

Dimension of Framing and Capturing in the Surface-driven World: A Study of Li Shun's Internet Sketch

Haina Wang^{1,a,*}

¹Department of Art History, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
a. yla1024@connect.hku.hk

*corresponding author

Abstract: This research paper discusses the works of art from artist Li Shun's solo exhibition- "Brave New World" in Enclave Contemporary, Shenzhen, 2022. The exhibition features Li's latest production continuing "Internet Sketch" series, which he uses Google Map to take virtual tour in foreign museums and appropriates the masterpieces for reproductions. Although Li tends to situate the viewers to consider the new dimension in viewing at the world, he also presents a "confined pleasure" that both combines and challenges conventional viewing. His intentional juxtaposition of multiple creations of the surface-driven imageries, fulfilling Nicholas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics and Guy Debord's Society of Spectacle, unhides people's fragmented understanding of truth under the chaotic contemporary world. Welcoming viewers' engagement and interpretation, Li's exhibition encourages critical reflections on the ongoing pandemic control, capitalist economy, globalization, and consumerist culture. The 2019 pandemic is lacked abundant scholarly reviews, but popularly being adopted as subject matter by worldwide artists. Therefore, scholarly reviews would be focused on the artworks, and then the reflection of their spatial installment on institutional critique and contemporary art market. Based on that, I will also analyze how the happening social situation is going to become the mainstream for art practice.

Keywords: *Internet Sketch*, utopian&dystopian, dream-wandering, isolation, confined pleasure, appropriation, and reproduction.

1. Introduction

Li Shun, a young contemporary Chinese artist receiving his BFA and MFA from Chinese Academy of Art, is never surrendered to confine his work into any single medium of visual art. He favors to embrace multiple mediums, and is even eager to keep blurring the boundaries between. Rather than focusing on the pure imagery visual language, he is especially sensitive in digging out the ontology of painting, sculpture, and photography. In other words, he realizes and maximize the functional feature of each medium: brush, burin, camera, canvas, frame, and until the ongoing practice-the Internet. Generally, contemporary art is highly connected with post-colonial globalization, capitalist economy, and consumerist culture. Under a social environment where everyone is able to "create art", artists are situated in a dilemma to separate fashion, kitsch and commercial from high art. T. J. Clark has once argued that contemporary art is lack of subject matter [1]. Pop artists like Andy Warhol, Yayoi Kusama, and Maurizio Cattelan explores visually simple and consumable signifiers within their works of art. Warhol and Cattelan's appropriations are again appropriated during industrial

commodification. The publicized accessibility of their works refers to the promiscuous conversation of contemporary art. Unlike these Pop artist, Li Shun's work, beyond the combination of art and commerce, challenges form and tradition.

In his *Internet Sketch* series, he maximizes the function of Google Art&Culture, traveling into worldwide museums and galleries online. He was randomly touched by the fabulous master paintings, and directly took a screenshot as the base for sketch. After finishing the sketch, he took a picture, reversed it into negative, and printed out onto an Aluminum board (fig.1) [2]. Such complicated working process reinforces his notion of appropriation and reproduction. More importantly, while the juxtaposition of a printed screenshot, a sketch and a printed negative follows a chronological order, the display of different sizes and distance generate disorder, discontinuity, and dislocation. Each set shows the same image through distinctive mediums. Ambiguity even functions with the bodily viewing experience happened in the gallery space.

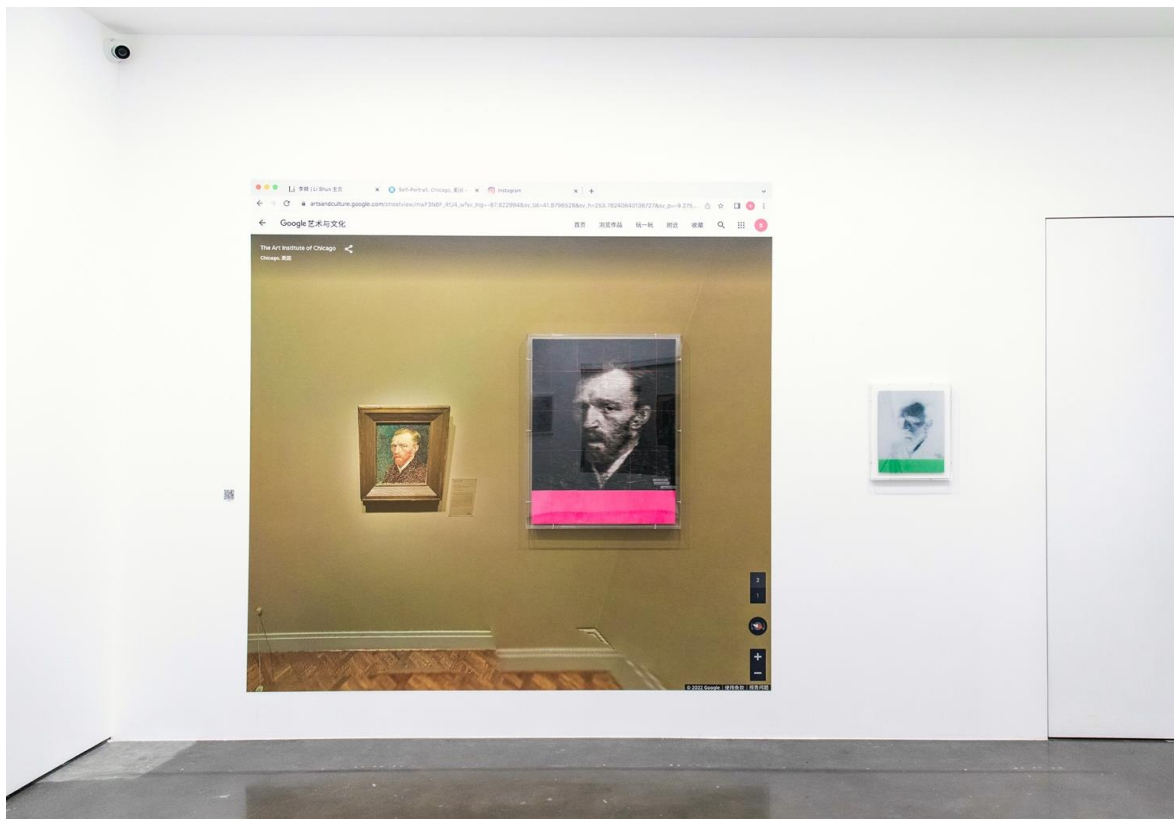


Figure 1: Li Shun, *Internet Sketch-Mr. Van Gogh*. Exhibition scene in “Brave New World”, Apr.9-May.29, 2022. Oil on the pages of *Brave New World*, giclee print on aluminum oxide plate, wallpaper UV inkjet. 90x70cm, 40x32cm, 251x255cm (size variable). ©Enclave Contemporary, Shenzhen, 2022.

To be specific, in each of the sets, except for the screenshot reference, Li's painting and photography are always protected by an acrylic cover. The shiny and somehow foggy surface diminishes the trace of his brushwork. Once viewers stand in the front of his installed work, they find it difficult to capture the complete and pure visual content. Instead, they see their own reflection from the transparent acrylic cover, merging with the imagery themselves. The cover cuts off the direct interaction between viewers and artworks. Creating a sense of detachment, it also isolates the vivid painting and photography inside a sealed room. The inside can even still witness the outside happening through the transparent seal, where they exchange gazes. In addition to the materiality of Li's reproduction,

the display of his original screenshot is also worth discussing. Most viewers put critiques on the direct printout of screenshot, believing that the copyright should either belongs to the master, the museum or Google. Take Internet Sketch-Mr. Van Gogh as example, Li displays the screenshot by medium of wallpaper (fig.1) [2]. The wallpaper is pasted on the gallery's white wall. Its scale is large enough to carry Li's sketch, but not filling the whole wall, overwhelmingly producing too many frames. In other words, while the wallpaper is not satisfying its original function in decorating and hiding the whitewall, it still presents an "imitation": it imitates a wall in The Art Institute of Chicago. In the journey of his exhibition, Li tries to persuade the viewers to trust on the layer-by-layer spectacles. All of these spectacles are fabricated; each of them is surface driven. Therefore, I am going to mainly elaborate the notion of fabricated surfaces in his exhibition, and how they reveal a society of spectacle. Since all the works in the exhibition were completed in 2022, I would also analyze Li's emotional expression of the Covid pandemic through medium, materiality and visual narrative.

