

Artist's statement - Shieh Ka Ho

My work originates from Chinese gongbi (fine-brush) figure painting tradition. Such style has been a signature of my art for some years. But as I live in an era filled with various images of different artistic currents and popular culture, my paintings cannot be considered an authentic inheritance from the old tradition. They should be seen as contemporary representations. Although I work in a classical painting style, I prefer different and diverse interpretations of my works.

The association with classicism has been a focus of discussion in my work. I would like to start this statement, therefore, by explaining the reason for choosing fine-brush figure painting as my artistic practice. I hope that such precise explanation is clear and useful for the new audience especially.

Before I studied fine arts in the university, I knew almost nothing about Chinese painting and art history. The Fine Arts Department of New Asia College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong is an institution that favors the study and practice of Chinese art. The founders of the Department and the College were important Chinese scholars and artists whose missions were to continue and broaden the understanding of Chinese culture. My enthusiasm in Chinese art was developed under such influences. So I always show my respect to these great masters.

When I started working in Chinese painting medium, I was optimistic about the prospect of transforming traditional art form into modern style. The reasons for choosing fine-brush figure painting were clear and rational. First, it was the meticulous process of its execution that suited my personality and working style. Secondly, as this style is considered to be a marginal art form in modern Chinese art discourse especially when compared with the literati expressive style, it leaves much room for exploration and development. Finally, it is the languages of figure painting that attract me to the larger extent. The research in the descriptive and narrative functions of this painting style formed the foundation of my work.

When I studied ancient Chinese figure paintings, I was captured by their extraordinarily strange but beautiful figural expressions. It is the combination of human forms and gestures, their costumes and accessories, together with the artist's skillful execution that formulated a new visual logic. The paintings are neither representation of reality nor illustration for literary text. They represent a systematic visual language that functions independently.

Based on such research and observation, I developed a new series of nude painting in the last few years. The naked bodies symbolize human beings in these works but they have no identity, especially those associated with real life such as class, profession or historical significance. They act as signs in the painting. The gestures of the figures are the focuses of the work. Through the arrangement of the postures and the grouping of the figures, I realized the effect and the order of the painting's visual language. Thus the resulting works represent my experiment and application of that language.

In addition to the nude series, I also produced a series of animal/ figure painting with specially designed costumes. They can be seen as complement to the nude series. The animal series is inspired by verbal slang that was used metaphorically to describe people with animalistic behaviors. My approach is not only looking at the form and spirit of the human figures as in traditional works. I pay particular attention to the costumes and ornament, as they are important expressive tools in figuration. At the end, though the animal series appear quite different from the nude series, both display the same kind of direction in my visual language investigation.