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Painterly Reality

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PAINTERLY REALITY

A Thesis

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by
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Abstract

During my three years in the LSU M.F.A. painting program, I experimented with many different directions, but I have always returned to painterly figuration as the means best suited to the expression of my thoughts and feelings. Symbolism of alienation and isolation have always been extremely important to me, but as my painting has evolved formal issues of composition and color have become increasingly important, allowing me to address more complex metaphorical structures.
Introduction

My paintings are a diary of things that have happened around me, a preservation of moments and events I have experienced, an expression of my personal feelings. I capture visual formalities, color relationships, textures, rhythms, auras, and moods that are produced by my surroundings.

I am fascinated by the way brush and paint can build up a painterly reality, a reality that involves my feelings, thoughts, and fantasies. Just like what Louis Finkelstein defined painting as “[p]ainterly—a kind of slop or a kind of sloppiness; whether as a habit of mind or as a set of physical characteristics.”¹ Painting for me is more about a kind of motivation or intuition; a desire to express what I see with paint and brushes. I consider myself as an artistic filter of my surroundings. Painting is a negotiation between my desire to clearly represent what I see and the desire to let the paint express its own sensual reality. I gradually build up my observations via the paint itself. Sometimes a painting can never be finished because of the shifting between objective and subjective responses. Beyond painterly, I am also addicted to different techniques of painting. Subtle color transitions and neat brush strokes really shake my nerves and touch me. One of my favourite sentences that explains my feeling about painting comes from an interview with Scott Noel, His large-scale cityscapes with extremely elaborate depictions amaze me. He commented that “[p]erceptual painting that deals with a way of seeing that can be confirmed by another viewer’s experience but also seeks to kind of open up a space which for me is poetic and eccentric that I refer to that space as the space of desire.”²

In contemporary life, things are going faster and faster with super high efficiency, but with less time to feel and contemplate what is going on around us and how life is passing. Connections become trivial,

² Noel, Scott. Scott Noel, Master of Realist Painting
information becomes like movie trailers. It seems like everything is fleeting. I am attracted to things that carry a sense of time, particularly obsolete and abandoned buildings. They are outsiders in contemporary culture just like me, an “alien” in America. From a confrontation with the flotsam and jetsam of the past, I attempt to discover unexpected aesthetic moments from these “vanishing things.”
The passing of time is soundless, but it is always brutally present when you become aware of it. “Days were slower in the past. Carriage, horse, and mail did not reach fast. You need your lifetime to just love the person who is right.” I yearn for the old times when we can just sit by the door, undisturbed by digital devices, and simply stare at the outside and listen to the clock’s clicking. I like the process of waiting for a written letter, and the moment of opening the envelope. I often recall the last time I did a very trivial thing, or action, discovered traces of past events, even a cup I left on a table in China that I find in the same position years later. As a nostalgic person, those memories play a major role in my mental life. They are my reminders of loss. My thoughts always float away into the past when I am alone, and they hold me there for a while. These moments from the past pop up in my mind interrupting my painting, but they afford me the emotional sustenance that pushes my paintings forward. Cavafy’s poem “The afternoon Sun” aptly describes my nostalgia toward the places I have stayed -- “They must still be around somewhere, those old things.” I am moved by the dreamy and illusory still lifes of Walter Murch. The ordinary objects in his work convey a strong visual force similar to Mark Doty’s feelings about our common surroundings --“We are instructed by the objects that come to speak with us, those material presences.” We currently live with the speed and superficiality of “E-communication,” but the distractions of cell phones and computers make us lose the time and the habit to connect with the mystery of nature and the passing of time itself.

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3 Poem: Slower Days in the Past. By Mu Xin. Translated by Isabella Chen.
5 Mark Doty, Still Life with Oysters and Lemon: On Objects and Intimacy (Beacon Press, 2002). P10.
Old Houses of Baton Rouge

There are many old buildings in Baton Rouge, and I always stop by and stay for a while. I am drawn to the odor they produce, the odor of mysterious stories. The subjects of my paintings have been accumulating a store of experiences for many years. The neighborhoods I choose to paint are full of poverty and neglect, but the decayed textures, the flaking paint on rusty surfaces, and the subtle colors left by time passing intrigue me. They create narrative possibilities. They wear the traces of their staying, which silently “speak” to people who pay attention to them. They are still, but not immutable. Decay is a process of change; its traces are the sediment of time and dialogues. The warm humid climate of Louisiana has filled Baton Rouge with these ruins. I know I am playing into the romanticizing of a very old picturesque tradition. But this unconventional beauty becomes an important catalyst to meaning for me. I would like to bring these buildings back into our attention and bring us back into relation with them. They are emblematic of this culture, but they also carry symbolic meanings for me, and I hope, for anyone who sees my paintings. As a foreigner, I feel a strong alienation from this place. Compared to my Chinese cultural background with a strong sense of continuity and conservatism, American culture seems more disposable and momentary. People usually pass by these houses without a glance, and they are fading away from everyday life. For me, “talking” to them is a good way to acquire some comfort, and I certainly cannot be repelled by them. It is difficult for an American to understand an international student’s feeling of separation, of not belonging, which is the most frequent emotion we have in daily life. By connecting emotionally with these old houses, I get a sense of permanence, stability, and rootedness. “Intimacy,” says the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, “is the highest value.” The painter Norman Lundin’s work presents exceeding silence and stillness. With simple objects and scenes, he conveys the sense of loneliness that I would like to possess in my old house works.