2. Visual Analysis and Materiality

To begin with, Li's displaying method confuses viewers at the first glance. Due to an Internet bug, the printed wallpaper shows a distorted frame of Vincent Van Gogh. On the surface of the paper, next to the frame, Li's enlarged reproduction of painting is horizontally placed. On viewers' right, outside of the wallpaper, we see Li's second reproduction of photography. The same portrait is transformed into different sizes, color, and mediums, being in parallel. Differentiated from the original masterpiece, Li's sketch is in black-and-white. He compounds a highlighter-like pink on the background, lays the pages from Aldous Leonard Huxley's *Brave New World*, and painted on the pages (fig.2). At this stage, viewers are able to imagine Li's talent in decoding the original colorful image into black-and-white exposure. Based on this, in order to distinguish his reproduction from the masterpiece, he deliberately depicts with a very loose brushwork. The combination of charcoal and oil constructs a seemingly defocused Van Gogh. From a closer look, viewers find the texts on the pages distracted. Although the dense English words adds certain mystery to deepen Li's interpretation, it also aggravates a misidentification in Li's own traceable movement and gesture. Being merged with the black texts, his black brushwork appears like digital print as well. While laying out the pages, Li left the cracks to bring out the background pink. In some other works of the series, he even rips the edges, making a sense of vintage. This highlighting pink is absolutely contradicting with the monochrome. Leaking out from the tiny cracks, it could be a representation of hope, which brings the oppressive darkness into life. However, without choosing a natural warm color to represent light, Li made this artificial light from his palette. The grid pattern from the cracks of the pages refers to a digitalized, pixelated Internet world. Leaving the bottom part blank, the whole composition could also look like a polaroid photo. Thus, despite Li's genuine and respectful painting, it is depicted into a snapshot.

Then, after finishing the painting piece, Li uses his camera to photograph the pure image, turned it into negative through his laptop, and printed onto an Aluminum Oxide board. In traditional analog making, negative is the primary base for later darkroom development. But in Li's chronological production order, the "negative" there is the last step-the artificially-made "fake negative". Going back to the original size, the metal material is highly coherent with the blueish, cold negative image. While viewers relate it to an X-ray photo and the experience of taking X-ray in a cold hospital room, we also realize the impossibility to receive a true X-ray of Van Gogh or Van Gogh's portrait because it is just a copy. Zooming out their scale, the pages of *Brave New World* also shrinks. Therefore, seeing the three frames of Van Gogh's face in a whole, viewers sense ambiguity ceaselessly. Following a well-composed curating order, their interrelations are totally messed up. He successfully constructs a viewing experience of questioning.

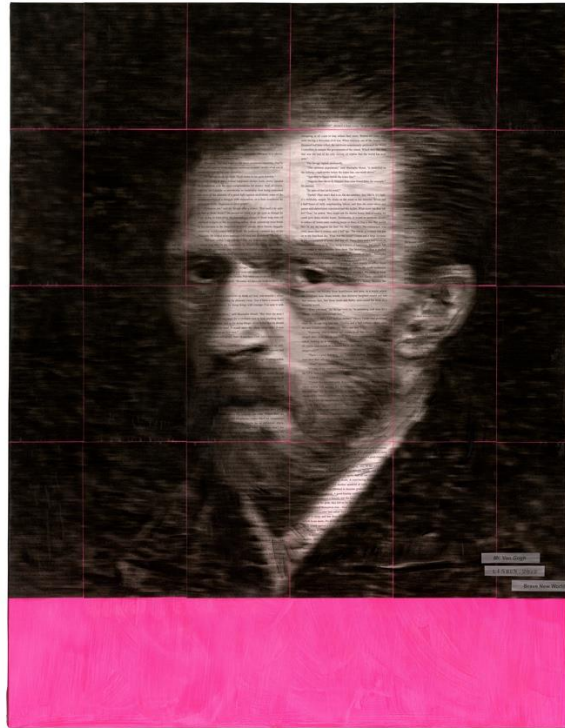


Figure 2: Li Shun, Internet Sketch-Mr. Van Gogh. Oil on the pages of *Brave New World*, 90x70cm. 2022.

Ambiguity is reinforced from the display of wallpaper. Originally being a screenshot of the wall in Art Institute of Chicago, it is printed on wallpaper and pasted on the gallery wall of Enclave Contemporary. This part of appropriating the “wall” is clumsy and straightforward. The yellowish tone and the distorted pixels are outstanding. He generously invites viewers to appreciate Van Gogh’s self-portrait together. At some point, he also controls the viewing by embedding his own perspective in viewers’ eyes.

