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INK GAMES

by RA Suri

Ink Games
Retrospective Exhibition of Dai Guangyu
IFA Gallery, Shanghai

The recent retrospective exhibition of the seminal Chinese performance artist, Dai Guangyu, proved to the one of the foremost events of the winter season in the sphere of contemporary fine art in the Shanghai area. The Chengdu native, known as a core figure for the subversive 86' movement, has not failed in his incessant pursuit of the question of the instance of performance, versatility and innovations which shatter form, in whatever direction.

Ink has become the symbolic reference of the artist, as his dynamic and tangential paintings, installation and opening performance lent witness to. One of the central works, where a suspended vessel allows ink to slowly fall in drops down upon an earthen mass molded as a replica of the geographical surface of China proved to act as a pivotal action by the artist. The ink saturated the soil, the mass gradually become an amorphic mass of black filth and near merged with the underlying Xuan Zhi (exquisite handmade paper) which lay beneath the original creation. The transition of ink, soil and paper from separate identifiable materials to that of one entire new combination was brilliantly lit and the painstaking transformation gave the exhibition a metaphysical dimension. The poetics of displacement, time and transience were given voice to in an action which denotes the physical and psychological stratosphere of the PRC.

While less engaging installations, such as the white clothing depicting scenes derived from traditional Shan Shui, were less effective in their dramatic effect, the exhibition remained coherent in due recognition to the curatorial stance of Berenice Angremy. From a rather

academic interpretation of the creative history of the autodidact, Angremy posits the importance of the symbolic reference and transitional, whether in the legacy of Chinese art & literature to that of contemporary fine art. The majority of works being in-situ creations held the breath of poetical reference and a definite dynamism found itself in the presence of the newly conceived works.

Geomancy, a photographic series based on the artists actions and performances, whether upon the frozen skin of the land of the nation or waters encased in ice, was a retroactive reference to a time when Dai distinguished himself with both irony and without reserve in adapting characters as symbols themselves and gave birth to a visual dichotomy which employed visual landscapes as the “found”. The remnants of his actions left written in broad ink calligraphy upon whatever random place.

One curious installation proved to be the sole detractive element, as while the national scandal surrounding the poisoning and loss of life accredited to the use of melamine in milk manufacturing was no doubt poignant, the presence of the two plastic infants left to imbibe milk via the repetitive cycle of injections at the hands of a live performer in disguise as a hospital worker was inconsistent with the majority of the work found throughout four floors. Rather than poetical and symbolic, the work was bold & sensational. Contrastive, yet the aversion created by the visually repulsive performance broke with the continuity and one doubts as to why it was specifically included.

Nonetheless, Ink Games has shown that the artists a priori attention to material, versatility and ability to transpose himself within whatever newly given space have not lessened with time’s passage. With ink as a fluid reference, the schemata and subversive course of history as contemporary China and art have come to reflect one another in a distinct parallel of illusion and paradox.

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