

Expression in True Colors, Modernism in a Flexible Manner

Teppeï Soutome has created artworks that feature geometric shapes and colors that remind us of puzzles or building blocks. His style of expression includes not only orthodox painting, but also various mediums ranging from painting with an unusually shaped canvas (e.g. oval or sector), relief, 3D object, installation, photography, and moving images.

The geometrical shapes in his artwork can be classified into two categories: representational figures as shown in “Saturn” (2011) and “Girls” (2011), and abstract figures in “Melancholia” (2013) and “Yellow Field” (2009). The fluctuation between representational and abstract reminds us of modernist arts such as Cubism, Constructivism, German Expressionism, and Orphism, and possesses toy-like functionality that allows viewers to appreciate his artwork actively and playfully.

While traversing various confines such as genre, medium, and representational/abstract, Soutome has conducted a diverse range of activities that cannot be easily pooled together. However, his diversity and abstract expression do not contain a sense of oppression that causes viewers much distress through pretentiousness and profoundness. One of the reasons seems that he employs a bodily sensation he experiences when he composes a painting for all of his artworks, whatever the medium may be.

For example, Soutome’s 3D object comes into existence by converting ready-made furniture into a formative expression through reassembling painted furniture parts and disfurnishing pre-existing segments from their original functions and meanings. As he focuses only on the composition of color and form, the object successfully escapes from the rules and systems connected with traditional sculpture. Also, his photographic works show connections with painting by bleaching the meanings of a particular subject matter and reducing the captured image up to a level of mere color and form.

It seems that his style of artistic creation derives from the openness of the category of art called painting, rather than to say that he is expanding the boundary of painting. While “expansion” is an innovative act that derives from disorganization or declination of preexisting framework, “openness” positively accepts externality by flexibly viewing the definition of painting. From a historical viewpoint, the expansion of the boundary of painting has already accomplished its mission. Soutome’s style is not the expansion, an act of stretching emphatically toward outside. Rather, his artwork diminishes the boundaries between painting and other styles of expression and flows freely over inside and outside of these boundaries.

Soutome has been doubtful about himself being seen as a painter. Because he thinks that if the framework catches up to him, he will be bounded by an area which means he closes his eyes toward the complexity of the real world. For example, in the European Union, free transfer among affiliated countries is allowed and cross-border collaborations have become ordinary. Such a relationship cannot be maintained unless exhibiting a sense of balance concerning negotiation, accepting compromise and halfway measures. Soutome makes it possible to create networks that cross and connect several areas of expressions through deliberate openness and flexibility.

Additionally, Soutome rejects and deconstructs an orthodox development process of artistic creation where an artist tries to create a new artwork based on the creative style of his/her past artworks. This means that he lays an importance on subjective attitude where an artist is always able to choose a completely different option when necessary. Therefore, it is inaccurate to capture the total image of Soutome in one conception.

However, this does not mean that the production process is in a chaotic state. He confronts the inherent complexity and manages it ably without totally abandoning the rules and structure of the painting or excessively cutting off the consecutiveness of his own historical accumulation. Soutome traverses between two contradicting areas such as representational/abstract, simplicity/complexity, consecutiveness/discontinuousness, hardness/softness, and heaviness/lightness, while never according a privilege to any specific area.

What Soutome takes from the modernist heritage is not the monumental artworks which brought about huge paradigm shifts in the history of art, but rather their small experiments in their studio and their subtle but important works, in addition to that work which has been categorized as applied art. Figuratively speaking, Soutome's artworks, which belong to several areas of expression, are positioned on a single map equally and horizontally and his activities are to move freely within the map. The attitude does not intend to be either hardcore or extreme, both of which are noted characters of modernism. His good sense of balance cannot be prescribed as radicalism. However, to put it the other way round, this can be a very critical attitude against contemporary arts and the avant-garde movements which have laid too much importance upon radicalism. Soutome tries to find out different paths, all of which are free from the limits and illusions of cutting-edge approaches.

However, Soutome's uniqueness is not confined to the diversity and complexity of his activities because the complexity is supported by the simplistic nature of his artwork. The motifs featured are sofa, car, cat, human, mountain, dust, and planet, which are all well-known or ordinary concepts with a high degree of anonymity before specific contexts are applied. The resolution of contexts applied to these depicted figures is low and any special messages which may contain symbols or metaphors cannot be seen.

As an exception, a portrait painting of one person, "He and She" (2009), has such a suggestive title. The relationship between the figure and the title make viewers conscious of the indeterminacy of gender and multiple personalities. Yet, still, "He" and "She" do not contain a specific context except for the information that indicates gender and person. As for his abstract paintings, very simple, even curt titles are chosen such as "Silence" (2012), "Yellow Form" (2012), and "Yellow Field" .

Therefore, viewers are free from researching, asking and annoying about the motifs and titles in order to understand his artworks. Soutome's artworks have little relationship with historical contexts such as the ones evoked by Anselm Kiefer's paintings, or symbolism drawn by pop artists. At least, his artworks do not require socialistic interpretation as a condition. Rather than concepts or representations connected with social/historical contexts, Soutome focuses on the process of abstraction and composition. Here, recursiveness of modernism art can be seen. Viewers are allowed to concentrate on senses and emotions they have when they see Soutome's artworks without annoyed by the contexts or symbolic meanings.

Also, Soutome's concept cannot be categorized as realism born from familiar reality because he tries to equally juxtapose things that are macroscopic/microscopic and boring/romantic. He considers that when he is in his true colors, he is in a mental state characterized by a scattered imagination. Through the process of abstraction, he connects contradicting areas or sensations and viewers experience a fundamental reconstruction of the reality of the world.

When an artist conducts an expression that is true to himself/herself and is free of radicalism or exaggeration, people may find him/her to be naive and lacking a sense of strategy. However, contemporary art has alienated such inartificial attitudes of artists for a long period. Nowadays, contemporary art does not evaluate expressions based on the reality derived from the true color of an artist, falling into a game of differentiation, approbating exaggerated originality in the same method as is used with commercial products. Yet the principle of explanation of an artwork became an act of futility which inevitably leads to a self-contradiction. Most contemporary artworks are forced to be too highly contextual to support the condition of their establishment, thus losing crucial

externality and inevitability. Soutome endeavors to stand outside of these stagnated systems.

Is this an attitude of a reactionary, anachronistic artist? No. Soutome sheds a light of freshness on the category of painting by setting “expression through an artists’ true colors” as his concept. The same kind of attitude can be seen in the works of Alex Katz and David Hockney. While they clearly have motivations different from avant-garde artists, they find themselves dismissed as eclectic, lukewarm artists. Although neither the innovation of Jackson Pollock nor the sensation of Damien Hirst can be seen in their artworks, it should not be overlooked that Katz and Hockney have provided massive influence and inspiration towards many artists of every genre. Katz and Hockney transform their real-life sensations into their expressions without fear, creating typological universality by diminishing the framework of painting. They also have created paintings with a novel sensation by introducing contemporary media, including the iPad, into their production process.

Although Soutome’s artworks do not have a direct relationship with the works of Katz or Hockney, many connections can be found concerning fundamental attitudes toward artistic creation. It is said that newness is tarnished soon. However, the artworks of Soutome, Katz and Hockney, whose purposes are not innovation or sensation, succeed to maintain everlasting freshness.