A Lecture in Xi'an

Before I begin, I'd like to say something which I have said to Gu Xiong in private. As many of you know, Gu was one of the artists in the ground-breaking "China Avant-Garde" exhibition in Beijing in 1989. It means the world to me that now he represents my country in this exhibition. I hope that, in the future, when you think of Canada, you will think of Gu Xiong, since he is what is best in us...

I've done many different types of artwork over the years. Today I'm going to show three different groups of work, which may seem discontinuous. But I want to discuss them in terms of anonymity and ghosts. About anonymity, I want to say that although I enjoy my my moment in the sun, the truth is that I prefer to be at the side of the stage and to place someone else in the light. This is why I often write criticism, why I've written about the works of my friends, Jamelie Hassan and Ron Benner. In this way I can take part in the long struggle over interpretation, which is the struggle over what we should value.

I think there's a quality of anonymity to my paintings of the 1980s. The images I used were not of my own invention. I only transmitted them, copying them from newspapers, magazines and books where I found them, and often bringing one image in relation to another. I painted the images in white, never in colour, because I wanted to drain them of reality, so that they would appear not as depictions of the world but as an image. I wanted them to feel as though they could be switched off, that they were temporary appearances on the screen that the surface of canvas is. I found images in various magazines and newspapers and books, made black and white copies of them, and then photographed them as 35mm transparencies, which I projected onto the dark grounds I had painted.

Over time, I realized that I could repeat the same image, that I could place the same image in different contexts, as I did in Comfort and Statues. In each painting, the same image of a somewhat thoughtful, perhaps somewhat anguished man appears—it's a sculpture which is presumed to be the self-portrait of the master carver of Strasourg Cathedral. I remember finding it in a book of art when I was a teenager and spending hours looking at it. In Comfort, this image appears with an expensive Italian sofa: perhaps he is pondering creature comforts, though what use is a sofa for a stone sculpture? In Statues, the image appears paired with Rodin's The Kiss. Perhaps here his concern is sexual, though both he and Rodin's figures all are carved of stone. Do sculptures have a sexual life? Or perhaps the fact that they're sculptures shows that the images know that they are simply images, and so it's possible to sense some sort of truth behind the falseness of an image?

I was haunted by images, and tried to make paintings that were haunted too. In slightly later paintings form the middle 1980s, The Flavour of Green Tea with Rice and I Never Dream of Anyone, I repeated an image over itself. I found that by repeating the image, I could make it hover above itself, dislocated, as though it were no longer taking place on the material surface of the canvas. The second image seemed to lack all embodiment, to be an image that was only image. I often thought of Henrik Ibsen's play, Ghosts. For Ibsen, ghosts were an image of the

inherited past, the past that weighs down upon the present and crushes it. But I didn't. I think ghosts are the sign of an involuntary commitment to the past.

By 1988, every painting I made had exactly the same image—the mesh of canvas enormously magnified. The AIDS crisis had begun; my friends were dying and the heart was being cut out of the Toronto art scene. All I could do in my studio was to cover canvas with paint; I thought of them as nets to catch mortality in. All I did was to repeat myself, though of course each time the painting was slightly different, though all of them seem mournful, valedictory.

Eventually the colour brightened, became more pure and more sweet. For reasons that still aren't clear to me, I wanted to retreat from the artworld and from the galleries and museums, to be somewhere where I could work completely freely and be far from the promotional culture that was beginning to dominate the artworld. I think you'll understand this, since there is a long history in China of poets and officials who left government service to live in reclusion. I retreated to the abandoned architectures of factories, ceramic works and farm silos.

This is the Grand Valley Silo from 1992. I wanted to work in a circular space, to make a pool of colour that could completely surround you. It was an amazing experience to be able to step into a well of colour. But I didn't want to make a painting which simply coloured the existing space. Painting always involves a virtual space, a phenomenological space that is not identical with what is already in existence. In that way, painting seems always to involve at least a tiny imagining or the smallest differing from the state of things as they are. In the Grand Valley Silo, the silo curved around you horizontally. I tried to make the colour-space appear to curve vertically.

The painted area was twelve feet high, exactly half the height of the silo. It's difficult to see in a photograph, but the lighter area appeared to bulge out towards you. The darker areas of course receded, and so they seemed to bend away from you at your feet and above your head. The painting was made with coat after coat after coat of very thin but very intense acrylic paint. There were about eight tin coats where the painting was lightest and about sixty where it was darkest. It was physically very demanding; it took an entire summer to complete the paintings, climbing up and down ladders, constantly criticized by an unhappy groundhog whose residence I had invaded.

This next image is the Georgetown Curve, 1993, which is simply a very long band of colour that attempts to make a flat wall appear to curve. It surprised me perceptually. I knew that the darkest area would appear to recede while the light area came forward, and of course this happened. But what I hadn't expected was that sometimes your eye would see the wall in terms of the intense saturation of colour. The most saturated colour will seem closest to is, the most desaturated colour farther away. When this happened, the dark centre which usually receded would suddenly flip and instantly seem incredibly close.

Like the Grand Valley Silo, it appeared anonymously in its site, with nothing to state that it was an artwork. And to return to ghosts, you can see in the photograph the damaged, scraped,

gouged wall on which it was painted. I tried to nurture that history by installing a present tense, the preent tense of this colour suddenly appearing, in the past which was the abandoned factory. The painting was in part just a way of cherishing these damages, this abandonment. I felt when I had finished that my life had worth living—though only a handful people saw this or saw the Silo.

