



Photo: Charlotte-Persia Young

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE WOLF

JOHN YOUNG INTERVIEW

by Yasmin Nguyen

As an Australian artist of the Hong Kong diaspora, John Young Zerunge has exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally for three decades.

Young has been able to successfully maintain the balance between theoretical concerns and the process of painting. Having created projects that traversed Asia, Europe, the Central Desert of Australia and Antarctica he now develops work aptly characterised by Thomas Berghuis as 'Situational Ethics'.

VAULT caught up with John on a warm autumn day, after the completion of his recent survey exhibition at the Australian National University in Canberra, to talk about the past, the present & the future of his practice.

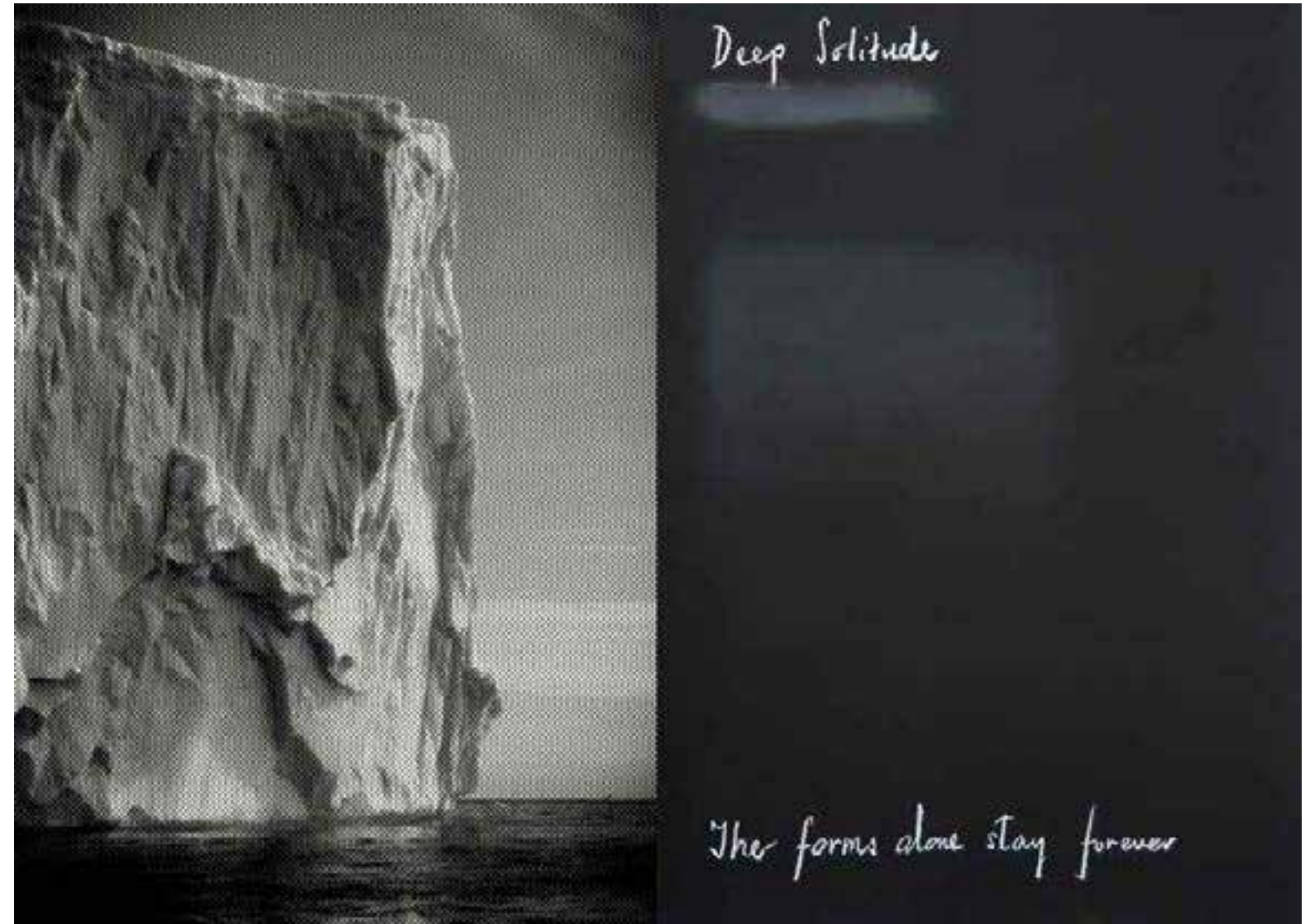
I READ IN YOUR BIOGRAPHY THAT YOU WERE INVOLVED IN THE SLUGFUCKERS, A SYDNEY-BASED NOISE, ART AND PUNK BAND. HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN A POST-PUNK MOVEMENT? DO YOU THINK THE PUNK MOVEMENT IS BACK IN FASHION?
We were all philosophy students at university: leftist materialist dogmatism had closed things up, and anarchistic pluralism and schizo-culture was a way out. Intellectually we were punks. No one ever said punk was an anti-intellectual movement! My position was to have an intellectual camaraderie with the band. Now - philosophically in terms of knowledge acquisition and the creation of world pictures - in 1977 the anarchistic theory of knowledge of Paul Feyerabend was very appealing. His idea was a deep critique of the chauvinism of science, and advocated 'anything goes' as a motto for acquiring knowledge. For this philosopher of science, Chinese medicine, witchcraft, voodoo, art, alchemy, etc. are legitimate ways for knowledge acquisition. Whilst punk initially had the British monarchy as its site of social criticism, Feyerabend had the monolithic institution of science as the site of epistemological criticism. Of course there was the music, but we felt the whole thing went much deeper; punk for us was not just an anarchistic social movement, it was also a new paradigm for knowledge.

