

LOUNGING APPARATUS PROVIDED

THE WORK OF MICHAEL LIN

by Bronwyn Mahoney

■ TFAM 08.09.2000-07.01.2001, Emulsion on wood,
3600 x 1600 cm, Taipei Fine Art Museum, Taipei, Taiwan

I NEVER UNDERSTOOD HOW PEOPLE COULD BE LAX ABOUT CHOOSING SOFAS," MUSES A NARRATOR IN HARUKI MURAKAMI'S CYBERPUNK THRILLER *HARD-BOILED WONDERLAND AND THE END OF THE WORLD*. MICHAEL LIN COULD NEVER BE ACCUSED OF BEING LAX WHEN IT COMES TO THE QUALITY OF HIS LOUNGING APPARATUS. LIN'S LARGE-SCALE INSTALLATIONS, PAINTINGS DESIGNED TO TRANSFORM SPACES AND SHIFT THE AUDIENCES' VIEWING POSITION, CREATE FORUMS OF INTERCHANGE, WHERE COMFORT IS CONDUCTIVE TO DEEP THOUGHT.

With his melding of history painting's scale and the subject matter of still lifes, and his conceptual encompassing of the audience within the work, Lin's art could be inscribed into art history in many ways. He has noted pop as an influence,¹ which can be seen in the subject of his works and in his use of flat blocks of color. It could be related to the shifting of the canvas practiced by the abstract expression-

ists, or minimalism's spatial investigations. All of these approaches could hold an amount of truth, but none would capture the multiplicity of Lin's own vocabulary.

Born in Japan in 1964, Lin was raised in Taiwan until the age of nine when his family moved to Los Angeles. He returned to Taiwan in 1996, when the nativist movement was investigating Taiwan's national identity. Taiwanese

New Wave cinema of the 1980s and 90s offered him a line to negotiate his own history. Its questions echoed his, as he found a culture both familiar and strangely distant.

In her monologue accompanying Lin's first solo exhibition "Complementary," Frances Stark mused on the comfort of her couch, of divisions between public and domestic spaces.² She placed herself within Michael's life, discussing

the books she flips through in his home and their conversations. As his work invites people into the painting and the installation, writing about Michael Lin's work invites similar "within" thinking. It was while I was lying on his sofa that Lin told me of a performance of Erik Satie's "Vexations," a minimalist 16-bar phrase for solo piano, repeated 840 times.³

Lin was intrigued by the time-span—some performances have lasted more than 24 hours. He described the bodies of listeners, lying on the floor, leaning against the wall, their comings and goings, unbound by the constraints of a theatre. "Vexations" extended, repetitive performance supplies the audience with unusual freedom. "To come and go at their leisure, shaping the experience of the piece according to their own interests and whims," reads the copy from an invitation to one performance. "Pillows and other lounging apparatus will be provided."⁴

Just as there is no one correct time or place to hear Satie's music, there is no prescribed position from which to approach Lin's work,

neither the physical painting nor the installation, or the ideas they are created from and generate. The positional hierarchies for "receiving" culture have been laid down.

Lin began painting the patterns from fabrics in his Taipei apartment, patterns remembered from the home of his grandfather in central Taiwan's countryside. The brightly colored, floral textiles, domesticated from nature, though manufactured, became still lives. Now the motifs are part of public spaces, and while seen through close focus, they retain the warmth to transform spaces.

With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear; instead it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject.⁵

Lin's works have an anti-monumental presence, though those he is best known for are monumental in scale—the impressive bird's eye view of his work overlaying the Richard Meier designed City Hall in Den Haag almost

begs for this description. In this difference, between scale and attitude, Lin creates places for people to meet and interact.

