

A Study on Post-Industrial Myths in Northeast Oil Painting Creation Against the Background of Urbanization

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Abstract: This article comprehensively explores the profound transformation of oil painting creation in Northeast China under the backdrop of significant changes in the era. With the advancement of urbanization and the restructuring of urban and rural structures, artists' creative perspectives have undergone notable shifts: from grand narratives to micro depictions of individual emotions and daily life. Meanwhile, under the waves of urbanization and marketization, the disintegration of the planned economy and structural adjustments of industries have profoundly reshaped the social landscape. The withdrawal of the working class and drastic changes in living spaces have driven the themes in painting to shift from collectivist narratives to a gaze at 'post-industrial' imagery such as decaying factories and unemployment realities. Artists like Zhao Xiao-jia, Cui Guo-tai, and Guo Xiao-guang, through their profound representations of abandoned spaces and the collective sense of confusion, reveal the spiritual emptiness and cultural disjunction that have faded in the wake of the industrial era, bestowing upon oil painting significant value as a vessel for visual culture and spiritual memory.

Keywords: Urbanization process; Post-industrial era; Northeastern oil painting; Transformation of artistic language.

1. Introduction

As an important industrial and cultural region of China, the contemporary oil painting creations in Northeast China profoundly reflect the dramatic transformation of social structures. Under the dual pressures of urbanization and the changes of the post-industrial era, artists in this land keenly capture and respond to the complex problems presented by the times. On one hand, the reconstruction of urban and rural structures prompts a shift in artistic perspectives from grand narratives to the individual lives and daily textures. Artists represented by Lin Zejun and Li Dafang employ diverse languages such as 'public images' and 'irony' to explore expressions that bring art closer to reality within the 'new urban language[1]'. On the other hand, the disintegration of the planned economy and industrial adjustments lead to the disappearance of the working class and their living spaces, giving rise to a pervasive 'post-industrial nostalgia' in the works of artists like Zhao Xiaojia and Cui Guotai, whose depictions of abandoned factories and collective confusion carry a reflection on the lost industrial civilization and a contemplation of spiritual fractures.

2. The Urbanization Process

With the development of the times, the creative context of Northeast Chinese painting has transformed in the new century. Artists' visual expression of nostalgia for Northeast China has gradually shifted from a predominant focus on macro narratives to a close and intimate micro depiction that illustrates the broader through the specific[2]. The subjects of portrayal have also transitioned from the grand scenes of the construction period to records of everyday life, showcasing the "subtle nostalgia within daily scenes." During this period, the style of works has evolved from celebrating collective spirit to expressing individual spirit, thereby narrowing the distance between art and life. Art no longer merely conveys

idealized grand visions; it is also capable of delving into ordinary life to present "individual spirit" and "emotional variations." Since the advent of the new century, the creative context of painting in the Northeast region has undergone significant transformation. The visual expression by artists regarding the theme of "nostalgia" has progressively shifted from a focus on grand narratives to a more nuanced micro perspective. The subjects depicted have likewise transformed from grand scenes of construction to recordings of daily life, presenting "subtle nostalgia within daily scenes."

The style of works during this period shifted from the celebration of collective spirit to the expression of individual spirit, bringing art closer to life. Art no longer merely conveys grand visions of ideals but delves deeply into the changes of individual spirit and emotion. With the advancement of urbanization, the gap between urban and rural areas gradually narrows, significantly improving the quality of life for rural residents. Lin Zejun's work "The Watch of Happiness Series - Journey of Happiness" vividly depicts a warm scene of an ordinary rural family of three on a trip: in the corner of the background is a hint of the protagonist's rural background, while the brand-new motorcycle and the stuffed toys in the basket reflect the enhancement of material life in the countryside. The use of light in this work is particularly striking, with the warm glow of the setting sun casting a light on the faces of the characters, creating an atmosphere of family happiness. The warm hues of the sunset are contrasted with cooler tones, allowing the expressions on the protagonist's face to reveal the sense of joy found in everyday life, illuminated by the interplay of light and shadow.

