

ZHANG ZHENYU

DUST

A text by Zhu Zhu

Before Zhang Zhenyu began using dust as a medium, he spent almost six years making his newspaper series. Every day for one year he used a needle to erase the entire content of that day's People's Daily newspaper. For two years, he also erased the ink on the China Daily and Beijing Daily newspapers. Each time it would take him five to six hours. He called this part "reading". It corresponded with the "copying", for which he would take the scraped-off bits of paper and mix them together in a blender with sheets of newspaper to create a paper pulp. From this pulp he would make new paper. Then, using a knife, he stenciled the content of the newspaper onto the paper. The characters in the end were barely legible.

These two manual rituals, bordering on obsessive-compulsive disorders, helped him get through some depressing times in Beijing. They were the mirror image of each other, forming a little self-circulating system between them. Even as these repetitive daily practices yielded a little comfort and freedom, they made even more apparent the divisiveness of the subject. Even as he resisted and eliminated the outer information world, he nearly forced himself to become a part of it, working in a state of intense anxiety. When the fissure was almost at the edge of collapse, it was only when he entered this machine-like state – as if he were on sedatives – did he then find comfort. The circle of this small sealed off system had one crack, just like sheds in the Dark Ages had small windows, through which poisonous forage could be brought in, chewed and ruminated upon.

One day when Zhang Zhenyu noticed the dust dancing in the sunlight indoors, and he was entranced by the beauty and emptiness of the dance and the tension in its contradiction. He began considering the possibility of using dust as a medium. After a period of experimentation, he created a method – he would use a brush to collect dust and mix the dust with glue to make a thin film-like layer. He made layer upon layer, "more than 30-40 layers, sometimes over 100," so the end result was a thick texture and volume. The changing colors of the dust were apparent; the layers could be seen in the edges of the work. The finished works express a feeling minimalist abstraction and the aesthetic elements were simplified and omitted. They remained only in the subconscious. Audiences are confronted with only a smooth and dark mirrored surface.

That is exactly the effect that Zhang Zhenyu wishes the dust to achieve. But it is not where the meaning of the work ends. The reflection of the viewer in the mirror is the work's dynamic continuation. Each person can see his or her own reflection in the work. "What do you see when you look at the work?" He sees the mirror as "a method of questioning." (Quoted from "Zhang Zhenyu in conversation with Liao Wen".)

The encapsulation of the "Reading" and "Copying" series is broken. The "Dust" series creates a kind of open situation, inviting others to come in to read: to read the book of dust and to read themselves. In other words, reading becomes a kind of ritual that refers dust to the self-image. There is no clear direction of meaning but it presumes a mysterious up and down movement: dust rises up to the wall and is given a solid, intense, even totem-like sense of existence. But when a viewer standing in front of a work experiences the self-reflection, he or she may go in the direction of dust's original state: transient and destroyed.

One thing China does not lack for is dust. The radical and blind process of modernization, the destruction of the environment, and the trampling on of people by the system...these are all reflected in the metaphor of dust. Just like T.S. Eliot's verse in *The Wasteland*: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." But we need to view the sociological motive of Zhang Zhenyu's medium with caution. He had a project in which he asked people to send him dust samples to go into the mirror so that he could express the theme of the "homogeneity of cities and culture". However, for him, in the pendulum-like movement between society and universality, he evidently leans toward the latter. In his and in our visual imagination, dust is the origin of the world and it is also the end of the world. That is a kind of barrenness and emptiness.

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Paper, dust, and, smoke: all of these mediums are characterized by lightness, thinness and a proximity to formlessness. They are the invisible parts of the overbloated materialistic reality. But they also form the deepest mirror image. Especially in the "dust" series, Zhang Zhenyu provides an artistic form that makes us stop and think deeply. Whenever this form solidifies, we must reopen it, so that the dust can be a dynamic medium again, so that it can confront different semantics.