

Rethinking Contemporary Chinese Art through Mary Bittner Wiseman's Book *A Grand Materialism in New Art from China*

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While observing contemporary artworks in an art museum, we might consider two distinct groups of questions. The first group relates to the mind, memory, and material: What will we recall after visiting the art museum? Might it be the forms, the concepts, the context, the connections between the images created by the conceptual space, or the artworks' physical natures made by the materials used by the artists? The second group of questions relates to issues arising from the differences brought about by the local and the global. Mary Bittner Wiseman's new book, *A Grand Materialism in the New Art from China* (2020), is a masterpiece about contemporary Chinese art that responds to both sets of questions. The book discusses the theme of materialism in new Chinese art, especially how to present its theme by using different materials to make artworks.

The use of "Grand Materialism" in the title is puzzling and fascinating. Could we explain it as *grand wei wu zhu yi*, or a tradition of thought in which all things that exist are made up of matter? As Kathleen Higgins, a philosophy professor at the University of Texas, Austin, points out in her review of Wiseman's book, *wei wu zhu yi* in terms of both ideology or consumer capitalism is not the "materialism" Wiseman had in mind when talking about China's new art. In Higgins's view, Wiseman is pointing more to the actual materials used by contemporary Chinese artists. Hence, we should translate Wiseman's idea of "materialism" as *da wu zhi zhu yi*, or grand discussion on material. For instance, we might consider the Chinese contemporary artist Xu Bing and his discussion of how the concept of artwork usually starts with a feeling for the materials, which is a reasonable relationship that many artists utilize in their works. Xu Bing's specific decision to use tobacco as his primary medium provokes questions about how and why he chooses to use

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this material. This is one kind of meaning of “materialism,” which inspires our interest in the idea of *da wu zhi zhu yi*. We might also consider the words of art historians Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione, who curated the 2020 exhibition *Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, a show that focused on the choice of twenty-six Chinese artists to make their artworks from everyday materials. According to the curators, in China, starting in the 1980s, the material used in an artwork was, itself, a significant tool of expression, one that took precedence over a particular style or the image portrayed. This is the concept of “materialism” presented in Wiseman’s book.

Overall, there are three key parts of Wiseman’s book: “Crisis,” “Working through Art,” and “Thinking through Art.” These three themes are relevant to Chinese contemporary art, dating back to the exhibitions *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (1998) and *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* (2017). Although Wiseman chooses “New Art from China” for her title instead of “Chinese contemporary art,” she still regards recent Chinese art as part of the broader, global contemporary art-world scene. In Wiseman’s discussion of contemporary Chinese art, we read about the complicity of different definition of materials as a key component of the art, along with themes that include the physical materials used by the artists ; Energy or *Qi* in traditional Chinese painting; the history of materials; the Chinese language; and the sexual body, most especially, the female body.

In Wiseman’s view, we can regard the avant-garde art scene in China as a series of subversive beliefs, including the subversive assumption that, early in this new century in China, there is a gap between art and nature—an artistic concept found in Western artists, as well. We can also find this opinion in the 2011 book *Subversive Strategies in Chinese Contemporary Art*, coauthored by Wiseman and Professor Liu Yuedi, specifically in the section of the book titled “Crisis.” This book section cites an *Art in America* review, which states that social realism occupied an important role in the modern art section of the Guggenheim Museum’s 1998 exhibition *China: 5000 Years*. While there is nothing left in the current exhibition for social realism, and also those young Chinese avant-garde artists are often testing the limits of tolerance and are not conformist. This type of review is not rare in the West, and Wiseman criticizes it. In her eyes, it is not fair to consider the work of Chinese avant-garde artists as something only meant to test the limits of tolerance in China, as it deprives us of considering the other functions of avant-garde and its nature, such as being a kind of critical thinking on social systems that can aim for its improvement.

Next, we can discuss the second group of questions highlighted at the outset of this review, which concerns the different concepts and understandings brought by the local and the global. As a part of the global community, when we see artworks

from another culture or geographical zone, we rely on our own local experience of art and our own cultural concepts to attempt to understand the non-local art. Yet, we must ask whether this approach helps to enrich our aesthetic and art philosophy concepts. In such circumstances, for a non-existent concept in one kind of art, might we find a related reference substance in another critical discourse of art? Alternately, do we need to find the answer by crossing into more traditional art and the cultural conception of “the Other?”

