



**The Question of Naturalism as a Mode
of Being (Dasein): "Is mimetic
painting also forever useful?"**

Aurora Vivenzio

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By; Aurora Vivenzio

This study addresses Ernst Gombrich's attitude towards modern art – what is there to cherish in the naturalistic mimetic art acquired over five centuries? In his view, “our billboards and cereal boxes have more and higher quality illusionist paintings than all of Italian Renaissance combined, though not always hand-made.” Why should we still be fascinated by naturalism? Additionally, this study aims to provide new perspectives on the questions “Gombrich only considered primitivism as an episode in Western civilization, not as a fundamental structure” and “Is mimetic painting also forever useful?”. These perspectives involve criticism of Gombrich's theories on art, particularly his views on naturalism and primitivism.

In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich argues that naturalistic painting is an art form that creates illusions by imitating reality. What is an art form of illusion? Illusion is expressed as a false belief that naturalistic images can substitute for reality. Why can language not achieve this? After all, did Aristotle not attempt to describe all

objects he saw through naming? Did René Magritte, in his 1936 work *La Lecture Défense, l'Usage de la Parole (The Defense of Reading, the Use of Speech)*, not try to make us understand that no matter how hard we strive to depict something identical to reality, it remains only a form of representation, functioning equivalently to language?

According to Gombrich, if every image, even a naturalistic one, is conceptual, this does not mean they are entirely conceptual. Whether in *Image and Code* or earlier works like *The Beginning of Art*, the clear distinction between conventional boundaries of images is achieved by referencing their biological origins, as described in *Illusion and Art*. Representation originates from substitution processes, i.e., biological categories, where the biological significance of images (mentioned in *Image and Code*) precedes their recognition as conventions.

“There is no neutral naturalism. Artists, like writers, need a vocabulary before they attempt to replicate reality... To describe the visible world with imag-

es requires a complex system of patterns" [*Illusion and Art*, p.96]. Gombrich also points out that although human vision has not changed in 5000 years, our contemporary experience of art differs. This illusion stems from believing the represented work is an independent organism, just like nature. Conversely, without active participation from viewers, who activate inherent cultural structures within their own vision, naturalistic images would lose their effect. At the *Dialogue with Leonardo da Vinci - Renaissance and Oriental Aesthetics Art Exhibition* held at the Shanghai Museum in 2023, preparatory sketches of atmospheric phenomena were displayed, along with 11 manuscripts spanning Da Vinci's 40-year career. These manuscripts likely contain studies on various topics including anatomy, mechanical design, architecture and botany. The sole trace and projection of water on the ground elicits surprise, yet we realize it is a representation (according to Wollheim.R) [R. Wollheim, *Reflections on Art and Illusion* (J), *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1963, Vol. 1, pp. 13-37].

