

Miao Xiaochun: *Microcosm* – A Modern Allegory

Huang Du Curator

Miao Xiaochun is considered one of the representative artists in the domain of China's new media art. His recent works seem to be a stimulant to the slow-going Chinese contemporary art circle—we have the confidence that a new value order is building in the process of returning to academics.

Miao Xiaochun's work *Microcosm* employed the latest three-dimensional computer technology to create many montage images and virtual realities. His way of expression is based on subjective interpretations of historic artworks, especially by taking the classic paintings around the Renaissance as the structure for visual expressions. Although Miao Xiaochun's *Microcosm* is based on Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, he turned the traditional Chinese idiom “looking up the sky from the well” into “looking down the well from the sky” (this is the literary translation of “Microcosm”). If the idiom “looking up the sky from the well” is used to describe a person with limited sight and knowledge who has difficulty in understanding the nature of things, then “looking down the well from the sky” means if a person is put into a macro environment to examine micro things, he would have difficulties to understand the nature of things too. In these two phrases, the spectator's positions are changed, but he encounters the same limits in understanding things, which shows the significance of this work. *Microcosm* is not to rebuild the trueness of historic image, rather it is to reinterpret and convert the historic image and derive new meanings from the image spectrum, or to de-structure the historic meaning by using an artist's own emotions, or to take care of and translate the target from personal visual experiences, so as to create a psychological medium analysis—to recompile modern images in the tangled relations among reality and virtual reality, familiarity and strangeness, closeness and alienation and individualism and non-individualism. In his works, we can see the mutual reflection, interconnection, overlapping and replacement between historic images and real images, western aesthetics and Chinese aesthetics, classic painting and new media art, humans and things, wars and peace and violence and pastoral. In these processes, an abstract piece is recreated that both attract us and puzzle us.

This is a baroque style — grand and spectacular.

This is a pure modern version of allegories...

On February 8, 2009, Miao Xiaochun and I had an impressive talk. It is impressive because not only that the talk touched all the above mentioned subjects, more interestingly, we two are both art practitioners with the same background but different approaches—it is a talk between an artist and a curator both with the background of art history. Different experiences constituted the contents of this talk, including the fundamentals for judging art history and different interpretations of modern art, the insight of a curator and the practical description of an artist, and the discussion on differences between western and eastern aesthetics and the art philosophical analysis in a

social context.

Huang Du (thereafter referred to as Huang): Your works have attracted a lot of attention in recent years. They have been exhibited in many important domestic and foreign museums and art projects and have received various comments and remarks. However, few people actually know about your experience, such as your education backgrounds and how do you become what you are today. I think people are always curious about artists' experiences, hence it might be necessary for you to explain your experience to readers, audiences and art fans. As far as I know, you studied German, then shifted to art history research, then gave up art history for painting, then went to study in Germany, then gave up painting for photography and then did a lot multi-media creations. Could you briefly describe the whole process?

Miao Xiaochun (thereafter referred to as Miao): The reason why I studied German is because I didn't get into any art academies. That's why I studied German literature in my undergraduate years. But I found that I was still interested in arts, so I applied to study art history in China Central Academy of Fine Arts for a master's degree. After graduation, I spent some years painting. In 1996, I went to Kassel Academy of Art to study plastic art. In Germany, I opened my views and stepped into many areas. My graduation work "Culture Shock" is the combination of photography and sculpture. I also spent a relatively long time doing photographs, from the time I was in Germany to now. Since 2005, I have become more and more interested in arts created by digital medium especially by computer software. That's why I made *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* that year. After 2005, I have been adopting this method all the time. The series of *Microcosm* shown in this exhibition is also made by three-dimensional software. That's roughly the whole process.

Huang: For a period, you focused your photography on objective reality: China's rapid development and changes. Especially since late 1990s or since the twenty-first century, China's urbanization process has picked up huge momentum, spreading from the super-big cities (Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou) to second tier cities (Suzhou, Nanjing, Changsha, Chengdu etc). I found that what were showed in your photos were things closely related to urbanization. Because modern urbanization involves many political, social and cultural uncertainties (frictions, conflicts and events), you recorded these urban changes in your photos. Of course, the "record" was not a very strict objective record; it contained both realities recording and subjective analysis of realities. My question is why did you choose this perspective?

Miao: Urbanization is the subject that I have been pursuing since 1999 when I returned to China from Germany. The works shown in "Urban Creation"- Shanghai Biennale 2002 and "New Urban Reality" in Netherlands(Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 2006) were all about cities. In recent two or three decades, the changes brought by urbanization are too huge for artists to ignore. That's why I spend seven or eight years

doing the same subject. I use photography because photos can better reflect these changes. But just as you have mentioned before, there are also subjective factors. They are not pure objective recording. I prefer to make photography like painting, because pure photography can only represent a fragment of events, for they are just pieces of the real world. I like to make something with big scale and grand scene and to integrate all the pieces into the grand scene. Then the spectators themselves can find out these pieces.

Huang: You tried to capture a historic moment and a real history. Then how did you handle the relationship among recording, reality and realism?

Miao: Among all art media, photography has the most natural feature of recording realities. No matter how many subjective factors you add to it, it still has something to do with reality. Photography and reality are inseparable. Painting can start from internal feelings, but photography can only be started from reality. I respect this. Even though I want to make my works like frescos, yet all details are real. I try my best to accurately reflect all details in the real world.

Huang: Going back to your early photography works. At the early days, you did not photograph pure real objective targets. You did not adopt Jeff Wall's staged photography. Rather, you conducted object photography first, which is more similar to Andreas Gursky's manner. But you were still different from Gursky, because it seems that you employed cavalier or scattered perspective in post-production. My question is how did your post-production lead to the differences between you and Gursky?

Miao: The early stage of photographing is completely objective and real, because I think there is a bottom line in photography. At first, there should not be too much fancy deeds, just photographing what is in front of you. While in the post-production, you can re-organize and re-compile the pictures according to your subjective feelings. If I am recording an instant through photography, then through post-production, I can change the nature of times. For example, a same person can appear in different places in a photographed picture. This is different from traditional photography in terms of times, a little like video-recording: putting a person's actions in different times within a picture, thus changing the instant nature of photography. This is the first point. The second point is that the traditional photography is usually confined by the physical features of equipment. Take the angle of view for example; it is only the angle of a certain camera. But through post-production, the angles can be changed. By that time, the original complete linear perspective of photography is changed to somewhat like cavalier or scattered perspective.

