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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School of Art

In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Silence So Loud

By

Qian Li

Date: August 15th, 2013

Silence So Loud

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TABLE OF CONTENT

4	Abstract
5	Section I: Context
	A. Personal Background
	B. Being a Science Major
	C. Artistic Influence
9	Section II: Body of Work
	A. Ideas Behind the Artwork
	B. Problem Solving and Evolution
	C. Painting Process
	D. A Combination of Painting and Installation
18	Section III: Conclusion
	A. Preparing the Show and Opening Night
	B. The Future
22	List of Images
23	Bibliography

Abstract

In this thesis I will examine the relationship between dolls and human beings through a series of oil paintings and installations that involve the arrangement of canvases and small, three-dimensional figures. The dolls that I paint are a metaphor for how humans interact. I also have incorporated language into the paintings. By lining up paintings of the dolls to “say” several short statements, each mouth on a doll’s face is formed to represent part of a spoken word. Although the dolls attempt to say something, silence still remains. In the following document my childhood influence, and struggle of transforming from a science major to an artist are discussed as important parts of my background. Two artists are mentioned in relation to my thesis: Jimmy Liao, who remains the biggest influence on my work, and Wang Xiaojin, who has a similar painting style as mine.

Section I: Context

A: Personal Background

It is difficult to deny the influence Confucianism has on the education system in present-day China. For a population of 1.3 billion, carving out one's success by ascending socioeconomic ranks lies deeply within qualifying examinations and rigorous study. Also tested through this meritorious means of advancement are one's social and psychological limits in a highly competitive environment. The amount and level of difficulty of material presented in class, tests and homework is far beyond what most teenagers can endure.

I love everything about my country except the education system prior to college, which is the part that, to me, is questionable. While growing up in Beijing, I attended all the best schools, so the competition was even more fervid. Aside from going to school Monday through Friday, I attended extracurricular classes at outside institutions to reinforce the subjects I learned at school. This was not required, but if I didn't attend these classes while everyone else did, I would run the risk of falling behind. Every day after school was filled with extra academic exercises with no time for leisure. After each exam, students are ranked in their own class as well as among the students in the entire grade across the school. For the high school and college entrance exam, students were ranked among the students in the whole city. The score on these two tests determines which high school or college you can attend. Everyone has only one chance, and one point can make the difference between attending a top-tier school or a vocational school. In contrast with the United States, a lot of the art students in China attend special high schools that concentrate specifically on art. These students still go through intense training in order to attend

art colleges, but those institutions pay little attention to other subjects. My parents did not allow me to even think about going into the field of art. I was only allowed to dabble in art as a hobby.

My future was always meticulously planned. I started playing piano at the age of 4, studying art at 5, reading all kinds of classic literature beginning in elementary school, and attending the best schools in Beijing on the science track. However, I felt overwhelmed by the pressures rather than excitement, and these societal pressures produced an internal strife that has contributed to the theme of my artwork.

B: Being a Science Major

I studied biology as an undergraduate in college, so I could only afford to devote time to one art class each semester. Because of this I did not have a solid direction for my art. Considering the lack of overlap that my chosen field had with the fine arts, I had a great amount of trouble applying to art graduate schools. However, I did not regret being a science major because biology is my second interest after art. The understanding and appreciation of science has no conflict with artistic practice. On the contrary, the meticulous aspect of science plays a positive role in my process of thinking about and making artwork, forcing me to maintain a sense of logic while doing things in wild ways. Although often I had to run to a Cell Physiology test right after printing a woodcut, shifting my thinking between two completely different tasks can stimulate fresh ideas from opposite perspectives. Creating artwork during study breaks following intense heavy scientific work was my way of spending leisure time.

Science can be an art form in itself. My main concentration in biology was cell and developmental biology, dealing with genetics and cellular revolution on a microscopic level. For

exam purposes, I took cross-sectional pictures of various organisms under the microscope. Often I was fascinated with these images that were artistic in their structure and pattern. In fact, some of the abstract portions of my paintings come from memories of those structures and the organic form and fluidity often mirrors my artistic style.

