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On the Void-Reality and Field of Contemporary Oil Painting Language from the Perspective of Chinese Time-Space View

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Abstract: The issue of localization of contemporary oil painting requires a breakthrough in aesthetic ontology. Instead of focusing on formal grafting, this paper combines China's traditional cosmic view of "unity of time and space" to study the contemporary interpretive power and value potential of "vivid charm". Based on this idea, the paper strives to integrate the core ideas of Chinese classical painting theory with specific artistic creation practices, transform them into the ontological language of contemporary oil painting, and connect and integrate the three core concepts of time-space, charm, and void-reality. It also summarizes operable creative approaches such as arranging void to accumulate qi, guiding qi to form momentum, and endowing life to enter the realm, constructing a painting field that can perfectly present the sense of time continuity and life rhythm.

Keywords: Vivid Charm; Time-space View; Oil Painting Language; Void-reality; Field; Contemporary Construction.

1. Time-Space View in Chinese Aesthetics and the Generation of "Charm"

To reconstruct the contemporary value of vivid charm, we must first return to its philosophical origin. For philosophy, time and space are important research objects, as well as important starting points and foundations for exploring all ultimate issues. Sorting out the context of Chinese and Western philosophy, we find that various "metaphysical" reflections are more or less related to time and space issues [1].

Western philosophy regards time and space as the objective framework for the existence of matter, while Chinese philosophy advocates the aesthetic view of time and space featuring "unity of time and space" and "integration of mind and matter". The Five Elements Theory in "Shangshu·Yaodian" put forward the view of "observing phenomena to determine time", corresponding spring, summer, autumn, and winter to east, south, west, and north, which was later combined with the Five Elements category in "Shangshu·Hongfan" to form the cosmological system in "Book of Rites·Monthly Ordinances" [2]. This system emphasizes that time and space do not exist in isolation, but form a dynamic connection through the mutual generation and restriction of the Five Elements—spring corresponds to wood in the east, summer to fire in the south, autumn to metal in the west, winter to water in the north, and earth, as the philosophical symbol of "center", does not correspond to a specific season but is regarded as the center of all time-space points and the hub of public time and space. This thinking integrates time and space, natural laws, and human social order, reflecting the time-space view of "harmony between man and nature".

The dialectical thought of "time and position" in "I Ching" is an important condition for constructing Chinese time-space philosophy. Among them, "time" emphasizes the fluidity and opportunity of time. For example, "I Ching·Gen Gua·Tuan Zhuan" states that "stop when the time comes to stop, act when the time comes to act; if movement and stillness do not deviate from the time, the way will be bright", holding that the success of things depends on grasping the rhythm of time [3]. In contrast, "position" refers to the orderliness and relativity of space, just like the differences in the positions of the six lines in the hexagram, symbolizing the positioning and relationship of different subjects in the universe and society. Further reading "Commentaries on the I Ching", the concept of "timeliness and moderation" proposed therein advocates combining the temporal "time" with the spatial "center", seeking balance and moderation in the dynamic changes of time and space. This thought has invisibly influenced the behavioral norms and value judgments of the Chinese people.

In "Xiao Yao You" (Free and Easy Wandering), Zhuangzi contrasts "great year" and "small year", creating an aesthetic realm of "interdependence of void and reality" through the medium of "perceptual boundaries". As stated in the text: "Small understanding does not reach great understanding; small year does not reach great year. The mushroom of the morning does not know the alternation of day and night; the cicada of the summer does not know the existence of spring and autumn—this is the small year. In the south of Chu, there is a spiritual turtle, which takes five hundred years as a spring and five hundred years as an autumn; in ancient times, there was a great parasol tree, which took eight thousand years as a spring and eight thousand years as an autumn—this is the great year. Peng Zu is now famous for his longevity, and ordinary people compare themselves to him; is this not sad? [4]" The contrast between "great year" and "small year" essentially reflects the collision of "perceptual boundaries", which breaks the fixed cognition of time and space by humans and gives birth to an aesthetic realm of "interweaving of void and reality". From the perspective of "small year" looking at "great year", we will, along with Zhuangzi's words, imagine the wind and frost that the spiritual turtle has experienced in 500 years and the circulation of stars that the great parasol tree has witnessed in 8000 years. Therefore, the "void" time and space become concrete and perceptible through imagination. From the perspective of "great year" looking at "small year", although the spiritual turtle and the great parasol tree can perceive the long time and space, they can also reflect

the vitality of the "small year". In the 500 years of spring and autumn, the "real" time and space become more vivid due to the embellishment of the "small year". The mutual response between the imperceptible time and space and the perceptible life is exactly the embodiment of the traditional Chinese aesthetic of "interdependence of void and reality", making time and space transcend the physical dimension and become a readable aesthetic realm.

