



Artist Interview

Curator/Interviewer : Gong Linlin (G)

Artist : Can Shu (C)

G : We have discussed before, you worked on writing novels in previous years, what is the reason that you started? What is the connection between your visual art and writings/novels?

C : I pay attention to various kinds of books in my childhood. I remember during my junior high school, there was a scientific-educational focused library next to where I lived, when cultural censorship enforcement was less intense, all kinds of books including lingo writing, science fiction novel, Kong fu novel, and Japanese manga, even some books that lack of aestheticism or banned by officials could be found. During those years information were unfiltered and all mixed together. A lot of books' author were anonymous, these books contain large sections of dialogues written in daily language and slang (similar novels can still be found online nowadays). Although those books were indeed officially published, they weren't written in formal written language. After reading these books I have developed an ability, that I am more sensitive to daily language and slangs. I enjoy noting down ideas and moments in every day

life, I am also sensitive toward pronunciations. And my interest had promoted me to be casted as a broadcaster in teacher Deng's work, Elevator, during my second year in university.

Novels spark me with excitements. For example, Romance of the Three Kingdom, Top ten thousand sentences, and The Three Body Problem, such kind of long novels are so inviting that might not be easy for reader to escape the stories. Mega-worlds created by each story are incredibly rich in detail. I like visual art as another vehicle for communication, it is more direct when compare to novels, however it is never completely realistically presented but inspires different perspectives. The difference between these two kinds of creative production is huge. I try to think in visual ways when writing, and that includes when I work on some video or new media works, I start with the settings first, then I fill in the rest. However, for some visual installations I start with key words. Thus it is hard to explain their relationship. I would call my desultory essays with key words and stories "drawer tales", locked away and never shown. Surprisingly some inspirations can pop up randomly when I reread my writings after some time.

G : You shared your reading experience in young age, especially influences from novels, moreover, this transition from reader to writer is tremendous. When you start to work on stories, they became not only about daily life, but essential structure of a world, have you experienced such changes? Also, another novel's key feature being fiction, is it one way to record daily life for you?

C : Actually I yield toward an enthusiast and reader, I still recognize the distance between myself and professional writers from usage of language and techniques. I think the core feature is creating fantasy to a certain extent, and it applies to visual art as well. Visual art engages fantasy to manipulate representation, it is a common practice to create three-dimensional world from two-dimensional world. This applies to not only visual art or writing but both, creativity and imagination are thoughtfully linked together, the process is to build perspectives, or in other words, to build a believable arena. To elaborate, creativity yields toward one goal, that is to constitute "trust" from great detail and the creator's skill. Believe in the future is the foundation of science, common goal is the foundation of economy, and religion. Yet, personally I am highly alert on utilizing technique on creating fantasies. Reality and fantasy intertwine with each other, and nearly are indistinguishable. Much reality resting in our memories shall not be overly analyzed, and for history, readers trust The Romance of the

Three Kingdoms not The Records of Three Kingdoms; similarly for documentary films, they do not represent full reality, since all films are selectively edited by directors.

Therefore, I believe in hyperrealism that sits above reality and settings, it departs from reality and fantasy, it gains trust from housing highly strangeness and certainty. It requires practice to achieve hyperrealism, creators need to constantly re-challenge one's own work, let the creation be neither an object not a subject, but to infuse the creator with the creation. Letting one self be the creation and slowly become a "breathing practice" as one. Focusing on infusing with one's work one needs to be mindful and engage fully, such experience and process is precious, and can not be achieved by merely technique and imagination. Thus, the use of technique and imagination can sometimes yield to immature results. Not to overthrow technique and imagination completely, they are still important tools, we should learn as we go.



G : So are you still writing "drawer tales" ? Or are you more comfortable with visual recordings now?