I think the western art circle does not have the tradition of cavalier perspective. Andreas Gursky might not think this way: I have to change it in perspective. In addition, he might not be used to changing the instant feeling of photography to put different times in a picture. This might make him uncomfortable. But for a Chinese artist, because of the tradition of cavalier perspective, and because different times of a same person can appear

in a picture, he might feel natural to employ cavalier perspective. In ancient Chinese paintings, the same figure can appear in different places, such as walking from bridge to pavilion, drinking with friends there and then climbing up mountain... Therefore, in a scroll, people's behaviors in different times can all be put there. I follow this mindset while making photographs. In my work *Celebration*, there are many people appearing in different places to demonstrate the changes of times.

Huang: This is the most fundamental principle that defines our difference with western artists. In other words, the principle of narration is different in Chinese arts and western arts. The aesthetics in traditional Chinese art means the completeness of a story constituted with repeatedly showing one figure in different places which forms a story line.

Miao: Right. It emphasizes more on subjective feelings. I did come from the foot of a mountain to its top. I have gone through this process, thus it is natural to put the pieces together. When I saw the scenes, I feel like I see the whole story. Hence it is an expression method which focuses on subjective feelings, and is employed in photography even though photography should be objective.

Huang: In your work *Celebration*, the repeated appearance of the same characters in different places is the concrete implementation of traditional Chinese painting aesthetics. What purpose did you try to achieve through the repeats?

Miao: Spectators of this work may feel like they have stayed there for three hours to watch the celebration from the beginning to the end. The first glance may make you feel that it has just caught an instant. But if you examine it carefully, you may realize it is not the case.

Huang: The conformation of photography before 2005 was: an objective reality (Miao's words: an objective presentation) and an internal world constituting a photography language. After 2005, you initiated a change, turning to analyze and dissect some classic western paintings by some famous painters, such as Netherlands' Hieronymus Bosch, and Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*—the most famous painting during the Renaissance. Why did you choose historic artworks as targets to dissect?

Miao: Facing a real and changing world, I have the desire to record it and freeze it, but not to analyze it, dissect it, or to re-present it. But for the works that record the past, I indeed have the interest to analyze and illustrate it, to make it solid and alive again.

Art has provided a lot of materials for us to recreate. Fortunately, we are vastly different from ancient people. When they were creating artworks, they had nothing to refer to. For example, when they were making cave frescos, they could not take reference from anything. When they were drawing an ox, they just draw it according to the image they got from life. For them, they probably had no sense of art history at all.

But when we are making creations now, we can start either from real world or from the art world which goes parallel with the former. We can learn something from art history. This is the interesting part.

So now we have a long history of art, where there are so many things which we can use as raw materials for recreation. When we are doing this, we do not have to worry that these things are from western art history. We do not have to think whether they are in the art history of China, or of Netherlands, or of Italy, or of Germany, or of Britain. To us, they are just cultural legacy left by our predecessors.

What I chose are complex works in western art history, no matter they are about structure or characters, such as Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment* and Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. I am thinking that as an oriental, I am more courageous than western artists. Provided there is an Italian artist, when he is re-interpreting Michelangelo's works, what would he think, would he feel afraid? But I remembered that when I was doing a three-dimensional work based on this, I felt very happy, without any sense of burden. Maybe it is the unknowing that makes me bold.

Huang: In fact, some artists rely on their intuition for creation; some rely on their accumulation of knowledge, experience and judgment. The reason why you choose famous western artists as analyzing targets is still related to your experience on art history research. Without that as a basis, it is hard for you to decide which artwork to choose. I think this might be a difference.

Miao: It might be one of the reasons.

Huang: I read your personal profile and there was an interesting self description: Bosch's art is only one of "my starting points. I actually do not particularly care about what Bosch's work is intended to show. What I want to reflect is the soul of the work. This is more important, or else I would be an art historian rather than an artist. My works do not describe the contents of Bosch's work, I only use the form of Bosch's work to express my own thoughts." ... My question is "I want to reflect the soul of the work" ...?

Miao: This is probably a version translated from English to Chinese. It does not exactly reflect my meaning. I have a Chinese version and the main message is like this: What Bosch created was based on the allegories of his time. There were many details, each of which reflected an allegory. Actually 90% of Bosch's allegories were beyond my understanding. What I want to say is that I may not have to understand them all. I am not doing art history research. I heard that some people have done a thorough research on all Bosch's allegories and have written a thick book about them, with each allegory marked with its origin. But I have to create it with my own language and to swap all the contents with modern things and make it a modern story. This can reflect my view and feeling in our times. I think the final story is like this: I do not understand Bosch's work and the

meaning it represents; but if Bosch would look at my works, he could not understand mine either. He would not be able to understand many things, such as this spaceship which can fly into the sky, but it was not in existence in his times. If he had looked at my works, he might ask what this monster is. There are many weird creatures in his works, making his works like dreams. I can not understand them, and I do not intend to. He may not understand my metaphors and thoughts either. But I feel this is more interesting.

We just express our own things. He stated his times, thoughts and feelings and I voice my own. I think they go in parallel. His works are my starting points where I used his structure, such as his structure of heaven, earth and hell and the basic forms of his pictures. But I only use these forms and changed all contents, including figures, backgrounds and all facilities. What I create belong to our times, they are mine.

He dreamed his dreams and I do mine.

Huang: That's good then. You only adopted the structure of Bosch's painting and his narrative pattern (Miao: yes, you are right). You actually compiled another set of allegories. Then what are the meanings of your allegories?

Miao: They are modern people's dreams. They reflect modern people's views on life and death, their desires and their view on human's weakness.

