

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Introduction

I accompanied Zhou Yilun on his trips to Los Angeles in the summer of 2015 and Bucharest in the spring of 2016, during which he created two bodies of paintings, installations, and sculptures for Nicodim Gallery's two locations. This essay is the result of my close observation of how he implements the strategies of chance, assemblage, contradiction, and contingency to overtly put under scrutiny the global postmodern discourse of dissolving what Jean-François Lyotard calls master narratives or metanarratives to embrace incongruity and expose the linear narrative of art history and the socioeconomic relationship between artist and collector, artist and institution, and artist and production.

Barbarous, desultory, elusive, and even whimsical, Zhou Yilun's figurative paintings are often overloaded with seemingly random motifs and appropriated imagery that are lifted from art history, mass media, and popular culture and then bandaged with found objects or vandalized with graffiti. The mashup of fragmented images causes the picture to become deconstructed in both formal and semantic terms. Instead of creating new meanings, the fragments disrupt and undo one another. As a result, collectors and artists alike often scratch their heads in confusion or dismiss his work as Bad Painting.

Bad Painting

Bad Painting is by now established as an art historical term that at one time marked a dialectical divergence from typical modernist painting practices, resulting in fractured imagery and source materials as a means to contradict mainstream capitalist culture. Marcia Tucker first applied the term in 1978 in the context of the exhibition *Bad Painting* that she organized at the New Museum, New York. She argued that “. . . it is figurative work that defies, either deliberately or by virtue of disinterest, the classic canons of good taste, draftsmanship, acceptable source material, rendering, or illusionistic representation.”¹ Her exhibition “foreshadowed the renewed vigour and acceptance of (especially figurative) painting in the 1980s, as well as this period's question of the avant-gardes' belief in progress and the acceptance of artistic pluralism.”² Since then, Bad Painting has become not only a popular strategy for both curatorial and artistic practices, but also a set of theories for evaluating painting. Twenty years later, the *Bad Painting—Good Art* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna brought Bad Painting into focus again. Curator Eva Badura-Triska points out in her essay that bad paintings are:

[constantly fighting] against themselves, against all forms of complacency, non-questioning, and ossification linked to the perpetuation of a “signature style” once it has been accepted, let alone established as commercially successful. Here, too, the Bad Painters adhere to a brand of radical non-conformism and freedom of thought that is critically at odds with model-based or schematic working methods and the argument used to justify them.³

The idea of “bad painting” already existed prior to Tucker’s exhibition—exemplified by artists such as Pieter Bruegel, Edouard Manet, and Martin Kippenberger—parading alongside “good painting” to embarrass the viewer into questioning his or her reception of works of art and meditating on the spirit of his or her time. The uneasy reception of Bad Painting emphasizes that our ability to appreciate art is limited by our knowledge and our assumptions. What is also interesting is that the embarrassment that accompanies the reception of art almost always arises from figurative painting. Bad Painting serves as a vehicle for artists to take the drastic step of challenging the condition of painting, negating traditionally what has constituted painting, giving a nod to a new kind of temporality and spatiality, and restructuring a literal quality different from master narratives in the hope of generating self-critique of the medium. New York gallerist Friedrich Petzel observes:

[P]ainting’s relationship to its own critique raises the question of whether painting can offer competent solutions that can be aesthetically formalized, or made operative as historically progressive forces. Accordingly, a confrontation must take place within the artistic conventions of painting as a medium of expression in order to articulate the break with the false promise inherent to criticism.⁴

However, Bad Painting, which was once supposed to reject all rules of accepted aesthetic conduct, is now becoming such a fashionable genre that it risks being kitsch, supporting our basic sentiments and beliefs instead of disturbing or questioning them. Additionally, Bad Painting as a strategy is not always sustained throughout an artist’s life; instead, it might be an instrument for the artist to open up new spaces for the medium during a liminal phase in his or her career. Albert Oehlen and Martin Kippenberger, for instance, eventually stepped away from what I see as their Bad Painting practice.

