

Painting Unsettled

Painting is unsettled, but also unsettling. For some time, painting has been in a state of contradiction. The world of painting can be defensive, but also self-destructive.¹ With the invention of photography, painting no longer had an imperative to be a record of the world, threatening the medium's survival and launching it on a long journey of correction. Contemporary painting seems to be "everything everywhere all at once," a new characteristic that fuels its sustained growth.

Modernist art history was predicated on stylistic "progress" and an associated genealogy of artists. As the original narrative adhered to a modernist sense of time and was bounded by nation and region, today historiographic construction has become more flexible in several fields. If we abandon traditional art historical measures, then what is the most critical existential issue in painting today?² A central issue may be painting's relationship to information and digitization. Paintings today almost always become digital images. At times this is subconsciously incorporated into their making, and at times they may even imitate or mock this anticipated digitization, but in any case this factor cannot be ignored. Information and images keep pouring in. Faced with the threat of (or acting in collusion with) digital images online, painting adopts all styles, techniques, and patterns as readymade elements. In this way, digital images, fragments of art history, spatial structures, and other readymades come together to comprise a connective network. The concept of "network painting" gradually rose to prominence beginning with the work of Martin Kippenberger and David Joselit's seminal text "Painting Beside Itself."³ With this development, Clement Greenberg's myth of "pure" painting seem even more irrelevant. Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, assemblage theory, and other sociological ideas now haunt various corners of the contemporary painting scene. Isabelle Graw offered a criticism, noting that connections within networks are not smooth, and overemphasizing frictionless connections in network painting neglects existing power structures, since conflict is also a form of connection.⁴ Similar to the modernist pursuit of a "pure" medium, network painting is ultimately an unattainable ideal. How does painting reflect on itself in the post-medium age?⁵ "Painting Unsettled" takes up painting's specific political and emotional meaning and the transformation of formal languages and materials as a starting point.

The artists in this exhibition come from different generations and educational backgrounds. They do not view the previous generation as a gold standard or as something against which to rebel. They are unconstrained by narratives of career development. They do not see art history as a linear story in which the new replaces the old, and they do not see their work as a link in such a chain. Instead, as Qiu Xiaofei describes it, a more appropriate metaphor would be to see art historical predecessors and stylistic threads as constellations of stars. Historical context is no longer a constraint of similarities, nor is it an identity-based label; instead, it is a fluid subject that is discovered and reconstructed in the process of making an artwork. The here-and-now becomes a flexible vessel whose boundaries are defined by communally shared emotions.

In Li Ran's paintings, we can see how he draws from Republican-era satirical cartoons that lampooned the era's social and political ills. The emotions churning within these closed environments are akin to those of religious myths performed on a theatrical stage. Li places a psychological exploration of "petty intellectuals" in the present day, searching for clues about the origins of our current situation in what they left behind. Wang Xiaoqu distorts and transforms everyday visual schema, images buried deep in the collective subconscious that retain a contemporary ideological tenor. Wang looks for their connections to other classic cultural images from history to create humorous dislocations. These artists' works offer subtle and playful responses to the age-old subject of what constitutes "Chineseness."

After the decline of Socialist Realism, artists began to break down and reconstruct temporality in painting. In Qiu Xiaofei's recent work, the complementary narratives of Chinese and Soviet history serve as a distant backdrop, while family history is the veiled protagonist. Here, a wormhole that collapses historical time, familial time, and present-day time appears in a meta-landscape of the subconscious. The formal languages and affective mechanisms of the paintings are two sides of the same coin, a relationship evident in the juxtaposition of symbols of melancholy. For Han Mengyun and Yong Xiang Li, the here-and-now also encompasses the dark legacy of Orientalism across the globe. One artist offers a corrective, while the other responds with parody. In appropriating traditional Asian handicrafts, Han's logic is not that of a renaissance of these techniques; rather, her work offers a comparative cultural study of image-making in the postcolonial context. Symbols that traverse religions and cultures, woodblock printing, and manuscript production techniques represent Han's search for unorthodox modes of image-making outside of mainstream art history. Her work explores the circulation of motifs, the origins of diversity, and the potential for shared emotional resonance. Yong Xiang Li explores connections between paintings and objects (often furniture and decor) such that materials in space become extensions of the paintings and the paintings themselves become readymades. Together with viewers, who move around to get a full view, the installations become a mobile ensemble. Han and Li's works illuminate social realities while also countering critiques of painting's elitism. The PVC in Li's work, usually used for shower curtains, and the pitch-black wrought iron in

Han's work, often used in residential windows, serve as metaphors for the atomization and constraints of contemporary life, as well as destructive gendered power structures.

