

LI SHURUI

NEW GALERIE

Selected press

Flash Art

THE AWAKENING OF THE INDIVIDUAL by He Jing
Li Shurui, Wang Guangle and Xie Molin discuss physicality
and control in their painting process

He Jing: Let's set aside for now the question of whether your works are "abstract." Something people find interesting in your work is the repetitive act of painting. Li Shurui, you have said before that your repetition is somewhat compulsive in nature, but I think that "repetition" is a kind of choice.

Li Shurui: I think that the majority of the traits of painting are compulsive to a certain extent, because they are too "physical." You must spend several hours a day within that working method. Much of the time you are working very mechanically, and in time it will certainly take on a form of physical logic. The choice to use this method to "kill" a few hours every day eventually becomes a very physical response.

Xie Molin: "Repetition" is sometimes done to get into the task. Actually, it may look like repetition, but each day under repetition is different. I am more concerned with the different possibilities that take form within the repetition process. Then, through repetitive labor, I grasp onto these possibilities and fix them in place, turning them into a new image.

Wang Guangle: I agree with what Li Shurui said about the operation of the body. It is all repetition. For instance, today we are sitting here having a discussion. Tomorrow I will go to my studio to paint. For me, time is repetitive. It is an endless series of mornings and afternoons. The subject of my painting is not an object or a thing that definitely exists, but I think that if you take away that content, time really is repetitive.

HJ: I've suddenly noticed that this repetitive painting process you are discussing is largely a private experience, while what the viewers see in the exhibition is the resulting painting.

WG: I really enjoy this privacy of painting. That's not to say I'll go paint something and never show it to anyone. The overall behavior of society today is more goal-oriented. For me there is this resulting painting. Once you have experienced this outcome, it encompasses that goal. But if you go back to the source, it is still very individual.

HJ: As for controlling the painting process and the resulting image, I would guess that the three of you each have different approaches. Xie Molin certainly revels in the precision of this process.

LS: I don't have any clear expectations. Before, I would make a study and follow it, but in recent years, I have been painting extemporaneously, so I have to spend more time with my paintings. I have actually been avoiding working toward a particular result. I hope the results stray from the trajectory I originally set. Otherwise, there would be no surprises.

XM: I am led by the labor, following possibilities that emerge as I work with the machines and paints in my studio, making decisions throughout the process. These possibilities can be ascribed to "control," and in the labor process, I gain feedback and come across surprises. These surprises prompt me to make judgments.

HJ: So in the end, are you controlling the outcomes or are the outcomes controlling you?

WG: A little of both. For example, the repetitive motions in my works form into a pattern, and I set this pattern, but a lot of the time, when you get halfway through it, you realize that you are being controlled by a picture. At that point, you become a part of the brush, serving to complete this picture. So it's a little of both.

HJ: This calls to mind two things that could be more or less the same or very different: "painting" and "producing an image."

LS: I think that all three of us lean toward "painting," because as the physical experience accumulates, something akin to faith begins to emerge within the overall process. I would define this chemical reaction as the watershed that divides "painting" from "producing an image." In these days, producing an image is very simple work. You can put it into an intensive artificial mode of production. But I think that bodily participation is a very essential component of painting.

HJ: In my experience, the "painter" is a very traditional concept. As for the distinction between "painting" and "producing an image," I don't think it's so clear. There is a lot of overlap.

WG: None of us strictly fit into "image" painting. I think that in the Chinese context, "image" refers more to figurative painting, but I still tend to call myself a "painter." That is to say, I am more concerned with the process, and guiding this process. As I work, an outcome will inevitably emerge. I can't say, however, that I have not considered the final outcome, and so in the artwork, these are a unified whole. I cannot choose between "not considering the image" and "considering the image."

XM: I don't know whether Li Shurui feels that tools have a strong influence over her, but for me, owing to the intervention of these new creative tools, I have come to a different understanding of the once familiar academy approach to painting. Of course, these outcomes are intentional. I have not put too much thought into the "production of images." I pay a lot of attention to the operation of the process.

