

唐永祥 Tang Yongxiang

精选文章 *Selected Articles*

Of Painting: The Moment of Ambience Act

One Among All Allegories of Painting in the Society of Control

Text by Wang Yamin

As a painter, Tang Yongxiang adheres to the process of "overpainting" his own works: each day, he enters his studio and, through a set of prescribed repertoire of brushwork gestures and coloring decisions, returns to canvases that were "paused" in their making from the previous workday. This cycle repeats daily, accumulating across years, with the painter's set of seemingly calculable and near-uncompromising operational actions: the extraction of images from "nearby" his life, the direct use of raw pigments, the application of uniform cross-hatched brushstrokes, and so on. Eventually a painting is "over," permanently "paused," and released from his studio into the broader moments of display, viewing, and critique.

This pause, whether manifesting as daily routine or a quasi-permanent indication of a painting's completion, seems to exist in a state of self-perpetuated release, intrinsic to painting itself and autonomous from the painter's control. A dozen or so paintings remain suspended here at Tank. They continue to silently vary and allure viewers and critics during the course of this two-month exhibition, unfolding an ambient effect moment of Tang Yongxiang's paintings.

A "formatted overpainting" before the painting-operator left is a rhetoric derive from the language of computer operation, referring to the in-game action of a video game player. Once the operator steps away, however, the video game machine continues to execute and perform its own narrative movements, unfolding a moment of ambient motion intrinsic to the computer itself.

Computer acts as an intermediary for the current society of control because it does not re/presents or simulates the world, but directly calculates and executes one. Unlike movies and paintings which are representations of society through images, computer is about action and execution—a form of practice rather than an ontological presence. In this sense, to articulate Tang Yongxiang's painting and operations through the multiple operational acts between the computer game player and the machine—within and beyond the game's narrative—is itself an allegorical gesture that speaks to the calculative and executive logic of today's society of control.

Viewing from the broader, systematic perspective of the art-operator and the

institutional "machine," the relationship of painting and its corresponding actions is that of control and counter-control, the computable and the uncomputable, execution and counter-gaming with the painting-operator. That is, the "painting-operator" and the "painting-machine" constituted an allegorical narrative within and beyond painting-diegetic. When Tang Yongxiang pressed "pause" upon entering Beijing's contemporary Chinese painting scene in 2007, suspending his own specific game of realist painting for several years, it represents the operator's act-moment of the player's subjectively initiated algorithm, one that manifests the act-moment of artistic hacking and critique.

The critical narrative of Tang Yongxiang's paintings is an ambivalent expression of something "meaningless," "inactive," and "resists to give in to total nihilism." It insinuates a reality that can now be described as the affective tribulation of being an ordinary constituent of the society of control. Can we still reimagine and bring forth a collective utopia in the age of control? Does Tang Yongxiang's painting operate as "painting as ontology"—re/presenting or simulating a world, or as "painting as ethics," an act parallel to the operative logic of the contemporary society of control?

How might the painting-operator take actions standing beside the painting—this "painting as allegorical machine" in the society of control—just as any actant within the actant-network society stands beside the allegorical

machine of their own social assembly-line station? Similar to Tang Yongxiang's act of "pausing," each of us may need to perform an operation of forsaking our ready-to-hand acts. This pausing is not a once-and-for-all solution, but must be revisited perpetually.

Interview with Tang Yongxiang

T: Tang Yongxiang

RD: Research Department, Magician Space

RD: We seem to be able to observe a special logic in your works, which grants your work (and you) a unique openness. Where does this quality come from?

T: I didn't suddenly realize the logic of my paintings. I have been thinking about what a painting is and whether it requires the use of representative images for a long time. For me, the indexicality of the image will provide the viewer with a distinct perspective. The content of the (represented) image is already perfect; it's no longer necessary for it to become a painting.g.

The photos I choose are all casually shot with my mobile phone in daily life, they don't have much indexicality and often present unexpected compositions or capture unanticipated moments. I use these photos as an excuse to paint. And my job is to seize these ungraspable images and reconsider them in my mind.

RD: As such, your work may be the moment when you wonder whether an image can initiate (and lead to) a painting, but what do you think about the relationship between image and painting, and how do you work specifically?

T: I have always been in the process of mutual adaptation with images. The information that an image brings me may point to a fixed way of thinking. During this process, I try to change parts of the image and cover the unsuitable parts with paint. But I do not forcibly change the image, since departing the image completely is another matter. That is re-creation. My

painting is a procedure of constant questioning and finding answers by myself. For example, when I try to replace the colors in a work, these colors present new relationships, and I will be able to start new experiments. Human minds are not straightforward, sometimes I let my mind wonder, incorporating the influence of the outside world on me. Otherwise, all paintings will end up in a similar state.

When I work, I keep imagining. Sometimes the consideration of color comes from Minimalism, sometimes I treat objects as (pieces in) a collage or installation. I contemplate the arrangement of forms on a canvas. In this process I look for the contingency of the picture, like in the work I created for Art Basel Hong Kong 2022. The original picture has many diagonal lines. I accidentally found a few points on one diagonal line, and finally followed this relationship and created the triangular structure of the painting.

RD: Accidents, or more specifically contingency, is an interesting concept. It seems to be the source of the possibility of your photos to become paintings. In particular, your paintings are not completely separated from the original photo. Thus, the accidents that lie in your photos gradually emerge as you work. Is there a meaning of time here?

T: My repeated experiments are essentially waiting for accidents or the contingency. It is not my aim to cover repeatedly, but the artist cannot simply wait. Coloring is progressing while waiting; it is the result of waiting for accidents and also the remnant of the process of waiting. When I keep working, I collide with possibilities in time. (If) I don't capture the possibility of this moment, it might disappear and become something else. Therefore, from another point of view, possibilities are just (a form of) time, and the traces of time are all in my paintings. Conversely, if the purpose of painting is to complete an image, the image will attract all attention.

