

Paintings Assembled under the Current Circumstances

Text | Hsu Chu-chun

Curator Douglas Fogle curated the exhibition *Painting at the Edge of the World* at the Walker Art Center in Minnesota in 2001.¹ This exhibition took the "hybridization" and redefinition of painting and other media in the 1960s as the point of departure. It attempted to respond to the embattled status of painting in the wake of modernism. Within this exhibition, since painting seemed to suffer from the anxiety of death, Fogle posed the question: "Is painting a mode of thought? Is there a philosophy of painting that extends beyond the confines of the medium? Where does the edge of the canvas end and the edge of the world begin?"

Today, the expansive and ever-changing medium of painting and perhaps concerns about painting are still challenging and haunting artists. Yeh Chu-sheng has always been using painting as a medium to convey his thoughts and art. Perhaps for him, all the concerns should return to the fundamental issues: How do artists deal with the material and the world in front of them?

The final term of Yeh's abstract drawing class was held in the gallery of his solo exhibition at Solid Art. Walking through the gallery, the concerns, anxieties, and worries about painting seem to have faded. Leaving behind Paul Delaroche's declaration, "From today, painting is dead" or the assumption "the end of art," a group of artists-to-be, who are freshmen from art school, lined their drawing exercises on the floor. It is a classic scene: artists experiment with different techniques and media to depict various forms of trees which they have photographed. Such training is simple yet challenging. When the artists focus on paper, they must be honest in treating all the texture, lines, expression, and space to realize their thoughts and feelings on paper through the comprehension and mastery of the depicted objects and materials. Such painting can only be understood "under the current circumstance." The artists interact with the surroundings with their bare hands, eyes, and mind, dealing with the materials and further turning their emotions and perceptions into forms. At the moment, the painting surface is just the end. The works only provide what it is. Merely by looking at

¹ Fogle, Douglas ed. *Painting at the Edge of the World*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center. 2001.2.

works placed disorderly in the gallery, we perceive the world from the artists' perspectives, silently unfolded "under the current circumstances."

From this abstract drawing class, we can almost realize how artists form their work from the very beginning; meanwhile, it may not be sufficient and accurate to label Yeh's work as painting concerning environmental issues. If painting starts from a meticulous observation of objects and will be wrapped up on the canvas, then, for Yeh Chu-sheng, the depicted objects and the point of departure for his creation would be the "order and disorder" found in nature, the evolution and changes of society, the dynamic surroundings, and the inner "retreat," "criticism" and introspection of artists. Instead of direct response, the artist assembles external changes and inner awakening into his work, allowing the materials to go beyond their ideological potential.

With the solo exhibition entitled "2012; 2021," Solid Art marks out the current time for Yeh Chu-sheng and takes the year 2012 as the reference point. It allows the artist to look back through a span of ten years and making it possible to look beyond individual works for a wider and deeper communication between the artist and his work under the current circumstances.

Therefore, when beholding "2012; 2021," we should include the artist's life experience (rather than the encyclopedic biography) and the gallery space's dynamic process; otherwise, we would just be limited by the works per se.

In 2012, Yeh's studio in Guandu was destroyed by fire located exactly at the current Solid Art site. When the gallery serves as an irreplaceable signifier in a particular time-space, the artist will not consider the space merely as an exhibition venue but a place he has to communicate.

Over twenty pieces from the series "Change," "Come True," "Trial," and "Metamorphosis" reflect Yeh's thoughts and subtle criticism on the environment, ecology, politics, and society. Besides, "River Variation," which runs from the second floor to the ground, and other outdoor installations interact with the environment, respectively. Practices from the abstract drawing class are also displayed in the gallery. Exercise books on the wooden tables represented the scenario when Yeh Chu-sheng invited students to his studio in the past. The interplay of time and space offers various pointers to

interpret Yeh's works, such as social changes, the artist's thoughts and emotions, and the academic legacy and practice. Rather than suggesting a single route, the exhibition is based on the "current circumstances," inviting visitors to rethink or reexamine painting, which seems to be pushed to its limitation today, to explore its potential with the artist from diverse perspectives.

Then, when we turn to the question "Can painting serve as a mode of thought?" and reexamine works of "2012; 2021," especially the installations exclusively created for the exhibition, we may assume that the veteran artist has not been following his familiar experiments with painting techniques. Instead, he applies a more varied and precise visual language to express his personal experiences and perception of his surroundings.

The "Come True" series embodies Yeh's mastery of abstract painting. Although the series deals with marine pollution, it does not explicitly reveal the issue with specific marine icons. Instead, he allows the solid and indeterminate colors to glide freely on the canvas, manifesting both the calm and turbulent presence of the ocean. From the artist's perspective, the "order" and "disorder" coincide in nature. However, a great loss may follow human civilization's development, making it difficult to strike a balance. When conveying such a concept, which continues from his previous work, the artist does not apply specific symbols as usual but gives the voice to canvas and the paint, transforming concrete vocabulary or objects into abstract code. Yeh counts on the visuality and lets the painting do the talking.

To be more precise, Yeh let "materials do the talking" in his painting. A critic once juxtaposed the presentation of "earth, soil, and habitat" in Yeh's work with Spanish artist Antoni Tàpies' methods of applying sand and waste to the canvas and creating a three-dimensional texture. He further pointed out that Yeh's manipulation of materials and physical textures allows him to outperform the simulation of colors and qualities or represent concrete concepts and objects. It is the recollection of material that expresses the coexistence and resonance of the inner thoughts and nature's presentation.² Yeh recently retains the original physicality of materials and even the original qualities of materials, thus forming a synergy within his works.

² Chiang Yen-Chou, Cause and Effect in Environmental Consciousness: Anxiety. great earth. 2000.12.

The installation "River Variation," which is composed of canvas, frames, driftwood, and sand is one of the rare large-scale installations works by Yeh Chu-sheng. He takes the flowing, ink-stained fabric as a metaphor for the river and suggests the scattered frames as the framework of human consciousness. Yeh believes that human consciousness's base will eventually be destroyed by natural forces and reflects his reverence for nature on his minimal modification of the raw materials in his works. "Ruins Graffiti" spread on the terrace is a collage of found objects such as wood, metal, and plastic sheeting, representing the ruins of human activities. Yeh adopts eroded material and keeps all the original forms and structure, having these objects lean against the terrace fence. He then covers all the objects with plastic sheeting, as if the objects have been abandoned and forgotten at the site. Yeh arranges and modifies the found objects on a minimal level and lets the objects' colors and qualities speak for themselves. However, the artist sprays graffiti on top of the natural material to convey his strong emotions. The graffiti reveals the artist's observations and reactions to external phenomena. Here, "abstractionism" or "materialism" are no longer formal experiments but reflect the real world through the artist's eyes.

By allowing the painting to reflect upon itself and let the material do the talk, artworks serve the creator's monologue and the interaction between the creator and materials, space, and the surroundings. When Yeh focuses on the observation and practices of the "current circumstances" and the close relationship with his surroundings, problematique once bothered art historians and philosophers such as "How does painting do the talking?" "How does art serve as a mode of thought?" may no longer be unsolvable. Also, it may not be necessary to count on concrete narratives and statements to describe nature and the environment, personal feelings and emotions, or even the future destiny of painting and art. Once the artist has sufficient confidence in his work, clues to those questions may only exist in the works.