

A Peep through a Tube at a Leopard

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Abstract

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Introduction

“*Guan zhong kui bao, lue jian yi ban*”

(“a peep through a tube at a leopard – to see only a spot”)

Liu Yiqing

In the Southern and Northern Dynasties in 4th Century China, this proverb was used to refer to a limited point of view. It is a well-known phrase from *A New Account of the Tales of the World* (*Shishuo Xinyu*)¹ compiled and edited by Liu Yiqing in the 5th C.

In the original story, a young talented calligrapher judged people without knowing their full circumstances, so people referred to him as one who peeped at a leopard through a tube - capable of seeing only a tiny part of the whole. Meanwhile, as a pun, this proverb also indicates that what we see could be just the tip of an iceberg. This inspiring proverb reminds me of the way we see things through the camera.

I am a photographer, but ironically, I mostly work with the imperfections of the camera.

Although cameras were invented to capture what can be depicted photographically, the way images are delivered—compressed from the three dimensional world into a tube with multiple lenses—is restricted by the structure of the cameras. Such restriction creates a kind of illusion that stops us from approaching the real world; photographic images are seen as representations of

the real world (Tormey, 2013)². However, as a tool for capturing images, camera with its imperfections challenge us to explore many other ways of utilizing it to see the world.

Fascinated by this profound and poetic proverb, I decided to use it as my ideational foundation and to create a visual metaphor by combining my own understanding of the proverb and my personal experience of the real world.

Sources

My work has always been a personal manifestation of my perception of life and the world, rather than an intellectual interpretation of it. My perceptions give birth to an intuition that guides me to make art. I cannot articulate myself to give a precise definition to intuition, but it is something I can trust when I have trouble making decisions. It is sometimes a pure sense of beauty, and sometimes a curiosity for life. All the outcomes that my intuition leads me to are eventually things that work for me the most.

I was born in a city on the east coast of China, and images of the sea fill my childhood memories. When my dad taught me to swim for the first time, he took me to the chest-deep water and told me to do what he had taught me two minutes ago to get myself back to the beach, then left me there by myself. Obviously, I made it, but that was the first time I was overwhelmed by the sea. When I dove I saw nothing, but I could always feel something coming towards me from the dense muddy water—something lured me to get closer and closer to. I was scared at first, but

then started enjoying being surrounded and submerged by it. Out of a sudden, it became something that is more than just a place where I grew up near.

Hiroshi Sugimoto's "Seascapes"³ images emerge in my mind every time I look at the sea. However, the human eye is unable to resolve all the detail of the view as the camera does (I with my naked eyes was unable to see as much detail of the actual sea as being shown in Sugimoto's seascape images). Instead, the view fades in the distance and things became blurry and unidentifiable. A place—the sea—that I used to be familiar with, gradually fades into a strange and mysterious scene. The detail of the scene goes beyond my vision, so I have to leave it to my imagination.



Cabo da Roca, Victor Wu, 2014

In 2014, when I was traveling in Europe, I went to Cabo da Roca (or Cape Roca) in Portugal, which is the west end of the European continent. There I saw the most breathtaking seascape in my life—vast, timeless, stretching into the infinity. The poet Luís de Camões once wrote “ Here, where the land ends and the sea begins....”.⁴ I was deeply attracted to this quote, as in my mind the sea is always like a symbolic place that marks the beginning and the end of things, including life itself.