The embryonic form of the concept of "charm" can be traced back to the pre-Qin period in China. The germination of this idea is closely related to the philosophical thoughts of the time, and it is also regarded as the origin of all things in the universe and the foundation of life. Laozi put forward that "all things carry the yin and embrace the yang, and the conflicting qi harmonizes them", pointing out that all things are generated by the interaction of yin and yang qi, and "qi" is the most basic constituent element in the universe, containing infinite vitality and motivation for movement and change [5]. Zhuangzi also emphasized that "all under heaven are one qi", further elaborating on the universality and unity of "qi". The birth and death of all things in the world originate from the aggregation and dispersion of "qi" [6]. This understanding of "qi" has laid a profound philosophical foundation for the formation of the concept of "charm".

Following the theoretical accumulation of "qi" in pre-Qin philosophy, Xie He of the Southern Qi Dynasty first put forward the concept of "vivid charm" in "Gu Hua Pin Lu" (The Record of Ancient Paintings), listing it as the primary criterion of the "Six Principles" of painting. This theoretical innovation marks that "vivid charm" has become the core aesthetic standard regulating the creation and appreciation of Chinese painting art [7]. According to Xie He's thought, excellent paintings should not only accurately depict the external form and quality of objects but also convey spirit, highlight their inherent spiritual temperament and life interest, and ultimately achieve the aesthetic effect of vivid charm in the works. When appraising other people's paintings, Xie He took "charm" as the core criterion. In his painting theory, when evaluating Gu Jun's works, he said: "The charm and vitality are not as good as those of the predecessors; the delicacy and precision surpass those of the ancient sages", meaning that the work is inferior to the famous artists of the previous generation in terms of charm and vitality, but highlights its characteristic of surpassing the predecessors in the dimension of delicacy and precision. Since Xie He put forward "vivid charm", this criterion has become the artistic effect pursued by painters of all dynasties, influencing the development context of Chinese painting. Under its influence, Chinese painting has achieved an aesthetic leap from "likeness in form" that focuses on the external depiction of objects to "likeness in spirit" that pursues the expression of inherent spirit, thus promoting later painters to shift their creative focus to the construction and expression of the inherent spiritual connotation and life breath of the works.

"Interdependence of void and reality" is the core mechanism to achieve "vivid charm", whose ideological origin can be traced back to the pre-Qin Taoist theory. Laozi once said: "Hew out doors and windows to make a room; it is because of its emptiness that it is useful", which provides a basis for the artistic practice of "interdependence of void and reality" [8]. In essence, the "function" of the entity can only be established in combination with the "void". In the Chinese artistic discourse system, "reality" specifically refers to the visible images such as forms, colors, and lines formed by brush and ink on paper; "void" corresponds to the blank space, empty scenes, and the deep connotation hidden in the places where the brush is broken but the meaning is connected. It should be noted that "void" is not pure "nothingness", but a real form with tension and vitality, or a key space where qi flows continuously and life breeds and grows. Da Chongguang of the early Qing Dynasty once said in his painting theory work "Hua Quan" (Treatise on Painting): "Void and reality generate each other, and the places without painting all become wonderful realms." This sentence profoundly reveals the core essence of the traditional Chinese time-space view—space gains vitality due to the flow of time and becomes a vivid existence, while time is materialized through the extension of space. It can be seen from this that "time-space view", "charm theory", and "void-reality theory" are fused into an inseparable theoretical whole: "unity of time and space" constitutes the core field for the development of the theory, "vivid charm" is the ultimate aesthetic realm pursued, and "interdependence of void and reality" is the fundamental methodology to achieve this realm.