6 Doty. P6
Processes, Materials, and Methods

Pictorial Space

In my works, subject matter and formalism exist simultaneously. I use representational features to present abstract formalities. For the visual structures, there are numerous elements that need to be finely considered: space, 2D structure, texture, tension, contrast, balance, proportion, tone, color, rhythm, etc. All of these are for the purpose of building optical harmony and cohesive compositions. I discover order within casual surroundings. These orders are always there if you look hard and analyze what you perceive. I carefully place them to pursue overall harmonies. What is more, I simplify objective nature to form a painterly reality, to construct clear harmonies and contrasts. I distinguish the content I see from form, which is the shape distribution of tones and colors. Robert Henri describes formal construction as “the play of one form into another, the balance of one form, or incident, or idea, or material, with the others, and all leading to one central interest. All satisfying things are good organizations. The forms are related to each other, there is a dominant movement among them to supreme conclusion.”\(^7\) When I am dealing with old houses, tress, bushes, roads, textures on a wall, or any elements in my sight, I think about how to make them interact with each other, I subjectively adjust their sizes, colors, shapes, positions and contrasts. So painting for me is about the reduction and selection of reality; it is about focusing on my particular needs and requirements.

Visual Balance and Composition

Visual balance and composition are indispensable aspects to be considered in my works. Painting is to turn the fleeting moment that I capture from my surroundings into the stillness of a painting. I intentionally reinforce the optical stability of my arrangements. Rudolf Arnheim said, “No object is

perceived as unique or isolated.”⁸ Contrasts of tones and colors, line (quality and direction), proportions, shape relationships, centers of interest, closed and open form, and weight distribution, these are the properties that Rudolf Arnheim called the structural skeleton that produces visual balance. He wrote, this “…skeleton that helps determine the role of each pictorial element within the balance system of the whole, it serves as a frame of reference.”⁹ When I begin to paint, I always try to find the structural skeleton of the scene I will depict; it is the heart of my composition, and any following refinements are meant to reinforce its features. Besides balance, I am also seeking the perceptual forces that embody rhythms and tensions, to have the viewer perceive a kind of arousal of the nervous system. I build my work to simultaneously obtain stability and force. Both Chinese calligraphy and Paul Cézanne are examples of highly skillful distribution of gravity and weight. Chinese calligraphy stresses the ink’s distribution, each stroke is executed with careful consideration of thickness, length, value, speed, position and balance. Cézanne’s work simplifies and unifies natural features as geometric forms in the composition. Through these formal devices, I am exploring the “inside” of nature, developing orders and multiple layers of meanings. Nature inspires the constructive formalities I discover during my painting processes.

**Painterly Paintings**

The power of brushstrokes for me is one of the essential value of paintings. Much of my thinking about painterly painting is inspired by Robert Henri’s *The Art Spirit. Brushstrokes can present a sense of vigor, direction, speed, fullness, and energy in the picture. I pursue rich and fluent strokes, strokes which can “speak” and carry messages, even spirits. The strokes show my intuitive and intense desire to express. The strokes need simplicity and certainty. A single brushstroke can perform multiple functions of variations and blended colors. Brushwork as a constructive element also plays a crucial role in formal structures. Henri elaborates, “[t]he stroke may make or it may destroy the integrity of the forms.”

⁹ Arnheim. P15.
“Strokes which move in unison, rhythms, continuities throughout the work; that interplay, that slightly or fully complement each other.”

For this point, brushstrokes for me are not only an emotional release, but also another visual element that I need to carefully execute. Finally, brushstrokes can convey my pleasure in a painterly touch and show that the paintings were made with joy.

**Color**

Color has always been an essential consideration when I am painting. Subtlety, harmony of parts to the whole, and contrasts are among the difficulties I am working to resolve. We identify colors by a complex of optical responses. Color is not a mechanical perception, but a subjective solution like “personalized color transformations.”

Colors shift by fleeting moments, not only the moments of light, but also the moments of the mind by mental activities. My job is to create a convincing and harmonious color scheme on the canvas, through a balance between reflected light and juxtaposed contrasts. Color, like music modulates between keys, has melodies and rhythms. Looking at the peeling wall of an old building, I forced myself to look harder and discover chromatic nuances. It is an artist’s job to discover and share the world of color. Nobody did better than Gwen John and Euan Uglow through extremely subtle color transitions, especially the nuances they built on figures’ skin tones. From their works I learned what the possibilities of oil paint on canvas could be.

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10 Henri, *The Art Spirit: Notes, Articles, Fragments of Letters and Talks to Students, Bearing on the Concept and Technique of Picture Making, the Study of Art Generally, and on Appreciation*. p 73, 76.

11 Finkelstein, p14.
Working from Life

I work from my memories, preparatory drawings, and color studies, but mostly from direct observation. With landscape I usually swing by the spot a couple of times or even stay in front of the subject until the most important moment of light and weather come. I adjust my location to find the best composition and point of view. With static photographs, it is not possible to make these selections. The direct visual experience and my mental state are imperative to my creation. When I am working from life, Patrick George’s plein-air landscapes always come to my mind because of their incredible control of brushstrokes, pigment and compositional selection always come to my mind. I admire in particular the way he simplifies natural forms and his solution of paint thickness. The analytical thinking necessary to painting from perception transforms my experience of the motif and by this method permits me to express the emotions I feel, and I hope to convey. The process adds value to the subject I am depicting. At the beginning, I felt it was a little risky to go out of the studio and place myself on those spots that are full of abandoned chaos. After a while I became more comfortable since people stopped by, were friendly, and talked to me. While I was painting an old firehouse, three different people told me they used to work there decades ago, and described the interior to me. From conversations with the locals who live near my streetscape subjects, I learned about the historical roles of these streetscapes in the community, which nicely enriched my experience. Some people even told me the spots I was painting are disappearing quickly. Their stories added new levels of meaning for me, and my attention to their neighborhood added richness to their sense of place. A few of the buildings were knocked down right after I painted them, for commercial purposes. I would think to myself, at least I preserved them with my paintings.
INSIGNIFICANT & NONFUNCTION

PAINTINGS BY CHAO DING
Notes on Individual Paintings

In this streetscape the telegraph poles tilt in all directions. I used their diagonal rhythms as the focal point of the painting. I placed houses at the far left and right of the canvas to reinforce the depth of the road. The more intense values of the houses on the left are balanced by the softer tones on the row of houses at the right. The cast shadows in the lower right serve to close the composition and counterbalance the strong diagonal of the road. I painted much of the foreground very broadly to contrast loose to tight brushwork. The scattered pieces of green lawn create a secondary spatial rhythm. I added a dead tree to the upper left to emphasize the mood of desolation.

Figure 1. Chao Ding, Old street view with telegraph poles, 24*48”, o/c, 2019.
I intentionally lowered the ground plane here. I wanted the weight of the sky to stress the feeling of an abandoned and forgotten place. People barely pay attention to these kinds of neglected neighborhoods, but I was drawn to the layered melodies of vibrating colors created by the little pieces of tones and shadows on the buildings. The large trees connect this isolated land to the sky we all share every day.
Figure 3. Chao Ding, *Old woodshop*, 40*30", o/c, 2019.

