

III. Chinese Oil-Painting Factories

But that doesn't stop painting from being a commodity, with its fatal consequence the fetishization of the "handmade." It is this fetishization that the best modern painters challenged, they who acted (and it is here that one finds the sign of their cultural ambition) as if they were in fact in competition with photographers on the same general market for images, and left in their work the marks of a desire, necessarily ungratified, to behave as if their hand, their eye, their whole body were a machine for the recording and duplicating of images.¹ -Thierry de Duve

Encountering the Chinese Oil-Painting Industry

Almost two thirds of the world's oil paintings are produced cheaply in China. The market for these paintings is huge, and bulk-orders of canvases end up in large retail outlets, furniture shops, hotel lobbies and cruise ships around the world. A large number of sales are also made over the Internet, with a myriad of web sites offering 'cheap,' 'wholesale,' 'economical,' 'high-value,' and 'museum-quality' reproductions to individual buyers. For the most part, these paintings are copies of canonical western art, though copies of oil paintings by 'real' Chinese artists are becoming more frequent. Paintings are not the only source material. Photographs culled from magazines, newspapers and online news outlets of George W. Bush, Osama Ben Laden, Hu Jintao and now Barack Obama are rendered as oil portraits. Personal photographs of loved-ones, cars, houses or pets can be emailed to a painter

¹ de Duve, Thierry, and Rosalind Krauss. "Andy Warhol, or The Machine Perfected." October 48 (Spring 1989): 11



Gold Apple Art, *Untitled*, digital photograph, <http://www.goldappleart.com/Paintings.asp>

and turned into fine art in a matter of days. Many web sites even offer to replace the faces of famous paintings with custom requests - imagine turning Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* into Marilyn Monroe leading the political leaders of the west (with Michael Jordan thrown in for good measure). This pastiche painting exists - used as a sample on the web site of one 'Oil-Painting Factory' as they call themselves.

I decided to commission my own paintings as an idiosyncratic way of exploring the system by which they are produced, distributed, consumed and classified. At the time, I was working on some computer-generated imagery based on found words, billboards and gas-structures on the American highway system. I sent emails and images to some 'oil-painting factories,' asking for prices and information. Emails shot back, with prices quoted, assurances of quality, and time frames. I chose the three cheapest quotes. 10 days later I had three painted copies of my image. The three copies were intriguing - technically well executed, flat, bright, schlock. I decided to explore the 'Chinese Oil-Painting Industry' a little further. First, I tracked down where my three paintings had come from in China. It turns out all three images came from the same place, the Wushipu Oil-Painting village.

Wushipu and Dafen Villages, Oil-Paint Capitals of the World

The Wushipu Oil Painting village (a village-within a city, it is really more of a neighborhood) was founded in the city of Xiamen, China in the mid 1990s. It is a collection of factories and studios, where 3000 to 5000 artisans busily paint canvases that are shipped by the container-load all across the world. Interestingly, the village itself is a copy of its more famous counterpart, the Dafen painting village in Shenzhen. According to one manufacturer's web site, "Xiamen Wushipu oil painting village has been named as "the second batch of national cultural (art) industry base" by the China artist association and the culture property department of Culture Ministry."¹ The 'Oil-Painting Industry' as it is called officially to distinguish it from traditional Chinese painting, has been put forth as a model for China's industrial successes. Manufacturing paintings for a predominantly European and American market has provided an influx of jobs and opportunities, and created an industry from scratch. Dafen, the 'original' oil-painting village, even has its own foundation myth. According to a news article, "Dafen has humble roots. It was a sleepy village of 300 people, mostly farmers, when China-born, Hong Kong businessman Huang Jiang arrived with 26 artists in 1989, seeking a cheap base from which to complete orders placed by Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and Kmart Corp. for more than 10,000 oil paintings."² In official accounts, written on plaques in the village, Huang Jiang is referred to as a painter rather than a businessman.³

This creation myth, as well as some of the ways in which the web sites describe 'oil-painting factories,' with large 'expert management teams' has the potential to raise eyebrows on an American audience accustomed to a particular art-historical discourse. The idea of art existing and operating in a mass-market, produced in a context where "talented management" is seen as a key for improvement, and success

1 Brown, Bill. "Xiamen Wushipu oil painting village." Commercial Tourism Web Site. Xiamen Guide <http://www.xiamenguide.com/viewArchives.jsp?r=12&id=41&cid=122>.

2 News, Bloomberg. "China's fake art market pinched." The Globe and Mail (Canada), September 25, 2008, sec. REPORT ON BUSINESS: INTERNATIONAL; BUSINESS TICKER: ART; Pg. B11.

