

Preferencing in Li Yan's Snippets No. 5

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One of twenty-two paintings in the "field" of Snippet No 5.

Art history is a discipline of preferencing. One artist is help up as a beacon of light on a foggy night while others are never remembered or even discovered. What is it that makes art worthy of study? Is it the historical and social import of the object? If it were, what would this mean for the contemporary art? The market, the gallery owners, would no doubt be involved in the preferencing of artists through endorsement and promotion. But what makes the art world turn its massive head toward anyone artist in particular? These issues of preferencing in art is an attempt to work out some of Moxley's arguments as they may apply to the practice of art writing about contemporary works. His argumentation regarding history is concise but his position on the discussion of Contemporary art where history is a matter of years, months, or even days for art historian seems to complicate Moxey's issues with the practice

of art writing.

Preferencing is a theme in the work of Chinese artist Li Yan. His acrylic works are based on images he found in newspapers, the Internet, and television. He selects themes of great controversy where the images available to the public are highly suspicious and never tell the entire story. His work Snippets No. 5 depicts the Tibetan riots in response to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Even American and European sources report that the Tibetans were the instigators and killed many innocent people. They all mention that Tibet and China quote different fatality figures, but there is little investigative journalism exploring the realities of these events. It is said that after the riots there was a police crackdown where about 200 Tibetans were killed. The preferencing in the discursive mega-structure of the media is brought to life by fragmented images, some quotidian and others down right brutal.

The difficulty (even impossibility) of piecing together the events leading up to and following these still images is questioned by the presentation of these works. Yan insists on exact placement of these works in a "field" like pattern where there are no obvious connections between near by paintings. Rather it is seen as a whole it is a scrap book or map of people and events. These events are all connected. Piecing together meaning is something of a test of ones' knowledge of world events. I was previously unaware of these specific protests, though I knew they must have occurred due to constant human rights abuses in China. There is an insider/outsider dimension to this work with which the artist plays. This tension of the local and universal is explored through images of pain that cross cultural boundaries paired with Chinese script illegible to most audiences. Moxey would be suspect of the historical weight implicit in Snippets and of our resulting interest in the piece. A work that simultaneously connotes

the oppressed, the oppressors and the means of oppression is a loaded gun that the art historian cannot wait but to fire wildly into the air. Using media images as a direct source of artistic input feels like the admission of powerlessness. The real stories go untold, especially in China where information has been heavily censored. During my own attempts to find the source images for these works, I found many images of police carrying people off and a few of burning cars. The fires seem to tell the story of chaos while the soldiers beget a discourse of restored order and control—Yan tells the story of the former.

Holly argues that, “The act of recognition that painting galvanizes is a production, rather than a perception of meaning”, applies to Yan's medium and style. The recreation of photography into painting produces meaning. Holly goes into a long analysis of the canon in terms of Albertian criteria for art appreciation being applied to other periods of art. The use of acrylic paint in a Chinese work, presented to American is an interesting position for a contemporary Chinese artist. Western style painting did not begin in China until the last century. Socialist realist painting was very popular in the cultural revolution. As evidenced by the China Urban exhibit, contemporary Chinese artists are typically less interested in oil or acrylic painting as they are in video or performance. The realism of the Bank of China paintings and the impressionistic obscurity of the wounded bodies juxtaposes to create meaning. The mundane, or seemingly mundane buildings of the bus depot and bank are in focus/ To contrast this stark photographic like quality the wounded bodies are painted with big swatches of color that almost erase the form of the body. The boy in the hospital bed exemplifies these stylistics. His body is left almost indiscernible due to heavy handed brush work while his bed is articulated clearly. He is set off from the sterile and bureaucratic hospital bed and his obscuring lends to the sense of his pain and status as a threat to the state. Holly would argue that my

focus on brushwork is a result of the work itself. Perhaps lost in the sea of images I must revert to the use of art historical power tools of visual analysis to affix meaning to this fragmentation. Each painting is a work of art, but Yan chose to keep them as a unit, working is symbiosis.

Holly is interested in art trying to forcibly weld image to text. She writes that this should be an artistic endeavor since it is already a cognitive leap that such a study should be poignant. These images were, literally, once tied to language and were used for the purpose of giving words evidence to back it up. The return to a textual understanding of these images is not and forever changed since these are no longer photographs with places and dates connected to each. This basis in text led me to investigate the source images for these paintings and I found one that was almost exactly the same—yet it is empty and the story gives it no greater meaning (Fig. 1)



Associated Press; May 14th, 2008. Lhasa, Tibet
http://assets.nydailynews.com/img/2008/03/15/alg_tibet_riot.jpg