the human environment is presented.

The existence and urban life of humans are the words expressed by An's artworks. The characters in the paintings are inseparable from both the environment they survive in and the unique aesthetic appeal of the artist. Different from being intimate, the act of estrangement is not only a foreign feeling but also one of indifference. Humans tend to act as though they are isolated from help and there certainly is no lack of this feeling of estrangement; this is what is often used to describe the relations among the people who live in the cities. People encounter others all the time on the streets but they remain strangers to each other, with faces devoid of expression and an air of indifference. However, fundamentally, the act of estrangement is actually an act of estranging the self. In Rousseau's eyes, estrangement is the denial or even renouncement of their natural instincts. Moreover, this type of estrangement is when a person begins to alienate those around them which becomes a precursor to them losing their self.

During the slow erosion of achievements and inducements, the loss of trust, the dissociation of the mind and the growing interest in physical commodities along with relevant anxieties and a psychological state of horror and unrest are all unavoidable. In the creative artwork of An, both Chinese and Western art techniques, artistic expression, and cultures are deeply intertwined. More accurately said, An's artworks not only contain the distinctive traits of expressionism but also the thorough investigation and explanation of abstractionism. In other words, aside from utilising the separation from a realistic portrayal to focus more on delving into the depths of human nature, An also places the characters in their usual living environment surrounded by the daily difficulties they must face. In particular, the focus on the emotions and complications for each character expressed through art brings about a familiar yet still foreign feeling of estrangement, a feeling so real and genuine that makes the painting come to life.

To observe oneself in a portrait is like finding a side that one has never truly acknowledged. This side is a self that most wish to turn a blind eye to but is actually more of a stranger that has transformed into an appearance. Here, the act of estrangement has led to disorientation yet it is not only the deviation from the correct path. Even more so, it is the inability to find one's self and disappearing into the endless crowd of people, becoming what Heidegger would claim to be the being and *Dasein*. According to Heidegger, *Dasein* is an existence humans struggle to dispose of; A person that can be anyone, anyone but themselves. In the article *Rebellion and Art*, Camus portrays rebellion as a unique trait of the aesthetics of art. Yet, it also hints that everything of rebellious nature is, in truth, preparation for the final return and reestablishment.

All the appearances of a person are representations of another but are also versions of their self, forming a complicated relationship that exists between the two. When all that belongs to them is

cast away into a state of disorientation, the loss of the self is no doubt fundamental. On the other hand, the return of the self is what An's creations urgently wishes to realise. Return is not only one being able to find their way back home but is also being able to find their self again. In this process, both similarities and differences can be found between one person to the next and there is an endless cycle of attempts to separate from a self that is constantly shifting.

To overcome estrangement and disorientation is to turn towards the shifts and evolution of both human and environment. To aid in the return of the self, art discovers and helps makes up the imperfections of human nature. In the book *Masks: The Art of Expressions*, Mack reveals the unique hidden abilities of masks and uses the phrase "take off the mask" to describe those who conceal their wicked intentions or intents to investigate.

While humans still cover themselves with an appearance in daily life, the act itself is not necessarily considered to be dangerous or risky. An's description allows many to realise a paradox: it is as though the appearance has become the self, yet when it is taken off, the self has already become the appearance. According to him, realism endeavours to reveal the unresolved difficult situations of humans, expressionism strives to effectively portray the feelings and emotions of humans, and abstractionism delves into human nature and thoroughly explores its analysis and thought patterns. As such, it can be seen that the realism, expressionism, and abstractionism intertwine and call out to each other in An's works. However, at the same time, An's artistic expression has always adopted traditional methods of inquiry and acceptance as its foundation.

Here, distress, helplessness, and struggling have become a complex people get trapped in all the time and yet, they are still essential components of a desperate attempt to save oneself. Regarding the return of a person's self, An did not get trapped within the confines of homogenisation but has carefully and successfully portrayed the irreplaceable charm of each unique individual. The era of globalisation may perhaps give support to homogenisation but it also provides many more possibilities for the aspirations of the future modern era. In addition, it attempts to build up the tension amidst art, aesthetics, and culture in between consistency and variability. It is through the tension between consistency and variability that the uniqueness of An's paintings is expressed, earning the acknowledgement of many widely accepted artists and cultures.

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