HJ: It is perhaps not quite so apparent in Li Shurui's paintings, but there is a very strong material quality to Wang Guangle's and Xie Molin's painting practices, including what we see in the final outcome — such as the components that expand beyond the frame (as in Wang Guangle's "Coffin Paint" series). This immediately raises the question:

LI SHURUI
NEW GALERIE

Flash Art

Is it sculpture? For instance, Wang Guangle speaks of one layer of paint covering the next. As time passes, we can see this as a “sculpting” process. Why is this painting rather than sculpture?

XM: I think that my artworks are still very traditional paintings; it's just that the material aspect lies in the texture of the paint, leading to a different visual effect. I think that sculpture is still three-dimensional space. I graduated from the mural department, and in mural painting, there is the concept of “relief.” I think that my works are closer to this. They are not entirely three-dimensional.

WG: My works perhaps touch on relief. I am actually interested in the square frame. As long as it is limited by these four borders, then it is painting. Meanwhile, I also engage in some independent projects, placing my work method for painting directly on the wall. When it becomes monochrome, then it is impossible to distinguish between painting and sculpture. But that doesn't matter. I don't make that distinction.

As for the “material aspect” you mentioned: when you reveal a material, I don't care if it is sculpture or painting. People often compare my work to Mark Rothko. He reduced material to its bare minimum, thus revealing the paint or highlighting its spiritual nature. As for me, the carrier of the spirit is definitely material. There is no spirit without material. This is perhaps a very traditional Chinese understanding. I do not have anything against the material properties of mediums, and even work to reveal them, to make them exist in a way they never have before and thus express my own focus on spirit.

HJ: This intersection with “material” also includes practices in space. For instance, Li Shurui has some painted installation artworks. They touch on the perceptions of people and the body in space.

LS: Actually, the framing of painting, as well as this frontal viewing method — it's a very ancient viewing form, one that comes with a strong sense of security and is different in essential ways from sculpture. Extending from the plane to space, these two things can be intertwined. At a certain point, I personally felt a need to place painting and space together because, on one hand, I revere that primal sense of painting, while on the other, I wanted to expand its dimensions a bit.

HJ: Do you feel that these four borders are a limitation?

LS: I don't feel they are a limitation, just that they have a very primal sense of beauty. It has been around for just so long, and everyone still uses this approach. As for my own needs, I just hope to step out from it a bit.

HJ: In art history, there has already been much discussion of this question of whether or not to step out of the frame.

WG: I think that painting could be better defined as having

an “inner light,” meaning it has its own light. It may require an external light to see it, but there is a light source inside. For instance, objects and forms in classical painting all have lit areas and shaded areas. My works can have a deep tunnel, but also a distinction between light and dark. These are rather traditional paintings. Xie's artworks, and my own “Coffin Paint” series, do not have a sense of light. They are very flat and lack any internal light source.



XM: I think that any work in a four-sided frame will place greater emphasis on frontal viewing. My paintings are viewed through motion, through the sides and different angles. Also, the four-sided frame is a great thing. I think that in a lot of my work, I am actually experimenting with ways that this four-sided frame can continue in its “greatness.”

HJ: The painter works with his body, so there is an energy there. This energy has limits, and it must be accumulated and focused. In some artworks, you can sense the artist's control of his energy — sense him storing it up for release.

WG: I have thought about these

LI SHURUI

NEW GALERIE

Flash Art

things as well. Sometimes people categorize my works as “minimalist.” I don’t know about you two, but I have never set out to systematically understand this thing called “minimalism.” But I am interested in certain concepts that have no direct connection to tradition or this society, for instance, the concepts of “emptiness” or “the void” in religion. Such interests are even more dependent on a medium as their carrier, and so I seek out a “material” as a medium for presenting them. Artworks can actually be dissected into layers. The outermost layer is the surface, and as you go further in, you get to conceptual things, and then finally to a spiritual core. If this structure is reasonable, then it can be infinitely released; it has energy.

