

Odyssey – The Return

Essay by Huang Du, Curator



This year, on the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Ireland and China, both countries celebrate an increasingly frequent and deepening exchange both cultural and economic. On this occasion, two Irish artists Fion Gunn and Niamh Cunningham along with three Chinese artists, Gulistan, Li Xinmo and Chen Qingqing, have joined forces to create “Odyssey: The Return” a collaborative art exhibition.

The exhibition features diverse reflections and interpretations by the Irish and Chinese artists which address the process of globalization in the context of complex, shifting social and cultural issues. Inspired by the famous Irish writer James Joyce’s book ‘Ulysses’, the theme of the exhibition aims to express and reflect on the culture of both countries in a metaphorical way.

We are all familiar with James Joyce who is regarded as one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, his ‘Ulysses’ is considered an enduring masterpiece in the history of modern world literature. In the late 1970s, ‘Ulysses’ was translated into Chinese, which had a tremendous impact on the Chinese literary world. Odysseus (or Ulysses in Latin/Roman legends) was a hero in Greek mythology. King of Ithaca in Western Greece, he played a leading role in the Trojan war and was among those who finally defeated the City State. On his return home from Troy, a voyage which lasted 10 years, he led his companions through many hardships and obstacles.

In the novel, Joyce uses Homer’s epic poem ‘The Odyssey’ as a device to establish parallels with the narrative of Stephen Daedalus - Daedalus is a young poet in search of a spiritually symbolic father - and Leopold Bloom, whom we can deduce from the subtext, is

looking for a son. Joyce uncovers this microcosm of human society by recounting their Odyssey over the course of a single day.

Through the meticulous portrayal of what constitutes an individual's daily life and their spiritual awakening, Joyce contemplates both the grandeur and the humdrum of human society, together with the heroism and cowardice of human beings. Simultaneously he ponders the state of Ireland and the history of the Jews in what is a snapshot of his contemporary society. Thus, he reveals a deeper and universal human nature.

'Ulysses' also features a strong female perspective and the portrayal of Molly Bloom's character transcends previous stereotypes in the literary depictions of women. Molly is an atypical protagonist, prescient and highly unusual, she is an allegory for an Irish identity, which represents in sensual terms, the country's aspirations for rebirth.

Although literary appeal derives from the unique nature of language itself, visual artistic expression has another perspective and is obviously a very different matter. Visual art communicates meaning and information through inference and perception, in a distinctive and particular way.

While it could be said that "Odyssey: The Return" is a small-scale exhibition, however it highlights big issues: the relationship between "countries, landscapes and geography" as well "otherness, identity and subject". Notwithstanding widespread, radical avant-gardism, the five female artists do not fall into the usual avant-garde discourse in their artistic creations, rather they work with their own lived experiences and responses, focusing not only on the relationship between art and history/reality, but also underlining the artists' engagement with ontology, vision and the philosophical nature of art.

When looking at these artists, rather than discussing the 'subjectivity' of individual identity, it is more appropriate observe how they analyse the pluralistic "subject position" of those in power and the discourse network. The pluralistic "subject position" is not static, deterministic and isolated, but dynamic, connected and interpenetrating.

This uncertainty is a phenomenon which increasingly reflects the nomadic nature of art. It exists and grows within inherently clear cultural boundaries, it floats and shifts within a distinct cultural geography. Therefore, today's artists have different channels or pathways for image/information acquisition, they are enabled to both perceive and access images/information from real-life observation, as well as to obtain cross-regional images/information via the Internet. In particular, the rapid development of high-tech mobile technology, digital technology and Internet platforms, where the speed of image/information transmission is synchronised in time and space, thus constantly changing people's cognitive dimensions and constantly spreading images/information which are disseminated freely over the 'geography' of the network. This multidimensional, shared interface subtly transcends ideology or national boundaries. This is exactly what Paul Virilio describes as the world's "end of geography."

Faced with such a rich literary heritage and complex social realities, the five artists in this exhibition show a flexible approach to media, methodology and language, they have their own personal creative approaches. Fion Gunn's works here are inspired by Joyce's *Ulysses* and in fact, from childhood she has had a keen interest in reading literary classics from which she absorbed much about the human condition.

In these classical stories of exploration and adventure, the heroes and villains are recognisable as ethically and morally ambiguous human beings who have complex psychologies, who are driven by selfishness or integrity and so on. She makes particular reference to Joyce's '*Ulysses*' in her three-dimensional, stream of consciousness "pictures", where the simultaneous encounter of thoughts, emotions and memories reflect the literary cross-narration.

