

Aesthetics and Memory Work in the Recent Painting of John Young

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John Young began making art at the end of the 1970s, a time of growing uncertainty for international contemporary art, the main clarity in art practice coming from what was being left behind and lost. The intervening years have seen an ongoing dispersal of authority and focus away from specific centres and styles of art production, with contemporary art becoming a platform for a diversity of post-political struggles over identity, meaning and representation. Lacking the collective purpose that formal investigation afforded aesthetic modernism, lacking also the criticality provided by the avant-garde, the challenge to artists has been to establish a sound basis for art making in an era identified with inauthenticity, denaturalization and the elevation of art world structures and processes. For a long time, Young's work, like that of many other artists, reflected a negative position in exploring the artifice of a wholly constructed world, art included. Today, the state of contemporary art is less of a concern for Young, his interest being to address questions of memory and history to the wider culture.

Prior to 2006, major painting cycles by Young focused on problems of art and culture in postmodernism. The *Silhouette Paintings* (1987-1989) referenced reactionary *rappel à l'ordre* painting of the 1920s and 1930s and modernist values of truth-to-materials, suggesting all art was open to cooption and decadence. The *Polychrome Paintings* (1989-1992) explored modernism's closure to further development, some works additionally broaching the ideological struggle between high art and mass culture in modern aesthetic debate. The *Double Ground Paintings* (1993-2005) addressed cultural flattening and fragmentation in globalisation, highlighting issues of origin and identity, temporal and spatial compression and shifting centres and peripheries.

In each group of paintings, Young took the role of 'cultural intermediary', appropriating, combining and recontextualising heterogeneous visual material.¹ The high proportion of borrowed content contrasts with to the emphasis on innovation in modernism, which suggests the preservation and modulation of



Castiglione's *Dream*, 1995-6, private collection, Melbourne

cultural forms is more consistent with the norm in art history. The appropriated images represented the conventional genres of Western painting—still life, figure painting, nature views, scenes of everyday life—but in a debased form, filtered through popular photography of the 1930s and 1940s. Young, however, had little interest in celebrating popular taste or exploring the shifting basis of aesthetic judgment and value in different cultural contexts. Ambiguous, inauthentic and sentimental, the character and range of the borrowed material explored contemporary subjectivity as disconnected, fractured and exposed to fluctuating influences, this having a particular significance for Young.

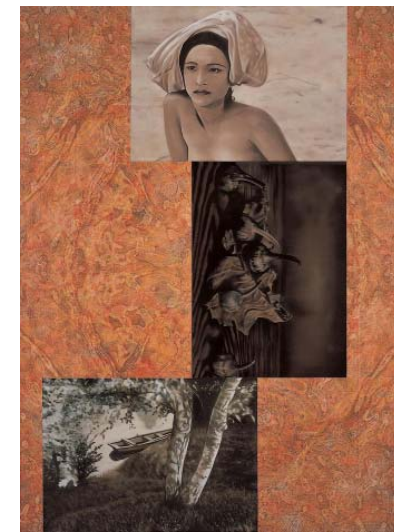
In 1967, as an eleven year old, Young's parents sent him to school in Sydney as insurance against escalating violence in his native Hong Kong inspired by China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Young has visited Hong Kong many times since coming to Australia, but has never returned to live there. Benzi Zhang argues that complexity and ambivalence are integral to the expression and definition of identity in diaspora. Diaspora, he comments, is 'not only a movement across the borders of a country, but also the experience of traversing boundaries and barriers of space, time, race, culture, language and history.'² The backgrounds of the *Double Ground* paintings mostly reference Asian culture and history, beginning with reproductions of the work of Giuseppe Castiglione, a Jesuit missionary and artist who lived in China between 1715 and 1766. The scholarly Castiglione's time in China represents a significant early encounter between European and Chinese culture, Castiglione overcoming incredible barriers to engage with the powerful Chinese Other. Mostly, however, the *Double Ground* paintings expose the clichéd and intransigent imaginaries bound up in transversal cultural relations, other pictorial elements reflecting stereotyped projections of Asianness, the romantic, the banal and the disparaging. Different paintings may match these to prosaic Western cultural tropes such as the representation of the sublime through landscape imagery or the capture of inner experience through portraiture and figure painting. The mannered examples that have been chosen suggest a basis



Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining) *Rising Sun Against Oceanic Sky*, c. 1765, Palace Museum, Beijing (Castiglione's last painting)

disconnection between Western metaphysical aims and the cultural tools that serve their realisation.

