

A Two-Way Gap: The Art of Vivien Zhang

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"The abstract does not explain, but must be explained."

— Gilles Deleuze¹

An arc line is drawn from the depths of the schematic process to the void of outer space. Forces intersect with this line, configuring, de-figuring, always on the move.

There is no play of emotion or mood, no passages of expression or bodily discharge; rather there is the balancing of weights, release of velocities, strategies of containment, the switching of elements, the modulations of fields, the calculation of sequence, the containment of tensions, the arrangement of folds, the expansion of forms all taking place within a vast laboratory of imaginary physics. Authorship is erased within the experimental apparatus. We are simply left alone to negotiate a space of encounter of the third kind (neither figurative nor abstract but in between the two). What are witnessed are things in the making as opposed to reflections on things in themselves. This is the difference between a world already named and organised by virtue of naming and either a state of emergence or disintegration of such a state.



Stencil Negative, 2013, 180 x 150 cm

"I was thinking about museums I had visited, in relationship to the moments or situations which appear odd or the accumulations held within brown cabinets. Gods and goddesses sit across from each other in a frenzy of colliding energies – do we dictate things to them or they to us? I start to think about motifs and the way artefacts accumulate on the threshold of misrecognition. It is as if we create motifs out of our storeroom of devices; but is the storeroom inherently located inside us? We constantly translate things from the outside to the inside world but are often unaware of the grammar in doing so."

¹ Deleuze & Parnet, *Dialogues*, Athlone Press: 1987, Preface.

Is abstract or abstraction simply the difference between everything that is figurative and thus assuming a negative identity? This would imply a stripping back, reduction as a prelude for a search for what is essential and non-reducible. Abstract thus signifies a freedom on the one side from illusion and the other from the literal. The search for a visual equivalent of the absolute is both a quest of abstraction and the abstraction of quest². Gilles Deleuze poses quite another model for abstraction that bypasses either absence or negativity and instead postulates an affirmation of 'the outside.'³ Abstract machines are assembled in order to propel forms outside themselves, lending to them other forces in the process. Rather than a model based upon a reduction valve, there is instead the potential release of forces towards unlimited manifestation. This notion of abstraction is distinct from Platonic formulations of abstract form withdrawn from matter. In contradistinction to mainstream ideas of abstract, Jean-Francois Lyotard discusses an idea of a "vulgar abstract" that "operates by system alone."⁴ In this instance painters might evoke notions to do with procedures or even method that stands in as a taming of the possibility of intensity. It is another way of coding the work as thoughtful but thoughtful in a way that also indicates withdrawal or extraction.

"Abstraction for me is about putting something down which is non actual. A gap appears either side of this first gesture. The two-way gap precipitates the next translation and itself is without the foundation of determination. What's built up through this is a series of multiple entrances and exits. So what is to be managed is not only the space in the painting, but also the various openings and intersections that accrue beyond the painting."



Twofold, 2014, 51 x 56 cm

² Wang Li in the Yuan Period stated: "Although painting is representation of form, it is dominated by idea. If idea is insufficiently brought out, it may be said, that the picture has no form either. But as the idea is in the form, it cannot be expressed if the form is neglected. When the form is grasped, the idea will fill it completely; but when the form is lost, how can there be either form or idea?" This indicates another way of thinking about abstraction based on the idea.

³ See John Rajchman, *Constructions*, MIT Press: 1998, P55-76.

⁴ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, Athlone Press: 1993, P245.

