

Memory, Space and Light

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Abstract

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Painting + Drawing

My thesis project explores ideas of space and light. It relates to my experience of growing up in a big city. Architectural structures play a vital role in the project. I create a personal space that contains memory and intimacy by using both photo and memory.

Growing up in Shanghai, a metropolitan city in eastern China, I experienced the most rapid development in its long history. With the construction of numerous skyscrapers in the past twenty years, I am continually amazed by their modern designs and the recent changes Shanghai has undergone. In the past two decades, the city has greatly expanded, displacing expansive farmlands with pristine skyscrapers.

Living in an environment like this, I had very few chances to run out in the vast countryside. Home therefore, is where I remained. I looked through the window and was always fascinated by the changing light in the sky. The interaction of light and architectural space became the connection between the nature world and myself. Light poured through the window and brightened up the whole room. I spent a great deal of time contemplating light in different spaces. The light in the corner, the light on the floor, light keeps changing with the motion of the Sun as well as our body movement. At times light could be so brilliant that it almost looked tangible and real.

My thesis project explores ideas of space and light. Architectural structures play a vital role in my work. Using both photo and memory, I create a personal space that contains memory and intimacy.

During the development of the project, my concept has been influenced by a number of artists, Patrick Caulfield and his interior paintings, being one. Many of his works combine various styles including pop art and trompe-l'oeil. In his mature work, trompe-l'oeil and photorealism co exist alongside simple graphic outlines. [1]” *After Lunch* (fig.1), for instance, features a photorealistic image of the Chateau de Chillon [2] hanging in a restaurant interior that is depicted in simple black outlines against a flat, two-toned background. The variation of tone

contributes to the atmosphere of the scene by suggesting a shadow, thrown across the imaginary space. The scene takes place in the afternoon when the lights have been turned off, and the waiter surveys the empty restaurant.

In many of Caulfield's big paintings, a life-sized object is placed in the foreground, in this case a chair, enabling the viewer to enter the scene. The artist chose a style of cane chair, not usually found in restaurants, in order to allow a view through its structure rather than create a visual block. It also serves as a visual pun, placing "real" water in front of "photo-realist" water [3].

The California artist Kevin Appel and his abstract architectural paintings provide both conceptual and stylistic examples from which to draw upon. His idea of "the sense of loss the photographs instill as a moment past, alongside the immediacy of the abstracted architectural proposal embodied by the paint [4]" forced me to reconsider my own understanding of space. The building is not simply a building, but a part of us, where we live, eat, work, sleep, learn, etc. From the "depths of his corner, the dreamer remembers all the objects identified with solitude, objects that are memories of solitude and which are betrayed by the mere fact of having been forgotten, abandoned in a corner." It contains memory and profound psychological influences on us.

A wide array of techniques and styles has also impacted my work, from trompe-l'oeil to pop art. Trompe-l'oeil and its ability to blur the distinction between fact and fiction appeals to me. Trompe-l'oeil realistically represents imagery to create the optical illusion that depicted objects actually exist in three dimensions. The technique has a long history that can date back to ancient Greek [p25]. Artists use trompe-l'oeil techniques to create a world between real and unreal. Vermeer, for instance, uses this technique in many of his paintings. In his work *Young*

Woman Reading a Letter at an Open Window (fig.2), the green satin curtain that hangs on the right-hand side does not seem to hang in the same implied space of the painting, but rather in front of the painting itself. The curtain becomes a connection between the painting and the real world, creates the impression that the viewer is looking at an intensely private, personal scene.

James McNeill Whistler and his landscapes also impact me. His works are among some of the earliest to deal with the subject of city and modernity. The way in which he minimizes the details in his landscapes reinforces a sense of solitude. His painting *Nocturne: Blue and Silver* (fig.3) uses relatively bright color to depict city's night scene. With the minimized details it portrays the silence and isolation of the city, which is related to the idea of the night view.

With the development of my project, Roy Lichtenstein's work grabs my attention. He uses strong outlines, big dots and highly saturated colors, which becomes his own painting language. However those dots and lines create patterns that carry the space.