The *Double Ground* paintings, informed by Young's situation as insider and outsider to more than one culture simultaneously, took diasporic experience as a model for broader issues of identity and meaning, and their splintering in globalization. To explore identity formation as a contingent process involving the bundling of meanings, Young developed a system of internal relations within his paintings based on the juxtaposition, layering and stacking of appropriated images. In certain sub-sets of the *Double Ground* paintings, he also manipulated the background images in the computer to cancel their original representational content. The resulting distorted forms and patterned fields cite digitization as a new agent of fascination and estrangement in the present. The *Double Ground* paintings equally recognise the role of reproductive technologies in the dissemination and recontextualisation of images, while contrasting historical and contemporary techniques of representation. Images copied from photographs are hand painted onto digitally printed grounds. The residue of the human in the act of copying resists the complete surrender of experience to the technological, but no image in the series is produced directly from life. What is painted derives from book and magazine plates or staged studio photographs, the cycling of pictorial content through several mediums identifying representational practices to be a source of meaning in themselves.



Malay Painting, 2000, private collection, Melbourne

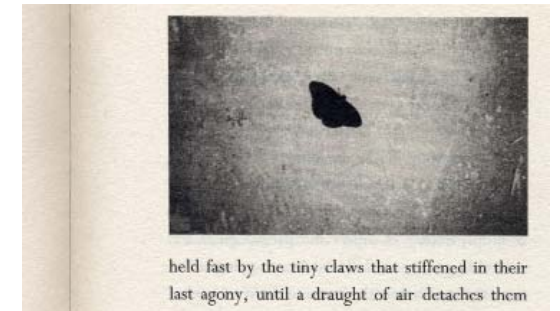
Today, Young sees the years spent exploring the play of diverse semiotic resources and the demise of meaning as an artistic apprenticeship in which he was only developing the means to say something through painting. The art system, however, has not stood still in this time. Howard Becker's 1982 book *Art Worlds* codified the unfolding frames of reference and the various mediation processes that organise contemporary art and provide status for its artefacts as art.³ More than ever, contemporary art seems caught between the endless possibility of altered



Red, Blue, 2005, private collection, Berlin



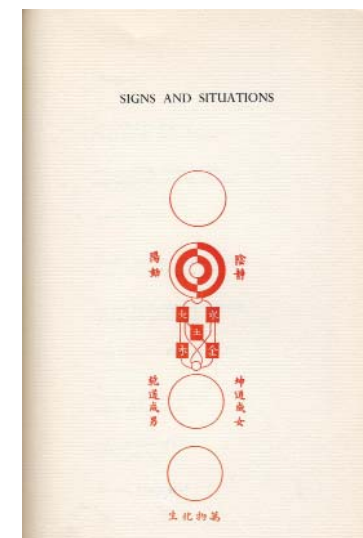
Still from H.J. Syberberg's Parsifal, 1982



W.G. Sebald's use of images for Austerlitz, Penguin, 2011, p. 33

criteria, changed means and new contexts and an even greater sense of closure and negativity. On one side, Nicolas Bourriaud, has notably argued that the principle of social interaction has supplanted aesthetic engagement in contemporary art, collaboration, participation, intervention in contexts beyond the art world and approaches grounded in research defining a valid contemporary practice.⁴ By contrast, Boris Groys sees contemporary art as wholly circumscribed by the art system, the artist's role being reduced to the production of their own public self.⁵

Until recently, exploring a self-referential semiosis has clearly been an undercurrent in Young's practice, providing a fulcrum for investigating the forces at work on the individual and the collective in and between cultures. Yet Young has also recognised the complicity of recent art's fixation on problems of signification and failures of representation. Marc James Léger goes further to argue that contemporary art's involvement in a diversity of 'decentred struggles' in denial of more transcendent issues has removed politics from the social and cultural conflicts produced by capitalism and resulted in 'the de-incapacitation of [previous] avant-garde challenges to the status quo.'⁶ After nearly three decades of confronting the contradictions of contemporary art practice, Young's current interest is to engage the whole culture in overarching questions concerning the shaping of historical memory, a processes implicated in many other issues.