Invariably work functions as an echo chamber of the place it was produced. Having lived in Beijing, Nairobi, Bangkok and London the sense of place is not only uncertain but shifts onto another vector, that of imaginary cities. Cities are sites of the play of memory and history; they are imbued with both structures and gestures through which an idea of having a soul is born. Often the idea that it is possible to breathe a city is evoked, as if the city assumes the identity or behaviour of a distinct organism. A counterpoint to a city having a soul is the city as a site of forgetting. Drifting from city to city it is easy to forget where you are. In dreams, places start to be confused and then imaginative fragments of literature might start also to mutate into actual places. The splicing of places, then the splicing of realms, re-occasions place into temporal reconfigurations that destroy fixed forms of representation. Cities shift then from sites of recollection to zones of becoming other. These zones of becoming are constructed out of the disembodied fragments and syntaxes collected in museums of the mind. The city becomes an all over city, even a city on the move but on the move in a way that places itself on the outside. Such a sense of the city is linked in turn to the feeling of the floating space of painting. This feeling is connected to not only a loss of ground but also a free play of the mind beyond indexical attachment.

"I find myself talking about the different stages of life as if it is not really history, but rather a parallel space outside of this realm of real events. When I return to Beijing and see my uncle, for example, I am aware of a gap that might never be closed. What is this? The gap is there because its concrete form has taken place elsewhere. My uncle has an image of me that remains at age ten (when I left China), whereas I have assembled different images through the course of time that are now actual in my life. He continues to live with this image and we are both unable to find something to occupy the gap. It's like an uncertainty about how to continue within the present. Do you stay with your respective images, or do you create a shock or leap to throw the whole situation outside of the habit of encounter? This relates to the experience of painting because the passage of one painting to the next is assembled mainly out of habits, but a point is always reached whereby permission has to be gathered to burst out of the space of painting into a space that is inhabited, strange, or arbitrary. The surprise of painting is not unconnected to the surprises found within lived experience."

In the Lankavatara Sutra there is a statement: "Things are not as they appear. Nor are they otherwise." This could be defined as an aporia; it is seemingly impossible to move through such a statement. In representational thinking it is possible to simply pass through because a logical structure is dictating the logic and intention of thought but this statement goes behind such a process of thinking and destroys its logic in order to release the mind from its various attachments. Freed from attachment it is possible to proceed with the realisation that everything is mind and such a mind is governed by a state of emptiness.

"I like it when the work appears to make a demand for what I term the 'second look'. This look is embedded within quietness in which there can be no assumptions. This might even be a suspension of what can be grasped, or an arrest in trying to find one. This creates a prelude for a true entry into the work."

Thoughts are always in the process of switching from one location to the next. Paintings do not follow thoughts around, but like thought, they are concerned with the openness of the future. Both thought and painting are defined by states of drifting combined with a sharpening of focus or alert attention. The operation of switching from pole to pole is constant because it is embedded.

When the brush moves, thought is dispersed. When thought is concentrated, the brush is static yet there is no contradiction in this. After all, something is always moving within an organization of switching.

Chinese Classical painting developed a sophisticated language for the use of the brush (bi).⁵ Spiritual beauty is not only produced by the use of the brush but also defines the movement of the mind that precedes the brush. In part this also explains the proximity of painting and poetry in Chinese cultural development. The painter Kuo Hsi (11th C) claimed that: "Poetry is a picture without form, and painting is a poem with form." This implies that painting and poetry follow the same laws.

There are distinct machineries and agencies of inscription. There is a bureaucratic machine that is in charge of regulating the socio-political flux, a production machine which assembles and distributes things, a cultural machine which generates identity and serialised social construction, and an aesthetic machine that produces a realm of difference as a principle⁶. All of these machines are based on modes of inscription that draw marks, signs, structures, velocities, lines, images, passages, intensities and boundaries. The production machine is a complex organisation that inscribes living labour into things as a measure of value whereas the aesthetic machine inscribes without determinate ends thus releasing energetic discharge beyond limit. The aesthetic machine is therefore an excessive machine detached from the other machines because of its lack of a direct signifying economy. This lack of a direct signifying order of economy is yet another way of thinking about abstraction because its very passage indicates the beyond of representation. Again in these paintings we have the hint of economies and spaces from different realms and within this different process of inscription within a sensorium that can choose to both follow and interrupt logic. Machines are switched on and switched off, rewired or even pulverised thus releasing an inscription process between the zones of recognition and misrecognition. Scanning a painting entails a whole series of decisions, switches of attention, accelerations, disruptions, attractions, ruptures of sense, interruptions of passage, loss of direction, mutation of drives: all of which draws the

⁵ For a discussion on the use of the brush see Osvald Siren, The Chinese on the Art of Painting, Schoken Books: 1963, P 38-72.