Bad Painting has always been saddled with the challenge of transforming “taste.” As Chinese society is fully under the influence of neoliberal capitalism, the bourgeois lifestyle has become a burgeoning phenomenon. One aspect of bourgeois lifestyle is conspicuously consuming in pursuit of particular tastes. Many Chinese artists are now eagerly emulating canonized works from the West, adapting to West-centred pluralism, and chasing after new aesthetic “nuances” in an effort to be recognized as equal players in the global art world. However, Danish artist Asger Jorn argued, “there is no

such thing as different styles, and there never was. Style is the expression of a bourgeois content, and its various nuances are what we call taste.”⁵ It is within this context that I want to examine Zhou Yilun’s painting practice. The reception of Zhou Yilun’s work has been largely shadowed by the misperception that he impulsively pursues Western “bad” taste. He rarely articulates the ideas behind his “bad” painting, which further convinces many that he might not have anything significant to say about art or about the world in general. This essay sheds some light on the dialectical thinking that invigorates his practice.

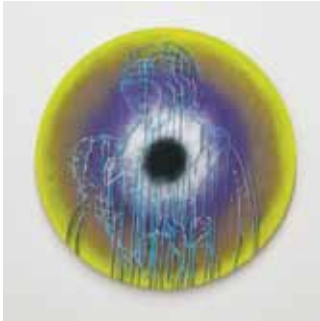
Zhou Yilun, *Untitled (The Pieta)*, 2015, oil on cardboard, clothes, and mixed media, 175.2 x 205.7 cm. Photo: Lee Thompson. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.



Appropriating and Undoing The Masters

Most of the works included in Zhou Yilun’s Los Angeles exhibition coalesce into a parody of Renaissance and pre-Renaissance subjects and compositions, featuring Jesus and Madonna, Adam and Eve, and various Christian Saints. Zhou Yilun casts himself as both an imaginary archetypical artist and a prankster with a huge appetite for mockery. His *Untitled (The Pieta)* (2015) is derived from Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, which portrays a young, serene Madonna cradling the dead body of Jesus. But Zhou Yilun completely strips away the piousness embedded in the original work and the Renaissance ideal of beauty; his painting is done on a piece of large ragged cardboard salvaged from the street. Garbage such as napkins, masking tape, and rubber washers collected from his temporary apartment in Los Angeles were glued onto Madonna’s face and chest; two defective, cheap t-shirts and a tank top bought from an American Apparel discount warehouse are smeared with dirty colours and hung on the cardboard to cover Jesus’s face and feet. Zhou Yilun’s liberal use of spray paint makes the holy Mother and Son appear obscured. This work references several artistic strategies: the graffiti, the readymade, appropriation, action painting, and the incorporation of sculptural elements onto painting. The absurdity in Zhou Yilun’s work relies on the juxtaposition of kitsch imagery, coded narratives,

contingency, and contradiction between the visual elements. At the same time, these very devices counteract any predetermined meanings assigned by the artist. Instead, they evoke various readings from various viewers, echoing Duchamp's premise that art is an intermediary in a process that the artist begins and the viewer completes.



Another untitled painting from 2015 is derived from the *Madonna Litta* (c. 1481–97), a small painting on wood panel attributed to either Leonardo da Vinci or one of his students. Here, Zhou Yilun depicts the Virgin Mary breastfeeding the baby Jesus on a small round wooden tabletop that he found in the street. He spray-painted the rim of the circle neon

yellow and the centre purple and white to make it look like a glowing light bulb. The Madonna and the Child's silhouettes are simply contoured with thin dribbling lines of blue and white, as if the image were melting in the electric heat of the light bulb.

Zhou Yilun, *Untitled (The Madonna Litta)*, 2015, oil on wood, 84 cm in diameter. Photo: Lee Thompson. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.



