Painting as a Reflective and Generative Process

THESIS

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By

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Abstract

This paper investigates questions and interests in my studio practice and how they influence the work I have made leading up to the *2016 Department of Arts MFA Thesis Exhibition*. Beginning with the challenges in addressing one’s intention, the reader is invited to share my memory and the thought-process in creating two paintings listed in chapter one. Expanding a personal history to a cultural history, Laura Owens’ appropriation of Chinese artist Muxi serves as analogy to explain the aesthetic dialogue in which I am engaged. Through discussing the potential pitfalls in expressing personal and cultural specific feelings, I state that a body is both the subject and object of a historical force and thus needs to be the agent in my painting process.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to my mother, Zhen Liao Post.
Acknowledgments

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# Table of Content

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ii

Dedication .................................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgments....................................................................................................................... iv

Vita................................................................................................................................................ v

List of Figures ................................................................................................................................ vii

Introduction: Intention ..................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: Two Paintings ............................................................................................................... 3

Chapter 2: Tradition, Appropriation, and Laura Owens ................................................................. 10

Chapter 3: Disruptions .................................................................................................................. 14

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................... 21

References.................................................................................................................................... 23
List of Figures

Figure 1. The first and second *Girl with Donald Duck* ........................................... 4

Figure 2. The second *Girl with Donald Duck* .......................................................... 4

Figure 3. A photo of Zhen from 2006 and a detail ....................................................... 7

Figure 4. Painting *Zhen and Dog* ............................................................................... 9

Figure 5. Laura Owens, *Untitled* ................................................................................. 11

Figure 6. Muxi Fachang/牧溪法常, *Mother Gibbon and Child* .................................. 11

Figure 7. Painting *Five Fortunate Sons* and details ..................................................... 17

Figure 8. View of the exhibition from inside of gallery .................................................... 19

Figure 9. View of exhibition from street and a small painting ......................................... 19
Repetition and recollection are the same movement, just in opposite directions, because what is recollected has already been and is thus repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forwards\(^1\).

— Søren Kierkegaard

Introduction: Intention

In his 2014 article “Statements of Intent”, Mark Godfrey didn’t really come to a conclusion regarding the artist’s intention. In his essay he investigated in four contemporary American painters including Laura Owens, Charline Von Heyl, Amy Sillman, and Jacqueline Humphries; and explained how those artists have each in their own way questioned and [eventually] turned away from the old conventions of American Expressionism in establishing new ground in contemporary painting; Godfrey was thorough in explaining those artists’ aspirations, which largely derive from a sense of discontent regarding the claimed “authenticity” in the mid-century abstract painting, as well as “the emptied postmodern gesture”\(^2\) that comes after. Godfrey claims that artists make their achievement through refining a personal experience in our world, and at the same time, embrace the “unknowability” of the material/medium itself. He states, in spite of the fact that the artist’s model of creation is constantly evolving as she is responding to a cultural landscape that is never static, those artists always remained true to the initially

\(^1\) Soren Kierkgaard, Edward F. Mooney, Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs, P3
\(^2\) Mark Godfrey, “Statement of Intent”, *Artform*, P296
personal decision based on their own experience. In addition, because they are open to the unknown, through transitivity, the work connects beyond their conscious effort and links to what we might call the spirit of our time.

Intention is indeed hard to address. For one thing, one sometimes starts to paint without any intention at all. Another challenge would be: how can an artist be explicit, really, in his/her own intention even if there is one? And does (or should) such an intention affect the interpretation of a work? However, it has been argued that one person’s intention is no more than a repeated exercise of thinking, which is constituted by our social experience and personal history³.