C : I have stopped writing “drawer tales” to be honest, but sometimes I still note down sentences, feelings, and peculiar play of languages, pile them up in a Word file that act as my crate of inspiration, but I barely write any complete stories now. I have been trying to get back to my writing habit, but it will never return to the previous stage. In my impression, contemporary realism writings and visual art works share a close bond, because most of the contemporary realism stories ditch antecedents and consequences, characters live in strange worlds producing peculiar happenings that are somewhat stable, and I really enjoy that. For example, I am a fan of Kafka (1883-1924) and Albert Camus (1913-1960), their vision and ability of constructing absurd worlds and believes are incredible, their works often lack of suggestive directions, but then the stories always end in certainty. My current works exploring visual possibilities and new media are partially influenced by their novels, but I cannot reference to just one or two core ideas. I have this feeling of walking in mazes, branching roads appear frequently indicating numerals possibilities during my art practice. I am always making decisions, I cannot point to anything particular but everything is interweaved all together.

G : How would you define novel?



C : It is hard to define. I return to this question regularly, if it is possible for audience to construct a complete story from a pile of random pictures or a collection of random sentences under certain occasion? Will the product be a detective novel? This kind of uncertainly

sometimes appear more intriguing than completed chronicle tales. Or perhaps under uncertainly, are audiences shrouded by symbolic structure? Do novels constitute symbolic structures at all?

G : Let say if visual language can transform into stories, what do you think in your understanding, novels are more than pure literature, perhaps a medium? A vessel? A concept? Or even visual representation and body languages can also be considered as writing methods?

C : Yes, it is extremely perceptual for one to write down any feelings and emotions. Occasionally we feel that we are restricted inside certain medium or methods: drawing, photography, film, multi-screen image media, games, visual reality, computer coding system, performance art and more, they all share the same possibilities when connect with novels, they can be transformed into passages, or a strong sparkling plot. For addition, written stories surely have limits, and will learn and evolve from new materials. Authors like Hemingway and Gu Long absorb ideas from movies, which result in their stories are united by mental imagery. I believe that if Marcel Proust (1871-1922) is still with us, he must be incredibly interested in visual reality technology, because it can produce nearly wholesome sensory which let memory and experience exist together inside a single vessel. Synesthesia is more than just a classic writing technique, it is also one of the most democratic attitude for any medium in the future.

Some people understand from novels to VR technology as a logical chronicle advancement, single-channel visual presentation is only one of the milestone in such development. However, I hold a different point of view that synesthesia brings democracy and equality, films shall never replace the beauty of silence in photography; VR shall never succeed montage nor cinematic spotlights. After all above, I think novels are unique in story telling and evoking emotions, which led me to reconsider other mediums. Novel is one important toll, and it is equally important to all other mediums.

G : Thus, “Corner of the Park Prologue” is a detective work that utilizes various synesthesia methods in your own words. What is your inspiration of this work, starting from subject matter to the medium? It is an extension of some sort from your previous works?

C : I started to write down my dreams a few years ago, and I would look for old photos and ask my parents about their past stories. All the stories begin as aimless pieces, until the pile grew into something bigger and more organized that I can pull a few key subject matters from, something similar to how chapters work in novels. Novel is only one medium, just like what I mentioned, it extracts subjects from ordinary daily lives, and transform history into something abstract. The process of gathering images, memories and stories from different sources, they all work together as evidences which finally became my inspiration of creating detective scenes.

It is hard to define what is the connection or extension from my previous works, because the preparation process of this work lasted approximately four to five years. Compare to my other works, this one is a peculiar one. I let the work grew by itself without much intentional manipulation, I do not think I can make any conclusion on this question at this moment, perhaps there are some interplay between my old ones and this one.

G : Why did you choose to leave out VR technology in this work?

C : I am familiar with VR technology, but I do not think it matches my demand upon creating cinematic spotlight effect, I want to explore CG language in multi-channel media with perspectives, VR does support viewing freedom, but for me I think it's range excesses the necessity. In this work my intention is to each of the four screens act as one unique perspective, to create one dream like experience.

G : Which four perspectives are represented with the four screens?

C : They all emerge from one single memory, with CG language created world, each perspectives intertwine with each other, sometimes they merge together to become one, sometimes apart, sometimes they interact. For this exhibition, "Corner of the Park Prologue" is only the first chapter, I would say it is an introduction chapter. In this chapter, "I" am situated in the setting, however in the complete work, "I" am absent, all four screens are first person perspective. Thus it leaves an open question to the audience to think about who's eyes they are looking through. In later chapters perspective will continue to be the key element. In one of

the following chapters there will be one different person's perspective, something close to Rashomon by Akutagawa Ryunosuke (1892 - 1927), but I did not put it in this exhibition.

