

The Painting Language of American Neo-Expressionist Painter David Salle

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Abstract

David Salle, born in Norman, Oklahoma in 1952, is the most important and controversial artist of the new-expressionist painting in the United States. His paintings are featured by unique artistic language, and extremely diverse and very ground-breaking expression, which reflect the American society at that time. Besides, he often uses complex image combination with striking colors and forms to attract and touch viewers. In this paper, based on the American new-expressionism, the painting language of David Salle's works was analysed, in which I found that it can be more intuitively and more profoundly feel the development of new-expressionist painting context and David Salle's particularity, and more clearly realize under what the characteristics of the era David Salle created the unique artistic language. The study on David Salle's unique painting language is of important research value and reference significance for our current artistic creation.

Keywords: *Painting Language, American New-expressionism, Combination, Disorderly composition ;Allego*

1. INTRODUCTION

Western painting art was the most active in the 20th century. As concept art ideology entered people's artistic creation, and irrationalism ideology developed rapidly, the traditional ideas of paintings, and traditional composition ways of paintings were overthrown. A lot of artists, including David Salle began to seek more unique and rich expression. David Salle received traditional academic education, but his art orientation and creative train of thought were under subtle influence of the ideas, and all kinds of film and commercial illustration permeating in the environment. Besides, his strong personal style, unique painting language are closely related to the historical background. His painting language was separated from the traditional modernism and turned to the modern self-consciousness state influenced by the factors of The Times. His creative technique is distinctive, innovative and compelling. Therefore, with the historical background and presentation of American neo-expressionism as the starting point, this paper aims to deeply explore the unique painting language of David Salle in the new-expressionism. It had a very important role to the understanding and development of contemporary art, and could also help to enrich his own painting creation language, more effectively and more accurately show the current social form in the works, and then trigger deep thinking[1].

There are a lot of materials on David Salle's art works, but there are relatively few works and journal papers on his painting language on the Internet. Duan Zhengqu, in *Contemporary Masters of Western Painting* gives a brief description of David Salle's life and painting style. Xu Yi discusses the use of discordant elements in David Salle's paintings in the master's thesis titled *The Use of Discordant Elements in David Salle's Creation*.

Manuscript received: February 20, 2023 / revised: March 7, 2023 / accepted: March 15, 2023

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Besides, Zhuo Yuzheng explores David Salle's painting language from the perspective of post-modernist painting in the master's thesis titled *The Art Language of Post-Modern Painting in David Salle's Art*. These works and papers give descriptions of David Salle's works. The innovation of this paper is based on his historical background, an in-depth analysis of David Salle's painting language was conducted to find out the artistic value of his works. As for the research method, literature research method, investigation and works analysis method were mainly adopted. Literature materials were obtained by searching online and consulting relevant books and papers, and then sorted out and analyzed. On this basis, by combining with the background of artist's characters and social background, a deeper level of summary and exploration was conducted.

2. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND PRESENTATION OF AMERICAN NEW-EXPRESSIONISM

2.1 Historical Background of American New-expressionism

America went through an unprecedented economic crisis, such as the stock market crash, unmarketable goods, and long-term mass unemployment in 1929. Artists did not receive social attention until 1934. It was not until the Second World War that economic indicators recovered, which took more than 10 years. Franklin Roosevelt began to introduce the New Deal after being elected President of the United States in 1933 so as to realize American Renaissance in such a way as soon as possible. With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, European countries were in ruins and a mess after the War, and artists failed to conduct artistic creation in this case. Thus, a number of European artists came to the United States, and created many artistic works there. In this way, New York ousted Paris as the center of the western art world, and the American art which lacked of cultural accumulation became the world art. Abstract expressionism art in the 1960s became the artistic trend, which stoked and expressed human emotion in the form of abstraction. It was the first art movement that rose in America, and also the beginning of postwar long style experiment, and enjoyed the highest status. However, American abstract expressionist declined within only a dozen years. And artists tried to find new ways to return to the top. American artist Duchamp stressed to view culture art world in a new perspective, and explored the essence of the art by shifting from the visual image to thinking. He believed that "a work of art is not just for appreciation, but more importantly to make people think". Duchamp recreated art like inventors. Due to artists' wrong understanding of Duchamp's art concept, various contents and forms of creation emerged constantly to search for unexpected creation. To search for "novelty" blindly, the artists abandoned the traditional arts. As a result, sculpture and easel painting were no longer mainstream art and were considered obsolete. Donald Judd declared in 1965 that "painting is dead"[2]. Soon, people felt bored and tired at the art form that excessively searched for "novelty" blindly. And the artists began to find fun in traditional printmaking, abandoned the attention of objective image shape, light and shadow and edge line in the traditional painting, only focused on the feeling of awakening, rather than pursue the truth in the naked eye. Thus. There was a revival movement of figurative painting.