3 Tinari, Philip. "Original copies." ArtForum, October 2007: 344-351

is rated by the amount of paintings produced monthly, is quite distinct from the western practice of unique art-objects and limited editions. The American art-world is a market typically based on rarefied rather than mass-produced items. It is easy to simply dismiss these paintings as second-rate objects. And yet, this industry of mass-produced hand made copies poses some key questions that are worth investigating in the context of contemporary art.

Systems of production like the ones in Wushipu and Dafen raise questions of creativity and originality, of repetition and copying, and of creating systems for producing visual art. How do these paintings relate to mass-production and individualized artistic production? Though the paintings operate in a globalized world, both China and America have particular cultural contexts. How are these contexts confronted or synthesized in the paintings? The oil paintings bring together the craft of painting, with the networks and information of the Internet. How do the paintings operate in each of these contexts, and especially as a bridge between them? Finally, how do the paintings play out issues of anonymity and authorship in cultural production? Underlying each question is the tension between copies and originals, and the large spectrum of possibilities between the two.

The particulars of this art reproduction industry offer up some interesting new takes on the copy. In particular, the commissioned Chinese paintings serve as elements in an idiosyncratic inventory that explores contemporary art production. Ultimately though, these paintings present an interesting twist on the effects of digital reproduction and mass-production, an upside down echo of the 'Work Of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in which Benjamin laid out the effects of photography and film on the arts, without ever imagining painting itself as the output of a mass-production industry.⁴ In these paintings, mechanical reproduction gives way to the strange alliance of digital and manual reproduction.

Philip Tinari, a writer for ArtForum, points out that within Dafen itself, a range of types of copies exists: "The shibboleth of rote, mindless copying is similarly challenged by an indigenous value chain that prizes "original creation" above all:

⁴ Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1969, 217

Adapted works “in the style of” a known master command better prices than straight replicas, and at the high end, Dafen paintings are sold, like other artworks, under the name of the person who made them.”⁵ Another form of copy that constitutes a large part of the market has been the development of ‘custom’ paintings. Customers can email photographs of pets, loved-ones, their home, or anything else, to be painted and framed for their living room wall. Many painters in these villages excel at painting from photographs - and many of the ‘copies’ of traditional masterpieces are based on photographs as well. This type of copy involves a translation in scale and medium that undermines the human-as-copy-machine interpretation of Dafen or Wushipu.

Furthermore, each painting is unique. That is one of the ‘selling’ points for the Oil-Painting industry. “Hand Painted” is always highlighted in bold on the web sites, and is the key to what makes these paintings attractive. The hand-made copy, as opposed to the mechanical or digital reproduction, has a large degree of variability to it. The painters may be making copies, but each one will be unique, distinguishable from the previous. Each will have its own character, tied to the hand of the painter. The canvas used may be different, variations will occur in the application of paint, the thickness of the paint, the particular shades of color, all the attributes that give painting its particular character, and make it different from a printed photograph to which a Photoshop paint filter has been applied. In the context of American consumer culture, there is a fetishization of the hand-made. Hand-made items carry an aura, much in the sense that Walter Benjamin discusses it. The aura has a certain value, associated with a particular form of authorship. Someone created these paintings, even if they are copies. The paintings then, even though they are copies, perform much like paintings in an American cultural context. They seem to exist as art objects.

However, in ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde; A Postmodern Repetition’, Rosalind Krauss describes how Monet, perceived as the master of spontaneous painting, carefully and laboriously crafted the look of spontaneity in his paintings:

⁵ See note 3 above.

Pochade is the technical term for a rapidly made sketch, a shorthand notation. As such, it is codifiable, recognizable. So it was both the rapidity of the pochade and its abbreviated language that a critic like Chesnaud saw in Monet's work and referred to by the way it was produced: "the chaos of palette scrapings," he called it." But as recent studies of Monet's impressionism have made explicit, the sketchlike mark, which functioned as the sign of spontaneity, had to be prepared for through the utmost calculation, and in this sense spontaneity was the most fakable of signifieds.⁶

The hand-made Chinese Oil-paintings function in a very similar manner. They use the hand-made to signify uniqueness, and to signify art. While Monet carefully crafted the look of spontaneity, the Chinese Oil-Painting industry carefully crafts the look of art in its means of production. It is not so much that these paintings are fakes - after all, they are not just made to look hand painted, they are hand painted. Rather the industry co-opts the signs of the unique into strategies of mass-production. The success of the industry is counted in numbers, in value, and in market percentages.