DO YOU THINK THAT IT IS IRONIC THAT THE PUNK MOVEMENT HAS BECOME SO FASHIONABLE, CONSUMABLE AND PROFITABLE?

Well, it was already in its scaffolds - in retrospect it was so interesting that in 1984, the year Baudrillard came to Sydney, Malcolm McLaren released *Madam Butterfly*, a good decade before Vanessa Beecroft! Sorry to digress, but to answer your question - authentic expression whether it's in music or art, as McLaren may have understood and exploited - is the most marketable and commodifiable market product. Hence you had the rise of neo-expressionist paintings in Europe in the '80s. Now in post race, post memory, late capitalism when almost all of the art world's mechanism is embedded within globalised late capitalism, authenticity, infantilism, pedophilia, neurosis, are all commodifiable and profitable themes. I have absolutely no interest in following this stuff. It's the condition of our vision, in relation with our consciousness and time, which has always been foremost.

FROM THIS POINT, HOW DID YOU BECOME SO OBSESSED WITH BEAUTY AND THE IDEA OF THE BEAUTIFUL OBJECT?

Was I ever interested in the beautiful object? I had a survey exhibition in Canberra last month, and the wonderfully intelligent, sensitive curator and art critic, Terence Maloon, related my works with Ingres' position of working. I thought a lot about this surprising insight, and I'm still a little baffled. I suspect his point was how Ingres related the beauty of the body with fashion, with bourgeois culture of the time. Yet the thing I had loved in Ingres' paintings, say in *The Valpincon Bather* of 1808, is the line. The way in which the line that rendered the body was at times insistent, at times an edge, at times indeterminate and soft, at times even only implied - in other words, the line meandered - your experience and understanding of the line transforms as it caresses and defines the body. That was what I had always found in Ingres' works. I suppose one can call that meandering beautiful, a sort of unfolding over time. You find this sort of meandering, this journeying, also in bland Chinese Northern Sung Dynasty landscape paintings.



JOHN YOUNG
Through the Eyes of the Wolf: Deep Solitude, 2012
digital print and chalk on paper
102.4 x 145.2 cm

Courtesy the artist and Philip Bacon Galleries, Fortitude Valley

CAN YOU LIST THE ARTISTS OR ARTWORKS THAT INFLUENCED YOUR AESTHETIC PATH?

