



Monumentality, Solemnness and Daftness

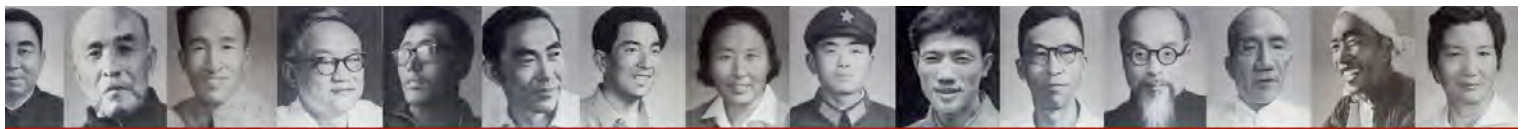
von Wang Min'an

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This large scale of portraits belongs to a monumental domain. Collecting close-up portraits taken during the Cultural Revolution, Xu Weixin enlarges them into immense figurative paintings. Apparently, the source of these photographs has its origins in an extraordinary and turbulent period of history. Xu transforms the monumentality in photographs and creates a new one in paintings. The portraits thus have dual monumentality implications: it is both individual autobiography and collective memory; private as well as national macro political domain; general preservation and also critical reflection. We must ask "how do the dual monumentality implications come to appear in Xu's works?"

We first examine the origin of these pictures. The genesis is people's desire to preserve the memory of how they once looked. Fighting against a transient life in history heartlessly engulfed by the murmuring stream of time, photographs capture a clear image for all time. Like the portrait paintings before photography, pictures play a role as the preservation of memory. Taken at a time when photography was not popular, during the Cultural Revolution pictures were only allowed for important historical events. Unlike the spontaneous and wide-ranging pictures we see today, they were sober, serious and earnest. In the '60s and '70s, being photographed was an unusual experience. It was an eventful experience. Photographed subjects underwent great pressure when facing the camera. The close-up frame had to responsibly demonstrate the significance of the historical moment. Completely banishing entertaining and amusing features that endow today's photography, these pictures, at that particular time in history, excluded the mediocre side of life and were either a recognizable symbol of a political identity or an important historical moment for a single individual. These photographs were impregnated with extraordinary "meaning" and came into existence at a remarkable moment in a life. Doubtlessly these pictures taken during the Cultural Revolution have become a memento in the individual's life. Photographs, capturing the timelessness of the moment, ensure the subject's image is retained for all time.

This is the first implication in monumentality: Since Xu's portraits cannot be detached from these photographs, the paintings ensure their monumental duality. Namely the monumentality of the painting is built upon that in the photography. The monumentality in the photographs belongs to the individual, confining it at a personal level. Due to the grim fact that men are mortal, the subjects survive the eternal history through these photographs. Monumentality in photographs is, therefore, generated by the initiative of the subjects being photographed. At this time, the monumentality is confined to the individual, an inner system. However, the personal monumentality fades away once Xu transforms these photographs into immense paintings. They have moved beyond the monumentality of an individual and become that of collective reflections. The personal monumentality has

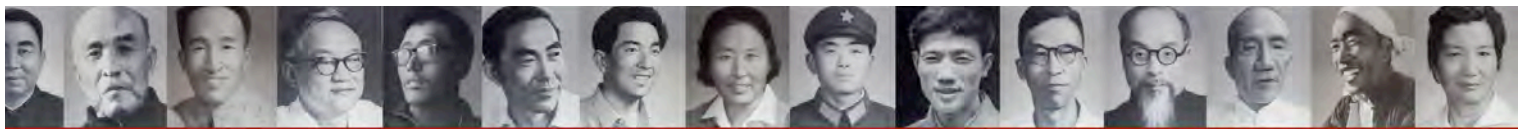


tended to disappear once individual features are reproduced through paintings. Those faces, instead, are caught up with the swirl of the historical as well as the political memory. Individual portraits (those portraits are presented on individual faces) no longer exist as a fragmented moment of the subject's profile, but have become a key component in a historical movement. In other words, individuals in the photographs now have transcended the personal context and become an important component in the social movement. Therefore, the monumentality spills from the personal arena to the social historical realm and becomes the commemoration of an era. Precisely speaking, the monumentality of an era is expressed through the individuals' faces. Accordingly, individuals in the portraits now intrude into social historical memory. Individuals become the core of historical monumentality. Similarly enlarged paintings based on photographs, in this sense, transform the monumentality from personal property into the public domain and turn private memory into a public one.