We can make some comparisons. Take the *Dance of Death* for example. In his painting, there was a person shaped like a tree, and a group of people danced on his head. I can not figure out what these people represent. My *Dance of Death* happened on a laptop computer and a skeleton danced there, an image that did not exist in Bosch's times. If we are going to have nuclear wars, the final command might be sent by pressing a button. Bosch could not imagine that the command could be sent by a computer, neither can he imagine powerful weapons of our times which have the capacity of destroying the earth hundreds of times. Therefore my *Dance of Death* is like this: on a laptop computer, Death dancing, nuclear war starting, total destruction... It is totally a fear of modern people and concerns of modern people.

Huang: That means this artwork that you create is actually a "transposition"?

Miao: Yes. Especially the concepts concerning Adam and Eve are changed, which is the most difficult part: because this work only employed "a single" three-dimensional model and this model is a male who can not represent both men and women. Therefore finally I came up with such an idea: use a robot to represent Adam and Venus for Eve. My consideration is: we modern people are just like god in the way that we create a lot of robots according to our will and ask them to do as we direct. In this perspective, it is like god creating Adam and Eve and telling Adam that he should follow his rules. Next is Venus. Why do we always think the Venus with broken arms in Louvre museum is the most beautiful one? I think one possibility is that this Venus does not have arms, which

means she can not pick the forbidden fruit as Eve did. From this point of view, this image can be used to replace Eve and reflect the thoughts of modern people.

There are many such cases in my work, and I have to do the same work in every detail.

Huang: This work actually has some features that are the same as the ones in Bosch's work. Though their meanings are different, yet both of them have something identical and immortal.

Miao: Right.

Huang: For example, I think to exhibit the process from birth to death and to look down the hell from heaven, look up the heaven from the hell, look at the end from the beginning or look back at the beginning from the end are the meanings of this work. Even though you present or metaphor modern reality or your philosophy of looking forward to the future, this work in the whole still has the same things as the ones in Bosch's work. It is only that the space and time are changed....

Miao: Right, the structure. In terms of birth, death, heaven, earth and hell, their general structures are similar, but with different view points. In Bosch's work, the heaven, earth and hell go in parallel or one after another. They may also go along with the time. But through the nine screens and after three-dimensional transposition, they developed a tangled relationship. By using the relation between side screens and front screens, we can look down the hell from heaven and look up the heaven from the hell. This is no longer a parallel structure, it is a tangled structure. There is a co-relation. Through the side screens, the three spaces are linked together.

The issues under discussion are the same, such as birth and death. But the ways of observing them are different.

Huang: The difference is: you use a modern technology to rebuild it, and by doing this you actually change the relation and form between times and spaces. In traditional western art, there is always something called "logos", which means "logic". It started from ancient Greek civilization, then gradually developed and evolved into "contradiction", or binary opposition. I think, as a Chinese artist, your job is not to make the logos (or logic) or binary opposition as the targets of expression or analysis, but to abstract and express the chaos, ambiguity and co-relation in Chinese aesthetics. It is just like why we do not consider *yin* and *yang* as oppositions (Miao: right). Is this also the position where you start your consideration?

Miao: I think this is the most interesting part. In a western view, objects are positioned either up or down and things are either good or bad. But for me... In fact, when Chinese create artworks, they have a subconscious believing that a good thing is not necessarily 100% good and a bad thing is not necessarily completely bad. Then conflicting ideas

appear in artworks, or maybe something different from complete logic might exist. I found this when I first started doing *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace*. When I did the transposition of one model replacing all characters in Michelangelo's artwork, I suddenly realized that there is no distinction between good people and bad people here --- because I used the same model: who is good? Who is bad? Then there is no difference between heaven and hell, or even up and down. At that time, I suddenly felt that I can tolerate this; I can tolerate this confused feeling. Thinking back, looking at the deep-rooted reasons, this is related to Chinese philosophy, just like you have mentioned.

Therefore, I could take a modern medium to create artworks; I could take a western artwork as an element to elaborate; but subconsciously there are still a lot of Chinese elements and oriental elements.

Huang: Therefore, from a modern perspective, you interpret the narrative principles in the works of famous painters. The metaphor of the interpretation—a modern metaphor of interpretation is not an objective metaphor that rebuild history; it is converted into a new metaphor which represent your view on the past, the present and the future.

Miao: Yes, this is what I'm interested in.

Huang: Another question. It is about Bosch's famous *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. While you were creating, why did you adopt the structure of a Chinese folding screen?

Miao: We don't have to look at it as a folding screen. A screen has a practical function: for it to stand up firmly, it has to be folded. In addition, every image on the panels has a parallel relationship. But here, it appears to be a screen, yet its function is no longer a screen. Because these two panels (pointing at the two side panels of the nine-panel complex work) serve the function of looking from here to there; their goal is to connect the three scenes. The artistic form is a folding screen, but it is not one in essence.

In addition, this is a different form than western altar paintings. The relationship between altar paintings is still a relationship in time (Huang: A-huh), and there is no mutual-looking in terms of space.

Huang: You established a relationship in another space context.

Miao: Yes, relationship in terms of space. For Chinese folding screens, several panels might represent the same image or they have a parallel relationship. For example, spring, summer, autumn and winter; this is about a change in time and there is no spatial relationship.

Huang: um, you used the folding screen to establish a spatial relation...

Miao: I indeed want to establish such a spatial relationship. To establish such a relation, I

used the technology of three-dimensional software. (Huang: Um) This software can precisely establish this “mutual spatial” relation. This is not very feasible in ancient times: it is too difficult to accurately depict a grand scene from both the front and the side and the results will not be good; it is almost impossible. With modern technology, it is easy to make it possible. Once I create this grand scene into a three-dimensional set, it is easy to look at this world from a side view. (Huang: A-huh) Then I can use one side panel to establish a spatial relation between several scenes.

This artwork appears to be a folding screen, so it is called a nine-panel screen. Yet it is not a screen in essence, and it does not serve as a decoration. It creates three scenes --- heaven-earth-hell --- a connection in spatial terms. Just like we talked about, this spatial connection reflects how an oriental artist connects heaven, earth and hell together to represent you within me and me within you. This possibly reflects an in-depth concept in philosophy or in cultural tradition where those three things can be considered at the same time; and this is different from only having either good or bad.

Huang: um...

Miao: I believe an interesting point is that once we used modern technology, what modern artists express in an artwork is completely different from artists in previous generations.....