Not really. I don't really have a path, again, I sort of meander! The time spent in making art has always been full of detours and variations. The artists and artworks I need to learn from at that moment sort of come to me: it's at times surprisingly synchronistic. Destiny leads us into insights and trouble. I say that, but you walk into a work say by Walter De Maria or Mark Rothko's room and your whole world changes. And I think I know why this happens. When I personally feel I've done something worthwhile, people react in such a way that I generally and almost inevitably need to reinterpret the result or the conclusion. When something gets popular, I get suspicious and feel guilty that my work has gone the wrong way, and I would need to atone this before I can feel I'm allowed to live in the present and to move on. Falling into collective amnesia whilst making art is the most urgent danger. Nam June Paik has always said, run in your own lane. Well that's true enough, but maybe it's also good to constantly re-invent your expectations, and ask, as an artist, 'what social condition am I in, and what then is my position and capability of helping or clarifying?'

WHAT WAS THE LATEST ARTWORK YOU PURCHASED?

Sandra Selig did a series of works with spider webs called *Universes*. I like these works; they have a deep sympathy for the world.

HOW HAS MAJORING IN PHILOSOPHY AFFECTED YOUR CAREER AS AN ARTIST?

I've never seen what I did as a career, you know, more a vocation really. I try to make things for the good and happiness, and I try to make some money for my family and my studio to survive so we can go on. Perhaps that's what thinking philosophically had taught me.

WHAT BOOKS ARE YOU READING AT THE MOMENT AND ARE THESE INFLUENCING YOUR WORK?

I am re-reading W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and Kenneth White's *Pilgrim of the Void*. And yes, most definitely they are influencing my projects.

WITTGENSTEIN WROTE, "WE ARE ASLEEP. OUR LIFE IS A DREAM. BUT WE WAKE UP, SOMETIMES, JUST ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT WE ARE DREAMING". DO YOU THINK ART IS A CONDUIT TO OUR UNCONSCIOUS?

Yes I do, very much so. And that is why if we try to make art based on the audience's want, you inevitably fail and it becomes entertainment. Regarding the quote, I suspect he was clarifying something in the way we use words. All I know is that he didn't much like Freud, and he disagreed with but admired Weininger.

LAST YEAR YOU RECEIVED THE AUSTRALIA COUNCIL VISUAL ARTS FELLOWSHIP FOR ESTABLISHED ARTISTS. CONGRATULATIONS! YOU ARE NOW SPENDING YOUR TIME DOING A RESEARCH PROJECT CONCERNING CHINESE DIASPORA IN AUSTRALIA. CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

Well all I can say is it's not what people will expect! I came to this work from a series of projects that I have done since 2005 such as *1967Dispersion* (Hong Kong Riots and the roots of the diaspora), *Bonhoeffer in Harlem* (the origins of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's action, installed in Berlin and Bamberg), *Safety Zone* (on those who saved lives during the Rape of Nanjing, installed in Melbourne, Brisbane and Canberra), *The New Wolf of Rome* (a remaking of myths, installed in Brisbane) and *The Macau Days* (the cannibalisation of values in a phantasmagorical global epicenter for gambling, installed in Hong Kong). All these projects work in literal, metaphorical and didactic ways, in what Thomas Berghuis coined 'situational ethics' as opposed to 'relational aesthetics'. This project will not be a historical document, though it will use much of it. It's a five-year project, three of which will be installations.

YOU LEFT HONG KONG DUE TO THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN 1967. WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE LIKE THEN? WHAT DID YOU THINK OF AUSTRALIA COMPARED TO HONG KONG ON A CULTURAL LEVEL?

It was disorienting: it was a very dangerous time in Hong Kong, and to leave your birthplace as a child

was the plight of many in any diaspora. Now, I find I have to retrace/reinvent a lot of that trauma, find empathy with that event, as I try with other historical events in my work. As a child, I felt Australia wasn't weighed down by history, yet I was ignorant of the Aboriginal culture. I came from a house full of Chinese landscape paintings, calligraphy, Cantopop, and Shaw Brothers films, and there were no such stuff in Australia then, but mercifully Australia had art museums and contemporary art - I think I picked up my first *Studio International* magazine around 1969.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR INVOLVEMENT WITH 4A CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ASIAN ART?

