

## Book Review

### ***A Grand Materialism in the New Art From China* by Mary Wiseman**

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The new book, *A Grand Materialism in the New Art from China*, by Mary Bittner Wiseman is a thought-provoking read. By focusing on materialism, this book looks at contemporary Chinese art within its changing social background and examines its relationship with contemporary and global art. Briefly, this book considers two independent movements that happened in the art world of China: first, the shift of the focus from language as “what determines how we articulate ideas and see the world” to what underlies and hides within language; second, the move towards globalization (xv). The two movements overlap because of their shared concern with material and Wiseman examines them through the lenses of Peter Osborne’s conception of the contemporary and Arthur Danto’s definition of art. However, this book is not solely about art; it is, rather, a multidisciplinary work based on art, especially on contemporary art in China. In this sense, art is not only the theme of the book but also the site or commencement of discussion from which Wiseman talks about philosophy, cultural traditions, and their relationship with art. Within these discussions are differences of how Eastern and Western practitioners and thinkers conceive of the world, life, and human existence; how they regard art and aesthetics; and what they value. Based on wide but in-depth discussions, Wiseman finally returns to her emphasis on art itself, reflecting on what art is in contemporary society.

This book is divided into three parts: crisis, working through art, and thinking through art. In the first part, crisis, Wiseman introduces the historical background of the changing point in Chinese art and then addresses the change itself. According to Wiseman, with the opening to the West, China also opened itself up to Western capitalism. This prompted a shift in the way that Chinese artists viewed the world. This change in attitude and perspective, Wiseman argues, expressed

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itself in artworks. Specifically, avant-garde artists speak to the new China by seeking the belief that is missing in the changing social background. At this stage, when language has failed to consistently capture the changing world, material versions of their expression begin to appear in some of the best new artworks.

In the second part, working through art, Wiseman shows how Chinese artists utilize art to work through these issues. Chinese artists faced three problems: first, how does capitalism affect their identity as a Chinese person; second, what is the source of the meaning of their language when its original meaning has been lost or shifted through changing social context; and third, what is their art and art theory in the new era. By assessing the artworks of several prominent independent artists, such as Xu Bing, Cai Guoqiang, and Song Dong, Wiseman argues artists in China seek answers through reflecting and thinking about themselves and their meaning by appealing to and expressing themselves through materials. In this sense, materials are their site and approach, as well as a means of questioning.

In part three, thinking through art, after having explored contemporary Chinese art in the previous two parts, Wiseman leaves the emphasis of Chinese art and reflects on art generally. Here, she focuses on three themes: the global, the contemporary, and the concept of art. Firstly, Wiseman considers several contemporary Chinese artworks and briefly outlines what is meant by the global, especially global art. She thinks “global does not mean the absence of features of identifying its place and origin”, but “a focus that values difference” (87). She also thinks of global art as the art that is engaged and appreciated by people around the world rather than as art without signs of its place and region of origin. Secondly, Wiseman refers to Peter Osborne’s *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* and appeals to the exhibitions of two Chinese artists to examine Osborne’s account of contemporary art. Osborne interprets contemporary art as a kind of modernism and concludes that modernism is far from being over – even if many critics think it is. Instead, he believes modernism continues to structure the entire field of contemporary art to the extent of remaining a historically critical practice. The two exhibitions, *According to What and Bound Unbound*, of two Chinese artists, Ai Weiwei and Lin Tianmiao, are consistent with Osborne’s interpretation of the contemporary art. Finally, Wiseman reflects on art itself by referring to Arthur C. Danto’s definition of art and looking at its application to some works of the new art from China. Wiseman insists that the history of art had not come to an end in China with its opening up to the West, and Danto’s definition is appropriately applied to this new Chinese art.

There are two considerable merits to be found in this book. Firstly, it opens a wide discussion when talking about Chinese contemporary art, involving philosophy (epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics), cultural traditions, and topics from

many other disciplines. This wide discussion helps readers reflect on art beyond art itself and look at the relationship between art and other disciplines from a broad perspective. Through this, readers can understand how art and other disciplines mutually influence each other and affect human life. When reading many details in the final part, readers might find that thoughts branching from the former two parts are still relevant to the thoughts at hand, helping them think independently about the question of what art is. As Wiseman suggests, art is not only about people's attitudes toward beauty and their comprehension and expression of it, but it also reflects how people think of themselves, comprehend the world, and understand their lives. In this sense, what art shows is not limited to beauty, for it embraces the entire human world, its life and existence. Therefore, this book opens up a wide space and copious resources for readers to think through these issues themselves.

Secondly, Wiseman accurately captures the features and spirit of Chinese art and clearly presents it to her readers, thus making this book a helpful as well as precise analysis of Chinese art. She notices valuable differences in the role of beauty between Chinese and Western art, indicating a difference in worldview between the two cultures. According to Wiseman,

It was to the spirit, not the eye, that the work of art made its strongest appeal. The art is notable for its beauty, but beauty is not what was sought, which was the harmony of the work with the pulse of the universe, that is, the satisfaction of Hsieh Ho's first principle.

(61)

Beauty is important in art, but it is a secondary pursuit in Chinese art. The harmony of the work with the pulse of the universe, or in other words, the harmony of the spirits of the subject and object of artwork is the first aim when Chinese artists create art. Again:

The making, not the made, has traditionally been valued in the art of China... Process, not product, and energy, not form, underlie and constitute the real... there is art when an artist captures the spirit and vitality of some object or activity through the use of the brush.

(63, 65)

Art is an expression of "the spirit and vitality of some object or activity," in other words, this spirit and vitality is what artists want to show through their works. To

capture them accurately, an artist “gives herself to the vital moment so that she transfers its resonance in her to the medium in which she is working” (65). This is how Chinese artists achieve a harmony between themselves and the object of the artwork, and how artists produce the artwork in accord with the pulse of the universe. At the same time, this is also what underlies the language. By capturing the core features of Chinese art, Wiseman lucidly explains Chinese art to readers.

This book, with its focus on a specific topic and overarching contextual discussions, is one many will find impressive and interesting. The first group of readers it will appeal to is scholars of aesthetics and artists who want to know Chinese contemporary art, especially in terms of materialism. The second group is of scholars who are interested in cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary research, especially between Chinese and Western traditions and between art and philosophy. Wiseman’s comparison of Chinese and Western views and her analysis and appreciation of Chinese artworks can satisfy these needs. The third group is of philosophers who are interested in the effect of philosophy on other disciplines. This book illustrates the influence of philosophy on art; thus, it can be regarded as a thorough case study for tracing philosophy’s influence on other disciplines. Briefly, considering the specific topic of art and the abundant content which covers a wide span of time and discipline, this book will be of interest to a wide variety of readers.