
Artist Le Kinh Tai and 'To He'

The title of the exhibition 'To He', which is also the 8th solo exhibition of artist Le Kinh Tai, inspires my reflection on the ontological aspect of the artist himself. 'To he' (toy figurine) is a traditional toy for children in Vietnam that is made from glutinous rice powder in form of edible figurine such animals, flowers or characters in folk stories. 'To he' was made and sold mostly on festivals, especially the Tet (Nula New Year) and the Trung Thu (Mid-Autumn Festival), which are Vietnamese children's favorites.

By the act of naming his show 'To He', it seems that Le Kinh Tai would more or less aspire to make a metaphor of his work as an artist. In this metaphorical peruse, his own artwork and career are referred to the practice and product of a traditional artisan, who has not only never been isolated to life, but also by his talent and creativity, gives joy, imagination and passion to the world.

Definitely, seeing the series of artworks in this exhibition, which includes 25 paintings (the biggest is 200cm x 500cm) and 9 sculptures (Le Kinh Tai himself insists to call his 9 sculptures as 9 'To He'), one cannot help admiring, firstly to his working efforts, and secondly to the joy that these artworks are able to give.

Right at this moment that the fundamental metaphor of art as a magic wand which could immediately turn its audience into the children by just one single touch seems to be perfectly manifested. In the world which is day by day becoming older and uglier, the ability of becoming a child seems to be a necessary need, even a vital demand for us to survive.

Becoming a child, in a sense, is to return to our ability of being surprised, which we seem to forget as we get matured. Becoming a child is also to come back to the magic of life, to our ability of being moved deeply by the little things that our grown-up minds may consider to be too frivolous to be noticed

In these new paintings and sculptures of Lê Kinh Tai, the colors: Green, Blue, Yellow, Orange, Black and White etc. seem to be no longer themselves anymore, just like the rice powder in the hand of the talented To he's artisans, is no longer itself but lively animals and characters. Lê Kinh Tai's colors, by a magic way, now become vivid, resounded, sometime warmly, and sometime humorously. Even the texts written down directly by artist on the surface of some paintings, also by a magic way, no longer make any literature meaning but transform into the visual elements, without which the whole compositions cannot be fully complete as they are and by which, release such a deep joy for us.

Here I would like to go further in reading the 'To he' metaphor in terms of its creating of a peripheral joy in comparison with the world of modern toys, which now, in Vietnam, seems to be invading more and more the entertaining world of kids

Seen from a certain perspective, the center/periphery structure is not only a passive one. In other words, in this structure, sometimes the peripheral is peripheral not because it is forced to be, but because it actively chooses to be. I would see the situation of being peripheral of an artisan making 'To he' as his active decision and not his passive thrownness (Geworfenheit). Similarly, in looking at a painter using brush and canvas to make his art in Vietnam now, on a background of an art scene where so many changes, not only in cultural and social foundations, but even in the very tools and methods of making art, are occurring, we must have a comparative feeling in comparing his with To He artisan's practice, and by which consider his situation now as peripheral.

The question here is, why, regardless of convenient, modern and highly available world of toys which now invades all super markets in Vietnam's cities, regardless of the more and more dramatic and heroic games for computers, somewhere in the cities we still incidentally encounter a To he-artisan who is passionately and patiently shaping the colorful 'To he', and around him there are still the kids with their happily enthusiastic and curious eyes, which are following admiringly his skillful hands. The answer here, to me, is more than simple. It is because of the superabundance of the ready-made toys or games, highly modern and convenient, that now we are aware of the end of returning to more innocent and pure joy of our childish time with which we are not tempted to play the role of a superman or a hero saving the world (as in a popular scenario for modern toys or computer games), but re-meet our ability of being surprised to the world. And now we also suddenly understand totally and appreciatively that it is the To he artisan who is aware of the importance of this kind of joy, and this is also the very reason that in our now modern and boring world, he still wandering quietly somewhere.

The paintings and sculptures of Le Kinh Tai in his solo exhibition 'To he', to me, contains the power of making such a pure joy. Similar to the traditional artisan, Le Kinh Tai, in his passionate process of working to create a world of pure joys of seeing for us, also shows his active decision of being peripheral to some ways, of practicing art around him now, which seem to be considered fashionable, but in fact totally faked and senseless.

This decision of Le Kinh Tai, in this case, illustrated convincingly by his wonderful world of shapes and colors, to me, even is ontological one in terms of being able to locate the real meaning of the fundamental joy of human beings, which can only being reached thanks to our ability of being surprised childishly; an ability that luckily, still potentially remains somewhere in our souls.

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Note: "To-he": a handmade folk toy, is made from rice flour mixed with color, it is very vivid, eye-catching by shape and color;

Source: book 'Le Kinh Tai - To He'