In 1995, a group of young Asian Australian artists in Sydney got together to try to start a group to help Asian Australian artists and to encourage Asian patronage of contemporary Australian art. It included a few from Hong Kong, including Felicia Kan and myself, and there was Kate Mizrahi and Kim Moore, and several from the Philippines such as Vicente Butron and Victoria Lobregat as well as Emil Goh, Guan Wei. Melissa Chiu was invited to be its founding director, Vicente its manager and myself the president of this visual arts association. It went through many many metamorphoses over the last 18 years, and many other artists worked hard to promote it, such as Lindy Lee, Binghui Huangfu, Dacchi Dang, Laurens Tan, Hari Ho, Chris Pang, My Lee Thi. Now, under the directorship of Aaron Seeto, 4A holds a vital position in Sydney for Asian Art, being in the middle of an art axis formed between the MCA (Museum of Contemporary Art) and White Rabbit. I'm involved with the organisation again, this time encouraging a presence of it outside of Sydney, such as in Melbourne and Hong Kong. The last president, Daniel Droga, helped a tremendous amount, and so did many many others who made it what it is today.

HOW DO YOU THINK THE ECONOMIC BOOM IN ASIA, ESPECIALLY CHINA HAS AFFECTED THE GLOBAL ART MARKET AND WESTERN ART PRACTICE?

You have an economic boom, more artists have a chance to realise works.

You also have more businessmen – artists profiting financial and cultural gains. But you also get to realise there are great artists everywhere in the world, like Cai Guo-Qiang or Xu Bing, or Yang Shaobin from China, and Santiago Sierra from Spain, or Mark Lombardi – it's important to see how wonderful it is that there are great artists everywhere in the world – this will finally lead us to accept and work comfortably within a time when there were actually many modernities in the world, not just Euramerican modernism, even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These are positions that advanced thinkers such as John Clark had been saying for the last three decades! So it's no big deal to realise there is a big global bazaar fed by speed, war, and digitalisation – in comparison to the grand scale of the world of art making.

LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR PRACTICE NOW: YOU'VE HAD MANY STYLISTIC CHANGES, WHICH I THINK IS A VERY BRAVE AND IMPORTANT PART OF BEING AN ARTIST. WHAT DRIVES YOU TO DO THIS AND DO YOU THINK THERE IS STILL UNDERLYING PRESSURE FOR ARTISTS TO MAKE THE SAME IMAGE OVER AND OVER TO SATISFY THE MARKET?

The underlying pressure for artists to survive and have a very basic life is a very real one. But I feel the repetition to make the same image comes out of financial and cultural greed or the miserable pressures of celebritisation – in which case these people are not artists, they are victims of the mechanisms of late capitalism, as they have lost their freedom to see their present clearly, because of collective amnesia.

Regarding my own practice, I change when I have exhausted or have thoroughly understood a certain way of working, or I have emotionally grown out of it, and then it's time to move on. There is a lot of pressure for artists to be kept at an infantile or adolescent state in order for the market to keep them churning out predictable amusing stuff. You are talking as if you believe the market wants culturally enlightened beings as artists: it does not. But as an artist you make that decision as to how you want the market to treat you, which has ramifications on the way you treat the world, and karma.

YOU HAVE USED DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY, AS WELL AS MORE TRADITIONAL MEDIUMS IN YOUR ART PRACTICE. WHY?

We are at an interesting juncture in history where these skills – that is, screen skills and hand skills – are still available. In time some such skills will be completely extinct, and something else will replace them. I hope to be able to describe our limited means with affection, and come to terms with their materiality.

WHAT MAKES AN ARTWORK BAD OR GREAT?

