RECENT WORK

BOOK REVIEW ON
A GRAND MATERIALISM IN THE NEW ART FROM CHINA
(BY MARY WISEMAN)*

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Reading the title of Mary Wiseman’s book, one might puzzle over the meaning of “a grand materialism.” One’s first thought might be that Wiseman is alluding to the materialism of communist ideology, given that the People’s Republic of China was born from a revolution with grand aspirations that took its ideological bearings from the historical materialism of Marxist theory. But it takes only a little investigation of contemporary Chinese art to see that socialist realism and straightforwardly revolutionary themes have long been passe. The materialism that seems in vogue in China these days seems to be that of consumer capitalism, not that of Marx. But this is not the materialism that Wiseman has in mind, either.

Instead, the materialism of Wiseman’s title involves matter in a quite literal sense. The grand materialism is focused on the physical materials of nature, those which artists use in their work. Wiseman is struck by the fact that contemporary Chinese artists often utilize natural substances such as dust, silkworms, earthworms, thread, bones, and bodies with little or no alteration in their work. In the book she offers a lively analysis of why Chinese art has taken the direction it has in recent times and provides context to help Westerners make sense of it.

Like much contemporary Western art, contemporary Chinese avant-garde art is typically not representational, but the non-representational character of art in the two contexts is quite different. In the West, contemporary art is made against a historical background in which a series of artistic developments responded to the crisis in painting that was prompted by the emergence of photography and cinema and the subsequent reconsideration of the nature of art that followed. Contemporary Chinese art follows a period from the rise of Mao Zedong until the 1980s in which Chinese artists were

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obliged to make revolutionary art and were largely cut off from what was happening in the Western art scene. Modernist formalism, abstract expressionism, and many other currents of importance in twentieth-century Western art have not been major influences on contemporary Chinese artists.

Wiseman argues that contemporary Chinese artists are engaged in their own reconsideration of what art should do now that art is no longer required to be revolutionary. Instead of presenting ideals, it is aimed at presenting realities, often by way of incorporating or presenting real materials as art. Wiseman indicates a variety of approaches contemporary Chinese artists take to materials, drawing many examples from exhibitions in the United States and the U.K. that some of her readers in these nations may have had the opportunity to see. (For those who have not, there are reproductions of many important examples included in the book.) The materials utilized can have cultural importance, as in the case of silk (a major product of trade in China) and gunpowder (a Chinese invention). Cai Guo-Qiang, for example, exploded gunpowder along a fuse shaped as a dragon (a symbol of power) as a means of extending the line made by the Great Wall by 10,000 meters. When ignited, it seemed to send a dragon of fire through the sky.

Besides emblemizing China, the materials contemporary artists utilize draw attention to nature and living things, the human body, the way the materials have been used, and historical contexts they have been part of, according to Wiseman. She describes a number of works (some of them banned) using living creatures, including silkworms, earthworms, insects, lizards, toads, snakes, a turtle, dogs, and pigs, in addition to one that included the corpses of conjoined twins (banned in Britain but awarded a prize in China). She also considers works in which artists utilize their own or others’ bodies in art. Chen Lingyang, for example, made a series of twelve artistic photographs of mirror reflections of her menstruating body alongside a flower associated with each month of the year, while Xing Danwen makes pregnancy a subject of art in a series of photographs of a pregnant friend. Another focus is the repurposing of materials that have their own histories, such as Zhang Huan’s use of ash from incense burned in Buddhist temples in paintings and sculptures. The artist construes his use of the ash as making the works themselves acts of prayer. Zhang also utilizes material from particular sites and events to yield material memories (for example, fragments from statues of Buddhas destroyed in Tibet during the Cultural Revolution, which he reworks into sculptures of fragments of a Buddha, such as a finger or a leg).

Wiseman includes language as among the materials deployed by contemporary Chinese artists, and one may wonder why it is characterized along with natural substances and organic bodies as part of the “material move” in Chinese art. She provides an explanation by pointing to the ways in which language can be understood as having its own materiality. The spoken language can embody qi, the energy that is the fundamental reality of everything that exists. The vitality of spoken communication links it to the materiality of the body. Chinese calligraphy, too, makes evident the connection between language and the body, for written language is produced bodily by means of the same materials that painters have traditionally used, ink and paper. Wiseman also emphasizes that a radical division between a word’s materiality and its
meaning is more in keeping with the dualistic thinking that is common in the West than with the more holistic framework of Chinese thought.