RD: Do you mean that your paintings have two layers—the surface and the implied?

T: How does a painter understand art? If only as a painting, just look at the surface. (But) for me, I don't paint for the sake of painting. It is a period of time, containing all the ideas in the process. The things formed within the frame during this period of time ended up being covered by white or another color. However, I believe that painting one color for ten times versus once are different. It's like floating up from the bottom of a pound to the surface. The surface of the water has the simplest line and the lightest color, but (underneath it) there are some lines and forms that cannot be obscured. As a painting, the surface embodies the aesthetic considerations, but the bottom is something that belongs to me, like the scent and temperature of the skin, although we all exist on the surface layer in the end.

RD: What do you think of these paintings? You interact with images all the time; can we regard the parts of your paintings that are not about the surface layer as a part of your life?

T: My relationship with images and the state of my process of painting as understood with the metaphor of the skin will be blended together. These are what I have seen and am experiencing. I can continue to work on a painting as long as it is in the studio. The longer it stays with me, my understanding of it shifts at each stage. But it (the painting) leaving the studio marks the end; it is no longer related to me. The other relationships that come next, such as being displayed or viewed, are the ones that I won't participate. Even the naming of the painting can be left to others. These are open for me.

RD: Can we understand it as that you are experimenting with a type of painting that has no specific intention nor ending? It begins with images

from your daily life and moves toward your state of painting. However, the end of it is not determined by your judgment of the painting, you hand it over to a larger world.

T: The result is uncertain. My previous works were in a known (or determined) state; once I finish painting, it was over. Now I leave more space for the unknown, only thinking about one part (at a time) or the work in the next few days. I treat these images in the manner of an hourglass. They first become very narrow, and then they enter the realm of my control and start expanding again. The state of creativity is linked to thought; works without thinking are meaningless. One must pay attention to this primary and secondary relationship. In this process, your past experience generates rationality that tugs at chance.

RD: This state of non-attachment is not abstract. Your work and thinking both follow this coherent logic. But how can we describe this painting that is undergoing transformation?

T: After a painting is completed, the audience sees a painting. But what is different about it? I hope to find a loop in the painting, like a spring, which is a circle when viewed from the top but brings another dimension when viewed from the side. This is my understanding of the picture, the pulling from the beginning to the end structures it. What's in the middle is buried beneath (the surface), slowly revealing time.

I want to build a platform in painting, placing myself in a state of constant changes and experimenting with unresolved problems and undetermined things.

Translated by Yupeng Wu

Tang Yongxiang's Becoming of Moderateness: Lifesc@pe Against Impermanence

Huang Chien-Hung

Tang Yongxiang's latest solo exhibition *People/Tree/Feet* opens at TANK Shanghai, presenting works that extend the painterly methodology he established in 2012. His approach begins with spontaneous photographs snapped from everyday life, which become the imagistic substrate of his paintings. Through years of layered overpainting atop these same foundations, these resulting surfaces eventually signify "moderateness"—yet "moderateness" always whispers of "impermanence." Contemporary China, as cinematically represented by sixth-generation domestic filmmakers, namely Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye, and Wang Xiaoshuai, aptly illuminates this conceptual polarity. Situated within landscapes that metamorphose at velocities beyond capture, individual, environment, and history have become thoroughly and mutually entangled and permeated. "Impermanence" thus arises as the defining condition of lifescape—the inseparable complication of innate nature and life (*xing ming*)—in post-1990s China. The pandemic has only escalated this circumstance, so much so that individuals are now forced to confront a planetary "impermanence" reconfigured by a volatile global supply chain. Paradoxically enough, it is precisely against this backdrop that the very "moderateness" has hence acquired unprecedented significance: as a practice of cultivating one's lifescape.

Tang Yongxiang's lifesc@pe intuition¹ is a cultivation practice untethered from worldly spectacles. As a quiet forerunner, or a contemplative secular practitioner who remains actively engaged with the social realm, he approaches painting as a world unto itself, where he maps out his creative development and experiential topography. For those who attempt

to comprehend reality through trans-specific and planetary scales, confronting the impermanence that arches across multiple dimensions becomes inevitable. Only by retreating one step—from image creator to observer—can one perceive or discern the "moderateness" dwelling within one's own proximity; This step requires a de-thinking of all preconceived ideas. One must decelerate the velocity of one's hands, along with the various apparatuses connecting hand, eye, and voice. Only through such measures can the practitioner remain embedded within networks of trans-specific and trans-planetary relations. Simultaneously, as the act of viewing occurs increasingly through imaging machines, our visual culture is being thrust into the era of Mechanosphere, or "enagrammatic cognition," characterized by either excessive overload of images or the internalization of "enagrammatic intuition." Our relationship with the world can no longer be determined by linear connections implied by "optical" reflection, but must instead be architected through intuition enabled by "folding back" toward reality after amassing vast image collections.

For these reasons, the "moderateness" is a "folding back" process initiated when we confront "impermanence." We must fold back to avoid being devoured by impermanence, or losing our way among the delusions camouflaged as solutions. This "folding back," initiated in reality with the intent of returning to a renewed reality, bears resemblance to the moment Bhagavat articulates in the Diamond Sutra, "Hence the Tathâgata is to be seen from no-signs as signs." So, for painting, how does it find its proper role in our contemporary moment to connect authentically with our lives? When Tang Yongxiang fixes his gaze upon an apple, or finds companionship with a neighborhood tree while practicing posture (*gong*) or taking a walk, both gestures achieve an egalitarian symbiosis with things and beings through the state of "folding back." "Moderateness" hence transforms into a verb denoting acts of cultivation and operation.

