

Introduction

by John Clark

It's not easy these days – if it ever was – to say where art fits, and for whom. It's also too easy to presume some overall concept has captured the totality of a particular field, rather than remaining like 'perspective' just another tool for seeing with. I suspect we are in a time when multiculturalism at the local level and globalism at the transnational level elide the purposes for which art is seen. Maybe some curators also don't let on they are aware of this.

Because of the presumed inclusivity of these two concepts we may be systematically prevented from grasping what it is when an artist and art moves between cultures, and particularly when this transition is made part of a technique and also the ostensible subject of the work. John Young's work sits there on the wall without expressionist self-declaration. It doesn't say: 'I come from Hong Kong', nor does it say 'I'm Australian too'. It deliberately uses digital techniques from the printing of advertising billboards, a technique which lies between the discourses of oil painting and photography, sometimes with thin colloidal overpaintings to mute out tones. Its ostensible subjects are juxtaposed between tourist images of China and exotic/erotic nudes from, or generated in the guise of, 1950s' soft-porn magazines. It declines to be of one thing, in one way, of one artist. He states:

'Since Benjamin, one function of the act of painting is to resuscitate a sense of affection for the image - to literally affect it. Painting is the body's union with the image, and to paint a photographic image - that is an image which is, so to speak, frozen dead out of the stream of time, is, to me, a sort of reincarnation. Regarding 'thinness' I have never gotten to a point in the belief of authorship that the mark is the mark of the author. Expressionism has never been my cup of tea - painting an image for me has always been the body's relation to the surface, not an author's relation'¹.

By letting one technique play off the other, one image play off another there is a kind of interstitial cultural paradigm being presented. This makes Young's work so subtle, but so difficult to identify from a single cultural position or a presumed genealogy of stages or associations based on cultural reference which, some viewers may presume, the work or the artist personally has gone through². For me, the interest of this painting is that it refuses simultaneously any trite notion of assimilation into one set of cultural pluralities, at the same time as it puts behind it any idea that cultural genealogies can be forgotten, even as their carefully chosen familiarity obviates any iterative

¹ From an email reply to questions by Clark of 29.12.2002. I am also grateful to John Young for an interview on 17.12.2003 in Sydney. There is a large body of writing on John Young's work among which are the following:

2001 Castro, Brian; Greenstein, M.A., *John Young: Pine's Edge*, Melbourne, Black Inc.

1996 Clark, John, 'Systems End' in Wright William, co-curated, *Systems End, Contemporary Art in Australia*, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts [and elsewhere in Asia].

1995 Chiu, Melissa ed., *John Young: the double ground paintings*, Sydney, Australian Art Promotions. This includes the interview with John Clark 'Swimming in the Transcultural Sea' which was published in *Asian Art News* vol.4, no.3, May/June 1994.

1994 Clark, John, 'John Young: the position of the transcultural - an end to hyphenation?' in Robinson Julie E., *Antipodean Currents: ten contemporary artists from Australia*, Washington, The Kennedy Center, 1994.

1993 Davidson, Christina; Coulter-Smith, Graham; Forsyth, Graham; Young, John, *John Young: Silhouettes and Polychromes*, Melbourne, Schwartz City.

² Greenstein sees the binary values of Young's previous work as now having taken on a cybernetic meaning, and the use of the 'photo babe' shot as now functioning in a cosmology which is 'growing into an apocalyptic one'. See her essay, pages 8-9, in *Pine's Edge*, 2001.

declamation. Actually, the unspoken denial of the agenda of assimilation – please bring your curious dragon boat races, so long as you acknowledge we play cricket – is probably more what makes his work complex for Australian critics and curators, let alone the general public. This is another issue from Young's own very intellectual awareness – he trained originally as a philosopher³, but I think it is underpinned by his deep formal knowledge of epistemology.

The problem of migratory artists' situation lies in their placement 'between'. This interstitiality – rather like the force field internal to a molecular structure between different atoms from which the modern usage derives – is constituted by the local agendas and dominant coteries of the art world to which they migrate or in which they are emplaced, *and* by the world which their country of migration nearly always supposes they have 'come from', and to which their origin may be attributed by third parties. Thus it may be habitual for an English observer to construct, say, a Nigerian artist in London as 'Nigerian' or 'Áfrican', even though he/she may have spent his whole life in England. Such artists may even have been entirely educated within the British art system where 'their ineluctable existence in the post modern arena embodies the discontinuity of normative assumptions about originary "authenticity" in their work'⁴. The same might apply to an artist of Turkish background born in Germany. But cultural bracketing falls down or is wilfully misapplied in cases where artists have moved either after, or in John Young's case before, his/her formation as an artist. Their existence itself is motile, the artist's work is enriched not contaminated by the intrinsic capability of both work and artist to move through reference to a multiplicity of origins and positioning procedures.

Where exactly these nomothetic and physically geographic spaces overlap is the site of boundary struggles between the codes of supposedly 'sending' and 'receiving' cultures, ones with which post-colonial art has been particularly engaged. Young has the added complexity of 'China' and 'Çhineseness' to cope with since the notion that he has an ethnic background and that he should be in some sense a representative of a civilizational continuum is an ideographic imposition from outside on Hong Kong by both the Chinese mainland, and by Euramerican notions of Chinese ethnic characteristics. In this context, the 'Áustralian' placement of his migration may be a little difficult to comprehend in Europe where multiculturalism is often debated through the terms of assimilation into a mainstream the hegemony of whose national language is naturalized. In Australia, multiculturalism has until recent racist revanchism been moving towards a recognition of plural identities where the hegemony of the English language and of the, say, pre-1950 culture it carried, had been increasingly relativized to certain specific – but not all – domains of inter-personal interaction. In the domain of art practice this had meant that artists of non-AngloCeltic Australian background were seen as presenting an enriching field of aesthetic play between multiple and differentially encoded cultural references. There still is a prospect that this potential richness will embody the future of Australian art, and its distinctive place within world art because of it⁵.