Wiseman’s discussions of certain works by Xu Bing shed light on the way in which language can be seen as a form of material. For example, that artist’s Book from the Sky (天書, Tiān-shū, literally “sky book” or “heaven book,” 1987-1991), incorporates physical embodiments of language. It includes carved wooden blocks of the sort used to print, hand-printed books mounted on wood, and gigantic scrolls unfurled from the ceiling, all using only pseudo-characters that combine real radicals but form characters that are unintelligible. Wiseman offers a variety of interpretations, describing the work as “a celebration of the materiality of the book,” a way of drawing attention to the beauty of characters independent of their meaning, and a gentle suggestion “that what is being spoken in China now means no more than these characters do” (43). The range of these interpretations suggests the subtlety and complexity of suggestions that can be conveyed by the material-focused works that are Wiseman’s topic.

Wiseman’s commentaries on specific artworks are wide-ranging and evocative, with the tone of opening an exploration rather than offering definitive interpretations. She revisits many of her examples several times, adding to the impression of interpretive openness. A reader might be inclined to pursue additional lines of investigation in connection with particular works. For example, one might consider the invented characters in Book from the Sky in light of the alteration of traditional characters to make simplified forms in the P.R.C., with the impact that historic texts have become illegible to those who are taught only the simplified characters. Wiseman herself mentions simplified characters, but in connection with another of Xu Bing’s works, The Living Word. The work is an installation of four hundred laser-cut acrylic pieces strung together in a wave that ascends diagonally. The lowest of these pieces are the simplified character for niao (bird), with higher levels transforming into earlier forms of the character, then to pictograms, and ultimately transforming into the shape of flying birds. Wiseman associates the presented transformations with the close connection between calligraphy and painting and the vital energy that is evident in the brushstroke involved in writing a character. Even if the work is aimed at liberating the realities words reference from “the words in their lifeless book-bound definition,” she contends, the expressive character of the written Chinese word makes it nonetheless alive, akin to a natural object.

Although she emphasizes language as being material, Wiseman sees Chinese artists’ turn to materiality in the early twenty-first century as an effort to get beneath language in the sense of discourse. This makes sense in a context in which discourses that conflict with each other, those of communism and capitalism, are supposed to harmonize and provide means for interpreting each other, while they in fact create cognitive dissonance. The contradictions between the two makes it difficult for people to find shared meaning within the social sphere, Wiseman contends, and the subversion of the idea that they can is one of three major subversions involved in contemporary avant-garde Chinese art. The second is the related subversion of the idea that meaning can be formulated in the socially available discourse, which conjoins communist ideology and capitalist economy. One aspect of this effort is political pop art aimed
showing that the discourse of “the revolution and the market” is vacuous or unintelligible (9). A third subversive project is the effort to undermine the idea that western conceptions of art are adequate for present-day China.

This third subversion has implications for the notion of global art and aesthetics. Wiseman explicitly addresses the sense in which contemporary Chinese art is “global.” Certainly, it is a major player in the global art scene, she argues, but this does not mean that it is “global” in the sense of being transposable from one context to another without loss. Contemporary Chinese art is not independent of features that identify it as coming from China. Indeed, it is of interest to people both within and outside China because of its Chinese-ness. Its cultural origin is a “difference” that makes it appealing to a widespread audience.

Because it uses materials familiar to people around the globe, contemporary Chinese art is also widely accessible. However, Wiseman emphasizes the limitations of interpretations that recognize only superficial stylistic characteristics as distinctively “Chinese.” Among her purposes in the book is to reveal to her primarily Western audience how China’s cultural traditions and its unprecedented recent history are reflected in the approaches and attitudes taken by contemporary artists and to show how awareness of these influences enables one to recognize the depth of their art.

