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Foreigner

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Foreigner

Cancan Huang

Thesis submitted to the College of Creative Arts
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Painting

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Abstract

Foreigner

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This written thesis serves as supporting documentation for *Foreigner*, my MFA Thesis Exhibition. This exhibition reflects my experience as a foreigner, a solitary Chinese man living in the United States. Through embodying my personal experience, my paintings question the relationship between individuals and society.

The exhibition is composed of a series of paintings that visualize my personal story as a foreigner living in an incompatible and unacquainted culture. By displaying imagery of myself and my family in frozen moments, the paintings draw viewers into a discussion about personal identity, life philosophy, and culture collision. The exhibition and this thesis expand on topics concerning creative processes, personal motivations, inspirations, and painting techniques.

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I would like to express my deep and sincere gratitude to my professors and committee members for their invaluable guidance and encouragement during the three years of my M.F.A degree study. I offer my sincere appreciation for the challenges and opportunities provided by them. I would also like to thank my fellow graduate students. It was a great privilege and honor to work and study with them. I would like to thank my parents for their continued support, both financially and mentally. Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to my loving, caring, and supporting wife: I cannot imagine that I could have finished my M.F.A. program without her selfless company and taking care of the whole family.

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Introduction

When I was a kid growing up in China, my parents were busy with their work schedules, so I often stayed at home alone. Gradually, I would get used to being alone, the fear and anxiety were replaced by relaxation and comfort. In the book *Über die Einsamkeit*, Johann Georg Zimmermann (1785-1786) stated that loneliness can be either a positive or negative experience. He states that, “the positive type of loneliness is related to situations such as the voluntary withdrawal from the daily hassles of life ...”¹ I strongly believe my feelings about loneliness relate to this categorization. This kind of loneliness became part of my everyday experience that continuously impacts the way I live and create art.

The meaning of loneliness is not immutable, and as my life continues on, my own relationship with loneliness has evolved into a major influence of my work.

Foreigner, my Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition, reflects my experience as a foreigner, a solitary Chinese man living in the United States. Twelve paintings from four bodies of work are arranged in the exhibition. Each series represents a different moment of my time here concerning personal identity and the meaning of loneliness. The decision to limit one figure for each composition creates a picture plane that symbolizes a physical and psychological barrier that isolates the figure from all connections. In addition, these paintings reveal the changes and development I have

¹ J. de Jong Gierveld, T.G. van Tilburg & P.A. Dykstra. “Loneliness and social isolation.” In D. Perlman & A. Vangelisti (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of personal relationships* (pp. 485-500). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2006. 486

experienced as a student who comes from a different art education background.

Through embodying my personal narrative, I attempt to question the relationships between cultures, races, individuals, and societies.

Minority

The paintings *Dolma* (fig.1) and *Lamu* (fig.2) reveal my initial research into the embodiment of loneliness. At this time, I was deeply influenced by American painter Andrew Wyeth, one of the few Western artists who was introduced to China after Culture Revolution in the 1980s. His masterpiece *Christina's World* (fig.3) depicts a skinny lady lying in a brownish grass field with her back to the viewers, her torso barely supported by her bony arms, trying to move towards the farmhouse in the distance. The whole image presents a quiet and lifeless atmosphere. The singular figure is seen from behind, which gives the viewer the impression that her connection to our world has been blocked. The figure is consumed by the grasses in the pasture. The horizontal composition made her crawling appears helpless and painful, which conveys a strong sense of loneliness. This painting shocked me. I can feel the wind blowing on my face. I can smell the grass and soil. I can hear the sound made by the clothing and the grass. Behind a believable simulation of reality is an intense emotion stirred through Wyeth's color, composition, and brushstrokes. The Museum of Modern Art's description of the painting succinctly describes this tension, stating that "...the painting is more a psychological landscape than a portrait, a portrayal of a state of mind rather than a place."²

² The Museum of Modern Art, "Andrew Wyeth. *Christina's World*. 1948: MoMA," The Museum of Modern Art, accessed April 2, 2021, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78455>.