G : Did you use your personal dairy for the narration?

C : It is a true story, I read one of my old dairy and found out that I wrote about a person that I have no impression of now, but my password suggests something else, which led me started a conversation with myself. In my work, the dairy is a new creation written by "I" myself. The first person in my work is and is not myself, authors like author Mo Yan, he uses this technique often as well. "History" can be analyzed into two words "his" and "story", it is interesting to learn that first person perspective is challenging the reality continuously. And it is the main reason why I chose to film from first person perspective. It is not the original dairy, but it is a true story indeed.

G : Why did you choose to narrate it in such gloomy tone?

C : I can't agree to gloomy... it's more like when one is in between awake and asleep. I have observed a few people who would sleep walk before I recorded the narration. Or I would say its a whispering tone, like someone is quietly talking next to your ear.

G : Did you feel more flexible when creating such a dairy-like work?

C : We write down date and weather in dairies, the imagery we try to save in our memory are in pieces, they merely are full stories thus they lack of transition scenes. I think the flexibility applies this feature.

G : Would you say your work falls in the contemporary realism category?

C : Yes, I am influenced by contemporary realism works, it does show through my work sometimes, but not completely. I have read someone's sentence says Tagore and Alexei Nikolayevich Tolstoy can never fit in contemporary realism's narrow doorway, it's because they are giants, and I admire this saying greatly. It is merely impossible to define a work with only one category, just like people are complicated. Many big names in the art society create flat and boring works, and I think that's merely adaptation to the bigger structure. There are countless vivid lives in all careers, I admire those who engage fully into something they love and passionate about, thus I don't know how I will be defined.

G : Any authors and artists have greatly influenced you?

C : I have a long list of who I enjoy, directors such as Tarkovsky, Bella Tal, Roy Anderson from Switzerland, Leo Cards from France, they all share some common trails in their theatre experience and humour. Samuel Beckett's play, Kafka's novels. Artists include Roman Signer , Deng JianYi, Ed Atkins. Authors Liu ZhenYun and Liu CiXin, it is hard to say how I am influenced by their works, I am more moved and shocked by their daring visions. Also I look at a lot of internet bloggers and also my own students (sometimes I even call them teacher), I have learnt a lot from them, sometimes they show me completely different views of the world from a different generation. We all have limits and I enjoy absorbing from all different groups to enrich myself.



G : Do you agree to words can be visualized? I remember Robert Green said, words are words, visual is visual, he writes when words appear in his mind, he films movies when mental images appear to him. In his view, words and visual cannot transform into each other.

C : Yes I agree that words can be visualized. However, the power of words surely exceed what stories hold, and the exceeded range is something cannot be visualized. I pay attention to novels that evoke images and films that yield to literatures. I read Robert Green's thinking as he is pointing toward a traditional attitude of viewing realism, it is a thinking that extracted only the most limited value between word and imagery, it is not the best status.

G : What kind of balance or value are you trying to achieve between language and visual?

C : I think the most important aspect is to not identify the value, but to utilize the most fitted method to create greatest value possible. I feel more and more eager when trying to perfect a work, chance is crucial. Trying to gain full control of technology, full control of script and imagery can result in something very powerless, instead, embracing chances can lead to powerful results. Sometimes a special exhibition call or unusual gallery space can spark new and break through old routines. Similarly, one since image can explain enough without words when blogging. So it is hard to define if I leaning toward language or imagery, most of the time they are bonded together, and that has been my creative process.

G : One of your previous work about matching concepts with colours, would you say that is one dedicate to the relationship between words and imagery?

C : It was rather a random idea, I thought all numbers associate to unique colours when I was young, like number one is black, three is yellow and six is green. The relationship represented in that work is not necessarily connected to visual representation, but more of a personal experience. Specially when abstract concepts linked to irrational experiences, and that differ from people to people. Many history are linked with colours, for example colours that represent cold war's are red and blue. For my opinion, I think it is closely related to concepts and our recognition.

