

Beyond Metaphors and Symbols: Ona B.'s Feminine Art

The name Ona B. is a fabrication. It means “female” in different languages. In Czech, for example, it means “she”. In Japanese, it shares the sound of “woman”. Ona B. says, the majority of female artists are not inclined to be called “feminine artists”, but she loves being a female.

Almost all the art works by Ona B. are immersed in red. Whenever she is confronted with the question why she favors the color red, she offers such an answer: “It is not I who go to look for red, it is red who approaches me”. The use of red provides her with “such a good feeling...a feeling at home in my painting. It is power and energy and joy. Like the sun and blood...but in a positive way. I never felt aggressive with this color.” (ONA B. Station ”The Power of Red Artist Ona B.’s Exhibition is Haunting, Powerful and Amusing ” Serena Lei)

The sympathetic favoritism toward red makes Ona B. somewhat oriental, a woman who practices a certain audio-visual, soul-connected sorcery. Significantly, this visual experience is also expressed by the use of metaphors and symbols. Ona B.’s works involve numerous media, including paintings, installations, performances, photography and music, etc. The elements in all her works possess some metaphorical or symbolic meanings, which correspond to an explanatory system within a certain cultural context. For example, the use of arrow and bow symbolic of Japanese Zen practice; the supposition of herself as the wife of God sitting at the bed (exhibitionism); a boat hanging on the outside wall of an abandoned church; a huge dress made of the cloth of former Czechoslovakia’s national flag, etc. It seems that Ona B. is experimenting through a quasi-alembic language with the elements of symbols and metaphors. These experiments normally look like pieces from different interpretative systems. The pieces are mixed together individually in the feminine sense, like a home-made dessert loved by females. At that very moment, Ona B. not only enjoys the mystery of personally crossing the symbolic border, but also finds the path of personally crossing the cultural border.

To refer to her own words, her interest lies in “ the interdisciplinary transfer of ideas and symbolism, based not only on current scientific thinking but also on an analogical thought process—a form of “metacommunication”—an occult means of communicating inherent within the arts, dreams, religion, alchemy, meditation and Zen”. (ARTE Delle MUSE “The Real Homeland-The pleasure of Thoughts”, Vienna, September ’98)

Ona B.’s artistic mannerism has the tendency of anti-conceptualism, sharing the style of many Western artists such as John Cage and Joseph Beuys. She tries not to embark on the art of linear thinking within the realm of conceptual art, but enables her body and her mood to enter the response of sympathy, in order to obtain the direct access of other systems similar to Zen.

Space, mirrors and time are interesting topics for Ona B. She uses mirrors and the reflection of lenses to create a new spatial experience; she lay once in the exhibition hall for a whole week to meditate; she stretched her body into the permeated red space, as if lost in some love; she cut pieces of her red painting on the huge red wall during the Frankfurt Fair and sold them to her visitors, like selling pieces of cloth. This manner carries still the characteristic of conceptual art, which coexists dialectically with her experimental approach in a single action and installation. Red, meditation, twisted and reconstructed space through mirrors, all these elements belong to the realm of science. But Ona B. does not use them as any art ideology, instead, she uses them as an experience beyond concepts, as a path leading to other symbolic spaces.

Proven by the modern optical theory, mirrors cannot offer the access to other spaces in another system. The arrival by a mirror is the return of self-image, not more than a self metaphor. Thus Ona B., for a time, began to employ the environment of churches. Although such an environment still belongs to the interpretative system of Western culture --- like the systems of classic architecture, Beijing opera and painting in China -- - Ona B.’s works began to enter, in her own words, a real “metacommunication”. Jesus didn’t have a wife. Yet Ona B. set up a newly-weds’ bedroom in the exhibition hall, dressed herself in the sexy fashion of the American pop singer Madonna, sitting at the bedside, waiting for Jesus. Madonna, Jesus the bachelor and the newly-weds, these metaphors are recombined in the alchemical style into a new narrative construction.

The color red has produced multiple meanings due to this metaphorical relationship: sex, irony or religious fanaticism. Another work of hers (wooden boat and church) describes the moment of souls waiting for the last judgment at the gates of hell. The inlay of a modern-looking racing boat on an abandoned old-looking church expresses the nihilist feeling shared by religion and modern social space.

These approaches reflect Ona B.'s gradual turning of self-symbolic space into the symbolic link of environment and property, thus entering herself into a comprehensive experience beyond control. This experience can not only cause self-drowning and force the mind to be in an void state, but also let the self disappear beyond the border of symbols. From Czech to Japan, from Japan to China, Ona B.'s later metacommunication seems to begin to cross the Western border. Using the Japanese bow and arrow to balance one's mind is the approach adopted by the Japanese Zen to train mental concentration. But our blonde Ona B., by holding the bow and arrow, shows a style different from the Japanese aristocrats. Her performance and installations possess the sentiment of aestheticism. Meanwhile, her behavior seems unconventional all the time. She alone owns the identity of opposites.

During the Biennale Beijing 2003, Ona B., together with Cang Xin, an artist from Beijing who engages himself with the topics of "metaphor and sympathy", arranged a co-performance on the Great Wall. An intertwined double-colored braid made of her blonde hair and his black hair, bodies being wrapped in a piece of red cloth, meditating on the Great Wall, kissing the earth, etc.

Ona B. is always trying to cross the symbolic borders, individual, racial, political, religious and sexual ones. She uses symbols to eliminate the isolation of symbols in order to achieve the individual freedom. Those symbols and metaphors are usually contained in the interpretative system of a certain culture due to history and geography. Ona B. does not want to follow the path of 20th century male philosophers, the latter carrying out a rational adventure by deconstructing and reconstructing a system and finally being trapped by a new system of isolation. Ona B. is more of an alchemist or a somnambulist from Vienna. She puts herself before an individual red background or sets herself in a perplexed labyrinth by mixing architectural space and utensils with her witchcraft method. The color red is her ultimate lost space, it is a nihilist place. There, all the borders of metaphors and symbols are dismantled. There, a crossroad is formed implying both ossification and rebirth. In Ona B.'s red space, there are no meaningful language-controlled metaphors and symbols. They are all caught in the red vigor of sensual orgy. The only meaning of this space is passion, passion brought by Ona B. to those metaphors and symbols, passion realized only by females.

In Ona B.'s own words, this is to create a new life.

Zhu Qi

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