These questions sit in the background as I write about my own work. The recent paintings included in my thesis exhibition are derived from personal experiences and my own history as well as the people that are close to me, but it was just recently that I realized the practice of painting has been a way to process and understand those experiences, thoughts, and history. I take Godfrey’s insistence for granted: that despite any intention, an artist can only remain true to her initially personal decision. With this in mind, this essay is largely a reflection on the personal choices in my work. Through reviewing my frame of thinking during the painting process, sharing the connections I make to my references, and addressing questions, I hope this essay can arrive at a place where my intention is (at least partially) visible. The omitted part, the part that is “under-acknowledged”, would be the work itself, which is up to the viewer to shed light on.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice, P91
Chapter 1: Two Paintings

To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize “how it really was.”
It means to take control of a memory.
— Walter Benjamin. “On the Concept of History”

The first Girl with Donald Duck was based on a childhood photo. The painting depicts a five-year old girl standing next to a plastic balloon sculpture of Donald Duck. Although the Disney icon was introduced to China in the 1980s and gained popularity in places like photo booths in big cities, it had not yet reached my hometown at that time when I was five (?). Japanese Manga was much more dominant and common in the minds of Chinese children. In the photo studio, I was ordered to stand next to this ugly strange duck creature, while wishing it to be the Monkey King or Sailor Moon. The disengagement was captured in the photo by the hand gesture and the gaze, which each turns in the opposite direction. Initially attracted by the strange composition and the pink color of her dress, I made this small painting at the fall of 2015.

Later, showing this painting to a visiting artist, Lyle Ashton Harris, I was confronted by his question: “How old were you in the painting?” “Five”, I said. “How old are you?” “Thirty” “Then how do you reconcile the twenty-five years of space in-between that five-year self and now? Has anything changed?”, he asked, then added, “and are you gonna do ANYTHING about it?”
Then I made the same painting again and decided to exploit that feeling of alienation.

In the second *Girl with Donald Duck* painting, she has grown but is still a child. Now she is standing against a darker, more gestural painted turquoise blue/black background. One branch of a plum flower tree, blossoming, comes in from the upper right corner and arches over and behind the child. Her face is obscured by layers of green paint, which covers her entire head and drips over her shoulder. It is hard to make out her facial expression now through the thick and sickly veil. One can only vaguely locate her eyes and a half opened mouth. She is standing in the same pose as in the previous
painting, slightly turning away from Donald Duck. The left hand reaches out, obligated to touch the toy, but the face, as obscured as it is, shows no recognition of its own obscurity. The duck has also changed, grown in size and now more roughly painted in black. The smile no longer implies innocence. Perhaps it is now closer to contempt.

The process described above exemplifies how I often make decisions in my painting. Childhood and family photos provide for me a point of access; flipping through them one by one like an informal sort of Rorschach session wherein the act of painting is initiated. It’s a process wherein my past experience is sifted through the filter of the person I am today so that these events that have come and gone are reanimated; but the works’ formulation is dependent on a reflection which develops into a process of finding a form by which to frame those thoughts.

In recognizing a seemingly insignificant moment in another photo, I made Zhen and Dog.

Zhen was born in 1962 in the small city of Lichuan, China. After completing her studies at the Secondary Vocational School, in 1981, the 19 year old Zhen started working at the Supply and Marketing Cooperative (SMC); at the time it was a privileged job position, as it was government owned and guaranteed a handsome pay with benefits.

In the system of Planned Economy, the Supply and Marketing Cooperative (SMC), was a powerful supplement to the state managed commerce; it contributed to the whole state economy. However from 1990s, the establishment of Socialist Marketing Economy System starting to place a greater impact on the growth of Chinese Economy; the SMC has lost its advantage to the more flexible individual shops, and eventually was disintegrated from the market.
However, from the 1990s on, the Socialist Marketing Economy System\(^5\) began having a greater impact on the Chinese Economy and the SMC had lost its advantage to the much more flexible individual market shops and was eventually closed. Thus Zhen left her position at SMC in 2000 and started to manage a brick factory. In 2002 she had a terrible car accident during a long distance bus trip, which disfigured the majority of her face along with multiple serious injuries all over her body. Depressed by her situation, she got a visiting visa and came to the United States, where she soon thereafter married an American citizen. In 2006, I came to the US to unite with her. Zhen was divorced in 2008 and now lives in Queens, NY, working as a babysitter while dreaming of becoming her own boss running a massage business.