I do not believe there is so much difference between art and science; a person does not have to be defined as a science or a liberal arts person. These two fields are not diametrically opposed; rather they intermingle and reinforce each other. I always introduce myself to others in this way: I am an artist who knows how to do science.

C: Artistic Influence

Eastern art and artists have been and remain the biggest influence on my work. In the Chinese language, one of the two characters that composes the word “art” means “beauty,” so this implied meaning leaves people, especially the general public, with the impression that a piece of artwork has to be beautiful. For a long time I thought the same way, trying to get as much detail and realism as possible in my artwork. The first major realization I made in the art field was realizing that art does not necessarily have to look aesthetically appealing since the concepts and ideas are just as important as the skill level of the artist. Since then I began to appreciate and focus more on the intentions behind each piece of art.

One of the artists who has been an influence on my practice is the Taiwanese illustrator Ji Mi (Jimmy Liao). I am attracted to not only his beautiful illustrations in each of his napkin-sized paperback books, but also to the characters and stories in them that create a sense of fantasy and

touch hearts across generations. Most of the subject matter is universal so readers can associate and relate to memories from their previous experiences. Each page is divided into two parts, one side with cartoon images and the other side with story text in poetic form. Jimmy writes in a poetic form that brings a sense of romantic yet somber feelings to the viewer. The subject matter revolves around everyday issues that resonate with the audience. Immersing yourself in each page of his short stories is like going into different aspects of Jimmy's inner world, which consists of universal feelings like loneliness, stress from life's pressures, or anxiety about failure. Many of Jimmy's stories treasure the purity of childhood hopes and dreams.¹ There is one scene in *The Moments* that describes a boy and a dolphin sleeping together on a white pillow. The caption says, "How come my childhood yearnings can only come true in dreams?"² This question is certainly asked by the boy, and possibly by Jimmy, and at the same time, by me, as a reader.

I have always been interested in reading literature and writing. What I find fascinating is that traditional painting and writing, two fields that are not normally combined, can be integrated. Jimmy's use of words and sentence structures are so simple; however, sometimes these lighthearted, seemingly superficial, words have deeper hidden meanings, forcing the reader to investigate more afterwards. After reading many series of Jimmy's works, I asked myself, what if I indirectly incorporated language into paintings, exposing the viewer to hidden messages? I thought this might add significance to the work, so that the art can speak for itself.

¹"Making picture books for adults." *Taipei Times*, January 10, 2003.

²Jimmy Liao, *The Moments*, (Liaoning, China: Liaoning Education Press, 2001)

Recently I have been trying to find artists who have a similar painting style as mine. I discovered a contemporary Chinese oil painter, Wang Xiaojin, who incorporates elements from traditional Chinese painting into his oil paintings. I was surprised to see how many similarities, in subject matter and painting style, he and I share. Even though Chinese oriental painting remains in the mainstream of Chinese art, I have never had any formal training or experience in it. I am indirectly and inevitably influenced by it from observing ink paintings that hang everywhere, from my house to public places. The more I paint, the more I am surprised to find traces of traditional Chinese art in my work, which I use subconsciously and unintentionally. From Wang Xiaojin's paintings I see transitions between sharp focus and lack of clarity, a consistent mood, and a harmonious atmosphere. This leaves me feeling visually comfortable yet intrigued. Most importantly, his work gives me the desire to discover deeper meaning behind the subtlety, which is the goal that I pursue in my painting endeavors.

Section II: Body of Work

A: Ideas Behind the Artwork

For my thesis, *Silence So Loud*, I created paintings of dolls that are metaphors for human behavior. These dolls are controlled by their master, as if on a "stage," just as humans are restrained by factors such as family, society, peers, and even themselves. They try to perfect themselves in order to fit into the social norms. In the process of blindly following this "expected" path on the "life stage," we lose the chance and even desire to be the "true character" we once innately longed for. In other words, we lose our identity.