Reading the paintings as art objects is clearly problematic then. Another reason for their indeterminate status as art objects or rote copies also has to do with the anonymity of how they are generally produced. At the simplest, most streamlined level, the custom paintings are produced by someone inputting a photo into an electronic box, the computer, and getting a painting in the mail a few weeks later. Even the monetary transactions are completely impersonal, occurring over Paypal. Payments are made to Andy875464@gmail.com for example, a fictitious alias, even down to the western name. Large orders of copied paintings sold to galleries, hotel chains or cruise ships are also essentially produced by anonymous painters. This is in sharp contrast to the 'real art world' in which the identity and authorship of the artist are an integral part of most any artwork. After all, one stark difference between art and corporate modes of producing media is the authorial voice - whether that voice is used to express a distinctive opinion, to keep a critical distance, or to brand artwork.

Are these paintings considered art in the various contexts in which they are produced and consumed? According to Philip Tinari again, many of the painters

⁶ Krauss, Rosalind. "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition." October 18 (Autumn 1981): 63.

distinguish between these kinds of paintings, which they see as a form of livelihood, and art. Many of these painters make their own art, or aspire to in the future. They liken their activity more to production fulfilling a market demand.⁷ As for the consumers, Kmart and Wal-Mart are part of the foundation myth of Dafen. These two institutions want to project the image of having art, without wanting to pay for it. The same is true of cruise lines and hotel chains, other big customers for the paintings. They want paintings that look like art, and they want them for cheap. Mass-production here is not a critical or self-critical technique of an artist, but is used for greater commercial profit.

In 1982, Allan McCollum began a series of photographs called 'Perpetual Photographs'. He photographed his television whenever he saw framed 'art' on the wall within the scene. He then cropped the image and blew it up photographically, so that it was a large photograph of the 'art' object. The images become fine art - grainy, blurry and amorphous black and white shapes. The material transformations that the copies go through are used as a formal generative device for producing original imagery. The 'original' fake art is created, hung on a wall, filmed, broadcast, displayed on a television, photographed and printed. All these remediations affect the final outcome of the image.

In these blurry grainy images he turns a television prop - a signifier for art, into art. The Chinese paintings are also props. They stand in for art. They connote art, but they are not art. They serve to signify art in specific contexts - lobbies, cruise ships, living rooms. In these contexts, the paintings help to create a set, a facade. They connote taste, luxury, wealth, and a whole series of things associated with art. They are part of a 'scripting' of spaces. They help spaces to be read a certain way. The fact that they are produced by hand, in a manner very similar to art, makes them all the more convincing. McCollum focused his copy loop on modern broadcast media - the television and photography. Over twenty years later, a copy loop can be created in painting, in an almost regressive way. The Chinese oil-painting industry has conquered the media of the past.

⁷ See note 3 above.



Allan McCollum, *Perpetual Photo, I.D. No. LPP 243b*, 1982/90, 2004, sepia-toned silver gelatin print, 45 x 51 x 3 inches, Freidrich Petzel Gallery, http://www.petzel.com/exhibitions/2004-09-01_allan-mccollum/

The paintings are rather unique then. Their hand-made quality and mode of production assure that the paintings have all the signs of 'real-art' at affordable mass-consumption prices. The paintings themselves are not just copies of specific works of art, but the entire industry serves a simulation for 'real-art.' Are these paintings 'the real thing'? Are they closer to the original because of the way they were produced? It's been almost thirty years since Eco coined the term hyper-reality, Baudrillard explained Simulation, and a generation of post-modern writers explored the real and the fake, the hyper-real, the recombinant, and mass-consumption copy culture. It is a fitting, logical conclusion to this post-modern era that a majority of the world's paintings today -mass-produced in China and shipped across the world- are simulations, paintings of painting, copies meant to signify art. Painting, one of the last refuges of the 'hand,' has been subsumed by the logic of capitalism. Painting itself, not just copies of paintings, has been 'Disnefied' for mass-consumption. Network technologies have enabled the Chinese oil painting industry to do more than merely copy models. Because consumers can email pictures, custom paintings can be made almost as easily as reproductions of existing paintings. Photographs of paintings, of sculpture, of people, of animals and media celebrities and political figures are blended together in elaborate custom fakes. Styles are blended, periods recombined, and genres of painting treated equally. In other words, the majority of contemporary oil paintings are remixed, mass-produced copies. Placing them in an art context highlights both the potential art and 'non-art' aspects that make these paintings interesting. The paintings function both as representational shorthand for art, and as art exploring the mechanisms of a copy industry. This sort of ambivalence loop is one of the key attractions of my projects with the paintings.

Commissioned Painting series