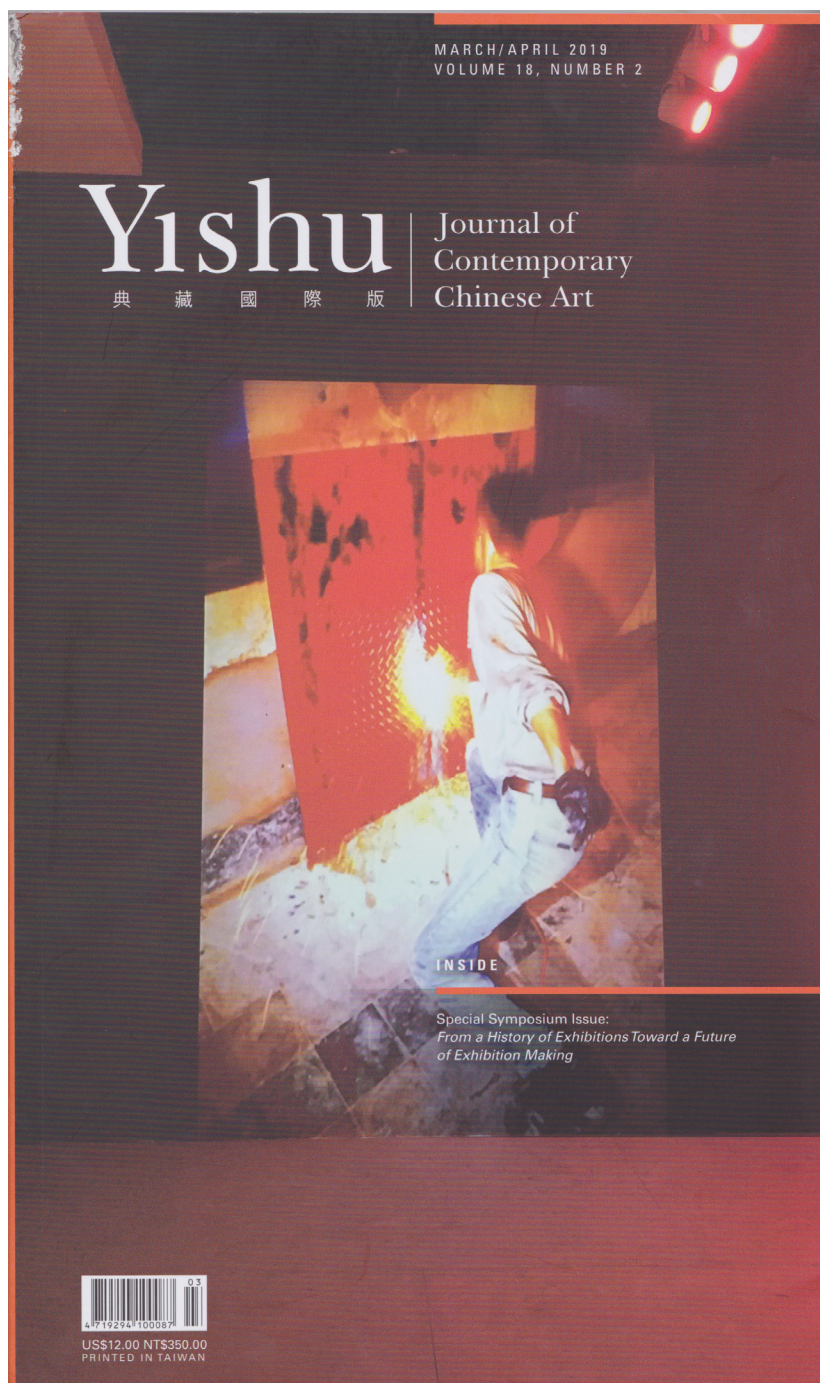


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Yishu

"Light at The End of the Corridor"





Edouard Malingue Gallery

馬凌畫廊

LIGHT AT THE END OF THE CORRIDOR

Yuan Yuan at the 12th Shanghai Biennale

By Kaimei Wang

Aimless, 2014-2018, oil on linen, a260 x 150 cm.

