

# Reflection of Daily Reality

by Kao Tzu-Chin (Editor in chief of Arco Magazine)

Renowned for her works on the subversion of Barbie-doll stereotypes, exploring the objectification of the human body and questioning feminine ideals, Peihang Huang's latest project sees the artist embark upon a new direction. Following her theme of contrasting perfection and cruel reality, Huang's paint strokes are strong and expressionistic, mapping out visual elements from current events. Part of her recent works take inspiration from fairy tale narratives with dramatic turns and happy endings. In *Frozen*, the signature heavy, suppressed snow scene in the Disney blockbuster of the same title is set against the sickly sweet palette through saturated colors that distinguishes Huang's style.

In stark contrast, some of the major disasters and crises in recent years have had a key influence on her recent works, such as the Nepal earthquake, the crash of the Trans Asia flight in downtown Taipei, and humanitarian crises caused by extremist groups. Unlike press photos that aim for vivid representation, nor tedious collages of pieces or digital alteration, Huang's works extract and tweak parts of images so that viewers are unable to map out a clear picture of the event. Anywhere from a microscopic invisible perspective to an image too large to be contained within the frame, clues wait solitarily for domestication by viewers.

The result is a communication gap created by the barrier between content and the viewer. Of course, one can still set out to interpret the news images by taking on a moralistic or an empathetic point of view. However, by doing so a series of processes of editing and organizing information enclosed in the images would be neglected and what Huang tries to reveal through her works would be over-simplified. Rather than looking at a compilation of disasters, violence and crime, Huang instead focuses on how we understand these 'views from the past', and how modern society and the context of nationalism influence our vision and perspective.

Before studying in the UK, like many Taiwanese, Huang had grown used to a media culture in which international reports were often sacrificed for local news and entertainment. When major events occur, local Taiwanese media are prone to bombard audiences with repeated broadcastings in a short space of time. The absence of follow-up reports and in-depth analysis often creates a distance between audiences and the event. Life in the United Kingdom has opened up a multitude of different channels for Huang to strengthen her empathy and contextualized thinking. Exposed to people of diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, her work has adapted to consider new reference points in time and space. In a world porously exposed to international trends and changing cultures, Huang was able to break from past stereotypes, re-examine herself, and participate with a fresh perspective.

Taiwan's confusing international status and diplomatic isolation creates a unique social environment that gives rise to a sense of rootlessness, restlessness and indifference within the culture. Living in both the UK and in Taiwan made Huang more keenly aware of such qualities, which are interpreted through an indifferent neutral tone underneath

the media images blended in the paintings. For Huang, there exists a distance for thinking, for expressing the powerlessness of an artist facing a country's political plight, for exploring images as a simulation that bears no relation to any reality, or for seeking any fun remaining in the day-to-day reality.

Since the advent of photography, observing disasters has become a typical contemporary experience. Images of tragedies are continuously circulated by all kinds of media. With the safe distance created by mass communication, we are able to observe violence conveniently and comfortably. Submerged in circulation of simulated experiences, we gradually lose our ability to judge political intentions or verify media reports. As observed by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, war is no longer won on the battlefield. The hostage replacing the warrior as the means of influence and information war without physical conflicts represent the modern forms of 'non-war' wars. Through contemporary media, the influences of simulation surpass that of traditional wars.

Huang's works re-create the context where these media images are positioned with collages of narrative streams and points out the possibility of amending the viewer's perception of the distant past in the process of production and cognition. The images taken from the internet are living proofs of events that people talk about but mostly have no chance to experience. They can be replicated and circulated in a short span of time and provide a condensed format to quickly comprehend and record the event. Events hence reach a maximum globalization through communication. Huang's works to some degree 'relay' the pain recorded by these images and stimulate us to reflect on them: Have we been given a reasonable explanation of the disaster? Who should be responsible for the pain we see in the images? Is it unavoidable? Do we have to question the facts accepted by everyone?

How can we respond to the news of distant disasters and sufferings brought to us by images in the media? Huang's question is like a blade cutting through our innocence, ignorance, and obliviousness. Do the images of others' sufferings diminish and reduce their violence, and further numb the feelings of the viewers? Or will they provide us with the power for change? The answer depends on your critical attitude toward the images, as the well-known American critic Susan Sontag commented: "Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks. All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say no. Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph."

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, trans. Huang Han-Ti (Taipei: Tonsan Publications Inc., 1997) 22.