Kenneth White's use of Chinese mystical diagrams in The Most Difficult Area, 1968

Young's current models of practice come from literature and film rather than visual art, notably the works of the Scottish poet Kenneth White, the German academic and writer W. G. Sebald and the German filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. Each deals with decay and destruction - of nature, historical epochs or memory - merging creative practice with critique, although controversially in the case of Syberberg. White and Sebald share a specific concern for the artist's responsibility to society and history. White's idea of geopoetics—where the subject of writing is the pure poetry of the natural world—seeks to realign human relations with nature by restoring poetics to the core of culture.⁷ Sebald was



Bonhoeffer in Harlem, 2009, St Matthäuskirche, Berlin, installation view

strongly influenced by the Frankfurt School position that artworks should reflect a dialectical response to their historical circumstances, while believing all acts of artistic resistance must emanate from the aesthetic.⁸ For Young, Syberberg's use of deliberate artifice in the mise-en-scène of his films demands the viewer question their own signifying structures. The Taiwanese filmmaker Ang Lee is an additional inspiration to Young's recent work in his ability to address subjects from a diversity of historical and social contexts, developing new representational languages in each case.

Young's exhibitions since 2008 have examined specific episodes of history within larger catastrophic events such as revolution and world war, forging a strong connection between art making and research.⁹ *1967Dispersion* (2008) deals with political turbulence in Hong Kong in the summer of 1967, the exhibition title referencing both the breaking up of Maoist protests by the colonial government and the scattering of many Hong Kong citizens through migration in response to the violence, Young included. *Bonhoeffer in Harlem* (2009) examines how the experience of racial oppression in New York in 1930 influenced active resistance to Nazism on the part of the German Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Safety Zone* (2010) concerns the activities of 15 American and European missionaries and business people in Nanjing in 1937, saving at least 200,000 Chinese citizens from death at the hands of the advancing Japanese army. *The New Wolf of Rome* (2012) uses the story of the founding of ancient Rome to explore how the interwoven textual and textural features of myth feed the phenomenon of nationalism. *The Macau Days* (2012) focuses on the merchant port's history as a key staging post for Anglo-European encounters with China and Japan, contrasting this rich period of cross-cultural exchange with Macau's current incarnation as a phantasmagorical global epicenter for gambling.

Each exhibition commemorates a historical event or situation, exploring how questions of origin influence the present. The use of sensory encounter for this



Bonhoeffer in Harlem, 2009, St Matthäuskirche, Berlin, installation view

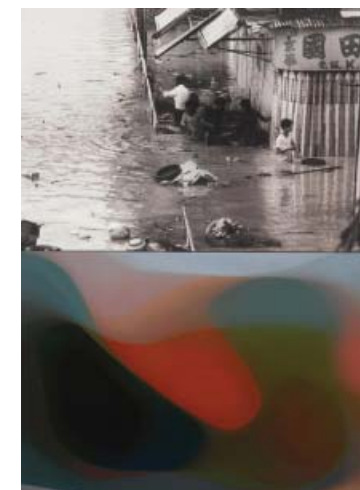


The Macau Days, 2012, 10 Chancery Lane Gallery Hong Kong, installation view



Safety Zone, 2011, University of Queensland Art Museum, installation view

purpose signals Young's equal interest in the affective structures of memory production. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze depicts memory formation as a fluid, two-way process, not a linear and cumulative one; a movement in time in which a vestigial past continues to act on the present.¹⁰ The past is an infinite source of subject matter for remembering. Deleuze's major work on time, *Difference and Repetition*, discusses the problems of retrieving and protecting the past through representation, not for the past's own sake, but in terms of how to exist with and act on the past in the present.¹¹ For Deleuze, Proust's approach to reminiscence is an important model. Proust's representation of the past transcends what the past was in its own time and establishes its significance for the present without veering into idealization.¹² For Deleuze, the return of the past as difference is vital if the past is to have meaning to the present, prompting him to characterise the recovery of lost time as an endeavor necessarily suspended between actualization and virtualization.¹³



Flood, 2008, collection: M+ Museum, Hong Kong

Young's acquaintance with Deleuze comes through his reading of the philosopher's writing on cinema.¹⁴ Here Deleuze discusses analogy, metaphor and realism as mechanisms for the representation of time.¹⁵ Young's painting of historical subjects, however, seem closer to Deleuze's idea from *Difference and Repetition* that for the past to achieve its full potential as a basis for understanding and action in the present, it must be represented as a 'pure' form while simultaneously retaining certain 'surface intensities' that reflect its specificity.¹⁶ In his recent history paintings, Young works with the historian's attention to detail and interest in analysis and interpretation. The aesthetic treatment of pictorial materials signals the multiplicity of relations and revelations bound up in the past and the past's resistance to fixity, resolution and completeness.