This way of deploying styles is not entirely new. Since Marcel Duchamp, artists have borrowed distinctive cultural forms from various historical periods.⁶ They are not just borrowing styles; all pictorial and spatial elements can be freely used on the canvas. Yve-Alain Bois referred to the field of painting as a "relation of dynamic forces."⁷ Contemporary painters do not merely coordinate these forces on the canvas, but also see painting as an object that itself becomes one of these forces. They thus manage the collisions and confluences of these forces in a larger four-dimensional space. This approach is also how painting can escape medium-centric ways of thinking.

This escape beyond medium incorporates high levels of hybridity, sometimes manifesting as synesthesia. In addition to rebelling against the dominance of iconography, Xie Nanxing is interested in how various techniques might also be used in a collage-like fashion. His strategy has no narrative goal; instead, Xie aims to activate the other senses, experimenting with how to evoke sound and smell through the picture plane. His meaning is concealed in how he both exposes and conceals his creative process. Hybridity can also be expressed in the transfiguration of imagery. The image distortions in Ce Jian's paintings have an almost religious sensibility. The robotic arm that is the subject of her paintings sometimes forms a nine-headed Hydra of ancient Greek mythology, while elsewhere it is composed of shells, propellers, and spinal cords. Diverse forms of humans and of human-made objects originate from and return to nature, weakening the borders of the artificial. At the same time, Jian situates her paintings above wallpaper, one of the most commercial modes of image-production. The images evoke one another—augmenting iconographic considerations while mocking the original sin of painting—its commercialization. In Wang Zhibo's paintings, animal forms hover between primate (evolutionary relatives of humans) and canine (loyal, domesticated companions of humans for millennia). Wang's human forms shift between heavy flesh molded by civilization and popular symbols from the virtual world.

Painting today aspires to become a meta-medium: all media can be part of painting, and all techniques can become painterly techniques. Painting is not just a form of embodied creation, it also serves as a mirror onto humanity. The ontological development of painting parallels the development of modern human subjectivity. With growing critiques of anthropocentric thinking, the discourse surrounding painting's status as a medium has also turned a page. This exhibition presents an attempt at this new mode of discourse, as well as the varied efforts of these outstanding artists towards this end. However, we cannot forget that, even as the organizational forms and boundaries of mediums constantly expand, we must occasionally stop to reassess their concrete connections to our lives. As mechanisms of censorship and the logic of markets push artistic freedom to the precipice, it is this self-awareness that can ultimately save painting.

01. Famously, Robert Rauschenberg erased a drawing by master Abstract Expressionist Willem de Koonig in Erased de Kooning Drawing (1953), and John Baldessari destroyed 13 years of his paintings all in The Cremation Project (1970).

02. Here, we have not rushed to call it a "crisis." Every technology that was thought would "kill" painting has been absorbed into painting in one way or another.

03. David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," in *October 130* (2009), 125-34; David Joselit, "Reassembling Painting," in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age*, eds. Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit (Munich: DellMonico Books, 2016), 168-181.

04. Isabelle Graw, "Frozen References to Life in Avery Singer's Paintings," in *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2019), 262-274.

05. For further exploration of this topic, see Nicolas Bourriaud, Postproduction, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002); Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000); Peter Weibel, "The Post-Medial Condition," *Arte Con Texto*, no. 6 (2005): 11-15.

06. Laura Hoptman, *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* (New York: MoMA, 2015), 21.

07. Yve-Alain Bois, "Matisse and 'Arche-Drawing,'" in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 50.