Wiseman values understanding Chinese contemporary art through traditional painting theory while also searching for its counterpart in the West via Hsieh Ho’s “Six Principles” (e.g., “Spirit Resonance,” “Life Movement,” etc.) and Shi Tao’s “one-stroke method.” She focuses on comparing the expression of traditional and contemporary art in China instead of looking at the differences between the East and the West. In other words, Wiseman is looking at Hsieh Ho’s “Six Principles” in modern and contemporary Western painting, from impressionism to abstract expressionism, to rethink the relationship between Western art and Chinese art. However, she also distinguishes differences between the Chinese context and Western art practices. For example, Hsieh Ho’s “Bone Matter Structural Use of the Brush” means building structure through each brushstroke, while, for example, impressionism is genius in terms of color and light; impressionists used the brushstroke, dots and daubs of paint, and other techniques to present modern life and to invite us to see the light and shapes. In terms of Hsieh Ho’s “Conform with Objects to Obtain Likeness,” Wiseman emphasizes a key difference between abstract expressionism and traditional Chinese painting, namely, that, with abstract expressionism, the subconscious mind was considered a major part of the context and form of the art, but the abstract expressionists could not rid themselves of their thoughts or emotions, unlike what traditional Chinese artists did. In the sense of notions about the “self,” the two really share nothing in common. In the West, the conscious mind is often at the center of each person’s world, with the individual being a rational and self-interested atom. While in China, “the center” is something artists try to capture that resonates with them, like Shan Shui—or, nature and its culture—instead of the landscape. While reading Wiseman’s thoughts about Hsieh Ho’s “Six Principles,” I was reminded of Wu Guanzhong’s description in 1981 when he viewed abstract expressionist paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston at the National Art Museum of China. In his opinion, Chinese viewers could see the beauty of the Dunhuang frescoes and the carvings of ancient tombs in Jackson Pollock’s artworks, as well as notice strong parallels between Franz Kline’s paintings and the written Chinese character “*Shou*,” meaning long life. Wu Guanzhong’s reaction looks similar to finding Hsieh Ho’s “Six Principles” in Western painting. It is a little strange at first to draw a connection between

Kline's work and the *shou* character, but this connection helps Chinese viewers understand Western abstract painting a little better while also allowing them to reflect more deeply on their own art and culture.

Wiseman provides a lot of examples of artists that most Chinese people are familiar with, names like Xu Bing, Song Dong, Wang Guangyi, Cai Guoqiang, Huang Yongpin, and Lin Tianmiao. At the same time, Wiseman discusses the expression of Chinese art, especially the connection between ancient painting and new art in China, in order to introduce a Chinese artist that people may not be as familiar with, Jizi, a new face on the contemporary art scene. Wiseman believes that the paintings of Jizi, a self-taught artist, relate to the idea of "grand materialism," since he depicts the world in ink as the universe and the origin of the materials, instead of, for instance, the leisure life of China literati or a stylized landscape. Wiseman conducted serious research on Shi Tao's art theory, and in her view, unlike God created the world with the word—"Let there be light"—rather than through action, Shi Tao created the world through his action of painting. While Shi Tao's paintings come from the stroke of his pen, they include the idea of language and other things. Wiseman posits that this is not unlike Jacques Derrida's point of view—that writing precedes words. Whether it is Shi Tao or Ji Zi, the artists' work has its own life, and it is not possible to distinguish the artist from his art. It is just like breathing naturally, which is to say that "grand materialism" in Chinese art points to the silent, moving material world made by mountains and rivers, replacing the physical world made by the invisible scientific world of constantly moving molecules. This idea reminds me of Liu Haisu's discussion in the 1920s on the similarities between Shi Tao and Paul Cézanne and other postimpressionists, especially in terms of their "expression." Liu Haisu stated that the then-called "new art" and the new ideas of modern European had existed in France for a long time but were simply buried. Thus, he believed that it was necessary not only to study the new changes in European literature and art but also to strive to unearth the inherent treasures of Chinese art, as well. It is unknown whether Wiseman ever read Liu Haisu's writing, but there appears to be similar wisdom in her discussion of the "expression" of traditional Chinese art and Western modern and contemporary art.

We can also read the influence of Arthur Danto in Wiseman's discourse. Danto centers his discussion of art on the meaning of artwork, which is like Wiseman's discussion about the material—the story surrounding a particular thing and the appearance of a work, which can convey information. We are left with philosophical questions: What kind of information can be conveyed? How close is the look of a work of art to the thing it is trying to express, the story it tells, and the final character it contributes to?

From the perspective of a Western observer, Wiseman, in her book, uses ma-

materials to discuss the spirit of Chinese art, narrating the information she comprehends and thinks about as one story. As she writes, contemporaneity is embodied in the ink works of contemporary Chinese artist Ji Zi—that is, “he found a breach in the available trio of traditional Chinese art, modern western art, and market-driven art, as have other artists who have gone their own way” (35).

Compared with some Western observers, Wiseman does not pay much attention to the political aspects or the marketability of Chinese new art. Instead, from a philosophical perspective, the author focuses her attention on the transformation of language and material, and she looks for the discursive conflict behind it while, at the same time, paying attention to globalization and Chinese-ness—the storytelling of Chinese contemporary art from the perspective of materials. In sum, Wiseman adds many interesting and meaningful considerations to the profound art philosophy discourse while also telling her international readers about China and the country’s recent art history.