During Bosch’s times, he used just one scene, even there are three... even it’s a triptych. Of course this word “triptych” already has a strong sense of time. But modern artists have more tools and means. I can make a static object into a dynamic one; I can change a two-dimensional object into a three-dimensional space...even if it is a virtual space, it is still a different way of spatial expression.

Huang: I have another question: when you were creating *Microcosm*, you first considered the static status, and then shifted to dynamic status. What are the reasons that prompt you to make the shift?

Miao: In fact, for this piece of artwork, I considered the static and dynamic status at the same time. Just like I worked on Michelangelo’s *The Last Judgment*, I made a plane artwork into a three-dimensional piece --- of course it is a virtual three-dimensional work; thus I am capable of looking at Michelangelo’s fresco from other perspectives --- from the side, top and bottom. You can only look at a traditional fresco from its front; but with the transformation using three-dimensional technology, it can be looked at from multiple perspectives. That means a two-dimensional plane work is transformed into a virtual three-dimensional thing; and this is the first step.

The second step, Michelangelo’s artwork is static and soundless. When it comes to me, I can turn it into a dynamic three-dimensional animation with sounds, a dynamic and living thing.

Same as *Microcosm*, it is probably true that static status is easier to be presented and achieved, and it takes longer to create a dynamic status --- it takes about 6 months more to achieve dynamic status compared with static status. Until now, I'm still making small changes, and it took another 6 months.

Huang: In your works, no matter *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* or *Microcosm* or three-dimensional computer animations, they all share a feature: you virtualized your own body into your works. When it is transplanted into these spaces, the body became impersonalized. Your body no longer belongs to yourself, rather it is the need of the artwork; it is a symbol that expresses certain messages. Why did you use your own image as a target to be transplanted into your pictures or animations?

Miao: There are only very few images artists can use nowadays. We can take a look at the art history. In the middle ages, all artworks are about the Bible, Jesus Christ etc. However, in our generation, maybe people don't have such beliefs and we will not use those figures anymore. Maybe during the Cultural Revolution, we know what kind of characters to use---"Worker-Peasant-Soldier" images or the image of our great leader. In our generation, the most available images for artists to use are themselves because their own images are easily available and least controversial --- there won't be any personality rights issues. It is the most private image that could be symbolized. I ask myself: other than this image, what else can I use? I seriously couldn't find any other images to use at all.

Then I'm no longer troubled by this. In fact, when we carefully examine artists' artworks in history, they use "one kind" of images more or less which are somewhat related to themselves. Take Michelangelo for an example; whenever you see one of his works, you know immediately that those characters are created by him. There is a sort of unique characteristic about men and women that he created; even his female characters have masculine characteristics. From this sense, he is using the same kind of image. Almost all artists are like this. Then I thought, I'll just continue to do it this way.

Huang: Actually, it is obvious that human body is complicated. If you want to understand and analyze human body, you only have three options as to where to start from: natural body, socialized body or science body. In your works, you are using your own image as an agent of expression, then why did you choose body?

Miao: Probably because a body is more of symbolization. Once a body puts on clothes, there will be some sort of representation; for example, a certain time, a certain social class... If I only use the body, these representations do not exist.

Huang: To get rid of all features of identity and background...

Miao: All identities, ethnic characteristics, cultural backgrounds, nothing; it is just an image of "a person", a symbol for "human". It only represents the "existence of a

person”. Then we can talk about abstract issues, issues like birth and death etc.

Huang: In your three-dimensional work *Microcosm*, aside from the pastoral context, I also feel an interpretation of issues concerning violence—the violence does not only come from man-made wars, but also exist in human’s ideology, and there is even violence derived from the magnifying of press information due to technology advance. I think your works seem to be consistent or proved French philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s theoretic analysis of violence. In 2002, I participated in the 2nd Seoul International Media Art Biennale 2002 as curator. During this Biennale, Baudrillard was specially invited to give an important lecture titled *Violent Images and Violence done to Image*. In Baudrillard’s view, violence has three forms: the primary form is the unilateral violence of the most powerful, such as aggression, oppression and spoiling; the second is that of historical, of critical violence, the violence of the negative and the transgression of revolt and revolution (including the violence of analysis and interpretation); the third one is different from the aggressive violence, it is subtle, deterrent, consensus and hyper-regulating, even therapeutic, inherent and communicative, sometimes transparent and not harmful. The third one is what we call violence of information nowadays. It is showed in information, media and images, and it is derived from images. Its main consequence is leading to the disappearance of reality. In a picture, the content violence is separated from the agent violence. When agent violence is converted into information, the violence occurred in the process of the integration of agents and information. Obviously, Baudrillard’s analysis of violence forms is inspiring. In your works, do you have such interpretations of violence? Did you use virtual technology and computer software to express your thoughts about these issues?

Miao: Yes, maybe some sort of mysterious and invisible violence has profound impacts on us. The robot appeared near the end of the animation is consisted of 11 television screens. All screens are re-playing how the fire-fighter ran wildly in the fire.

One of the characteristics of our times is that there will be some sort of image recording for sure when something happens. Either it is a terrorism attack or a natural disaster, the event, after it happened, will be played over and over again in a global scale. Then this event is magnified by many times, forcing countless people --- related or unrelated --- to face this event together.

Huang: Your work *Microcosm* easily reminds people of an artist group AES+F’s [Tatiana Arzamasova (A) , Lev Evzovich (E) , Evgeny Svyatsky (S) and Vladimir Fridkes (F)] *Last Riot* exhibited in the Russian Pavilion during the Venice Biennale 2007. They created an historical artwork with grand narratives as well. Of course, the creation process is different for you two, but in terms of the form --- I’m talking about the similarity in the visual language --- it is video equipment consisted of three screens. It utilized the combination of real person shows plus 3D animation to create a video artwork with 180 degrees of vision in a half circle.

