

Emotional pursuit in landscape sketching: interview with Wang Keju

Jia Guozheng^{1, a, *}, Liu Zhi^{1, b,}

¹Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House, 7th-8th Floors, Publishing House Building, 35 Xi kang Road, Heping District, Tianjin, 300051, China

a.jiaguozheng_19820309@gmail.com, b.liuzhi00_412715@163.com

***Corresponding Author**

Abstract: Wang Keju insists on creating on-site in landscape sketching, emphasizing the close connection between sketching and creation. He believes that sketching is not only a form of practice but also a process of integrating emotion with nature. Through on-site sketching, he is able to capture the direct emotions brought by the natural scenery and incorporate them into his paintings. In his creation, Wang Keju focuses on the sense of order and rhythm in the paintings, as well as emotional expression. He draws on the order and completeness of Western classical painting to pursue a balance in the internal structure and rhythmic order of the paintings. Although he will not completely move towards abstraction, he will explore different artistic pursuits in different periods. His works reflect both his interest in the state of natural life and his careful construction of the structure and order of the paintings.

Keywords: Landscape sketching, On-site creation, Emotional expression, Nature and art, Abstraction and representation

1. Introduction

This article is an interview about the landscape sketching practice of the painter Wang Keju. Wang Keju is renowned for his on-site sketching approach, which he considers a vital means of integrating emotion with nature. He believes that sketching allows him to capture the immediate emotions evoked by natural scenery and incorporate them into his paintings. Wang emphasizes that there is no gap between sketching and creation; the key lies in the artist's ability to coordinate emotions with the treatment of natural scenery. In his creative process, Wang focuses on the sense of order and rhythm in his paintings, as well as emotional expression. He draws inspiration from the order and completeness of Western classical painting to achieve a balance in the internal structure and rhythmic order of his works. His paintings reflect both his interest in the state of natural life and his meticulous construction of pictorial structure and order.

2. Sketching: From practice to emotional expression

Q: I've heard that you insist on sketching on-site. You choose a location, set up your easel, and either complete the painting or discard it if it doesn't work out. Moreover, your paintings are usually large in size. Nowadays, there are very few contemporary artists who still work in this way. What is the significance of this approach for your creative process?

Wang: In the past, I regarded landscape sketching simply as a form of practice. Initially, I just wanted to experiment with landscape painting in a very pure way. Once I got into it, I discovered many unexpected elements. For example, when you transform natural scenery into the language of painting, lines, colors, and shapes acquire emotional attributes once they are detached from their natural characteristics (the lines drawn when one is calm are completely different from those drawn when one is agitated). Additionally, there is a sense of order and rhythm in painting, and these elements all have their own rules of combination.

Since 1997, I have been painting landscapes for a full decade, and this process has been built up gradually over time. In fact, there is no gap between sketching and creation. The key is to have your own pursuit and to coordinate emotions with the treatment of natural scenery. Wang Yidong once copied Ingres' paintings, and he said, "Ingres' paintings are too far from reality!" At that time, we didn't quite understand.

Ingres is so realistic, isn't he? But actually, the distance between his work and natural objects is particularly large. He has his own rules for shaping treatment, and that is creation.

The advantage of sketching on-site over painting from photos is that natural scenery can provide you with more reference information. You can also paint from photos, but it is never as emotionally intense as being there in person. The sense of being on-site and looking at photos in the studio are completely different experiences, and this emotion is very important to me. The urgency of sketching lies in the rapid use of brushstrokes, which also brings emotion into the painting. Additionally, it is quite challenging to generalize, process, simplify, and strengthen the painting itself. Especially when handling large-scale paintings, you need a sense of control. You must have a corresponding arrangement of the picture structure, but at the same time, you cannot lose the feelings that the object gives you.

In fact, the process of sketching is also a process of accumulating through tempering. It is like practicing calligraphy. At first, you practice regular script, writing it neatly and accurately. Once you reach a certain level, you can let go and write running script or cursive script, naturally infusing emotion into it. Mountains are towering, plants are gentle, different objects have different characteristics, and different regions and seasons give you different feelings, which will force you to adopt different treatment methods to deal with them.

3. Drawing inspiration from classical painting



Figure 1 Wang Keju, Spring Tide, Oil on Canvas, 160cm×180cm, 2013

Q: Your paintings seem to capture a kind of naive elegance in the simplification of forms, along with a strong sense of tension and expressiveness. These qualities appear to resonate with some intrinsic characteristics of traditional Chinese painting. Is that something you've been aiming for?

Wang: People always talk about the "Eastern spirit," but where exactly does the magic of traditional Chinese painting come from? I've always wanted to understand how the brushwork and the sense of artistic conception in Chinese painting are created. Many people are exploring and trying to integrate these elements, and while some have done it very well, others have only scratched the surface. I think it's more about the principles of painting and aesthetic orientation, not just the effect of brush and ink. My paintings also include a lot of line work and elements of wash techniques, which can be found in Western painting as well.