HJ: Or perhaps we can understand it in this way: you ultimately find a form on which you can place the energy you wish to convey. Li Shurui was saying it’s something like DNA. It is different for every person. Everyone finds a different outlet, and so in the end, we see different artworks. Xie Molin, up to this point with the mechanical painting, have you found the means for conveying your own energy?

XM: You could understand it in that way. I would go as far as thanking the machine for its participation, because it has allowed me to magnify my energy.

HJ: Wang Guangle once mentioned that “abstraction” is a very convenient term for summarizing what we see in his artworks, but I think if we probe deeper, none of you are in the traditional category of “abstract.” What interests me is that in China these days, many artists are focusing on themes within the framework of historic narrative and sociology. This is of course connected to the rootless “traditions” we have been bringing in since the Cultural Revolution. You three, however, seem to be exploring in a relatively pure aesthetic direction with your works. This is something quite lacking in China at present. Everyone has just skimmed over it with no discussion.

LS: Here, “abstraction” is a market categorization. The three of us are often placed together because when others are considering what to buy, they often place us together. It’s the method used to categorize products on the supermarket shelf. This notion of an “aesthetic” linked to abstraction is a highly class-based distinction, one that has grown increasingly apparent in China over the past few years. Why did this “abstract” market gradually begin to take shape in China? It is because a certain group of people, roughly my age and older, came to feel that it fit with our social status, economic standing and level of appreciation.

XM: As my work has progressed, there has been this process of gradually eliminating subject matter or concrete images, or at least of setting them aside temporarily. I have tried in the past to use images to organize every aspect of my paintings, which is closely connected to the Socialist Realist education I received at the academy.

Coming from this “tradition,” China produced large quantities of figurative paintings around the year 2000, such as those giant portraits. When it came to us, we perhaps started to rethink the practices of that generation of artists, or when we saw those outcomes, we had ideas of our own: Why does our native soil only provide these kinds of possibilities? What about deeper possibilities? What kinds of breakthroughs can we have in our practices? I think that it was on this foundation that I gradually felt my way to where I am today.

HJ: The three of you are all highly representative, whether it is in terms of no longer probing the grand narrative of the past or departing from today’s sociological framework and instead turning to a more microscopic level. Another way to put it is that you have begun experimenting with the possibilities of a parallel exchange with the “West” that we often talk about. In the past, it was relatively semantic and provocative schemas that attracted most of the attention in Chinese contemporary art. Many in the new generation of artists seem to be acting out of hopes for a more equal exchange, including in aesthetics.

WG: I think that this overall trend is part of the awakening of the “individual.” You no longer belong to a unit, but are a unit in your own right. This is the social phenomenon within which our works emerged. In the general artistic ecosystem in China, the focus on “society” is the strongest. The focus on the individual is not strong enough, and this is a task for modernization. Abstract painting may appear quite innocent, but I think that what we are doing is not so simple. The businessman is shaping the rules of business as he trades. In the same way, we are carrying out these dual tasks in today’s China. If we “elevate it,” speaking on the level of the structure of social existence, there have been many “social” explorations, but most of them tend toward materialism and utilitarianism, leaving no place for spiritual explorations. Under such circumstances, if you have this need as an individual, then you will have such hopes for the direction of art, and they all end up folded together.