In fact, AES+F adopted the most common commercialized production method of contemporary art. They selected professional models from modeling companies, and their props are from a famous sports brand Adidas including sports shoes, shorts, baseball bats and golf clubs. We even see Evian spring water several times in the video. This is suitable for commercialization, but it also implies the criticism of globalization. AES+F's artwork has a clear target in terms of concepts --- it depicts religion, civilization and the conflicts between different cultures; and all of these are expressed by beautiful youth figures fighting each other from the start to the end. Not only did AES+F analyze violence in reality, but they expressed the despair, anger and criticism about the current situation that humans face through their interpretation of violence. This artwork precisely presents the perfect and lively plot conflicts and contradictions through peculiar details and dazzling shots. There is something montage about this group's artwork --- it integrated all kinds of things such as Japanese temples, Chinese dragons, oil fields, Islamic mosques, Rome historic sites of Christian, ice mountain, dessert, wasteland, hanging bridge, carousel in Disney land, tents of military bases, airplanes, golf clubs, military knives etc. All of those are combined in a montage way. It also has a kind of allegory – birth and death, violence and war, uneasiness and anxiety caused by conflicts of tradition and modern times. Your artwork also contains such conflicts and contradictions. I believe that the ultimate meaning is related to the development of human kind. So how do you look at the differences in terms of concepts and languages between your artwork and AES+F's artwork?

Miao: I think this is the best question! It is the most interesting to decide when to look at these two artworks at the same time because there are many things that could be compared and discussed about the two pieces.

AES+F combined real person shows, actual camera shots and three-dimensional virtual scenes, and they used Primatte Keyer technology to mix them into a three-dimensional set. Therefore, although there are many killing movements from the start to the end, none of the movements became an actual cut; this is vital to human lives and it shouldn't be acted out casually. For me, since I used three-dimensional virtual technology right from the beginning, everything is generated by the computer and it has nothing to do with real persons or actual scenes. Therefore, I can peel a person layer by layer or cut a person into slices; I can also make these people into potato and cucumber first and then peel him or slice him to achieve visual results that cannot be achieved with actual shooting.

The characters in their work has different skin colours, mostly are young men and women, so there is a difference between individual characters. This is a carry on of their static photography works in previous years. I only used a three-dimensional self image and the copies of this image, and there is no difference among individuals. I only used this image as a common symbol for "human". This image was first used in 2005 when I started creating *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* .

Looking at the images on the three screens of AES+F's work, sometimes it is one image

such as a grand scene; sometimes it shows three different images combined together. Therefore, it is better to be projected on three screens. The image on my three screens is always the same one, so I could have projected it on one screen as long as the screen is big enough. The reason why I used screen divider to project it on three screens is just to make the image bigger.

This is how I consciously not avoiding similarities in creating artworks. For artists living in the same times, we face the same issues, use the same technology. Of course there will be similar art features. There are many examples like this in art history either in China or in other countries, and this is called artistic features of the times. However, every artist has different life style, different cultural background and different aesthetic taste; and this will form a certain fundamental distinction which is the uniqueness of art.

In fact, at the end of creating this animation, the most exciting thing is: their artwork ended at the peak of a mountain; and my work flew into the universe, then all sounds disappear as well..... This is the part which makes me the happiest. This is also why I decided to name this artwork *Microcosm* at the end. Because when you look at these things from a far away location, many things become unimportant and minimal. Maybe this is how two artworks differ from one another. The Russian group's artwork focuses more on violence. When you think about this video, it is all about knives and swords motioning continuously. At the end of my animation, we are away from all of those, and we can look at all these with a detached perspective from a far away place. Maybe this is the difference between a Chinese artist and a western artist.

Maybe this new media art gives us the opportunity to throw away burdens. This young form of art only has a history of a few decades. The most dazzling thing is the upgrades of hardware and software in a breathtaking speed and the updates in concepts following that. The difference between eastern artists and western artists is only a few years away or even a few months away. With such a background, what is oriental, what is western, what is classic, what is modern, what is vanguard, what is rearguard, what is the core and what is being marginalized? Masters and classics are young, and they leave no standards and pressure for other people. Every artist can surpass the previous classic and to form his/her own classic; and they know clearly that they could be surpassed by the next person very soon. This is a phenomenon that only exists during the most active period of art development. Compared with old times, hundreds of years or decades are compressed into a few years or even a few months. Young and active minds sank in it without any fears. Then what is the most important factor in such an era? What makes this artwork worth viewing and thinking after it is surpassed by other artworks in terms of technology?

Huang: When looking at AES+F's artwork, I found that this group actually select, sift and compile a set of fragmented images of different times, different spaces and different historical stages, and then use technology to integrate it into a narrative scroll about violence. Comparatively speaking, your work *Microcosm* does not have such a narrative method. Obviously you are trying to send out another kind of message from this even

bigger universe, meaning that looking at this earth from a universal perspective as if everything happening on earth is minimal, temporary and fragmented; it is only a matter of one moment. On the other hand, AES+F started out from a more concrete subject or image. I believe that if we say the artistic language of AES+F's artwork is literary narration, then your artwork has more abstract characteristics.

Miao: um, this is why I changed the Chinese saying of “a frog in the shallow well looking up the sky” into “sitting in the universe to look at the well” (this is the literary translation of *Microcosm*). For the frog living in the well, everything is comfortable and beautiful. Time and space are appropriate. The frog can never go up to the sky because it will freeze, starve and burn to death. It is born for the land and it will die for the land. It is suitable to live in the well and it uses the spatial measures of a well to consider things.

Looking down from above, we cannot see this frog in the well, and we cannot tell it how big the universe is. There is no need to praise the life within a well; no need to fight each other for a small piece of land. Even if the frog uses all its power to image, it still cannot grasp the vastness of the universe.

But who is to say that I am not that frog in a well? Even if I look at things from a different perspective, even when I “look at the well from the universe”, I am still short-sighted, narrow-minded and I cannot manage or handle grand events; I am still ignorant and muddleheaded just like before.

It is just that I once heard when you can create art to the level of supremacy, beyond your imagination and soul, you will get away from that muddleheaded status temporarily. One melody, one image can make people passionate, lost in rambling thoughts, and go beyond times. I wish I could get there, and I feel that even if I live in a well, I can still think big and accomplish splendid achievements.

Artist's Statements

About *Microcosm* - 9-panel complex work:

To see death from birth, and birth from death;

To see hell from heaven, and heaven from hell;

To see the end from the beginning, and the beginning from the end.