His painting operates as this process of operating (cultivating) the "folding back to moderateness." In this sense, it seeks to render visible not only the "folding back" that departs from superficial landscape but also "moderateness" as such. The work penetrates reality's non-linear space while making a regression back toward states of "non-intention." Therefore, we can understand the image as a dialogue process that accommodates these mental dynamics. Throughout this process, techniques including compositional framing, chromatic adjustment, color field configuration, flat painting application, and vertical layering all seem to materially engage the image. They fold back the processed and inhabited image, calibrating it against proprioception and internalizing such interiority. His painting thereby forms a process in which one engages in a dialogue with image through visual conduits. This is not mimetic reproduction of discrete objects or phenomena, but experiential field where dialogue and interaction achieve actualization.

We feel the imperatives to fold back toward "moderateness" and return to "non-intention" precisely because we have forfeited "everydayness" itself! Over half a century, contemporary art's exploitation of the everyday has unfortunately culminated in the latter's standardization and commodification—not unlike the "nowness" we perpetually lose to computational algorithms and big data analytics. Tang Yongxiang's painting presents primarily an exploratory process granting freedom both to machines and to selfhood. How does one access "cyborgian" creativity amidst equipment ungoverned by subjective control and techniques unhijacked by professional orthodoxy? The answer resides at the convergence of liberated machines and free will. This convergence activates an "experiential becoming" so that we can bear witness to how the artist re-thinks information and phenomena through color blocks and contours, how he interfaces with machines via experience to generate what

might be termed the "non non-human" cyborgs. "Moderateness" exceeds mere existential or lifestyle conditions; it constitutes a "compatible place" where humans, as both biological species and cyborgian assemblage, retain agency and cognitive capacity amid the confluence of world and machine. Let us refuse reduction to biofuel for artificial intelligence; let us, through personal experience and intuition, evolve into cyborgs infused with vital life force—the lifesc@pe intuition (moderateness) weathering through impermanence.

1. T/N: Lifesc@pe is a term derived from lifescape, the coined concept of ones' inner nature and life as developed in Daoist philosophy. The stylization here is inspired by the title of exhibition "Trans-Justice: Para-Colonial@Technology" at Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, which aims to debunk the prescribed binary framework of "justice/injustice" or "colonizer/the colonized" in a world where rapid flows of information and the volatile state of democracy have rendered any dominant role in constant flux. Whoever assumes dominance is constantly changing. Meanwhile, what persists is dominance itself. This stylization suggests a fluid state of power relationship realized in the new phase of technological development and machine agency.

A Floating Fiction, Lurking Perceptions, and an Interwoven Form

Lu Mingjun

In Autumn 2007, Tang Yongxiang arrived in Beijing, alone and disorientated, but nonetheless full of determination having graduated from the oil painting department of Hubei Institute of Fine Arts. It has been ten years now, a decade that has witnessed immense transformation in terms of upheavals within the art system, Chinese society, and the wider world. Like many other artists, it has been practically impossible to escape the clamor, influence, and anxiety prompted by these outside changes. After experiencing his own difficulties and uncertainties, his decision to resist is what sets him apart from his peers, and these two factors have become essential components within his language system. While it may be difficult to locate the highs and lows of this struggle directly from the canvas, the carefully poised surfaces reveal an inner world of rich perceptual experiences.

It was as early as his debut 2012 solo exhibition *HIDE* where Tang first began to distinguish himself. As an artist, he has never been drawn to only stylization, but has focused more on achieving a greater depth and sense of the profound in his paintings. Profound painting is an elusive and undetermined expressive form. For Tang, it is impossible to comprehend the profound in its entirety. Yet, there is seemingly no other comparable expression to accurately express the inclinations of his pursuit. In his words, "Although I might not know what this thing might be, there will nonetheless be something captured. This thing is present in front of you. However you choose to paint it, there will never be enough painted of it."¹ For these reasons, Tang has established his own ascetic methods that he strictly abides to. Within this framework of fixed premises and language, new possibilities of painting can be coaxed out from the canvas. That is to say, his practice deals with questions related to the determinacy of a given

rule, looking to move away from a simple causal relationship in order to yield further elements of chance in his work. Rather than the artist exerting a strong hold on the canvas—instead it is the canvas that leads the artist deeper through each step of the way.

1

The application of an overlay is a technique Tang consistently employs in his work. One could argue his paintings are epitomized through these layers—each canvas comprises at least ten layers or more. Therefore, the time to complete each canvas can elapse into an exceptionally long duration, often stretching to a period of more than one or two years. By itself, despite the importance of this fundamental technique within the long history and tradition of oil painting, the repetitive overlay of paint does not entirely explain the idiosyncrasies of his work. Likewise, neither is it sufficient to place concepts of temporality as the primary framework to gauge his painting. On the contrary, Tang employs a methodology that deliberately resists and thwarts conventions of layering acquired either through the academy or the art-history canon. So since the very beginning, he has restricted himself to the confines of a narrow corner.

There is no specific reasoning behind the choice of motifs by the artist. The subjects of his painting are derived from photographs, which are taken at random from his observation of daily life. However, to merely describe this process as random is also inappropriate because he intentionally searches for the unnoticed areas of quotidian existence. The back of a figure, a hand gesture, or an arrangement of still life objects—they are fragments gleaned from everyday life, which together form the object and lay the foundation for Tang's paintings. His method of overlaying paint differs to the brushwork we are typically accustomed to. Choosing to layer with a repetitive and mechanical technique of cross-hatching, the brushstroke is minimized so

that the trace is barely perceptible aside from the edges of the canvas. The technique is used in a fashion so as to deliberately dispel, not only marks from the brushstroke, but also more to disperse the traces of the academy too. This also corresponds to the tactile quality of the artist's hand, which gradually becomes subdued by this prolonged process. What might separate him from, say the Neo-Impressionists (or Pointillists) is that Tang refrains from a reliance on the principles of science to frame his work. It is from within the canvas itself, where he pursues a feeling of indeterminacy as well as maintaining a loose connection to the hand.

