A Song To The Vitality Of Beauty

By Yang Lian

Netherlands-born, Berlin-based painter and sculptor Fré Ilgen makes art that speaks to the power of sculptural organization and materials. His sculptures are touched by both stillness and movement and reveal something of the responsiveness of art to the human dynamic.
Fré Ilgen understands in great depth how aesthetic transformations progress in both sculpture and painting. His sculptures and paintings should be seen as consciously composed aesthetic wholes, permeated with an awareness of structure and organization. The sight of these steel plates, seemingly about to scream or to sing in sweet harmony, makes us attain more closely to the spatial dynamic as they embrace. And in each piece of clay or terracotta, as in the shaped formal text of classical landscape painting (triptych), 2013, oil, acrylic, and conté crayon on canvas, 205 x 350 cm. Photograph: Matthias Kolb, Berlin.

Fré Ilgen, Great Fantasy and Fugue, sculpture, 2013, stainless steel, paper clay, acrylic paint, 135 x 135 x 75 cm. Fré Ilgen, Battleground of Evermore – Changes, work on paper, 2013, watercolor, white gouache, 220 x 113 cm. Photograph: Matthias Kolb, Berlin.

As I look at his Great Fantasy and Fugue (2010), my eye is at first entirely engaged by the hallucinatory turbulence of colors—the greens, yellows, blues, blacks, whites, pinks, ochres, and oranges that hit the viewer in the face like a tsunami engulfing every line, carrying off in every direction. Is this riot of color a landscape? Some nighttime forest pounded by a storm perhaps? What a minute, though—as my eye gradually adapts, past these explosive waves of color, somehow, from the depths of my brain’s vision as if from the seabed, human forms at first unnoticed rise slowly to the surface. Who is the woman on the left, her eyes downcast? Who is the man she turns her dancer? His Christ-like figure, submerged in russet brown, seems encrusted in a bloody froth. A little above him, a hand can be seen pushing something aside with classically beautiful fingers. A figure sitting sideways has had its turned head changed into a yellow-white goat of flame. But the flame shoots out in one direction, and over it, as it surveys the scene from high above, another figure stretches out his left hand, consoling suffering humanity.

Perhaps what Fré Ilgen has painted is the passion and resurrection of Christ set amidst all the tumult of human life. But that other face at the very top, why does it so resemble a statue of the Buddha? This group of figures suddenly reveals a structure and a connotation in what I had taken for a random disorder of line. This makes the painting’s surface rather like that of the oil paintings of da Vinci, Rembrandt, or Rubens—who Fré Ilgen loves—overlaid or Rubens—who Fré Ilgen loves—overlaid as they are by the minuscule punctuation of the crucified left by time, and this leads us to redouble our efforts in order to search out the essential meaning implicit in the work. Only at this point did my eye suddenly become aware or the series of slanting rectangles set so obviously across the surface of the painting: they are directly and explicitly revealed, and seen in the highest degree, they remain hidden. They do not attract the eye (perhaps they even subtly repel it) and so they demand eventual ‘discovery.’ Revealing the world’s structure is the aim of all intellectual inquiry: here, though, we ourselves must proclaim it.

Fré Ilgen, who was born in 1956, has had numerous international exhibitions and has realized numerous monumental and site-specific sculptures. Your Long Journey (5 x 7 x 40 meters) (2007–2008), which is on permanent display at the Heungkuk Life Insurance building in the center of Seoul, Korea, is his largest. He is represented by Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York, Hong Kong, and Singapore; in Germany; he works with Beck & Eggeling International Fine Art.

“I am not interested in the ego of the individual, but I am interested in the position of the individual in the complex flux of reality,” says Ilgen. “This motivates me to study in my work a synthesis of European artistic form-language with Asian concepts of nothingness, and has spurred my interest in European Baroque, Asian temples, paintings, and sculptures.”

