
The Art is Not a Game

30/12/2016 by Pham Long

One of the outstanding faces of contemporary art in Ho Chi Minh City after 2000, artist Le Kinh Tai has a unique art style: his "human" - "animals" characters are rich in instinct and the symbols of human philosophy of contemporary life, sometimes containing many abstract signals that are difficult to grasp.

Owning a powerful brush style, bright color palette, generous mind and innovative thinking, especially sensitive temperament and passionate emotions with endless sources of topics filtered from his diverse life experience, he has composed paintings and statues with a very clear concept': "I want to paint the inner beauty of people where only I can find myself and understand what I am thinking and pondering. On the occasion he brought 2 large paintings to a group exhibition in September 2016 in Hanoi, we had a frank and sincere talk revolving around the artist's life, work story and his personal view about the Fine Art innovation period.



Portrait of Le Kinh Tai

Sir, when did you care about painting and why did you choose to become an artist?

When I was 12 years old, I went casually to a bookstore near my house. I bought books entitled: ' Fine Arts Creation 1978', ' Fine Arts Creation 1979', work arts like as Nguyen Sang with 'The enemy burned my village', 'Saigon self-defense of Hoang Tram', 'Bamboo' by Tran Dinh Tho, 'Bong' statues by plaster of Nguyen Hai, so on, fascinated me, and in those years I began to tinker with crayons, Gouache boxes of "Painting workshop Vietnam Fine Arts".

After graduating from high school, my father wanted me to enter the University of Economics, but I went to Saigon took an art exam to fulfill my dream of becoming an artist.

Do you remember the first exhibition you participated in?

In 1992, when I was a first-year student, I bravely submitted an abstract painting, I painted it in my break time, not a lesson, to 'Saigon Tourist Fine Arts', then the painting was selected and hung at the HCMC Fine Arts Association, also it was the first painting in my life sold immediately after the exhibition. In February 2006, after 9 years of fine arts graduation, I opened my first solo exhibition entitled 'Something about life', which were the two happiest moments I could not forget.

Is it easy for you to compose art works?

The first few years after graduation, it was extremely difficult for me, I did not know where to start when standing in front of the canvas without instructor like in school, often when I drew a satisfied painting, there are several paintings removed. Four years later, after many incidents from my work, family, children, I didn't consider painting as a job, I rushed to make money from designing, decor, at this stage I often wrote more than paint, writing to relieve pressure, to love myself, my life, when bored or even to enjoy. However, I did not easily abandon my desire to become an artist since I was a child. I started trying to use the paint to "write" on canvases with drawings, with more conceptual words than finding pure aesthetic. When engrossing in work, as an inertia, I forget all the rules of coordinating colors or specified layout made me a headache, what I created, it makes me happy, it mainly comforted me, I do not think I'm painting.

Until one day, I realized that the individuality in painting originates from the life of the artist, this is what I understand best, what makes me feel the most comfortable and happy when I am liberated out of the body...Just like that, every night after time work to make money, I spend a lot of time refining that I wrote, understood about worldview in life, it's easy for me to convert it on canvas. Round twenty years, until now , honestly as for me, there is nothing more confident than standing in front of the canvas, I seem not to paint, I seem to directly and honestly talk to myself about life, about the ego of 'animal - human' through the brush to create the figures or shapes that I 'see' and face them every day',



Le Kinh Tai, Pre-eagle, 2015, oil chalk, oil on canvas, 200cm x 300cm

In your paintings, it always appears characters with half-human and half-animal, why?

I have always assured and bet on myself that there are two things inside me, a part of 'human' and a part of 'animal'. I feel happier and more love with bizarre thoughts, so I paint, just simple like that.

Why do in your painting always appear words, sentences in Vietnamese, when in English. Is it a code or symbol?

In my habit, I always write what I want to "state" before painting, then it takes some days or a lot of days to visualize what I want to paint into a shape that can cover all my content. However, while I am painting, that shape is not enough to convey, because many new ideas suddenly came around the main topic, like the voices in my head urge me, so I rushed up on the painting, sometimes in Vietnamese, sometimes in English, when in short and when in long sentences, whatever feel convenient and fast to catch up with my thoughts and my "fast action", that I do. At such times, I express my personality more clearly.

On the exhibition "Open the Door" - 30 years of Fine Arts during the innovation period (1986-2016) at Vietnam Fine Arts Museum in September 2016, would you please let me know your personal ideas about "innovation" and the period called "innovation" in Fine Art of our country over the past few decades?