In a photo from 2006, Zhen was working as a babysitter for the family of a Chinese physician in Queens. At a glance, I was immediately pulled in by the hand that is reaching out to touch the dog; this gesture embodies everything I know about her: the scare on her face, the joyous expression, and the reaching, reaching in a setting that is saturated with materials that always belong to someone else.

\(^5\) Introduced by Deng Xiaoping in order to incorporate the market into the planned economy in the People's Republic of China in the *Chinese Economic Reform*. 
In the effort of making Zhen my subject, I unavoidably had to confront a question: What am I constructing by making an image of her? Being aware of the portrayal of the immigrant in America, perhaps already overstated in popular culture, the media, and to a certain extent in some academic circles, wherein the actual authentic immigrant experience is undervalued, under-expressed and ultimately folded into a more easily recognized and accepted version of the immigrant as Other, what kind of presence and narrative am I bringing to this unbalanced discussion? The question is further entangled by the fact that Zhen is my mother; if my departure is already (and unavoidably) an emotional and sentimental one, how should I address such an emotion so that the sentiment and sympathy might coexist with my formal, aesthetic interests?

I want to paint my mother in a way that she could be thought of as anyone’s mother. A photo always discloses a history and the effect of such history that is specific to those people framed; but inside of the specificity, there is an essence of humanity to which people can connect and relate. My mother is a very passionate person. She
restlessly navigates, planning and initiating dramatic life changes, and a sense of temporality seems to constantly overshadow her trajectory. In coming to the United States, Zhen found herself having to live within a narrower set of parameters, a condition that extends beyond this one individual’s story. Under our blind notion of “progressing”, the global economic and political process has become more brutal to minorities like Zhen. Scholars argue that the exacerbating economic, racial, and gender inequalities need to be demystified, reexamined, and theorized. However, one must also be ready to do the groundwork, which to me, is the everyday practice of painting.

What is the meaning of originality, continuity, and individuality in painting Zhen and Dog? I am again staring at her “reaching hand”. Last fall, I made four painting based on that photo but felt that each had failed in some way. Finally out of frustration I painted over the fourth one with a shade of pink, and then on top of that only outlined an enlarged figure. The sweater is filled in, but her body is transparent – a body that is reduced to a gesture of reaching. I left a small blue, square window where the reaching hand was in the previous layer of the painting, indicating a trajectory and history of painting itself which specifically, for me in this case, has constituted Zhen’s development as I have known her and know her now.

Can I draw an analogy between the physical dimensionality of one painting and one person’s past and present? If we understand the visible surface of a painting as one dimension of reality, as the final decision of the painter, will that window manage to cut

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through that dimension and provide a glimpse of a painting’s previous reality, the painter’s doubt? By the same line of thought, could my subject exist in multiple framed spaces as well? The life of Zhen is a living and continuous one and so is the surface of a painting. In considering this, I added another portrait of my mother on top of the frame; one painting merged with another. In the new portrait she has turned away from where her body is facing, no longer engaged with the viewer, only the flesh on her scarred face is so present, so opaque, refusing to concede to the question, “of what sort of subject am I or am I not?”

Figure 4. *Zhen and Dog*, 2015
Chapter 2: Tradition, Appropriation, and Laura Owens

A canvas is never blank in this sense whenever an artist casts his/her gaze on an empty surface, the canvas is already pre-filled with one person’s experience, history and emotions. Durkheim has said, “in each of us, in different degrees, is contained the person we were yesterday, and indeed, in the nature of things it is even true that our past personae predominate in us.” Over the course of my graduate study, it has become increasingly clear to me that my interest is to realize those experiences, history, and emotion so that I might find a form by which to connect them with viewer.

A canvas is also pre-filled in the sense that the history of painting is always present. If we expand the thought process about a personal history to a social history, and understand that a current cultural landscape always circulates what was made before us. Technology brought us a networked world; everywhere we turn there is an encounter. Inspiration comes in fragments – this is not just a phenomenon but also fundamentally how contemporary people exist today. Taking these new changes into account, how do I relate a Chinese cultural tradition to contemporary painting?