2. The Implicit Presentation of Time-Space Consciousness in Localized Oil Painting Practice

The construction of theory requires historical verification. All along, the core of Chinese localized oil painting creation lies in breaking through the paradigm of "fixed time and space regulated by linear perspective" in Western oil painting, and naturally integrating the paradigms of traditional Eastern time-space view such as "interdependence of void and reality", "flow of time and space", and "harmony between man and nature" into oil painting creation practice. This implicit presentation is not directly expressed through explicit Eastern symbols, but permeates into the composition logic, brushstroke rhythm, and image selection, making the oil painting medium a carrier of Eastern time-space philosophy.

The composition of traditional Western oil painting follows the principle of "linear perspective", emphasizing the proportional relationship of near large and far small and the visual principle of line convergence, creating a picture order of "single time-space focus" and limiting the viewer's sight to a specific moment. Taking Rembrandt's oil painting "The Night Watch" as an example, the picture takes light as the core focus, and the time-space form presents a "static and closed" visual framework. In the composition logic of Chinese localized oil painting, the "scattered perspective" and "time-space juxtaposition" thinking of traditional Chinese art are implicitly integrated, breaking through the fixed focus and realizing the flow and extension of time and space. It is worth noting that this transformation is not a mechanical application of the external form of "scattered perspective", but the transformation of the essence of the Eastern philosophical thought of "time and space are impermanent" into a visual discourse system that can dominate composition practice.

The time-space extension characteristic contained in "blank space and framing" in Wu Guanzhong's formal aesthetic system, its most touching part, can be regarded as a modern poetic expression of the "empty white" space. In Wu Guanzhong's series of works depicting the water towns in the south of the Yangtze River, the large area of bright white walls in the picture cannot be simply summarized as background elements in the overall picture structure. From the perspective of visual language, the essence of this "blank space" with

white walls as the carrier is the "implicit bearer of time and space": the "reality" of the stone bridge corresponds to the "present time and space", that is, the specific moment visible to the viewer's vision; while the "void" of the blank space corresponds to the "past and future time and space", that is, the historical context accumulated by the water towns in the south of the Yangtze River and the changes of natural laws. Wu Guanzhong once said: "My paintings should be 'the simpler the brushwork, the richer the meaning'", and the "richer the meaning" here is realized through the blank space technique to expand and extend the time-space dimension. The realistic painting of Western oil painting can only present a single time and space, while Wu Guanzhong's "combination of void and reality" makes oil painting carry the Eastern philosophical thought of "infinite time and space", extending the time-space consciousness from within the picture to outside the picture.

In Zao Wou-Ki's abstract paintings, the chaotic time-space images constructed by "color blocks and brushstrokes" have long been sublimated to a broader and deeper philosophical dimension. What he drew from the magnificent momentum of landscapes by famous artists such as Fan Kuan and Guo Xi of the Northern Song Dynasty is not the concrete technical paradigms such as texture strokes and tree-stone depiction, but the cosmic life consciousness of "looking up and down freely, wandering in the profound mystery" contained behind them. What his paintings construct is exactly a chaotic time-space field of "dim and indistinct, yet with images within", such as his work "Invisible Earth", where colors and light and shadow blend, surge, and pervade, like the origin and annihilation of nebulae, implicitly conforming to the laws of cosmic operation. In the picture, there are no recognizable objects, but it is full of the aggregation and dispersion of "qi" and the surge of "momentum". Zao Wou-Ki's success lies in his transcendence of the constraints of Eastern and Western artistic forms, reaching the ontological level of "qi", and using the rich materiality of oil painting to construct an Eastern-style, life-oriented cosmic time-space model.

The practice of these masters shows that the success of the "sinicization" of oil painting is actually the creative transformation and integrated application of the spirit of Eastern aesthetics, rather than the simple transplantation and mechanical copying of traditional formal language. Although their explorations have not formed a complete and systematic theoretical system, they have clearly pointed out a feasible direction and provided extremely valuable practical examples, enabling the traditional Chinese aesthetic standards to realize modern expression and practical creation in the art medium of oil painting.

