

Telephone, candlestick, shopping list, clothes, painting on the wall, chandelier on the ceiling, chocolates, notebook filled with names of modern artists, fruits, vegetables, COVID-19 mask, teacups, golf balls, magnifying glass, teddy bear, box of pencils, box of cookies, tree outside the window.

What are we drawing today?

She often asked me this, just as I asked myself.

When the pandemic led to a lockdown, we moved from drawing together outdoors and in the botanical garden to drawing still lifes at home. Furthermore, she became increasingly forgetful and bad-tempered, to the point that we acted cautiously around one another every time we began drawing.

E.S. loves flowers, so they appear often in our paintings.

She had lived in the Netherlands for a long time. Tulips were our first choice for drawing. Once, I drew a tulip and E.S. liked it very much. She said, “The petals wrap around themselves in layers. There’s a sense of security, that it is protected.”

Sometimes when the same object was drawn over and over again, she would inevitably get bored and say, “I hate tulips, I want to draw something that has never been drawn before!” This reminded me of O’Keeffe’s comment, when she said that she didn’t particularly like flowers—she painted them simply because they don’t move and it was cheaper than hiring models.

There’s a positive side to repetition. In the Analects of Confucius, the phrase “learning from the past to know the new” refers to the ability to acquire knowledge based on the life experience previously accumulated. Digging through existing bodies of knowledge could lead to new things being generated, new points of interest being discovered. Having this ability was enough to become a teacher.

And what does repetition mean to me? When I revisit the masterpieces, it brings back many memories of my studies at the art academy in Guangzhou. There, reproduction was a very common method of learning within the academy’s strict training style.

I wonder if we can also learn by reproduction?

It so happened that E.S. also had a number of Impressionist catalogues on her bookshelf, and Manet painted a series of poignant still lifes in the last months of his life—16 small paintings of flowers. She felt that Manet’s personal style was too strong and difficult to reproduce.

Why not try Cézanne?

She often talked about how she had been to Cézanne’s former residence in Aix-en-Provence and also to Montagne Sainte-Victoire before. Once she started copying, she found it difficult to clearly see Cézanne’s paintings because some parts were rather abstract. But she was fascinated by the details because she was a draughtsman of mechanical parts for the post office, which needed to be depicted precisely.

Although E.S. had long since stopped drawing these mechanisms, she still retained her quest for detail and wanted every petal or leaf to be perfect. Her vision has become less sharp over the years, making it difficult to draw accurately.

We have probably all experienced this—the longer the line, the harder it is to draw straight. Through practice, muscle memory allows the lines to look good, effortless and even playful or magical. But what kind of line is a good line? William Hogarth would say that drawing a good serpentine line requires highly concentrated observation and that reason could be used to transcend the simple appearance of things.

In other words, to summarize an object to its contour. I sometimes speculated whether her pursuit of precision, or her standard of *good* drawing, was influenced by rational thinking.

I remember when we first started drawing together, we often went to the botanical garden; it was autumn, and the greenhouse was warmer than the outdoors. We could see plants from all over the world growing together in harmony, and the plants were well cared for by the complex system of the greenhouse.

Many of the plants in the botanical garden were new to us, which we found difficult to deal with when drawing and didn’t know where to start. So, I suggested that she try to draw by just looking at the objects and not looking at the paper, which was a practice she sometimes employed, a playful warm-up exercise that made it easier for her to enter into a drawing state. At the beginning she found it quite interesting, the smooth lines easy to draw, enjoying the pleasure that came from serendipity. But after a few more drawings, it didn’t feel fresh anymore. She wished she could draw more *professionally*.

How could a painting be judged as professional or not? Or even something complete? How could it be *more artistic*? Something like this is difficult to answer, and the standard is always changing. Sometimes she would ask me in return, “Is this the effect you want me to achieve in my drawings?” I also wonder if my suggestion was just my own subjective will. Did she actually not want to draw this way at all? If she didn’t want to draw a still life, wouldn’t it be nice to write something in a stream-of-consciousness instead?

She enjoyed literature—in comparison to drawing, she was much more confident about the written word and habitually wrote in her journal. While drawing, she would sometimes write down her own feelings, the famous words of famous people, proverbs that were easy to understand, or sentences she found funny from our conversations, which showed the humour in her character.