Paintings included in *The Macau Days* especially exemplify Young's use of diverse and nuanced aesthetic languages to suggest the immense complexity and richness of the past, and also its distance and incongruity. Their tangle of pictorial



Plate 20
Naïve and Sentimental Painting I (small version)

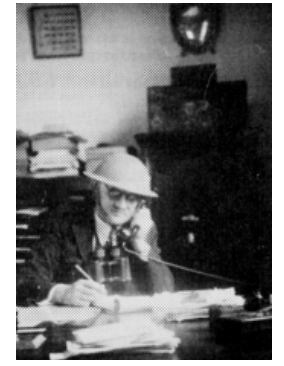


content, much of it presented as layers of filmy traces, evokes the elusive, synthetic processes bound up in memory, the observation of different aspects of the past charged with different intensities in the present. Across the whole group of history paintings, different visual metaphors allude to the emotional and intellectual distance that must be covered to connect with the past. Monochrome images, negative images, images that reveal historical processes of reproduction, figures that defy gravity, other worldly forms, visual manipulation that stretches the limits of representation, realism, abstraction, indeterminate spatial planes, these varying effects are the implements of Young's critical historiography. The history paintings have the quality of compelling apparitions, echoing Deleuze's idea that the past encompasses nothing actual, but at the same time cannot to be regarded as fictional or intangible.

Where previously Young produced longitudinally unfolding cycles of works, installation has a greater pertinence to his recent practice. Jungmin Lee argues that 'the terminology of "installation" reveals an inward movement and thus an effort to bring the subject inside.'¹⁷ In Young's exhibition *Safety Zone*, a bank of images covered one wall of the gallery, towering over the viewer and forming an extended plane of vision. The *in situ* corporeal experience of the works intensified the encounter with their subject matter, affording the past a living presence in this instance. Young's approach to installation takes much from the model of cinema, which uses duration, the editing and sequencing of images, and sensory immersion to produce and modulate meaning. In *Safety Zone*, reproductions of historical photographs and drawings on chalk blackboard paint comprise a quasi-cinematic language of reference and representation, especially in regard to the role of characters as bearers of narrative and embodiments of values and meanings. The sum effect evokes memory as a montage of elements, some fully wrought, others fleeting in form - a text whose countless potential connections are open to exploration.

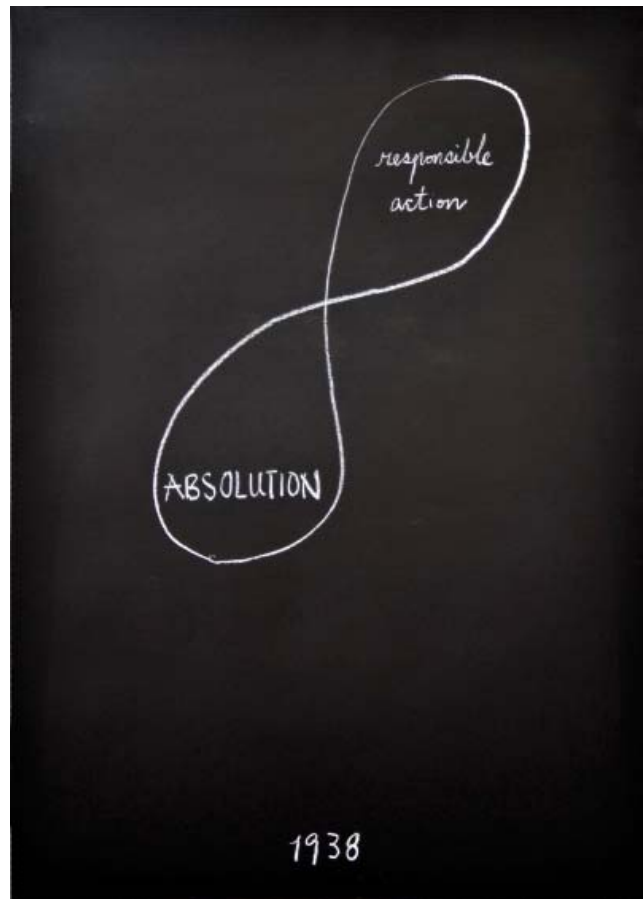


top left: *Mazu, Goddess of the Sea II (The Drowning of Mazu)*, 2012, courtesy 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong; above: *Macau I*, 2006, private collection, Melbourne



