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This is the place I never wanted to leave

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to explain how I embody my experiences through image-making, as well as where my resource materials come from and how they support my practice. In addition, I want to reflect on how personal experiences construct my vision of reality and how I attempt to bridge the gap between the personal and the universal. My work focus on emotions that are triggered by ordinary daily moments, thereby encouraging the viewer to bring their own experiences to the context. In this article, I will talk about the relationship between emotions inspired by ordinary moments, the experience of having a sense of wonder, and my perception about darkness and light. I will reference some of my work and work of other artists as examples to explain why those elements are the important components in my thinking process, and how they function in supporting the context of my painting practice. This article will provide an opportunity for me to reflect on and share my experience as an image maker and will be beneficial to my practice in the future.

THIS IS THE PLACE I NEVER WANTED TO LEAVE

by

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Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in Painting

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THIS IS THE PLACE I NEVER WANTED TO LEAVE

Don't leave. Please. Stay.
It's nice to be in the dark, Right?
You can relax a little.
No brittle smiles. No air kisses.
No sarcasm. Forget the stress.
The worry. The petty skirmishes.
Life is too short. Too short for cruelty.
Close your eyes.

—Barbara Kruger

EMOTION AND MOMENT

For me, the daily world is saturated with poignant moments. Even the most ordinary kinds of moments elicit essential emotions. I pinpoint the emotional potential in each of these moments, then I address the association between observing and engaging. I intend to create occasions in which affective experiences can be fully addressed while still leaving the viewer in a state of unknowing. In this state, what may at first seem familiar begins to disappear and the viewer is left with questions. Imagination and assumption are spontaneously stimulated at that moment and generate a sense of curiosity and wonderment as viewers' attempt to reach the answer.



Birthday Party, 2016

Figure 1



Swimming Pool, 2016

Figure 2



Banquet, 2017

Figure 3



Figure 4

I consciously search for moments that can stimulate my emotions and trigger a sense of awareness in me. I'm not as interested in exploring what happens beyond that moment; the experience of being conscious of my feelings is what matters most. A sense of curiosity then inspires me to intensify my emotion and I wonder, "What if a birthday party with shining presents, delicious food and a celebratory atmosphere is covered by a gloomy shadow?" (Figure 1) "What if a relaxing swimming pool is filled with still dark water?" (Figure 2) "What if a fancy banquet is attended by no one?" (Figure 3) Moments from my past experience serves as resource materials and drive the conceptual expression of my work. For example, when I look at an image of people laughing, I am affected by that moment of laughing as this happiness reminds me of a past experience that causes sadness. I am surprised by my emotional response and curious why I feel sad from this happy image. This emotional response inspires me to create an image addressing that sad feeling, and the curiosity allows me to arrange a system to explore the basis of why I respond to a moment in a particular way and how to explore the relationship between past and present. (Figure 4)



James Turrell, *Skyspace*, 2013

Figure 5

Familiar moments that at the same time trigger a distance from the familiar lead me to a state of self-reflection and self-awareness. James Turrell's light installation "Skyspace" takes advantage of this mental effect and offers occasions to "activate a heightened sensory awareness that promotes discovery".¹ Accordingly, serious and careful looking becomes necessary. (Figure 5) "Turrell hopes to coax the viewer into a state of self-reflexivity in which one can see oneself seeing".² For me, Turrell's question is, "How does one engage the viewer in intense self-reflection by staging a moment in which there is nothing special?"

Through my work I aim to create occasions where the viewer will be consciously and unconsciously asking the questions, "What am I looking at?" and "Why this is important?" and will hopefully then be engaged in serious self-reflection to form their answers and perceptions. It's much like the experience of looking at a historical image where, because of our absence from that period of time, we lack access to the context. It stimulates our curiosity and drives us to seek what we can associate with in order to form a personal connection. Conceptually, figuring out the original

¹ Nancy Spector, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/4090, 1992>

² Nancy Spector, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/4090, 1992>

meaning of the image is unnecessary, but figuring out how to form a personal connection becomes essential. This is the experience I have had, and I want to place the viewer in a similar position that makes them feel that something is familiar but different. They will become aware of the relationship between this orchestrated happening and their own experience, looking for associations to fill the gap.



Laughing Room, 2017

Figure 6



Story Time, 2017

Figure 7

My project titled “For Future” is aiming to illustrate this experience. Two paintings, one of people laughing and one of people with their backs to the viewer, are installed on opposite sides of a room. A narrative is presented between these two paintings and the viewer is asked to consider their emotional reaction. Viewers may laugh along with the laughing figures in my painting or feel humiliated at the thought of being laughed at. (Figure 6) Viewers may feel left out or simply be curious by what they cannot see in the painting with everyone’s back toward them. (Figure 7) These mixed feelings pervade the space and provoke self-examination, along with the wonder of why these figures are laughing, and what these figures are focusing on.

