Understanding China through its Visual Arts

Emmanuel Lincot

Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1427>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.1427

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2010

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Emmanuel Lincot, "Understanding China through its Visual Arts", *Critique d'art* [Online], 36 | Automne 2010, Online since 16 February 2012, connection on 05 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1427> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.1427>

This text was automatically generated on 5 July 2021.

EN

Understanding China through its Visual Arts

Emmanuel Lincot

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Comentale, Christophe. *Cent ans d'art chinois*, Paris : La Différence, 2010

Lazarus, Anny ; Septier, Laurent. *Chine/Art contemporain/Pékin en 11 parcours*, Marseille : Images en manœuvres, 2010

- 1 Christophe Comentale's book is the first complete and annotated inventory of one hundred years of Chinese art. It helpfully complements the monumental tome by the sinologist Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of the Twentieth Century* (1996). The œuvre of the painter Wu Guanzhong–*Nouveau Paris* (1989)–illustrating the foreword–provides the slant of the various issues raised by the author. The whole history of Chinese art, C. Comentale seems to be telling us, is writ in terms of identity, insomuch as it questions the tricky attempt to reconcile endogenous cultural categories and others borrowed from the West. To unravel all these interactions, C. Comentale reminds us, in an exhaustive manner, who the most influential western artists have been. Käthe Kollwitz, whose neo-Expressionist prints are commented upon in Shanghai by the great writer Lu Xun; Goncharov and the Soviet school, well beyond the Maoist period, still has a far-reaching impact. The author prefers the history of sino-European artistic relations–French in particular. And he follows this path by adopting a method which a Chinese historian would not turn his back on. By outlining a series of portraits, he re-creates the stuff of an intelligibility which runs through both the century and each one of these works. The message is clear: C. Comentale is not a theoretician, but an aesthete.
- 2 The bibliography shows a marked interest in monographs. Nor do we find references in it to those great contemporary historians, Wu Hung, Julia Andrews and Lü Peng, whose notions of “modernity”, “avant-garde” and “realism” the plentiful scientific literature

has helped us to comprehend. Permeated by ideologies and values, these notions, in the interpretation made thereof by art criticism in China, explain more than a few disagreements. Besides, what China are we talking about? If the author displays an obvious interest in the arts of Taiwan and those of the mainland, the Hong Kong community, on the other hand, is sidestepped. The political history of the Chinese world, which is so chaotic, is dealt with. It is essential for understanding both the individual trajectories and the socialist-realist variants which someone like Dong Xiwen had to make from one and the same picture (*The Founding of the Nation*).

- 3 Readers will appreciate the beauty of the layout and the introduction—well documented by the author—to artistic genres that are little known in Europe. Works of the *bapo* variety, in particular, which, he tells us, “can be somewhat likened to propitiatory-type pieces produced during the new lunar year” (p. 80), have influenced generations of artists. C. Comentale invites us to make a journey through a very varied creative scene. As a sinologist and chief curator at the Musée de l’Homme, he has always sought the company of artists. As a doctor of Chinese art history and archaeology, his lengthy experience among artists both in eastern Asia and in Europe with the diaspora enables him to share his passion with his readers. It is guided by a very confident taste which indicates an attachment to the job and to the empathy that is nurtured by meetings with those men and women whom Francis Ponge called “Persons”. One such is Hsiung Ping-Ming (p.166): in his to-ings and fro-ings between France and China, then in ruins, via the Trans-Siberian railway, his translations for the US army, his return to France in 1944, his doctoral dissertation (in philosophy), his sculptural studies with Zadkine... He is the author of an outstanding body of work produced in exile in Paris, but he never had a retrospective show. The fact that this book by C. Comentale may help to remedy this injustice would already be a significant fact in the acknowledgement, in France, of this immense artist. For much remains to be done in the field of disseminating knowledge about the visual arts of the Chinese world in France. In particular, the works linked to the neo-scholarly movement (p.223) call for much more attention. This movement, long sidelined because of the supremacy seemingly granted Chinese Pop Art, is one of the most interesting. It is contemporary with a re-emergence in China of neo-Confucian aesthetics and philosophy. If the artists Xu Le Le and Zhu Xinjian lay claim to it, they do not, however, turn their backs on the erotic tradition inherited from the *Jinpingmei* or the subversive cheeky humour inspired by other Chinese classics. The *Huaniao* genre (painting of flowers and birds) is part of this tendency. The beauty of the brush strokes of an artist like Yang Chunhua echoes that of the master Badashanren (end of the Ming dynasty), the precision of whose strokes hallmarks both his calligraphy and his birds (p.226). Needless to say, C. Comentale does not overlook Xu Bing, Fang Lijun, or Zhang Xiaogang, and all those other artists whom China, in the upheaval caused by the challenges of globalization, and confronted at the same time by the major issues—in terms of art theory—represented by the translation of great authors (Erwin Panofsky, Rudolf Arnheim, Ernst Gombrich, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault), has, since the end of the 20th century, thrust into the world of the greatest international exhibitions. Lastly, the author concludes that if, with regard to Chinese art history of the past century, it is impossible to point to any foreign hegemony whatsoever, which is no way implies the absence of specific influences, it is on the other hand possible to pinpoint precise instances of de-westernization. The artistic approach of the *Shechi* group (*The Society of the Pond*) is an example of dynamics taking into account experiments situated on the borderline of theatre (borrowing from

Jerzy Grotowsky), and action painting (borrowing from Jackson Pollock), bringing to the fore the predominant notion of the *gesture* of painting and not its *representation*. This is a Chinese concept if ever there was, developing from a principle of immanence the idea of a *breath(ing)* (*qiyun*) open to an accumulation of changes and maturations, and which, through an apparent acculturation to the West and its borrowing trends, rediscovers its far-reaching modality in the mental loam that saw it come into being.

- 4 To discover, *in situ*, the works broached by C. Comentale, and more recent pieces, we highly recommend the guide *Chine/Art contemporain/Pékin en 11 parcours*. It has two parts: one devoted to everything that underpins Chinese contemporary art on the historical and cultural level; the other assigned to Beijing which is still the city where this scene is the most active and diversified. Let us wager that Anny Lazarus and Laurent Septier will be offering their readers guides-to-come focusing on the artistic exploration of other urban centres in the Chinese world.