My initial effort was an installation that consisted of two paintings on paper with constructed shelves and a real cup (fig.5). Utilizing the corner, each painting is hung on an adjacent wall, creating a play between actual and implied space. The idea came from the structure of corner itself. The corner, one of the most essential elements in a house, also has a rich diversity of psychological impacts on people. The corner produces a range of feelings: from a sense of security and protection, to the anxiety of being trapped, to a feeling of isolation. It is "a haven that ensures us one of the things we prize most highly-immobility. It is the sure place, the place next to my immobility [5]." Staying in the corner has a feeling of isolation, which is similar to the feeling of staying indoors.

In this piece, the two paintings appear to influence one another. The light comes from the right side out of the window, illuminating on the painting on the left. The shelves and the real cup give form to the light which is temporary. It's the interaction between the individual paintings and the architecture space that creates the illusion of the actual light.

After the corner installation, I became more aware of the way to represent the space. My interest is not to embody a space objectively, but the personal experience happens in the space. A building is “first and foremost a geometrical object, one which we are tempted to analyze rationally...but transposition to the human plane takes place immediately whenever a house is considered as space for cheer and intimacy, space that is supposed to condense and defend intimacy [6]”

The cheer and intimacy are related to human's psychological activities. It is about memories and imagination. I realized giving too much information might restrict the imagination. In order to deal with this idea, I limited down the realistic part in my work.

The installation *Untitled* (fig.6) consists of two large ink drawings. The scale offers an opportunity for one to feel as though they can step into the space because of the bodily relationship. The two pieces are done from different perspectives, yet still relate to each other. The windows on the right appear to cast shadows on the to the structures on the left. So when people move around it, the perspective changes and they will get their own view. There are only two values in the drawing, black and white. With the minimalized color and details, it became more unrecognizable. The shapes of windows and handrails suggest an interior space and the high value contrast implies a light that is very strong.

Space is not only made up of real objects, but imagination, memory, daydreams, and intimacy projected onto the space by the individual. When talking about interiors and the intimate, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard believes:

In order to suggest the value of intimacy, we have to induce in the reader a state of suspended reading. For it is not until his eyes have left the page that recollections of my room can become a threshold of oneirism for him.... The values of intimacy are so absorbing that the reader has ceased to read your room: he sees his own again.”[6]

A Silent Space (fig.8), painted with metallic silver paints, addresses the patterns created by the light and shadow. With only two colors, the painting depicts an unidentifiable space, which could exist in a factory, a hospital, a school or a train station. The metallic silver brings a cold tone to the painting. There is no life, only stillness and silence. Light is the only subject of the painting, because it is one of the most common things in a space.

Similarly, the painting *Morning Light* (fig.9) also relates to the idea of pattern in the space. The zigzag shapes compress and diminish towards the top, suggesting the shifting of perspective and space.

Living Room (fig.10) is a small square painting on canvas describing the morning light in my living room. As light shone through the window blinds, shadows spread across the table and stool. The ways in which light and shadows are altered by different objects and surfaces describes a space without actually depicting it.

Research into trompe-l’oeil paintings has aroused my interest in the realm between what is real and unreal. *Untitled* (fig.11) incorporates collage by uniting two separate spaces. The light and shadow from different spaces merge together, creating an exchange between the two. The window, chair and checkered floor are common elements taken from daily life. The generalized everyday objects allow the viewer to project themselves into the painting because of their own

experiences with similar household items. Since the painting has more than one space and does not exist in the real world, the viewer must use their imagination to read the painting.

Many of my paintings do not have any figures. They are emotionless, and only involve depiction the light. This comes from my memory and experience of living indoors. When I recall the memory I remember light. It is the one element that always stays with me. There is a sense of solitude and isolation, a negation of the outside world. “From the depths of his corner, the dreamer remembers all the objects identified with solitude, objects that are memories of solitude and which are betrayed by the mere fact of having been forgotten, abandoned in a corner.”

I began working directly on architectural structures in order to overcome the limitations of a canvas and the challenges edges present. *Untitled* (fig.11) is a freehand drawing made by silver acrylic marker pens, which is done directly on the wall. The piece is composed of many geometric shapes, with most of the large shapes amassed towards the top of the drawing. This collection of rhomboid shapes suggests the structure of windows. The smaller and lower collection of shapes form a bottle and dish rack, the drawing represents a kitchen scene from daily life. The coffee pot on the left and the water sink in the middle also help people to recall their own memories and experiences of living indoors. The wall does not have a definite edge like the canvas, which allows for the drawing to be incorporated into the real space.

