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NI YOUYU

RELIC

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Ni Youyu discusses his Pinball Series with curator and art historian Penny Xu. This conversation will be published in Relic, a catalogue accompanying the exhibition, to be released in November.

Everything that Came from the Arch

PENNY XU: Before this interview, I meticulously studied every component piece in this series. The more I observed, the more questions emerged. Though you have been working on this series for many years, little about it is known to the public. It is connected to the rest of your oeuvre, but a difference is tangible. As far as I recall, very few works in this series have been shown in China, except for on social media. This veils the works with an aura of mystery, imbues them with a sense of introspection that also informs other works of yours. I think my questions gravitate towards this sense of introspection: I would like to take this opportunity to ask about your perspective, your feeling, towards the works. To begin, how do you refer to the series? 'Holy Shrine'?

NI YOUYU: I'm glad you've chosen the word "introspection," as these works certainly are introspective. Holy Shrine is not an official name, like Pinball Series, for example, these are simply nicknames for the group of work. So, I didn't name the series Holy Shrine, it was deemed as such by viewers, perhaps pointing to a unanimous feeling among them. As opposed to the effect of something larger in size, I think viewers find that smaller pieces facilitate focus and ease the mind, as if they were facing a holy shrine. Holy Shrines take the shape of an arc in both Eastern and Western religious traditions and that is how this name came into being.

PENNY: What inspired you to begin this series?

NI: It began by accident. At the beginning of 2011, I found a pinball machine that the Russians had left behind after the reign of Kuomintang at a second-hand market. It caught my attention immediately. There was something intriguing about it. It was something from another era, simply an old-fashioned toy. But the arched shape, the beautiful lithography on the foreground, the amalgamation of intricate pieces and structures, sparked my imagination. I didn't incorporate the piece into my work until more than a year later for my exhibition at the Shanghai Museum of Art in 2012. I used this modest installation for the exhibition poster.

PENNY: And then you found the second one and the third?

NI: Yes, I found one in Japan, then another in Berlin. The size varies greatly, but they all share an arched shape. From then on, I started to pay more attention to this kind of material.

PENNY: What does an arch signify for you?

NI: That is the key question. Initially, it was just a form. But on a deeper level, it implies a lot, even something mystical. Archeological research shows, for instance, that the arch was used as a basic architectural shape across ancient civilizations, despite the lack of communication between East and West. I broached this topic with a range of people, but could not reach a conclusion. This universal form might originate from an innate reverence for the universe and the land, where the sky was believed to be round and the land square. Or perhaps from the stability the arch enables in architectural mechanics. Or its origin could be connected to the body: if we connect the dots between the top of the head, shoulders, hands and feet we trace something like an arch. Over an immeasurable amount of time, drawing upon human experience, adjusting and improving little by little, a classical form arises. Who knows? Regardless, the shape strikes me with a strong sense of ritual and meaning. So strong that I have to do something with it.

PENNY: As your pinball collection grew, you began to deliberately create within this genre. How long does it take you to create a pinball installation? What is your state of mind like during this process?

NI: I have always been a goal-oriented person with regards to my work, though much of it cannot be planned in advance. In my collaged work *The Idle Peregrination*, for example, I created the work entirely from found photographs. It took quite some time to collect the photos, sort them, and wait for a serendipitous energy to begin the collage. While I worked on the collage, I couldn't plan when and where I would come across an antique pinball machine, nor precisely calculate when I would finish the work. Unlike painting, where size and content can be predetermined, a work like this can be put on hold for lack of material. It is quite common for me to put a piece aside for one or two years. I do that often. I will continue to improve on it little by little, while I work on paintings or other works. It is like receiving a prescription – it doesn't mean you can necessarily find the ingredients, even with the prescription in hand.

PENNY: And how do you manage to find your 'medicine'? I would imagine everyone who visits your studio has the same question. Your studio itself is like a museum. To extend the analogy, we could call it a 'pharmacy'.

NI: I use all possible means to find material. Whenever I travel, I make every effort to visit flea markets and second-hand shops. I have even scavenged dumpsters. Of course, I also use the internet. This is the best tool of our age. The internet has widened our scope immensely, compared to artists working with readymade materials in the past.

PENNY: You once said that an artist resembles an explorer, more than a creator. I am curious about the 'process of finding the medicine'. In a flea market or an antique shop or when you rummage through a dumpster, how do you discover your material? Do you have any underlying criteria that guide your search? Or is there anything in common between the items you select?

NI: On a philosophical level, the material has always been there. For a painting, the paint is sealed in a tin tube. It can simply be squeezed out, mixed and spread on the canvas. The same applies to installation. The material has always been there. What I do is liberate it from functionality, from how it is perceived or defined, and reformulate it with seemingly unrelated material, an arrangement informed by the logic of art. You can see it as color and stroke. I don't have any selection criteria. It doesn't matter whether something is of great or little value. I do prefer material that bears an imprint of time. An object doesn't have to be antique to bear an imprint of time, it can also be something that reveals traces of use. Something that has been consumed, polished, oxidized to nurture a kind of texture, or even a temperature, that makes it different from a brand-new material.