G : What is your opinion on our psychological experience is constantly being influenced by visual and language?

C : This is an interesting question. I remember that colour coding genders with blue representing male and pink representing female only began with a powdered milk advertisement in early 20 century. It was solely a marketing strategy for profit. In anthropology, a lot of standards and understandings that are widely accepted by the society now all started in hunter period's psychological experience. We now have artificial intelligence that can identify colours, but A.I. can only decode colours into coding and pixels, since machine lack of perceptual. However it is not impossible in the future quantum computation era A.I. might be able to match colours sentimentally.

G : So that bring us back to synesthesia, accumulate from experience and emotions.

C : Yes, indeed. It's just nowadays excitement and shocking effects are overwhelming popular, causing us to seek for thrilling emotions, subtle experiences are becoming even more precious.



G : Is “Ulysses” one chapter of Corner of the Park Prologue ?

C : Yes, it is one part of the Corner of the Park Prologue, but it was finished before it. Multi-channel that multiple perceptions, interacting, plots, background and start point are all different. Strangely during the production it slowly shifted and became something that can seamlessly merge into one. The two works share many common trails. These two works gave me a feeling similar to when two lost person in a maze bumped into each other, shared a few information about the maze and started they journeys again. After Corner of the Park Prologue as an introduction chapter, I will keep on experimenting new ways and new starting points to construct my “space-oriented novel”. I can’t say for sure now, but I see opportunities and chances that are coming my way.

G : Ulysses is completed, will you stop working on it?

C : Yes, at this moment I would like to keep it as it is. I would still keep it as an open file if in the future any new ideas or experience inspire me to work on it in different ways. My initial proposal is to film in infinite lens, stop only when I can’t do it anymore. It is something can only be achieved by CG technology not editing. Then this work would be a long movie that lasts few hours, few days or extremely long one does not see the end.





G : What has been your research direction in all these years?

C : I have a few key words that I frequently use or come back to: Meet, Horizon, Wait. A few years ago I have focused on “horizon”, the work that contains cigarette box is named Horizon. It is a rather extremely word, horizon can never be arrived physically, and it extent limitlessly. I also have a work named Meet.

Words have always been my inspiration and initial points, when I discover a word or a phase that is meaningful, my ideas come naturally.

G : I remember one of your work where you extracted popular internet language, made them into pre-school learning cards with pronunciations, are you still working on something like that?

C : I have finished this project, but I have faith in this one, perhaps I will start it again someday.

G : Will you be working on it as an art project or just gathering material?

C : I am just gathering useful material, I will probably let them be for a while. My collection is reaching its first ten year mark. My habit is to collect first and then work on them.

G : So can I say your method is to collect the pieces and merge them into something big and with structure?

C : Yes, that applies to almost all of my works. I always start with small pieces and let them grow freely. It is the same to visual presentation, I start with one idea or one single image and let it develop.

G : Did you ever work on any school projects? You are a professor now, does the institution require you to propose studio classes with specific themes?

C : It is indeed demanding to fit into the school system... proposals are always hard to work on when they require something formal, informative, meaningful and with clear goals. But when it comes to art, it is interesting to balance between fun and meaninglessness, and I am especially interested in things that are certainly meaninglessness. I think a lot of really awesome works are all indescribable in their own ways. Also, my habit is to build from scratches, inspirations and ideas are hard to fit into formal structures for me.

I think that is more personal, I will always seek out interesting things, but they might not be enough.

G : What is your opinion on so-called research-art-making ?

C : When it comes to art, it's core is one's artistic language, when one's artistic language is interesting enough the work shall be great no matter what subject matter it discusses. When one thousand painters painting cups, Morandi and Cezanne might just exceed all the others with subtleness and style. On the other hand, there are some cases where research-based art works need reality to promote the messages, leading artists are Gursky and Huang Yonglin, but that also means the key feature is still messages. Moreover, art works can not solely be research based at the end, since they all begin with limited structure within requirements in the

institution. Some half-annual exhibitions embraces great topics, and the works curated act as vehicles to carry out the topic, and I can not fully agree to this mode of curation, the works sometimes can even be understood as footnote of the curator's proposal.