frieze

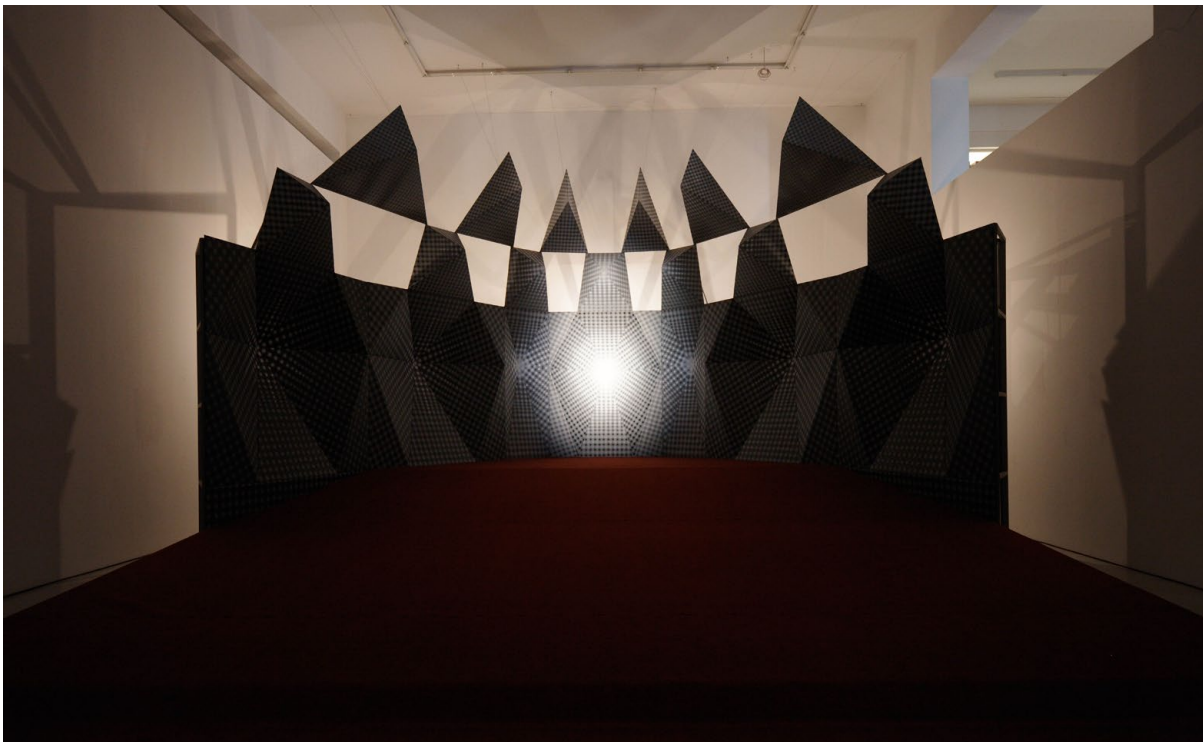
LI SHURUI AT WHITE SPACE, BEIJING, CHINA

by Iona Whittaker

'The Shelter: All Fears Come from the Unknown Shimmering at the Edge of the World', a display of Li Shurui's painting, was less an exhibition, perhaps, than the event of an art work. A single structure occupied the gallery space, standing in darkness but for a beam of light shining onto it from the facing wall. The structure comprised a giant metal framework supporting a total of 106 of Li's paintings, arranged geometrically, with hexagonal indentations in the lower wall and inward-pointing pyramids and tetrahedrons forming a spiked upper level. The paintings were uniform in tone and content: bluish-grey backgrounds with white and dark circles airbrushed onto them in graduated, concentric grid formations. A red carpet led up to a stage created in the curvature of the wall, where the light hit the centre point forcefully. This, we may deduce from the exhibition's title, was 'The Shelter'. Or perhaps not. 'All Fears Come from the Unknown Shimmering at the Edge of the World' might also be what was visualized here – luminescence on some abstract frontier.

Regardless of the metaphysical levels the installation may have aspired to reach, erected in the gallery was a huge frame hung with paintings and lit by bright light. It represented a new incarnation for Li's light-based practice, which she began in 2005; in her own words, Li 'wanted to paint light'. She was photographed wearing a paint-smudged gas mask strung over bleached blond hair, a brassy stare trained on the lens. Much has been pinned to her practice – including Op Art and abstraction – ideas with which she was unconcerned. The level painted fields combining dark or white orbs and bright colours like the nebulous artificial haze of a dance hall (some works retain shadows of figures and objects) have gradually become more restrained; two 'Skylight' paintings from this year, for example, dispense with a rainbow of colours to concentrate on blue and pinkish tones that occupy the canvas in an equable grid to its edges, creating an image of greater flatness.

