Shiquan Zou: Illusionary Reality

It is a great pleasure to be given the chance to reflect on the paintings of Shiquan Zou. As the title of the exhibition 'Illusionary Reality' suggests, we are encountering something very complex and puzzling.

When Shiquan first proposed to us that he should come to Newcastle University to be an 'artist in residence', it wasn't just the clear technical accomplishment of his work that was immediately evident. The imagery was also very intriguing but in the back of my mind, as always, was the question of what would he be bringing to Newcastle - what would he offer our students, and what would we - the department, the city and the country and the continent, be able to offer him?

For an artist, this need to travel and renew themselves is ultimately a process of having conversations - sometimes verbal, but more often visual. Some of these conversations are explicit, some are subtle, some are ambiguous and some are without any obvious purpose. It is clear from the many paintings that he has produced in his studio here that many types of conversations have taken place. He has been prolific and he has not just been looking within the UK; he has also spent short periods in Paris, Florence and Amsterdam, soaking up and developing a relationship with the paintings and ideas in those cities. Shiquan' clear need and desire to go to see the actual 'real' paintings rather than relying on reproductions has been striking. This is a salutary reminder to us all of the importance of looking at art in the flesh and that reproductions are simply reproductions.

I am reminded here if the painting Isabella and the Pot of Basil, by the Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt, which is in Newcastle's Laing Gallery. In reproductions, we might spend a few seconds and only see it, or think of it, as a typical painting of its time; seen in the flesh however, it is hard to accept that the richly patterned cloth depicted by Hunt is simply paint - pigments mixed with oil. It is almost incredible, in the sense that one can't quite believe that the depiction of the reality of the cloth - its pattern, the material, its folds and softness, is an illusion. Of course we know that it is all an illusion, and of course we know that it is paint. It is clearly a painting and yet it is more 'real' than any photograph, for example, could be.

Perhaps this is Shiquan's work; as with all good artists who incorporate or use illusion, they also celebrate the deceit of it all, and allowing something in the painting to point to that deceit - usually drawing attention to the surface on which illusion operates. If anyone was ever in doubt about the power of painting in an age of ubiquitous digitally and photographically derived images, Shiquan's paintings are clear proof that painted images can be both engaging and provocative. Perhaps most importantly they have the inherent capacity to make the viewer want to look and not walk by. Thinking about both scale and space in Shiquan's paintings, the ability to attend to the 'overlooked' is also a reminder that we as individuals each have something very particular, special and unique to offer. In a time when Globalisation is being both questioned and championed, the ability to make things that are unique and special and which are born out of passion and curiosity is also critical. As an artist, Shiquan Zou offers this in the form of paintings that are an odd hybrid and fusion of western classical imagery, traditional Chinese imagery, combined with something akin to the spaces and landscapes of Surrealist paintings. Where one thing starts and another ends is unclear and ambiguous, and this perhaps is what makes them both very real, and very contemporary paintings.

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