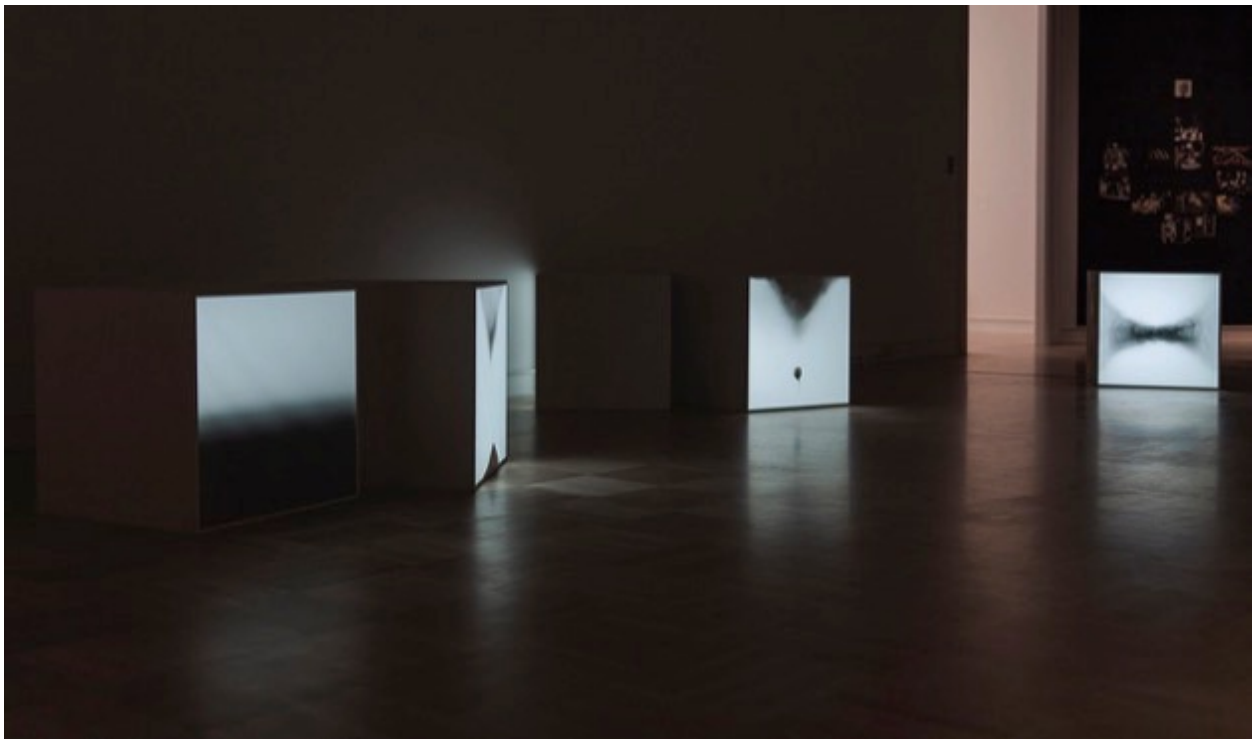


Non-shaped, Victor Wu, 2013

There have always been images of intangible forms in my mind. I’m not exactly sure who/what inserted those images in there, or where they originally from. They are images of vague, organic forms, like some kind of cells or lives. They don’t have much vivid color, instead, they are a little bit de-saturated and sometimes in pure black & white. These intangible forms keep changing,

which appears to be the evolution and the mutation of life. It is not my interest to provide philosophical and/or scientific proof of where life is from and where it is going. Instead, as a visual artist, I prefer to sketch a pattern based on my own perception and to create a visual metaphor of what life can possibly be.

The Boxes



A Peep through a Tube at a Leopard, Victor Wu, 2015

My thesis piece, *A Peep through a Tube at a Leopard*, is a result of me creating the visual metaphor based on the sources I mentioned above. It is a series of five white cubic light boxes with different sculptural objects in them. Instead of constructing narrative scenes and arranging them in a linear way like a storyboard, I prefer to give each box its own life and character, and let them live on their own. Eventually they were paired and arranged based on their intrinsic quality

and the potential relationships between them. By arranging them on the floor, I intend to guide the viewers to physically go through the space, and let the boxes be read and felt the boxes as individuals and as a whole.



A Peep through a Tube at a Leopard (detail), Victor Wu, 2015

As for me, looking at things through the viewfinder is only a way of seeing, not knowing. When I point the camera at the objects I intend to photograph, a certain connection between me the photographer and the objects is established. However, this connection seems to be too ephemeral and ambiguous for me to really understand the objects. But it is the ambiguity that drives me to explore what I see. The translucence surface of the boxes echoes and emphasizes the ambiguity, and waits for the viewers to explore.

Exploring the properties, limits and potential of different types of material has always been my interest. It allows me to better anticipate and understand the outcome of the projects, so I can have a better control of the visual overtones conveyed through the material. The series of aluminum foil images by James Welling is a great inspiration to me for my material study (aluminum foil specifically). I was fascinated by how the aluminum foil was manipulated to be unidentifiable, and the way he played with our sense of scale. Another major influence to my material study is a series of stainless steel sculptures called *Jiashanshi* by Zhan Wang. What impacted me is how he perfectly turned scholar rocks from Chinese gardens into cold, shining and extremely industrial stainless steel sculptures, with all detail preserved. I could not figure out the technical aspect of his work, but I realized that the right material can without a doubt contribute to a great visual impact.



2-29 I (B15), James Welling, 1980



Jiashanshi No.92, Zhan Wang, 2006

The aesthetic quality of my work has always been an important aspect. Here the aesthetic refers to both a sense of beauty the content reveals and the quality of craftsmanship. Black and white, white space/background, backlit objects.... these are usually the fundamental aesthetic elements in my work through which a sense of beauty is conveyed. This sense of beauty stems from the quality (or the nature) of the materials (paper, aluminum foil, plaster, to name a few), and then the materials were transformed to be clean, simple, quiet, vague, mysterious, etc. When I look at Chinese ink wash paintings (especially those by Mi Fu⁵ from Song Dynasty, Huang Gongwang⁶ from late Song Dynasty, and Bada Shanren⁷ from earlier Qing Dynasty), my focus always falls on the quiet, isolated, timeless, ambiguous and sometimes clumsy imagery the painters depicted. This imagery is usually in a state between specific and abstract, which allows a huge space for our imagination. The influence of these images on me is subtle but significant. In my final thesis, I have adopted aspects of this unique aesthetic, aspiring to leave the audience a space for interpretation.



Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains (partial), Huang Gongwang, 1348-1350

Epilogue

Reaching for perfection is in my very nature, however, I realize that imperfection occurs when the limitations of our point of view becomes normality. These limitations – and ultimate failures – motivate me to go on to my next project.

Gregory Crewdson's description of his motivations ring true to me and have inspired me to articulate my own:

*"I think my pictures are really about a kind of tension between my need to make a perfect picture and the impossibility of doing so. Something always fails, there's always a problem, and photography fails in a certain sense. It's so limited. Despite the fact that we work enormously in post-production, reproduction is reproduction and it will always, one way or another, fail you. This is what drives you to the next picture."*⁸

I have always been looking for answers, or meanings, or solutions to things that I am curious about, but have always failed to do so. These unsuccessful experiences do not change my desire for making art, but it does change my understanding of art making itself. As Xu Bing said in response to his own process: "a transcendent state is achieved by consciously making effort to realize a meaningless goal"⁹ (Wu, 2008). This statement raises critical questions about the purpose of art, Is art-making a way to find answers, meanings or solutions? I do not have an answer to this question now. Perhaps art is not about making things meaningful but about making them meaningless, as the meanings are already there.

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