The Garden of Earthly Delights by Hieronymus Bosch is a triptych. It is commonly recognized that the left wing represents heaven, the central panel earth, and the right wing hell. Facing such a painting, I would like to do two things:

First: remoulding the original triptych into a nine-panel painting, and remoulding one perspective into seven perspectives using three-dimensional software. The three front panels have the same perspective as the original painting where heaven, earth and hell are shown. The other six side panels are added to show further perspectives. After remoulding the two-dimensional painting into a three-dimensional scene, the side panels reflect various perspectives by examining the original three scenes, now linked together on the same dimension, from different viewpoints. From heaven, surpassing earth, one can directly see hell, and from hell one can also look back at earth and heaven; from birth we see death, and from death we look back at birth; from the beginning we view the end, and from the end we review the beginning.

Second: remoulding an ancient fable into a modern fable. The original painting shows a spectacular scene with numerous characters, and it is depicted with countless details which cannot easily be interpreted. Maybe for Hieronymus Bosch's contemporaries, all of these details were explicitly obvious. Yet for modern people who are situated in a different context, these details appear obscure, bewildering and confusing. Thus, I would like to use our modern language to create a new set of mysteries, to metaphorically express my views about the world, my understandings of existence and death, and this is an alternative way of digging into the roots of mysteries belonging to other times.

Looking from another perspective of space and time, how many times do we have to magnify it, so that our own world can be found ---

Is our birth really birth

Our death really death

Happiness really happiness

And pain really pain?

How many times do we have to magnify it, so that

Mountains appear high

And oceans deep?

Paradise

Desireless robot,

Will you be our obedient Adam???

Armless Venus,

Finds the forbiddance to pick the forbidden fruit needless!!!

Earth

Heavens and earth reformed,
Time and space transformed,
Four-wheel cars everywhere,
Four-foot horses nowhere,
Tigers and wolves tamed,
Cattle and sheep crazed.

Hell

The doom of the world,
Occurs,
At a press of a button,
On a piece of keyboard,
No time difference,
No one can escape.

About *Microcosm* - 3D computer animation script

1. Magnifying glass

There are two “O”s in the opening caption “Microcosm”. The “O” in Micro is used as a magnifying glass, and the “O” in cosm is a symbol for some place, for example, the earth that we live in. It represents that among the boundless universe, looking from another perspective of space and time, how many times do we have to magnify it, so that our own world can be found ---Is our birth really birth, our death really death, happiness really happiness, and pain really pain? How many times do we have to magnify it, so that mountains appear high, and oceans deep?

2. Lucky fruit

A hand hanging in the air drops an apple. One piece of the apple was bitten off mid-air. Then a pile of apples fell from the sky, some went through transparent channels with the noise of coins falling from slot machines when you win in casinos.

We are all very lucky to be living on a planet that is suitable for human beings, just like we have won the lottery.

3. Adam and Eve

I only used one three-dimensional model, digital, male. There is no way for me to use this one model to represent both Adam and Eve from heaven at the same time. Robots came to my mind: strong, tireless, obedient, doing all kinds of hard work without any complaints; they obey our written programs and commands unconditionally. For Eve, I thought of Venus de Milo in Louvre Museum: armless Venus who cannot reach for the

forbidden fruit. She lost her arms, would this woman then become the most beautiful and most innocent woman in the world because of that?

The reason why I made such a seemingly unrelated representation is that I do not remember what else Eve did in heaven other than she picked the forbidden fruit. I do not remember what Adam did as well, only that he violated God's will.

4. Giving orders

Human beings give countless commands to the robot. The most important principle is: the robot must obey human beings; otherwise, as creators, human beings might not have the capabilities to punish the robot which is being created.

5. Two kinds of animals

Two kinds of animals surround Adam and Eve; one kind is pets, tamed cats and dogs, dolphins swimming in the pool; another kind is furry toy animals created by human beings, cute, without any dangers at all.

The role of human beings on earth is too special and too honorable; we are only one step away from being the ruler of this planet. Only tamed animals are allowed to be around human beings, such as docile puppies and kittens. For tigers, lions and bears, they can only be close to humans once they are made into furry toys; otherwise, they can only be locked in cages or put away in a protection zone. This is somewhat a problem.

6. Giraffes

Some giraffes have long necks and some have short ones. Those with short necks can eat grass on the ground, and those with long necks can eat leaves from trees. They all get what they want, so they live together harmoniously without any conflicts: what a great picture of heaven. Unfortunately, there is more trouble for humans who have necks of the same length and intelligence of the same level. From outer space to deep underwater, power and regions are being redistributed once and again according to the ever growing or weakening power of different countries.

7. Half-hearted

Pieces of papers with written commands are separated from Robot Adam's hands; they rise to the sky and start to dance mid-air. Sometimes papers are scattered all over the place; sometimes they are connected to one piece (represented by different colored papers connect with each other and turn into the same color); and sometimes papers fall in an unordered manner creating a mess.

As an individual, one human being would not be considered strong in absolute terms

when facing the nature, other species, even other human beings – humans cannot fly into the sky, dive into the underground; our skin and hair are not adequate for cold winters and hot summers. We are not as fierce as lions and tigers, not as agile as monkeys. Only when humans communicate with each other and stay united that we can have extraordinary powers. Humans use language as a kind of media to accumulate experiences from previous generations, wisdom of other ethnic groups and powers of machines; those are all passed on to later generations.

8. Be waited on hand and foot

A flying bird is shot midair; it falls, cooked and becomes delicious food within plates. Wine glass, football, diet, losing weight.

If I have to shoot a bird in order to get a taste of meat, I would for sure starve to death. We live a life with extremely easy access to food; we buy chicken, duck, fish and meat from the supermarket and store them in the refrigerator. We can have them as we wish. We do not capture those animals by hunting, nor do we feed them or raise them in our backyards. We are getting further and further away from the nature.

9. Four-wheel cars everywhere, four-foot horses nowhere

“Road” used to be called “horse road” in Chinese, and the original definition is “road for horses to run”. Since the invention of automobiles, cars run on streets instead of horses, therefore, “horse road” was changed into “street for vehicles”. Horses gain their strength from eating grass, but cars have to eat oil to run. Oil then became the blood of our generation, and we cannot live without it for one day --- a price we have to pay to acquire the speed and comfort we have never experienced.