Image courtesy of Edouard Malingue Gallery and the artist.

For visitors of the 12th Shanghai Biennale, while walking around the venue viewing large-scale installations, spending time in dark screening rooms and browsing video archives and artists' research materials, it must come as a small shock when they stumble upon a room filled with paintings—only paintings—at the end of the first floor's corridor. The room is large and so are the paintings. The Chinese artist Yuan Yuan, known for his eerie and realistic paintings of the derelict and abandoned interiors, created a pictorial space titled *Bright Corners* at the 12th Shanghai Biennale.

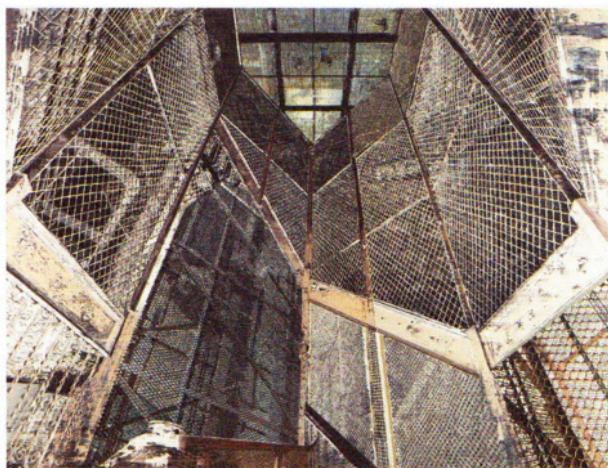
What am I looking at here? On each side of the room hangs only one painting albeit on the longer wall, there are two paintings hanging side by side. While I am surrounded by the walls, I feel like I am surrounded by the paintings depicting the grids and fences, to be precise. There are five separate paintings, all glimmer in a grayish and blueish hue and they all share a similar motif: huge iron-casted fences covered by myriad of grid with repetitive designs and patterns, all painted with meticulous precision.

Where are these places on the paintings? *Escape from the Tunnel* (273 cm x 200 cm) could be at the backside of a malfunctioned elevator room; A place that is covered in dust and left in oblivion. *Invisibility* is a diptych (276 cm x 180 cm). They could be a wrack of a shipyard or a deserted factory warehouse. Behind the iron fences something humongous seems to have been locked in for too long. The bright and cold light source from the high ceilings inside the Power Station of Art which is

the venue of the Shanghai Biennale cast a certain harsh and crude industrial look on the paintings. The only red color in the room comes from a painting called *Aimless* (260 cm x 150 cm). Here the artist painted a tall red fire escape stairway at the backside of a typical New York residence building. Again, a hidden place behind a civil