3. Literature Review

The selection of *Brave New World* is a continuation of Li’s signature preference in painting making. He enjoys immersing his personal perspective in society, history and politics into the text-heavy canvas. Different selection of literature delivers the male artist’s emotional mental world. *Brave New World* depicts a dystopian fictional society, which probably unveils Li’s sentimentality to the Covid crisis [3]. The outbreak of the pandemic exposes the truth that human beings are extremely vulnerable. While different countries overcome with different considerations and strategies, Nationalism is strengthened at the same time. In Terry Smith’s *What is Contemporary Art*, he suggests that we all come to a world that is “already formed by others”, and contemporary artist and audience have to deal with a “coexistence with distinct temporality” [4]. Li’s obscure metaphor of the dystopian society is cohesive with the chaotic ongoing history. The title of this exhibition, directly appropriating *Brave New World* in quotation mark, challenges people’s dwelled belief in the superficial world. Without clarified linkage between visual and text language, the notion of “page canvas” deepens a romantic and poetic overall quality.

Although Li intends to project the chaotic society onto the pages from dystopian fiction. The ant-like ink-prints offers rare combination to the images. Without being told about the materiality, viewers would never know about this inner connection. That is, it somehow represents the actual social phenomenon: people live under the shadow of historical, social and political background, but is disconnected from the linear layout. This disconnection is removed in Li's second reproduction-the Aluminum board. It unifies the unrelated texts and images into negative exposure. Ink-prints becomes the tattoo on Van Gogh's face.

4. The Confined Pleasure of Online Dream-wandering

Jonathan Hay's Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting [5], as an inspirational method for literati's poem reverie, provides a trace to translate Li's emphasis of "walking around online". Hay translates the notion of such poetic and illusionary walking-around into *dream-wandering* 卧游. In the article, Hay mentions scholar Gaston Bachelard's argument that "imagination as a major power of human nature" and "daydreaming has a privilege of autovalorization", which "derives direct pleasure from its own being." At this point, we learn how Chinese ancient dream-wandering emphasize the spontaneous and perceptual pleasure created among the organic communication between literati and the nature. Instead, Li's work persuades viewers to believe in a fabricated Internet daydream. Neither the interaction with nature, the appreciation of scenery, nor the perception of atmosphere is genuinely existed. In other words, virtual adventure is detached from a reality dimension. The seemingly wonderful exploration of artificial virtual world is eternally limited inside one's brain. This perceptual pleasure is a confined pleasure, which people, including Li or not, may not realize. Based on this, we can see Li's work shows sparse expression of self. Despite his artistic selection of materiality and methodology, the dominant Van Gogh's figure still blocks the way to observe Li's personality. He portrays himself as an individual who lives under the shadow of history and master, and under the surveillance of Internet. Or, according to his interview, surveillance could also be decided by the governmental pandemic control [6]. Admittedly, Li's artistic transformation of his perceptual emotion during quarantine could be identified as certain expression of self, this emotion is a shared emotion by everyone. To be more specific, the identification between quarantine and imprisonment recalls a shared, common experience among people. Therefore, without mentioning his own identity, Li elaborates his concern to represent the whole society. In the meantime, the shared experience is able to "cover" everyone's feeling, and everyone could also be no one.

Li's work is full of multiple dimensions of representations. In Nicholas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics, he argues how artwork functions as social interstice [7]. The playfulness of Li's footprints during the "Internet dream-wandering" fulfills Bourriaud's argument in conviviality and "relation". In addition, once viewers take a picture of Li's work, an updated dimension of viewing is created: it would be a picture of Li's photograph of his sketch of an Internet screenshot of a framed masterpiece. This sensuous interaction seems to be messy, but each layer, or each copy, is just a 2-dimensional surface. Van Gogh is never organically presenting in any one of them, or his figure becomes nothing more important than a symbol. Li's manipulation of representations is coherent with Bourriaud's discussion on Guy Debord's idea of "Society of Spectacle" [8]. Bourriaud argues that "yesterday art was dealing with relations inside the art world, but today the emphasis shifts to an external relations and eclectic culture."; and he believes that contemporary art plays the role of an "angelic programme beneath the real capitalist economic system, so as to patiently re-stitch the relational fabric" [9]. Li's work is initially constructed on a spectacle of Internet. Upon that, he continues making multiple spectacles, puts them together to form a new spectacle, and opens the endless potentiality of future spectacles. Although he seems to aware of deepening his reproduction work with materiality, the materials, especially the novel *Brave New World*, is still being consumed by its superficial pages. Its actual narrative or content does not interfere the other spectacle. Standing in the front of Li's work,

without imagining his gesture in painting with brushes, viewers are more likely to picture his laptop screen, new layers being piled up in Adobe Photoshop (fig.3).



