

As the mind opens, the artist uses the eye to photographically capture images of interest - information is then stored in the memory of a 'micro-chip'. It involves a continuous accumulation of things, but also a perpetual procedure of screening, verification, and layering, which together enhances the process of image recognition.

Starting in 2013 with the work 'Flag of Sweat', Shi Guowei has attempted to incorporate the 'Cavalier Perspective' into photography, a perspective often found in Chinese scrolls - creating within scenes an array of images, which can be read in a dynamic way. Later in 'Low-Pressure', one of the first works in a new series, or whether facing the 'Four Girls Mountain', a forest, objects or scenes from around the artist, he employs a similar method to photography throughout. As a result, he neither tries to 'devise' a subject nor does he overtly emphasize the connection to the work's structure - in this way, the objects photographed in the scenes appear imperturbable like the everyday.

Shi Guowei studied photography at Fachhochschule, Dortmund. For his graduation, he took inspiration from the technique of hand-coloring photographs influenced from his parent's generation. Through processes of using Kodak C-print, he first chemically develops the black and white print onto photographic paper - this becomes the 'base color' - before finally hand painting the final layers to complete it. It is a traditional hand technique, which shares more than one hundred years of history with black and white photography - and it reappears again to beguile a new audience. For a long period of time, photography has become associated as an 'objective' form of reproducing objects. Taken this idea further, today the photographic technologies have reached a point of practically becoming an omnipotent presence in our lives. Shi Guowei uses his own work to challenge this point - "There is still distance between color perceived with the naked eye, which far surpasses that of the lens. Color obtained in color photography still falls short to the vivid qualities of nature - in fact it pales in comparison. On the contrary, through the mind and its memory of the photographed scene, color is mixed and applied according to what feels appropriate to the scene - adding lucidity to the image as well as a heightened accuracy."

From the 90s, new media art in China has been carried by the popular tastes of the international art world. As a result, traditions such as categories of oil painting, sculpture, and photography have been pushed to the periphery. Facing this abrupt change to an international context, techniques and disciplines of art, which once enamored people, face questions of how to respond and answer to this situation. Aside from conceptual art, what other possibilities do we have? The work of Shi Guowei is one resolute response to such a question.

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史国威 CROSSING FOUR GIRLS MOUNTAINS
Shi Guowei 2016.07.09-08.21

















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An Interview with Shi Guowei:

Excerpted from the Butterfly Effect Photography Pioneer Forum

Butterfly Effect: It was in your graduation series in Germany that you first attempted to hand-color black-and-white photographs. At the time, why did you choose this technique? And why did you become so enamored of the effect in your later work?

Shi Guowei: I added color by hand because I'm interested in painting. My master's graduation series for the Fachhochschule Dortmund in 2006 was also a summary of my life in Germany. At the time, I decided to risk it and attempt to bring painting into my photography. In this process, I discovered that I really liked this method, and then there was no turning back. With the gradual progress of my hand-coloring, I began to think that color photographs seemed dull and lifeless compared to hand-colored pictures. In addition, manual intervention better suited my ways of looking at the world and my understanding of color. Hand-coloring is a love of mine. I like manual intervention, and I very much enjoy the process. Compared to the single process of coloring black-and-white photographs, the work is reborn through hand-coloring and given a unique atmosphere, which in turn inspired me to explore deeper.

BE: People may place more emphasis on the concept behind the photographs, but in my view, and especially with regard to a classic photography technique, these pictures are very technical. Can you tell us how you came to practice this technique, and can you tell us more about your process?

SGW: In hand-coloring, the color requirements, the color mastery, and the application techniques are rather complex. I think that "Common Nobles" (2009) was a turning point in my hand-coloring technique. From that point onward, I had better command of the complex coloring of large areas, and I gradually perfected my methods.

My work during this time was related to famous works of Western art, because this was something I was studying at the time. I took classic Renaissance pieces as frameworks, then switched in Chinese figures or symbols. This was something I was trying at the time, and I made a lot of works in that vein.

I have always believed that art and craft are closely related. You can't abandon craft and simply talk about concept; if you can't realize your concept, then there is no work and no meaning. Craft is an indispensable part of the art world.

The energy of craft is founded on numerous failures, and one of the traits of hand-coloring is that it cannot be changed or fixed. In the coloring process, I had to pay close attention to each brushstroke, including my breathing, the depth of the color, and the amount of water. All of this must be precisely controlled. But in my recent work, I actually highlight the “flaws.” Now, precise, accurate colors are not a problem for me, so I wanted to relax a bit and give the brushstrokes a bit more latitude. It was like loosening the reins, allowing the piece to run where it wanted. This technique better suits my current creative direction.

Beginning with “Sacrifice” (2012), my style began to change. The figures became less interesting, and so I moved in a prosaic, planar, and abstract direction. If what you saw is what you got in my previous figurative works and the meaning was straightforward, then my more recent work might be more implied. Now, I don’t want to use intense colors or pictorial structures to “shout” a story; I tend to use moderate tones to relate a deeper subject.

