

rhetorical, encompassed on all sides by the empire of language,² because the action of interpretation requires engagement with this empire. While distinguishing differences between literature and painting is more easily done, distinguishing their shared qualities brings forth the idea that every part of the two is constructed.³ Painter Li Yan implores his viewer to look at images of conflict from the media and recognize not only their constructed nature, but also the construction of urban space; Li forces the viewer to re-interpret images of the *everyday disturbing* through transformed mediums and implications of loss.

The media, for all its shortcomings, has done away with the tension implicit in Wolf's essay: the existence of a feeling that humans "enjoy a direct and intuitive relationship with the visual arts"⁴ while literature, or language is more easily categorized as having the labor of a "task to perform, some social work to achieve."⁵ While higher forms of art in the realm of painting and literature produce this tension, there is a chemistry or harmony in the relationship between the words of a news report and the images they accompany. The modern media is as easy to digest in form as fruit and granola, but in content, the media is often unsettling, naturally, as the events of history are disturbing. This harmony produces in its readers a laziness that renders them partly incapable of individual interpretation. Li Yan's paintings require the viewers, the same group as the readers, to participate more actively in the urban events of today.

The media also informs and frames our viewing of urban spaces. Whether an earthquake and its aftershocks are destroying an Italian city, or the American Army is

² Wolf, 184

³ Wolf, 192

⁴ Wolf, 188

⁵ Wolf, 182

invading an Iraqi town, the media is the one employed with the task of, for lack of a better word, mediating between the event in these urban spaces and the rest of the world. In the same way that Wu Hung in *Remaking Beijing* speaks of mass movements of people defining the space of Tiananmen Square, the people who instigate, engage in, or fall victim to events represented in the media help define the space of the city in which the event takes place. We, as readers and outsiders, can only experience these hypothetical events through the media. For those not in Tiananmen Square during the 1989 uprising, the media was the informer of all things dealing with that urban space, which was being re-shaped at the very time of that movement. Every media picture re-shapes the time and space it represents towards a greater understanding of our current condition. Li's task is to remake these pictures in order to evoke reinterpretation.

In his *Snippets* series, Li Yan paints images that originally appear in the media. His works are collections of small acrylic paintings (5 x 7 inches) normally grouped around one large painting (48 x 36 inches). In *Snippets No. 5*, it would seem Li is telling the story of the protests that occurred in Lhasa, Tibet in the months leading up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Among the small images represented, there are the Dalai Lama adjusting his glasses at a press conference, protesters carrying the flag of Tibet, an Olympic torch-run at a moment of the passing of the flame, a car flipped over on its side while something burns in the background, a wanted man, a car aflame, the Bank of China, a bus-stop, students in a classroom, a donkey wandering the suburbs, bloody shoes under the bed of their injured owner, and coffins awaiting transport at a hospital door. The large painting depicts a man on a stretcher, his head bandaged, bloody all over. It is an image everyone has seen: man wounded during conflict. The paintings are

immediately recognizable as images from the media, which immediately informs the viewer that they are lacking one thing: captions, or words.

There are three images that may not be from the media, but at the same time, they very well may be. All three happen to be images of text or graph. One is a map that to a non-Chinese-speaking person is illegible. I have been informed, however, that the map portrays a route that begins in Lhasa, Tibet, and travels in the direction of Beijing, China. There are twenty-two stops on the map, and there are twenty-two paintings in the work. This implies that each painting in the series takes place in some symbolic sense on the road to the Beijing Olympics. The other two works are of a postcard written in a Slavic language, addressed to a recipient in Czechoslovakia, and a scratching of Chinese characters onto a brown wood-like surface. The three images not immediately recognizable as images from the media are nevertheless images of non-art objects (map, postcard, sign) that are lacking context, much like the newspaper pictures are lacking language.

The paintings are configured in a specific way, all separated “randomly,” at least they are meant to look disordered. Because most of them are small, it is impossible to see the details of the piece all at once. The viewer is led to *read* the piece, as well as she can, painting-by-painting, one at a time. But even then, the amount of information spanning the gallery wall makes the viewing hard to remember, piece together, or digest. In short, the work is hard to read. This specific layout contributes to sense of disconnect. As stated above, the images are recognizable as being from the media, but they are missing their captions; therefore they are disconnected twice of their language and their formation. Where images like these would normally be efficiently organized by the

layout editor and then expounded upon by journalists, here they exist disconnected completely from their origins. What the artist does next is disconnect the representations from their medium.

