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Xiao, Ya

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2012

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

A Pillar of Salt

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Ya Xiao

Committee in charge:

Professor Kuiyi Shen, Chair
Professor Steve Fagin
Professor Ernest Silva
Professor Paul Pickowicz

2012

The thesis of YA Xiao is approved and it is acceptable
in quantity and form for publication on microfilm and
electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

Thanks
All of my professors, friends
And
Christopher Clubb

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

A Pillar of Salt
by

Ya Xiao

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Kuiyi Shen, Chair

Usually, things that have disappeared have a name, but not upcoming things. An old human social structure has been destroyed, and the structure of an unknown is about to begin.

A pillar of salt is a process of my imagination of another human being society. The three characters in this video are individual and independent. In my original plan, the ballet suit girl who wears a gas mask presents the fragile sense of art, the golden raincoat man with a bird face relates to logic thinking and philosophy, and the protective clothing guy reflects technology and industry, Some other elements involve in my work during the shot.

A Pillar Of Salt

The story of the pillar of salt

Many people are familiar with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, even if they are not Christian. Yahweh destroys these twin cities with fire and brimstone while Lot and his family members are assisted out of the city by angels. Lot and his family are forbidden to look back as they escape, but Lot's wife does not follow this rule. She looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt.

Regardless of whether it was because of her fear of the future, or because of her curiosity of the past, she broke the rule and the punishment was her life. Obviously the cost of her action was overpriced. At that moment, as the last victim, Lot's wife lost her life for disobeying God's commandment.

When I first read this story in primary school, for some reason, it made a large impact on me. At that time, I did not know as much about Christianity. At first, I wondered why, after destroying the two cities to punish evil actions God would claim another life under his authority. I kept imagining that moment when Lot's wife turned back to see Sodom and Gomorrah burn. I could not absorb the story into my own logic, and it flooded my mind with sadness.

The spiritual aspirations of the human eternal home

Human beings search for the eternal home. The ancient Chinese poem "Peach Blossom Spring" written by Tao Yuanming describes an ideal society of the poet's imagination. In this poem a fisherman sails down a river in a forest made of blossoming peach trees. When he reaches the end of the river he finds a passage that leads to a village filled with people and animals of all ages. The villagers are surprised to see him, but are kind and friendly. They explained that their ancestors escaped to this place during the civil unrest of the Qin and they had not left or had contact with anyone from the outside since. They had heard nothing of the changes in political regimes. The fisherman was warmly received by the villagers and stayed for over a week. When he left, he was told that it was worthless to reveal this experience to the world. However, he marked his route on his way out with signs and later told others about the village. They tried to find it repeatedly but could not. In this place that was far away from outside world, people loved each other and lived with peace. But the poet did not mention how this ideal world runs and what kind of structure the residents were following.

In ancient philosopher Laozi's conception of the ideal society, countries were to be completely isolated from each other. In this world he dreamed, the people were independent, there was no war, weapons were useless and people stayed in their community.

Thomas More and Karl Marx both presented human being's dreams and aspirations of a perfect social system. So far, the existing social structures are not perfect. Since ancient times, regimes change to other regimes, a

new system is made to overthrow the system of another, and human beings continue to change the social structure based on conflict of interests. Every system seems to be replaced by another more appropriate system. Obviously, people have never been satisfied, but in past structures of society, membership and the social division of labor seems closer to the ultimate human home.

Marx's communist vision depicts an ultimate ending. It is an elimination of private property rights and the public ownership of the means of production. There is no class system, and actions are done according to need. The current countries that implement this system, without exception, are one-party dictatorships. This runs counter to the desire for freedom of human beings.

Nowadays, the imperfection of a capitalist society is more and more exposed and obvious, but the superiority of the socialist society has never been shown. The "ultimate social structure" in its implementation proved only how ridiculous and naive it was. Indeed, it may be the worst social structure. The idea of this social system is equality for the entire world; in reality, it is full of killing and exploitation. It has created countless tyrants, blind idolatry and obscurantism. The human social structure is in an awkward phase, not completely mature. One system has been decadent, while the new system has not yet appeared. It is the bottleneck of a structure of human society.

Tranquilizers and joy-ether

Religion tries to inspire human beings of God's nature, but it is impossible for people to shed their human limitations. In order to strengthen control, religion

becomes an institution of authority. In order to maintain their own authority, the religions prohibit other doctrines, so the enforcement and execution of dissidents are inevitable. In contrast, Buddhism seems more merciful and compassionate. But emptiness is still not the answer to all the mysteries in this world. People can experience illusory divinity and sublimity by religious worship. It is similar to drugs as the illusion of freedom. This is not a solution. Religion cannot completely constrain human's behavior. Drugs cannot completely free human behavior.

Every religion has fabricated a heavenly world to comfort those who cannot obtain satisfaction in the here and now. In parallel, they also construct a fearsome and cautionary world of hell. In these two extreme worlds, systems of hierarchy are complex and rigid. Every religious system will have a certain chief deity, and all the others support his work. Humans can really, it seems, come to believe in and rely upon the alternative society in this virtual structure. They give themselves to this theory made by themselves, making it sublime and mysterious, and deeply believe in it, such that when they talk they express holiness and mercy on their faces. But in many massacres and wars, religious conflict is one of the prominent sources of confrontation. In medieval Europe, religious power was greater than imperial, and religious oppression reached its apogee. When the crusaders embarked on their expeditions, the bodies they had nailed to the cross, sliding down dead, and women being burned alive as witches, were vivid portrayals of hell. Human beings have been consumed by this giant toy that they created themselves, but they still place their fantasies of the future on

it, and with no regrets.

