

PATTERNS OF THOUGHT: THE INSTALLATIONS OF MICHAEL LIN

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Performance during opening of *APT 2002*. Gallery 5 wall, QAG 09.12.02 - 01.27.03 2002. Photo: Mio Iwakiri

Every painting and every poem has its edges; the question is where they are placed?¹

Michael Lin's works are carefully placed; his warm-hued paintings overlay and define spaces, saturate them, but become so one with each, that they are accepted in the same way it is hard to remember how something was before it changed. While they meld, their scale and intensity almost dare people to overlook them, or at times, walk over them. Lin described his work in the 2001 Istanbul Biennial as "there not to be there."²

Widely known for his expansive installations of predominantly floral patterns, it would be easy to classify Lin as simply a decorative painter. But this would be a misreading, missing the vernacular of Lin's work, which encompasses many vocabularies.

Describing himself as a conceptual artist,³ Lin synthesizes ideas from sagacious sources. He observes and absorbs a variety of information, an osmotic approach, possibly informed by the migrations of his childhood, from the countryside of central Taiwan, to school in Los Angeles. His approach to art is very much influenced by American art history, from the artists he invokes in conversation, to the pop sensibility that he notes of his work.

Returning to Taiwan in 1995, Lin found a culture that was both familiar and distant, a country dealing with a history of colonial rule, martial law and moves toward democracy. The traditional cotton textiles he recalled from the countryside of his childhood, were now



Atrium Stadhuis Den Haag 12 juli t/m 8 september 2002. Courtesy of the artist

Patterns also set edges, in their repetition, parenthesis—from the Latin, to insert, to place or to amplify. The relation of Lin's work as amplifying space is enunciated by the titles he chooses: Gallery 5 wall, QAG 09.12.02 – 01.27.03 2002; Bar Merlo, QAG 09.12.02 – 01.27.03 2002; Taipei Fine Arts Museum: Sept. 9, 2000 – Jan. 7, 2001; Atrium Stadhuis Den Haag 12 juli t/m 8 september 2002; Palais de Tokyo, 21-01-2002/21-12-2002.

Hermann Minkowski, during a lecture in Cologne in 1908, stated “nobody has ever noticed a place except at a time, or a time except at a place.” He concluded by saying “space by itself, and

time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality.” This geometric relationship, establishing a 4-dimensional space, is how physicists often describe events, places, actions and moments in history, in terms of their location in the fabric of space-time.⁵ But we still only see in three dimensions, but an event takes place in four.

Within these parenthetical edges, in the four dimensions, events take place. These events—whether organized by the artist or institution, like the parties in the Palais de Tokyo, or the everyday traversing of the work by workers on their way to offices in the Hague City Hall—give the work depth. In this there are resonances of the theatrical, but like the domestic notions associated with the installations, the relation returns to the physical work, for like theatre and home, all are intervals, interludes from the “normal.” Painting is only a tool, a trope in the projects’ situation as a forum: “the work does not raise any concrete possibilities directly but opens up a space which allows for possibilities to be proposed.”



Palais de Tokyo, 21-01-2002/21-12-2002.
Photo: Ai Iwakiri

Other authors have noted the physical shifting of the verticality of the viewer, the transgressing of the “understood” behavior that Lin’s work encourages—lying on cushions, sitting, walking or painting.⁷ We have been trained to behave in certain ways when looking at art, we are conditioned to believe that we stand in a certain way, and wait for the wonder. The unsexy museum is the instigator of this:

In the Louvre the seignorial Valéry feels himself constrained from the first by the authoritarian gesture that takes away his cane and by the “No Smoking” sign. Cold confusion, he says reign among the sculptures, a tumult of frozen creatures each of which demands the non-existence of the others, disorder strangely organized. Standing among the pictures offered for contemplation, Valéry mockingly observes that one is seized by a sacred awe.⁸

Perhaps the Valéry Adorno describes would have found himself more comfortable encountering Michael Lin’s work, lying on the scatter cushions and thinking. But the Proust of Adorno’s “Les Problème des musées,” who found that, unlike Valéry, works go beyond aesthetic, becoming part of the viewers’ consciousness—may have also found art that provided the memory that for him inscribed work with value.

decorating his Taipei apartment. He began painting the patterns from these fabrics as intimately-scaled still lives.

His first solo show, complementary, in 1998, sought to draw two elements of his history together, and he has continued to develop the ideas initially raised in this exhibition, of creating fluid spaces from the fluid sources, which blend masculine and feminine, in their scale and origin, with the fluidity of the lines of the patterns, and the patterns people create in using the areas he makes.



Bar Merlo, QAG 09.12.02 - 01.27.03 2002.
Photo: Mio Iwakiri

Lin's shifting of the physical plane of painting relates art historically, to the creation of spaces from the early twentieth century. His spatial engagements are informed by investigations and experiments in space, including sculpture, like that of Donald Judd and Richard Serra, which have been described this as invading the space of the viewer.⁴

Lin does not so much invade space, but chooses venues, locales, often outside "official" spaces to create his own world, with considerations of the history and uses of the place, for a designated period of time. Most spaces we use as a public, including museums, are particularly unsexy. Liminal spaces, those ones in between, are often notoriously so—those stairwells, cafe walls, passageways, entranceways and open floors. It is these areas Lin sensualizes.

This is the role of the patterns—not only do they deliver sensuality to our eyes, but the domestic history of their origins invests them with warmth. Patterns create boundaries, visual and emotional, providing comfort in their repetition. The sensual envelops us, but still leaves us space to move. We retain our own skin, it is not constricted, rather we become more aware of it, aware of its shapes and what it feels, by the presence of another element—sensory, sensational, carnal, sensuous, the sensorial movement of bodies.



Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Sept. 9, 2000 - Jan. 7, 2001. Courtesy of the artist



Platform, Istanbul Biennial 22 September - 17 November 2001. Courtesy of the artist

Adorno sees the positions of his protagonists as correct, along the continuum that is the truth, though there is much space in between the two: “each takes the part of one moment in the truth which lies in the unfolding of contradiction...the two most knowledgeable men to have written about art in recent times, have their limits, without which, in fact, their knowledge would not have been possible.”⁹

These limits are necessary so we can gain perspective. The grounds that Lin produces, bounded by time and space, and his desire to create places encouraging social exchange, provide an interstitial freedom that bridges the history of their intellectual component with the humanity of the events they host and are part of, and the memories they become.

NOTES

¹ Eric Lindner, “Whoever has an eye for the extraordinary among the commonplace can imagine what we are actually familiar with, yet do not always know,” *Michael Lin: Atrium Stadhuis Den Haag 2002 12 July – 8 September 2002* (The Hague: Stroom hcbk, 2002).

² Quoted in my catalogue entry in “Egofugal,” *Istanbul Biennial*, 2001, 128-129.

³ “The Other Side: An Interview of Michael Lin by Jérôme Sans,” *Michael Lin Palais de Tokyo, 21-01-2002/21-12-2002* (Palais de Tokyo, 2002).

⁴ Nicholas Serota, *Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996), 33.

⁵ Sten Odenwald, *Ask the Astronomer*, <http://itss.raytheon.com/cafe/qadir/q411.html>.

⁶ Email from the artist to the author, 10 December, 2002.

⁷ Vivian Rehberg, “The Language of Flowers,” *Michael Lin Palais de Tokyo* (Palais de Tokyo, 2002).

⁸ Theodor Adorno, “‘Le problème des musées,’ Valéry Proust, Museum,” trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, *Prisms* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1981): 173-85.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.