The formal inspiration of my work comes from converting Chinese cultural signifiers into a new visual element that is relevant again. In search of methodology, I have drawn inspiration from artist Laura Owens and her approach to collage and
appropriation. The following comparative analysis of her appropriation of a Chinese painting serves as an analogy in explaining the aesthetic dialogue of my own work. In her 2001 painting, Untitled, Laura Owens appropriated from the work of Muxi (active from 1220s to 1280s), who is regarded as a Chinese Chan Buddhist painter. It is quite a contrast to juxtapose Laura Owens’ painting with its original inspiration - Muxi’s White- robes Guanying Crane, and Gibbons. Here Laura Owens appropriates only the third painting from the triptych, which is this Mother Gibbon and Child.

Figure 5. Laura Owens, Untitled, 2001.

Figure 6. Muxi Fachang/牧溪法常, Mother Gibbon and Child. Year unknown.

In drawing this comparison, I wish to highlight a confrontational stance in both artists. Both artists weren’t well received initially. Described as “coarse and ugly, not in
accordance with ancient canons, not for refined enjoyment,”7 Muxi’s painting is criticized for its unorthodox composition, untreated brush work, and depicting an animal figure directly facing the viewer—which is not poetic in a Chinese literati painting tradition. Similar to Muxi, Owens’ work was considered as “an emphatically girlish regime of cutesy-pie color and teeny-weeny form.”8 She uses cartoonish color and decorative pattern, which typically were given less aesthetic value in fine arts, and her immature appearance of mark sometimes was misunderstood as technical incompetence.

Both Muxi and Owens, as different as they are, to have made the decision to establish a new ground for painting while they acknowledge how a surface has been previously filled. For Muxi, the metaphysical quest related to Chan Buddhism helped him to see the stiffness and incapability of a long established literati tradition, thus he had broken away from it. In the case of Laura Owens, one has only to take into consideration the challenge and the plight of the painting practice during the period from which she is emerging to understand the necessity (and even urgency) for her painterly language and method. Like Muxi, she is conscious of the stiffness of an earlier modernist movement (namely American Abstract Expressionism) and all the associated, male dominated conventions, as well as the later, post-modernistic critique of painting including the declared “death of painting”9. Taking this into account, one would find her mythology and painterly language to be anything but irrelevant. She deliberately enriches her

7 James Cahill, “Lecture Notes” P 4
8 Gloria Sutton, “Shifting Figures Moving Ground”, P135
9 “Death of painting” as was brought up several times during the last century. The last major debate was around 1960s as the minimalist sculptor Donald Judd declared “painting is finished”.

12
paintings with heterogeneous materials, references and textures in an effort of erasing the cultural boundaries of the pictorial signifier and eliminating the conventions of narrative or authorship to prove a non-mediated conversation that is very much in sync with a contemporary life situated in the global process. If we think of earlier movements such as Abstract Expressionism as an achievement that is exclusively male, pure, and American, then it is evident that Owens’ work demonstrates a direct confrontation with such a notion, which is gender equal, pluralistic, and global, but once again as in Godfrey’s example, the renovation in her practice remained true to the initially personal decision of the artist.
Some arguments are hard to believe as we think them, easier to believe if we feel them.

- Richard Schiff

When Laura Owens incorporates pictorial elements from various cultures, whether as subjects of their own or as a pictorial icon, her gesture is an attempt to “exploit a collapsed and forbidden terrain in order to open it up, de-mythologize, exploit and change it for new people’s use”\(^\text{10}\). However, in examining her work, it is evident that she has only referred to what she can see, without any knowledge or deliberate intention in regard to the cultural content in her source material. Her collage appearing in those paintings is neither an academic inquiry nor a political statement, but simply a gesture of juxtaposition. Owens is lucky in a sense that she does not have to legitimize herself one way or another. There would be no audience to question whether or not her reference is self-promotional and underscores any “Chinese-ness” identity through her appropriation of Muxi. The usage of image is merely there to provide a departure to take on the action of painting. Owens has said that while she is open to including other cultures, she is

\(^{10}\) Mark Godfrey, “Statements of Intent,” P301
concentrated on exploring a limited number of essential forms achieved through maximum expressiveness.\textsuperscript{11}

This is a privilege reserved only for the Euro-American artist. The context shifts, however, when discussing an artist with an ethnic background working in an international setting. The same appropriation by artists like myself risks an interpretation based on the recognition of racial, national, and cultural differences; the problem is, as Joan Kee has identified, that non-Euro American artists always have to face a possible situation when “ethics precludes any critical examination of the works in question, includes discussions of artistic quality”\textsuperscript{12}, or the artist and her work is only studied in relation to content.