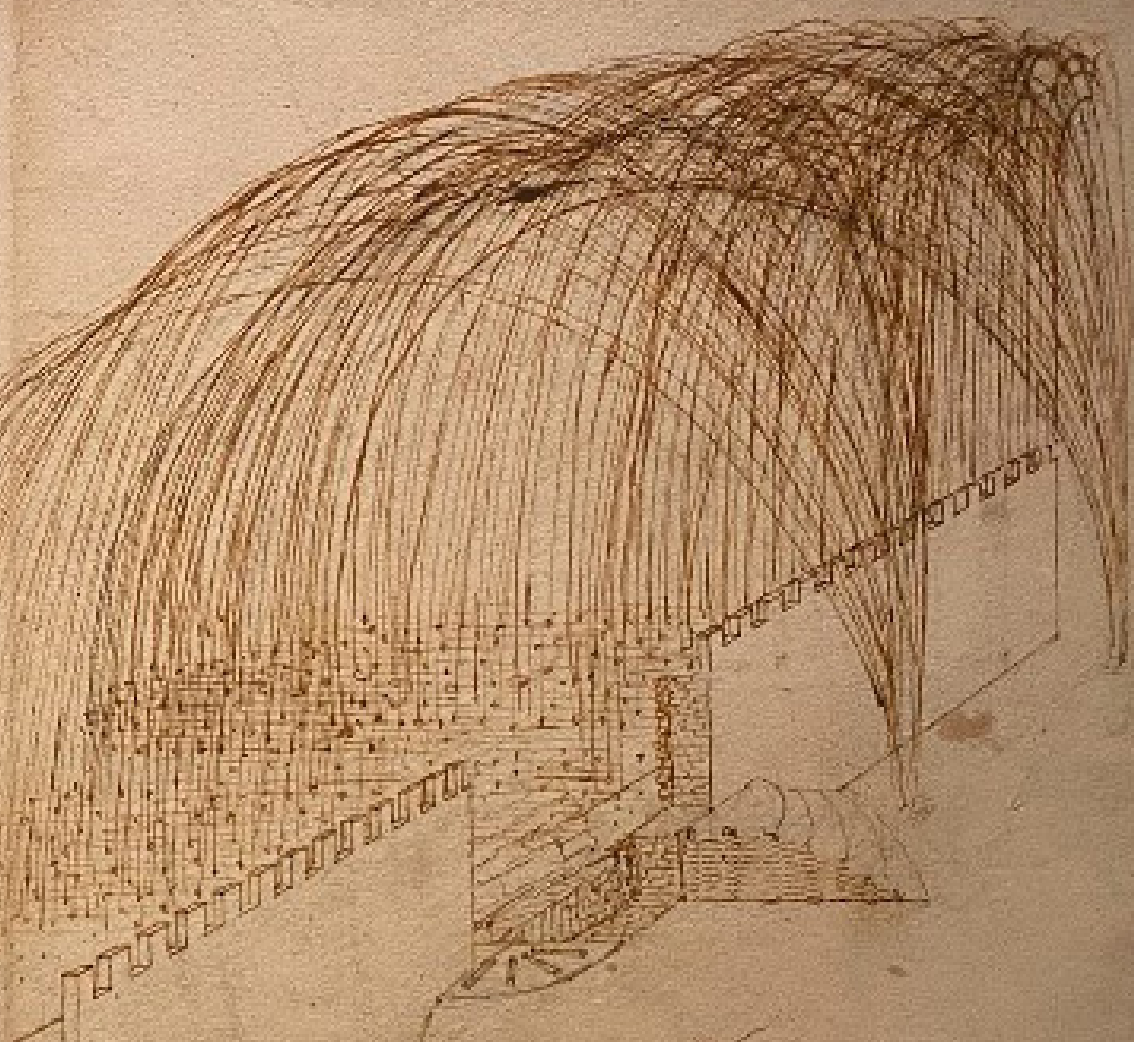
"It is quite clear that it is not a snapshot of water falling on water but a refined drawing of his thoughts on the subject. No waterfall or vortex allows us to see the lines of flowing water so

clearly, nor are bubbles in flowing water ever distributed so systematically. Even those unaccustomed to observing such effects would undoubtedly agree with L.H. Hevdenreich that this elegant sketch is an iconic, stylized work, an embodiment of various forces rather than a record of individual observations" [Cao Yiqiang and Michael Podro, *The Vision of Art: Theory, Method, and Meaning in Image Studies* (M), China Academy of Art Press, 2007, p. 413]

For Leonardo, this would be commonplace, if he believed painters must rely solely on their eyes, he wouldn't have written *On Painting* and its entire corpus of scientific observations. "Here (we read in *On Painting*) opponents say that he doesn't need so much *scienza* [knowledge] because for him, the practice of painting objects from nature is enough. The answer to this opinion is: nothing in reality deceives us more than relying on our own judgment without further reasoning, for experience always shows that reasoning is the enemy of alchemists, sorcerers, and other clever yet foolish people.

Considering Song Dynasty works depicting birds and flowers realistically (as exhibited in Zhenjiang Museum), one might believe such works can replac-







室不須老吏
畏張湯
己卯春月
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reality. In Chinese concepts, for a work to be naturalistic, it must not only conform to the true conditions of depicted birds but also accurately represent their habitats, food, seasons, and locations. Therefore, Zhang Yanyuan said calligraphy and painting originated together but later separated; images began to be created, but they remained simple. To convey meaning, writing was needed; to show form, painting was required.