Personally, I see in our country, people have abused the word "Innovation" too much, in any field, and after many people respond that is only "new bottles of old wine" or vice versa.

It is just a bell of self-encouragement, self-comfort, then sinks and falls into oblivion.

If you talk about "Innovation in art"? Need to understand more clearly what needs to do is to innovate in creative thinking, don't expect to change the morphology in artists' works, need to renovate the management mechanism of cultural and fine art ways, even innovation in national art development investment, those are worth discussed. I think that, innovation in art, it is not just saying and to do that, but it needs a specific strategy in the aesthetic education of the people, raising the aesthetic awareness in school education, so that can have the right to look forward to more 10 years, 20 years of innovation in art.

Vietnamese Fine Art had famous names from primitive period, when the French blew wind into Vietnam such as Nguyen Gia Tri, To Ngoc Van, Nguyen Tuong Lan, Tran Van Can, etc. Next generations like Bui Xuan Phai, Nguyen Tu Nghiem, Duong Bich Lien Nguyen Sang or Hoang Tram, Tran Luu Hau, Luu Cong Nhan ... We have the right to proud and honor of that, as well as responsible for preserving their precious works, beside true value from the works, it is also show Indochina fine arts period. It was national pride, It is the peak of 'golden age' of national fine arts, but if we only based on the normative beauty of this period, to mechanically evaluate art development or search for new seeds with breath of a new era, it like as art managers still do, that show clearly by awards in national art exhibition, what do we think when compositions called "innovation" always seem to have the same idea?

A generation of people often reminded and considered it was the next "golden age" of Vietnamese art: "open-door period of fine arts", someone regretted about "golden age" in the early years of 90s of Vietnamese fine art, it was the transition from the subsidized "ask-give" mechanism, which stagnated many of the artists' creative thinking, to "market mechanism", the compositions referred to as "perverted", or "hybridized" anymore, many authors are intoxicated with the new mechanism to creative composing; Objectively, this was the most "good time" for many artists, on the one hand, "the rich people" didn't worry about "fight bourgeois" anymore, they invested and even speculated in front of the waves of foreign tourists buying Vietnamese paintings as an elegant, sophisticated hobby ... Artists "survived" because of the need for essential materials changed after the "poverty problem" pervaded the country under the subsidy mechanism, they sold their works quite cheaply ... Personally, I would like to say honestly, if regretting, I do not regret about this "golden age" art trend, I regret of its market value consequences, that last until today more ... Sorrowfully and comically, in terms of the art market, if that is the "golden age" of Vietnamese art, in my opinion, this time should not have had better.

Returning to the topic "Open Door" exhibition, it considered as "comparing the chopsticks and choosing the flagpole" of three curators, very difficult for them. Objectively, in the list of 50 artist, there are many

artists has far-reaching influence on the next generation, it is an indisputable recognition, but in my opinion, the list is both redundancy and very shortage.

There are many chances to contact with contemporary art in the region and the world, would you please comment on the trends of contemporary Vietnamese art standing in the context of regional and world Fine arts?

I often go to international art fairs in Asean countries, recently, it was Art Basel in Hong Kong in March. Honestly, in my opinion, besides artists like Henri Matisse, Yoya Kusama, Botero, Picasso, Miro etc. ... made the history of world painting ... I think there are many Vietnamese contemporary artists have works that really merged with new flow and new trend, it is no less comparable to the works of Asian and Pacific artists presented here. But why is there always a shortage of Vietnamese galleries attending the fair? I think the cost of attending is the biggest barrier.

Knowing that your painting price is one of the top highest selling price Vietnam today, would you please give your personal opinion about the creative spirit in composing when the market face with trend of commercialization and fierce competition?

If you work in art, your head only think about money, money may come and may not. If you work in art, your mind only thinks about profits and losses when investing composing, money may come or may not. If you work in art, your heart is full of jealousy, enmity, your composing will depress, restrictive, because paintings are human, money will also hate you and not visiting (laughs).

So what is your opinion about art in general?

Art is not a game, it is extremely harsh. Art always derives or updates the latest thinking possible, from the mind to the behavior in art need to be careful

How do you evaluate the role of individual artist in cultural and artistic life?

It is the responsibility of an artist to convey humanistic message from his experience life through the work. The highest purpose of artworks is serving spiritual food for the people in that era. New aesthetic values generate in the same era, can be welcomed or doubted, after all, the values exist forever, must be summarized and recognized from the next generation.

Thank you I wish you have good health to continue bringing life delicious and nutritious spiritual dishes at the right price!

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