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The materials in Ilgen’s sculptures—heavy as they are, and usually constructed on an immense scale, with their whirling lines penetrating light, and suspended forms—make us forget their weight and instead take pleasure in this graceful, supple, and responsive art. At the touch of the sculpture’s hand, the form of the sculpture is sketched out on the shapeless void of nothingness. As in a painting, where the surface may be all surging mayhem while the depths are steady and firm, Ilgen’s syntax says: art is used to illumine deep reality, and in the mere ornamental play of the surface, a realization is encoded that allows us to grasp the depth, the reality, of the experience and the cultural events that are its background. This is why I have felt that Ilgen’s sculptures commemorate the moments and the events that are recorded in their structure, that they are the shape of a thing that is not there, a shape that is a projection of the most important moments of our time. And so I have repeatedly thought of contemporary in that sense.

Above Fré Ilgen, Peace and Noise, painting (triptych), 2013, oil, acrylic, and charcoal on canvas, 305 x 600 cm. Photograph: Matthias Kolb, Berlin. Fré Ilgen, Battlefield of Eras and Thanatosis, terracotta group, 2012–2013, each max approx. 40 x 30 x 25 cm. Previous pages: Fré Ilgen, Vertigo, suspended sculpture, 2010–2012, stainless steel, industrial paint on permanent site on top of each other, approx. 9 x 4 x 3 meters. Bank Kreissparkasse Herzogtum Lauenburg, SparkassenCenter, Geesthacht, Germany. Photograph: Matthias Kolb, Berlin.

Fré Ilgen, Immigrant Song, painting, 2012, conté crayon, acrylic, and oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm.

Fré Ilgen, Sweet Melody, sculpture, 2012, red copper, industrial paint, 66 x 112 x 67 cm. Photograph: Matthias Kolb, Berlin.

Fré Ilgen, So It Goes, sculpture, 2013, stainless steel, aluminum, cellulose clay, 43 x 35 x 28.5 cm.

Fré Ilgen, Battle of Evermore - Changes, works on paper, 2013, watercolor, white gouache, each 220 x 113 cm. Photograph: Matthias Kolb, Berlin.

Fré Ilgen says, “… having noticed that humans tend to be more interested in looking longer at artworks that are purposely made imperfect, and much less at industrially made artifacts, I have realized the importance of the artwork made by the artist’s own hands. Like in the Baroque, or in much of Asian culture, I look for offering the struggle of life in depth, combining and juxtaposing the beautiful with the more negative of life …”

This quotation brings me to understand that depth is the word that links Xu Longsen and Fré Ilgen with Chinese and European artistic thought. The points of commonality are these: First, possession of a tradition: neither Xu Longsen’s ink-wash landscapes nor Fré Ilgen’s Baroque can be the stuff of idle gossip, because both demand rigorous study, in order that technique might penetrate deeply into tradition. Second, each of these artists has brought a unique concept into being. The reproduction of classical works is a long way from enough; judgment of an artistic masterpiece must begin from its inimitable completeness, ancient or modern, Eastern or Western. So, in essence, these are both conceptual artists, and both create out of a conscious awareness of their own techniques and their own skills. Third, and the rarest of all, is the awareness aestheticians have of the hardships involved. The modern transformation of traditional Chinese culture is founded on Qu Yuan’s 2,300-year-old Questions to Heaven, an eternal questioning, a continual challenging of the limits of one’s own heart. Similarly, what great artist, East or West, does not put their own questions to heaven?

Questioning is a type of energy that crosses every kind of frontier, whether classical or contemporary, East or West, or time or space, and integrates us within the concentric circles of thought, mutual understanding and mutual inspiration.

“In general, we may conclude that all artistic developments of the late-19th century, through the 20th century, until today have had their merit, but that we should afford to acknowledge this has run its course and it is time to think what art means to the human being,” says Fré Ilgen. “As such, we need to allow ourselves a new, open mind and, for instance, reconsider mutual values in artistic expression that work by themselves and are acknowledged by a broad audience, regardless of time and local culture, while still building on the time of creation as well as on specific culture, in other words which are ‘contemporary classic.’”

Yang Lian is one of China’s foremost contemporary poets and associated with the Misty Poets and also with the Searching for Roots school. He was born in 1955 in Bern, Switzerland, but raised in Beijing.