

THE WORLD IS A FACE: THE ART OF FA-Q

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1. DRAWING NOTHING BUT FACES

What is surprising about the painter, Fa-Q, is that he draws nothing but faces.

Although Fa-Q lost his baby daughter (1990) and ended up in prison after becoming addicted to drugs and committing thefts and other crimes, I don't think that the shock of her death is the reason why he started drawing faces or his own portraits in prison. I also doubt that he has become focused on faces (or "self-portraits") as a result of certain self-reflection after leading a wild life. From the beginning he drew only faces and cannot really draw anything but faces.

Fa-Q was born in 1955 and started working as an outsider artist at the end of the 1970's. He received some notable attention in the 1980's when he visited other countries or was invited by overseas institutions (Italy, Finland, Austria, Japan, etc.). I am not familiar with his works before the 1980's, but he was already an established painter of "faces" when he came to the forefront.

Even when he draws something other than a face (which is very rare), it still resembles a face. Even when he just draws a line with a pen or a pencil, not intending to draw a face, his hand automatically draws a face.

It is because, for Fa-Q, the world is a person, regardless of his past and present way of life. That means, for him, the world is nothing but a person, and the "person" exists and appears as a face. For him, beautiful nature or dainty urban scenes do not exist. His eyes look at a person, and only one person. There are no groups of people painted in his works. For him, the world appears as one person's face. In fact, it is not even a "person's face." It is just a "face."

2. GROUND AND FIGURE

With this in mind, it is meaningless to ask if his "faces" are self-portraits or not. They might be and might not be, as they are individual faces (existence) as well as the world itself. Even if he starts drawing a particular person's face, the result goes beyond individuality to the horizon of the face itself.

The main point (or, in other words, a characteristic of his) is that he cannot see his subject or himself from a third person's view. This is characteristic of his images and it is the essence of Fa-Q himself. Because he cannot see things objectively, his expression integrates two different dimensions—the subject (face) and the space in which the subject is set. Originally, fine art referred to the drawing of a figure (subject) on the ground (space). In Fa-Q's expression, however, the figure and ground are combined. Or rather, they are not separated in the first place. Actually, he draws a face to the extent that it ultimately becomes the ground. In other words, he does not have a sense of ordinary "ground." For him, the face is the world itself.

Furthermore, what is particularly interesting is that it is actually incorrect to say there is an absence of ground in Fa-Q's works.

Cartoons are typical works that have only figures and no ground. Pictures, of course, consist of figures and ground. In other words, secondary expressions such as cartoons have appeared and developed against the traditional standard of pictures. And usually, as you no doubt are aware, pictures are referred to as fine art and those secondary expressions are called "sub-culture" or "low art." In fact, the group where Fa-Q was found when his works became recognized was regarded as one of the main streams of sub-culture.

It is true that, at a glance, Fa-Q's works can be categorized as those "without ground," just like those of graffiti art, as they often appear as if there is no ground present at all, or they fall on the border area between "expression without ground" and "expression with ground." The truth is, however, his works are not "without ground." In his works, the ground and the figure are indistinguishable.

3. THE SUPPORT OF THE WORLD

The act of drawing started quite early in human history. It is, however, only recent that we have given the names "art" or "pictures" to the act of painting or something painted. Within the context of human history, this really is a recent development. In other words, human beings have always drawn and painted, but it is only very recently that what people draw or paint, or the act of drawing itself, has been transformed into something we can call a "picture" (as fine art). What has brought about this transformation? In my opinion, it is the awakening of self-awareness. Human beings, in isolating themselves from the world and looking objectively with the clear sense of self, began to see the "world" and "objects." Since then, to look at something (figure) is to look at it separately from, but still within, the world. So we should say that when one draws something, they draw it against the background of the world (on the ground). If so, the ground in the picture actually represents the world. The world supports the ground.

I do not know why, but Fa-Q must have lost the "world" as it is either at the beginning or at some point in his life. That means he used to live in a three-dimensional world, but all of sudden, his world was deprived of a sense of reality both mentally and visually, and it has become two-dimensional. He was like Gulliver when he entered the land of Lilliput. Fa-Q has probably entered the land of "playing cards." He could continue to live as though nothing happened, but in reality, he does not have a world or a space mentally, visually nor in his expression.

4. THE PRIMORDIAL POWER

Some people choose to "draw" as a means to express themselves. These people can be divided into two groups: those who draw pictures of fine art, and those who draw illustration, cartoons and designs. The latter are those who only draw figures and they either don't or choose not to use a ground. Contrastingly, the former group believes their work is not complete unless they use a ground in their picture. Just as a person cannot live without the relationship with the world, a figure without a ground is not a "figure" as such, but rather just a "shape." Such people cannot stand firmly and so they drift away. They do have some roles and merits, though. They are perfect for entertainment, for instance, because they drift away and do not remain.

The creation of pictures does not mean to embrace a shape on the surface and let it drift away. It means to embrace a space, with shapes in it, and to realize this on a plane surface, because shapes exist in relation to space. Ultimately, pictures are not shapes or images but rather a realization of a space. In Fa-Q's works, the space is absorbed in the face. The face, like a tornado, absorbs the surrounding space. The absorbed space does not disappear but simply remains. That gives his picture a unique power. That gives a certain characteristic to his "face." It is not like the faces of Pablo Picasso, Enrico Baj or Willem De Kooning, but his own characteristic: it is a complete plane.

His "faces" are complete planes, but they also "vibrate" on such planes. They do so despite the lack of special width or depth. Within this vibration, however, you can steal a glance into Fa-Q's world. Fa-Q's world is so limited that it is hardly seen, but still its vibration attracts us. Why is this?

Fa-Q's pictures are not "figures without ground," but there is no distinction between his figures and ground. What in his pictures attracts us? When we think about it, we can derive the answer from a primordial stage in human history. At that time, the act of drawing and things drawn existed where the ground and figures were not completely separated. Fa-Q has lost the "world" and since then he has been put in a situation similar to the primordial stage. He is no doubt driven to draw, without recognizing this himself, and when he is to draw, he must have a moment of primordial inspiration. He himself would not ask for it, but he is given a certain primordial force that both empowers him and attracts us.

I do not mean he is driven by such force to draw. He himself would like to restore his world. So, he is looking at the world, not at a primordial time, but he is situated at a border area. It is not the place he wants to be in, but his stance toward the world from that place gives his works a certain sense of tension. He does not return to a primordial time, nor deviate to somewhere else, but he adheres to this place, this horizon, and this stance, as if he is driven by something. He clings to it unconsciously. It is his battle and his works are the result of the battle. Or rather, they are the record of the battle.

In that sense, we could say all of his "faces" are his portraits, because, needless to say, we show our own "face" when we have to confront the unknown. Just as our face freezes when we confront the unknown, Fa-Q shouts, shows his teeth, puts a cigar in his mouth pretending he doesn't mind. In the picture, he draws haphazard spirals and lines to seal this off. Whatever expression he takes, it is definitely frozen. He confronts the world with his "face," and there is no alternative. He has to keep that stance. When he does so, his "face" becomes his world.

That is the reason why we feel from his works a sense of tension of being on the edge. Of course, they "face." But that is what it is, because the world itself, existence itself, is something of sadness—at least for Fa-Q.