One of the greatest works I have seen is by Israeli artist Micha Ullman, his *Bibliotek* memorial is an empty white room with vacant book shelves in an underground room: you can see it through a ground-window on the cobblestone plaza. The window and room is in the exact spot in Bebelplatz square in Berlin where the Nazi book burning began in 1933. I found this an absolutely moving and inspirational work, and from that experience, I developed the project *Bonhoeffer in Harlem* held at St. Matthäus-Kirche in the Kulturforum in Berlin, 2009. Another great artwork would have to be the entire oeuvre of On Kawara, where he spent an entire life painting the dates of the days.



CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR EARLY WORKS?

The early works were minimal and conceptual works, like *Drawing in Ten Parts* or *Synchronic Screen*. They were very process oriented and the processes were derived from Eastern thought, such as the *I Ching*, or the breathing and movement techniques of Tai Chi. The musician David Ahern showed me John Cage's road. In the early days in Australia, my Eastern processes had to be covert, otherwise no one would have accepted them as contemporary.

LOOKING BACK, DO YOU THINK YOU HAVE ACHIEVED YOUR OBJECTIVES AS AN ARTIST?

The objectives as an artist can be very personal, yet the objectives of what your art may advocate is something very different indeed. The art I make may advocate objectives that I don't think many people understand as yet, or care to understand – it will probably be understood by people who travel the same road. When it comes to personal objectives, well we all have that responsibility, and we face that on our deathbeds.

IF YOU DON'T MIND ME SAYING, I HAVE ALWAYS FOUND YOUR WORKS SLIGHTLY SPOOKY, I ALWAYS HAVE THE FEELING THAT SOMETHING IS LURKING BEHIND ALL THIS BEAUTY. AM I CORRECT OR AM I OFF THE MARK COMPLETELY?

Beauty may live in the sublime, it can live in empathy, but it can also live in bad faith. Yet there is no beauty in evil. A younger artist friend of mine wrote on his canvas that we can lose the world of beauty, with the smallest lapse of attention – how true.

WHAT WAS THE LAST SHOW THAT SURPRISED YOU? WHY?

Anish Kapoor, because his work is greater than the media's presentation of it.

IF MONEY WERE OF NO CONCERN, WHICH ARTWORK WOULD YOU LOVE TO HAVE IN YOUR HOME?

There are artworks that need to be seen by the public, and others that do well in a home, because after a while the work becomes invisible on the wall and you register it unconsciously, daily. And the great thing is, there are many works that can do a lot of good in a home, for the children's consciousness etc. that are affordable and available. Growing up with a Caravaggio on your bedhead can do more damage than good! But perhaps a Fra Angelico fresco on your bedhead can be very morally instructive indeed! I still love the simple silhouette cutouts of my children we got at Hong Kong Disneyland.

DO YOU THINK HONG KONG WILL BECOME THE NEW CENTRE OF THE ART WORLD? IF SO, WHY?

I feel it may become a new centre, yet there will be many new centres coexisting in the art world in the future. Nobody can take the twentieth-century idea of 'New York is the greatest city because it's been in the twentieth century the longest' into the twenty-first century. It was an idea of a much smaller world than the one we live in now.

YOU'RE A TRUE SURVIVOR IN A CREATIVE INDUSTRY! HOW DOES IT MAKE YOU FEEL THAT YOU HAVE BEEN MAKING ART FOR OVER 30 YEARS?

Thankful. I don't think I've been making inadequate art for over 30 years! And I've never felt I could have done anything else! You ask a dog how it survived and it does so by wagging its tail. I've gone through great patches and some ordinary patches, but I feel at present that the near future is going to be a very fertile garden indeed.

John Young is represented by Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne; Philip Bacon Galleries, Fortitude Valley; 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong; Alexander Ochs Galleries, Berlin, Beijing.

JOHN YOUNG
Flood, 2008
digital print and oil on linen
170 x 125 cm
Courtesy the artist and
M+ Museum, Hong Kong



JOHN YOUNG
Mazu, Goddess of the Sea (The Drowning of Mazu), 2012
oil on linen
190 x 145 cm

Courtesy the artist and 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong