

The Belly of the Trojan Horse: How the Abstract Paintings of Shiau-Peng Chen Speak Hongjohn Lin (Translated by Yvonne Kennedy)

“Trust not the horse, O Trojans. Be it what it may, I fear the Grecians even when they offer gifts.”

-- Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro)

After unsuccessfully waging war against Troy for ten years, the Greeks staged a false retreat only to conceal their military elite within a giant wooden horse that the Trojans seized as the spoils of war and brought into their city gates. When night fell, the Greeks launched into action with their stealthy plan, thereby claiming victory in a decisive battle. The Trojan Horse of Homer's *Odyssey* differs from other tactics of luring the enemy into a trap or advancing by retreat, as described in the “Borrowing Arrows with Thatched Boats” or “The Deserted City” stratagems. Rather, it is a tactic of direct conversion into “the radical Other”; as Jacques Lacan suggested, the “empty belly” of the wooden horse, as a vehicle for the most dangerous of object, is an excellent example of the big Other. In other words, the Trojan horse is a radical strategy of “simulacra” that inverts the subjective context, and Lacan compared the City of Troy, into which the wooden horse enters, to the discourse of the analyst: its guise as a gift allows the big Other a dominance in form. This artistic strategy of “pretense” as an artistic response to Marcel Duchamp's art reestablishes the definition of art through the non-identity of art on the one hand, while it intends, in the words of Duchamp, to “murder” art on the other hand.

Shiau-Peng Chen's works are like abstract paintings, seemingly the most traditional, most formalized, and starkest of expressions. In applying discursive practice to current conceptual operations, space and imagery are compressed by mediation choices, and by deliberately reductive lines, colors, and graphical brushwork. More importantly, the subject within the painting is no longer an abstract presentation of analogous relationships, for instance in Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43) which attempted to represent the forms and colors of jazz music on the streets of Broadway. Shiau-Peng Chen's abstraction is not a representation but a referential semantic text, like charts and maps that point to other real world relationships such as cultural, geographical or historical cognition through mapping. However, the analogies of representation have been lost, and are disclosed instead through the titular forms of the “categorized, multiple, sequential” in each “series” through references such as “Taipei”, “Melbourne”, “Mapping”, “Gift”, “My Batchelor.” The audience is not informed of the sources of reference; the subject/object remains unknowable; and nothing is identifiable. The title holds the sole clue; specific details in the painting (such as corresponding range, limitations of color, etc.) often express the arbitrary nature in the interpretive process of these depictions. As the viewer, we are merely aware that the work has been intercepted, the relationship of the images to reality are determined by the points of embarkation, transition, and framework from the artist's personal experiences. Simply put, this semantic manipulation of referencing and indexing hovers over the possible content of “abstraction” and invites a production of meaning by Others in a disparate semantic space. The virtual imagery context established in “mid-air” by Shiau-Peng Chen's work emphasizes the conceptual manipulation of writing, ultimately pointing to the Trojan horse of “writing” in the resistance against “pictoriality.”

Discourses on the Truth in Painting

Mondrian's composition and color block forms are elevated and replaced with the nearly

satirical politico-historical relationship between Taiwan, China and Hong Kong. Using the blues and greens of the corresponding political parties in the work *I Don't Belong Here but There*, from the "China Series," Chen applies these common symbols and draws upon idioms from existing works of art to challenge the representative logic in the imagery and the images that generally operate within art. This approach toward composition/writing not only includes the management of mediation techniques such as prints and acrylics within the works, but also encompasses issues of "picture turning" that attempt to include the presentation and representation of various permutations and combinations through the semantic spatial extension, incubation, and redirection of reversals and contexts: a presentation of representation, a representation of presentation, a presentation of presentation (representation?), a representation of representation, etc.; so that traces of alteration and interpretation in the writing-like narrative space deployed in the works are revealed to expose the mechanisms of semiotic production. The presentation of this type of narrative space can only be opened up by compressing space into a two-dimensional painting. This is the artist's self-reflexive contemplation from the historicity of art as well as a considered response to her own contemporaneity. In *The Truth in Paintings*, Jacques Derrida began with a quote from a letter Paul Cézanne wrote to a friend: "I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you,"¹ as he analyzed the intermediary zone of logos, of truth in art and linguistical truth that operate within a painting. For an artist, the artist's truth must be within the work, which is not an equivalent to the truth of a painting. These two modes of truths must be presented in a contradictory amalgamation, as though represented and presented in extension, incubation, and repetition, with a deeply expressive method: "the truth about truth." In other words, how does a painting speak? And what does it say? Since a work is not a speech act but a painting act, the truth written within a painting -- a truth of special form and action within intermediary zone that subverts the linguistic system -- also encompasses the truth of the visual semiotic systems that raise the internal mechanisms to produce meaning as an explicit artistic proposition. Which is to say: the rules constructed by application, by language/painting, and by the mechanism itself are within the function of artistic systems, rather than existing as an entirely externalized transformation. This is a cognitive change through reformation which necessarily operates the production logic of rules of the mechanism originally represented by language and its representation. It is an aesthetic strategy that renders internal failure, and becomes the most paradoxical of speech actions in the presentation/representation within paintings, precisely because the motley cluster of image/imagery/language within the work, and the original definition of the painting medium, have been rewritten in self-reflection.

