

Li's outback from Wuhan

I've been worried about tomorrow, but never more as I did in the past year of 2020. Maybe this is the most common feeling for most of us. In this year, I only mentored less than two students for art portfolio instructions, as only a third of the amount of the previous years. It was almost an accident for me to join a sub-career as an art educator whilst being a curator. However, this has continued for years, and I have more requests from my agency.

The year 2020 begins with a series of online courses, typical for me as most of my teaching time has converted into online courses since 2018. Art mentoring is a highly flexible job. This is kind of unique in China as there are gaps between the socialist Chinese society and the western world. However, we are playing the roles of the gap fillers.

There's one student of mine, Meng Li, who is from Wuhan - before it became the world's infamous city as the ground zero of break of covid-19, I even didn't know if there's any art academy in the town, and thanks to this young man, I came to know this city just a bit more. It was the year 2016 when I met him, and he was just graduated from the experiment art college at Hubei Academy of Fine Arts. He came with his graduate show works based on the city's "popular suicidal sight" - one of the bridges that cross the Yangtze River. His Rauschenberg style constructive pictorials let me understand that this city has never been an easy place to live. And this young man was seriously confused about his work, also his future.

"You need to get back to your life." That was what I suggested, "What is the biggest confusion in your life?" And his answer was simple: "The way I live, where I can't see tomorrow, or it will just be the same." "So tell me more about it," I asked. "I was trying to seek a universal value system or the rule in reviewing my art, if these are meaningful or if my works are just pieces of trash." He looked in a hurry, and I gave him my answer on the brink of light: "There's no such things that can be called the universal rule, especially in art, art itself is meaningless, but it doesn't mean what we did is meaningless." As a matter of fact, these kinds of "ultimate questionings" is not uncommon among the students studied in mainland China. That's because the pedagogical structure in today's art college is still heavily influenced by the Soviet systems and mixed with the censorships after the cultural revolution and 1989 - which can be hardly concluded as the "modernism aesthetic" led system.

During our mentorship, Li decided to go back to Wuhan from Beijing and made a thoughtful work with his multiple experiences of having fun with friends in different local night clubs in which he secretly recorded the pale and confused faces of his friends - a group of local young people in their early 20s. Those moments are meaningful, as later these young people will realize that being alive is one of the most essential meanings to be in the city of Wuhan.

Reading through Li's portfolio, one will see the tragic history of Wuhan, which can be revealed in the other series of works about his past-away grandfather. This series of work begins with several talks when we first met. I could figure out that he had got strong

intentions of making his beloved one a timeless memory by converting the details and symbols that related to his grandfather's life. So the requests were made: get back to where his grandfather lived, and gather all kinds of information to interview the relatives, find the leftover documents, photos or diaries. And the result was uplifting, yet, his grandfather's life during the cultural revolution was still a sorrowful story. Li's grandfather was an artist who helped out to paint the decorations for the riches before 1949. During the Cultural Revolution, he was imprisoned and beaten up tens of times just because he was believed as "the helping hand of the capitalists". "He was lucky for he was able to paint; there need to be propaganda pictures, so they still needed him to paint," Li told me "otherwise, he might be beaten to death by those red guards."

Deploying creativity on a tragic history is cruel. However, not mentioning and not understanding is even more dangerous. Li has made history visible in placing out the pieces of a person's life. "We are not making a documentary film, neither a story, not even narrative, we are showing up what it was." this is what we been agreed before he develops all the materials he gathered after his trip back to Wuhan. The final work turned out to be a very noisy installation, and in fact, it delivered the ambient of the time. Li is not an art theorist, he is an artist who speaks somewhat broken English, but this piece of work stands and speaks strongly and wisely.

The past 2020 has made Wuhan famous (infamous, to be precise). I hope Li will later come up with some ideas of depicting what has happened. As we all know, when documentaries and media reports are censored, words are deleted, and diaries are distrusted, the art could be one of the last ways to record what has happened. And it is important the art can be seen and discussed by younger generations.

Written by Ying CUI, December 2020