The development of cities has provided people with diverse ways to understand, interpret, and express their emotions about the world. In an era where the audience for popular culture is increasingly vast, Li Dafang chooses to integrate traditional oil paintings with the form of 'public imagery' to express emotional depth in his art. He employs still images to represent the dynamic nature of film, such as mimicking the

freeze-frame moments of a movie screen in his oil paintings, even recreating subtitles from the films within his works. He also makes use of the intuitive characteristics inherent in public imagery, employing irony to address themes closely tied to everyday life, directly engaging the mental activities of viewers, thus bridging the gap between ordinary people and gallery art, ultimately attracting a larger audience that appreciates art. Li Dafang's expression of themes does not merely replicate or display 'public imagery'; instead, he 'substitutes the beams and alters the columns' of the concept of 'public imagery', achieving a critique of imagery through critical representation, conveying the ironic meaning of the works through a more sophisticated artistic approach.

Li Wei skillfully employs the artistic technique of using the "deviation," "contingency," and "uncertainties of unknown factors" inherent in the small and everyday elements within the imagery to provoke disruptive narrative plots. He also expresses reflective thought stemming from the reconstruction of inherent impressions or the disruption of order through a micro-narrative approach, utilizing the mundane traces of daily life in his artwork. The evolution of eras in his paintings prompts continuous contemplation of "identity transformation." Li Shuchun, from the perspective of an educator, portrays the special significance of the "graduation season" for students. The oil painting "To Youth" centers on the themes of "time and youth," focusing on the transformation of individual identity. The painter intentionally adopts a method that diminishes the realistic depiction of figures in order to convey and create a unique atmosphere of "timelessness" during this special moment of graduation. Northeastern artists, drawing from everyday life as their subject, incorporate diverse painting styles to express a "personalized" artistic concept, which involves an analysis, reflection, and even a subjective construction of life, thereby opening up a new urban narrative in their artistic practice[3].

3. Post-Industrial Myths

The myth of post-industrialism serves as an important creative context for Northeast painting, primarily referring to the profound reflections of Northeast artists on the era, homeland, and future through their works. Since the reform and opening up, the economy of Northeast China experienced a decline at one point. In 2002, the per capita GDP rankings of various provinces were released, revealing unsatisfactory results for Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang, placing them at the 8th, 10th, and 13th positions nationally. This marked a fall from being one of the country's most developed regions to a mid-level status, accompanied by the emergence of the 'Northeast Phenomenon', leading to a gradual transition of the Northeast region's social culture into the post-industrial era. Between 1990 and 2012, the population engaged in the secondary industry in Shenyang[4] decreased from 1.747 million to 1.22 million, while the population involved in state-owned and collective enterprises plummeted from 2.224 million to 722,000. Market-oriented reforms accelerated the disintegration of the original planned economy system, resulting in the gradual dismantling of the urban spaces constructed under the dominance of the traditional working class, which provided a realistic foundation for the presentation of urban planning and transformation themes in regional landscape painting. This social transition has also further stimulated the working class's historical memory regarding the 'organic city and its rise and fall'. Unlike previous urban decline caused by population migration, the

social structure and cultural origins of Northeast China are primarily influenced by external forces, such as colonial economies and planned systems. While these external forces once facilitated regional economic prosperity, the lack of endogenous factors has resulted in a development that is characterized by phases and discontinuity. Currently, state-owned enterprises and factories are gradually withdrawing from people's daily lives. Although residents express a recognition and nostalgia for the glorious industrial civilization of the past through 'industrial heritage' landscapes, it is challenging to truly evoke a collective resonance regarding the social structure of that time. Simultaneously, the historical identity and actual foundation of Northeast cities are increasingly being replaced by the logic of consumerism and the aestheticization of space.

