

Xu Bing, Malevich, and Shiao-Peng Chen

Tzu-Chin Kao (Translated by Yvonne Kennedy)

“One must view a painting as a representation of a spiritual image, not a replica of an object.”

--Wassily Kandinsky, 1866-1944

Our understanding of abstract painting, specifically geometric abstraction, is often over simplified. There is excessive discussion of color, style, and form, while glossing over its aesthetic transcendence and concept. Our deeply ingrained impressions of geometric abstraction are its clear-cut outlines, its rational experimentation with colors through simple dots, lines and planes, and the precise, mathematical counterpoint and disposition, regardless of transition or ambiguity. By thoroughly discarding descriptive and three-dimensional representation, these geometric shapes that reveal no sense of volume and depth deliver the emotion of their creator to the viewers through the presentation of painting effects such as coldness and warmth, movement and stillness, order and conflict. At the same time, we overlook clues provided by the titles of the paintings, and see them merely as a way of distinguishing between different works, or as an afterthought to capture perceived qualities.

Many people categorize Shiao-Peng Chen’s work as geometric abstraction based on its form, mistaking her intent to be the stylistic simplification. However, as the artist herself states, “geometric abstraction is a form of discarding forms, it is revolutionary and societal. If an artist chooses to paint in geometric abstraction, it is a statement that he is not concerned about the form.” The abandonment of forms of personal expression for the basic elements of painting—dots, lines and planes, results in a visual similarity in the works of geometric abstract painters. However, we should be attentive to this as the artist’s conscious discarding of illusionary reality, and turning toward the representation of ideas. The creative process approaches a system of codification for responding to structures in the external world through geometric forms. Its decoding process differs from previous interpretations because geometric abstraction does not require the participation of elements of visual realism; nor an imitation of nature or society. It is released from the relational systems that represent reality by using the most basic methods of form—a simplification and disposal of details. The artist delves into the essence of objects and extracts what is meaningful. Hence, the aesthetic value of the painting is what remains in the form itself, specifically in links to perceptibility and knowability in its role as a transformative medium, and not merely a method of depiction, nor simply an established material or substance of painting.

The title “Xu Bing is My Good Friend” (2013) is particularly eye-catching and intriguing because serendipitously, during Chen’s exhibition at the Mind Set Art Center, a retrospective exhibition of Chinese artist Xu Bing (1955-) had simultaneously opened on the other side of the city. The term, “good friend,” refers to the fact that Chen supposes that she and Xu share a similar path in artistic creation: Xu’s famed artistic expression using texts was established based on several ingeniously self-created textual systems based on a study of the principles of Chinese character construction. As visual symbols, these outwardly resemble Chinese ideographs, but in truth they are structures of dots and lines. Specifically, in his famed work “A Mirror to Analyze the World” (1987-1991) (also known as “A Book from the Sky”), the artist “fabricates” more than four thousand pseudo-Chinese characters using a strict internal logic, then prints these on long scrolls and several bound books using hand-carved movable type. There is an aesthetic of pleasing grandeur just seeing the enormous scale of the work. What occurs is a complete transformation from phonetic symbols into visual symbols,

expunged of content, rendering the words unreadable. But the point of this work lies in the appeal of these Chinese character forms. As Xu puts it, they catalyze our connection to and re-evaluation of the best part of Chinese culture. Entering into a world seemingly within our realms of knowledge, but is in fact, a world beyond comprehension, words no longer serve as vehicles for sound and meaning, nor do they retain the original capability of words for exchange and communication. They have become agents of a linguistic revolution induced by the perspectives of the artist.

In Chen's "Xu Bing is My Good Friend," the artist refers to Xu's other character system, "New English Calligraphy." Xu converts Chinese characters into Hanyu Pinyin, but rather than writing them out in the usual linear form, from left to right, these are designed similar to Chinese character components, and written as a block unit, blurring the boundary between Chinese characters and English words, and creating a new system of words. Chen's "Xu Bing is My Good Friend" is an "introductory guide" for understanding her body of work. On the one hand, it explains her principles of character creation that originates in geometrification and pixilation; on the other hand, it reveals the truth that geometric abstraction has linguistic elements: its meaning is not gleaned from content or style, but from a relationship between the observer and the observed object. In Chen's works, the world is constructed from various relationships and their internalized set of rules, rather than from actual events and objects. Thus reality is made "linguistic" (here, linguistic does not merely refer to a system of symbols based on sound used to communicate information, but encompasses a broader meaning of a set of governing rules for communication and expression.) Linguistic symbols also become a prototype in Chen's discussions of cultural phenomena; a cursory investigation into this logic and structural system provides a glimpse into elements of reality in daily life and exchanges.

The cultural meanings confined by linguistic systems operate in method intimate to the self. For instance, in "My Galleries: Are They All the Same?" (2012) a new work from her *My Taipei* series, Chen uses her own creative principles of formation to simplify and geometricize logos or architectural features from galleries in Taipei in which she held exhibitions. She further abstracts these existing symbolic markings using a personal lexicon. Here, Chen not only appeals to the audience's responses to individual images; but through these multiple points of selection, she also examines her artistic career to date. Chen describes this as "an exploration of points of nexus between the self and the city of Taipei." Taking this a step further, among countless subtly differentiated art spaces, which invitations to exhibit from whom were accepted—the symbols that are finally presented are not only an exhibition of a personal creative resume, but also delineates a tacit aesthetic taste in the realm of art, and a recognition of the artist's position and value in the field of artistic practice, which can only be excavated by a professional audience that lingers at a deeper level.

Reality and abstraction are often the two sides of the same coin; a relationship of mutual correspondence exists between them. Geometric abstraction does not ignore reality, but decodes it through structural method that transcends visual reality or descriptiveness. These creative codification systems may appear to lack personal style, but in actuality they brim with personal meanings, with an emphasis on unique conceptual individualization and creativity. Chen's work is an exemplary manifestation among these. The symbols of reality that she constructs geometrically through metaphoric method are neither meaningless, pure material forms, nor sensory-filled aesthetic experiences; for Chen, logical thought is built on a foundation of language, and the aesthetic value of an artwork is in its meaningful form.

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