Much of the imagery incorporated in his paintings for Nicodim Gallery's Bucharest show was culled from catalogues of European historical, ethnological, and art museums collected during his stay there the month before his exhibition, whereas the rest was derived from flamboyant turn-of-the-century European architecture with sinuous and floral motifs. The city of Bucharest's many graffiti-bombed streets

are littered with this architectural glory from the past, while the communist era also left its brutalist mark on the urban landscape. Nicodim Gallery itself is located in an old French Baroque palace where Zhou Yilun set up his makeshift studio to create the works he later exhibited. But for Zhou Yilun, nothing is sacred; everything is vernacular and subject to his parody. While traveling in Europe, he noticed the ubiquitous equestrian imagery—knights or legendary historical figures riding on horseback. Perhaps one of the most noticeable equestrian portraits that commemorate rulers and military commanders in art history is *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1800–01) by Jacques-Louis David. In one of the paintings he produced in Bucharest, Zhou Yilun took a cue from this classic subject, and the composition indeed recalls David's Napoleon. However, he mounts a monkey (2016 is the year of Monkey according to the Chinese zodiac) on horseback to replace the heroic and idealized Bonaparte and bestows a tongue-in-cheek title, *The Golden Monkeys On Horsebacks* (2016), referring to the auspicious Chinese pun combining monkey and horse in order to wish someone an immediate promotion. To further diminish the archetypal grand gesture in the imagery, he veils the painting with a large piece of bubble wrap that

Zhou Yilun, *The Golden Monkeys on Horseback*, 2016, oil and spray paint on canvas, 250 x 190 cm. Photo: Alexandru Paul. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.

is slashed and spray painted. His deconstructing of iconic and familiar European imagery that has been inherited from ancient Greek and Roman empires serves as a point of departure for him to direct critical attention to the globalized art world centred in Europe and the US and deeply rooted in classical Greek philosophy, Renaissance traditions, and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which culturally and historically have little significance to a Chinese person. It seems preposterous to Zhou Yilun that artists around the world should adapt to the Western version of humanism.

Zhou Yilun's images do not overturn the original meanings of the imagery he appropriates but, instead, empties them. He is "remaking" European masters' work but doing it badly. He elaborates that his "painting is about simultaneously representing visual events from different spaces in one intended coincidence. It disrupts the present space and time. The reciprocation occurs unintentionally, but the unintentional is intended."⁶ On the one hand, his engagement with Western art history is different from that of artists in the West, and he makes this very clear not only by showing apathy toward masterpieces in Western art history but also by adulterating them. On the other hand, his deliberate appropriation of highly charged images somehow resonates with what Kippenberger intended in his own work:

[Kippenberger was] intentionally unoriginal, his paintings depend on the renowned paintings from the Renaissance era, as he first approximated and then disassembled it. As if he acknowledges his missing the period when visual arts were innovated and transformed. His work is peppered with ironic references to the masters. It was no longer credible to relate oneself to prior work in terms of progress—one could only portray the reality of one's own belatedness, destined as a successor to some of the greatest artists of all time, never to be more than second best.⁷

Interior of the Cantacuzino Palace (1901-02), Bucharest, where Nicodim Gallery and Zhou Yilun's makeshift studio were located. Photo: Danielle Shang.



The conflicting reaction of both resistance and admiration toward Western artistic canons is something commonly experienced by artists on the global margins, those who have been forced wholesale the knowledge, techniques, prototypes, and forms of representation according to the framework established by the "centre." This West-centred pluralism in the contemporary globalized art world is what Zhou Yilun ridicules in his paintings;

yet he does not attempt to resolve these conflicts. Aside from the narrative of art history, the repertoire of images that he reworks also includes those derived from the everyday spectacle of the middle class and the consumer society exemplified, for example, in television programs and billboards on