She is constantly searching for unexpected connections and by incorporating these in her artworks, she creates a very different kind of literary 'collage', one which leads her to remember old worlds and discover new ones simultaneously. In almost every painting, Fion Gunn's narrative is intrinsically linked to a chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*, however the artist is not merely recreating or illustrating literature, for this is a subjective depiction of the real world inhabited by people and things.

Running through her personal concerns about family, reality, mythology, Chinese culture, gender and immigration, she has brought to bear her visual ideas and imagination, so in '*Dublin Bay Triptych*' (2018) which refers to '*Ulysses*' Chapter 13 (Nausicaa), she depicts the frequent trade between Dublin and Liverpool through a church like window. At the same time, the painting also makes reference to an episode in '*Ulysses*' where Joyce explores the male gaze, sexuality and love from both male and female perspectives.

Meanwhile, in *The Dream of Zheng He* (in five parts, 2017), Fion Gunn uses a 'continuous image' technique to depict the stories of Zheng He's personal life: family separation and capture by the army in Ming Dynasty China. It vividly evokes Zheng He's extraordinary courage and the arduous adventures he experienced in the Western Ocean. Although Zheng He's expedition to the West did not end as brutally or tragically as the sinking of the "Titanic", the artist hints at the dark side of today's complex and uncertain reality, one where the world is in crisis and at risk.

Contradictions and conflicts between globalization and counter-globalization, migration of immigrants and conservative populism, the divide between the North and the South, between the center and the periphery are highlighted throughout her work. Similar concerns are addressed in paintings such as *Age of Exploration no.5* (2017) and *The Immigrants no.1 and no.2* (2017) which metaphorize or infer that we are in a state of uncertainty.

On the other hand, Fion Gunn's two paintings, '*Agamemnon Waiting*' and '*Eurydice and the City of the Dead*', which refer to '*Ulysses*', Chapter 8, (Lestrygonians) and Chapter 18 (Penelope) respectively, encompass fantastical narratives. From these collaged paintings, frightened people and broken bronze statues, gaze. The dramatic treatment of this gaze

highlights the contradictions within the central figures in these works, symbolizing their loyalty and love through the juxtaposition of other figures, flowers, wedding dresses, architectural vaults or Greek columns

The narratives of these two works play with the notion of "absurdity" and reflect on the contradictory psychological characteristics of human nature - betrayal, guilt, disgust, death, love and so on. It is in this sense that she uses a unique method of expression to recombine unrelated or incongruous images. For instance, almost all these images derived from different times and places, are grouped together on the same spatial plane, creating and enhancing the sense of magical reality. The synchronised dialogue and narrative of different images undoubtedly echoes the stream of consciousness evidenced in 'Ulysses'.

The artist uses colour expressively and in so doing highlights and celebrates the body's visceral instincts and perceptions: the relationship between light and darkness, consciousness and physicalism, emotion and energy. Her paintings recreate a dreamlike visual language, using natural landscapes and intimate everyday scenes. Through the assemblage of incongruous fragmented images, her work evokes the fragility of the human spirit and the unpredictability of the world.

As an artist with an awareness of "destruction" and "reconstruction" in the context of contemporary art, Niamh Cunningham has created the "Wandering Rocks" a series which consists of 22 small portrait paintings, inspired by the rich and curious literary narrative in the eponymous Chapter 10 of 'Ulysses'. She paints these portraits of people living in Beijing and Ireland (families, friends, students, artists, curators, etc.) in which they are reconfigured, their images are transformed, reshaped metaphorically into different 'wandering' rocks. The artist uses a method whereby she layers photographic images to create an ethereal effect like water ripples, a way of combining real and virtual elements to provoke a sense of surprise in the viewer.

Her paintings describe another way of interpreting the world. The images bear testimony to a real investigation into the way in which the living world actually exists. Rather than saying that she simply likes painting portraits, it is more accurate to describe these works as perceived thinking about the image itself and how to engage with cognizance which is habitual. In fact, each piece of work is a combination of the artist's lived experience, her brush painting and materiality bound together using technological pre-sets. She combines the artistic language of painting with today's lived experience in order to create a unique and personal visual language.

This series of portraits embodies a range of experiences in its dynamic fragmentation, insubstantial images which evoke time, space, identity and memory. This fastidious way of painting is not merely a type of formal innovation, the creative process itself causes an actual disintegration of the painting's subjectivity and internalizes this metaphysical rupture. In bringing together the perception of image and that of memory, a new image narrative which redefines the portrait, is created.

