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Notebook: Conversations with Hoang Duong Cam

by Nguyen Qui Duc

On the conflict between photos and paintings:

There are none. In the past, the thinking that went into paintings was parallel to that of other works, i.e. installations or photographic images. I can't work on two mediums at the same time. When I paint, I think in a different mode, far different from photographic images.

Normally, I paint all the time, which means ideas often come when I am painting. There are mediums that are more suitable with some of my concepts, such as installations or photography. When I see that it's feasible, I switch mediums.

On humor and contexts:

Humor isn't premeditated. In fact, if I feel humorous, then humor arises by itself. As I work, I don't decide beforehand that something should be funny, but the content will determine whether a work has humor or not.

In conjunction with the earliest concepts contained within my previous exhibition *Fat Free Museum*, I painted a series pondering how images are viewed, how they relate to their surroundings, and I noticed the paintings and images are framed in a certain way. When you place an image in another perspective, in a fresh relation to another image, then often the context or another image becomes a new frame for an old picture. In that way, its vocabulary and language evolve, it develops a new meaning on its own, or a new language and vocabulary emerges without me deciding. Maybe that's how humor is born in my works.

On his works differing from works often produced in Viet Nam:

On the surface perhaps my paintings don't use anything Vietnamese, but perhaps they still are about Viet Nam. Even if one wants to escape it, one can't. Even when you directly paint something about Viet Nam, you inevitably place the Vietnamese aspects into a larger context. More accurately, I want to speak of

my emotions, how it is to live here, and that becomes a roundabout, indirect comment, through my own self. I indirectly speak about Viet Nam in that way, through personal emotions and observations.

On new methods and mediums of expressions, computer and digital images:

There are more mediums available now. I can work on many, not only mediums but in terms of relationships within society. A painter can hire another person to execute something, not having to rely on technical things such as Photoshop, but in fact they are only using another means of expression. It's just that when you use Photoshop, it means you are departing from more traditional methods to produce images. Photographs rely on things that are photographed. Montages are more like paintings. It uses the techniques of photography, but in truth it is more like painting.

On methods:

Normally when you cook a dish for a daily meal, and you prepare something good, then that's valuable. But when you prepare a dish that didn't come from anywhere, and manage to make it tasteful then it's a challenge. I do like to present a dish, perhaps rather experimental, but also one that questions how it's to be consumed.

On the presence and experiences of the self in his work:

The presence is deeper than the surface story. Paintings aren't stories. What I would like to do is a literature of paintings, but paintings don't convey a story. It's more what's behind the painting conveying what's behind a story. Perhaps this is due to circumstances. As a child, I loved science, and read many technical books, about the electronic revolution, how it affected human life, then I discovered that, while still developing, Viet Nam has many leading scientists, many with considerable credibility. I think I am the same, meaning that when you think about scientific things, it's not simply about a wish to acquire knowledge, but science engenders a need for hope, to find new realities. Because of this, I have returned to reading books on physics and electronics, and I realize while I am removed from the day-to-day concrete issues, my own curiosity means I am harboring hope.

On research:

I didn't have too many books to read while in school. I read mostly Milan Kundera. When I grew older and moved south, I was exposed to more, but even

then, only to older writers and philosophers. Now I can read more and am exposed to new ways of thinking. I tend to think about a lot of subjects, or different ways to see an issue. As an example, when you look directly at a car, you may only see one driver, at an angle, you realize there's another person, so on... While in school I felt encouraged to pursue a deeper sense of things while doing art. When I started to know what I wanted to do, there was still no internet, and I didn't know much about conceptual art. Later, I read more and understood more. I really connected with it. Later even, obviously with more information, I stopped simply absorbing ideas, but pursued my own while letting other ways of thinking confront and confirm, or "cross examine" mine, but I never became a disciple of any one school of philosophy.

On influence:

I have learned from and have been influenced by many artists, their styles and expressions in terms of idea and technique. I tried to give as much insight as possible into the reason why and how something is done the way it is. I became much more interested in conceptual artists at a later stage, including artist Bas Jan Ader. He always embraced an experimental approach, not only in art making but also in life. He once turned himself into a sailor and did sail out to the open sea. He went missing at sea in the early 1970s. I appreciate such an artist. Of late, I really like Janine Antoni, a female artist active in the making of video, photography and installation. However, my appreciation of these artists is more in their work attitude rather than methodology. I rely on myself when it comes to method and genre.

I am also inspired from stories by Haruki Murakami. He tells stories about robotized but truly human characters. He uncovers some very strange things in normal daily life.

