

Hans-Ulrich Obrist, interviewer
Julia Peyton-Jones, interviewer
Yan Lei, interviewee
Philip Tinari, onsite translator

Hans-Ulrich Obrist (HUO): Are all these new works?

Yan Lei (YL): This one is new [points to painting]. The others are all old.

HUO: I was wondering about the different aspects of your work. On the one hand, there are the works we saw in Guangzhou like the painted series entitled “Targets” and then there are the more photographic paintings. What is the relationship between those two? Is it different series, is it the same research?

YL: It’s all about the possibilities of the painting system. I have a unified palette that I use in all my works that is very numerical. The color wheel paintings belong to an extended series. The color in the middle ramifies out according to a numerical algorithm and then the next color wheel painting begins with the last color that this has arrived at.

HUO: So it’s a system?

YL: Yes, it’s very systematic.

HUO: There is a system of the photographic paintings, and of the target paintings. Are there other systems?

YL: The systematic element of the color paintings is about the palette itself. It’s a recursion, whereas with the photographic works, there is a systematic element that has to do with the actual digital processing, because essentially they are all digital images that are turned into what you see there, the raw state of the “paint by numbers” canvas. Then they are painted by unskilled labor. I guess the other system that I want to mention is that the concepts of the imagery all come from the art system itself. For example, this the third partner from BAO (Philip Tinari’s company). She is an architect, lying outside Ai Weiwei’s studio [referring to the same painting]; this is the entrance to the Nanjing Museum of Art; that’s the gate to the Hangzhou Academy, where I studied; this is from New York, from the Armory Show; and that’s the USS Intrepid on the Hudson [River].

Julia Peyton-Jones (JPJ): Behind there, on the right hand side, there is an image, which looks like a Buddha.

YL: Yes, those were from a series of triptychs, where in the middle you had a color wheel, on the left, a representation of an actual bottle of paint, a numbered bottle of paint that was used in the fabrication, and on the right a Buddha or some other kind of classical Chinese image.

HUO: Can you tell us about the unskilled labor dimension? I'm very interested in that because you also mentioned it yesterday. How does this function? Do you hire people from the street, or...?

YL: I feel that I can't paint anymore. I've felt this way for some time. It is as though my skills are no longer "pure."

HUO: You don't paint anymore?

YL: Yes. So it's better to have someone else, someone who has a more innocent attitude towards putting the brush to canvas. It's like a double process: if you put the brush stroke on the canvas, you contaminate the canvas, but the process also taints yourself. So it's an escape from that.

JPJ: I'm interested in the way you build up the face, build up the contours of the face. Because, for example, we are working with Thomas Demand at the moment, who is making an enormous Grotto out of cardboard paper. He's created a whole computer system that slices the contours, layer by layer by layer, and this painting has something of the same feel to it in the sense of density of the image.

YL: It comes from my early art education, studying art as a kid and going about representation systematically. It is a drawing-based structure, actually.

JPJ: Can you elaborate on this drawing-based structure?

YL: For example, playing with connections between light and dark, and black and white. A campy version of this basic principle can be found in my work.

JPJ: So like the idea of "painting by numbers."

YL: Yes.

HUO: What about the image fundus? Because obviously, these are found images and then they are transferred onto those [canvases]. You said there are images from the Chinese art world and some from the international art world. I'm wondering what kind of image fundus there are. Do you have, like Gerhard Richter, an atlas of images you use?

YL: I don't really know about Richter, but the fundus is constantly in flux. I'm not going to spend my life painting donkeys or deer.

HUO: Do you take your own photographs? Is it based on your own photographs?

YL: I have a series that is all based on photographs from my own perspective, photos I took myself. The *Climbing Space* series consists of photos I took from airplanes landing in different airports.

HUO: So that's like an exhibition in itself. Have you done an exhibition of those?

YL: No, the first series I really tackled was *Superlights*.

HUO: Can you explain *Superlights*?

YL: It is about a lighter, reduced understanding of art – the same kind of relation a light cigarette has to a heavier cigarette, coming out of a moment in my career when I had sort of come to terms with the dismissal or embrace of art. It's about the balance I kind of struck with my own practice and to use the style of one's own life to go about creating art based on that life.

HUO: What about the combination? Because here we have the two paintings combined and here we have the triptychs. Very often your paintings don't go alone, they go in sort of sequential, cinematic sequences. Can you talk a little bit about this? How do you combine the paintings? It is associative, or is there a system [here] too?

YL: Yes, there is a system. There's always a system. It's like an assembly line because the next painting will be in this same color, and then the painting on this side would have its right side in the yellow palette. It's sort of an infinite line. The production of the works is almost automatic in this way.

HUO: An automatism?

YL: Yes, exactly.

HUO: So it's basically a system that produces work in an automatic way, but that also means a great quantity, so I was wondering how many paintings you have made. Thousands? Hundreds? Is it a fast process or a slow process?

