

Lindsey Putnam
Recent Writing in Art
20.april.2009
assignment #3

Li Yan's Snippets and Alexander Nemerov

The artist Li Yan has found a way to interact with, represent, and shape urban life through a reduction into individual components of the issues acted out within this metropolitan space. These then interact in ways that reinforce established thoughts on the issue as well as creating new methods of thinking about such. The work *Snippets no. 5*, exhibited in the CHINA URBAN show at the Douglas Cooley Gallery reveals this method in Li Yan's depiction of a combination of quotidian moments surrounding the Olympic games, combined with images of violence and cruelty in relation to the Tibetan protests, as well as everyday news events. These multi-canvas paintings concentrate on the use of fresh and often disturbing photojournalistic imagery in a way that tells a story of the "pain and pageantry of contemporary life as seen through the news media,". An understanding of this work and the way that Li Yan confronts the issues of urban life can be discussed in much the same way as Alexander Nemerov grapples with N. C. Wyeth's work *Wreck of the 'Covenant'*. Nemerov's insistence on viewing the work from its "deepest historical sense", meaning "perceiving the painting in terms of the issues most driving its production", as well as "attending to the picture's operations of metaphor--its insistence on seeing one thing in terms of another, its wish that the properties of disparate entities coexist, superimposed in pleasurable tension, as the same motif," both function as critical ways of understanding its point.

Nemerov's discussion of the unintentionality within a work can be used in dialogue with Li Yan's work because of its ambiguous nature. The work *Snippets no. 5* is ambiguous in the way it juxtaposes unrelated and narrative-less moments with each other. This offers a wide range of ways in which to read the

work besides the superficial display of violence and how it is expressed through the media. Because of this, Nemerov's emphasis on reading images in relation to others is evident. The same way Nemerov reads N.C. Wyeth's work as emanating from a historical moment (in *Wreck of the 'Covenant'* this is the threat of technical advances on reading) one can read Li Yan's work as produced in response to urbanization and modernization. It is Li Yan's dismissal of blatant narrative and subject and the tensions created by these disjunctive images that creates a need to interact with the environment; urban life.

The format of the works (the isolation of the individual images) controls the way that the overall concept is read. This control, however, can only go so far. The violence of seemingly random events in relation to the instances of cruelty associated with the Tibetan protests and the iconic images of the Olympic games taken from the media, combine with simple fragments of ordinary life and demand a particular reading when displayed in relation to each other on the wall. The installation creates a desire to read each moment individually, while at the same time forces the viewer to find a connection among them all. This emphasizes a need to read the work in a way that goes beyond its superficial meaning and delves into the metaphors created within these tensions. Seemingly incongruous facets of contemporary reality are exaggerated and amplified by the grouping of the paintings. The tensions between the disparate entities create a need to see one thing in terms of another, a smashed car covered in blood in terms of the Olympic torch relay.

Within Li Yan's work there is a noticeable reconfiguration of the body rendered, not only through the placement of the many canvases depicting the body, but also through the abstraction of different body parts. An example of this can be seen in the painting that depicts the car door covered in blood. The

injured human body has been reduced to nothing more than the blood that remains, reconfiguring the body as only evidence of an event.

The body also becomes reconfigured through the size of the images. One image of the body being miniscule while another many times the size of the surrounding canvases. This serves, whether done consciously or not, as a metaphor for urban space and the reconfiguration of such as a result of urbanization. In the same way that a part of the body becomes indicative of the whole, fragmenting and confusing the physical, the city through rapid expansion becomes disjointed and moments indicate entire situations. This reflects Nemerov's view that tensions within a work, in this case, the unrealistic (for lack of a better word) sizing and deconstruction of the human body create metaphors of which it is itself unaware of and must be extrapolated by the viewer.

Within this observation comes the discussion of the metaphor's agency within a work and how it works to express the artist's intentions, as well as their "unintentions" influenced by historical context. This work appears to be subconsciously illustrating the turmoil of the artist in relation to their position in history. As opposed to what could be considered a well-thought out display of basic aspects of the city, the work takes on a deeper significance. The organization of the works in space and the abstracted moments, point to an inability of Li Yan to orient herself within the modern urban environment. The subject points to a discussion of the media and its transience while the medium indicates the personal translation of this issue in the way that it unintentionally personalizes it.

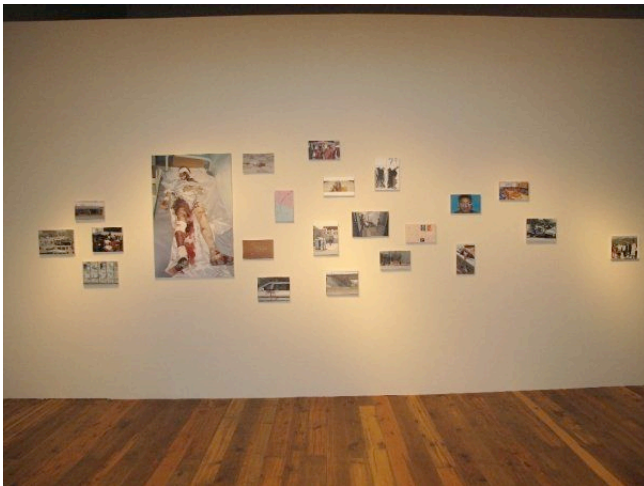
Nemerov states that what is most important in reading a work of art is to look at its historical context which is what most drives its production. In doing this, one can extrapolate moments that may be invisible to the artist,

because of its proximity. In tuning oneself into the unconscious narrative created with the work through metaphors (placed intentionally or unconsciously) the viewer gains a far greater understanding of the moments in which these images were created. Li Yan's work is a prime example of an artist's creation which can be viewed as such in the way that the juxtaposition of violence and everyday banal moments can appear ambiguous in its meaning. The excess of disparate entities and the creation of tensions generate conflicts, the meanings of which must be pulled from the work by the viewer. As Nemerov suggests, this gives the viewer a moment in which to see one thing in terms of another forcing the viewer to have one's own dialogue with the work and discover new meanings. The way that contemporaneous but also disjointed moments (a car accident placed nearby a portrait of a monk) are rearranged in a way that creates continuities and connections literally paints a picture of present day situations which can be seen as a comment on journalistic moments in specific, or issues of the disjunctive banality of present day violence in general. The entire situation lacks a single subject making it difficult to pull a direct narrative.

What is interesting about this work is the way that discrete symbols of horror and violence are consolidated into specific, uncontextualized images lacking any obvious narrative. Certain information is obscured and somehow in this obscurity the work can become simply an aesthetic image as opposed to a direct indication of moments, scenarios and political issues. The hidden individual in tension with the blatant showing of the aggression towards it reflects a violence of unease and a need to orient oneself within a transient environment. Whether intentional or not, the discussion of Tibet as a site of protest and conflict juxtaposed with the Olympic games and everyday media images, reminds the viewer, not only of these conflicts which fueled the

production of these images, but through this, the artist's place within this discussion, something that they may not have necessarily been trying to evoke. Nemerov would find Li Yan's work as an example of a work that unintentionally expressed far more meaning than one would find on first glance. The irregularity of the subjects, chosen for their historical context, indicates a confusion and need for orientation of the artist. While succeeding in expressing thoughts on violence in the media by pulling instances from such, Li Yan is also succeeding in creating a dialogue of the artist's personal situation within this historical context of urban life as exhibited through a lack of individual and clear narrative.

Li Yan's *Snippets No. 5*, acrylic on canvas (22 panels), 2008





Snippets No. 5 (detail)



Snippets No. 5 (detail)