I examine the relationship between dolls and human beings through a series of oil paintings and installations that involve the arrangement of canvases and small figures made from popcorn. Each character in my paintings is a combination of a doll and a human being, both real and fantasy. Each face distinguishes itself from others by its unique features. However, they are all given porcelain skin, and empty, dark hollowed eyes ironically hinting at a superficiality of appearance. I also incorporate language into the paintings. The dolls are lined up to “say” several short statements by changing the shape of their mouth. Although they all are making an attempt to say something, silence still remains.

As mentioned in the previous section, my major influence comes from personal experiences of reading classical books and attending the top schools in China to major in a field that was not my first choice; I am exhausted from being the perfect student. The dolls are a representation of myself: fighting against the superficial, and looking for the “ideal character” that I desire to become.

B: Problem Solving and Evolution

My first inclination was to paint a series of more than 60 same-sized, doll-face paintings, which, when lined up in order, would convey a statement of seven sentences through changing mouth shapes. During my first-year grad review, some professors argued that the numerous faces were too similar and they suggested varying some of them to create surprises. I took their advice and decided that instead of doing the entire statement, I would reduce my project to three groups of dolls “speaking” three simple sentences that would best represent my idea, my working

process, and my future wish. The faces would say, “I’m a Doll,” “Dreams Fade Into Reality,” and “Be Free.”

Each of the now completed groups contains doll face paintings of various sizes, lined up in horizontal, vertical, or S-shaped directions to “pronounce” a sentence through changing mouth shapes. This decision was not made until two months after the beginning of my second year. Several times I almost gave up the “talking dolls” idea and resigned myself to working on individual paintings. I eventually realized that this, while not individual paintings, was one uniform project. The start of a new sentence involved not only one painting, but a number of them divided by each syllable, and all of them had to aesthetically match the ones in other sentences too. Often, a painting looked strong on its own; however, it stood out as awkward in a group due to the color or face shape. Inevitably I found myself making adjustments or massive changes so the three series as a whole created the same atmosphere. Finally, I overcame all the difficulties and began actively producing the thesis show.

C: Painting Process

Over the summer, I developed a technique where I sprayed water on top of oil colors to create abstract elements in the background. Since water and oil do not mix, small, interesting bubbles and organic textures formed on the canvas. The first layer was usually washed out, so a glazing technique followed to accomplish a sense of depth. Layers of transparent colors on top of each other create a sensation of luminosity, giving the illusion that light is emanating from within the painting. Plus, additional touches of other colors help relate the doll figure to the background in a more seamless way. I successfully used this technique on the backgrounds of my larger

paintings. Many people have told me that the background reminded them of mountains. To me, the abstraction allows viewers with different cultural backgrounds to apply their own interpretations of what is in front of them. Relating the image to specific objects is not necessary. The image can be anything, or nothing. On an aesthetic level, my primary intention of making the background abstract was to contrast with the representative nature of the doll figures, creating a sense of balance. The hue and intensity of the background's color pallet largely represent the world that doll is currently living in, or wishes to live in. On a psychological level, my artwork is really about the freedom of creating during the process—my freedom of manipulating two opposing properties to create a synthetic form of harmony, and the natural state of being under the influence of will and man.



Qian Li, *Be Free No. 1*, 2013

Oil on canvas, 24''x 36''

In contrast to the complete freedom in making the background, the placement of the doll on top of it required meticulous consideration. Normally, after I took a picture of the background and imported it into the computer, I dragged a cut-out of a doll figure onto the background using Photoshop. This Photoshop method allowed me to minimize mistakes by helping me visualize a possible finished composition before starting each painting. Unlike the technique used in the background, the dolls were painted in a relatively opaque manner, with some additional glazing of colors done on the skin tone as finishing touches. Color transitions on the face are subtle with very fine brushstrokes to illustrate a doll's porcelain-like skin. Since each of my characters had a mixture of human and doll features, I sometimes transformed a human face into a doll's, and other times I added human features to a doll's face. Each doll figure was freeze-framed in the midst of a syllable in a chosen phrase. It was not important to me whether or not the audience recognized what the dolls were saying, as it was not my main priority. I did, however, ask my friends to accurately pronounce each syllable of the sentences, so I could use their mouth shapes as references for the dolls' faces. The dolls in the paintings are dressed in traditional Chinese dresses, which best represent my cultural background. In order to blend the figure into a relatively flat background, I matched the background texture with the dress patterns, so the figure and its environment would share a similar atmosphere.