YL: My ideal is one a day. It's fast enough. I have a new method whereby I can complete entire paintings via e-mail. I can take a picture and e-mail it to the initial studio, which is out in Langfang, a suburb of Beijing, and then the initial numbered canvas will be produced and be transported here for fabrication. I don't even have to be near the process.

HUO: So it's sort of a new form of outsourced factory.

YL: Essentially.

HUO: If the assistants are not here, they are there [Langfang]?

YL: Painting happens there as well as here. The initial painting of the canvases happens there, and then the more detailed painting takes place here.

HUO: What about these light cones, these more radiant images? Is this another series, or another system?

YL: Yes. It is the same kind of process where you start with one color and come around, then the color you get at the bottom right begins the next painting with the dot and then goes around. It's all numerically governed by the out-of-the-box kind of acrylic color numbers from the palette.

JPJ: Is this a good example of how you build up a painting?

YL: Yes.

HUO: So that's how it usually works?

YL: Yes, all the concrete images are produced in this manner.

HUO: Do you ever make drawings?

YL: No.

HUO: Who are your heroes? The usual question about the heroes [laughter].

YL: My heroes? Jeff Koons.

HUO: Why?

YL: He's the most successful. Everything he does has many reasons behind it, and you know, having read interviews with him, I feel he is the only artist who can really give a rationale for why he is doing what he is doing and sound smart about it.

HUO: Warhol?

YL: Yes, of course.

HUO: Chinese heroes?

YL: Qi Baishi, an early Twentieth Century painter, considered the first populist painter.

HUO: Do you do anything else besides painting, perhaps three-dimensional work like sculpture or installation or photography?

YL: You need opportunities to do other things.

Philip Tinari (PT): There is a whole strand of his work of conceptual projects that don't take on any visual form, like in a 1997 project he and Hong Hao did that involved fake invitations to *Documenta* that they circulated around.

HUO: Can you tell me more about this? This is a very famous project.

YL: It's about developing a direct method of not being subtle about the issues you are trying to address when making works. That was a way of really saying something about the situation, the marginal position of Chinese artists at the time, essentially.

HUO: Do you have any unrealized projects, projects too direct or too big to be realized?

YL: There were a few occasions when I started a project but offended enough people to get kicked out of the exhibition.

HUO: Can you give some examples?

YL: Once I was in a group exhibition in Hong Kong. I swept some garbage in a pile and said, "This is my work, do not touch it." The next day when I came back to put up a tag for the piece, it had been removed. So then I was not in the exhibition.

HUO: Are there any other works we should see?

PT: I think you should see this piece over here.

HUO: This one?

PT: Yes, this is very interesting. He doesn't work in photography, but this is the woman who keeps the keys and sort of manages the guesthouse at Villa Arson. She was a model for many years. The sentence reads: "I choose this place, at this time, to leave my heart forever." These words actually appear at a place inside the Villa Arson complex and were sort of cast by goldsmiths. I think it was an old church space or something similar, so these words appear in that context. He puts them here and applies it to this woman who has basically spent her life in the art system but in a very marginal position.

HUO: Yes. She's seen it all, I suppose. She is a testimony.

JPJ: Is she of Chinese origin?

YL: No. I think she is very lonely, and has worked there her whole life. The books behind her are produced by the residents. The keys are for the rooms.

HUO: I stayed there once too, in the early nineties. We all stayed there. Who in Beijing are the artists you liaise with? I mean, it's obviously not like in the 1980's or 1990's because in the 1980's you had avant-garde as a group, and then you had the Elephant Group in Guangzhou in the 1990's. Now, one feels it's more individualistic, yet I'm interested in what kind of liaisons you have with other artists.

YL: I don't really do group projects, but I've collaborated with Hong Hao on a few projects, like the 1997 *Documenta* project. We also have a project up now in the Taikang Insurance Space that is sort of about insurance.

HUO: Can you tell me about this insurance project?

YL: One of the major insurance companies in China has a space on the top floor of this building, sort of a decorative thing, and the curator had this plan to bring in two artists and give them 50,000 yuan to have them do a work. Hong Hao and I wanted to do this project. So first, we took the 50,000 and used it to buy insurance for ourselves. Then, they asked what credentials we had for purchasing insurance. We said that we would make a painting and replicated a Van Gogh piece but put ourselves into it, with bandaged ears. We are insured for 5,000,000 RMB, against unexpected incidents and hospital stays in case art makes us crazy. We found an artist to copy a famous Van Gogh painting of a patient's ward, a hospital. The exhibition ended up as a massive canvas completely framed, one side was the Van Gogh image and the other side was blank. We stapled plastic sleeves containing the actual insurance documents in them onto the blank side.

HUO: Maybe my last question will be in relation to that. Have you ever worked with moving images, with video?

YL: I did a few little video projects in the early 1990's.

PT: I think there's a real resistance to this whole sort of "Chinese are photo and video" kind of discourse, of using this new media to do things that he is just very allergic to in a way. It is as if painting becomes the simplest way, and then not painting becomes the simplest way of painting. So there is this very psychological element to the whole practice.

HUO: Great. Thank you very much.

Proof Reader: Edward Sanderson