THE APPEAL OF LOOKING

By

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Introduction

Visual Perception, according to the definition on Wikipedia, is the ability to interpret the surrounding environment by processing information that is contained in visible light. All my works are always directly or indirectly associated with this concept. My urge to research visual perception comes from my curiosity and deep desire to explore the unknown in the world. The evolution of my work shows the depth of my study of this amazing human ability.
Biography

I was born in a beautiful small town called Yantai in Shandong province, China in 1988, when China was in the beginning stages of its economic reform, and the economy began to grow rapidly. My generation was deemed to be a very lucky generation because at that time China began to engage in international trade and began to import foreign products and culture. For example, after I was born, my family bought our first color television, and 10 years after that we purchased our first computer. Because of the Chinese economic reform, my parents’ generation had numerous good opportunities in their careers. They put a large amount of their energy into their work and provided our family with good living conditions. But, at the same time, we are the generation born after the Chinese government implemented its family planning policy. Without the company of siblings, and with parents who were absent because of their commitment to hard work, I was a part of the loneliest Chinese generation.

In my mind, I spent a lot of time during my childhood watching television. The world of television had a strong appeal for me. At that time, I was too young to know where the appeal came from. All I knew was that what was happening on the television was so interesting. As a viewer, I did not need to interact with anyone I saw on the screen. I always adopted the perspective of the observer, but I could feel my emotions being moved by watching television. I also retained this interest in observing what was happening around me in real life, just like when I watched television. My mom said that I was a curious girl, and my eyes never stopped looking around. It should not be surprising that in 2007, I enrolled at Shandong Normal University as a photography student.
In the first few years of my photography studies, my definition of a photographer was that they were observers of real life. All of my work focused on what was happening around me. In my mind, a good photographer needed to stay curious when looking at the world and develop good skills to represent what they saw. At the same time, as a viewer of media, my viewing habits had changed because I got my first laptop during the first year of college and started to watch TV shows online. Watching those shows enabled me to control my watching pace and take time to think about what I saw. I began to realize how firmly my attention was controlled by television shows. This new awareness made me barely able to watch television on cable from then on. I found it interesting how I had become addicted to television, and this interest especially intensified after I took a film class and became fascinated by the process of film production. I started to understand that viewers’ attention and thoughts were not just represented or reproduced naturally but actually carefully predesigned. This realization influenced me as a photographer, and I began to feel unsatisfied by merely representing what I saw as an observer.

Background

One day, I came across Lu Yao’s work, New Landscapes. In this series, Yao used the aesthetic style of Chinese traditional landscape painting with photo collage techniques to express his concern about the impact of China’s rampant urbanization development on our daily environment. This visual conflict between China’s past and present alongside the conflict between traditional painting and modern photographic technology was striking. I saw the possibility for photography to no longer be a process of passive reproduction, but rather a
creative process totally within the control of the photographer, just like a film is wholly in the hands of its director.

Figure 1. *New Landscapes*, Yao Lu, 2006

Deeply influenced by Yao, I finished my thesis work, *The Ink of Shadow* in 2011. I enjoyed the predesign process of planning every detail before I clicked the shutter button. Each image of
*The Ink of Shadow* was a direct shot of a human’s body taken with my digital camera, but I cropped each one into a circle. By doing so, I was trying to use the same aesthetic style of Chinese traditional landscape painting to express the harmony between nature and mankind, which is a very important theory in ancient Chinese philosophy. I emphasized the details of the human body in these works, such as the texture of the skin or unique marks on the body. I reference those details to the general configuration of the earth’s surface, to differentiate the first impression of these images from what they really are. By doing so, I encourage my viewers to associate the two elements, nature and mankind, together and deeply think about their relationships.

Without clothes or any accessories, the human body, as a part of nature, is wonderfully imbued with the beauty that I truly appreciate. As in myths, religions, or works from the history of art, the human has always been linked with the land and all other creatures on the earth. We are all born naked and we all die without taking anything with us, not even those things we struggled for our entire lives. The coexistence of mankind and nature is amazing, but more and more people forget this gift because they focus on their desires and things that do not belong to them.