⁶ The coding and organisation of these machines are open for re-organization or mutation and therefore can take on characteristics of other machines. Also machines join together to create complexes of operations.

encounter closer to the erotic excitement as opposed to meditative emptying. In this sense we are drawn into the play between plasticity and desire.

"I think that it might take a lot of effort to look at my work because they make so many demands at the same time. They create atmospheres whereby a change has to occur in order to re-order a relationship to such a visual event. This may be the adaption of the subject to the object. Painting for me is the machinery of such adaption. Painting is also an intensification apparatus. I am not sure if intensification comes first or adaption but I guess they work together."



Stencil Negative (Not Dragons Not),
2014, 180 x 150 cm

"The grid is a trinket made from a stencilled motif. This motif is a basis from which a hint of infinite manifestation occurs. It can take the imprint of different shapes that can in turn be moulded into different forms, folding down, crumbled up, flat and modelled for the feeling of depth. The grid thus becomes a mode of fragmented repetition and this repetition builds either anticipation or expectation of what is to come. This is affecting the stance of the viewer even before the event of recognition."



Folded Stencil (Generosity),
2013, 56 x 51 cm

In his commentary on the idea of genius⁷ Kant claims that it serves to generate excess that everyday or structured production cannot. In doing this it surpasses determinate concepts that are never adequate in relationship to the inexhaustible intuition released through imagination. In part, genius creates a relationship not to nature directly but produces instead another nature, thus surpassing nature of the first order. In the paintings of Vivien Zhang there is a distinct order of play between orders of nature. We might finally say they are abstract paintings because a distinct second order of nature dominates the installed imaginary order to the point that a new mode of physics is in evidence. This in turn manifests as elements that float, sink, push, pull, oscillate, spin, dissolve, overlay, accelerate, rupture and so on. If nature might be viewed as the realm of necessity then second nature stands for the realm of freedom for in it we are presented with the potential co-mingling of all things. On the deepest level of abstraction it is this relationship between necessity and freedom that is being tested.

"I tried to decipher the secret rules behind a red grid in a painting – does the space make sense? Does it need to make sense? Perhaps it is the futility of the agenda, the deserting of the system, the offset that is the focus within the work."

Abstract can be viewed as a state in which one is left to figure something out without the adequate signs for doing so. Being caught between excess and emptiness either side of

⁷ See Karin Schutjer, Narrating Community after Kant, Wayne State University: 2001, P72-76; "Kant asserts that genius creates another nature which, while employing the first nature as its material, surpasses mere nature." P73.

this process of attention that circles around itself for adequation, the artist creates the rule that destroys the rules. It can be said that this is hostility to representation or the production of a picture. We are not provided a map to mark out this abstract, aesthetic machinery of production. Instead we are left to do the best we can and thus to make our own route. Are we dealing with micro and macro events? Who knows, but there is enough by way of pleasures along the way for us to proceed. Quick step, slow step; we are left to move this way and then that, looking forward and then backwards, scanning, next focusing, accelerating and slowing in a gradual process of distillation.