Later, people began to use scientific formulas and principles to explain the world, and they gave an explanation of cause and effect based on reason and science. The result of materialization is that this world is more easily read. However, everything became dull, because that which most which fascinated the imagination and sense of mystery had been strangled. This may make some people feel safer because the simpler the logic and principles, the safer people feel.

I don't believe in any particular gods, but I believe that in the universe exists a principle of balance, which controls the operation and development of material things. This law is not one we already know, and does not have any relationship with the laws of physics. But it cannot be a god. This principle of balance may be unconscious and without physical form.

The process is better than the result

I am just a wounded soul, and discussion of the system is not my strong point. A distant singer has already erected the boundary marker, and crossing the Tropic of Cancer it becomes a dotted line. So I was trapped by this, and hurried to escape relationships with all existence, but there was nowhere to go. This world sometimes is very boring, but it is hectic, and absurd. I hold the hem of my skirt, like the most careful spectator, hesitating to step into the water. Then I know that the powerful system will eventually absorb all the sounds of opposition, and all challengers will be coopted, like Marina Abramovic rushing to enshrine herself in the Parthenon.

When I was a child, I read a random article. It said that each time a person makes a choice, the world splits and creates a parallel one. In this parallel world, everything is the same as the current world, but the events in this new world follow our different choices.

I am not a lazy person. Mostly I do not do anything. I feel confusion, like everyone in their twenties. Reality has numerous possibilities; each selection of a possibility will diminish me. As a negative person, I believe in emptiness. There are many plans in my mind, but I barely act. Undeniably, I am not satisfied with this world. I narrowed myself in a certain circle of social interaction. When I touch the outside world, it scares me. People have those kinds of positive, diligent, courteous and decent personalities that are industrialized powers. Even their sadness had a certain mode.

A pillar of salt is my process of imagining an alternative society or world. The three characters are all independent individuals. In my initial plan the ballerina with a gas mask represents an aesthetic of fragility. The man wearing boots, a yellow raincoat, and a black bird hat represents logical thinking and philosophy. The man wearing the hazardous materials suit without a face, with only a monitor running a loop, and on his back are strings of LED lights. Being the character in the play with the smallest number of human qualities, he represents technology, technical skill, and even industrial power. I sketched out scenes from my imagination and then found a site for filming. When people asked about my script and my storyboard I was always embarrassed because I had only a few not very detailed notes. When we went to the shooting site, most of the time I could

not capture the image from my imagination, as in the scenes near the San Diego Amvets Thrift Store when I shot the flock of pigeons, but on those days the birds were already surprisingly full, so not one was willing to approach me to eat the food I provided. In my original plan, the bird-headed man in the yellow raincoat was to lie on the ground and I would spread food on his body to let the pigeons eat.

Later I could only change to two scenes, with feeding and eating shot separately. The final feeling of detachment, however, was exactly what I wanted.

Most of the performances were improvised according to the environment. Because the requirements for body language were not very high and the faces were hidden by masks, and the actors carried out their duties very well even though they were not professionals. My favorite shot was right before the sun set, and captured the last ray of light before it was extinguished. In the foreground in profile is the birdman, who is buffeted by the wind, but silently stands firm. From the distance, the ballerina wearing a gasmask approaches, gives him a glimpse, and then turns and walks away.

When I first formed a plan of this project, I had no confidence that I could actually create it. I had little experience collaborating with other people, and I was not familiar with video making. The farthest place I went to shoot was Bombay beach in Salton Sea, which was over a three-hour drive away. It was difficult to move all the equipment and costumes around.

The first location I used was near the Amvets thrift store. The first time I passed by, I saw hundreds of pigeons hanging out there. The background was not

as good as what I wanted, but I liked how the fence looked. During the shot, a lady came out from nowhere. She was wearing a dirty pink T-shirt and heavy make-up. She told me her name was Candy and she was a volunteer to feed the cats behind the fence. I never expected some place I passed by so many times to have a little hidden haven. Candy could not understand what others were talking about, so she could not answer questions very well, but when she introduced us to her cats, she suddenly changed into a different person with a very clear mind. Sometimes she took food there and ate with the cats. She removed a mat that was hanging over an opening in the large wooden fence to show the colony of cats that she took care of. She had given nicknames to all the cats like “the king” or “the lieutenant” One time when I came back, my friend Christopher tried to greet her when she was hanging out with her cats. She did not recognize him at first, and she was so protective. Candy had no phone and lived with her brother. I thought this volunteer job was her only thing to do everyday. She was out of the system. I did not know if it was her own choice. The next person I met definitely made this choice himself.

When I planned to go to Salton Sea, I had to find a car, a driver and an additional performer. One of my Chinese friends told me she could not make it to drive me to the Salton Sea the day before we planned on shooting. I had to post on craigslist to see if there was any possibility that I could get some surprise help. Dave responded quickly. He is the protective clothing man in my video. Dave was an anthropology student at the University of California Santa Cruz before he decided to leave on a long trip with his dog. He left school and drove towards New

Mexico with hopes of visiting with an architect who had been building sustainable homes from recycled material since the 70's. He chose to be a bump to fight with this world. He asked me "Some learn of the world through words; some through numbers; what is your method?"

What is my method? I have not answered him yet. The consuming of time and energy comforts me. I am trying to find a more suitable place for myself in this incertitude and amphibious position.