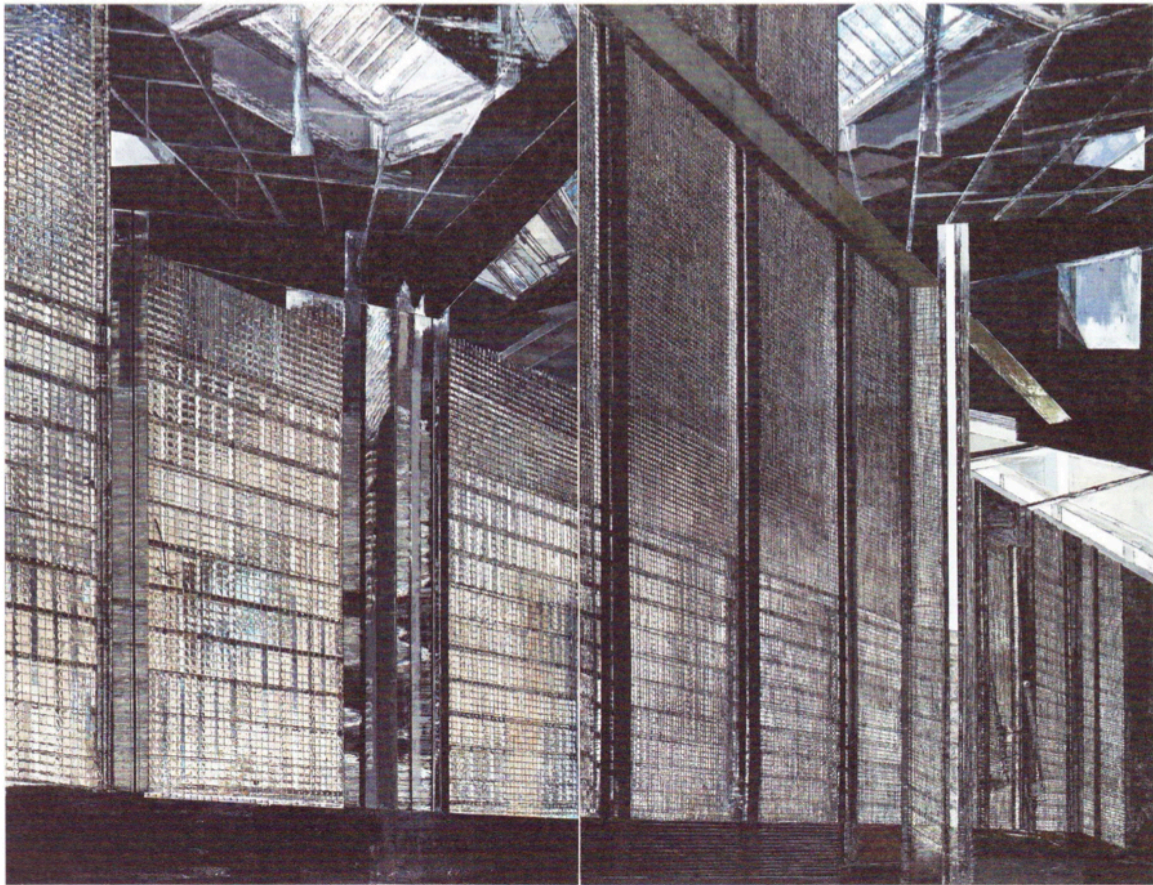
architecture. There are traces of human inhabitants on all these paintings, but there is no human image on them.

The paintings are realistically painted with the details of every grid visible. In *Escape from the Tunnel*, behind the iron wire netting, one could peek in and identify staircases, windows and some



Free Fall, 2018, oil on linen, 200 x 255 cm. Image courtesy of Edouard Malingue Gallery and the artist.

unclear objects. As I get closer and feel the unresisting power of this enormous painting, a strange sensation of floating hits me, as if I am hovering above as well as inside these paintings, a sensation that one would encounter in a sci-fi film. As in *Free Fall* (200 cm x 255 cm), the iron fences cut the pictorial space on the canvas into several separated enclosed spaces. Each side of



Invisibility, 2018, oil on linen, 276 x 180 cm each, diptych. Image courtesy of Edouard Malingue Gallery and the artist.

the fence seems like its own mirror reflection. Between pictorial reality and artistic imagination, the viewers are trapped in the *matrix* of lines and grids, between the abstract 3-D networking in cyberspace and a 2-D presentation on canvas. Certainly I think of the 1999 cult film *Matrix* where simulated reality entangles with human minds and super humans' evil intention. Actually some years before the film *Matrix* was made, in 1984, the American science fiction writer William Ford Gibson talked about our dystopia future in his book titled *Neuromancer* and coined the new word "cyberspace" that fundamentally changed our relationship with our computers. Gibson's *Matrix* is an accumulation of all images roaming in the cyberspace of every computer in our human system. Its complexity is beyond human imagination and its beauty surprisingly poetic. Gibson wrote "lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding..."