*The Ink of Shadow* is a very important piece of work in my life. It motivated me to go further in my photography studies. I began matriculation in graduate school at the University of Georgia in 2013. Focusing on art photography, I feel freer with my work. The capabilities of photography were no longer limited to the work produced by the camera. I started to try multiple new techniques.
The most successful work I completed my first year is called *The Universal Surface*. Each image was generated by a computer application called IOGraphica. IOGraphica can track the movement of a computer mouse cursor and convert it into an image that shows all the paths the
mouse has taken. The lines on the images indicate the paths of the mouse, and the black circles represent where the mouse stops. The more times the mouse stops, the bigger the black circles get. The white circle with the little black dot in the center indicates moments at which the mouse is clicked. These images are similar to maps, recording the mouse behavior over the recording time period. I asked several of my friends to record their mouse movement when using their own personal apple computers. I then titled those images using the recording time of each one. I was curious about how my viewer would read those images, in other words, how they would interpret the visual information from those abstract lines and circles. This was the first time I started to research visual perception.

I compared the reading experience of this work with the experience of reading maps. A map enables us to read abstract spaces and directions in a more straightforward and efficient way by using conventions, such as symbols and legends. People who read the images generated by IOGraphica also use a convention that exists in our cultural memory. I found that the random looking path of the mouse movement actually has a pattern, because the design of the computer system has predetermined how we move our mouse. One can interpret the crossing black lines on the top of the image as a menu bar of a computer screen, because the design of the computer system is universally understood. I also read these lines as gestures that constitute the act of contemporary white-collar work. They represent the manifestation of such digital labor in a poetic, aestheticized form. In any amount of time, there are thousands of people moving their mice and completing their jobs using computers. To measure the value quantity of digital work becomes hard with the absence of material. The hand movement shown on The Universal Surface offers the viewer a unique chance to read those creations of value beyond the timeline.

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1 Ascribed to German Egyptologist Jan Assmann, Cultural memory "is formed by symbolic heritage embodied in text, objects and other media that serve as mnemonic triggers to initiate meanings associated with what has happened."
During my first year of graduate school in the United States, I felt the experience of being able to look at a word but having no idea of its meaning. Text at the very basic level can also be a visual signal. I found a similarity between the action of reading words and reading images. Once I have learned an English word, I can translate its meaning without any effort. But when I read English words that I am not familiar with, the words become signs that I try to understand with my imagination. That encourages me to keep researching the cognitive ability of humans. Anjali
Hans and Emmanuel Hans wrote in their paper\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Kinesics, Haptics and Proxemics: Aspects of Non-Verbal Communication} that:

"The Non-verbal communication (NVC) is conveying of emotions, feelings, and messages through actions and expressions rather than words...Nonverbal communication is the process of communication through sending and receiving wordless (mostly visual) cues between people. It is sometimes mistakenly referred to as body language (kinesics), but nonverbal communication encompasses much more, such as use of touch (haptic) and distance (proxemics)..." (Abstract).

The act of seeing and understanding is very different. Seeing is the "hardware" part of vision, it includes the process by which light enters our eyes and fires a signal to a neurotransmitter, which then propagates the signal to the brain. Understanding can be considered the "software" part of vision. It includes pattern recognition and associated higher-level reasoning. We are not always conscious about the process of seeing and understanding, especially when we encounter non-verbal communication. Awareness of these underlying processes is very important, especially when we are continually bombarded by visual images from all kinds of media today. We are in a world in which most people do not have enough patience to read words because they can obtain information more directly and efficiently through imagery. The evolution of social media, from Facebook to Twitter and now Instagram, shows that people rely more and more on images to learn about and understand the world. In 2014, the second year of my graduate program, I started to make a series of works that used books as visual symbols of word information.

In this series of work, \textit{Reading Book}, I used a 4X5 large format camera focusing on the non-bound side of two closed books that were stacked vertically. By doing so I offered my viewer an opportunity to read the book as a textured visual symbol via the format of images. Photography as non-verbal communication can easily be overinterpreted. I appreciate this tendency as it

regards artworks. A book can be read by the words on its pages, but in this work I showed that a book can also be read as an object itself. Photography limits the ability of the human eye to see in different perspectives and to define the borders of their visual field. In this work, I allow images to have significant information distortion and the minimum possible documentary value. By doing so, I am trying to deliberately present the possibility that the images might be taking the role of words.