Moments, my final piece for thesis show, is comprised of a traditional canvas painting within a larger wall painting. My previous wall drawings caused me reconsider the edge of the canvas. By working directly on the wall, the painting merges into the real space. As a result, the painting on canvas becomes part of the painting on the wall, which is incorporated into the architectural space.

The two paintings are joined together through color and composition. Many of the blues and grays on the wall relate to the painting on canvas. Besides, the small shapes on the left and the big shapes on the right collectively imply a perspective to the space. The canvas itself creates a large rectangular shape within the whole piece. The composition helps to move the eye from the right to the left, then perceive whole piece together.

The painting on the canvas depicts a bedroom night scene, with the light coming through the windows. The idea came from a place I stayed briefly while I was travelling. It was not my bedroom, yet somehow reminded me the room I stayed for years. With the elements like the lamp, chair, table, closet, mirror and etc., I brought to mind memories of my own living space.

The abstract painting on the wall is a result of the combination of a number of interiors spaces. I cut out the light parts of the spaces, collaged them together onto the wall. Compositional elements of the wall painting are mirrored by that of the painting on canvas, creating a sense of unity between the two pieces. The lamp-shaped blue area on the wall, for example, relates to the shadow of a lamp on canvas. The elongated geometric shapes in the upper right relate to the shadows in the painting. By enlarging everyday objects to a scale much larger than we are use to, the images becomes almost unrecognizable. It presents the opportunity for one to use their memory and imagination, which are inseparable in our minds [7]. This piece does not depict my own personal space or memory, but are cues to allow others to see their own.

“For the real houses of memory...do not readily lend themselves to description ... all we communicate to others is an orientation towards what is secret without ever being able to tell the secret objectively. What is secret never has total objectivity. In this respect, we orient oneirism (dream-like state) but we do not accomplish it.” [8]

The process of installing was a new experience. The scale and the size presented a challenge, while time constraints to install required a well-developed plan. The original plan had many colors that decelerated the working speed, so I had to limit the colors in the process.

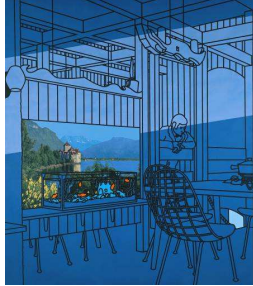
At this point in my practice, my work is no longer limited on canvas. The real architecture structure becomes more and more important. It is a combination of the two-dimensional painting and the three-dimensional space. I use my work to understand the relationship between the interior spaces and myself - a space with memory, imagination, thoughts, and intimacies.

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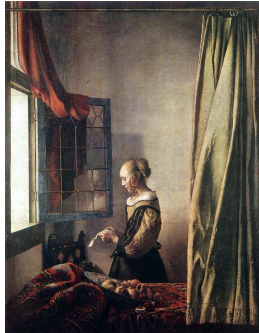
Table of Figures

Fig. 1



Patrick Caulfield, *After Lunch*, 1975, Tate Gallery, London, England

Fig. 2



Johannes Vermeer, *Young Woman Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, 1657-1659, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, Germany

Fig. 3



James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne: Blue and Silver-Cremorne Lights*, 1872, Tate Gallery, London, England

Fig. 4



Afternoon, 2013, mix media, both 20 x 26 x 2.8 in.

Fig. 5



Untitled, 2013, ink on paper, 5 x 8 ft.

Fig. 6



A Silent Space, 2014,
metallic acrylic on canvas,
22 x 30 in.

Fig. 7



Morning Light, 2014,
metallic acrylic on canvas,
30 x 36 in

Fig. 8



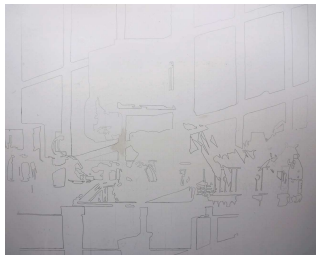
Living Room, 2014, oil on
canvas, 14 x 14 in

Fig. 9



Untitled, 2014, oil on
canvas, 68 x 84 in.

Fig. 10



Untitled, 2014, metallic
marker pen on wall, 14 x
12 ft.

Fig. 11



Moments, 2014, oil on
canvas and acrylic on wall,
15 x 29 ft.