On art interaction:

I am part of the Vietnamese art scene. If you are an artist and close yourself in an ivory tower, your artwork will be out of tune. I am open to every type of art making in Viet Nam, and always keep myself up-to-date on the latest work of friends and colleagues.

I have lots of artist friends, but only few share common points with me in working methods. Many of them are working on stuff that can be related to conceptual art, but we are different in approaching this.

I have connections in Sai Gon with artists of various generations, and what I love about the art community in Sai Gon is that everyone respects each other. Even if they are different and sometimes do not agree with each other, one always recognizes something good in the other's work. As such, although you cannot witness the artists warmly welcoming each other or happily hanging out together, they are actually very appreciative of each individual's work.

My group consists of Vietnamese national, overseas Vietnamese and expatriate artists, but we share many common points, e.g. the interest in the general public or in the critical idea of an artwork. These drive us closer to each other. Naturally, when you work together often, you grow more intimate in life. The work practice helps develop a joint working method and our friendship.

On findings from trips oversea:

The first thing I paid attention to was the life of artists, specifically what it is like for an artist in a given place. It was obvious to me that being an artist is different from San Francisco to New York, and from Italy to Germany. Depending on the living environment, an artist could be exposed to more pressure in terms of money or could suffer from less privacy in the public; but the common thing is that every artist managed to find a way to adapt to and continue in his living environment. I read about artists like Andrea Zittel, she used to live in New York and she used to live in a desert.

I also noticed what the artists are like in relation to their art. There are artists who seem to lead a white collar's life but do make good art, and there are artists whose art making is very organizational and whose artworks appear less self-expressed but the artists themselves are very creative and "artistic" upon meeting.

I am not sure what kind of artist I am. Given my working environment and my lifestyle, it would be interesting and most suitable to position myself somewhere between the objective and the subjective.

On the latest series of works 'Projecting into the night what has gone with the dawn':

This series was inspired from my thoughts about science, and then the universe, such as quantum physics or astrophysics. More specifically, it's not only the desire for knowledge but also the hope that they gain through studying science.

Spectroscopy tells the presence of various metals and factors on a star by recognizing colors, green, blue, red, purple, yellow, etc. That is the way stars are studied. I would like to use layers and colors in a similar way in my paintings. These paintings are therefore rather colorful. What I care about is not only the aesthetic aspect of the paintings but also what seems to be related to the quantum, or the expressions in physics study using colors.

On the two major components of these paintings: color patches and human figures:

Neither of these two components appears before or after the other, nor simultaneously. However, what I would like to create is a multi-layered space and open it up beyond the horizon, which can give viewers the feeling of looking into the universe but still able to see figures and stories and even the Milky Way. Stars are lined up and take the form of hands or faces. In many instances, the shapes would relate very much to human figures, the human spirit, and the feeling of watching propaganda posters. If you want to know why the present is as such you will need to look deep into the past. In the science of the universe, the farther scientists look physically into the universe, the more backwards they are able to look into the past of our earth. I see the meaning of the Milky Way under the same light. If you can somehow see the stars in figures that represent the human spirit, you get an interesting question to address.

On the video clips that accompany the paintings:

The title of the show is 'Projecting into the night what has gone with the dawn.' It implies the thing that is projected does not exist and the projection will soon fade away. I want this title, together with the paintings, to express a hope, a certain hope.

There are two accompanying video works. The first one refers to the elephant: a very big thing, physically present, yet very difficult to figure out and see through its nature. This reminds me of something of the chaotic picture in this cultural context. The second one is about the feelings following a performance in a theatre. The artist keeps returning to the stage to bow to viewers even after the curtain has closed, and this repeats on and on and on, as if they are stuck in a time trap.

On the large size of these paintings:

I started with the usual size of my paintings. Then I realized that the larger the size of the painting, the more space of a universe my viewers and I can become

immersed in. When I worked on the biggest paintings, those measuring two or three meters in height and length, I had to lay them down on the floor to paint. And when I moved around while painting, and changed my viewing angles, another interesting thing was revealed: the object I painted and then revised from different angles looked different from different angles. Large paintings need a certain distance for proper viewing and the look changes at different viewing points.

I like it when my artworks inspire the feeling of humor. Painting is a daily procedure for me, since I was very young. Although I do work on other genres of art making, painting remains a challenge in how to make it more accessible to the general public. Paintings are mostly presented in certain spaces, under good lighting conditions, and they require viewers to have a certain level of knowledge, that's why paintings are so unfamiliar to the larger public. The challenge of painting is therefore, to be able to induce questioning from viewers and entertaining them with that question, so that they will slowly approach the painting, to arrive at the ideas behind the painting's surface. This challenge makes painting interesting.

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