I kept one main color scheme in each series of paintings, which reflected the content and tone of the sentence. A darker blue for the "I'm a Doll" series, and purple for the "Dreams Fade Into Reality" series seemed appropriate. When it came to the "Be Free" series, the color palette was lighter with a dominant greenish-blue and the addition of a variety of other colors. I took into account the relationship between the paintings and their corresponding words. The girl in

the painting saying the diphthong “ea” for the word “dreams” is laying down, dreaming of a fantasy world. When transitioning to the “fading” paintings, dark, blurry textures in the background become predominant. All the ones in the “Be Free” series have a fantasy-like background consisting of lighter colors, as if the figures have escaped to another imaginary world. It took me some time to include the largest painting in the “I’m a Doll” series. While I like to rework unsuccessful paintings, the main character of this painting, which is a complete human spitting dolls out of a microphone, did not match the entire project. However, after reworking it for several days, I felt since it was the beginning of the whole project, starting with the human and the doll being separated was not a bad idea as it reiterated the flux between what is a human and what is a doll. The “Dreams Fade Into Reality” series is the largest and is positioned in the middle of the three series. In order to exaggerate the struggle from the result of being controlled, I incorporated three-dimensional human figures made with popcorn with several smaller painting panels suspended from the ceiling and others tilted at an angle off the wall. I also tilted the paintings off the wall in the “Be Free” series, but without any strings attached to the paintings, as the figures are free from “control” unlike the “Dreams Fade Into Reality” pieces.



Qian Li, *I'm a Doll*, 2012

Oil on canvas, 4.5' x 4'



Qian Li, *Dreams Fade Into Reality*, 2013

Oil on canvas, thread, popcorn on mannequins, 11' x 7.5' x 2'



Qian Li, *Be Free*, 2013

Oil on canvas, 6.5' x 3.5'

D: A Combination of Painting and Installation

The overall mood of my artwork has a theatrical effect, mainly due to the influence of my early childhood experiences growing up around film crews. When I was young and when there was not too much of a school burden, I had the opportunity to play roles in films and TV series. Whether acting, observing others, or watching the postproduction editing and voiceovers, these experiences became imprinted in my memory and certainly had a subtle influence on my artwork.

With the paintings lined up together, “talking” through the changing mouth shapes, and the suspended panels and popcorn men projecting off the wall and the floor, my piece is essentially a combination of painting and installation. Each one of the three series of paintings is composed of several paintings of doll-like figures making an attempt to speak; however, silence

remains and no one can hear them. This implies that our desires are suppressed and controlled by internal and external forces. In the centerpiece, "Dreams Fade into Reality," my primary intention was to express the illusion of having control over the forces and people in our lives when really, we are blind to how much control these forces exert on us. Ironically, sometimes the forces come from our own subconscious. As much as an individual can try to mold and craft a desirable existence, there is also uncertainty about how our unconscious mind influences those choices and decisions.

Popcorn figures are tied to the faces in the paintings while some faces are controlling the popcorn people. There is no clear clue as to who is manipulating who, because "Life is a stage." No one can distinguish who is the master and who is the doll, or maybe the master is simply another part of us. Regarding materials, my original plan was to wrap thread around the figures. For me the focus of this installation was the arrangement and gestures of the human figure while the addition of other materials on the surface of figures was a secondary priority. Finally, I chose popcorn as a material because it is often sold by vendors as a snack at theatrical productions. This added to the "stage" metaphor.

I believe people's unconscious or true natures drive them to make the choices that appear to give them freedom. Even if I carried out all my parents' wishes and found success in a science field, there would be the lack of emotional/intellectual freedom, causing unrest in me because I would not be doing what fulfills me. This is why the eyes of my dolls remain dark and empty. Through free will, however, by listening to my desires that are my true self, I found the power to "Be Free," as the title of the last series of paintings proclaim.