In light of this agenda, Wiseman situates recent Chinese artworks in a context that is important for understanding it, but which may not be known by many Westerners. That context includes traditional Chinese thought and culture, as well as its recent political history. Wiseman points out that despite Mao’s efforts to eradicate traditional ideas and practices, the legacy of the tradition still affects art. She draws attention to important historical texts that shaped the traditional understanding of art’s purpose and historical practices in China, some of which differ importantly from art theory and practice in the Western tradition. For example, the six rules for painters articulated in the sixth century C.E. by Xie He reveal different priorities than those common in the West. In the West, the imitation of the appearances of reality was the dominant goal from antiquity until the early 20th century. By contrast, Xie He takes qi yun, “spirit resonance,” to be the highest priority for painters. The work should convey the dynamism and spirit of its subject, a goal that does not require imitation of the subject’s appearance.

The Chinese intellectual tradition helps to explain this emphasis on spirit resonance. Human beings are not understood as exceptional, but as part of nature. We are configurations of energy (qi) within the Dao, the flowing reality of the world, just as other natural phenomena are. Energy moves among the parts of this whole, and human beings are affected by and interact with other natural entities. All things resonate with each other. The ideal is to recognize and promote the harmonious interaction of all things. Accordingly, the Chinese framework emphasizes complementarity rather than sharp opposition.

Transformation is taken to be the normal course of things, by contrast with the Western perspective, in which stasis is taken as the norm and motion requires explanation. This context sets the background for an artistic practice in which the aim is to resonate with the spirit of the subject matter, rather than to capture the appearance.
the subject has at a particular moment. Wiseman sees contemporary Chinese artists’ turn toward materiality as partially explicable in terms of this notion of spirit resonance. The complementarity of all things is, once again, evident in the lack of a presumed opposition between matter and spirit. The move toward materiality is not a move away from what is spiritual, but a manifestation of it.

Another difference between China and the West that is evident in Xie He’s rules for painters is his advocacy of the “bone” method, the creation of structure through the use of the brush. Wiseman observes that the painting is considered a trace of the brushstroke in the Chinese tradition, emphasizing the primacy of dynamism, and suggesting the means through which the painter conveys the life of the subject matter. The importance of brush stroke is also indicative of the principal materials traditionally used in Chinese painting, specifically the brush and ink, with pigment playing a less focal role than it does in Western painting. The brush can generate impressions of structure through control of the ink’s opacity and transluence. Wiseman points to the way that this controlled use of the brush informed the traditional Chinese notion of the “Three Perfections,” excellence in the three arts of the brush – painting, poetry, and calligraphy – which should complement each other within an artwork.

Although Xie He told painters that they should learn by copying the works of the ancients, Wiseman also draws attention to the influence of fourteenth-century artist and theorist Shitao, who encouraged artists to create something new instead of copying. Wiseman connects the idea of creating rather than copying with the Chinese avant-garde’s distinctive productions. Noting that Chinese art was unaffected by the period of modernist formalism in which inclusion as art in the Western art world depended on a work’s belonging to a particular artistic genre, she suggests that contemporary Chinese art seems to conform in many ways which what Peter Osborne describes as the third stage of modernism, in which each artwork has to stand on its own to establish that it deserves to be considered art. Many of the works she discusses are not in traditional genres at all. Installations, performance art, and mixed media works are common, and those utilizing standard genres often depend for their effect on their materials and where they have come from, as in the case of Zhang Huan’s ash paintings and sculptures from fragments of previously destroyed statues.

As already suggested, Wiseman’s efforts to situate artworks help readers to recognize long-standing divergent tendencies in the Chinese and Western art traditions as well as differences between contemporary art coming respectively from China and the West. For example, she observes that the Chinese emphasis on spirit resonance in art has long had an impact on depictions of human beings, a theme she addresses particularly in connection with depictions of women. The aim in Chinese art was not to present beautiful appearances, but to convey an impression of living spirit and to create a work that was in harmony with the fundamental flow of the world. Wiseman suggests that one effect was that female figures were not presented as objects of male desire, as they commonly are in the Western tradition, and no genre of depictions of nudes developed in China. In connection with recent art, Wiseman thinks these different backgrounds help to explain some degree of failure in communication between Western and Chinese feminist artists, pointing out that while Western
feminists have tended to make works about how men regard women, Chinese feminists tend to make works about themselves as bodily beings.