This painting depicts an old wood shop group building. I placed the entire scene to the very bottom of the canvas, to convey the marginalized feeling. I was intrigued by all of those dislocated poles, pipes, bricks, gears, and the general chaos just randomly piled there. This bunch of buildings wear decayed skin tones which produced exciting variations of gray.
This is the view through my studio door. Despite the anonymity of the industrial interior, I was drawn to the pattern of interlocking rectangles created by multiple doors opening at different angles. I contrasted the interior light in the bathroom to the natural light cast on the middle door. The three spaces interconnect, but all are empty. I was thinking about Lopez Garcia’s “spatial tension” while painting this one. His “studio with three doors” presents the way to use space as a symbol of the unknown and mysterious, to convey the feeling of absence in the room, to have a meditation on silence. Lopez Garcia incorporated door frames and open doors several times in his work to serve as symbols of transcendence and to make the viewer feel like a voyeur, directions for further pursuit in my own work.
This is a giant cemetery. The depth of the space and the vast number of graves presented me with an intense sense of isolation. The decayed surfaces of the tombs look quite grayish at first glance, but actually carry a complexity of nuanced colors and textures. I stretched a large canvas and brought it there in an attempt to “deliver” these subtle transitions. It was a long process. The cemetery is not as neat and organized as the other public cemeteries I found, but the apparently random layout provided multiple visual rhythms. The large tomb that fills the lower right corner is in the shadow, paired with the large green tree above, they stabilize the composition and balance the softer tones of the other graves. These tombs might not be that “functional” to people’s lives nowadays, and some of them may be forgotten, but the visual “function” and a profound sense of time passing remain.
A worker who was sweeping out this abandoned house while I was painting told me it had been purchased by someone in California and that it would shortly be knocked down. The detached and dislocated pieces of the house produce a scattered rhythm, but also gather together into a stable central triangle. How could a new house be as interesting?
This is a fleeting moment in my apartment at the beginning of a normal workday, from 9:00 to 9:15 every morning. Pieces of light penetrate the venetian blinds to illuminate the head of our bed. The ticket labels on the luggage underneath the bed reveal my current situation as an international student. The folds in the bedclothes show where I was lying just moments before. Barely discernible in the upper right is my girlfriend with her back turned to me, checking her phone without a word. I set up my easel in front of this view for several mornings to capture the specific colors, the atmosphere, the sadness. The loose and open brushwork is meant to carry my emotion.
In this abandoned nightclub, I highlighted the cracked and decayed wall. I emphasized the layered pattern of non-functional machines and fire escape. I stood directly below this building to stretch the perspective and show its distance from the picture plane. The diagonal telegraph pole at the left forms a triangle with the cast shadow and the stairs to stabilize the composition. I placed a dead tree to the right side to balance the triangle and enhance the lonely atmosphere. An interstate ramp on the far-left contrasts deep space to the frontality of the building and also juxtaposes the unstoppable stream of contemporary life to this abandoned building.
I broke this group of houses into a diptych, or two small canvases. I made monochromatic drafts on the sides of the canvases to give a sense of the continuity of the two sections. I simplified the empty roofs and abstracted the brushstrokes to reinforce a visual formalism. I carefully considered and measured the proportions and positive and negative shapes. I made each form in this picture as simple as possible to build up the composition, and gently depict the decay of the houses. The dead tree and its cast shadow on the wall add to this mood.
This is a view of my studio window at around 3 pm. I was drawn to the light penetrating this corner and the color transitions that came with it. Those individual light pieces create a balanced rhythm from the top to the bottom right. I placed my palette in the foreground to further stretch the spatial depth and to counterbalance the table at midground.
Conclusion and Reflection

My aesthetic judgements have broadened over the three years of this MFA program. I now appreciate more diverse forms of expression. During my study, I have been struggling with my interest in traditional representation and encountered many doubts and hesitations. But after having gone through this period of questioning, I realized that figurative painting is really what I have always wanted to do, and my motivation has become even stronger. I have learned how to stand firmly and be confident in myself. I have reinforced the emotional expressiveness of my works and kept exploring the significance of representational painting. For me, it is about my formal understanding combined with subjective selections of subjects to paint, so painting can be truer than photography. I also learned how to aptly communicate my work and share my thoughts with others. I have come to realize that communication is essential to the contemporary art community.

I often think about how to define the significant or insignificant; meaningful or meaningless; functional or non-functional. I have titled my exhibitions in this way since 2015. Like the old houses I paint, I often feel my works are irrelevant to other people -- they are neither political nor contemporary issues. But when you slow down and give yourself into painting, you will discover many things that were not expected. Mu Xin’s poetry and Xu Bing’s Sky Book inspired me in this arena of thought. I recently began making paintings that have no narrative functions, to declare an attitude of anti-interpretation. One of my paintings is just an interior of the bathroom in my apartment that I finished on the toilet without any preconceptions. The German philosopher Boris Gorys defined art as follows: “Artworks are art—they immediately demonstrate themselves as art. So they can be admired, emotionally experienced, and so forth.” Real art as a representation of an outer reality has its own capacity to “interpret” itself. Nowadays, interpretation is trending to be an equivalent of artwork, and sometimes even “manipulates” it. Susan Sontag in “Against Interpretation” provided an insightful alternative to narrate the loneliness of

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abandonment I have attached to most of my works: “[t]he function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.”¹³

My future goal is to both look intensely at my subject and to think intensely about it as did Antonio López Garcia did while painting his cityscapes and interiors. His exploration of common everyday scenes evidences an extraordinary insistence on everything. He claims three planes of reality in his work: the real, the supernatural, and the dream world. This thought inspires me as a route towards poetic significance in my future work.

¹³ David Hayman, “Against Interpretation” (JSTOR, 1966).
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Mu, Xin. , cjsmore.wordpress.com/2016/04/14/slower-days-in-the-past/. Translated by Isabella Chen.


Vita

Chao Ding received his B.A in Fashion Design from Beijing University of Technology in 2012. In 2014 he moved to Buffalo, New York to study drawing and painting at SUNY Buffalo State College. After he graduated from SUNY, he went to Baton Rouge Louisiana to pursue an MFA in studio art at LSU.