The large floral patterns are sensory overloads, with their voluptuous petals and rich colors. Even without knowing their genealogy in domestic textile, the paintings are sensual, enlivening spaces for bodies.⁶ Patterns deliver sensuality to the eye, pleasure in the familiar and repetitive. They contain their own end and their own continuity—infinite and finite. They are stopped only by the edges, arbitrary demarcations, creating boundaries, visual and emotional, though without depth. Without depth it is hard to move—those mornings when all you can see from your bed is steel gray sky—no shapes, no way of judging, impossible to make one's way in the world. Patterns create edges, parentheses.

*Nobody has ever noticed a place except at a time, or a time except at a place.*⁷

It is only by punctuating space with lines that definition is found. Lin additionally defines the works in spatial/temporal terms—the titles

■ GRIND, 2003. Emulsion on wood, 1600 x 650 cm, PS1, New York.





■ PALAIS DE TOKYO 22.01-22.08.2002, Emulsion on wood, 2800 x 900cm, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France ■ ATRIUM STADHUIS DEN HAAG 12.07-08.09.2002, 5000 x 2500 cm, City Hall, The Hague, Netherlands

use of the room. Thus what we gain is *Something*, yet it is by virtue of *Nothing* that this can be put to use.¹¹

The notion of creating spaces for contemplation also ties into Lin's long-held interest in Chinese gardens.¹² Unlike European gardens, the philosophy behind Chinese garden design decrees the creation of discrete spaces, spaces that may mirror another place, frame a vista or provide a locale for contemplation. Chinese gardens were designed by artists and poets, as spiritual utopias, closer to nature, reflecting the designer's own heart. They were designed so their actual size could not be determined from any point. Rather, they were framed to resemble scenes, reminiscent of, or sometimes directly copied from, Chinese landscape painting.

Space does not equal emptiness in traditional Eastern art. The perceived nothing is full, as Western science has only recently allowed. While the design of European gardens is concerned with filling up the available space, Chinese garden design is more architectural, creating spaces within spaces. It is this empty

space that makes a place functional. As in Chinese landscape painting, you are in the space, not looking at it from the outside.

The meandering lines that intersect and connect Lin's work are personal, historical and theoretical, weaving between domestic history and public transformations. These disparate lines do not define Michael Lin as any type of bridge between East and West. But, where do we exist in relation to the work? Where do we walk in, out, stand, sit or lie? Where does it put our mind, and when?

Michael Lin's pieces do not need writing to make people smile; they do not need to know the history of the cloth to feel the sensation of being touched; they do not need to know anything of Einstein's special theory of relativity to sense the spatial manipulations, the turning of space into mass by creating definitions. The work encompasses the paradox of the object and its context as the place of meaning. The works are digressions within the "usual" life of spaces, leaving us free, as does Satie's music, to find our own position. **END**

1. "The other side: An interview with Michael Lin by Jérôme Sans", *Michael Lin Palais de Tokyo, 21-01-2002-21-12-2002*, Palais de Tokyo, site de création contemporaine, Paris, 2002.

2. Frances Stark, "The Architect & the Housewife", in *Complementary—A solo exhibition by Michael Lin*, Dimension Endowment of Art, Taipei, 1998. The title of this exhibition is variously written as "complimentary" and "complementary", including within the catalogue.

3. Written in 1893, *Vexations* was not performed until 1949, in an event organised by John Cage. All information from the Erik Satie website: <http://www.af.lu.se/~fogwall/intro.html>

4. From a performance announcement at The Kitchen, New York - <http://www.af.lu.se/~fogwall/vexation.html>

5. Walter Benjamin, "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction", *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn, Pimlico, London, 1999, p.229.

6. In Taiwan such fabrics were traditionally used for matrimonial duvet covers and can also be seen in the countryside, worn as head scarves.

7. Hermann Minkowski, in a 1908 lecture in Cologne. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minkowski>

8. Sten Odenwald, *Ask the Astronomer*, <http://www.astronomycafe.net/qadir/q411.html>

9. Minkowski, opcit.

10. Benjamin, p.233.

11. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Book One, XI, trans. D.C. Lau, Penguin Books: London, 1963, p.67.

12. Email from the artist to the author, 5 January, 2003.

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