Tang reminds me that hands regularly appear as a motif within his oeuvre: for example with works such as *Like a Hand on a Light Background* (2015), *One Hand, Pink Background* (2015), *Some Hands and Some Lines*, *The Background Is Blue* (2015), and *Patches of Color, Three Hands and a Partition Line* (2015). Moreover, they arrive fragmented, whilst at the same time retaining certain realistic qualities with each appearance. In my view, this reveals a gesture of withdrawal and separation: firstly as it seeks for a detached feeling of the hand. For example, by approaching the hands as an object, this allows us to understand why they always appear either encircled or compressed. Conversely, they are never completely concealed by the layers—for it is not his intention to completely erase all feeling. According to our sensory system, the hand indicates our sense of touch. Meanwhile, within the framework of Wölfflin's classic formalism, a contour in a similar fashion correlates to a tactile sense of touch in addition to delineating the surface. What differentiates him from the Neo-Impressionists is that he looks to neither blur nor eliminate the contour. He instead deploys the contour as a reference point to reconstruct relationships between positive and negative form, employing an overlay within this compositional foundation through a repetition of layers. Meanwhile, similar to the Neo-Impressionists, Tang applies paint directly without mixing onto the palette. The difference in Tang's approach is his conscious separation of color from the brushwork

style on the canvas. In this regard, the canvas becomes the color palette and the act of layering paint serves a double function to mix color and create outlines. Even as he proceeds without a clear preconception of the outcome, there is no way to anticipate the changes that will gradually occur within the canvas. Another shared connection with the Neo-Impressionists is his constant method of adding layers to each painting (or parts of the painting), which evoke characteristics of a gestalt: the idea that on a micro-level, all the constituent parts contribute to a single unified whole. It calls to mind a theory by sociologist Émile Durkheim: "A whole is not identical with the sum of its parts. It is something different and its properties differ from those of its component parts...On the contrary, association is the source of all the innovations which have been produced successively in the course of the general evolution of things."² This gives insight into how Tang reconstitutes the relationship between positive and the negative through these layers; in a similar manner, this process in fact also amounts to a redistribution of parts in relation to a whole.

As early as seven or eight years ago, the relationship between positive and negative form gradually emerged as a prominent motif in Tang's oil painting. In the painting *Blue Back* (completed between 2010 and 2011) the composition already begins to establish this relationship clearly. At the same time, the form is both the back of a figure's upper body, but also becomes a surface for irregular forms, where two different colors simultaneously appear within the composition. Perhaps due to this motif, the outline between positive and negative form are exceptionally defined on the canvas. This enables us to distinguish clearly the positive side, but also traces of the painting's formulation, meaning that the painting transcends the relationship of one mere surface. In comparison to another work of the same year, this quality is less discernible in *A Bit Abstract, The Upper Part Is Blue* (2010). Originally a portrait, it has transformed into irregular shapes consisting of two color tones. This new positive and negative relationship collapses the

narrative of its original incarnation, giving form to a newer, more indefinable language structure. This could be regarded as a formal relationship, but beneath the crust-like surface belies a composition structure that is far more complex. For Tang, the surface does not make sense on its own without the support of the bottom layer—the bottom layer is part of the surface. What is pivotal here is that the bottom layer never disappears entirely, both the texture of the brushwork and traces of previous layers are still perceptible to the eye. Observe for example, how the line arcs below the blue form at the top half of the painting—this was perhaps once the outline demarcating hair from a figure, but is now hidden beneath a bottom layer. While applying a layer, the artist does not follow the initial composition set by the foundation layer. He instead enlarges the facial area and replaces it with the contour of another irregular shape. On the surface, the line that protrudes from out of the layers initially appears insignificant, but is in fact a subtle gesture that holds together the entire canvas.

Tang has employed this method effectively on multiple occasions throughout his practice. Occasionally, he might deliberately preserve a line or shape such as a circle or square to achieve balance in the painting. For instance, *Three Trees, Figurines, and Several Circles* (2009–2011) features five horizontally aligned circles, which function like a mediator holding together the work. There is a horizontal symmetry between parts of the canvas, whilst a symmetrical relationship is also aligned to a vertical axis that appears within the composition. Similarly in *Three Pairs of Legs and One Foot Walking on a Light Green Background* (2013), the irregular circles between the legs work as a physical narrative, establishing a mimetic relationship between viewer and painting to evoke the act of walking in a subtle way. There is another comparable painting from the same year in *Dark Woman on Purple Background* (2013), where a relatively intact line is forcibly inserted into the left half of the painting. Almost at once, it becomes an object observed by the figure inside the painting—the object falls into alignment at

the same precise area of the gaze to achieve a state of parity in the painting. Another line appears in a recent new work, *A Pile and a Few Buckets, Below an Area of Blue* (2017). Here, a solitary line appears as a structural motif embedded deep within the painting in order to resolve the composition.

Through repeated usage of layers, alternation, displacement, or by working within the boundaries of positive and negative form, the artist looks to initiate a complex discourse on the irresolvable and ambivalent relationship between narrative and space. In these paintings, the contour of every form is particularly noticeable; what is unusual is that the brushstroke is used not so much to accentuate a line, but rather to leave marks where different areas of color coalesce together through the repeated layers of paint. The contours of the brushwork and traces of color can be regarded as markers of time, or in the words of the artist He An, as markers indicating memory.³ Intuition can be considered here as the concentration of points within the canvas or conversely the diffusion of areas created in an unmediated involuntary manner. Additionally, the artist aspires to demonstrate the specificities of painting as a medium. For example, it is important to consider traces of the contours left behind from previous layers in spatial terms as opposed to regarding only their function as an outline. The remnants of these contours constitute a new negative space, which causes the original negative area to turn into a positive one. This is notable in *Half Body and Two Circles* (2010) where he inserts a new line into the middle of a shape, creating further linear forms from within, and thereby rendering the initial dialectical relationship more complex. Of course, this dialectical relationship ultimately hinges on how we observe it—we can consider this to be a visual experiment.