《五代十國畫史》
ink and color on paper,
26.3 x 44.3 cm



钱选 Qian Xuan,
《桃枝秋实图》
Squirrel on a Peach Branch

poetry praises beauty but cannot fully represent images; therefore, pictorial representations combine both".

Thus, language cannot fully separate from images, as each reaches places the other cannot surpass. Zheng Qiao realized that pictorial records and textual narratives play complex roles in forms and conventions. We can illustrate this point with examples. Gu Hongzhong's *Night Revels of Han Xizai* can be seen as documentary reporting. Emperor Li Yu of Southern Tang wanted to appoint Han



Xizai as prime minister, but Han felt powerless against threats from the Northern Song and declined office to avoid ridicule. Suspecting Han indulged in debauchery instead of state affairs, Li ordered Gu Hongzhong to secretly observe and document Han's private life, intending to persuade him to reform. Modern historians regard this work as valuable historical evidence, recording attire, artifacts, utensils, and more [Cao Yiqiang and Michael Podro, *op. cit.*, p. 4.].

Similarly, in Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation of Christ*, it can be considered documentary reporting. With Federico da Montefeltro's rule facing severe threats, agreements to maintain Urbino's dominance relative to church politics faced opposi-

tion, leading to his son Oddantonio's death. Various interpretations suggest the dialogue among three figures in the foreground and the scene of Christ being flogged by Pontius Pilate in the background not only hint at political events but also serve as hidden testimony to the executioner of Oddantonio's death. Notably, this work hangs above his tomb. These examples help understand how images, like texts, witness reality in specific contexts. Piero's work is highly realistic, yet this does not imply texts and images are completely separate domains or that one can replace the other. Without Renaissance historians' written records, understanding *Flagellation of Christ* would be difficult today. This proves images evolve like languages, changing





顾闳中 Gu Hongzhong, 《韩熙载夜宴图》,

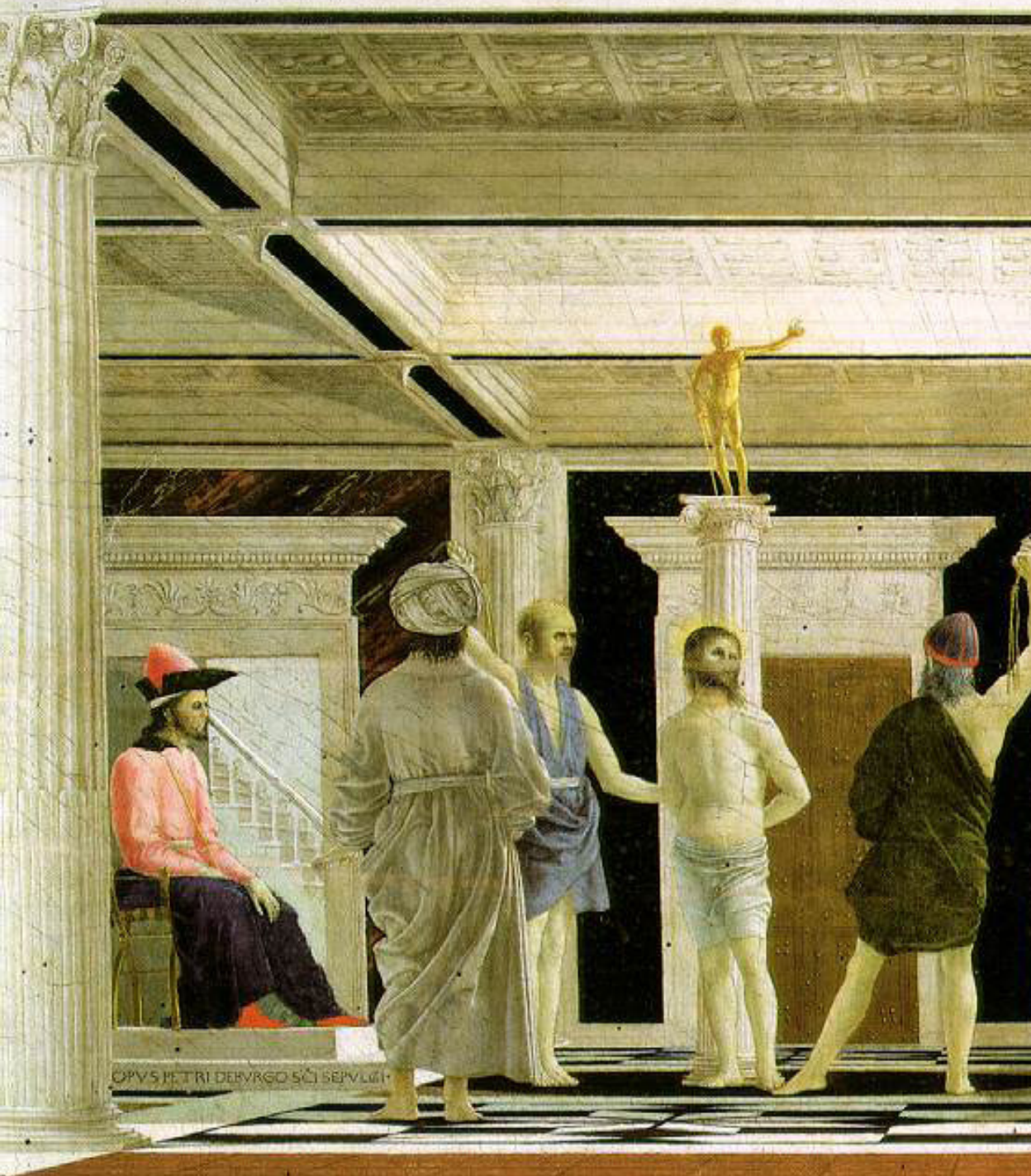
our perception of the world.