2.2 Presentation of American New-expressionism

One of the biggest characteristics of American new-expressionism is *sui generis* without a specific and unified style. America, like a big melting pot, integrated different regions, different nationalities of the world's immigrants. Therefore, as a multi-ethnic country, America has been advocating and developing national culture of autonomy, and fostered the coexistence of diverse arts [3]. With different races, different religious backgrounds and different understandings of social reality, American painters have a more uninhibited attitude and a broader painting space, and were better at accepting new things than other European painters. Unlike

traditional European paintings, American new-expressionism paintings seemed not to have a long and profound history, which made people feel immature and simple in terms of techniques and techniques. However, in this way, artists in the American context defined new art with new expression language, and dispelled the so-called “halo” of elegance. As can be seen from the American new-expressionist paintings, the artists deliberately avoided thinking about language, focused on many social problems, focused on the awakening of people’s feelings, and dissociated the mystery that had always existed in paintings, and emphasized that the viewers’ own views and feelings were more important than the artists’ feelings. In addition, they paid more attention to the stability of form and focused on practical production in the picture rather than the instant creation from simple intuition, established tangible forms, regarded “truth” as the final goal and emphasized the production of art [4].

3. DAVID SALLE’S UNIQUE PAINTING LANGUAGE IN AMERICAN NEW-EXPRESSIONISM

3.1 Image appropriation and combination

The artists paid increasing attention to the inner thoughts after 1970. Under the influence of structuralism theory and the development of pop art, image appropriation and combination were used in the works of art. Image appropriation and combination is the most representative of language elements in David Salle’s forty years of paintings. The images appropriated by him were mostly from commercial advertising, cartoon movies, art history, fashion magazines, pictures of everyday objects, his own photography, etc [5]. He boldly and desperately applied Dutch landscapes to his works in order to express his ideas. Besides, he also appropriated the paintings of many painters directly into his paintings, such as Velazquez, Cezanne, Margaret, etc. It is difficult to comprehend David Salle’s simultaneous appropriation of multiple cultural images into a single giant image, yet it was powerful and thought-provoking. In his work Mr. Lucky, for example, he compressed and integrated the American complex social reality in the end of the 20th century into the painting. This painting as a whole seemed to be combined by three unrelated pictures (the upper one. the left and right side). Such way was different from traditional painting creation. The combination creation means was quite common in David Salle’s works, and also his unique style.

In his works Carrier is divided into the upper, middle and lower levels. In the bottom, David Salle appropriated the known image of the sailor moon through the spiral deformation to the picture. He broke the beautiful girl image and original image plot of the object in the mind of viewers, placed the old image element in the new context. Spiral sailor moon above embezzled an upward perspective images of a woman who wanted to take off coat. He deliberately processed the female image into black and white tonal, and presented the images of the female form with very loose attitude. A vague blue handprint was used near the female image. The background was processed into a deep black, making the image produce a kind of erotic plot, presented a kind of mystery and provided the viewers a wider imagination space. In the top of the picture, the background was processed into brown fog, and the upper right corner appropriated the image of a deliberately-reduced white ship after plane processing. These common images in life and various styles of images are appropriated into the same picture, which enrich the contents of the picture. The painting expressed the complex and mysterious social reality in a seemingly-chaotic way, had a sense of absurdity and ironic tension, and conveyed a unique aesthetic effect. We can see from David Salle’s works that the artist no longer created the images. The world we live in is full of information and the images. He provides a new way of viewing the world. He presented the ugliness of human life through rudeness and poor performance in his works, which was extremely Americanized. Levin pointed out that David Salle proposed today’s urgent philosophy problem: when split, discontent, meaninglessness, emptiness, and loss of authenticity and memory became the focus of debate, things in deeper level became insignificant” [6].

3.2 Disorderly composition

Harmony, balance, sublime and solemn are the highest aesthetic norms in classical traditional paintings. Composition, color, form and perspective all follow the inherent and established rules. However, with the development of The Times and the emergence of new technologies and new media, the status of traditional art has been shaken. There have been new ways of artistic expression constantly. Disorderly composition came into being under the collision of the old ways and new expression of traditional paintings. David Salle used disorderly composition as his unique painting language, which was also a typical characteristic in his works, and brought more impossibility to the unified feeling of the picture. The images he rendered did not conform with the objective reality, often gave viewers a kind of chaos and ambivalence. His disorderly composition had a lens effect, was influenced by film editing technology, and also promoted the development of the film and television splicing technology. His works *Columns* is a painting made up by four independent pictures, looking like four unrelated scenes edited together in the film. The continuity of the image with the traditional three-dimensional space was broken. On the left is a portrait of man who wears a suit and looks down at the mirror. His face is blocked by a piece of yellow cheese, forming strong color contrast. The middle part of the body and arms misappropriated the patterns of the two roses, and the inclined mirror clearly shoes the appearance of male. The second picture on the left is a lateral angel bronze sculpture, contrasting with the blue background. Below is the white plate with food. It was like a lens in the visual snippet. The third picture on the left is a lying black and white female body. There are strong light, and pink line outlined around, seemingly no visual center. The fourth picture on the left is bursting shades of orange and white. The yellow and blue dots are disorderly connected into lines, which seem to be chaos but have a certain order. The unrelated visual pictures are presented in a painting in a disorderly manner. This disorderly composition of contradictions and chaos was consistent with the complexity of the society at that time and enriched the contents and connotation of the picture, and stimulated people's thinking about the living situation critically. David Salle's works fully reflects the disorderly composition in the painting in another way, that is, superimposed graffiti on the works. David Salle constantly tried to seek new breakthroughs in his works to express his concern of social problems and express his ideas. With a cool eye to view a complex reality, he used his unique expression way and unique painting language to criticize of the absurd contemporary American society, and the alienation and the distance between people. He endowed seemingly chaotic and complex form language with a unique meaning and connotation, which presented the harmonious and orderly overall image.