2

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein discusses the classic duck-rabbit figure. He remarks that in this analogy, features of realism are

eliminated that facilitate a glance purporting to offer a stable interpretation. The image is reduced to a schematic, minimal abstraction that "looks like" neither a duck nor a rabbit. According to the psychologist Joseph Jastrow, what the viewer sees is determined by one's identity (or the physical eye) and the mind's eye. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, disagrees and implores to his readers not to be misguided by these internal mechanisms. For Wittgenstein, an external mode of viewing an image relies on the reciprocal relationship between vision and language, which supplants the logical connection between the "mind's eye" and the "physical eye." Meanwhile, W.J.T. Mitchell believes that: "The point is rather to flatten out the field of inquiry, to go away from the model of using deep, inner causes to explain surface effects, and replacing it with a surface description of complex interactions between different codes and conventions. Instead of 'looking inside ourselves' to find a mechanical explanation, we can ask ourselves what kind of different senses can be made of expressions like 'I see a rabbit,' or 'now I see a duck,' or 'it's a duck-rabbit,' or 'rabbit!' In other words, what we need to do is to remove these selective and fixed experiential interpretations. We should view objects comprehensively as a composite image, which means it is neither a duck nor a rabbit—it is just what it is."⁴ Admittedly, Wittgenstein's theory becomes a call for the liberation of our visual perception.

The purpose of these references is not to equate Tang's painting to the duck-rabbit figure, or a language game, although his depiction of the relationship between positive and negative forms on the canvas does indeed encapsulate the logic of this discourse. Like the duck-rabbit figure, the images painted onto the canvas clearly show traces of minimal abstraction. The difference here is the preservation of certain features of realism, such as the layering, shaping, or sculpting of color. More significantly, Tang has not entirely discarded an internal mechanism in order to give way to pure surface description. Here, the crux of the issue lies precisely at the gap

separating and defining this complex inter-relationship between a pure surface description and this inner mechanism.

Through the repetition of layers, Tang not only flattens the canvas surface, but in many ways he also empties the background of the first layer. Even with parts left from the remaining image, these areas are flattened in a similar way, becoming a simplified schematic not too dissimilar to Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit figure. Likewise, this liberates us from our visual perception and experiences that limit how we perceive an image. For Tang Yongxiang, it is precisely the ambivalence between positive and negative form, which functions as the emancipatory proponent to his work. There was a particular period for Tang when he was captivated by the I-Ching and related practices of Yin-Yang. This extended to his interest into principles espoused by ancient Chinese seal carvings and traditional painting such as the saying 'counting white as black' (the value of leaving spaces empty in calligraphy)—a complementary logic of interplay that has provided his practice with inspiration.

Tang Yongxiang once told me that the quality of everyday life that particularly fascinated him was a relationship to negative form. For example, in the last few years he has developed a habit, if two people walking together were to come into view, his eyes will focus not on their physical shape, but rather on the empty space between them. In front of an arrangement of still objects, his interest is in the points where they link with one another, rather than in the still objects themselves. Whether from the perspective of form / composition or visual / observation, the figures or objects within the bottom layer transform into a physical/geometric structure through the positive and negative relationship. But in practice, Tang does not settle on a simple binary between positive and negative form—neither does he completely erase from the canvas characteristics taken from realist painting. For instance, in *Three Basins* (2015) its composition optically might only appear as three

oval forms on a single plane if it were not for the effect of some partial shading. With this crucial detail, although they equally appear as three optical ellipsoids—they remain as three basins. Perhaps the only artist who could be said to have a significant influence on Tang Yongxiang is Giorgio Morandi. A phenomenological interpretation of Morandi's painting is that it functions as a return of sorts back to its own materiality. The materiality in this case is painting and its medium, which includes also form, brushstroke, and particularly the paint itself.⁵ For Tang it indeed embodies a return of a kind that points not only to the medium as a material itself, but rather to knowledge, moving towards material knowledge and the perception of a painting. This naturally involves questions of vision and the act of seeing. In this respect, both he and Morandi share common ground, as the object of return is to go back to the uncertainty of seeking a truthful state of seeing. Here, the so-called truthful state of seeing is never purely about vision, but rather the outcome of different senses combined together such as sight, touch, and perception—therefore this state is always unstable and in continual flux. If this can be described as "profound painting," it is because on one hand, the onlooker is guided towards a certain gaze, while on another hand it reminds us of the impossibility of a 'pure' gaze. In this way, it becomes a gaze into a gaze.

Photography is the most important source material for Tang Yongxiang. Each photograph has a focus point and therefore is the product of a mechanical gaze. The surface is a composite of reconstructed positive and negative forms with areas of color, which dictates a way of perceiving the surface that is resistant to the notion of a singular gaze. For Tang, whether it is reconstructing the positive / negative form or the flattening of the canvas surface through layers, these techniques are employed so as to remove the painting from a fixed centralized gaze. At the same time, he utilizes cool color tones to vary and subdue the influence of the viewer's corporeal sensibilities, moving towards a state that complicates the gaze. Another issue is that

the painting is never entirely concealed by the layers. The bottom layer never completely disappears as it always finds a way of surfacing out of the preceding layers above. Even if the layers are produced using the same unmixed color, eventually it will yield an array of murky tones. The final form eventually appearing on the canvas is in actuality a permeation of accumulated pigment and brush marks from every layer beneath. Certainly, on one hand the outcome hinges on the physical properties of the paint, while on the other hand, the copious layers of pigment and brush marks set free a visual sensorium for the gaze.

