

Pixelating, Tearing Apart, and Regrouping

I.

Spatial relationship has been a continuous thread in Han Bing's painting practice. In works c. 2013, physical and architectural spaces bear the weight of the artist's visual expression. In *Bush* (2013), an outdoor tree is inserted into the interior of a modernist house; *Meeting* (2013) depicts a domed room converted into a deep dry well; and, in *Landscape #5* (2014), a floating billboard of landscape, like the backdrop for a play, is suspended above a pink stage. With these works, Han Bing wanders along the fine line between fiction and nonfiction. She examines and imagines an unusual quotidian reality using painterly thoughts.

In Ball Room (2015), muted depiction of human figures contributes to Han Bing's exploration of spatial relationships. The crowd in, presumably, tuxedos and gowns appear no different than the crystal chandeliers, stairs, or curtains in the background. Thick layers outline shapes, conveying specific objects and figures; but none of this is the subject of this work. The subject is encapsulated in the three bars of colors - white, gray, and deep red - placed high and centered in the painting. The bars are short and clear-cut, and contrast with the rest of the jagged images that resemble visuals from a distorted television screen. With this work, Han Bing seems to be confronting a contemporary dilemma: In an era during which images and symbols saturate reality, how can a painter trust their authenticity on the canvas? Perhaps, at the time she created this piece, for her, the straight-forward bars of color served as a refined extraction of shapes, but also a basic unit she could trust to measure reality.

II.

Han Bing soon started to fight against this dilemma, and fortunately, she was not devoured by this beast-like reality that is so occupied with an excess of images. On the contrary, she strove to identify its chaotic nature and portray the folds and particles within it.

In a group of works represented by *East Wave* (2017), Han Bing used photos she took of street posters and subway advertisements in various cities. She noticed these ready-made images that had been torn apart in many iterations, and then translated the misplaced, ripped-apart, and then adhered parts onto her canvas. In *East Wave*, the artist created at least three layers of images: first, a large area of yellow with white-edge slices sits in the foreground, almost appearing as a yellow iceberg; next, a layer of faint blue and red creates a haze, haunting the background behind the bold yellow shards; at the bottom, a plain grayish-white with creases and neat borderline suggests a darker background lurks below the whitish surface. It seems as if the image's most relevant parts have been

sliced off in large chunks. The gaps, holes, and fragments give off the feeling of an abandoned image as an object.

Other works in the series, such as *Double Screen* (2016) and *Overlap* (2017), include complex layers of images, dazzling the eye to the extent that it is difficult to clarify the elements. The eye experiences a journey full of rhythms while moving around these images, just like a melody with peaks and valleys - along the white edges lie the staggered residuals of fragmented images; some parts are dense like drum beats, some graffiti sprays a line of rap, and some comet-tail-shapes the ending notes with a gradual-weakening effect. The materialized and invalidated images are reborn on Han Bing's canvas. She cherishes the previous life of these images, tracing back the process of separation between an image and the information it carried, and keeps the glue marks, curly edges, uneven wrinkles, and torn and broken remains. She replaces the original images to allow a new one to emerge.

For Han Bing, the creation process is an anti-symbolic one. It is also the reality that Han Bing gives to her painting. She deconstructs all sorts of purposeful images in real life, and these resulting images construct new patterns, rather than new semiotics. In the titles of some works, places like New York City's Mott Street, Canal Street, and Downtown LA are mentioned. They hint at the existence of spatial relationships in a traditional sense. But just as the images are stripped of meaning, the reference to specific locations has nothing to do with geopolitical critiques; rather, the geographical information is an archiving method for the newborn patterns.

III.

If it is presumed that Han Bing started off figuratively depicting images and her portrayals of the folds and particles of reality led to abstract images, then we could argue she is taking it one step further: She knows how to comb a chaotic reality and re-purify it in a more abstract way than an abstraction. It is as if she starts the second round of a juice squeezing process by using a spoon or a blunt tool to scrape fibers remaining on the squeezer's filter. She gets more drips.

She first filters out specific references, thus erasing any portrayal of reality. In *I am not unaware of my reputation for self-seriousness* (2019), a work based on a broken poster of FKA Twigs' new album, the singer's metal earrings could be recognized faintly in the fields of reddish-brown and dark purple. The borders, edges, curls, and wrinkles are all removed. The effects of pixelating and tearing-apart have merged into her recent works, forming a new visual language through their amalgamation.

By banishing the portrayal of reality in her work, Han Bing opens up space in her practice to explore intertwined memories and cultures. Taking *Angels in America* (2019) as an example, the shape of the angel's double wings is based on a photo of a miniature sculpture the artist took at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Its composition recalls Luc Tuymans' painting *Angel* (2004), while its title makes direct reference to the eponymous play written by the acclaimed playwright Tony Kushner. Yet, Han Bing's painting remains anti-symbolic, as the angel in her work does not appear in traditional white, nor does the artist go deep into any of the details of the image of an angel. The artist abstracts the sculpture into two-dimensional outlines on her canvas, as if this is the only way that all three angels - from the Met, Tuymans, and Kushner - could coexist as one.

Such an introduction of memories and cultures may correspond to Han Bing's growing interests in frescoes. From the fresco fragments, which had been traced back to the Renaissance and had been shaped by the power by time, the artist realizes that, through the centuries, the broken and missing parts of a fresco have all become its flesh - it is as if the fragments have taken on an organic quality - changing with the passing of time. They are the shape of memory and culture in themselves. In the meantime, Han Bing switches her medium from acrylic to oil paint. Compared with the former's quick-drying lightness, oil paints are thick and tough, an almost "meat-like texture," as described by the artist. Accordingly, painting becomes a battling process that requires physical wrestling, in which a painter's hand tames her paint, and vice versa. Again, it is as if the work has its own life that shifts and revises as time and forces act upon it.

Spatial relationships remain an important element in her work, and perhaps even more important than ever. In *Cards on Cords* (2019), Han Bing restages a scene she captured from a construction site. The interior of a building has returned to the collapsed state where all bricks, steel bars, grids are not functioning at all. The doors have fallen down, the walls peeled off, and the sawdust is scattered around everywhere. It is a scene ten times worse than an abandoned image. Symbols and their carriers, frameworks with structures have all lost use. Adopting a large format canvas with a height of more than two meters, Han Bing positions her viewers right in front of the hole of the ruins. In its upper right corner, the sketchy brushstrokes evoke a feeling of potential danger from falling stones. However, despite the fact that it's falling apart, the entire scene also inexplicably displays a sense of order, in which pillars stand firm to support vertical structures. It seems that the purpose of the chaos here is not to destroy, but to reveal its inner layers. Like a metaphor, the work combines abstract and figurative visual languages to push the viewers to confront what the artist has seen and felt, as her painting has regrouped those fundamental things that are not taken away by the chaos. One could argue that the spatial relationships manifested in Han Bing's works mirror our relationship with reality.

Perhaps the artist knows well that ruins are the dead-end of dilemmas. Through pixelation and tearing-apart, Han Bing has developed a process of regrouping, and through painting, she conveys these visual experiences to us.

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