
Deep And Silent Space Nguyen Thanh Binh

Deep and silent...the space in Nguyen Thanh Binh's works is etherealized. Persons and things – visual objects – are detached from their 'context' and repositioned in a dreamland without perspectives and horizons. On this background of illusory reality, colours are reduced into white or yellowish patches, and the black contours of a girl's hair often appear in only a few strokes of the brush. The dissolution of things into the background space rends the work similar to 'a vocal harmony', sparsely marked by the acute redness of an apple or candlelight as points of emphasis. The light, as if obstructed by translucent glass, is diffused over the whole composition. Nguyen Thanh Binh describes this characteristic of his paintings. To make whiteness, which is basically not a colour, capable of all gradations, vibrate into infinity, and to make flat and monotonous space immense or bottomless in the imagination of viewers...'

The paintings of Nguyen Thanh Binh form a 'pure' two-dimensional space, in harmony with any kind of walls which they are hung on, whether it is a modern architecture or a simple lodge, because they do not demand the support of an exterior aesthetic atmosphere. The work is detached and independent from the environment, because it is by itself an autonomous aesthetic discourse, and in this way similar in character to the age-old arts of the East.

Personal, quiet, humble, but ever serene, such paintings could find themselves at home in innumerable lifestyle and cultural spaces. They are there, harmonious with the 'context', but remain themselves both rustic and luxurious. They may decorate your everyday life, and may also lead you into a strange dreamland.

Nguyen Thanh Binh's style of oil-painting obeys the techniques of classical art, but his strokes and slashes create a double effect. With familiar and plain shapes, even with patterned lines, his subjects are transformed from reality, as if appearing from a curtain of mist. Whether with a patch of monochrome with few gradations reminiscent of a Japanese woodcut, or with only a few splashes of paint, or the precise shadow-forming from the palette knife reminding us of Cezanne's style, the works of Nguyen Thanh Binh evoke a feeling of ecstasy and inspiration. The brush stroke or the knife slash on the canvas is done one and one only, and never revisited, in the same way as in Chinese painting and calligraphy, where the black ink marks and characters on white silk or on rice-paper are drawn only one.

But the distinctive heritage in Nguyen Thanh Binh's works is unmistakably the traditional folk-art of Vietnam. As he has confessed: 'Since time immemorial, Vietnam has produced the folk-art traditions of Dong Ho and Hang Trong, mass produced and on sale in the market during the Lunar New Year. Dong Ho paintings are woodcut prints made on Poonah-paper sprinkled with horizontal filaments of sparkling ground seashell. The subjects of this folk-art are generally simple and derived from everyday life. The colors are few and primary, the composition is well-proportioned, the drawing not complicated or elaborate. If you put one of my typical oil-paintings with a floating background beside a Dong Ho folk-art painting, you will easily recognize the link...'

Using the techniques of oil-painting – a Western material – to imitate the poonah-paper and sea-shell effect, the paintings of Nguyen Thanh Binh sparkle a serene and rural beauty, yet his subjects – from schoolgirls' in white tunics with conical hats to those more familiar to Western eyes such as ballet dancers and violinists – always create a fancifully exotic atmosphere.

He does not strive for surprising effects but sincerely tries to appeal to the viewer's emotions. His brush strokes and knife slashes may occasionally appear haphazard, but they are in fact the result of a long process of practice and distillation in an attempt to grasp the spirit of things. The painter and the objects become one – though they still always remain there, a rectangular patch of oils on the white wall.

The double effect of Nguyen Thanh Binh's works resides in the artist's feelings and also in the materials and the manner of their application. A magic reality is born from a sculpted reality as in an escape. Oils and canvas from the West resonate with an artist's eyes and hands from the East. The dexterity and maturity resonate with a free-flowing brush and an exquisite mind. It is the appeal of such a sweet marriage in his paintings that attracts us. Simple, but overflowing with feeling – his deep and silent spaces...

By Thien Lang, Art writer

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