The horse that should not have run on the “horse road” or “street for vehicles” is hit and being splattered into pieces. The heart of the horse became an engine, its pieces combined into a “BMW” sports car which gone off with the speed of wind.

10. Lifetime hard work

In sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.

--- Genesis 3: 17

11. Garden of earthly delights

Spring wind blows, and all creatures come alive. Trees sway; people’s faces glow. Pink peaches and green willows; fragrant flowers and singing birds. This is the most joyful time, and I wish I could kidnap time.

The camera follows the mosquito closely, sometimes flying high and sometimes low;

sometimes slow and sometimes fast. It flies up and down, left and right until it flies out of the scene. Transition.

12. Sour grapes

A transparent bubble is flowing on the water; people sit amid flowing with the water. One of them is trying to grab grapes from another group of people, unsuccessful.

Grapes not acquired can be considered sour grapes, and there should not be desire for it anymore. Grapes acquired will be eaten, digested, turned sour, fermented and became the carrier of a new round of desire.

13. Sacrificing to feed birds

Humans are turned into potato and cucumber, and the human-shaped potato is being peeled and cucumber being sliced; a flock of hungry birds swiftly took all slices. Animals, vegetables and fruits are probably not that willing to sacrifice themselves to provide proteins and vitamins for humans. They are not Buddhists and they are not willing to suffer from baking, frying, steaming or stewing just to become delicious.

14. Life is like a chess game

A chessboard is situated in the foreground, and one game is played after another. There are numerous figures in the scene, some are disappearing somewhere and reappearing somewhere else.

Life is like a chess game full of changes and uncertainties. Humans are like chessmen, and they are being pushed by a certain power without their own control. Either you win or lose, there is only one game for you. You will leave after the game, and there are no re-matches or re-placing of chessman.

15. Killer music

With the album slowly spinning, two dancing people disappear gradually; cluster of people dance wildly inside the harp, and they are being cut into pieces and scattered on the floor. Weapons can kill people; knowledge from books and science & technology can also make people die. Even music, it might mobilize all kinds of passionate and uncontrollable emotions that could kill people without their realizing it.

16. No time difference

Either it is New York, Paris or London, the clock hands of the polygonal clock point at the same time, there is no difference in time.

When catastrophes come, there is no harbor of refugee in the world; there are no utopian places; everyone faces disasters at the same time.

17. Recycling weapons

Every species has a killer tool, even tamed cows and goats have horns to protect themselves; of course humans would also have such tools. If humans produce devastating weapons just to threaten and contain each other, and those weapons are being recycled or put in exhibitions – non-explosive weapons from ancient times are being exhibited in museums – then it is not a bad thing; it is just that we consumed a lot of manpower and resources. However, once we start a war, there will be unimaginable consequences. Humans will not be able to face and handle such consequences, let alone cleaning the mess up. In the animation, the knife and fork on bombs, the broken porcelain plate, and the garbage bin with environmental protection signs are all images related to the above concerns.

18. Fear nothing with a strong backing

Tanks drove by loudly one after another, and guns firing non-stop. Kung-fu masters on the tank are doing Bruce Lee's moves; other kung-fu masters die in front of the tank; there are also other kung-fu masters doing side kicks. Skeletons jump and death comes.

Humans wish to have some sort of internal power or external power to fight strong enemies. In ancient times, if you had good kung-fu skills, then you had no enemies. In modern times, you have to have all kinds of sophisticated weapons in order to police the whole world and confront other countries. This kind of power needs continuous upgrades; otherwise, just like the kung-fu masters standing on tanks in this animation: they are just brave but useless.

19. Dance of Death

Skeletons dance on the notebook computer.

In ancient times, to destroy all civilizations on this planet requires an extremely long process; and we could almost optimistically believe that the destruction would never happen. It could only be a phase, in some regions and can be recovered. However, nowadays, to destroy all human kind on this planet only requires the movement of a few fingers and a few buttons. We can almost pessimistically believe that once the program is activated, there is no way back. It is permanent, full-scale and irreversible.

20. Escape

A gigantic monument-like head portrait sees a military aircraft flying by.

The precondition of destruction is usually that the destructor can escape before the destruction happens.

21. Total destruction of all

A firefighter is trying his best to run with a fire extinguisher on his head. Sky scrapers are collapsing one after another. Televisions, washing machines, refrigerators, ovens, microwaves, keyboards, and artworks are all over the place creating a major mess. The firefighter is sacrificing his life; paintings falling off; machines destroyed, a total destruction of good and bad and everything.

Civilization can be destroyed in one second. The power to save it is minimal.

22. All Empty

The refrigerator door opens, and one last apple falls from it. The refrigerator door rebounds and reopens; the apple falls on the ground and it was picked up by another hand. A bunch of empty refrigerators stand like tombstones, and refrigerator doors are opening and closing in the wind just like the death knell.

A pile of ice cubes are squished together and skeletons appear in a subtle way. There are three baby cries as the background noise. Three spacecrafts rocket into the sky.

23. The Last Supper

There is an egg inside the first spaceship, and there are 13 people on the egg. Their movements and gestures are arranged in a ring shape somewhat according to da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. If those people are arranged in one row, it would be an exact replication of da Vinci's artwork. All people shrink into the eggshell and disappear.

People are born in different times, yet they are destroyed at the same time.

24. Noah's Ark

The second and third spaceships contain animals and plants.

Assume that the earth is destroyed, and we have to find another homeland. Here, the spaceship can be considered a modern version of the Noah's Ark; how many people can it carry? Who is qualified to go away? How many animals shall we bring to another planet in order to provide protein for humans? How many plants shall we bring to another planet to make oxygen for humans?

25. Birth and Death

At the beginning of my birth, I must have strong feelings about life, but I was not capable of recording such feelings. When I finally learned to read, make sentences and express my feelings, it is already ten years later and I have already forgotten all the joy at the beginning of life. Then I learned to use languages other than words --- painting, photography and animations --- to express my thoughts, but the forty-five-year old me have no whatsoever memory of my birth. This is looking back at birth, something that I have experienced. If I am asked to describe the experience and feeling that I have within the 10 seconds of birth, I have no other ways to do so except to make up stories.