What has really benefited me the most is my study of Western classical painting and its application in teaching practice. In classical painting, the order and completeness of the composition, as well as the use of various contrasting elements, are impeccable. Usually, when people look at Western classical paintings, they easily see the realistic and representational aspects, but they don't immediately see the hidden potential

within. In fact, the most abstract elements are found in classical painting, which is also the most meticulous in using abstract factors.

Q: That's quite an unusual perspective.

Wang: The use of abstract elements in classical painting is something modern painting can't compare to. Modern painting has only taken or continued some aspects of the technical elements of classical traditional painting. For example, in modern painting, Bonnard's work is very traditional. His attention to detail is comparable to classical painting, but it's a bit more verbose. Matisse's paintings are very meticulous and traditional, but the expression is more direct, and the abstract elements are more apparent. However, Picasso broke free from the constraints of time, space, and natural forms, creating an entirely new visual style. He also gradually disrupted the completeness and order of traditional painting. Artists like de Kooning and Braque focused on irrationality, emphasizing the process and emotional expression in painting, gradually moving away from the rationality and perfection of traditional painting.

4. The fusion of emotion and nature

Q: It seems that you are increasingly pursuing an internal structural form and rhythmic order in your paintings. Will this eventually lead you to abstraction?

Wang: There will still be changes, but I won't completely move towards abstraction. Change is certain because every time I face a new painting, my feelings are different. I believe that in different periods, there will definitely be different pursuits. How it changes and where it leads are all unknown.

Q: Is the emotion you now convey in your paintings still a deep affection for the countryside?

Wang: People often say that, but I myself haven't deliberately or consciously done so. The sentiment of nostalgia was mainly reflected in my earlier paintings. The landscapes I paint now and the so-called feeling of nostalgia are not the same as before. It's just that when I face nature and feel the state of life in mountains, rivers, and plants, I am purely interested in the state of nature. I think it would be a bit of a stretch to interpret it as nostalgia. Sketching is a way for me to convey my ideas through the objects that interest me. Natural scenery is just a medium and reference that inspires and prompts me to express my emotions through the language of painting.

5. Order and refinement in complexity



Figure 2 Wang Keju, Trickling Autumn Rain, Oil on Canvas, 120cm×140cm, 2014

Q: It seems that you enjoy depicting relatively complex and intricate subjects and scenes, and you manage to create a sense of structure and order within them. It's often said that "simplicity" is a higher level in art. So, how do you handle this kind of refinement and simplification?

Wang: Morandi is a great example. His works are highly simplified, yet within that simplicity, he finds a lot of richness and variability. From an intuitive perspective, it's about his treatment of forms, his grasp of the interplay between reality and illusion, and his adjustment of subtle color differences. The variations in the strength of the outlines, the rhythm that goes from presence to absence, from strong to weak—it's hard for non-painters to see these nuances. These treatments are actually based on the feelings that the subject evokes, and they involve strengthening, processing, and generalizing those elements. That's where the magic lies.

I'm willing to paint a lot of things because, in fact, I'm bringing order to them. This ordering is a form of simplification and organization. Even if something is originally chaotic, I give it a new order and rhythm. Even though there might be many elements, the painting feels rich but not disordered—that's the kind of control I aim for. I really like simple and generalized compositions, but I don't apply this approach to all my paintings. It depends on my mood and the feelings that the subject provides. If I don't have that feeling, I definitely won't go in that direction.



Figure3 Wang Keju, Returning from Fishing, Oil on Canvas, 160cm×200cm,



Figure 4 Wang Keju, Apricot Blossoms in the Misty Mountains, Oil on Canvas, 160cm×180cm, 2013

6. Conclusion

In Wang Keju's landscape sketching practice, we see an artist's profound understanding of nature and sincere expression of emotion. He insists on sketching on-site, closely integrating the vitality of nature with his own creative emotions. Through the sense of order and rhythm in his paintings, as well as the infusion of emotion, he endows landscape painting with a unique vitality. His works not only display the grandeur and delicacy of nature but also present a unique artistic style through the integration of the spirit of traditional Chinese painting and the order of Western classical painting.

Wang Keju's artistic journey is still one of continuous exploration and progress. Aware of the diversity and variability of art, he maintains an open mindset when facing each painting, pursuing new possibilities. His landscape sketching is not just a depiction of nature but also an expression of inner emotions. Through the dialogue between his painting language and nature, he presents a visual world full of emotion and order. As he says, natural scenery is merely the medium and reference for his emotional expression. What truly touches people's hearts is his pure interest in the state of life and his persistent pursuit of art.