PENNY: Kurt Schwitters is probably the first European artist to use waste in his work. Joseph Cornell epitomizes that practice. Has their work influenced you? When you first encountered their work, what impressed you most?

NI: To be honest, I don't know anything about Kurt Schwitters. I didn't know Joseph Cornell either, but when I encountered his work in 2014, it felt like I was struck by a thunderbolt.

PENNY: Did seeing Cornell's work make you skeptical about your own?

NI: Yes. In any case, there is someone who did similar work to mine over half a century ago and he did a fabulous job. One would naturally be touched by that revelation. I was despondent for quite some time, torn between feelings of excitement and failure. But soon I returned to what I was supposed to do.

PENNY: What kept you working on the series for another four, five years?

NI: Well, I really enjoy the process of creating these pieces. The more you know about Cornell, the more you realize his art is resistant to imitation. It is not like assembling a model toy, but is rather a very metaphysical task. There is no technique in creating these works. It relies on a gift, or even an eccentricity. I began making works like these three years before I came across Cornell's work and I continued for three years after. I see the relationship as a dialogue across generations between two men who share similar eccentricities. It is no doubt equal.

PENNY: Cornell's works are resistant to imitation, similar to Duchamp's. One risks becoming a laughing-stock, imitating Duchamp on purpose.

NI: Exactly. But Cornell and Duchamp differ from one another. If I could go back in time, I would love to speak with Duchamp. But I would prefer to work with Cornell, to be his assistant. I would go with him every Sunday to rummage through the junk at the garage sales on 25th street in New York. It would be interesting to see the difference in taste between us.

PENNY: As one of the early surrealist artists, Cornell creates installations that are more like a static embodiment of his experimental films. Each contains a condensed sense of story, tinged with mysticism. It is no less than surrealist 'visual poetry'. But your arched installations brim with the character of classical aesthetics. A sensibility that blends science and rationality, recalling the cartographers of Dürer's age. Back then, cartographers were not too different from scientists. They relied on a rigid apparatus to evaluate the precision of perspective. Scientific graphs often appeared on early copper plate etchings. I observe something similar at play in your work.

NI: Yes, Cornell is more than a painter. He was an artist whose concept precedes his work, an illusionist. The genius of epiphany overflows in his work, while my creation tends to rest in a state of meditation.

PENNY: As you mentioned earlier, you can conceptualize the materials in this series as akin to paint and stroke. Personally, I pick up most on the elements of painting. How do you define painting and installation in this series?

NI: Like Galaxy in my earlier days and Dust later on, I cannot define 'painting' and 'installation' with clarity. To some extent, painting in its earliest form is synthetic, in terms of the material used. Our ancestors used any material they could to leave a mark on the stone walls of a cave. They used stone artefacts and bones to engrave hieroglyphics onto a turtle's back or drew with twigs, pebbles or shells on the beach. This mark making was a prototype of painting. Not until very recently in the history of human development did the craft of painting gradually evolve into a profession, separated from other quotidian production activities. Compared to the big installations that are increasingly common in exhibitions these days, I understand and approach the pinball installations as paintings in a way, it's a similar visual language, or a similar mindset.

PENNY: Atlas and the King reminds me of Galaxy. Very few artists are still interested in making something that small. What is your stance on size?

NI: First of all, the size of my work depends on the size of the material I've chosen. Second, I suppose the perception of big and small is entirely relative. In different frames of reference, big and small can become interchangeable. Dong Qichang (1555-1636) painted the series Large Emerging From Small, copying classical paintings from the Yuan and Song dynasties onto A4 pieces of paper. These works were refined and nuanced to the utmost degree. Probably because of this influence, when someone mistakes my small work for something larger when they see a reproduction before the original, I always smile to myself. Of course, some art dealers care a lot about size. I care most about the density of a work, the thickness.

PENNY: In 2016, I saw your solo exhibition at the Singapore Biennale. Seen through the classical arched door in that space was the work Atlas. At the time, it was juxtaposed with two of your faint installations of starry skies (Gravity and Dust). It created a very special field, which was quite impressive. The theme of the biennale was Atlas, was your Atlas made specifically for that occasion?

NI: Yes, Atlas is a work with multiple meanings. It means both a book of maps and a mythological figure with overwhelming strength. For that exhibition, I made an atlas in the universe. I also made a map of stars based on a picture of the galaxy from the coordinate position of the Singaporean sky.

PENNY: Where does your obsession with the starry sky come from?

NI: Perhaps it is not far from Kant's.