

Crossing the Border: Identity Issues in the Scope of Representation

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Abstract

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After photography first emerged in the early 19th century, it has developed as a technology that enhances human ability to preserve visual information and challenges the tradition of painting as the fundamental apparatus to contain optic experiences. For generations, artists have been making paintings to represent both factual moments and fictional plots that mark the ups and downs of the humankind, making painting a reliable source of evidence for critical judgments, especially in terms of the historical and scientific archive. However, the making of the artifact can take ages and cost a big fortune; the finished piece's reading can be highly subjective to outside influences, which undermines the integrity of the painting as an information carrier. The introduction of photography solved all these problems. Compared to painting, photographic images can be taken immediately. Digital technology also made the storage of images more stable and cost-friendly. The advantage of photography seems to make representational painting obsolete. However, the interaction between the two media is never a zero-sum game. This thesis will attempt to push the border of painterly representation in the scope of photographic images, discussing humanity's

interdependency and information from the angle of identity issues. The essay will work as an explanatory component of the author's studio work, consisting of a diptych of oil paintings and preliminary work and studies.

Introduction

The work contained in my thesis project originated from the act of my relocation across the globe. As a Chinese man who moved to the United States for higher education, I went through challenges like language barrier and cultural shock to understand the struggle and difficulty of acculturation. Such an experience inspires me to analyze and represent the issues of identity through visual languages. Identity card, being the most important document for me to stay in this country legally, is how I first realize the idea of representation.

For most people who live in the United States, it is normal that the cashier at your local grocery store asks to see your driver's license to confirm that you're old enough to purchase any alcoholic beverage, especially when your appearance makes you look much younger than 21. In this case, your identity is represented by the information written on the card, which enables the transaction to take place legally. In other words, the appearance, how a person is recognized visually, can be ignored once the verbal authentication is completed. Compared to personal information, such as name, height, and date of birth that can be easily digitalized and extensively collected by public/social database, the analysis of visual signals requires more human interaction, which can be tricky to maneuver in some situations. Therefore, government-issued identification combines photograph, highlighting the visual likeness, with

archival descriptions to represent who the cardholder is. The authority endorses the authentic connection between visual and verbal information once the ID is legally issued. Since human appearance is subject to change over a more extended period, the acquisition or renewal of an identity card requires the most recent photograph.

The interplay between the imagery aspect and the information aspect of the identity card coincides with the relationship between painting and photography in the territory of representation. Painters started to work with photography early on. Louis Daguerre was recognized for his invention of the daguerreotype, the earliest photographic process in human history (Saltzman). However, the man had become an accomplished painter before inventing photography. The introduction of the new technology opened up new possibilities for those who work in representational manners to pursue perfection in terms of visual analysis. Appreciating the quality of photograph relative to time, painters were able to capture the overall structure and/or details of their subject matter quickly with outstanding accuracy. Eugene Delacroix was one of the earliest painters who incorporated photographs into his painting practice. Taking his famous masterpiece, *Liberty Leading the People*, as an example, the momentum of the characters' body movements emphasizes the representational value of the scene, which is more cinematic, if not as much as, than a theatrical experience for viewers to perceive and analyze.

For those painters who extensively work with photography, the formal language of representation never allows a simple copy and paste. Chuck Close is known for his monumental self-portraits. Manipulating his reference images in the darkroom, Close altered

the original photo in different ways. For instance, in *The 1968 Big Self-Portrait*, which was his earliest big one, the artist played with the focal distance to create a blurred figure and ground relationship. In fact, by focusing the lens on his nose, he created a sense of depth on a slightly flat surface. In his *1997 Self-Portrait*, a work made 30 years later, his face, looking sideways, appears in a close-up composition, where little space is given to the background. By going way beyond the original Polaroid, the painting was finished in the artist's signature mosaic rectangles, exposing much of Close's inner self (Friedman & Close).

Taking mostly found images as her subject matter, Marlene Dumas uses photography differently than Chuck Close. Since her figurative work addresses the relationship between the self and the reality, which inevitably intertwines facts with fiction, Dumas acquires images from multiple sources. Her reference source ranges from the newspaper, school's yearbook, to pornography, etc. Upon turning those pictures into paintings, the artist applies unrealistic color with her "highly synthesizing brushstrokes and the very liquid, fluid paint" (Verzotti). Such measures infuse the figure with vitality, re-animating it from the fixed representation of photograph; regardless, it was originally a living body or a corpse.

Being considered one of the most significant painters of the contemporary, Luc Tuymans challenges the spatial logic of both painting and photography. Similar to Dumas, Tuymans acquires reference images from all kinds of places: magazines, television, webpage, cellphone, and so on. Even though the pictures he uses come directly from mass media, his muted color palette, horizontal brushstroke, and claustrophobic composition can easily bewilder the audiences. The imagery space of Tuymans's paintings is somewhat confusing,

lacking the sense of depth and volume at first glance. However, the representational nature of his works means that the thing he depicts is supposed to be three-dimensional. However, the subtle beauty of such images, mixed with a touch of almost abstract gestures, intrigues audiences to come closer until they finally realize what the painting is about by reading the captions. It is at this moment that the visual effect of the painting overloads the audiences' minds with an explosive amount of information, figuratively smothering the viewers, forcing them to fight against preoccupied understandings of the representation, further questioning the true meaning of history and memory (Molesworth).

Execution

The latest paintings I finished before launching the thesis project was a diptych of self-portrait (image 1&2). I posed for myself in the gestures of beard trimming and face washing. The idea of self-grooming metaphors the alteration of my appearance, which witnesses the entire journey of acculturation as I want myself to be seen more like local people. Similar to how Cindy Sherman would carefully stage her photographic settings, I spent several days trying out different combinations of nuances like props and lighting to get the best reference image for the painting. Except for the relatively large dimension, slightly intense composition, and somewhat out of focus treatment of figure and ground relationship, I took inspiration from Chuck Close's large self-portraits. I painted in a relatively traditional manner. The movements of brushstrokes were following the contour and structure of the figures, but in the beard trimming piece, the forms of the figure seem to be on the verge of

breaking loose of human anatomy. In this fashion, the influence of Marlene Dumas' dynamic handling of figures starts to show.

Taking advantage of my trip to Singapore during the summer of 2019, I began to experiment with watercolor portraiture. Not only did Dumas' large sets of drawings of faces inspired me for its highly expressive, yet spontaneous quality in representing the heads (Boogerd), but also did the color palette and the composition of Luc Tuymans's portraits interest me with a subtle sense of uneasiness. In response to such influences, I painted head portraits (image 3&4) of pedestrians I encountered in Singaporean street. The flow of the water-based medium was hardly controllable at first, but the result was beyond my expectation. It turns out that the highly diluted watercolor could enable the brushstroke to spread out pigments with tremendous fluidity, creating disarray of colors merging across large areas. The trick was not overly to control the direction of where the water is going, but to pay attention to the layering of colors. In this way, the dried watermarks can stay as indexical signs of perished movement of paint, which metaphorically forms a connection between the physicality of paint and the conceptual background of the project.

After the watercolor series, I knew that I could push the idea of fluidity further. By revisiting the idea of Luc Tuymans, that how he overturned the spatial operations in painting and photography, creating "the symbolic incompleteness" thus questioning the validity of history in the eyes of archival memories (Molesworth), I realized that the interdependency between humanity and information is a specified version of history vs. archive. In Tuymans's idea, the orthodoxy of the past will eventually concede to the promise for the future. Nothing

from the past is meaningful unless it has a meaning to the future. The slightly detailed version of such notion becomes that human existence, representing humanity in total, is the only reason why information, no matter in texts or as pictures, is created and circulated. I then realized that there would be nothing more appropriate than photos on driver's licenses to visualize such nuances. Being fixed with the seal of the designated state government, as well as anti-counterfeiting patterns, this type of photograph simultaneously possesses imagery and text information (image 5&6).

To dramatize such interplay, the canvas for the project each has a measurement of 102 by 91 inches. The monumental scale of the paintings enables the banality of the present to be celebrated with sarcasm, while the inner essence of the existing remains unchallenged. In terms of color, I intentionally chose a palette of similar value, lower contrast to create a flat pictorial space that completely negates linear perspectives. The paint was applied with low viscosity, taking reference to the watercolor portrait series, to display the face as out of focus, further denying the sense of space in exchange for the drippy quality of the surface and complicated layering of oil paint. Accompanying the fact that portrait has been constructed abandoning almost every rule of representational painting, verbal information, such as governmental seals and serial numbers, are painted with clarity. The contrast between the blurry subtleties underneath and articulated patterns occupy the top ultimately questions the representational identity of the work.

Discussion

My thesis work is titled *CA & WA*, as the state of issuance of the two driver's licenses. The floating elements: governmental seal, numbers, and patterns conceptually create a barrier between the painting surface and the audiences, preventing them from fully engaging the representational aspects of the visual experience. Because the situation of COVID-19 has postponed the opportunity to show my thesis work publicly, I am currently unable to install the diptych in a gallery environment for viewers to interact with the work. However, I am confident that the visual experience of viewing a digital reproduction of a painting will never equal that of seeing the actual piece in person, just as the personal information listed on the identity card can never represent someone in the same way as human interaction. Eventually, as technological advancement keeps making human life increasingly convenient and entertaining, are we becoming more or less of human as many of us are willingly submerged in fragmented information, which is not necessarily formed based on the reality.

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Images



Image 1&2



Image 3&4



Image 5

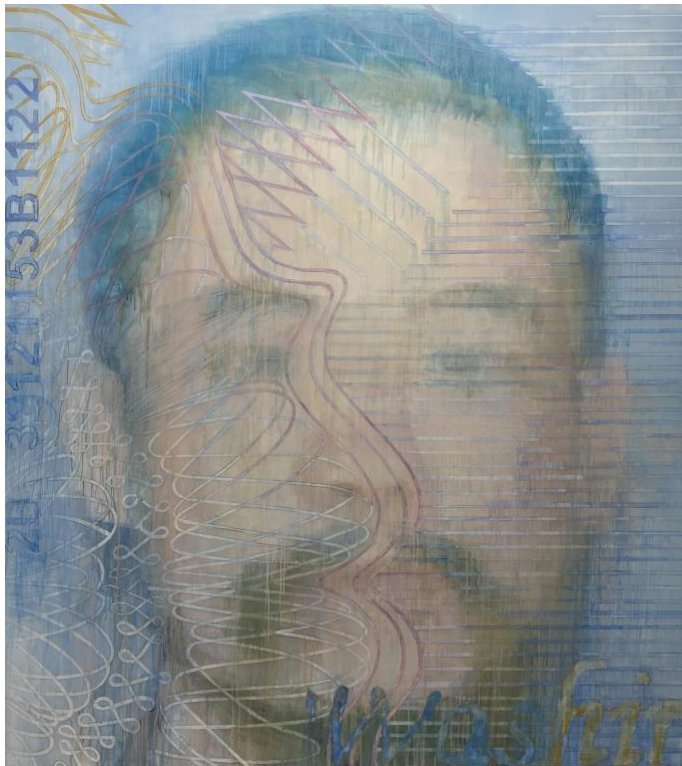


Image 6