the street. By manipulating imagery that represents both the art historical and the everyday, he highlights moments of indignity and empties the works of their original pious, heroic, or allegorical meaning. His critique is evasive, often hinted at in his wittily awkward compositions and in the self-vandalization that he performs by mutilating his own canvases and frames, attaching objects found in dumpsters to his paintings and defacing the images. Similar to Tala Madani, a Tehran-born artist based in California, Zhou Yilun plays on “stereotypes and the power of iconic symbols and with a stylistic kinship to political satire and caricature”⁸ that lead us “to a pressing discussion on representation and communication in a globalized information society.”⁹ Zhou Yilun understands that the problems of painting are not solely the problems of taste on a purely formal level, but also problems with social, ethical, and anecdotal elements. Although he does not paint political banners, his “bad paintings” reflect his punk attitude of anti-establishment, anti-mainstream values and a do-it-yourself aesthetic. He shares much with the protagonists of Sergio Leone’s 1966 epic spaghetti Western film *The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly*: they are antiheroes who foil archetypes and poke fun at societal canons.

The Tension in the Exchange

No matter how idealistic an artist is, he or she cannot escape the uncomfortable relationship of exchange with the gallery and the collector, as the commercial art market is very much a part of the luxury-consumption sector of the economy. Thorstein Veblen in his 1899 *The Theory of the Leisure Class* calls the collector a “gentleman of leisure” who cultivates his aesthetic faculty to live a life of ostensible leisure that appears opulent.¹⁰ Art, often expensive, is regarded as both a valuable *éclat* and an object



Zhou Yilun, *Head I*, 2016, charcoal, spray paint on drywall and wood board, dimensions variable. Photo: Alexandru Paul. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.

expected to last eternally. Zhou Yilun is aware of this, and he insists on challenging this notion by inconveniencing the collector and the gallerist. There is always something “wrong” with his work: either the material he incorporates is too flimsy and a challenge for conservators, the picture too deranged compositionally, or the handmade quality of his assemblage too amateur looking. He chiseled off a few chunks of plaster on the gallery wall in Bucharest to integrate the ruined wall into the work *Head I* (2016), in spite of repeated warnings from the building management to preserve this building as a historical landmark. Whoever decides to collect this work would be expected to “damage” his or her own wall. Leftovers, swap meet bargains, and useless scraps often make their way onto his paintings as “the icing on the cake,” according to the artist.¹¹ He assembled his installation *Relic* (2016) at Nicodim Gallery with his paint-smeared clothes, empty containers, plastic tarps that were used to protect the floor of his makeshift studio, moss that grew on the gallery balcony, and various scraps collected

throughout the city of Bucharest on the day he turned the studio back into the gallery space. Nothing was wasted.

Zhou Yilun, *Relic*, 2016, mixed-media installation. Photo: Alexandru Paul. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.

He succeeds in making his work incongruous and frustrating. This intentionally created discomfort is not his attempt to nip at the hand that feeds him; rather, it alerts the audience to the seductions of the prestigious white cube as well as the neatly framed painting hung on a pristine white wall. The ostensibly displayed crudeness in Zhou Yilun's choice of materials as well as his pictorial idiom brings forth the tension embedded in the artwork as commodity and upsets "the illusion of the artwork's detachment from the political and economic contexts within which it is produced."¹²



The Punk Attitude

Zhou Yilun, whose body is almost completely covered with tattoos designed and inked mostly by himself and some friends, constantly goes against the grain and breaks with social consensus. Even his school years were marked with demerits for misdeeds. He opts for a Bohemian lifestyle of a voluntary exile on the periphery of Hangzhou, far away from the central art hubs. Instead of networking with art world's *Who's Who*, he surrounds himself with individuals who are outside the mainstream, or even outcasts. He finds their eccentric character and non-conformist visions more agreeable, given his own recalcitrant and curious nature. As an artist, not only does he mock the grand narrative of art history and reassess the aesthetic canons at a distance, but he also dismisses the social codes of high culture in favour of the aesthetic found in thrift stores. His favorite pastimes are dumpster-diving in local neighbourhoods and "treasure-hunting" in flea markets.