There is always an invitation to a specific reading in Shiao-Peng Chen's essay-like paintings which, on the one hand, necessitates a contrast of index between visual culture and artistic context, while on the other hand, makes specific reference to the artist's life experiences as indicated by the layout of the title. This method of viewing does not apply to typical works of art hung on walls as a completely self-contained aesthetic subject. Here, the viewer is required to learn to read specific definitions external to the work hung for display. This is a contrast to works of art with a visual emphasis with an original intention to be "viewed." Chen's works emphasize the self-evident "literal" meaning, and uses text as a method of displaying the work. Although the black text on white paper requires the viewer to read art, the viewer also simultaneously reads the texts on the wall. Within this "linguistic conversion" is a direct metaphor that presents how paintings themselves require reading rather than an

¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans., Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod, Chicago: U of Chicago, 1987, p. 2.

unmediated visual expression. Revealed through the exhibition context, this invitation to read a painting represents a shift in artistic epistemology. At the same time, it is a response to the paradox between “painting” and “writing.” Reflected in Chen’s work, the viewer is presented with a problem of symbolic efficacy²: “Though you are viewing a painting, how do you know this is a painting?” In the past, this rhetorical strategy is often intentionally omitted or concealed in modes of painting, because it highlights the creative value of a painting in art, such as its uniqueness, genius, originality, and mystery, etc. The paradoxical condition of Chen’s painterliness questions the dominance of paintings among categories of art since the 16th century. As the ultimate tool for visual imagination that represents art itself, the aesthetic position of paintings is diminished by the paradoxical pose of Shiao-Peng Chen’s work and reclassified. For instance, the work *I Would Love to Become an Author I* is a good example. The Chinese characters appear in the foreground of each image. The words “I would love to become an author” are pressed in purple text onto a base of a monochromatic painting from the past. The degree of desire in the insincere overstatement of “I would love to...” points to the representation of “writing” and “painting,” while simultaneously demonstrating the ambiguity of the role of the artist, post-Duchamp.

The simultaneous construction of writing and painting regards generalized cultural phenomenon as *objet trouvé*. In other words, there is a tendency toward works of textualization; what becomes even more interesting is the mutual overlapping of texts that present social, cultural, and historical dimensions as aesthetic objects subject to reading and contemplation. Furthermore, they also rely on the artist to view culture and art production as a meaningful whole. As such, the process of textualization is a process of continued proof and explication. Using different series to showcase a certain established rule of symbolism, Shiao-Peng Chen produces a narrative practice in linguistic effect precisely because the text is a process of production and reproduction that traverses various dimensions of work. Shiao-Peng Chen’s overriding abstract geometry points to the manipulation of form seen in Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, Sol Lewitt, or even Richard Lin. This openness is removed from the original classification of style in the ideology of the aesthetic movement, and serves as an opportunity that contemplates on an occasion for art and culture to rendezvous, as well as identifies any work necessarily as a certain product of a specific cultural and historical context, rather than as an imagination that transcends the dimensions of space and time.

Four Disparate Painting Discourses

The text of Shiao-Peng Chen’s paintings attempt to respond to the radical artistic subject through painting especially as a hovering form simultaneously woven into the historical context of art. This seemingly despondent aesthetic stance must be contextualized in the painting theories of Clement Greenberg emphasizing flatness and in Kantian self critique on the one hand in order to return to the subject of pure painting through abstract paintings, such as abstract expressionism, minimalism, and color field painting. Content and inner spiritual pursuits are not the inevitable results of a linear logic in an attempt to realize, confront, and debate the representational paintings of the past. On the other hand, it responds to the minimalists and conceptual artists of the 1970s such as Joseph Kosuth and Donald Judd, who attempted to declare an end to painting through spatial techniques of installation and

² Zizek offered many analysis regarding transfers between real order and symbolic order as an ideological function, see Slavoj Zizek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge: MIT, 1992, p. 106-107.

sculpture that transcended two-dimensional form.³ Drawing a clear boundary between a work and its representation in real space to present a field of view, the end of two-dimensional painting seemed to herald the beginning of the spatial era. In these two different discourses on painting that dialogue in Shiao-Peng Chen's work, the medium of painting seeks an artistic exit and seeks to open possible discussions through a narrow and awkward expression.