About death: I have never experienced it, and all I get is hearsay and imaginary feelings. Within the 10 seconds before death, I must have profound understandings about death; I must be as wise as a philosopher. However, I do not have the time to use words or artistic means to record it; I probably do not even have the strength to cry or laugh.

Thus I am certain that I can only make all kinds of assumptions about birth and death in my whole life, and there is absolutely no way for me to express the deepest and most genuine feelings. To put other people in my shoes, this is a common problem that all thinkers, philosophers and artists face since ancient times. We are not satisfied with the definitions of birth and death, so we are still exploring tirelessly.

Words are for quibble, and art is for affectation. Birth is birth, it is a matter of one moment, and it has nothing to do with art; death is just death, it is also a matter of one moment, and it has nothing to do with art as well.

Background music:

Background music is composed with three tracks.

The first part is Wagner's Tannhauser Overture conducted by Jansug Kakhidze and played by Tbilisi Symphony Orchestra. When I was doing the background music, a war in Georgia started, so I put the names of the composer, the conductor and the orchestra on a slowing spinning album in the animation to memorialize them.

I did not change the tempo, speed and melody of Wagner's music. I was always thinking that my images have to be as strong as his music, and they cannot be separated, disturbed or destructed by his music. If I can do this, then I believe that my images are strong and intense enough. Therefore, rather than calling this background music, it is probably more appropriate to call it confrontation and reaching some kind of balance in this confrontation.

The second part is all kinds of noises; some are related to the scenes in the animation to create an atmosphere; some are not related to the scenes, they are specially made to express a specific meaning.

The third part is non-stop keyboard clicking sounds from the start to the end. One part of this is to show that all of the things are happening in a virtual reality; maybe it reflects the real world, the past, the current and the future to some extent. Another part is to show the working condition of me and my whole team: we sit in front of the computer clicking keyboards everyday, all seasons, and day after night in order to turn the invisible into visible, and soundless into sounds.

Old and new media

The expression form of works done by new media is different from that of traditional ones. I think the relation between the traditional and new media is not necessarily that we have to choose one against another, but there could be inheritance and further development. I can reproduce a form in the art history by digital means. Outwardly, there may be some similarities between the two, but inside they are worlds apart.

For example, I am always interested in Chinese ink painting, but I didn't find a way to work it out in computer until now. By digital ink, the Chinese ink painting features both delicate drawing and freehand splash. Previously, delicate drawing required thin silk or rice paper with alum coating, which is not good for freehand splash; splash brushwork, on the other hand, chose unprocessed rice paper, on which you are unable to outline the object with exquisite lines. You can not sell the cow and drink the milk. The digital ink, however, makes that possible, driving me excited.

What makes me even more exhilarated is that this possibility can go on continuously. .It only requires energy, time and enough enthusiasm.

3D digital Ink and Wash Painting

My obsession with "Line" is perhaps rooted in the high regard I hold for traditional Chinese painting. Nearly all the collective art experiences from around the world have at some point gone through a stage in which "line" constitutes the dominant form of expression. However, with traditional Chinese painting it seems that far more emphasis is placed on the incomparable expressive power of the line, because it is at the same time so concise yet it can eloquently express the essence of anything in its totality.

For the past three years since 2005, I have sat in front of my computer every day, working with my assistants using 3D software to build models and using all these models to construct a 3D virtual world. Points are connected to form a line, then lines to form a surface, and then the whole thing is re-rendered into a seemingly real object. Then one day I thought 'why not use the lines directly to make an art work?' These lines depict the contours of an object's fundamental shape and also reveal the beauty of form. I am

particularly excited about printing these lines on Xuan paper in order to simulate the beauty of traditional line drawing, but achieving it with a modern inkjet printer and ink instead of using a traditional Chinese brush and ink.

3D drawings differ from the traditional line drawings because the latter depict only the visible aspect, as it would be seen from the viewer's perspective. Anything that is obstructed from view or not directly in the viewer's line of sight is not necessarily shown. Whereas objects in 3D line drawings are, in effect, transparent as the viewer can gaze through them to what is behind them.

Because of the nature of software and computer calculations used in 3D drawing, all the contours of the objects are visible, regardless if they are at the back of an object or concealed behind other objects. This yields a transparent and three-dimensional appearance. Even with a face in profile, viewers will be able to see both eyes, not just the one on the side of the viewer. This, in a way carries a taste of Cubism, reminiscent of Picasso's paintings, portraying both eyes on the same side of a profile portrait. But for computers and software, all this is just a matter of course; there is no requisite reason or *-ism*, it is purely something essential.

The beauty of traditional line drawing, Cubism from the early last century and technological wonders of the 21st century encounter unexpectedly, running into each other!

Drawing

Originally, drawing is a study of natural form and structure. In that case, the improvisation and incompleteness of drawing will be discarded after the work is done. Nowadays, however, we come to realize that drawing can also be an independent expression.

In my work, drawing is only necessary in expression instead of function. Now that we can draw a picture facing the natural world, we can do the same in the virtual world. The only difference is that it is a process of retroduction in the latter case. Every sketch has a computer diaphragm around it which indicates that the image is formed in the computer before being drawn, so that my drawing is opposite to the traditional ones, despite of using the same tool- a pen or a pencil.

Embroidery

When 3D software is used to make a piece of work, the first step is to form a surface by gridlines. Different colours distinguish various objects. With colorful gridlines changing before my eyes, especially when lines of different color lap over each other, the image is

just like the embroidery. One day I made up my mind to fix the variably colored gridlines in accordance with traditional forms of hand embroidery.

I am not clear to what extent has the computer replaced handicraft. But at least in the above way, my embroidery combines the computer with handicraft. The work is quite time-consuming and energy-consuming, because the women workers have to embroider all the gridlines generated by the computer.

Sculpture

The fact that all my works are done by 3D software means that, with a proper output way, all virtual 3D forms can become real—the sculpture in traditional meaning. This is 3D printing technology, used to be applied to industrial modeling, which I think can also serve arts.

I did not discover all charms of this idea completely yet, but I am convinced that it absolutely deserves further experiment. .