Figure 3: Li Shun, Exhibition scene in “Brave New World”, Apr.9-May.29, 2022. ©Enclave Contemporary, Shenzhen, 2022.

Back to the discussion on materiality, Li’s selection of acrylic cover may be the most distracting part for viewing. As mentioned in the Visual Analysis part, while viewers try to get closer or take a picture of Li’s painting and photography, the shiny transparent cover diminishes the trace of his movement. Especially from Li’s black-and-white oils and charcoal, viewers see a much clear reflection of their own. First of all, we may accept that the cover can preserve the artwork nicely. Since Li lays slices of novel pages on his oil canvas, the edges are easy to lose their stickiness. If there is not a cover, the display would be precarious. This precariousness also infers the fragility of Li’s work. As discussed, the cover isolates Li’s intimate interaction with his viewers, but the superficially secure cover still takes the risk: there are dusts and even dead flyers inside. Nevertheless, without careful observation for most of the time, the cover still functions in polishing. Secondly, Li’s painting features an elegance of craftsmanship and vintage. On the contrary, the highlighter background and the acrylic cover are both quite artificial. This contradiction is visualized in the front of viewers eyes, but possibly hard to sense while we are reading history and news through various Internet links. Thus, we may see the transparency as a projection of our eyes, or a disturbing fog that needs to be wipe out. Lastly, Li’s name and the exhibition title, along with the painting and the photography, are also closed inside the cover. As we know, the painting is an appropriation of other’s work. But by putting on his own signature, he challenges the originality and copyright. More importantly, no matter from the ink-print of the novel or the printed signature, Li’s handwriting is never traceable. He printed out his name, labeled them on every single oil canvas, and sealed the canvas with an acrylic cover. The action of

sealing closes and spectacularizes the inside world. Meanwhile, this process is such a correspondence to commodification, the by-product from Post-colonialism in Homi Bhabha's statement [10]. Li Shun, the artist himself, has completed a preliminary packing for his own art, pulling them into the market. In relations to Anne Petersen's discussion of institutional critique, the gallery here becomes a store to exhibit their latest limited editions walls by walls [11]. In fact, the "confined pleasure" can be also understood as a "Covid pleasure", featuring how people figure out and embrace the lockdown. More and more institutions, because of the huge shrinkage of foreign audience, established online viewing exhibitions. Based on a virtual touring of artwork itself, institutions also market their exhibitions and special events with a pack of access to videos of Artist Talk, Curator's Talk, front notes and all kinds of archival information you used to have explore on your own in the space. Li Shun is somehow a curator, who collect and push the information for the lockdown people, along with some personal "by-product". Just like what he himself admitted, he is "standing on the shoulders of giants" [6].

5. Conclusion

Going from *Internet Sketch-Mr. Van Gogh*, we see how the whole series contains Li Shun's effort in making appropriation, reproduction, fabrication, and representation. He appropriates the images of masterpiece, the digital archive of Google Map, the printed novel of *Brave New World*, the Chinese literati concept of dream-wandering, and even his own painting. His smart choice in displaying and materiality weaves a huge net of layers and dimensions, which viewers sense ambiguity and detachment from his presentation. Nevertheless, his selection of colorful masterpiece, alternatives of mediums, and craftsmanship of painting are all directing viewers to enjoy a convincing visual journey. He is also aware of avoiding boringness with little reformation. The duality between positive and negative is replaced by much more complicated tension. The ambiguity reminds people of the multiple copies of picture: with high or low resolution, or even with watermarks. Since the visual content is more important, people are ignoring the investigation of originality and authority, getting lost in the labyrinth of snapshots. In contrast, Li's work somehow ignores the visual language, going back to the ontology of mediums. Due to the catalyzation from the pandemic, he questions the degeneration of people's critical thinking skill. Surviving from the speedily developing technological and virtual world, we should also consider whether it is meaningful or helpful to figure out the inertia in filtering information.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my MA professor Vivian Sheng at Department of Art History, The University of Hong Kong, whose lectures on Contemporary Art inspired my analysis and selection of bibliography.

I also want to thank artist Li Shun and the manager of Enclave Contemporary-Younghwa Jeon, whose interview constructed my understanding and further interpretation during my internship in this gallery.

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