

Dilemmatic moments of abundance society

Pinchuan Huang

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Committee:

Helen O'Toole

Ann Gale

David Brody

Philip Govedare

Zhi Lin

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Pinchuan Huang

University of Washington

## **Abstract**

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Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Helen O'Toole

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This is an analyzing writing about a two-piece painting series I made for my MFA thesis exhibition. The series is titled "What are they doing?" I will talk about how the paintings were developed and how both images visualize the ideas on behind. The content includes context from my previous painting practice, interpretations of various elements and those visual influence from other artists that contribute for setting and making of the works. In the first part, I will explain the idea the painting series is revealing and a deeper level of connotation on behind. In part two which is a major part of the writing, I will break down various visual elements in both painting along with contents about the shared and different strategies of them. The third part will be an explanation on the references and inspirations of the paintings.

Key words: Painting, Consumerism, Decision Fatigue, Abundance Society

## **Introduction**

Since few years ago when I tried to introduce more cartoon elements in my realistic paintings, I have often thought about making works with many toys with various facial expression. After I came to America for study of my MFA degree, I began to make toys as a primary motif of my paintings. I have to say that America gives me soil to plan the idea of my painting series “What are they doing?”. Consumer culture seep in to every cell of people who live here. This is a direct factor that drives me to transmit from depictions with a still-life language to paint objects integrated in a shopping environment. Then the painting series was born. This an analyzing writing about it. It is about some kind of subtle mental state people may experience in this era of consumerism. When today’s consumer culture keep stimulating our desire of purchasing and acquiring, we are suffered in a soft way at the same time, since abundant choices is overloading us. According to systematic descriptions and analysis in studies conducted by psychologists and behavioral scientists, negative effects, often happen at the same time when people are excited to countless beautiful commodities. The “What are they doing?” series was born with inspirations from this kind of mixed feeling.

## **Part 1 Basic idea:**

“What are they doing?” is a painting series made of two individual oil paintings based on a shared contest. They describe the subtle dilemma people experience in the abundance society. Nowadays, shopping as an important part of our life is taken for granted by most people. In such an abundant paradise we live, our culture is deeply shaped by consumerism. Desire for buying are strongly ignited. However, before we buy, we have to choose first. In this choosing state, something strange happens.

An interesting study titled “When Choice Is Demotivating.” was recorded in a book titled “The paradox of Choice” (*The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less, by Barry Schwartz, 2004*). The study was set in a gourmet food store. On a weekend, new items are set on a sample table as usual. The researchers set up a display featuring a line of exotic, high-quality jams that allow customers who came by to taste samples, and give them a coupon for a dollar off if they bought a jar. In one condition of the study, 6 varieties of the jam were available for tasting. In another, 24 varieties were available. In either case, the entire set of 24 varieties was available for purchase. The large array of jams attracted more people to the table than the small array, though in both cases people tasted about the same number of jams on average. When it came to buying, however, a huge difference became evident. Thirty percent of the people exposed to the small array of jams actually bought and only 3 percent of those who exposed to the large array of jams did so.

The book’s author Barry Schwartz also presents:

*When people have no choice, life is almost unbearable. As the number of available*

*choices increases, as it has in our consumer culture, the autonomy, control, and liberation this variety brings are powerful and positive. But as the number of choices keeps growing, negative aspects of having a multitude of options begin to appear.*

*- Paragraph 3, P2*

While people are exposed in a space with dizzy attractions, excitement is aroused, but hesitation and indifference are paradoxically attached at the same time. In such situations, freedom of choice consumerism provides is quietly challenging people's limitation of memory, vigour and time etc. However, even though people are sometimes aware of it, the focus of dissatisfaction may not be immediately at the overload of choice which is brought by the abundance society. The painting series "What are they doing?" is made based on this interesting facet of consumer society. It is about a hovering-around feeling in our contemporary life.

## **Part 2 Working progress and analysis of content:**

Before the current version of the paintings were given birth, the series was planned as two different interior scenes of a large grocery store. The initial idea was mainly about showing today's mundane life. The size of them were set very big, so that I can take advantage of the size to get the viewers involved into the scene and they would be awed by the straightforward presence of magnificence atmosphere looming from the everyday scene. However, because painting a supermarket interior scene is a little too cliché, the plan was abandoned.

That was a key turn of the whole process. Although ideas like usual shopping scenes,

colorfulness, item piling and size setting and so forth are inherited from the former plan, the picture was no longer a big scene depiction. It became close-up. The content of each painting also started to be relatively distinctive, though they still share things in common, which is not a twin set as formerly conceived.

The first painting is a keynote setting piece of the whole series, so I will talk about that first. After the “interior scene” plan was abandoned, a new issue emerged. What kind of specific content would most fit the core idea? After additional studies, a shelf with layers of stuffed animals in a shopping mall finally became the final setting. The first reason is that these objects provide a feeling of playfulness, which helps to create a seemingly joyful ambience. Secondly, those abstract concepts of the painting’s connotation can be expressed in a personalized way through the figure’s face, which provides the viewers some kind of interactivity.

First, the composition provides a feeling of strong randomness. Taking a photo nowadays can just be driven at a whim. The quality of aesthetics is usually low and most of them were simply born for being forgotten although they have long been saved somewhere. The composition is inspired by those meaningless casual-taking photos which shows a snapshot-like style. The composition makes the work look like it was done with no care, which makes an intense contrast with the realistic depiction of the subject matters. By looking at the painting as a whole, the composition can also be seen as a metaphor toward a larger reality that intangibly houses our consumer life.

As I mentioned in part one, people feel hesitant while being attracted. That is a weird dilemma situation which creates a kind of distance integrated with intimacy. In the

shelf piece, the sense of distance was embodied as those deflected sight lines of the stuffed animals. Perhaps besides the very unsure, weak eye contact with the small unicorn at the center place, no other eyes are looking at the viewers. It looks just like we are embracing the joyfulness of consumerism but it is somehow unapproachable. Like how the stuffed animal in the painting sweetly smile, yet remain indifferent to those who is staring at them. The viewers' interaction with the image is like an ephemeral game of looking.

For the second painting of the series, the toy is also the motif. A front view of a claw machine was painted with many stuffed toys inside, which is another small corner in a shopping place. Piling, layering, colorfulness and the figures' communicating face are elements that stem from the strategies of the shelf piece, and the claw machine piece goes further.

A claw machine implies a choosing moment, which echoes with the work's theme—dilemma of choice in a consumer society. Similar to the first piece, the claw machine piece also shows a familiar, realistic scene mixed with a subtle feeling of estrangement. Something different is that the estrangement is revealed through the sense of illusional complexity. Along with layers of stuffed toy, reflections of the surrounding environment projected both on the machine's internal mirror and the glass window interweave in a dizzy way. Unlike the shelf piece, the claw machine piece is compositionally stable and atmospherically calm, which contrasts and balances the complexity.

This painting provides the viewers with a sense of participation. The controller part at

the middle of the front ground indicate a first-person angle. The water stain on the left side of the joystick also reinforces the ambience that the machine is in relationship with everybody who walks by it. It is as if someone just came and played. After a trip of close looking, the presence of the glass window is something the audience will gradually realize. It is a symbol of an invisible obstacle led by the abundant choice. Like the sense of intangible distance depicted through the deflected sight lines of those stuffed animals, the subtle presence of the glass window is in the same idea in the claw machine piece. The glass window functions as a latent contrast with those various eye contacts from the toy figures inside.

### **Part 3 Sources and references:**

Before the series “What are they doing?” was made, I had already been attracted by the consumer culture and various related works. Generally speaking, pop art is a chapter in art history no one can skip while planning works about consumerism. Although I don’t see “What are they doing?” as a series of Pop work, those visual elements of Pop Art, such as collage of saturated colors and obvious applications of cartoon figures, were applied on both paintings. The Minnie Mouse figure in the shelf piece shows an apparent visual connection with Pop language. Inspirations from Wayne Thiebaud is also decisive. Karen Tsujimoto, a curator of SFMoMA, describes Thiebaud’s still life as neither a heroic nor a mystical vision of life.

*Isolated from their larger contexts, his objects are simply meant to be as they really appear. As Robbe-Grillet has gone on to assert, “Let it be first of all by their presence*

*that objects and gestures establish themselves, and let this presence continue to prevail over whatever explanatory theory that may try to enclose them in a system of reference, whether emotional, sociological, Freudian, or metaphysical”*

*-Paragraph 2, P54 “Wayne Thiebaud” 1985*

I am not saying my painting series needs to be isolated from external explanation like the ideas Thiebaud held, but his attitude really inspires me to make the paintings with a kind of calm expression which doesn't immediately emotionalize audiences. This idea set the keynote of the atmosphere on both paintings.

For the claw machine piece, it gets a very strong influence from cityscape paintings by Richard Estes whose style also provide a calm vision reflecting internal tension. Estes' works offer a good example of depicting complexity. I strongly reference the dizzy objectivity of his works.

Title is an interesting part of today's artworks, which allows a literary dimension in a visual expression. A title is a summary, whether it is straightforward or allusive. The title “What are they doing?” is based on a reference from how Richard Hamilton titled his iconic work “Just what it is that make today's homes so different, so appealing?” “What are they doing?” is actually an ask-back question. Like the paintings, the title also has a quality of duality. On one hand, it is an invitation of a direct review upon the picture, one the other hand, it is an implication of self-reflection.

## **Conclusion:**

From an analyzing angle, the “What are they doing?” series reflects a negative

attitude toward consumerism. Because with increasing critiques and reflections against consumerism nowadays, it is difficult to put aside those heavy, tragic or awakening moods when dealing with such topics. However, if we try to approach the paintings through an intuitive angle, we will find those various allusions are actually haunting accompaniments while those direct depictions of the abundantly joyful atmosphere are singing out loud. Two paintings reflect two different corners in shopping places. They are not only like a record of an unimpressive moment in our life as a consumer, but they are also a visual symbol of today's consumer culture, embodying the coexistence of ecstasy and aimlessness in the abundance era. We are shaped by consumption with its sign-values. What we buy means what we want to be. Freedom of choice which abundance society provides displays beautiful possibilities of self-realization which is almost impossible to abandon. Jean-Paul Sartre said: Human beings are condemned to be free. Although we may experience numerous dissatisfaction led by consumerism, we are more afraid of the loss of freedom as an essential attribute. We have to always convince ourselves to comfortably stay at this hesitant situation. This series is not providing a critique, instead, it is a reminder to be aware of the dilemmas of reality.

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## Images of Paintings:



Title: What are they doing? Year of completion: 2020

Size: 87×79" Media: Oil on Canvas

Photograph by: Larry Huang



Title: What are they doing? No.2 Year of completion: 2020

Size: 109×79" Media: Oil on Canvas

Photograph by: Larry Huang