Some Western readers may find Wiseman’s positive take on some Chinese feminist artists’ emphasis on the connection of the female body with nature problematic, in that this association is among the many binaries that have been used in the West to justify women’s subordinate status. Wiseman would likely remind them that the notion of binary oppositions is foreign to the Chinese conceptual framework, and complementarity between the genders is at least the metaphysical premise, even if not the actualized social fact in China. In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, with its avowal of gender equality and its prescription of genderless clothing, moreover, bodies presented as gendered have a very different significance in China than they do in the West. Wiseman sees the representations of bodies in contemporary Chinese art as a reworking of identity in a new era, and even to be presented as male or female is to show them as individualized in a way that was not countenanced in the Maoist years.

Individual perspectives are, as Wiseman sees it, an important aspect of what contemporary Chinese art conveys. She claims that Chinese artists are managing to express attitudes toward their contemporary reality with their material art by getting beneath the signifying discourses of ideology. They speak their minds, but the kind of personal expression involved differs from what one might find in Western art. In Western art, emphasis is often placed on the way the individual is distinct from others. In China, according to Wiseman, contemporary artists are still influenced by the traditional aspiration of Chinese artists, which was to empty themselves and fuse with their subject matter. Traditional Chinese landscape painters, for example, aimed not to show us what a landscape looked like, but to present what it is from the standpoint of empathizing with it.

Wiseman sees this idea of fusion with the subject as being still in evidence in works such as Yang Shaoabin’s 800 Metres (2006), a series of photographs of coal miners’ blackened faces. She interprets the work as involving empathetic fusion with what one encounters on multiple levels. The miners literally become one with the mountain in which they work. The artist empties himself to open up to their experience and the reality of the historical juncture, in which China has achieved much by its rapid industrialization but is burdened by the need to keep meeting the fuel demands that have resulted. The audience of the work, moreover, is encouraged to empathize with the miners whose faces they see. The individuality is personal intimacy with the subject matter, and while it expresses personal feeling, that feeling is conjoined with something of collective significance.

Although the book draws attention to differences between Chinese and Western art and art theory, Wiseman also considers points of comparison between Chinese and Western aesthetic perspectives as she proceeds, ranging from comparisons on the fly to extended discussions of Western debates that have counterparts in China. In light of Arthur Danto’s interest in the relationship between artworks and the “mere real things” they incorporated in the Western context, it is probably not surprising that she explores the relationship between Danto’s theorizing and the contemporary Chinese move toward materiality. Danto theorized that the narrative of Western art history, which was
aimed at mimicking the appearances of reality, had run its course. He was convinced
that art will continue as a wide variety of projects, with no new defining narrative about
the aim of art replacing the one that had concluded. Wiseman takes issue with these
historical speculations, and she argues that whatever one might conclude about art’s
reaching its historical end in the West, it clearly has not done so in China. I suspect that
Danto might agree that art has not reached its end in China. However, I doubt that he
saw art in China as having a trajectory shaped by an overarching project akin to the
mimetic project in the West, so he might have rejected the very idea that China could
reach its “end” in anything like the way he thought Western art had done.

More interesting, by my lights, is Wiseman’s examination of Danto’s
characterization of art, which she does see as applying to Chinese contemporary art.
His criteria, as she itemizes them, are that an artwork (1) is about something, (2)
projects an attitude or a point of view toward its subject matter, (3) does so through a
rhetorical figure (often a metaphor), (4) requires interpretation, and (5) is produced in
light of art history and art theory. These contemporary Chinese works are about
something, and they do convey a point of view on their subject matter, making us see
things in a new way. The materials themselves serve as rhetorical figures, often by
means of metonymic relationship to a larger network of associations, though sometimes
by means of “their sheer there-ness,” which manifests something about reality more
broadly (148). They clearly require interpretation, and Wiseman shows some of the
ways in which they are informed by art history and theory.

Danto concluded his first influential consideration of the relationship between
artworks and real things with the suggestion that artworks that are hard to distinguish
from everyday objects can reveal ourselves and our reality to us. Wiseman shows in
her stimulating book that Chinese artworks using everyday materiality can do this, too,
offering revelations to their audiences both inside and outside China. Aply, she
concludes the book with a simultaneous nod to Danto and the Chinese tradition:

Art as Danto characterizes it is meant to show us what things are. . .Chinese artists bid us
pay attention to the sight and sound of words, to particular things, to material . . . in order
to take the pulse of what is coursing through them to harmonize . . . state, society, and
individual. The art puts its subjects before us so that we can see what they are and hear
what they say (148-149).