Section III: Conclusion

A: Preparing the Show and Opening Night

Before my "installation" date, I played with the show arrangement on Photoshop and tried to find the best arrangement. The curator allowed me to exhibit my three series of paintings on three adjoining walls to complement each other. This allowed more room between the three so the "popcorn people" and suspended paintings did not crowd each other in the space. During opening night, most people could tell the dolls were speaking, but they could not tell that they were actually saying the same sentence as stated in the title before reading my artist statement or listening to my explanation. My committee had asked me beforehand if it was important to let the audience know what the dolls are saying. Due to my personality, I chose to express my idea in a subtle and indirect way. As I mentioned in the previous section, I used the fact that no one could understand what the dolls are saying to show that our inner desire is being ignored. Additionally, I like the audience to be intrigued by having several levels of experience—the more complex the interaction between the audience and my work, the more I enjoy seeing their reactions.

I was also surprised with the feedback I received from my audience. They said the popcorn mannequins reminded them of *Shibari*, which is “an ancient Japanese artistic form of rope bondage that has many styles and uses.”³ *Shibari* conveys the feeling of being trapped in a rope and responding to external pressure. From a human psychology point of view, the Japanese have a tradition of suppressing their inhibitions by having a dominant person manipulate a

³Hikari Kesho, "Shibari," *Hikari Kesho - Fine Art* (blog), <http://www.hikarikesho.com>.

submissive person by using tools like ropes. This response occurred mainly because many of my friends come from China and have long been influenced by Japanese culture. Although this was not my intention, I can see the controlling part indirectly related to my work to a certain extent. My biggest regret during the opening night was that I did not communicate enough with the westerners, who made up the majority of the visitors, or the deaf audience who sometimes communicate through lip reading. For this reason, the audience response I received may be biased, and not necessarily an objective one. If I have a chance in the future, I would like to hear feedback from the deaf population that may view my work from a completely different perspective.



Thesis Show, Bevier Gallery, 2013



Thesis Show, Bevier Gallery, 2013

B: The Future

I will continue examining the same theme using a similar style. I am still interested in the water and oil technique and want to further explore it and push it to the limit. Considering my personal background, I want my paintings to have both traditional Chinese and western feelings, and I hope to gradually develop my own visual signature. Although painting has always been my main focus, installation and video works are also an important part in my work. Sometimes an idea can be approached and expressed from different angles, which require the challenge of touching other fields of art.

My study at R.I.T has been the happiest two years of my life. Here I could finally devote all my time to a field that I enjoy the most. Upon finishing my thesis show, I asked myself, “Did I really find my “true character,” and “Am I really able to ignore all the pressures and be myself?”

The answer is yes, and no. I found my true character but being able to become it requires effort. It is so difficult largely because part of the human condition is not static. Traditionally, we evaluate ourselves through neatly defined jobs, genders, and roles in relationships that tell others who we are, but once removed, there is a feeling of identity loss. Who are we if we aren't a student or an artist? Your "true character" cannot be lost, so these titles and roles are not valid ways to define your sense of self. So how do we measure this "trueness?" What part of us does not change? Simply, it is our consciousness; it is our state of being. In order to be my true self, I have to follow what I decide each day and be the person I want to be in each moment and not get caught in expectations or titles or labels or roles that provide false comfort. This process is never easy in my life but I am working on reaching my goal. I already let art brush past me once by choosing to pursue another major as an undergraduate student. Now no matter where I end up, and whatever I do in the future, I will grasp art tightly, and never let it go again.

List of Images

Img. 1. Qian Li, *Be Free No.1*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 24'' x 36''

Img. 2. Qian Li, *I'm a Doll*, 2012, Oil on canvas, 4.5' x 4'

Img. 3. Qian Li, *Dreams Fade Into Reality*, 2013, Oil on canvas, thread, popcorn on mannequins, 11' x 7.5' x 2'

Img. 4. Qian Li, *Be Free*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 6.5' x 3.5'

Img. 5. Thesis Show, Bevier Gallery, 2013

Img. 6. Thesis Show, Bevier Gallery, 2013

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