Figure 4. Reading Book, Yongxi Wang, 2014
Color Games

In 2015, I continued to do research on the emotions conveyed by visual perception in media culture. I found color to be an extremely useful visual element for representing different emotions. The psychological effects of color have been studied by scientists since the middle ages. Avicenna (980-1037) was first to discuss chromotherapy “which is claimed to be able to use light in the form of color to balance “energy” lacking from a person’s body, whether it be on physical, emotional, spiritual, or mental levels.” (wiki). In the book 3 Color: The Secret Influence author Fehrman, Kenneth R. and Cherie Fehrman state that: “Colors have been stereotyped by the public when it comes to emotions ...colors do not contain any inherent emotional triggers. Rather, it is more likely that our changing moods and emotions caused by our own physiological and psychological makeup at the moment we interact with color to create preferences and associations at the moment we interact with color to create preferences and associations that we then link to the color-emotion response itself” Hoping to go further to comparing reading words to reading images, I made the work Color Games.

I used freshwater and saltwater of different densities to create two different layers in a clear container. And by mixing dyes of different colors in the container, I created several mysterious colorful views. Each image was shot with a 4X5 large format camera and scanned to yield a digital image. I then cropped the digital images into a circular shape, suggesting the aperture of the lens and of human vision. And I added a square border on the images, representative of the editing process of the visual media. Square is the perfect quadrangle that can be encapsulated in a circle. I also used this shape to imply the replacement of the circle by the square in media. The

most interesting part is that I am trying to use the confliction of word-emotion response and color-emotion response to give my viewer two contradicting feelings. For example, I titled Cloudy on one piece of work, which has a blue sky-like color on top and a green grass-like color on bottom. I titled it Cloudy because the image in the square emphasizes a more cloud-like shape. Green and Blue are commonly associated with calm and peaceful feelings, but “cloudy” is normally associated with anxiety and foreboding. I expect that when my viewers already look at the images they will have a color-response, and then when they look at the title they will have a word-response, the conflicting feeling will lead them to interpret their original emotion differently.

Figure 5. Cloudy, Yongxi Wang, 2015
The Appeal of Looking

At the end of 2015, I started to prepare my thesis show for exhibition at the Georgia Museum of Art. I thought about my persistent interest in photography’s capacities as a non-verbal communication medium to underscore differences in experiences via visual perception. I wanted to make several pieces to illuminate the experience of the unconscious viewer of media.

Neuropsychologist Oliver Sacks states that the ability of human image reorganization is learned by practice. He uses an example to confirm this theory that people who have been blind for a long period of time will need to learn how to recognize the objects that they are seeing even when the physical structure of their eye has been fully repaired. Without noticing it, we are trained to look at images and interpret them rapidly and efficiently everyday. This is very similar to the process of language translation, except that the visual information is harder to translate in a standard way. That is the reason why visual information is commonly used by advertising, political parties and news media to influence our thinking and our emotions, while we remain unaware.

In April 2016, I finally exhibited four pieces of work from this series, *The Appeal of Looking*, in my MFA show. Each of these images was directly shot by my digital camera after I predesigned and manipulated the objects. The objects in these works are the computer screen and the surface on which the images were projected. I choose the computer screen to represent the way that most people see media online and I choose the projector to represent the way that most people see the mass media. The images involved
in my work were images I found on digital archives. I chose them as examples of visual information that we could receive from the media.

![Image of a window blind with sunlight shining through]

Figure 6. *It is not Tree*, 24”X36”, Yongxi Wang, 2015

*It is not Tree* is an image of a window blind in morning light. The light and shadows on the blind were from the actual tree standing outside of the window, while the green leaves and branches of the tree were projected from the inside of the window. In this work, I deliberately displayed the visual signals that our eyes receive from physical objects and the visual signals from media technologies at the same time. Our eyes tend to treat these two kinds of signals equally, but the image of the tree generated by media artificially seems to be a stronger stimulation to our brain than the physical window blind. Nikolaas Tinbergen, a Nobel Prize
laureate in biology, coined the term “supernormal stimuli” to describe an artificial stimulus that results in a stronger response than a stimulus naturally existing. Social media could be classified as one kind of supernormal stimuli. There is much research suggesting that media has caused an increase in clinical depression in our current society. It is not only because the negative coverage tendency, but also because an idealized representation.  

4 Bessenoff (2006) conducted a study on female college undergraduates, and found that “exposure to thin-ideal advertisement increased body dissatisfaction, negative moods, and levels of depression and lowered self-esteem” (p.239) It is important to be aware that our brain can be attracted and trapped by many “supernormal” signals.

It is not Empty is the image that totally focuses on a textured blank white wall, where a one percent transparent blurry image of Majestic Mountain is projected. The image of Majestic Mountain is the well-known logo of the Paramount Pictures Corporation. Every time I watch a movie produced by Paramount Pictures, I see this mountain. Paramount Pictures has been using this logo since its inception, and it is the oldest surviving Hollywood film logo. Media can also plant an impression on people’s memory. Take the paramount mountain for example, my impression of the Majestic Mountain is this picture because I never went to this mountain, however I saw this picture thousands times.