Visual depictions may seem reliable historical evidence, but since existing versions of *Night Revels of Han Xizai* are copies, not originals, could copyists not have altered the imagery according to their era's aesthetic conventions? Moreover, different eras have different painting languages influencing and changing copied images' forms and atmospheres.

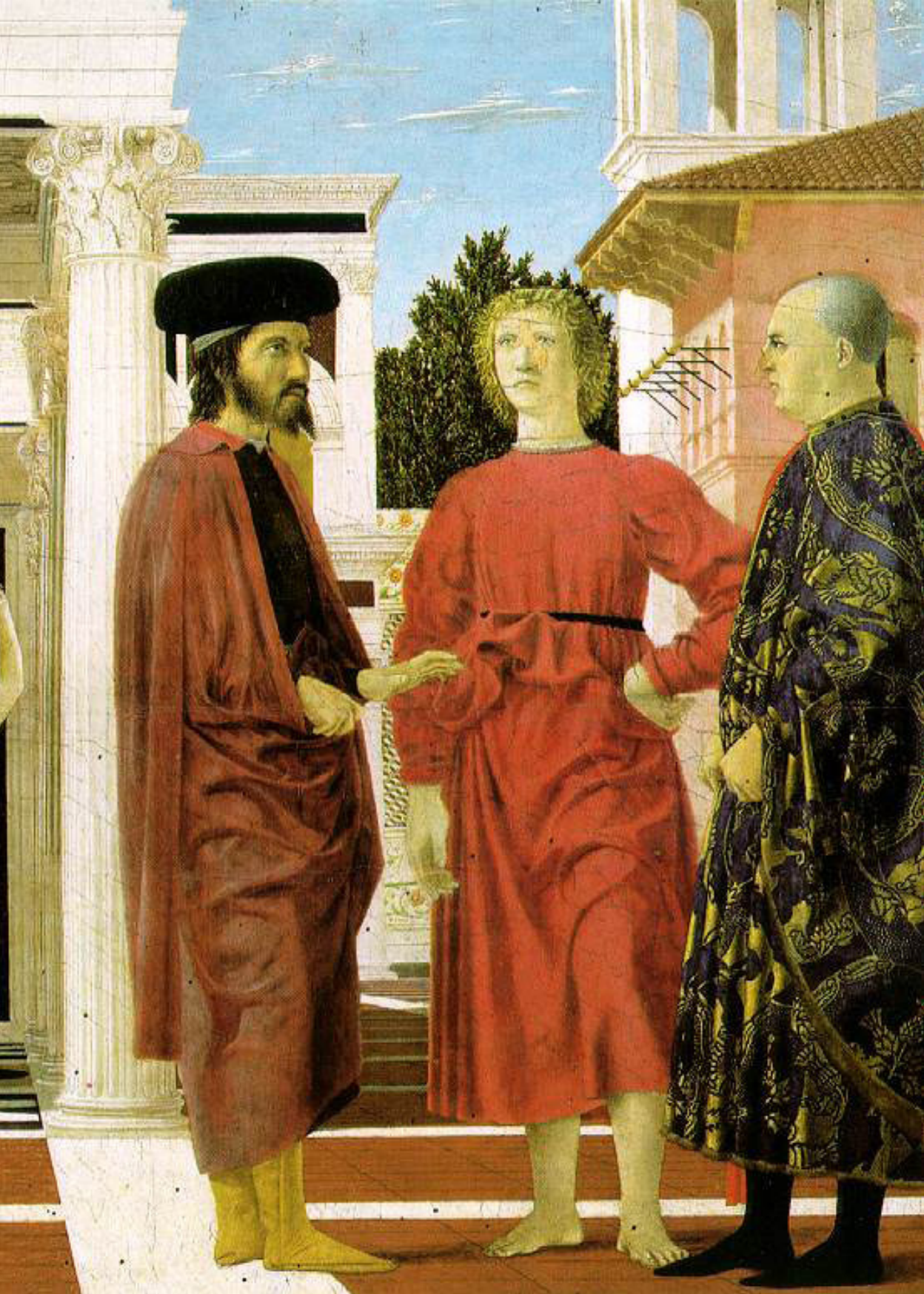
Renaissance style evolved influenced by Dante Alighieri, Boccaccio, Polizzano, etc. It's no wonder the rigid Italian language distinguishing clergy (Latin) from commoners (vernacular) was questioned by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. His 1909 Futurist Manifesto *Zang*