SENSE OF WONDER

“Sense of wonder is a feeling of awakening or awe triggered by an expansion of one’s awareness of what is possible or by confrontation with the vastness of space and time.”³ “It associates the experience with that of the “conceptual breakthrough”. In many cases, it is achieved through the recasting of previous narrative experiences in a large context. It can be found in short scenes and it can require entire novels to set up.”⁴ Although to have a sense of wonder is unpredictable, being dependent on time and space and, more importantly, the mental state, it allows my mind to sense a reality that is beyond its physicality. In other words, it inspires me to envision the “possibilities of becoming”.⁵ For me, a sense of wonder contains the significant information that helps transport my mind to an inner world. I feel honest with myself when I am confronted with a sense of wonder, but also experience a sense of disorientation that makes me gravitate toward forming the emotional connections.

³ Prucher, Jeff (ed). *Brave New Words*. The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction, Publisher: Oxford University Press, 2007

⁴ Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sense_of_wonder#cite_note-1, February 1, 2018

⁵ Simon O’Sullivan, *The Aesthetics of Affect: thinking art beyond representation*, Publisher: ANGELAKI journal of the theoretical humanities volume 6#3, December 2001, p.130

I am fascinated by times of experiencing a strong sense of wonder and appreciate being surrounded by pure feeling. It's a time of stopping my mind from assessing physical phenomena and being fully absorbed into my inner reality, where I feel peaceful and inspired while contemplating the pure feeling itself. Assumption, suspicion and logic fade away as the peaceful consciousness emerges. I simply experience life in this space of tranquility, without being disturbed by the thoughts or dreams or desires of the mind. There is no expectation or urgency, no rationality or judgment, only intuition and instinct. I want to reach that pure state in my practice as an artist, where I can simplify the complexity of daily life in order to approach that purity and produce moments of wonder through image-making.



My mind becomes saturated with time in that state where lived experience has been transformed into a spiritual occurrence. While painting, I simply sense time passing away, and there are no such intellectual thoughts needed to support my process in that state. Consequently, I become sensitive to those small differences that appear on the painting surface and I'm fascinated with learning how to perceive them. They represent the most direct evidence of

pure feelings. These instances allow me to deeply experience spiritual occurrences and incorporate them into my work. It is similar to Monet's *Water Lilies*. (Figure 8) "Although working from nature, Monet filtered nature through wonderment and imagination. The emphasis shifted from the subject matter to the feelings it evoked in the artist, and from a cognitive to an intuitive response in the viewer".⁶ In my work, *Researching*, (Figure 9) I create a dark and hazy atmosphere to evoke a transcendent experience with water, through which I was able to "induce feelings of physical disorientation, destabilization and transcendence in the viewer."⁷

I am looking for a way to achieve that mental state through my practice and eager to amplify those pure feelings in my work. I believe my practice lies in the power to be able to reach this mental space and that the sense of wonder plays an important role in gaining access to it. Hiroshi Sugimoto's series of photographs, titled "Time Exposed", also possesses pure feelings and a sense of wonder. Hiroshi Sugimoto uses a Time-Lapse technique to enhance the influence of time and to let light slowly penetrate through the



Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Pacific Ocean*, 1991

Figure 10

⁶ Katharine lochnan, Roald Nasgaard, Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, *Mystical Landscapes From Vincent Van Gogh to Emily Carr*, Publisher: the Art Gallery of Ontario and DelMonico Books. Prestel, 2016. p. 133

⁷ Katharine lochnan, Roald Nasgaard, Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, *Mystical Landscapes From Vincent Van Gogh to Emily Carr*, Publisher: the Art Gallery of Ontario and DelMonico Books. Prestel, 2016. p. 133

surface of film, creating an image in which the subjects have been transferred into spiritual occurrences. He intends for the viewer to gain access to these occurrences and to open up to a world beyond utilitarian interests. Accordingly, the work inspires a departure from temporal looking and triggers a feeling of wonderment. The two elements in his work, sky and sea, function not only as representatives of memory, but also as the access point to the affective experience of the artist. (Figure 10) The boundary between ocean and sky is blurred and spread throughout the whole image by time. As Hiroshi Sugimoto stated: "A sea memory, I am quite sure that it's a memory of the sea. Not a cloud in the sky, a sharp-edged horizon, waves surging in endlessly from beyond. When I saw that vista, it was as if something in my infant consciousness awakened from a long dream. I looked around...My life began from that moment".⁸ While looking at his images, I seem to be facing an empty space. Although there is still limited information to portray the content of the moment, I have been placed in a position where I feel separated from reality and in a world where there is only time and space.