According to Tang Yongxiang, he has consistently treated both the edge of the canvas and contours within them with equal importance since the beginning. As a fundamental method of consolidating the structure of a painting, his treatment of these elements help draw our attention towards the inter-textual nature of painting—particularly around the edges of the canvas. This textuality alludes to the feeling of a collage, bringing together pictorial and color relationships, which are embodied internally by the canvas. A typical example is *Blocks of Color and Three Groups of Figures* (2015), which includes a collage of two layers: firstly on the canvas there is a layer of three irregular shapes in-between a background—moreover, this composition retains the minute traces of a positive and negative form. The second is a background of several regular blocks, where at the same time, there is a relationship to a collage formed from a set of corresponding rules. Regular and irregular pictorial shapes are scattered across the canvas in a fashion incongruous to the orderliness of the background—they appear as a collage and yet the forms are seemingly embedded from within it. With the background, the uniquely textured edge of these blocks materializes as if they were part of a wall constructed by these cube forms. But at the same time, there also appears to be two blocks of blue that look similar to a wall that has been painted on. This ambivalence unsettles the way we view the painting, thereby allowing us to perceive all kinds of various objects that are

interwoven into one another. Moreover, what these obscured figures within the bottom layer reveal is also another method—his real motivation is to open up a more unpredictable dimension of chance into his narratives.

3

The artist wishes to rely more upon intuition in order to invite an increased role of unpredictability within his work. However, the truth is that even with each moment of chance, there can never be a complete break away from existing forms of perceptual experience or a logic of causality. Hence, his strict abidance to a set of rules and methods, which he uses to both guide and influence the experience of his daily practice of painting. In the last two years, each canvas has become increasingly complex and he is less liable now to be restricted by the compositional constraints of the original image or becoming fixated with a painting method. There are also times when it appears as if he has made a radical departure from the composition of the original image. During this process, he not only uses techniques of layering to reconstruct pictorial relationships, but he might also resort to making cuts, movement, addition, and duplication, which are applied onto an existing composition of an image. There are times when an old work becomes the subject of a new painting. This seems to have slowly loosened his initial set of self-prescribed rules, allowing his paintings to become increasingly more varied. The artist relies mainly on intuition as he looks to set free a sense of heightened unpredictability into his compositions.

The view of a figure's back is another recurring motif within his oeuvre. *Whereas Blue Back* (2011) can be regarded as an attempt to avoid sentimentality and the narratives typically associated with this motif, thereby directing a discourse towards the binary between positive and negative form. In the case of *The Backs of Two Girls Stroking Their Hair* (2015) it becomes evident that his painting is no longer confined to this simple dialectic.

Taking the perspective of a female figure's back as a starting point for this motif, the artist proceeds to extract only the upper body, which brings the composition closely to a collage. The figure appears to be standing in the middle of a body of water due to the inclusion of a dark purple and half-oval shape backdrop added in front of her. From this base, he applies with the same painting technique on the top right area of the canvas a similar view of figure's back again. Due to the subtle difference in the degree the body is slanted and with the placement of her hands, it looks to be the same person, but is captured at a different moment depicting the transition into a separate stage of movement. They both seem to share the same single space, whilst simultaneously appearing separate, and a band of light blue appears like an interval separating these moments of time. Furthermore, the shape and color of the shadow around the head seemingly obscures a complementary formal relationship to the semi-oval blocks of purple in the foreground. It is in this moment, where all forms of sentimentality or existing narratives associated to this motif vanish altogether. In place of this, a complex arrangement of ambivalent forms and language structures brimming with contradictory relationships emerge in its wake. So it seems that again it appears there is a relationship between visual perception and textual experimentation.

In 2016, *Like the Back of Three Figures with Pink and Green* was completed. The work features the rear view of three upper torsos aligned together horizontally. Their resemblance to one another perhaps seems to suggest a collage of the same figure, which is duplicated and pieced together across three different places. Aside from the visible positive and negative relationship, he adds a harsh band of color painted with a pinkish-green hue onto the head area. This is another method he uses to obscure the discernibility of the image; whilst within this gesture he also highlights the fundamental properties of painting itself. From here, we can either view things as a pictorial narrative or regard these overlaps as a series of displacements between different layers of color and form. It is worth

mentioning here, rather than allowing the band to bind the left side of the canvas to the right side, he intentionally leaves a small gap on the left side, while on the right side it reaches to the edge. It is a device that not only retains a sense of equilibrium to the entire composition, but it also disrupts the visual structure behind the various motifs that are at work within the canvas. Meanwhile, the position of this color band to the left side in relation to the area of dark blue located below also seems to suggest a formal relationship with one another. They together evoke incompleteness and a lack of finality—yet, there is a sense of clarity within the canvas that exudes a sense of being "just right."

The back of a human figure also features as a motif again in *Three Figures, A Tree and Areas of Color Underneath* completed in the same year. However, they are no longer arranged separately within a row. The three people in this canvas have moved directly onto the canvas entirely in their original form. The lower parts of the three torsos are concealed with only fragments of their negative forms remaining. On close observation, one can discern the formal relationships and the structure of the image. In the process of covering the canvas with layers, as with other paintings, he divides the canvas horizontally into two halves. The artist has left the branches within the background and added layers along the contours of its form in order to create a hill-like negative shape. What is peculiar here is how the pink green area within the middle section replaces the human figure as a focal point within the canvas. With the left side of the canvas, the artist extends the motif's line of perspective by following the heads of these three figures. As it turns out, it aligns perfectly in "symmetry" with the lines of the branches extending outwards towards the edges of the painting on the right hand side—the lines differ in the sense that one is curved and another forms a straight line. Perhaps to disrupt the symmetry of the composition, he deftly paints an area of green to the left side of the canvas, establishing a formal interplay between the semi-circular form and the area of pink green in the

middle of the canvas. The color hue in between the pink green and the dark blue trousers of the figures is also controlled very precisely, even revealing to the viewer the layers where he blends the colors together. In addition, a perspective line on the upper half of the canvas forms very discreetly a symmetry on a vertical axis, which is created in relationship to the edges demarcating fragments of negative forms situated near the bottom right corner. In a new painting *Three People, Two Buckets* (2017) the composition is similarly divided into top and bottom halves. The top part features the back upper torsos of three figures, while the bottom part features an arrangement of still objects. These two parts originally derived from the same motif have become separated into two seemingly unrelated images. While the two parts differ in color tone, they share a similarity in the way they are constructed through the contours and silhouettes. What is worth noticing is that as the figure's back is molded into shape, it does not finish with a completely flat surface. He leaves behind outlines where creases from their clothes form together so as to bring a subtle haptic quality and sense of visual depth to the painting.