Tumb Tumb initially arose as a literary movement, reconfiguring and questioning language rhythms, paralinguage, and common expressions, even creating onomatopoeic language for instant communication (*Parole in libertà*). Eventually, language became images in poetry, like Apollinaire's calligrams, forming pictorial poems. Words became manifestos, pursuing speed and immediacy, transforming into visual images, which, while not comparable to Leonardo's naturalism, are real images in cognitive perception and visual phenomena. Wang Chong believed words reflect ancient sages' thoughts and behaviors more truly than images, which are mute and speechless, verifiable only visually but unable to convey sounds.





Piero della Francesca, *Flagellation of Christ*, Oil and tempera on panel, 58.4 x 81.5 cm



According to Gombrich, perception is a hypothesis-making process about colors, shapes, and relationships among individuals and communities. These hypotheses differ in each era and culture, as do languages used for communication. This is why Gombrich argued no artist truly returns to primitivism, thereby belittling Picasso and Gauguin's works. Gombrich notes classical art cultures, like ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, did not pursue realism as a primary goal. However, during the European Renaissance, especially under Leonardo's innovations, realism gradually became central. According to Gombrich, European art turned towards realism due to faster-developing painting techniques compared to other civilizations and deeper explorations in scientific research and literature. European art technology consistently explored *mimesis* (imitation) issues, reflected in visual and language arts. Similarly, many Chinese artists such as Gao Shiqiang + Shan-shui Creating Collective (高世强 + 山水集体创造) have also taken this approach. Their work, *Shan-shui: Six Chapters of Yunshan* (山水: 云山六章), was exhibited at the National Museum of Hangzhou as part of the exhibition curated by the Venice Biennale titled *Marco Polo and the City of Heaven*. This piece presented a work across six large LED

screens, showcasing parts of the landscape from Zhejiang Province in sequential slow-motion videos. Through a contemporary language accessible to foreign viewers as well, Gao aims to capture the flow of nature, expressing that sense of movement and continuity which Leonardo also sought in his notes and manuscripts. The camera is positioned from the viewpoint that Wen Ren Hua artists would adopt to represent their works.

The viewer is required to focus and contemplate the life-sized images, which also aim to engage the concept of the viewer's immersion in the artwork. The sense of realism is further enhanced by the use of audio. Through this mode of appreciation, not only is the viewer free to notice the details they prefer in the work—details that otherwise might have been presented or imposed by the painter on the viewer—but it also disrupts the common temporal mode of appreciation, achieving a unified vision of the work.

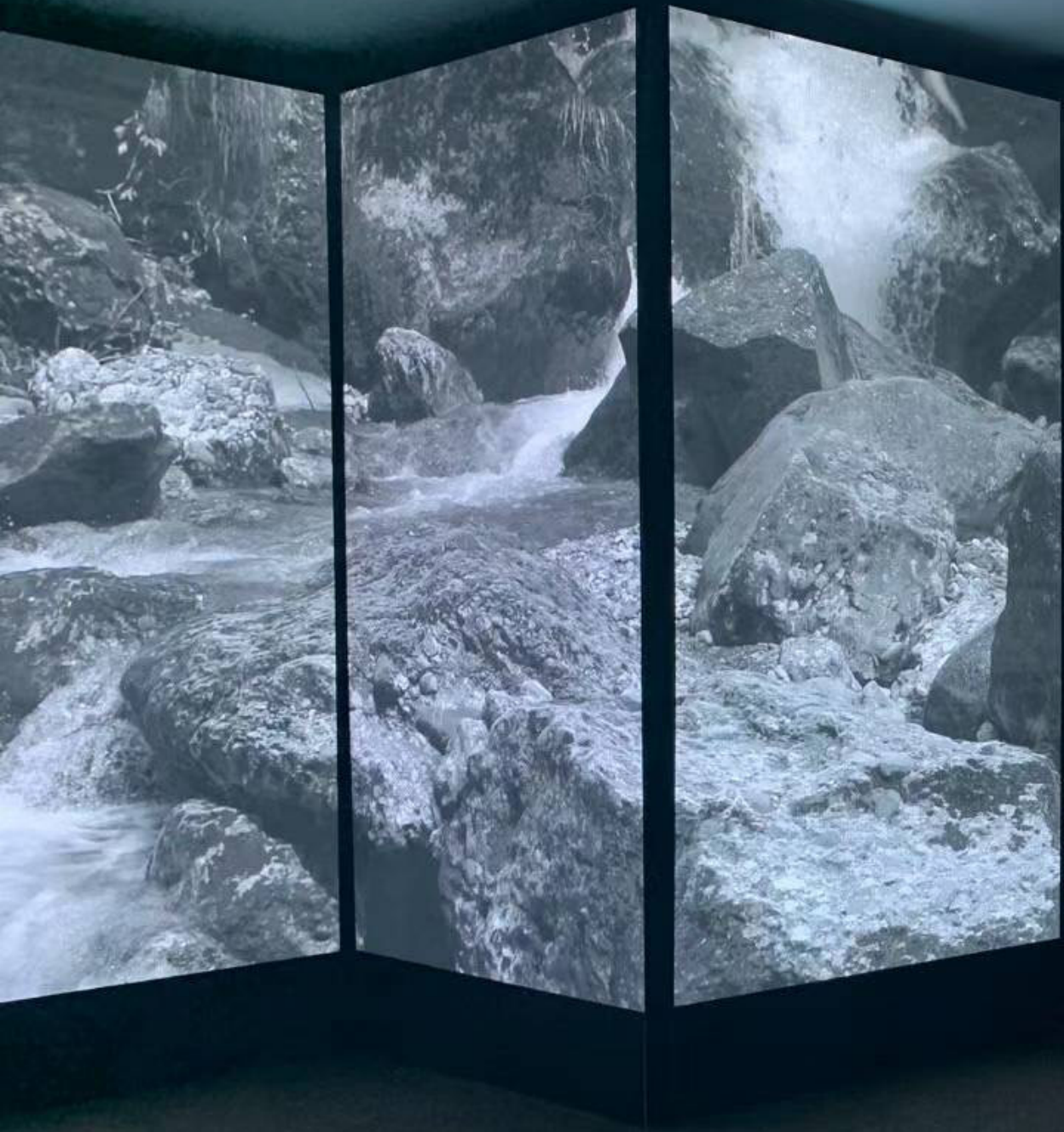
Gao's work invites the audience to experience the landscapes in a way that emphasizes personal engagement and reflection, transcending traditional boundaries of time and space. This creates an immersive environment where the viewer can explore the artwork freely, discovering elements that resonate most

with them, thereby creating a more intimate and personalized connection with the art.

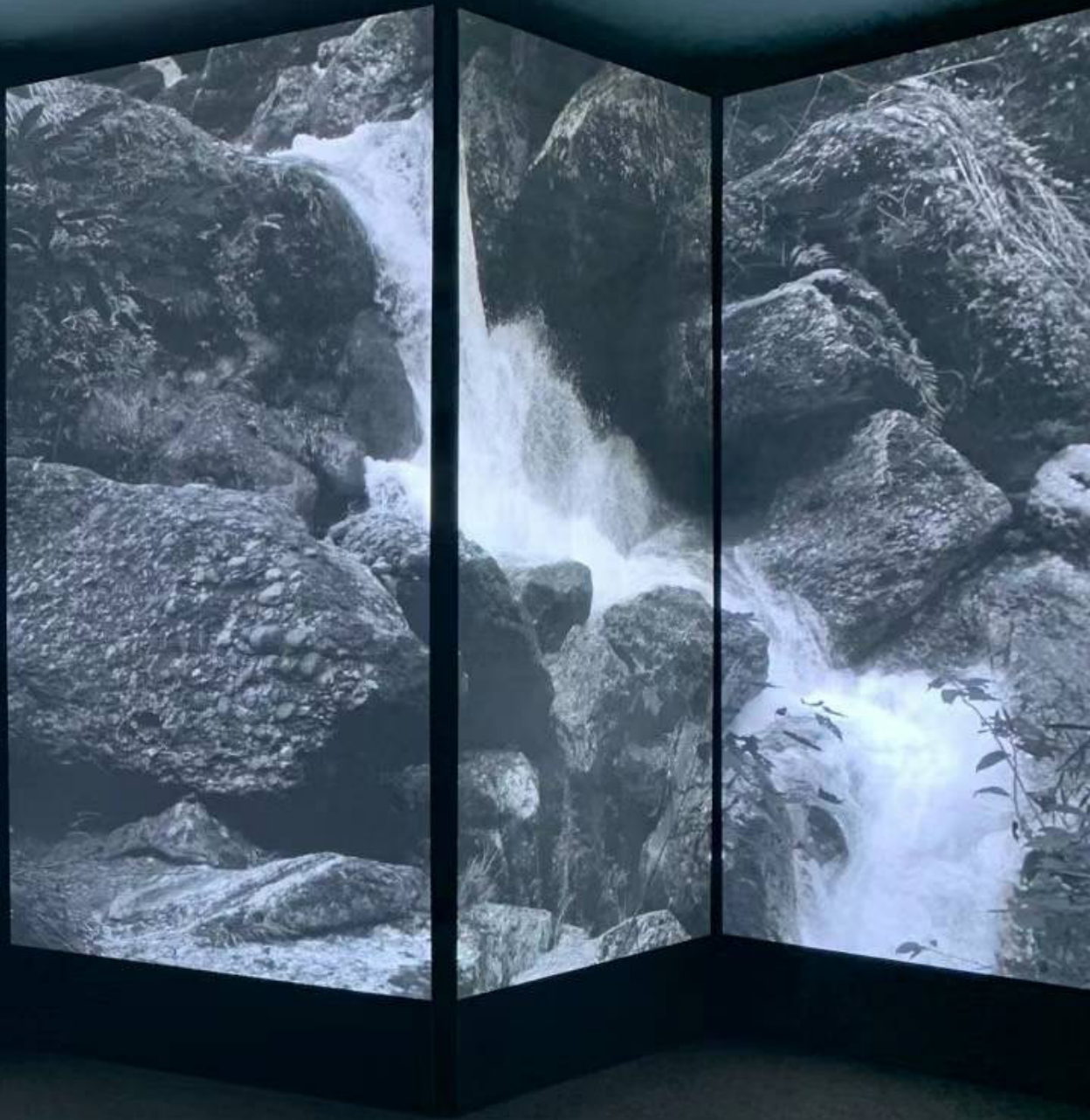
This pursuit of realism embodies European artists' relentless efforts and innovative attempts to represent the world's true appearance. Starting with Leonardo's analytical revolution, analyses and presentations of natural phenomena trended towards comprehensive exploration, defined and explained through appropriate images and professional languages. From early 20th-century avant-garde activities, Picasso and Gauguin gradually shifted towards primitivism, distorting and transforming realistic images. Picasso borrowed African art elements, while Gauguin referenced Polynesian primitive art. Gombrich believes artists cannot truly return to primitivism, evidenced by Picasso and Gauguin's distorted styles representing 20th-century linguistic reforms. Their creative works are inseparable, with Baudelaire, Champfleury, and Huysmans contributing to primitivist language formation. Furthermore, according to Krauss, Picasso responded to a new positive semantics field, possibly influenced by critic Apollinaire's research. Through collages, Picasso followed the evolution from Renaissance masters to abstractionists. According to Greenberg, Renaissance masters aimed to cover