⁸Simon Morley, *The Sublime*, Publisher: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2010. p.205

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

When I encounter a gloomy day, my mind seems to become filled with a heavy atmosphere; emotions become grounded and I have no clue of how to find the outlet, as if I am left in a world where there is an absence of light. I feel doomed during a dark day. My mind loses its focus and starts wandering without purpose. Then all of a sudden, dim light arrives in an unexpected way; my eyes start blinking and my mind feels inspired and eager to leave this unclear state. I see brightness and shadow are alternating through time, as if they are communicating to manifest their existence. No matter how subtle or how strong they choose to be, it becomes a stirring experience to feed my emotion. I want to stop time and to be surrounded by the light, as my mind has been softly affected by this experience, which drives me to consciously memorize this moment.

In general, people respond to darkness in a negative way because of its mysterious quality and heavy atmosphere. Psychologically, we are not prepared to go into a world that is full of darkness; we only want to stay in brightness for a clear view. For that reason, darkness

sacrifices itself to make brightness important to life, which contributes to the belief that illumination is always meaningful and inspiring. From my point of view, there is no such boundary between light and shadow or illumination and darkness. In other words, darkness is just another form of light. Darkness and light softly interact with each other, neither demanding a loud participation nor leading to a specific emotional direction. However, my attention is drawn to these subtle differences because they increase the happening of spiritual occurrence in my mind. In addition, the gradient between light and darkness produces multiple layers of interpretation that pull me away from my present position, inspiring a sense of discovery that drives me to seek essences rather than answers.

Creating a surface that contains multiple layers is essential to my practice. The surface acts like a veil to disengage me from reading reality and allows my mind to moderate the darkness and the light. This surface also acts as a portal through which I can sense the richness under the dark tone and have my feelings affirmed. I can see the colors come through the darkness and it gradually loses its intensity. The light seems so subtle that I must stay longer to wait for it to grow stronger.

I define my painting process as “atmospheric promotion.” In other words, I am attempting to build up an atmosphere through my practice where I am able to experience my emotion as softly silencing any overt commentary on those emotions while painting. As a result, there is no heavy brush stroke, no strong color contrast, only a still surface that conceals my activity and contains the emotional energy. On the other hand, I simply experience the light and the richness of the dark while manipulating the surface, which invites optical effects that enrich the atmosphere of my painting and informs me to reach the essence of the moment. Mentally, I feel intimate with the surface. As a response, the surface presents me with all the information to moderate those visual effects and to lead me to reach a balance between imagination and reality. My mind is penetrated by light and time simultaneously, and ultimately, finds its place to settle down.



Mark Rothko, No. 207 (Red over Dark Blue on Dark Gray), 1961
Figure 11



Mark Rothko, Rothko Chapel, Houston, Texas 1967

Figure 12

I have the same experience when looking at Mark Rothko’s painting. The rich color in his painting appears in a quiet way through a flat surface. (Figure 11) His works demand a specific setting in order for their complexity to be revealed. Rothko asks viewers to stay with his work longer, because the longer they look at the surface, the subtler the

color will become. (Figure 12) I see those subtle brushstrokes gently showing up mixed with dim light during a long time watching. The optical effect improves the intensity of the color, but also introduces a sense of time and space to its surface, by which the flat surface becomes active and an atmosphere emerges that requires the viewer's engagement.

CONCLUSION

Daily reality is ordinary. However, as we start consciously sensing those moments from everyday life, the sound, the smell, and the light and darkness, we will realize there is always something that possesses the potential to initiate a spiritual event. In this state, intellect and logic neither contribute to explaining the happening nor help support the process of thinking. Rather, we have to sidestep ourselves to remove the very condition of our subjectivity and be open to what happens in order to experience the intensity of the spiritual occurrence. In fact, more or less, we have all encountered the experience of being affected, which invites meaning to ordinary life and makes us feel inspired. As an artist, my work aims to create moments of unknowing by promoting evidence of affective experience and translating them. People will become aware of their feelings by experiencing the offered moment, where nothing may be new, yet it's different. I want to position the viewer to sense wonderment and disorientation,

and to bring his or her experience to the contexts I present. However, selecting moments that are able to trigger an affective experience depends on a very personal perspective. The subject matter in my work always contains a universal meaning that can help my practice avoid the disturbance of cultural barrier in order to reach a common ground.

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BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Tong Zhang's watercolor paintings bridge his daily experience with today's life aiming to create occasions in which affective experiences can be fully addressed and leave the viewer in a state of unknowing.

Tong is the recipient of many awards including The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant 2017, The Sam and Adele Golden Foundation for Art Grant 2017 and George J. Vander Sluis Award 2018, 2016. His work has been shown nationally and internationally, including Milk Gallery, NYC, Swansea College of Art, United Kingdom; Attleboro Arts Museum, Massachusetts; Tucson Museum of Art, Arizona and Central Academy of Fine Arts, China. He received a BFA in Printmaking and a MFA in Experimental Art from China and is a MFA candidate in Painting program at Syracuse University.