top left: *Playing Nurse, Nanjing 1936*;
top right: *John Rabe, 1937*;
above: *Foreigners at the Safety Zone compound*

From the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, history painting was central to Western art, academic practice being grounded in the effort to transmit moral understanding through exemplars from history, literature and myth. During the modernist period, the locus of art shifted to articulating the aesthetic basis of painting as a form of communicable knowledge, with the truth of art given the status of an ethical imperative. Postmodern art reflected a complete skepticism towards the principles of knowledge and truth while declaring the idea of pure art to be myopic and uncritical. Recently, knowledge exchange has been restored to the core of art practice through the effort to contest fixed categories, discourses and representations. John Young's recent history paintings recognise collective memory as something continuously negotiated, but he no longer approaches painting as an expression of the arbitrary nature of referentiality. Certainly, the emergence of painting in particular social situations and the amenity of its form to commodification have diminished its validity as a medium of intervention for some artists, critics and curators. However, even where painting is not a medium of choice (as Deleuze has suggested), it maintains a presence in contemporary art as a dimension of its past, especially where the present in current practice is driven by a seemingly perpetual compulsion to reincarnate itself as difference. In contrast, Young approaches painting as a providential alternative to the discursive orientation and mercurial nature of much recent art, offering a context for a focused encounter with the dialectical processes of remembering and forgetting.



Absolution, 2010, courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne

Notes

- 1 The term cultural intermediary is proposed by Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge, UK, Harvard University Press, 1984.
- 2 Benzi Zhang, 'Identity in Diaspora and Diaspora in Writing: the poetics of cultural transrelation', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2000, p. 125.
- 3 Howard Becker, *Art Worlds*, 25th anniversary edition, Berkeley and London, University of California Press, [1992] 2008.
- 4 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, Les Presses du Réel, Dijon, [1998] 2002, p. 11.
- 5 Boris Groys, *Going Public*, Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2010, p. 12.
- 6 Marc James Léger, 'Avant-Garde and Creative Industry', *Creative Industries Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2010, pp. 151-2.
- 7 Pierre Jamet, 'The Poetry and Ideas of Kenneth White: A Perspective from France', *Scottish Literary Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2009, p. 103.
- 8 Ben Hutchinson, 'The shadow of resistance: W. G. Sebald and the Frankfurt School', *Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 41, Nos. 3-4, 2011, p. 276.
- 9 For a fuller account of these exhibitions, see Christhard-Georg Neubert and Alexander Ochs (eds), *John Young: Bonhoffer in Harlem*, Berlin, Edition St. Matthäus, 2009; Claire Hielscher, 'Historical Visions, Present Rememberings' in *John Young Zerunge*, Hong Kong, 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, 2012, unpaginated.
- 10 Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, New York, Zone Books, 1988.
- 11 James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze's Philosophy of Time: A Critical Introduction and Guide*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2001, p. 77.
- 12 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, London, Continuum, 2004, pp. 121-124.
- 13 Williams, p. 74.
- 14 These are Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986 and Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galatea, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- 15 Williams, p. 162.
- 16 Williams, p. 163.
- 17 Jungmin Lee, 'Modes of Exhibition as Mediated Space: Projection Installation as Spectatorial Frame', *Art & Education*, Accessed 25 September 2012 from <http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/modes-of-exhibition-as-mediated-space-projection-installation-as-spectatorial-frame/>, undated, unpaginated.

Image acknowledgements p.57: W.G Sebald, *Austerlitz*, Penguin, 2002.

H.J. Syberberg, still from *Parsifal*, 1982, copyright Artificial Eye.

Kenneth White, *The Most Difficult Area*, Cape Golliard Grossman, London, 1968.