But recent political and cultural tendencies have curtailed this. The first is the return to an *ur*-Australia defined in AngloCeltic terms where according to some political trends all cultural identity, including art, should be re-emplaced. The second is the lack of recognition given to the mutlilateralism of some distinguished artists of Asian association of whom there are quite a number, including John Young, and their under-representation in important interface exhibitions such as the Sydney Biennale or the Asia-Pacific Triennale. Here, like elsewhere, the tyranny of curatorial

³ See Forsyth's essay and Young's own texts in *John Young: Silhouettes and Polychromes*, 1993.

⁴ See Enwezor, Okwui, 'Between worlds: postmodernism and African artists in the Western metropolis', in Oguibe, Olu; Enwezor, Okwui, *Reading the contemporary: African Art from Theory to Marketplace*, London, in IVA, 1999, 245.

⁵ This is by no means a potential found in just the situation of 'Asian-Australian' art. It is exemplified in the rich work and intellectually sophisticated ideas of Imants Tillers, an Australian-born artist of Latvian parents who has been something of a mentor and later peer for John Young. See for example, Curnow, Wynstan, *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'*, Sydney, Craftsman House, 1998.

selection categories reigns. The third is perhaps more universal. For in parallel with curatorial unwillingness to confront assimilationist agendas has been the widely recognized decline in the quality of art criticism in Australia together, I would say, with the increasing avoidance of polemical clashes. This may be due to the institutional absorption by galleries and some universities of what had been a non-mainstream art culture in the 1980s and early 1990s. But there is no doubt the reception of many artists' work has changed with new coteries of curators forming small but on occasion highly effective alliances, locally and internationally.

'What some Australian curators consider as significant now-a-days (and I'm not thinking specifically of the Triennale, but generally), is how a work represents their institutional interests (whether its technology, indigeneity, gender in art etc.). The inherent quality and articulation of a work always seems to come second or third place, or not at all'⁶.

Art above all needs a reception positioned by a critical and curatorial culture where ideas and works are exchanged and in an open discourse. This situation has weakened, if it has not yet disappeared in Australia and Young has carefully observed this:

'The reception [of my work] has changed since the early 90's, partially due to, I suspect, 1) the collapse of art criticism in Australia - which means the works' contribution to formal and process investigations are rarely valued and publicised; 2) the rise of a new class of provincial curators; and 3) the window to 'Asia' being shut by John Howard - that is, 'Asia' is now configured as trade, rather than sets of qualities or values intrinsic within Australian society - in other words, the values and qualities which [my] works articulate have been othered rather than absorbed'⁷.

The mark of Young's exhibition in Berlin is that it reinforces a broader recognition his work has achieved outside Australia, rather than the various self-interested parochialisms which now govern the Australian art world. The paradoxical effect of postmodernism is that it has not merely relativized value, in the multicultural assimilationist context of Australia it has made some critics and curators reluctant or even afraid to acknowledge value. Young sees this as also indicated by the collapse of the idea of civilization which forms a background to the censoring of work because of its intellectual complexity, one which is particularly evident when art critics no longer call art curators to account⁸. Appeal to such a notion may also form one basis for the groundswell of criticism which Young sees among Australian artists of the curatorial scene because of a basic lack of engagement with the artist by curators. In the 1980s there had been some confusion about the critical base to situate curatorial practice because of the density of some kinds of art writing, but this density has now gone and with its disappearance there is yet to be found an intellectual and critical substitute. The phenomenon is not specifically Australian and starts with the rise to dominance of large institutions specifically engaged with contemporary art⁹.

The issue is also one with a European face, specifically after the widespread attention given to Chinese artists at Venice in 1993 and 1999 from a very limited curatorial and collection base. Young thinks that,

⁶ Young in email reply of 29.12.2002.

⁷ Young in email reply of 29.12.2002.

⁸ Young in conversation with Clark on 17.12.2002.

⁹ Young in conversation with Clark on 17.12.2002.

'The artists' appearance from China in both the recent past and the future may appear to the West in what seems to be a relatively chance-like blossoming. Yet if there is no mature art criticism which helps to articulate the works in language, the whole scenario will remain in a sort of infantile avant-gardism, the endless heralding of the new, without any possibility of qualitative judgement or maturation. If the criticism is happening in Chinese, it does need to be far more accessible to the West¹⁰. As China moves into late modernity, art criticism needs to provide a ritualistic juncture, so that artists may work with a conscious dialogue that also allows them to move on'¹¹.

It may be that Young's work arises from a situation in the past conceptualized as that of métissage or hybridity. But we've gone beyond that now. Traces of cultural binarism are merely traces. Young's work carries too many pasts, and too many others just for that.

¹⁰ There is now a considerable difference with the intellectual situation in Europe surrounding the reception of Chinese contemporary art in the early 1990s as perhaps typified by Pöhlmann, W., *China Avantgarde*, Berlin, Haus der Kulturen der Welt & Heidelberg, Edition Braus, 1993, and the situation since 2000. Some of this new context is provided in Clark, John, ed., *Chinese Art at the end of the Millenium*, Hong Kong, New Art Media, 2000 and Wu Hung, ed., *Chinese Art at the crossroads, Between Past and Future, Between East and West*, Hong Kong, New Art Media, 2001, as well as by the journal *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, especially the 200 Zunyi International Symposium in Fall Issue, November 2002.

¹¹ Young in email reply of 29.12.2002.