

Deity, Humanity and Materiality

Ding Jin

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2017

Committee:

David Brody

Ann Gale

Philip Govedare

Denzil Hurley

Zhi Lin

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

School of Art + Art History + Design

©Copyright 2017

Ding Jin

University of Washington

Abstract

Deity, Humanity and Materiality

Ding Jin

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Professor

Philip Govedare

Painting and Drawing, School of Art

This thesis is about the process of making the art work for the thesis show. It includes the original source of why I chose this subject and how I developed this idea for the work. The source of the idea is from my personal life and my interest. I considered this idea based on art history, and turned this idea into art work. Meanwhile, the methodology of making the art work is from some great artists in this world. Finally, I combined the art work with my personal thought, art history, and methodology of masters to decide why and how I paint the art work for the thesis show.

Deity, Humanity and Materiality

Three year ago, when I was in China, I had a girlfriend who works in NICU. Sometimes she showed me some pictures of premature infant. I remember at the first time when I saw it, a lot of methods were going on in my mind. But I had not realized what they were that made my thought change. After a while, I kept thinking why I was interested in premature infant and used it as the subject matter for my work. Then I figured out some reasons. Generally, human being is intellectual species in this world. We can think and make so many things that the other species cannot do. But, we cannot declare that we fully understand everything about ourselves as human being. There are still so many things unknown about human, although science and technology have developed so fast and made lots of big progresses. In the human culture and history, perhaps human being is considered as a mysterious, spiritual and sacred species. That is part of the reason that there is the word “soul” in almost every human language. Based on all of this above as I mentioned, when I look at premature infant, at this very moment, what I see breaks my thought about human being is sacred. Afterwards, I feel that premature infant is just like a small machine made of bones, flesh, blood, and tissue etc. and then doctors just set up some medical devices to keep this little machine working as being alive of human. Furthermore, premature infant blurs the boundary between human and other species, because all premature infant needs to do is just survival which is close to the essence of any life.

Premature infant comes out to the world earlier, and most of them don't have obvious characteristics, so they look and sound similar each other. Thus, the identity of them becomes ambiguous or the range of identity of them turns to be larger. It is hard to distinguish who is whom among the premature infants. To some extent, a premature infant could be anyone if you don't know it. In addition, we don't know if it's able to think or be aware of anything. The



Ding Jin, *premature infant No.1*, 2016



Ding Jin, *premature infant No.2*, 2016

society has not input anything into it. Thus, if premature infant is as a space of mind, this space is empty comparing to the space of adult. As of this space is empty, so it is very

unpredictable about what it is going to be like in the future, because it could be probably filled with anything. In terms of this space of mind theory , in other words, premature infant could include so many possibilities of having any specific kind of humanity. When premature infant associates with humanity, this humanity is dynamic rather than static.

When I consider to use premature infant as a subject matter for my work, I also associate it with art history to think about it. I see a lot of classic paintings and sculptures in art history, so many of them includes nude as their subject matter. Those classic artists considered that human body had its own beauty based on aesthetic, so they painted ideal nude as this aesthetic. On the other hand, these ideal nudes in classic painting represent deity serving for believers of religion. Thus, this is some certain motivation for classic artists to paint or sculpt nude human body. Today, in this era, when I look at premature infant as one of the different forms of human body, I can observe how different premature infant is from the normal human body, especially from the ideal nude in classic painting. The difference between them is not only about the appearance of body, but also about the medical devices setting up on the body of premature infant. Because medical device replaces some certain function of organ which does not work well for premature infant, medical device already turned into the necessary part of their bodies. In the old age, longtime ago, before certain specific medical technology was invented to save premature infant, keeping them alive had not happened yet. Hence premature infant being alive is new phenomenon comparing to that old era. That also means in art history, premature infant being alive with medical device had not been the subject matter for art works. Because of all these characteristics of premature infant, it could be a new form of human life based on art history.

In terms of the two paragraphs above, there are some reasons to paint premature infant for my work, and then I want my work to bring out some questions rather than answers. But



Ding Jin, *premature infant No.3*, 2016



Ding Jin, *premature infant No.4*, 2016



Ding Jin, *premature infant No.5*,2017



Ding Jin, *premature infant No.6*,2017

there is a problem which is what way is that I should paint them, so I start to search and look at some works of artists to solve this problem. Jenny Saville's work is also to express human

body, many of them are female nude. Her works changed the way of how man looked at women's nude in old art works in art history. They are not to serve male inner perspective of looking at female nude. She painted female nude directly on canvas in realistic and academic way for the expression of human body, so it is worthy to try to paint premature infant as a new form of human body directly like she does. But this way of painting is kind of expressive and emotional, I realized that this way of painting doesn't work for the subject matter very well.

Because premature baby is so vulnerable, delicate and subtle. Thus, I changed the way of painting to be objective which means it is less expressive. In addition, the skin of premature baby is very soft and gentle, so I tried to hide the sharp brushstroke and make the visual effect fuzzy. I also considered that it could be painted in the abstract way. For example, Tom Wesselmann and Alex Katz, they painted their work to be flat to refine what they want to express. But I realize that if I paint my work in this way the premature baby will lose the details and texture which are what I want to express. Hence I think I should take the stance right in the middle between the image and painting, that means the painting is better to be realistic and remain the details and texture of premature baby. After I painted some works, I think the meaning of the works is too simple and it doesn't work for my original impression of premature as what the first paragraph mentioned. Fortunately, I read an article of Philip Guston in the seminar class, it said: "Each object—or, in the terms of art, each image—thus present itself under the absolute pressure of its own transformation, so that the only way to "represent" an object is as that which is about to become another, and yet remains itself." Then I think the premature baby in my painting only represents itself, so I need to make it represent something else to improve my work. The article

also mentioned a painting of Philip Guston's, which is called *Pyramid and Shoe*, it said: "As always, however, Guston's primary aim is expressive, referring the spectator back to the quandary in which these and all other products of perception dwell. The near-equalization of size between such disparate objects reminds us that both are human artifacts, and yet what each bespeaks is human absence: the empty shoe and the sealed tomb." I realize that the pyramid is not pyramid itself and so is the shoe, the relationship between them goes first in this painting. Whereupon I decided to combine the premature baby with something else as one work. In terms of my original impression of premature baby, which breaks my thought of human as a sacred species, so I want to add a baby from the classic painting next to it. Because the figures in classic painting always

FIG.1. _ Guston, *Pyramid and shoe* (1977). Phot. David McKee Inc



represents the deity, idealism and eternity, on the other hand the baby in classic painting and premature baby are both initial form of human life, which means even though they are both babies, they look so different from each other. Hence if I put them together, the point of work will be the relationship between them, so premature baby could represent something else. Soon afterwards, I think I could add the third object to the two pieces to create the second relationship. Because there is a relationship among three things haunting me in my mind. The first is something mysterious we don't know beyond human world, that's why there is the word "god" almost in very human language. The second is human being as ourselves. The third is everything we know as materialism. On some level, in terms of this work, classic baby is related to the first thing as something mysterious and premature baby is related to the second thing as human being, so I think I should find out another object related to the third thing. Finally, I think meat is the better choice, because meat is one of the components of human body, so it has a connection to premature baby as an initial human body. On the other hand, even though meat is part of life but it doesn't have its own life, so I think in the context of this work of three pieces, meat could be related to the third thing as materialism. Considering of the three specific pieces, I named this work Deity

reference:

Zaller,R. "Philip Guston and the Crisis of the Image" in *Critical Inquiry*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp 69-94