What of this new installation, 'The Shelter...'? A real glare has been substituted for that of depicted light; this surely represents something of a renege relative to Li's original impetus to 'paint light'. Whereas the paintings share a predefined goal, this installation was contrastingly open-ended, transposing the visceral experience desired from canvases alone into something much more literal, and therefore suggesting a new boundary lying beyond. Li has also produced successful works in three dimensions, namely 155cm (2009) – a set of white pyramids 155 cm high, their tips darkened with graphite – or A Room Named Elevator (2008), involving an open lift stuck between floors, and fluorescent lights. Although 'The Shelter...' is technically masterful, it is wanting as an attempt to synthesize the different aspects of Li's practice: vision (both physical and metaphorical), painting light and creating installations. The sharp peaks and flat planes came to resemble a house of cards, fragile against the beam of light. Borne of the illuminated brume of earlier works, 'The Shelter...' was initially spectacular, but ultimately insubstantial – a necessary process, perhaps, towards an improved realization in the future.



The New York Times

CHINA'S FEMALE ARTISTS QUIETLY EMERGE

by Holland Cotter

[...]

A Different Role Model

Since Ms. Xiong finished her project, China has improved the trucking road and added a mountain tunnel to make Tibet more accessible to Chinese settlers and tourists. It has also prohibited logging in the region. As a result, the caravans and many of the truck stops that Ms. Xiong turned into temporary art installations are gone; her documents are what remains of them.

Ms. Xiong is well aware that "Moving Rainbow," with its blend of activism, anthropology and abstraction, is an anomaly in new Chinese art, much of which, in addition to being only obliquely political, is product-oriented and studio-bound.

Not all of it is, though. A much-noticed young artist, Li Shurui, born in 1981, began her career while still an undergraduate with an ambitious outdoor installation. It consisted of a long line of fabric cubes that stretched across a lake in a remote part of Yunnan Province inhabited by a matriarchal ethnic minority.

Although she has since become best known for her paintings — air-brushed, semi-abstract images of music club interiors executed in a pleasing internationalist mode — she stood out in a recent gallery group show for an installation work that suggested a cross between a Minimalist environment illuminated by fluorescent lights and an open elevator stuck between floors. Some people spoke of savvy references to certain Western art; others noted a vague resemblance to the shot-up sculpture that caused so much fuss in 1989.

A few years ago Ms. Xiao revealed that the primary motivation behind the shooting had not been aesthetic or political, after all, but emotional. She was expressing anguish over her relationship with Mr. Tang, which was going sour. What she was firing at was not the sculpture per se, which was made from two telephone booths and titled "Dialogue," but at her own image in its reflective surface.

For some people the significance of her action was diminished with that revelation, although to anyone viewing it through a Western feminist eye — meaning with the understanding that the personal is political — its significance increased.

As for feminism, Ms. Li, who is married to the painter Chen Jie, acknowledges the force of male chauvinism in the art world, both in China and elsewhere. But, she says, she is still too young, still too much in the stage of discovering herself, to figure out whether she considers herself a feminist or not.

It may say something about her present and future thinking, though, that when asked to name a cultural role model, she pointed neither to other artists nor to contemporary politics, but to the deep past: to the seventh-century ruler Wu Zetian, who through a combination of brains, beauty, unsparring ambition and tenacious hard work, became China's first and only empress.



PAINTING HERSELF INTO A MAN'S WORLD Contemporary art in China is generally dominated by men, but women like Li Shurui, above in the mask she wears while airbrushing, are quietly emerging as artists.
Credit Natalie Behring for The New York Times

LI SHURUI
NEW GALERIE