At the same time, the artist has endeavoured to transform the act of painting, distancing herself from the pursuit of the classical, while at the same time incorporating photographic elements. So, the cropped image instantly establishes the connection between the subject and the experience/awareness of language. She uses alternative painting methods to deconstruct the existing rules of artistic creation and establishes a real intersection of two creative worlds: the visual and the literary.

Gulistan's work has a quiet and concise style. Her paintings *The Nature of Memory* (an observational painting created in 2001) and *The Portrait in Memory* (oil on canvas, 2006), are immersed in the realm of Song and Yuan poetry, as well as in the elegance of European classical painting. The passage of time and the traces of memory are meticulously portrayed by the painter in a pure form.

By integrating these fragmented and discrete images and thus constructing touchpoints between time, history and life itself, the artist evokes a fascinating and mysterious chronicle.

Encompassing distant events and narratives, when viewers stand before her paintings, they are inevitably drawn into this relationship between time and space, between East and West, shifting between historical imprints and personal memories, thus they absorb the poetry and rhythms of different cultures. Her works encapsulate the lived experience, the perception of time, and the memory of traces left behind. The images are created subjectively, discretely and manifest a slight unease, a sense of disconnection. However, the links between the images are transformed into another new narrative, faded and fractured, these images are redolent with a distant past and transient present, the classical and the contemporary, replete with personal and historical relationships and conversations.

And so Gulistan's methodology does not seek to 'revive' the classical, but rather to use it as a point of reference, to tease out its aura and energy and to explore the potential of blending and combining classical techniques with her own. She revisits the classics in a postmodern way and reconstructs a classical elegance. Her paintings reflect her aesthetic taste and vision.

Li Xinmo is a passionately feminist artist who pays close attention to the discourse surrounding women's rights. In her work 'Free' the artist uses images, words, devices etc as a medium for a female centred narrative.

Her work records the journey of a woman who leaves home in the morning and visits an old girlfriend whom she once rejected. She is accompanied all the while by her memories and fantasies of a British lover, as well as her own visual and aural perceptions, her fluctuating thoughts and feelings, throughout the journey. In a way this is a manifestation of the individual artist's resistance to a secular society and their desire for a spiritual escape.

In Chinese, the noun "free" actually, derives from the homonym of Yuri, meaning free while at the same time also being a girl's name. However, in this case, the artist uses the verb "free" which denotes a substance which does not exist separately from other substances. It exists as a metaphor for leaving the collective or for attachment to it. In this way, Li Xinmo hints

at the individual's freedom from restraint, while at the same time questioning those things which are taken to define gender difference. She clearly expresses her doubts about the criteria which shape male and female gender relations and boldly reveals what remains hidden within social norms.

Males dominate discourse often using ridicule and criticism to do so. This historical set of behaviours reinforces the domination and suppression of women and leads to gender segregation. In turn this segregation not only imposes limitations on men, it also imposes constraints on women.

While Li Xinmo's work is fraught with tension, Chen Qingqing's works reveal a light, elegant and poetic touch.

Her "Han Feng" is woven from very simple twine, and the garment like form is derived from archaeology. It evokes history and cultural pedigree, a feeling of what it means to be "human" and what the existence of life itself may signify. The charm of this work lies in the bringing of lifeless things to life. This does not depend on elaborate craftsmanship, but on the artist's conceptual intervention, the subjective interpretation and translation of matter and spirit. The aspect of weaving which figures in Chen Qingqing's work also seems to connect with the story of Odysseus. She, like Penelope has completed her work in a quasi-ascetic manner

There is a mystical "soul" underlying Chen Qingqing's artworks and this is their great appeal. The artist's love for life, this "spiritual essence", also expresses the unpredictable and impermanent state of human destiny. Her other work, 'For Burying the Soul', manifests a mysterious and ritualistic energy in its creation, which is generated by the phenomena of life, death, ethics and customs. Thus, her work always conveys a vision of imagined worlds and mystic knowledge.

In short, whether the featured works are abstract or imaginative, whether rational or perceptual, the five artists participating in this exhibition contemplate, to varying degrees, the links between image making and literature and what these concepts mean in their individual artistic practices. They interpret James Joyce's work from Irish and Chinese perspectives; in a profound way and in a variety of visual languages, they reconstruct a visual Odysseus from the lens of their personal experience.

They have fully wielded their imagination, judgment and expressive power; they have expressed their lived experience from different viewpoints, either subjectively or instinctively. They have contemplated identity, critiqued gender politics, explored the classics, reconstructed artistic ontology. Ongoing and close investigation of these themes has enabled the artists to construct unique, personal and ideological visions - to develop formidable, artistic narratives with confidence. This is what will enable the viewer to find a deep sense of spiritual connection to their work.

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