The painting is solemn, concise and simple once the public monumentality is confirmed. Solemnness is the premise of monumentality. It cannot coexist with frivolity. Frolic comes after frivolity. It is solemnness that recalls history from the silent and remote past. Standing in front of these solemn, serene and huge portraits, a restless historical uproar is felt. It is like the awakening of symphonic music slowly arising and saturating the tranquil space and serene paintings. It is strangely quiet, and yet, restlessly tumultuous. Additionally, these portraits are pure portraits that are freely independent of time, space and history, if removed from the context of their original pictures (if there is any). In fact, the subjects are both substantial and intangible. These unsubstantial subjects, who are beyond the historical contexts, seem to be fraught with historical secrets. These background-free faces seem to imply that they have one. These quiet subjects seem to ceaselessly narrate all the secrets about history.

Why would these enormous portraits narrate the historical secrets, obviously they are unable to talk? These portraits bring us great immediacy in terms of the size and quantity. We have no choice but to listen to their whisperings. Together they form a massive scale that creates meaning in both artistic technique as well as basic sensation. These portraits that are gigantic in terms of size and quantity occupy a commanding position and encompass us like giants. The audience diminished by these immense portraits experience an un-peaceful state of mind. They are neither irrelevant "spectacle" to us nor indifferent or neutral historical figurative paintings. At this point in time, these portraits intrude into our memory and become a part of our knowledge. People must connect to them, absorb them, comprehend them, and listen attentively to them. The subjects in the paintings have stridden from a quiet corner of history as photographs. Now, instead of looking at them, it is literally these subjects in the paintings that look at us and press in on us.

These figures write a very different memoir of their own, though they are bound to the same era. Each memoir is molded into a dramatic personality by the Cultural Revolution. They could be independent or compliant. They might be tactician, follower, historical



creator, historical bearer, hero, ordinary person, comedic genius or tragic character. The element that glues them together is a common historical time. The souls of this historical time unfold from the solemn faces.

Here, the very special time during the Cultural Revolution meets our eyes. Why would we be concerned about the epoch? How would the epoch differ from others? In fact, each era has its own distinctive characteristics, style and freakish nature. No era is mediocre. You can find heroes and clowns in any era. Every era in history is not so different in nature, if looked at from a long-term perspective. In retrospect, history always has an illogical facet. Every era in history enjoys its glamour. Chinese history in the 20th century saw a wave of one dramatic scene after another, one tide followed another. Not one period in history is unimportant. Not one can be completely ignored. I do not mean to deny the importance of the Cultural Revolution. On the contrary, I want to highlight the unique feature of the tragic daftness during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, a time of amazingly comic daftness to us today. The tragic daftness is conveyed in a solemn language in Xu's paintings. Solemnness not only exaggerates but also provides a contrast backdrop to the tragic tonality of daftness. These subjects, people living in this daft era, are producers of the tragic daftness as well as sufferers. Xu puts the subjects together in his own way. The subjects have formed a special network among themselves. They are classic representatives of the era. To some extent, they literally compose the drama. Being placed all over Xu's studio with some of them overlapping each other, these figures have formed an intricate and interesting relationship. As they look at each other, a dialogue unfolds between them. This is the memory of the ten-year-long Cultural Revolution and the dramatic revival of that era.

Why bother to revive the era? In other words, why would we revive the memory through paintings? Let us try to answer the question by quoting Nietzsche. "Now, what purpose is served for contemporary man by the monumental consideration of the past, by busying himself with the classics and rarities of earlier times? He derives from that the fact that the greatness which was once there at all events once was possible and therefore will really be possible once again. Securing the knowledge is therefore useful." It implies that the agonizing has once existed. Therefore, there is the possibility for it to become real again. Securing the knowledge of the agony is still therefore helpful.