While it is clear that the subject submerged under the layers has become flattened onto the surface plane of the canvas, it does not imply that the artist has completely abandoned use of perspective. There are different parts of the motif's image that still evoke different forms of depth within the composition. In addition to the line of perspective featured in *Three Figures, A Tree and Areas of Color Underneath*, there is also another example within the previously mentioned work *The Backs of Two Girls Stroking Their Hair*, where the space between the backs of the figures in the foreground and background demonstrate another perspectival relationship. In another example *Blocks of Color and Three Groups of Figures*, the strong contrast to the dark blue squares of the bottom half of the painting suggests an intense external light that appears directed at the space between the layers of the canvas. Another example is *Three Legs and Blocks of Color* (2015) where

in a similar fashion, a combination between a characteristic outline in the central area of the painting and variation in color, together reveals a strong sense of depth. Yet due to the depth of these compositions they resist to be hermetically isolated as they very often are deployed at the overlap together with other forms. Because of this nature, these details more often than not are easily overlooked or neglected by the onlooker. This also illustrates that the artist is not dependent solely on exploring the relationship of positive and negative space in his paintings. Take the example of his new series of work connected to "branches" and where the negative space takes a secondary role in relation to other elements. The starting point here is the restructuring of color in relationship to the positive and negative form within certain parts of the canvas, which then open up a new mechanism for the imagination. It is this process that leads towards an entanglement and struggle between subjective appearance (an outcome of experience and related to causality) and an illusory appearance (an a-conceptual type of fantasy).

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Tang Yongxiang's favorite novel is *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust and is the only book by his bedside. A canonical work of stream-of-consciousness writing, the book lacks a central protagonist, a resolved narrative, and it avoids the cadences of a plot. The mode of language and narrative structure of this work has influenced to varying degrees the way Tang weaves together visual images. Within the lexicon of his work, one can indeed see this very clearly through the de-centered, fragmentary, and stream-of-conscious usage of color. Furthermore, he even reads this book in a stream-of-conscious way by randomly opening pages with an irreverent attitude to its form as a whole. He is drawn towards certain pieces of information scattered within the work, which coincides with the logic and structure that lies behind his language of painting too. I am reluctant to say this in conclusive terms whether my aforementioned analysis and

interpretation matches the artist's original rationale, but what I can be certain about is his formal play of foreshadowing, as well as the plethora of language devices he uses, whose mechanisms lay submerged within the painting. All of these ploys are intended to emancipate the viewer from pre-existing experiences influenced by our cognitive functions, thereby leaving the space of interpretation as open as possible to the viewer. It is therefore difficult for us to locate a clear path or trajectory as he intentionally leaves behind obstacles and creates ruptures within his compositions. It is precisely here that these ruptures become the entry point into the canvas space just as he will always be able to see in unlimited ways a positive negative structure within a form. Just as Tang opens up new possibilities of a visual narrative within these ruptures, it is also possible that these narratives might always remain incomplete. Conversely, while the forms within the canvas may be unpredictable, because of the many different layers they can be viewed, read, and interpreted, this also signifies how the canvases are never entirely arbitrary in their making. In this way, any provisional rationalization or causal relationship that influences the act of viewing no longer seems to impede Tang as he develops a way of imagining forms beyond methods of description.

Tang Yongxiang once mentioned to me a curious fact that many people are often unaware of: that he never personally provides the title for his own work. In a typical situation, usually it is a staff member from the gallery or museum who will telephone the artist after receiving his work. The purpose of the phone call is to identify the work and the staff member is usually required to describe the work to him, the resulting description often forms the basis of the title itself. It is an arrangement that resonates very strongly with his language structure. Of course, Tang is the first to know that the typical description from the majority of staff members will be a simple description of its appearance without giving away too much in terms of a notable logic or clue within the work. But very often than not, they will nonetheless produce

a visual reaction or narrative that transcends the anticipation of the artist himself. Indeed, there is a kind of rupture or gap that emerges between the staff member and the artist. What we discover from these titles is a common misplacement in the separation between positive to negative structure, which is a dialectic mixed together with issues connected to the image such as form, color, and a whole vocabulary of other relationships without a fixed order. Even if the title deviates to the actual composition of the canvas, this irrational logic of describing something is still in keeping with the language of the painting. For example with *Blue Background with a Few Profiles* (2013) the bust profiles of these figures are upside down, but this important detail within the canvas is clearly missing within the information provided by the title's messenger. Layer by layer, the artist preserves the profile of these figures before turning the canvas upside down. What is more, he then proceeds to add a thin block onto the top of each head as if they are sculptures resting upside down on a shelf. With the associations created by this illogical work title, there is a certain equivalence shared between his method of rupture, obfuscation, and the undetermined language of oil painting.