Li first stripped the images of their captions, then deliberately disorganized them, and then transformed them into paintings, a medium which has no connotations of aging or authenticity. A picture ages in the sense that once a picture is taken, the scene it portrays recedes further into the past with every passing day. In a painting, there is no inherent illusion implying reality to the medium, therefore it adheres to no aging process. A picture is also inherently authentic because of the medium: it captures whatever is in front of it in real life. A painting is an original creation of the artist; therefore the medium intrinsically transcends the realm of authenticity (meaning reality). To take what is perhaps the most real, a picture in a media story, and re-present it as a painting is to strip the event of its place in time or space. For a painting need not be connected to a real event or even a reality at all.

This negation of time and space places the urban with which Li is dealing on a psychological level, existent only in its constructed representation, whether it is image or text. Li returns the media photographs to the purest form of painting, but leaves the scars of low-resolution media images stylistically, thereby implicating a loss of text. This style is cubist in nature, but current in its similarity to blurry pictures on a screen: blocks of color fit together like puzzle pieces creating a representation. This return to a purist art form (painting), coupled with the implication that there is something missing (language), forces the viewer to contemplate its construction from its origins to its current state.

Also, the content/subject of the pictures lead to a deeper essential meaning of the work in relation to the universal urban, not only in China.

The urban in these paintings is represented as a stage upon which conflict creates news, which we then experience through the media. Though the map tells us the time and place we are viewing is specific and unique, the medium and the actions taken by the artist imply a meaning outside of time and space. The large painting in the piece can explain this lack of necessity for a definite time and space. The young man is laid out on a stretcher, seemingly blown to bits. There is blood in all the right places, and a bandage over his head. The picture is situated among others that implicate specific time and places, but it is by far larger than all the others and therefore the natural focal point of the group of paintings. The picture is of *wounded man*, and anyone who has engaged with a media outlet in the past ten years has already seen it. The picture, though quite disturbing and painful, is as generic in this day and age as pictures of the Madonna and Child were during the Middle Ages.

There are other paintings in the series that more obviously lack a necessity for time and space: the bus stop, the bloody shoes, the classroom, or the car on fire. However, none of the paintings need connect to the story of the protests in Lhasa. If a child were to look at the paintings in *Snippets No. 5*, she would not recognize the man at the press conference as the Dalai Lama. If she were young enough, she might not know that the Olympics have happened anywhere but Beijing; therefore the picture of the two people passing the flame is just something that happens on television sometimes. The wanted man's mug shot would look the same to her as every other wanted man on the nightly news in America. The flag would be unrecognizable to her as Tibetan, but she

would understand that the people are protesting. And most importantly, the images of blood and coffins would look as horrific as any other to her; their place in time and space would not matter, do not matter.

Though Wolf speaks of this type of innocent eye as non-existent, I happen to disagree when attempting to reach some essential meaning. Any interpretation of a work of art is no doubt informed by the historian's culture and experience, but there is no point in neglecting to recognize human nature, in the animal sense, plays a role in the most instinctual ways. I do agree, however, that image and text are inseparably linked in the common sphere of representation; therefore, we should try to interpret this work as human animals viewing representations of life.

Li's stylistic choice to portray the images in their original manner, stark and blurry, informs the viewer the paintings are images once seen in the media. The viewer then realizes the images were once accompanied by words that told the story of an event. However, Li's choice to paint these images rather than display them in their original form destroys the harmony image and text enjoy in the media. The act of painting brings back the tension between language and text explored in Wolf's essay. The viewer is aware the images were once explained in the media, but must now confront them without words, using their own language and interpretive skills to re-explain them. Wolf uses the analogy of King Midas to explain this instinctual facet of human nature: like everything the King touches turns to gold, everything "we touch turns into *language*,"⁶ or at least should if we are not lazy. Li's work plays with this action, transporting images already once explained for the reader/viewer in an easily digestible way to a realm more intensely

⁶ Wolf, 191

reliant on individual interpretation. He has created ekphrastic conflict where there was none; he is forcing the viewer to take her time in digesting the everyday representations of the media, forcing the closeted ekphrastic to come out. Li Yan's urban stage is making a statement about reinterpretation of representations of the quotidian, using the actual events that took place on the road to Beijing simply as a basis.