This aesthetic stance of "rebirth in desperation" parallels debates on painting that prevailed in the 1980s in the Europe and the United States. Among these was an important argument posited by Thomas Lawson in his work and in his essay, *Last Exit: Painting*⁴, where he advocated that painting's response to problems of art must be external to the main body of painting, must express the "nothingness" in painting, and must begin by "appropriating" the linguistic space of painting. The exit for painting isn't an improvement on painting techniques, nor is it a linear progression that is an extension of existing tradition, but lies in painting's escape from representative techniques and external simulations. In his words, "limitless possibilities exist in the imagination." The exit for painting must recognize that the language of painting itself has been exhausted. This is precisely the issue that contemporary paintings must contend with in order to maintain a specific critical distance from the main body of painting, not only in themes and techniques, but moreover in the possibility for paintings to speak, as Derrida described in *The Truth in Painting*. On the one hand, this Trojan horse-type response epitomizes the abstract expression of 1950s modernism and the aesthetic ideology of color field painting; on the other hand it is also a response to an aesthetic practice that abandons painting to declare an end to painting (Judd, et al.). The discursive dialogue of Shiao-Peng Chen's work must necessarily be established in a developmental context from modernism and beyond.

The development of painting in the early 1980s corresponds to the aesthetic stance of the "final exit," with elements of aesthetic strategies Craig Owens and Douglas Crimp proposed, advocating for a distinction between artistic practice and artistic media, for paintings that emphasize image production (image painting), and which directly convert the content and perspectives of film and photography transferred into personal allegory, such as the works of artists such as Robert Longo and David Salle. This painting quadrant also parallels the development of postmodern photography. In his 1979 essay *Picture*⁵, Crimp proposes the photographic image as a possibility for the progression of visual culture. With changes in the era of media, the originality of manual painting appropriates the production of reproduced images. This artistic practice is similar to the artistic lexicon of Taiwan's "Weak Painting." This practice of "image painting" often replaces imageness with painterliness, with an emphasis on the binary of the media itself but unable to further develop the imageness of painting itself. While this also reflects the level of visual technologies, it is actually a shortcut to the operations of aesthetics without confronting paintings as a basic problem of art.

Paintings under the banner of expressionism, such as trans-avant-garde in Italy or neo-expressionism in the United States, provide contrast in the continuum of traditional aesthetic ideologies. The development of painting is regarded as a destiny. Artistic practice is often ritualistic, and retreats from the original political stance of expressionism. Under these circumstances, these neo-expressionist declarations of personal heroism and the return to

³ For instance, some of Donald Judd's admits to the limitations of painting, and in essays such as *The End of Painting* (1981) by Crimp in *Art Forum*. See Douglas Crimp, *The End of Painting*, *October*, vol. 16, Spring, 1981, p. 69-86.

⁴ *Theories of Contemporary Art*, ed., Richard Hertz, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1985, p. 145-155.

⁵ Douglas Crimp, *Pictures*, 1997, New York: Artist Space.

individual free imagination is itself a degeneration of aesthetic strategies. Iconic art is produced as evidence of the uniqueness of art, while disguising itself as elitist and opposed to mass culture and kitsch. This is precisely the secure fortress of neo-expressionism. In this safe aesthetic zone, art becomes the image writing of personal biographies. This style of painting returns to idiosyncrasy and further visual fragmentation, while references to various painting styles and cultural symbolism become both motivation and model. Under these circumstances, the so-called “new” painting is only relevant to its own game rules, often becoming pale and vacuous cultural markers, and stereotypical affectations. We can also observe similarities in the amalgamation of various styles. The production of meaning here is a certain cataphor; it is an expression of cultural vulgarism; it is an anti-art epistemological state that proves itself with existing artisticism.

The Discourse of the Pseudo Analyst

When an artist faces a blank canvas, she faces not only the manifestations of her creative content and mode of expression, but also faces the task of her painting as a historically unique mission. Shiau-Peng Chen’s work is built upon various painting theories of modernism, neo-expressionism, photographic painting, and the end of painting (or how a painting speaks). In confronting painterly issues, because art is a development of text, and because the viewer no longer has innocent eyes that blindly believe in the image, enabling the viewing of a painting as an object of contemplation is a reenchantment. Shiau-Peng Chen’s various “series” are precisely the manifestation of a gazing mechanism. They ask the viewer: “What are you looking at? Is this a painting? Or a reference object?” With external references, and taking an aerial perspective, this distance brings the visual illusions on the canvas back to its foundations of sketching on the one hand, and on the other hand enables a certain self-reflective critical contemplation. As Lacan pointed out, compared to hysterical, collegiate, and master narrative forms, the analyst must make himself a “dummy” -- an empty shell onto which patient can project their own desires.⁶ This is precisely the aesthetic strategy utilized by the “simulation,” acting on the autonomy of the inherent disposition of art, organized on the text of order and chaos, while asking the Other narrative of “What do you want from me?” (che vuoi). Along these lines, perhaps there is a necessity for a strategy for radical art, a guerrilla strategy to elevate the self for ultimate survival, to complete an understanding of the image, and its relationship to language. The two learn the other’s tongue, to speak, to narrate, to observe, to present and represent this world. More importantly, they construct a mutual history that serves to locate our time and space, as Derrida said, hidden in “the truth within the painting” is the origin that enables the world to “happen.”

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⁶ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limit of Love and Knowledge*, (*Encore*, vol. Book XX), trans., Bruce Fink, New York: Norton and Co., 1998, p. 90-92.