The social environment at the beginning of the reform and opening-up era played a crucial role in the transformation of painting themes in the Northeast region. Along with the changes in the economic system, artists began to rethink social ideologies, allowing painting subjects to gradually transition from the glorification of collectivism during the planned economy of the 1950s and 1960s to reflections and reminiscences of past industrial splendor against a post-industrial backdrop[5]. As creators of visual art, artists bear the responsibility to reflect reality and inner worlds through visual language. The structural changes in agriculture and industry brought about by reform and opening-up not only reshaped people's lifestyles but also shifted artistic themes from idealistic narratives to a focus on realist concerns. The artistic creations during this stage placed a greater emphasis on the authentic representation of contemporary society, with emotions evolving from fervent collective appeals to expressions of individual emotions under diverse ideological influences. With the advancement of urbanization, various social contradictions gradually surfaced, prompting a widespread interest in the memory of industry within the art community, thus making industrial-themed artworks a significant direction in artistic creation at that time[6].

The northeastern region was endowed with the identity of the 'firstborn of the republic' during the 'industrial era,' embodying a collective value orientation that served as an important symbol of the area's cultural spirit. However, in the early 1990s, with the transformation of the economic system, this aesthetic ideal centered on struggle and dedication gradually became marginalized. Artistic works began to shift from celebrating industrial glory to depicting the decline of factories and the realities faced by laid-off workers, presenting a visual transition from idealism to realism. The social pains brought about by reforms triggered artists to reflect on and revisit the 'industrial era.' Zhang Xiaoling[7] once pointed out that the artistic creations of the 1980s were filled with passion and idealism, whereas in the 1990s, such sentiments gradually waned, leading to a diminishing pursuit of industrial ideals in the creative process. At this time, artists moved away from rigid depictions of specific historical periods and began to focus more on the bursts of vitality and dynamism in social development, thereby constructing a new context for visual expression.

The representative artworks from this period include Zhao Xiao-jia's "Lonely Factory," Cui Guo-tai's "Industrial Ruins" series, Dong Xi-chun's "Existence" series, Huang Ya-qi's "Sealed Memories" series, and Yang Ye's "Old Factory" series, among others. These paintings, which center around industrial themes, convey the complexities of the post-

industrial era. In Wang Jia-zeng's oil painting "Industrial Diary No. 224," the most advanced achievements of this industrial city, which people were previously admiring, suddenly become symbols of desolation today. Individuals peer through telescopes, looking around and searching, yet they find no entrance to the future. The artwork expresses the confusion people feel about the future as they navigate the post-industrial age. Oil painter Guo Xiao-guang's piece "Changing Scenes, Declining Landscapes" serves as an outlet for the artist's visceral emotions. Through the use of brushstrokes, colors, and lines as mediums for expression, he interprets an abandoned factory that has faded from public view. The artist communicates a roaring and struggling emotion through artistic language, evoking nostalgia for the industrial era and articulating a sense of 'longing for complexity' in the nostalgia for Northeast China[8].

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that Northeast Chinese oil painting profoundly reflects the dramatic changes in social structure through the evolution of artistic language within the dual contexts of urbanization and post-industrial transformation. The process of urbanization has prompted artists to shift from grand narratives of collectivism to micro-expressions of individuality: Lin Zejun presents the transformations of material life through everyday scenes, Li Dafang dismantles artistic barriers with 'public imagery' and irony, Li Wei captures the uncertainties of life, and Li Shuchun explores the permanence of identity transformation, collectively constructing a 'new urban language' that focuses on individual experiences. Meanwhile, the collapse of the planned economy and industrial decline has generated a deep 'post-industrial myth,' with painters using symbols of decaying factories and disoriented crowds to point directly at the spiritual void left by the disappearance of industrial civilization, expressing nostalgic emotions with vigorous brushstrokes. This thematic evolution from collective celebration to individual concern,

and then to a gaze upon ruins, is essentially a visual footnote to the social transformation in Northeast China: the retreat of the working class, the encroachment of consumerism upon industrial spaces, and the processes of fractured and reconstructed historical memory are transformed into a visually epic narrative with critical power in art. As a result, Northeast Chinese oil painting transcends regional limitations and elevates into a spiritual atlas that records the pains of the era and reconstructs cultural identity.

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