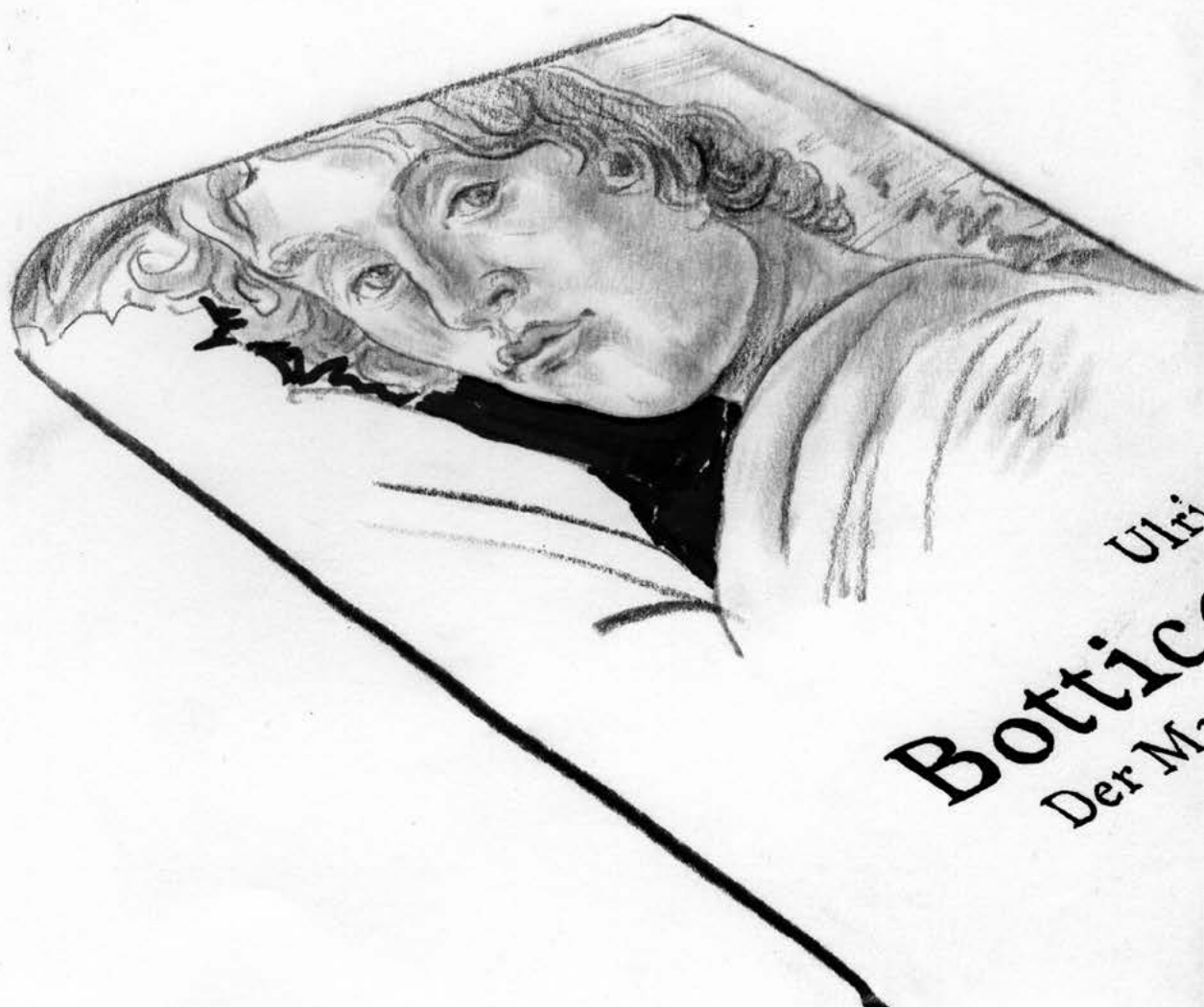
It reminded me of literati paintings, when an artist would make a painting and then write a poem on it, or sometimes ask a friend to add an inscription instead. Once, E.S. painted a banana and wrote the word schlodderich (messy). I learned more German being with her than I did in German classes. I told her that I didn’t think her drawing was messy, but that the banana seemed to be a moving image, as if it was falling from a height. Later, she gave me that drawing.

We often chatted while drawing, but it was easy to get lost in the conversation and forget which part of the flower we had drawn. She would sometimes look at several different flowers to draw one flower. But this is also a way of depicting an object. It may not be necessary to consider whether the drawing is faithful to the object at all—*forgetting* is an important concept in Zhuangzi’s thought, a kind of *relaxation*. Is it too romantic if I think in this way?

When people lose something they once cherished, they may feel disappointed, angry or sad. Shi Tao said, “人为物使，则心受劳,” meaning that when people are controlled by external factors, they suffer physically and mentally. So, it is better to forget them. But what if the loss is *memory*? Can this help me to get rid of the bondage and entanglement in my body and restore my natural happiness? How many people lose their *memories* but become happier?

But, as Levi-Strauss said, only artwork can confirm that something did happen among human beings within the flood of time. We may not be able to call our exercises *great art*, but there are still important and mundane things that are recorded day after day.

It is easier to grasp what is in front of you than what is in the distance. Those objects drawn on paper—tulips, tree trunks, cars, cows, bananas, apples, signatures, words, dates—are like flowers, blooming and falling silently, but they exist quietly there, shining in their vivacity. Finally, with my repeated encouragement, she drew her first portrait of me. I realized that there was still a lot left to do.



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