

The Obscurity of Appearances

Written for the art exhibition of Jianjun An

Jianjun An is a traditional man from Northwest China. At an early age of eighteen, he left his birthplace in Gansu, China in pursuit of his dreams as an artist. He travelled from Shandong to Shanxi, then finally made his way to Vancouver, Canada after thirty years of hard work.

During this period of time, An has experienced quite a bit. From a university student struggling to get through life while perfecting his artistic skills to establishing his own business, An continued his journey by immigrating to Canada and experienced over a decade of struggles living on a foreign land. He has done designing, renovation, and construction jobs, opened a restaurant as well as started an art college. He has founded a non-profit art foundation and participated in several public charitable events. Undoubtedly, he has gone through many things, met many people and has succeeded and failed countless times throughout these years. Yet, these experiences of hardship have not robbed him of his identity as an artist. Instead, they have enriched his creativity and enthusiasm, which are clearly visible in his artworks.

Decades of persistence and perseverance have resulted in not only making a living out of what he loves to do but also achieving new heights and creating a name for himself. His artworks have appeared in art exhibitions all over the world, in places such as the United States of America, Italy, France, China, and Canada. However, even with all these accomplishments, An remains a humble man earnestly living his life, carefully assembling together his every thought and feeling into masterpieces of art.

Recently An has begun a new series which will be presented at an art exhibition in Vancouver this year. When I first saw these works, they immediately caught my attention. They were distinct from his works of the past. My understanding of his previous artworks was that they, more or less, contained some obvious traits of Neo-expressionism, leaving behind a deep impression on all of his viewers. His previous artworks have always contained either concrete or abstract elements that originated from his inner thoughts and were expressed in an abstract manner through images. However, these new artworks are diversified in that they are not what they appear to be on the surface, carving out the distinct figures of sixteen diverse characters.

Each character carries a unique purpose and a sense of realism yet while his style and brushwork are clearly present, there is an extreme tilt towards modern absurdism. An used his own perception of the world, his humour, and his artistic talents to shape out the sixteen individualistic Asian immigrants, all contained within their own limited space that is defined by

the frames. There are men and women, each depicting the lives of immigrants who come from different lands and play different roles in society. Each identity and distinctive personality trait is effectively portrayed, the exaggerated nature of each figure hinting at the ridicule that lies beneath all the layers of paint. For those of us who have also experienced living in a foreign land, these figures, regardless of who they are or what they do, all invoke a sense of familiarity as they are all around us and we are perhaps also among them.

What makes one curious is why An purposely painted an incomplete mask in each piece. While they certainly do not feel out of place, when all the pieces are placed together, it is as though an absurd play were being carried out on stage.

The stage is simply a multicultural city with each actor grounded within the four sides of their own frames. The masks play a significant role in this play; perhaps they may even be the running theme. The actors all attempt to make their presence known by acting out what they assume to be the “appearance” of a proper foreigner but where does this “appearance” go as time goes on? It becomes nothing, not a single one of them still has their appearance still present in the end. These masks, these appearances, have no existing value because in consideration of one’s appearance and natural personality, no one is able to hide who they truly are. Furthermore, these masks are incomplete, they are merely an expression, a weak illusion that is sooner or later overwhelmed by reality.

The unspoken agreement over social expectations comes from the advancement of civilisation which in turn comes from the combined efforts of different cultures, each playing its own part. However, the level of acceptance and degree to which these expectations are carried out vary with each individual. On this stage, no matter where one is from, their performance must always be at its best. If this stage were to be compared to the endless bounds of the earth, immigration is merely an act of migration that humans have been doing since old. Humans have had the right to decide where they want to stay in order to pursue their definition of happiness but in this process, conflict is inevitable. From then to now, in the long history of humankind, countless conflicts and wars have occurred because of the right to a piece of land, whether it was between different groups, different nations, different countries or different cultures.

The final battle that comes into play eventually is nothing physical; rather, it is from within, a constant struggle with their individual selves with no relation to where they were born or where they came from. Even today, these struggles continue and who is to say when they will ever end? Many are still held back by the social expectations of this era, continuing to put on a mask, keeping up appearances, because this has become a form of escape, a method for them to forget about the harsh realities they have to eventually face. As time goes on, these types of people will only increase. Only through engaging in introspection do we realise that we naturally lean towards open-minded individuals to which we also wish to reciprocate in the same manner.

I imagine that even when these artworks are displayed, the play continues regardless of where it is, as though they are now on a grand stage with the audience only inches away from the actors. This is a pantomime show with a voice, a combination of several voices, in fact, each telling their own story that echoes in the heads of each member of the audience. Perhaps this is what An was trying to attempt, to reveal the serious contemplation that was put into these works, hidden beneath the layers of ridicule. Maybe this is what he wished to express through these pieces, to share with us what he has experienced, observed, and gained of reality through all that he has gone through in the past. Moreover, this is not only a materialisation of a new series of artworks from An that carries extreme significance in the modern era but also represents a breakthrough for his own style of art.

Yi Liu, April 2018