3. The Contemporary Transformation of the "Void-Reality" Category in the Oil Painting Medium

"Void-reality" is the core category of traditional Chinese aesthetics. From the "endless meaning beyond words" in classical poetry to the "five colors of ink" in ink painting, it always takes spiritual connotation as the core. Although the concept of "void-reality" has not been clearly put forward in traditional Western painting, its expressive techniques in space, light and shadow, color, etc., have certain similarities with the traditional Chinese concept of void-reality, as well as obvious differences. When the category of "void-reality" enters the oil painting medium, it faces the core problem of differences in medium language: how to adapt the realistic and material language of Western oil painting to the freehand and spiritual core of Eastern "void-reality"? The key exploration in contemporary Chinese oil painting creation lies in realizing the linguistic translation of the "void-reality" category. It is not the simple appropriation of traditional "void-reality" symbols, but the transformation of its core connotation into the visual language of oil painting, and endowing it with new connotations in combination with the contemporary context.

Compared with traditional Western oil painting, contemporary Chinese oil painting has undergone a significant paradigm transformation in the application of color language. It has shifted from the realistic depiction of colors in the objective world to a more subjective and creative expression. Moreover, many Chinese oil painters have evolved from the traditional wisdom of "treating white as black" in blank space to the modern color expression form of "resonance of color gamut". In Chinese ink painting, the "white" of the paper is the infinite "void". The "empty white" in contemporary oil painting is not simply leaving the base color of the canvas, but an Eastern understanding of color relationships. A dominant color gamut with high brightness and low saturation can form a subtle breathing relationship with other colors. This "void" color needs to have positive modeling ability and emotional tension. There is no hard boundary between its edge and the "real" color, but it is a permeable, blending, and echoing air vent, which is the key to the breathing of colors. Such innovative explorations have opened up new paths for the diversified presentation of the void-reality relationship in oil painting art.

Contemporary oil painting has made a major breakthrough in the momentum of brushstrokes, from "broken brush but connected meaning" to "continuous momentum". This transformation provides new possibilities for the construction of void-reality levels and the grasp of picture rhythm. Traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting attach great importance to "one-stroke calligraphy" and "one-stroke painting", and the "momentum" that runs through them and never stops is the inherent sense of power. In contemporary oil painting, brushstrokes are not only used to shape the shape of objects but also become traces carrying "qi" and "momentum". By controlling the lifting, pressing, pausing, and speed rhythm of the brush, painters make each stroke have direction and power. Even if the brushstrokes seem broken, the inherent brush momentum must be coherent, just like Kandinsky's "inner necessity", which can form a life line connected by qi in the viewer's mind.

It is worth noting that contemporary oil painting also uses changes in texture to reflect void-reality. Texture can make the picture present an exquisite and perfect visual effect, becoming an element with independent aesthetic value in the picture. In Chinese landscape painting, the "distant and indistinct" method is used to express the depth and infinity of space, while the thick stacking, thin application, scraping, and flowing of contemporary oil painting pigments can also achieve this effect. Contemporary oil painters also use the alternation of transparent and opaque painting methods, and the strong contrast between the "near" sense formed by thick stacked textures and the "far" sense formed by thin glazing to create a very deep space. This kind of "void" constructed by the material itself is a more profound and mysterious sense of time and space integrated with tactile experience.

Contemporary oil painting has shown a significant

development trend from "scattered perspective" to "juxtaposition of psychological time and space" in composition layout. This exploration has provided a broader space for the creation of void-reality contrast and visual guidance in the picture, and further expanded the expressive force of oil painting. Contemporary oil painting abandons the single linear perspective not to copy the ancient three-distance method, but to absorb its spiritual core and freely organize the picture time and space according to the needs of psychological perception or emotional expression. This means that contemporary oil painting can place materials from different times, perspectives, and even different time and space in the same picture through superposition and juxtaposition, creating a subjective and comprehensive "mental image field". This composition method breaks away from the time and space constraints of painting and provides greater structural possibilities for the free flow of "charm" and the generation of "artistic conception".

4. The Realization Path of "Vivid Charm" in Contemporary Oil Painting

After the "void-reality" is initially solved at the technical level, the ultimate goal of creation is to integrate these techniques to create a complete, charming, and life-filled aesthetic field. In exploring the realization path of "vivid charm" in contemporary oil painting, the author summarizes several methods to help construct a painting field with a sense of time continuity and life rhythm.