From “Door” (2013) to “Lab” (2013), these series have focused on large black-and-white pictures that I hand-colored, and this style is gradually taking over my current work. Personally, I think that this process is a shift from figure to object, from figuration to abstraction, from surface to content. This transformation has been closely linked to my life, my experiences, and my views on and understanding of things.

BE: In the decade from 2006 to 2016, we can see a few changes in your creative style. You say that you don’t want to put what you want to say directly in the image; you want to use subtler or more precise ways to “sprinkle” meaning into your works. What caused this change?

SGW: Previously, the majority of my works dealt with the surfaces of society, working from surface to surface. Later, I wanted to approach the essence of these objects, and this change directly or indirectly influenced and changed my style. I wanted to use gentle tones to discuss a serious topic or to conflict with reality. Personally, the hidden contradictions and internal anxieties are more intense compared to my earlier work. I hide them in images that are calm on the surface, but if you look closely, there is an indescribable cruelty and intense anxiety behind those images.

I use these large images, which are repeatedly hand-painted, to create an oppressive picture to be placed in front of the viewer. I want the atmosphere in these images to shock the viewer. I work to describe what words cannot, and activate people’s dulled nerves. This is what I pursue in my work, and I think this is one of the meanings of art.

My current work consciously blurs the boundary between painting and photography. For me, photography is a tool; like brush and color, photography as a tool has objective characteristics. I attempt to use a familiar language to tell an unspeakable story. I use images as sign language, and I realize that this description may make my current work more figurative.

I use photography to record scenes, then through manual intervention, I blur the photograph's objectivity, such that this trait becomes weaker in the work. I strengthen the subjectivity of painting, such that the picture is both familiar and strange, like the roads and parks I capture. After the hand-coloring and the layering of brushstrokes, people begin to doubt its authenticity. This is my goal; is the world really as we perceive it to be?

BE: Your works seem to hold a lot of secrets, with whispers in every corner, but the final answer is that it is a reflection of yourself.

SGW: Yes, because after I take a photograph, there is a long process of hand-coloring. Because this takes more time, I have the chance to engage with these massive black-and-white images, and gradually interpret the emotional processes of the pictures. These emotional changes directly influence my use of color and the depth of my brushwork, and it seems that every day I have a different narrative. Thus, these repeated applications of color are compressed into a momentary image. The images are alienating precisely because of this accumulation of time. We are individuals coerced by the lightening operation of the social machine. At this point, we should stop for a break. We don't want to be too numb, so we should give ourselves time to observe and experience the world. I think that working slowly is a very precious thing. Human life is so short that we only have the chance to appreciate the meaning of living when we slow down.

Interviewer: Xu Jiawen

Shi Guowei

- 1977 Born in Luoyang, Henan Province, China, Currently lives and works in Beijing
- 2002 Graduated from Photography in Upholster Department, Academy of Arts & Design Tsinghua University (Originally Central Design & Art College)
- 2006 Obtained Master degree in Photography Institute of Dortmund FH University

Solo Exhibitions

- 2016 *Crossing Four Girls Mountain*, Magician Space, Beijing, China
- 2014 *Shi Guowei Solo Exhibition*, SZ Art Center, Beijing, China
- 2010 *What Year Is It Today*, In-Shine Gallery, Beijing, China
- 2008 *Old Stories*, Contemporary Retellings, Cetus Gallery, Shanghai, China

Group Exhibitions

- 2016 *Nature: A Subjective Place*, Shanghai Center of Photography (SCôP), Shanghai, China
- 2015 *Don't Shoot The Painter, Paintings from the UBS art collection*, Galleriad' Arte Moderna Milano, Italy
- The Bright Eye Of The Universe*, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York, USA
- The Civil Power*, Minsheng Art Museum, Beijing, China
- Silent Poetry-Chinese Contemporary Youth Art Exhibition*, China Cultural Centre in Sydney & Adelaide Festival Centre, Australia
- 2013 *6th Chengdu Biennale*, Chengdu, China
- Made in China*, London, UK
- 2012 *'Pop Sensation' from the UBS Art Collection*, Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong, China
- 2011 *China: Memories & Imagination*, Albemarle Gallery, London, UK
- Art Nova 100 Project, Art Nova 100 Organizing Committee*, Beijing's Ditan Park, Beijing, Jinhan Exhibition Centre, Guangzhou, Shanghai International Sculpture Exhibition Center *Micro-Life*, Soka Art Center, Beijing, China

Asian Art Festival, Chongqing Young Artist Biennale, Chongqing, China

Micro-Life Tour, Soka Art Center, Taiwan

2007 *Dressing, Photography Exhibition*, Cetus Gallery, Shanghai, China

Art Beijing, Photography Beijing, China

2006 *Diplom-Arbeiten Dortmund Photography Exhibition*, Germany

Art Fairs

2014 Art Basel Hong Kong UBS VIP Art collection, Hong Kong, China

2013 Art Macau, Macau

2010 Art Beijing, Photography Beijing, Beijing, China

2008 Art Beijing, Photography Beijing, Beijing, China

Cooperate Collection

UBS-United Bank of Switzerland  **UBS**