This work is the most interesting one in the series because the details are very subtle. Many people thought that it was an empty screen. I get very excited when asking my audience, “Did you see the mountain?” I believe most people will recognize the mountain because most people have seen it many times. To make Majestic Mountain appear, all I need to do is to ask a simple question to allow my audience to look at it in a slightly deeper way. This experience is extremely important. We are constantly looking at the world around us, and quickly identify and make sense of what we see. The Internet is strengthening our ability to search and skim information rapidly, which renders us impatient when attempting to read visual information as deeply as we could before. Another interesting aspect of this work is that people will subsequently always see the mountain after they have seen it once.
It is not Theater is a shot of a computer screen showing a red curtain image, which was cropped in the format of a movie theater screen. John Berger said in his book ⁵Ways of Seeing that “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (p.8). If you believe it’s a Theater, what you saw could be 70 feet by 40 feet. If you believe it is on a computer screen, it is only 13 inches by 9 inches. Sometimes it is hard to believe what we see, because when you are trying to read and view things quickly, your brain will be led by the information that you are used to and even addicted to. That’s why the media can manipulate our minds today, and that’s also why people will always see the mountain in It is not Empty after they have seen it once.

⁵ John Berger. Ways of Seeing. 1972
Emily Balcetis, social psychologist who is also interested in social reception, talks about the limits of visual focus in a given time

“....the amount of information that we can see at any given point in time, what we can focus on, is actually relatively small. What we can see with great sharpness and clarity and accuracy is the equivalent of the surface area of our thumb on our outstretched arm. Everything else around that is blurry, rendering much of what is presented to our eyes as ambiguous. But we have to clarify and make sense of what it is that we see, and it's our mind that helps us fill in that gap. As a result, perception is a subjective experience, and that's how we end up seeing through our own mind's eye.” (Why some people find exercise harder than others)

Many human activities now are limited in this platform. It also limits our visual perception for a real sense of the world. Marshall McLuhan is a pioneer in media theory study. His theory is well recognized as one of the footstones of media theory. In 1964, he wrote a book Understanding Media in which he suggested that people should consider media as not only a carrier of content but also a message that affect the society. He said,

“Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act the way we perceive the world. When these ratios change, men change” (p.41).

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6 Marshall McLuhan. Understanding Media. 1964
Figure 9. *It is not Wood, 24"X36",* Yongxi Wang, 2015

*It is not Wood* is a computer screen which displays several images of wood texture and is partly covered by a piece of real wood. What I want to discuss here is nothing about wood itself. However, wood as serving as an example of visual information. The mouse cursor is functioning as an indicator to let my viewers differentiate the screen on the left side from the real wood on the right side. Apparently the left side is more easily seen as real wood than the right side. But the truth is the opposite. The visual information of any object can be easily duplicated by visual media technology today. The imaginary world created by the internet and digital media is far
more appealing, compared to that of the boring and stressful reality we are living. I use the ambiguity of images of wood to symbolize the weak border between media social lives and normal social lives.

While most people are already familiar with the potential danger of media, a large portion of them still choose to live in the exciting and comfort illusory world the media offers. The same idea is one of the main themes of the film *The Matrix*. In the movie, Cypher told Agent Smith, “You know, I know this steak doesn’t exist. I know when I put it in my mouth the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss.” The danger is not media, but we lose ourselves and succumb to the media too much.

We are not living in *The Matrix*, however much the media appeals to us. We still live in a physical world. The family we were born into and our position within that family still should be the primary way to define ourselves. The ability to be able to connect and disconnect ourselves from the media world becomes extremely important.
Conclusion

Vision is the most important sense we have. I am very lucky to be a photographer because photography allows the spreading of information worldwide very quickly. And photography is an easier and more direct way for people to grasp information in a very short period of time. It is also a non-verbal form of communication that opens the possibilities for it viewer to interpret, which feature I have always emphasized in my work. I prefer to use my viewer’s experience to deliver the concepts. My own experience directly influences interest toward my work. Also, my personality and my painting background influenced my classic aesthetics. Regardless the subject matter, I have always pursued a purely visual aspect. Three years of graduate study thought me the important of concepts in art photography, and also strengthened my willingness to continue research on visual perception.
Bibliography

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