LBX Gallery, Hangzhou

Zhou Yilun does not have an assistant; he does everything himself by hand. In addition to the physical action of painting, he often handcrafts his own stretcher bars and objects; even his furniture at home is made from mundane and often recycled materials that he accumulates on a daily basis. His relentless appropriation and accumulation have become the trademarks not only of his everyday life but also of his artistic practice. His savoring of menial tasks and his interest in the physical evolution that takes place during the process of art making set him apart from the increasing practice of outsourcing the making of art, where the intellectual prowess is removed from physical labour and the artist acts as the consumer relying on others to satisfy his or her needs. It is also worth mentioning that his LBX Gallery (short for the Chinese word *laobaixing*, "commoners"), a large project space at a location that does not even have a street address because it fails to meet the zoning requirements of the city. At LBX, Zhou Yilun collaborates with all walks of life. Anything produced by anybody, be it homemade cakes, tattoo designs, or outsider paintings, can be put on display and regarded as both art and commodity. Very often, products and items are either traded



Left: LXB Gallery, Hangzhou. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Danielle Shang. Courtesy of LXB Gallery.

Right: Zhou Yilun's amateur tattoos. Courtesy of the artist.

directly between owners or simply given away. Guided by his DIY attitude, LXB, a proud commune-like amateur space, creates opportunities through low-cost programs and activities for ideas and visual forms that would not otherwise be heard or circulate. One of LXB's on-going experiments is "amateur tattoo," clumsy and crude looking tattoos that are designed and inked by amateurs.

Zhou Yilun's art and life are inseparable. He uses both to create dissonance and to disrupt normality and challenge the establishment in his own oblique yet playful way. He champions embarrassment, paradox, derivation, and irony. His work is about painting's capacity (or incapacity) to produce a self-critique, and he seeks alternative constructions of painting through what Asger Jorn and the Situationist International once called "modification" or *detournement* in order to unsettle the viewer's preconceptions about discourses in art history, global cultures, and social conditions. Consequently, his "bad paintings" often empower the viewer with a sensation of transgression and a sense of freedom not to believe certain things, especially when it comes to assessments of quality, "good taste, draftsmanship, acceptable source material, rendering, or illusionistic representation"¹³ in art. But at the heart of his deconstructing of classical subjects and his multilayered pictorial commentaries is the reconstruction of the role of the artist in society. In the end, we come full circle to a critical question: If Bad Painting is perhaps only an ephemeral phase for an artist to seek new possibilities, what is next for Zhou Yilun?

Notes

1. Marcia Tucker, *Bad Painting* (New York: The New Museum, 1978), 5; see http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/6415/.
2. Eva Badura-Triska, "Who Becomes a Bad Painter, When, Why, and in What Sense?" *Bad Painting, Good Art* (Cologne: Dumont, 2008), bilingual edition, 78.
3. Ibid.
4. Friedrich Petzel, "Psycho Sludge," in Catherine Gudis, ed., *Oehlen/Williams 95* (Columbus: The Ohio State University, Wexner Center for the Arts, 1995), 144.
5. Jean Louis Ferrier, *Art of Our Century: The Chronicle of Western Art, 1900 to the Present* (New York: Prentice-Hall Editions, 1989), 455.
6. Zhou Yilun, interview with the author, October 2011.
7. Ann Goldstein, *Martin Kippenburger: The Problem Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 261.
8. Joa Ljungberg, "An Unsettling Journey Through a Male Wonderland," *Tala Madani: Rip Image* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, and London: Koenig Books, 2013), 52.
9. Ibid.
10. Thorstein Veblen, "The Theory of the Leisure Class" (1899), in Natasha Degan, ed., *The Market* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 50–52.
11. Zhou Yilun, interview with the author, May 2016.
12. Martin Braathen, "The Commercial Significance of The Exhibition Space" (2007), in Degan, ed., *The Market*, 114.
13. Tucker, *Bad Painting*, 5; see http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/6415/.