Figure 1. Painting oil *Columns* by David Salle

3.3 Allegorical use

“Allegory” literally means the nature of “fable”. From traditional sense, allegory is a kind of independent literature genre and a kind of rhetoric. As a literary genre, it has a narrative; as a figure of speech, it has the function of a metaphor. Rather than be limited to the narrow sense of traditional allegory, it, in broadly speaking involves a broader scope, including the allegories used in painting, music, film and drama, etc. And it expresses philosophy through short stories or events.

It is very common to take allegory as the method of painting creation in the painting art. Especially, many classical European traditional paintings are created based on religious allegories, such as the Ghent Altarpiece and Lamb Offering by the Van Eyck brothers, and Four Apostles by Durer. The traditional European classical paintings regard religion as the theme of the creation method so as to achieve the exhortation and enlightenment to the public. In this period, the objective world formed by God as the center was the judgment criterion of painting art, while modernist painting was different from traditional painting. Modernism paintings regard “independent value of art language itself”, “painting gets rid of the dependence on literature and history, and concept of “art for art’s sake” as the theoretical basis. They argue that the narrative and the anti- tradition of artistic creation, emphasize subjective feelings and continuously pursue new art forms. Thus, painting creation with the theme of allegory no longer appeared in this period, and such art form was forgotten by people. The use of allegories became the the important methodology of postmodern art in the postmodern period. It was mainly activated by Benjamin messiah type rhetoric and the deconstruction of linguistics, and highlighted in the postmodern period of artistic creation method¹. Allegorical use is a common art language in painting creation by David Salle, which is manifested by expression forms and the implication of frequent pictures in the image. And there was the characteristics of narrative metaphor in the picture. The complex and seemingly casual contents and form in his “allegory” paintings show his understanding and expression of the real world, and was the real mapping of various phenomena in real life. Besides, they conveyed the absurdity of contemporary American society, complex humanity in real world, strangeness and alienation between people, as well as his thinking about the problems such as the injustice and violence. For example, in his works *Wig Store*, the images composed of two scenarios, which had a kind of lens effect. The left depicted the scene of the corner inside the wig store. The characters and contents were closely and orderly arranged, but the images of the characters were deliberately exaggerated. A cold skull image which was unrelated to the surrounding characters was used in the middle of the characters. The whole image looked very crowded and narrow; the overall color was warm color, but there was very strong contrast. On the right side was the profile of a woman playing the cello with a single color; and there were no complex colors. The whole painting presented a kind of metal texture, which formed strong contrast with the left side. The multiple narrative schema produced complex spatial structure, and brought strong absurdity and cold feeling. The Metaphor implied the current social ecology of the United States and the living situation of the American people. The use of the “allegorical” way is an expression of the cognition of the real world, enhances the sense of form and deeper implication of the picture, and triggers people’s infinite thinking.

4. CONCLUSION

New-expressionism has no unified style. New-expressionism artists have different expression means, but they emphasize spirit, the feeling of the heart, rather than the surface form of the works. They absorb each other on creative ideas and expression techniques. As the different objects and a diversified whole, they presented a new society to viewers. Their works could be more really show the complex real world. David Salle believed that art is the reaction of the society, rather than be bound by tradition, and is the embodiment of the spirit of freedom will, without needing to carry historical mission. I find that David Salle is different from the traditional painting expression, his painting language was bolder and more direct. He used image appropriation, image combination, disorderly composition, and complicated color stimulus to reflect the anxiety, hectic, interpersonal alienation of the era, as well as the alternated visual perception of the whole society. David Salle’s painting language is explored in the paper based on the origin and presentation of the

¹ Zhuo Yuzheng. *The Language of Postmodern Painting in David Salle’s Art*. CNKI 2017 , p11

American New-expressionism. It can help better understand the creative ideas of David Salle, and have deeper understanding of the roots behind the painting language. David Salle brought the traditional figurative paintings back to the public's view, and transformed the traditional painting spirit and traditional painting language, reflecting the new creation on the basis of inheritance. The exploration of his painting language art practice has important research value and reference significance for our current artistic creation.

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