It was during the 1990s, as I was doing these architectural paintings, that I began a decade-long immersion in Tang dynasty poetry. I began writing poetry collaboratively with my friends the poet, Roo Borson, and the poet and physicist, Kim Maltman. Together we took apart translators' forwards and critical introductions to Wang Wei, and later, the other great Tang poets. From words and phrases we'd found, we began to make poems. We wrote together for ten years, beginning just for the pleasure of it, though eventually we gathered enough poems to make a book. But at one point, perhaps after six or seven years of being immersed in his poetry, I began to be visited by Wang We's ghost. I don't mean that I saw a whitish translucent figure. I simply felt his presence behind me at times. As the poems slowly began to form a finished manuscript I knew that his ghost would leave me. The book was published and Wang Wei never visited me again. I'm left with information, or knowledge, things I've learned about him, but his presence, real or imaginary, vanished for ever. If ghosts are the sign of an involuntary commitment to the past, clearly I'm no longer committed to Wang Wei as I once was. I suppose this is true.

But during the time we were writing those poems, I began to become fascinated by Chinese calligraphy, though I couldn't read a single character. I especially came to love Su Shi's Rain on the Festival of Cold Food, which has such startling writing—sometimes like tall flowers on stems, sometimes like slanting rain. But what astonished me was learning that this work of visual art was also a great poem—that it was both art and literature. Under Su Shi's influence, I tried to make paintings in the English-speaking world which could be both art and poetry—for several years the results were terrible. But eventually I found my way.

This painting, which is in the show here, is one of the first successful paintings. It imagines Xi'an as Chang'an and confuses the two, mixing the past and present. The text comes from a poem by Pain Not Bread, but taken apart and reworked just as we took apart texts and made poems from them. The English letters are laid out in vertical rows that are read from left to right. In English we read from left to right—but horizontally, not vertically. And in classical Chinese, the writing is done in vertical rows—but from right to left, not left to right. I remember my old friend, Andrew Lee, delightedly, "The paintings are wrong in both languages!" That perhaps is where the paintings are at home, slightly outside either culture.

Two and half years ago I finally was able to visit the Forest of Stele, shortly after the Spring Festival. What turned out to be most useful for me to see was Yan Zhenqing's Yan Family Stele, with its deeply carved, very upright characters. I was also very struck by how beautifully written was Liang Shengqing's Yu Shi Tai stone. When I returned home, my friend, the artist Yam Lau, said to me one day that I was fascinated by an ideal China. I don't know whether he meant this simply as an observation or as a criticism. But in any case, it is and was true. A year or so later,

when Yam returned from another of his long visits to China, he told me that what he'd said of me was true also of him, that he too was fascinated by an ideal China. I think you can see this in these images taken from a recent work, Between the Past and the Present: A Chinese Scholar's Studio, which he made in 2012.

Yam makes animations. What you see in this one is a modernist scholar's studio on a boat, a floating studio which he has designed for himself. Perhaps it is floating on the Grand Canal, in some apparently timeless moment. In the studio, on the scholar's desk, there is a tiny a folding screen. It lifts into the air and unfolds itself. What is revealed on the screen is not a a literati painting of a landscape or a gathering in a pavilion. Instead we see a video recording of a busy afternoon street in contemporary China, the street where Yam lived that summer in Beijing. The quiet stillness of a scholar's studio, floating on the Grand Canal in an idealized past, contains the noise and hurry of contemporary Beijing,

Clearly Yam Lau's work knows that this "ideal China" is an illusion and that it always was an illusion, an image at best of what we could be at our best. But I want to say that I think Su Shi too was fascinated by an ideal China—since he was exiled three times, once even by his own faction. He died returning from his last exile in Hainan Island; the Cold Food scroll that I love so much was written in exile. Perhaps Su Shi was a fool then, to be exiled so often, always dissenting, never able to stop his mouth from speaking what he saw as the truth. Obviously this "ideal China" was crucially important to him. Perhaps it came from the long Confucian tradition; I don't know, perhaps one of you will know. The important thing for me to say here is that this ideal still perpetuates itself and even infects a foreigner like myself. I realize that every nation has its own myth and that through that myth it projects an image of itself to itself, an image it would like to believe. But I think this "ideal China" is something different, an ideal which is a cultural achievement. I think that it calls to us, and that if Su Shi was a fool, then it is necessary now to be a fool, to live according to something important than our own advancement, than our own careers.

I see art in the light of that ideal. And so I want to leave you with two thoughts which are perhaps cannot be held together, because they come from completely different times and very different cultures. The first is Su Shi's friend, the calligrapher Huang Tingjian's insistence that "To learn calligraphy, one must develop a sense of justice." The second is the French novelist Stendhal's observation that beauty is the promise of future happiness. The first sees in art the demand that we must change our lives, if we want make the art that must be made. The second sees the beauty in art, but sees it as proof that life has failed to be what it one day must be. Perhaps these can never be united intellectually, but I believe that they can be held together in the contradictions of an individual life, that they can and must be lived out. Thank you.

-Andy Patton

note: This essay is reconstructed from notes that formed the basis of a lecture on my work given in Xi'an on August 11, 2014. The lecture was part of the public programming for the

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