The first is "arranging void", which is the strategic preset of the energy generation field. This requires painters to, before creation, like an architect or landscape designer, strategically preset the form and position of the void while planning the construction of the entity, and think about where to open windows for ventilation and where to leave blank space to accumulate qi in the picture, and how these "void" places will echo with the "real" places. "Arranging void" is the contemporary interpretation of constructing the qi field framework of the picture and leaving heaven and earth in painting.

The second is "guiding qi", the context management of the internal power and momentum of the picture. Through the direction of brushstrokes, the momentum of color blocks, and the rhythm of points, lines, and planes, painters carefully design invisible "qi guiding" lines in their works, just like the literary qi of articles and the melody of music, which can guide the viewer's sight and mind to experience the feeling of time flow in the painting. This qi vein can be tortuous, circling, and ups and downs, but it must be connected and rhythmic, making the static picture have a dynamic sense of life.

The third is "endowing life", opening the light for objects between similarity and dissimilarity. Charm can only make images come alive when attached to specific artistic images. This requires painters not to coldly reproduce objects, but to resonate deeply with them, and deeply observe and capture their inherent life structure and spiritual temperament. In modeling, dare to "grasp the meaning and forget the form", appropriately generalize, exaggerate, and image-process, and pursue what Qi Baishi said: "The wonder lies between similarity and dissimilarity". This blurred area is exactly the space where charm exists and viewers' imagination plays.

Finally, "comprehensive infiltration" towards poetic holistic art. To enhance the field appeal of works, we can appropriately learn from the tradition of integrating poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal carving in literati painting and carry out contemporary transformation, such as integrating poetic texts into the picture composition in an appropriate visual form. More specifically, during exhibitions, oil paintings can be combined with sound, spatial installations, and even smells to create a comprehensive immersive aesthetic situation, allowing viewers to change from simply looking at paintings to immersing themselves in a complete cultural field derived from paintings.

5. Exploration and Reflection in Personal Creation

The value of theory lies in illuminating practice. In the author's creation "Old House"(Figure 1), the author consciously applied the above methodology for exploration. With dilapidated buildings as the theme, the author "splashed" a flowing base on the canvas with diluted turpentine, which is "arranging void", presetting potential channels for the flow of qi in advance. In shaping, instead of piling up details, the author used a flat brush to depict the "momentum" of the building with rigid brushstrokes, which is "guiding qi". For the depiction of the old house, the focus was on expressing its texture, blurring the specific light and shade and colors into the overall ink atmosphere, pursuing a sense of wholeness, which is "endowing life".



Figure 1. LIU Xianghua Old House Oil/ Mixed Media 2024

In this process, the biggest challenge lies in balancing "control" and "accident". Chinese freehand spirit emphasizes accidental naturalness, while oil painting materials have a certain irreversibility. The solution is to adopt a layered operation method: the bottom layer is based on black, and texture effects are made with comprehensive materials on the black base, which is the thinking of "arranging void" and "guiding qi"; the middle layer obtains vitality through the flow and infiltration of colors; the surface layer uses more calligraphic brushstrokes for "modeling" and "guiding momentum". In this way, the temporality and sense of life in the creative process are retained, and the final completion of the picture is guaranteed.

Through practice, the author deeply realizes that creation oriented by charm requires painters to transform from the dominator of the picture to the builder of the field and the guide of qi mechanism. It is not just a set of techniques, but a kind of cultivation, which requires the creator to first have a

quiet and peaceful mind to appreciate images, so that the magnificent chapter of "vivid charm" can be generated under the brush.

6. Conclusion

This paper completes a closed-loop discussion from theory to practice and back to theory, demonstrating that the traditional Chinese aesthetic view of time and space can re-interpret "vivid charm" and providing ideas from philosophy to methods for its construction in contemporary oil painting. In the current era of many images but weak meaning, the contemporary construction of "vivid charm" is not only to find a new style for oil painting but also a spiritual return and value re-evaluation. The highest mission of art is not to create amazing visuals, but to build an aesthetic field where the breath of life can flow and resonate with the viewer's spirit. This not only provides a vibrant future direction derived from Eastern wisdom for oil painting but also for contemporary art practice.

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