It could be said that in precisely this way, he forms a methodology to resist all social and ideological factors within his work. But this does not signify that he simply can keep himself unimpeded nor is there any intention to return back to a particularly style of formalism, conceptual idea, or way of thinking. In many ways, the lack of finality within his canvas and his mode of working embodies the doubt, recurrence, and struggle of his state of mind—they also provide a way for him to visually map a realization of something within reality as well as reflecting the reality that he finds himself in. Since the very beginning, rather than withdrawing himself from life, he has thrown himself into the ambiguity and rules of its cruel game—it is here, where one can determine the disorder of reality as the true motif behind oil painting.

1. From the press release of "Tang Yongxiang Solo Exhibition," 2014, Magician Space, Beijing.
2. Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, 1895, trans. Sarah Solovay and John Mueller (New York: Free Press, 1964), pp.102-103.
3. He An, "Skin," *HIDE*, Beijing: Hemuse Gallery, 2012, p.1.
4. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, The University of Chicago Press: 1994, p.51.
5. Cai Huimeng, "An Epistemological Analysis of Morandi's Paintings," *Practice and Criticism*, vol.6, 2016.

A Provisional Presence

Zhong Shanyu

What distinguishes Tang Yongxiang is an introspection of the self, rather than the inclination to seek refuge within philosophy or art history. He avoids responding in a direct way to external influences, instead adhering to a selfless process of looking inward. Through the act of painting, details begin to accrue through a progression that gradually turns complexity into a succinct form. As the canvas is submerged through the layers of paint, the picture plane turns into a frozen frame as soon as this process draws to a conclusion. With this abrupt pause, what is left within this surface reveals a restrained palette of modest color tones. The deadpan titles of the artwork summarize the subject of each painting in a matter-of-fact, almost indifferent manner. Extra significance is thereby underscored within the complex arrangement of lines or the remnants left around the canvas, which draw the attention of the viewer to the rich layers behind the work.

By engaging with memory, intuition, and the subconscious, Tang Yongxiang endows his work with an ethereal quality of estrangement. Material is culled from photographs and repeatedly function to extract information through engaging with the memory of the artist. The visual image is approached as an inexhaustible resource that offers unlimited possibilities of permutation—this also explains why similar icons frequently appear throughout his work. Suggestive of a compulsive tendency—when the back of a figure, the leg, or a still life appears, they each evoke a bewildering sense of *déjà vu* to the viewer. Yet these familiar archetypes and objects are merely the entry point into his paintings. They begin with a photograph, which becomes reconfigured via the artist's own memory before appearing on the canvas. From there, they gradually begin to diminish—reaching a point of defamiliarization before eventually the painting becomes a record of sorts, capturing an instantaneous moment similar to the function of a camera.

Perhaps in this way, his paintings can be regarded as the second take of the original photograph. Relinquishing the warmth of the body (although this does not entirely disappear), they become removed from the common attributes tied to the quotidian everyday object.

Tang relies upon a long gestation period to both scrutinize and refine his paintings, a duration that can often last for years before the work's completion. This way of ruminating recalls the approach heralded by the Tang dynasty era school of "Bitter Chanting" poetry, bringing to mind a particular phrase by Li Keran, "I don't depend on talent; rather, I learned through hardship. It's the School of Asperities." Liberated from its archetype mold, the object is repeatedly polished at before revealing a quality of refinement akin to the appreciation of a curio worn down through long periods of use. Whilst suggestive of an inclination towards a state of perfection, Tang persists by intentionally seeking a "cumbersome" fashion to work within gaps opened up through his painting. He frequently employs cross-hatching with even brushstrokes to minimize the presence of the artist's hand. By varying the technique, attention towards the subject of the painting is dispersed across different areas of the canvas. The focal point might be isolated into specific details such as an ear or hand, or often using a conspicuous black line to cut across the space in order to interrupt the careful balance established through the colors of the composition.

Therefore, Tang Yongxiang's work is best regarded as a positivist method of constructing an image. This does not signify that his work is the mere result of a formal exploration dictated by a hermetic internal logic. His way of layering color directly in an unmixed form onto the canvas contributes to a form of interference, which leads to a situation where these different elements counteract with one another. One motivation behind this approach is a rejection to an overly metaphorical or symbolic reading of painting. Likewise, an analysis based solely on the spatial relationships is also

problematic as the discourse becomes limited to the narrow confines of formalism. Rather, Tang's interest lays in the fundamental elements that persist in painting, encapsulating an inquiry that spans from classical into the contemporary: a way of visualizing things. Whether representational or abstract, realist or postmodern, they each provide a means to create a visual outcome. It is precisely this emphasis on the relationship between vision and perception that frees his work from an over reliance to art history—avoiding an overt historicization of the painting and establishing an atmosphere of timelessness.

With Tang Yongxiang's paintings, contours are often not drawn, but are formed through layers of paint. There are moments when these lines become the object of observation and in other instances they might retreat back to behind their form. Large swathes of interwoven textures oscillate between background and foreground; each time a layer covers the surface, a new surface layer is produced. Like a geological process of sedimentation, each layer is nothing more than a temporary presence. When we can no longer differentiate between the boundary lines, the painting acquires a form of aesthetic autonomy. Form is no longer defined as a "what it is" but rather drifts into the ambiguity of a "what does it resemble." The focal area for observation loosens as the gaze becomes interrupted, the binary logic between positive and negative space is dismissed with. A divergence from base layer to the surface occurs through the discrepancy between the visuality of the image and its discernibility, while other objects remain submerged within the folds and depths of the painting. In spite of the fact that many of these elements remain indiscernible to the eye, their presence is nonetheless tangible as well as its ability to perturb the sensorial engagement of the viewer. The intervals between the moments of painting are also palpable within the canvas as an invisible blank space embedded within the formation of the image. The unstable fluctuation between form, color, and outline often encourage different modes of immersed viewing. At

certain times, the work requires you to move focus between specific points, while at other times, a step back might be needed in order to view the composition as a whole. These techniques together instill a contemplative space and a heightened state of viewing, which is created from a fluid interaction that moves between viewer, artwork, and artist.