Representation always aims to make the subject or presence present itself. It strives to present concepts of presence, identity, and being in their totality. However, if it were to achieve its objective completely it would negate itself, for then it would become the object represented. If representation is to re-present presence, it can only do so in a formal or material way, that is, through the mediation of synthetic or constructed entities, such as words, symbols, and images. Thus, representation always involves the duplication or presentation of an object or a concept by means of something that it is not, which also means that representation begins with the duplication or repetition of identity."⁸ In contrast to representation we have presentation that is closer to a journey of becoming or enactment of a drama. Within presentation there are dislocations of practical and cognitive fields with aesthetic judgement that implies suspension. Thus presentation might imply that the question of art is itself suspended within the making of art. This implies a disturbance to either the boundary or identity of the work of art. Imagination is the faculty of presentation and "plays at finding a form in accord with its free play."⁹

Paintings are simply left to hang. This wall, that wall, in fact any wall. They wait on walls; that is all they do. They do not provide data, reason, discourse or concepts. They might assume a gaze, that is look back, but that is all. Is it enough to hang and look back? We cannot expect such things to be answered by the painting. Does being abstract imply hanging from any wall, in any cultural location and with this the promise of discrete adaptability or is it quite the contrary open only to the most specific spaces? Slowly a doubt accrues between the singular and general condition of these paintings.

Is abstract close to the silence that precedes speech or the silence that follows the emptying out or displacement of representation? Who is to decide the before and after case of this? Perhaps there is a form of desire that aims to collapse before and after, scattering pre and post to the winds in the process. Yet desire only scatters in order to achieve something else namely to stage a figure or manifest the figural (a third space between signification and designation). Is then abstract the contested space between

⁸ Azade Seyhan, Representation and its Discontents, University of California Press: 1992, P4.

⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, Essay 'The Sublime Offering', in A Finite Thinking, Stanford: 2003, P215; Nancy goes on to say: "The imagination thus presents the image, or rather that there is (such a thing as) "image" (Bild). The image here is not the representative image, and is not the object. It is not the placing-in-form of something else but form forming itself, for itself, without object: fundamentally, art, according to Kant, represents nothing in either the beautiful or the sublime." P215.

before and after and the in-between of the figural? Are we condemned in turn to oscillate between the language of excess and lack to provide for the condition of designation?

"I think that there is an inclination to try and discover a reference to reality. This is connected to a desire to find words that will fill the gap engendered by the experience. There might be egg-like shapes in a painting, but to name them as eggs evades the point that they are no longer resemblances to eggs. Rather, they are just something that has passed through the gap that has stripped it of this relationship to the world. I just face this experience of subtraction so it is left to the viewer to discover a way of being with it as well. It is about presenting the possibility of being otherwise."



Six Stencils, 2014, 170 x 210 cm

Instead of figures that indicate the past in the form of memory, mourning, nostalgia and melancholia why not a model of time in which the past is inscribed into the future. Would not one of the projects of abstraction be to disrupt the very sense of habitual schema?

"Your eyes are travelling and your mind appears on the edge of grasping, but then something comes to a halt in this comfort zone of progression."

Look at any one of these paintings and invariably there is the interlocking contest of drives with eros providing constancy and regulation and the death drive staging deregulation and producing intensities. Both drives run at different speeds producing in

turn their own abstract theatre.¹⁰ The air is thick with anticipation that is all we know and all we need to know.

The air is thick, then the air is thin, something stutters mid air, something rises, a body swirls about then dissolves, there are repetitions followed by an eruption indicating difference, excess starts to manifest, form starts to empty itself of definition, offering this and withdrawing that, erasing, interrupting, overlaying followed by slowing issuing out of a weaving motion in and out... almost without indication forms pulse and swell, next but in the distance there is fading then a shifting into even deeper recess, colours combine with colours producing intensity as the machinery of perception begins to discover its route. Moments follow moments and this might congeal into congealed duration but acceleration occurs within this stutter and something opens with this. Painting after painting records such traces.

A world arises and then declines, in between motions of expansion and extraction occur but all without definite figures. These passages accumulate as the mind discovers its resolve, shifting this way and that way, the mind settles at a point between the depths of schematism and the forces of dissolution. The arc line is traced, desire inscribed, movement recorded by marks; the unity of presentation occurs. That is all, the simple, even primitive pleasure before all things.

Jonathan Miles (in conversation with Vivien Zhang)

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¹⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard states that: "Fascination with the abstract is an instance of jouissance proper." Libidinal Economy, P245.