Taking this into account, one ought to ask: when and how does a subject, whether personal or historical, lose its subjectivity and become a mere signifier? This position of questioner is by no means accusatory. Owens is making an ethical stance in her effort to collage various subjects, cross-cultural references, and make them co–mingle.\textsuperscript{13} However, her gesture remains as a mandate of inclusion, but if we want to ensure equality in a true

\textsuperscript{11} Gloria Sutton, “Shifting Figures Moving Ground”, P136
\textsuperscript{12} Joan Kee, Form in the Service of the Global, P100
\textsuperscript{13} Laura Owens quoted in an interview with Richard Kushner in the online issue of the Believer, May 2003, www.believermag.com/issues/200305/?read=interview_owens

In the interview she states:

“I feel like what’s most important for painting is that painting should open up laterally to include other cultures and things that don’t immediately resonate as a painting but are obviously of equal constitution to the genre. When I look at the textiles from Peru or from India and use those elements in a painting, it doesn’t in any way erase the functional quality of those works, it’s not an either-or proposition…Rather, all sorts of things can co–mingle.”
globalist sense, the creator need not be contained only with the inclusion but ensured the parity among those included\textsuperscript{14}.

And this is where I have to leave Laura Owens, for it is impossible to complete the analogy that I have started. In order to move forward, there is a need to return. One cannot shy away from the potentially intrinsic embarrassment of telling one’s own history—there are no lack of stories, only of those told by minority group members.

Yet an artist’s intention cannot be an effort to “design” a precise outcome. At the end of his article, Godfrey also explains what might be the generative paradox at the heart of the creative process; he says “the painter, through constantly making considered decisions during composition, is never quite transparent to herself and never, therefore, quite transparent to her viewer.”\textsuperscript{15} Pierre Bourdieu explains this paradox as an incapability of \textit{Self-Reflexivity}; he says as a creator,

> “Simply because he is questioned, and questions himself, about the reasons [for his practice], he cannot communicate the essential point, which is that the very nature of practice is that it excludes this question…[one] convey[s] this primary truth of primary experience only by omission, through the silences and ellipses of self-evidence”\textsuperscript{16}.

As much as a cultural position and emotional content are consciously included in my work, one has to allow the action of paint and the medium itself to intervene in the construction of a meaning. Aside from a preferred ideology, cultural position, and even

\textsuperscript{14} From Joan Kee’s definition of \textit{globalism}—where she says: “Globalism in art refers to the constellation of attempts to realize an ideal kind of world order based not only on mandates for inclusion, but also on ensuring parity among those included”\textsuperscript{(96)}.
\textsuperscript{15} Mark Godfrey, “Statements of Intent,” P301
\textsuperscript{16} Pierre Bourdieu, \textit{The Logic of Practice}, P91
personality, there is always the question of the form and material. Just recently one brought to my attention that every single one of my canvases is about the size of my body—I have never thought of that! Then what about the other properties of a painting that I have omitted from my conscious thought? Such as transparency, fluidity, thickness, orientation, surface texture, speed…?

Figure 7. Painting *Five Fortunate Sons* and details.

It is impossible to addresses them each explicitly as the validity of those painterly elements always exists in relation to each other. When I pick up a childhood photo and reflect upon it, I know that the history and its force is far less coherent than say the information found in a textbook, and one perhaps can never grasp or visualize the overall contour of such a force. The stylistic, representational and historical complexity may be embodied in the paint’s experimental and experiential handling. This becomes the ultimate challenge in my recent works. Only through this, may an artist sometimes step

17
out of his/her character and reveal the unfamiliarity from a familiar subject, and potentially take the work out from the comfort of thoughts and sensations already known.