surfaces showcasing content, following "nature's rules" (Leonardo's words). Picasso's abstraction began this slow process (according to Krauss), modifying "form systems." Cubist collages are modern art because they embody "form systems" themselves. This system challenges language rules and grammar, becoming the most powerful tool for subversion in Picasso's multi-material period and futurist works. Gombrich describes this evolution from "painting what one knows" to "painting what one sees," summarizing both the creation of a representational painting and the progress of Western art history. Greenberg's painting history concept contrasts this: Western art moved from representation to conceptualization, culminating in abstraction, achieving ultimate autonomy, a process of self-criticism and self-limitation, granting it modernity from an aesthetic perspective. [Cao Yiqiang and Michael Podro, *op. cit.*, p. 418.]

Roland Barthes mentioned the transition from a "linguistic turn" to an "iconic turn." In today's society, oral exchanges simplify into rapid opinion exchanges using terms often describing similar yet distinct emotions. Meanwhile, contemporary art adapts and simplifies, showing fleeting emotions, dramatic



Gao Shiqiang + Shanshui Creating Collective 高世强+山水集体创造, *Shanshui: Six Chapters of Yunshui*



moments, witty expressions, or conceptual art. Have we discovered everything, only referring to and hinting at things or presenting their appearances, or do we lack time to appreciate them? Time shortage issues are evident across fields, including education. As Gombrich said, studying how the world presents itself, investigating phenomena, and finally reproducing them skillfully require time and investment. Citing Gianbattista Vico, discussing historical cycles, one answer might be: time. "People increasingly recognize that scientific progress relies not on observation but on thinking about words and nature, a process requiring time." Appreciation is an accumulative and continuous training process, developing continuously. Practicing appreciating forms is necessary. Thus, regarding the question posed on billboards, we can reasonably cite his research, indicating art expression history is based on authors' personalized styles, not collective ones. Personal choices and reactions to style innovations are objective results of technical advancements, each artist reaching this progress and ultimately ushering in an era. Therefore, the Renaissance can be seen as the result of evolving painting and literary styles, determining an era's arrival.

Returning to the opening question: In our information and image society, a billboard photo meets quick and immediate communication needs but reflects a society no longer pursuing reality imitation (*mimesis*) but substituting reality with imitation itself. Gombrich's emphasized "relationship" with images has transformed into silent acceptance of virtual and mediated realities. Children's drawings no longer resemble Picasso's idea of primitivism. Perhaps pursuing naturalism and reassessing Renaissance masters' works expresses a longing to return to slow observation of nature.

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*It has been said: '...
not mean he is w
the rule, which is
but also flexibility,
necessary to unde
flexibility, to know*



*"The man of great virtue has no rules." This does
without rules; rather, the absence of rules is itself
the best rule/method. All things have principles
they have a rule, but there is also variation. It is
understand the principles and the variations of their
by the rule and the application of transformation.*

Shi Tao