It is this kind of mixed feeling of scare and fascination in Gibson's words on our future that one could experience when standing in the *Bright Corners* filled with Yuan Yuan's

paintings. These five paintings were created by Yuan Yuan between 2008 up until the present. Although they were not made specially for the 12th Shanghai Biennale, they have never left Yuan Yuan's studio before mainly because of their enormous sizes. The Shanghai Biennale becomes a chance for Yuan Yuan to bring his biggest paintings to the public for the first time. It is also the first time that Yuan Yuan is participating a biennale. Among 67 artists/groups from 27 countries that are chosen to be in the 12th Shanghai Biennale, Yuan Yuan is one of the only two considered to be a traditional painter. The other painter is Mexican artist Yishal Jusidman whose series of paintings *Prussian Blue* address the Holocaust. The serious tone and conceptual approach in Jusidman's paintings stand as counter point to Yuan Yuan's image making which naturally also put pressure on him. In the art world, the distinction between biennale artists and gallery artists is still remarkable. Yuan Yuan is without question a gallery artist. He is represented by Edouard Malingue Gallery and his artwork are often seen in international art fairs and auction houses sales. His works fetch high prices among Chinese contemporary artists. The question

regarding who should be featured in the biennale should be determined by examining an artist's work and how it resonates with the theme of the biennale.

The 12th Shanghai Biennale led by the Mexican chief curator Cuauhtémoc Medina puts the focus on the ambivalence of the present age. Taken from an e.e. cummings's poem published in 1931, the title "Proregress," a juxtaposition of the two words "Progress+Regress" entailing opposite meanings, questions our view of framing the current global moment: technical development and economic growth versus political conservatism and environmental disaster, just to name a few. The social system in the world today, as Medina points out in his curatorial statement, shows a clear sign of the mixture of social and cultural progress and regress at the same time. Just what makes us human and what did we learn from the past? Contemporary art is considered to be a platform where the struggles and anxieties of the society find forms of expression.

For an artist like Yuan Yuan, he has found painting as a means to reflect on history and society. Yuan Yuan was born in Hangzhou in 1973. He spent his childhood in a compound with many other families. There were a lot of shared collectivism in Yuan Yuan's upbringing at a time when China was at the brink of social changes, from Mao's isolation to Deng's open door policy. Eventually the storm of economic reform would swash away the old system as Yuan Yuan grew up. "In the compound, all apartments looked the same and we all had the same furniture and interiors in every household," he recalled. Many years later, as an achieved artist from China, Yuan Yuan visited Cuba with his Cuban friend. He stayed in his friend's parents' apartment in Havana. At the Cuban collective compound, Yuan Yuan experienced a strange sensation of *deje vu*. His memory of growing up in the army compound found echoes in Cuba's socialism living situation, however, in Yuan Yuan's own hometown, his childhood houses have been torn down to leave space for new commercial real-estate development. After his return from Cuba to Hangzhou, Yuan Yuan made a painting which he named *Dear Neighborhood*. It was a painting of a kitchen lying in ruins and a Baroque style bedroom reflected through the mirrors on the wall. The painting bares many typical signatures of Yuan Yuan's personal style: the meticulous

brush stroke, the complicated composition and various perspectives within one and the same painting, but most importantly, the painting is imbued in a mood that, despite of its bright color and gilded bed frame, feels sad and melancholic. Time in Yuan Yuan's paintings is the narrative threads that stitched together luxury with desolation, vitality with decay. In Amos Oz's half autobiographic novel *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, he wrote about how he as an adult revisited his primary school teacher and felt how everything still looked, felt and smelled the same despite that the color of the window frame has faded. Yuan Yuan needed to travel to Cuba to find the entrance to his memory and reconstruct the feel of his childhood kitchen and bedroom. As an artist, he has the privilege to visualize such discoveries.

Gibson in his novel *Neuromancer* predicted that technology will affect human psychology negatively and become the key factor for increasing anxiety among humans. It hasn't taken long before our social-media-obsessed society has claimed his general victory. We already live in the *Matrix* that our constant connected cyber network has trapped us in. Between advanced *Matrix* pointing to the future and memories lingering in the past, Yuan Yuan's art build a link that makes both future and past talk to us through his recomposition of images. In his paintings, the uncertainty about where it is and incompleteness on where it goes openly respond to the Biennale's focus on ambiguity. As Yuan Yuan's own understanding of the Chinese title of the Biennale, Yu Bu(禹步), the name of a step in Daoist ritual dance which moves both forward and backward, or a crowd of people walking their own steps, even the hesitation of taking these paintings to the public for the first time is an art of ambivalence.

From the *Bright Corners*, something glimmers at the end of the corridor.

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