**Thesis Exhibition**

The final presentation of the thesis show is a single wall holding thirteen paintings. Starting from the right side, six paintings and merged and stacked with the bottom lined up at approximately thirty inches from the ground. The merging breaks with the biggest painting in the group - *Five Fortunate Sons*, then scattered into a bunch of smaller portraits. The hanging height is based on disabled accessibility, but the intention to present a linear, line-like appearance comes from thinking of the bodily experience in viewing paintings.

It was an effort of stepping out of a traditional habit of displaying my work. Foucault has proposed a new perspective suggesting that various cultural concepts do not simply fit into a structural description of the history of ideas; rather a discontinuity is characteristic of every discursive statement. Thinking in those terms, I felt there was a need to present a temporary continuity then disrupt that lineage of painting display.

There are two main responses to this experiment, on the one hand, audiences have expressed that the display had an almost “cinematic” affect on them. One viewer compared her experience of viewing to reading a flipbook – the impression of the previous painting bleaching into the next, which makes her concentrate less on each painting individually, but to focus more on a loose sense of narrative or a continuous
movement. On the other hand, there are frustrations about not being able to engage with a painting fully due to limitations of the space.

Figure 8. The view of the exhibition from inside of Gallery.

Figure 9. The View of the exhibition from Town Street, downtown Columbus and the small painting hangs at the street level height.

The responses above posit the challenge of how to balance the self-assertion and autonomy of painting, while taking into account the living environment and a viewing body? Having a still, in depth reading of a work and meanwhile engaging in a continuous
experience seems deeply ambivalent yet necessary, and this exhibition constitutes a first step in finding forms to host this interest. There is a small moment that I do find hope and a sense of comfort in my struggle. The exhibition space Urban Arts Space is lower than ground level, and I requested a space that is south facing, toward the windows on Town Street, where pedestrians are able to pass by and peek into the gallery space. Trying to utilize the characteristics of the architectural space, I hoped to give viewers a chance to “discover” rather than “be presented with” a painting. A small painting was hanging at eye level to the passer-by on Town Street, and a person who is at the gallery often misses this painting since it is too high. It is a painting of my grandparents and myself with their faces covered by smiley stickers and I wanted to offer this work to people who might never go to an art show. Now looking back retrospectively, the position of this painting somehow embodies my desire of have an equally composed intention and interpretation.
Conclusion

Pierre Bourdieu claims that an artist’s work is not contained in an original inspiration but is continuously defined and re-defined in the dialectic, between the objectifying intention and the already objectified intention. This notion of “in between-ness” perhaps can be find in a visual metaphor that Artist Ann Hamilton once created: in The Event of A Thread, a writer sits by herself at one end of the space facing the art installation, but through a waving mirror, her gaze is connected with what is behind of her – a crowed, busy New York street, an outside world17.

In my work I dwell in that space between looking forward and looking back; when I look at the photos from my childhood, I am thinking of captured personal experiences and a shared social history. Those thoughts serve as an inspiration for the past and in many ways they are already objectified intentions; and through a body and the very engagement of the medium I make sense of those memories. Through the study of Laura Owens I also learned about the risks and possible pitfalls of expressing “culturally specific feeling” -- it can be dismissed or misunderstood as merely a strategy for drawing attention, meanwhile I recognize that it is my effort and task to make my expression authentic. “One always finds one’s burden again.” Camus sighs for Sisyphus in carrying his rock; but he then adds that during this very condemnation Sisyphus is still conscious of how he feels, which crowns his victory. Although there are certainly times one can feel

a bit powerless in facing all these worldly forces (historical, social, and personal), I think of the painting practice as a means of generating a new history and reality. “Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle toward heights is enough to fill a man’s heart”. And I imagine the atoms of Sisyphus’s stone are made into the pigments, which becomes a tube of paint. The synchronic intentionality has to join a diachronic axis of painting-as-medium, then a painting may exist as something beyond an art object or a mere vehicle for nostalgia and sentimentality, while also presenting a new possibility for acting out of character; for finding the unfamiliar in those traditionally comforting thoughts and sensations that one already knows.
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