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无法抗拒 – Untranslatable

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R•I•T
无法抗拒 - Untranslatable

by

Yuanyuan Liu

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

May 20, 2015

Abstract

无法抗拒 – Untranslatable

By: Yuanyuan Liu

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As an artist, there are several themes I find of interest within the medium of photography including the relationship between the lens and the eye, aspects related to imagination and truth, as well as history and tendency. I believe that photography is the best medium for my current body of work because it inherently allows one to reflect on the conflict between reality and construction/fabrication. This is the main theme conveyed in this work. The title, 无法抗拒-Untranslatable, describes the problematic aspect of expressing oneself in a different (foreign) language and the feeling of inadequacy experienced therein. Any individual who is not versed in Chinese cannot have a sense of 无法抗拒. The use of both words in the title represents the fact that we cannot properly translate another language. Additionally, it symbolizes the feeling I wish to express being untranslatable. Thus I use a different format and distinctive perspective to explain the “feeling” in this body of work.

This collection of work includes various elements such as, still photography, stop motion, drawing and sound. Ultimately it is exhibited in three formats: photographic series, videos and a book. The work expresses my pessimistic and helpless feelings towards power dynamics from these three perspectives, including the human’s inner struggle, the external influence of society and cultural mutual manipulation among people.

Extended Artist Statement

By Yuanyuan Liu

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Bas Jan Ader’s works are sincere and unadorned. In his video works he uses very simple elements and performance, which are “humorous”, but express a sad and hopeless feeling. All the while, he is essentially talking about a fundamental fact. In his work, Fall I, he sits at the top of a house, and then falls down. The power of gravity and the power of nature, are not forces a person can oppose. How can we make artworks with profound connotations while not too straightforward? From Bas Jan Ader and William Kentridge, one learns the importance of carefully choosing one’s subject and metaphor.

In this body of work, I use many metaphors, particularly in the photographs and drawing video. A metaphor is a kind of analogy and is closely related to other rhetorical figures of speech that achieve their effects via association, comparison or resemblance, including allegory, hyperbole, and simile. For example, if hair represents every single day in one’s life, then the hair-clips represent all various choices and difficulties. The audience may be doubtful, because these scenarios are

entirely avoidable. Putting bobbypins in one's hair in a manner that would make combing painful or drinking water with holes in the straw are not actions a normal person would do. Actually, it is true, but this is precisely what I wish to express: self-sabotage; which is independent of the outside world and is purely rooted in one's own heart. In my opinion, self-manipulating behaviors exist in everyone's heart. We seldom pay heed to these behaviors instead we subconsciously conduct them. Just like in these photos, we may well get rid of the hair-clips, but we are still doing exactly what makes ourselves pained and miserable.

The elements utilized in my photographs such as water, hair, plants and plastic bags all carry symbolic meanings to them. There are two main reasons for why I choose these elements. Firstly, they are closely connected with daily-life, which can bridge the communication between an audience and myself thus making it easier for the works to affect a viewer. Secondly, these everyday items have become an inseparable part of our existence; we value them while neglecting them, which is also a metaphor for the "invisible" self-manipulation and self-struggle. In a similar manner to Bas Jan Ader works, my photographs exhibit personal abnormal behaviors and express feelings of sadness and hopelessness through a minimal visual representation. Photography is a means of recording, which solidifies many moments in our lives. For me, this collection is both an independent photographic work and a record of my performances.

I have many self-portraits in this body of work. Self-portraiture has a long history; and is characterized as a reflection of the inner self of a person. From surface representations to representations of the inner-self, Self-portraits not only represent the appearance of a subject, but also convey the complexity of human nature and emotion while recording one's cultural background and environment. In my opinion, the landscape photographs in this collection are even more important than my performances. I took photos of these landscapes, over a period of two years, after coming to the U.S. The time, serenity and peace hidden in these pictures express my feelings and emotions in an authentic and subtle manner. The natural aspect of nature and our lack of control over it allow one to express their emotion in a more dispassionate way. When we try to understand the landscape, we will think about why it was taken, how is it presented, who took the image; these are all factors that need to be considered to truly understand what is being represented. The central theme of this body of work is sadness. The pieces are a kind of magnification of my individual thoughts and subjective influences. Thus within this collection, the pictures exemplify bright colors creating a radiant feeling, while the content of each photograph is "morbid". Similarly, in my video works I simplify the visual effects through the use of childlike drawings in conjunction with words/text, thus strengthening the contradictory mental experiences. Within all my pieces I

utilize a multitude of methods to express how I feel as an individual experiencing two different cultures, countries and languages.

In designing this book, my major concern was to provide a reading experience that is identical to my designated themes. Different from conventional books, this book can be unfolded from the left and right sides at the same time, which enables a reader to view three pages, rather than two, at the same time. This design liberated me from the classic rigid reading mode. Based on a pre-configured sequence, one can develop their own reading sequences through different combinations of pages, which can generate different narratives. Although this photo collection mainly manifests the self-manipulation of individuals, the design of the book itself corresponds with my video works, and allows for a unique style of storytelling.

Additionally, William Wegman's works have greatly inspired me. His pieces often depict abnormal behaviors that are humorous and hilarious, corresponding strongly to my intentions for this work. In his video *Spelling Lesson* (1973-1974), he unsuccessfully attempts to teach his dog English; this proves to be a futile act. This video correlates to my *Translation* piece. Due to my exposure to both Chinese and American culture, which are quite distinct from each other, I have experienced diverse integration and a unique personal impact. The text in the video *Translation* is a little story I wrote, an abbreviation of a relationship that I had, which begins in China and ends in the US. I translated the original "Chinese" text into English through Google and then corrected it; following this, I translated the modified English into Chinese, once again utilizing Google. I repeated this action several times; the result was that the story became so distorted that even the word she eventually translated into him.

In the video *Translation*, the overall translation speed goes from slow to fast, mimicking the manner in which a foreigner learns a second language. It conveys the feeling generated from experiencing the learning curve, as well as, the difficulties in expression, the misunderstanding in communication and other experiences, which happen prior to experiencing high language proficiency. In fact, the viewer undergoes a similar experience when watching the video; since the translation accelerates it becomes difficult to catch up with the changes in the text, thus making it so that a viewer is able to grasp only a few words while trying to understand the text/story. This piece discusses the different feelings one experiences when translating two languages; even I tried to correct the translation, the consequence was that the meaning of the story still changed and was different from the original.

Understanding does not depend on what we said, or how much we did, but the

decision is how much information can the viewer accept. Communication is the most important way to express oneself and receive information from others. It is difficult to realize all-around exchanges between two distinct cultures. Due to cultural differences, our thoughts are firmly in the control of the language, environment and other external conditions in the exchange. This body of work describes the control exterior influences have over a person and a person's struggle against the control created by language and culture. The photographs in my work mainly express the emotions experienced upon encountering this conflict and struggle.

To conclude, I wish to quote the Philosopher Kierkegaard who noted, "The truth is a snare: you cannot have it, without being caught. You cannot have the truth in such a way that you catch it, but only in such a way that it catches you."

Committee Approval:

Christine Shank

Date

Director of MFA Program/ Assistant Professor

Willie Osterman

Date

Program Chair of Fine Art Photography/ Professor