With the influence of Wyeth, I started looking at the Tibetan in China. The reclusive lifestyle of this group of people makes them become attractive to me as subjects for my paintings. When creating these paintings, *Lamu* and *Dolma*, I did not entirely follow Wyeth's naturalism narrative. While painting, I tended to integrate my imagination into the imagery. I took inspiration from German painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774 – 1840) who said that “the artist should paint not only what he sees before him, but also what he sees within him.”³ Friedrich is known for his allegorical, still landscapes that focus on the meditation of life and death. The scenes depicted in his paintings are not reflections from reality but staged to express certain morals. In the painting *Der Winter* (fig.4), Friedrich paints a monk staggering through the thick snow-covered ground. The figure is so small that he can almost be ignored. Next to the figure, Friedrich presents a giant, sloping, withered oak. A striking contrast is created between the human's weakness and the strength of the tree. Another contrast is presented through the strange light in the sky, shining against the uppermost part of the trunk. This light is like a symbol of heaven and hope in a dark and dismal setting.⁴

Inspired by Friedrich, I use photographs as the main source of references for my paintings. Using photography in this way gives me the opportunity to capture a fleeting moment, which is hard to catch when painting from life. As the contemporary German painter Gerhard Richter stated, “the photograph is the most perfect picture. It

³ Boörsch-Supan Helmut and Caspar David Friedrich, *Caspar David Friedrich* (New York: G. Braziller, 1974).7-8

⁴ Linda Siegel, "Synaesthesia and the Paintings of Caspar David Friedrich." *Art Journal*/33, no. 3 (1974): 196-204. Accessed March 19, 2021. doi:10.2307/775782. P200

does not change; it is absolute, and therefore autonomous, unconditional, devoid of style. Both in its ways of informing and in what it informs of, it is my source."⁵

However, rather than paint a direct translation of a photo, I choose to clip and combine several unrelated pictures to stage a semi-fictional narrative. In both *Lamu* and *Dolma*, I used photographs of minority women who were the passing villagers I met during a journey to Tibet. The appearance of this Tibetan woman, such as her braids, coat, and face, are referenced to symbolize a spiritual loneliness and trigger the viewer's imagination about Tibetan people. Imaginary backgrounds were created in both paintings: a cabin for *Dolma*, and a lighthouse for *Lamu*. There is not a clear path for the figures to reach those locations, which reinforces the helpless and isolated feelings in the paintings.

Creating these paintings helped to reveal my first awareness of the sense of incompatibility stemming from my alien state in this country. Certain aspects of life like giving an extra security deposit, taking an English Proficiency test, and possessing a transient driver's license, incessantly remind me that I am a foreigner. I suddenly realized that my perception of the meaning of isolation and loneliness had changed. I used to consider the terms as reflective of a certain aesthetic, or drama in my paintings. I enjoyed creating bleak, quiet, and lonely images. As my time in the United States progressed, I gradually realized that I am in a passive isolated situation, always feeling a sense of being out of place, different from my surroundings. By

⁵ Gerhard Richter, Dietmar Elger, and Hans Obrist, "Text: Writings, Interviews and Letters, 1961-2007," in *Text: Writings, Interviews and Letters, 1961-2007* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), p. 30.

drawing the figures onto a mismatched stage, I hope the viewer can begin to understand the isolated position of a foreigner.

Undressing

In my second year, I took advice from my committee and further investigated sources of reference and varied ways of combining and reconciling reference images. Moreover, the committee feedback made me rethink the notion of isolation and loneliness. To me, the words were no longer aesthetic ideas, but apropos adjectives that precisely describe my present situation. I felt a desire and urgency to record this distinct experience that has encapsulated seven years of my life: a period long enough to make a significant change on an individual. Therefore, I decided to abandon the minority theme and shifted my attention to myself and my wife. Again, photographs were used as references to create *The Setting Sun* (fig.5) and *Thunderstorm* (fig.6). Through this series, I attempted to explore cultural identity and interpersonal relationships from a foreigner's perspective. In these paintings, I captured the moment when a piece of clothing, such as a jacket or shirt, is either put on or taken off. Clothing is a tool used to help create one's identity and express it to others. In each painting, the clothing is added or stripped away, serves as a metaphor for my complicated feelings about my cultural identity and interpersonal relationships.

In addition to the staged compositions, I also started to explore the idea of ambiguity. Michael Borremans (b. 1963), a contemporary painter, who used ambiguity in his work influenced my approach to this series. In his large-scale 2006 painting *The Avoider* (fig.7), a young man is depicted, larger than life, wearing a pink T-shirt, white pants, and a scarf around his neck. Then, there is something bizarre in

this painting: the man is barefoot, the trousers are uneven, and the shoes are nowhere to be seen. His right hand is holding a cane made from a branch, but the shadow behind the cane does not match its actual shape. The lifelike image makes the audience believe there is a story about this man, but the double shadow challenges the viewer's understanding of it. This is a typical strategy of how Borremans creates an image, combining realism and believability with subtle hints of uncertainty. This sense of ambiguity inspired me to conceal the faces of the figures in my *Undressing* series and in later works as well. While I was personally experiencing the feelings of isolation and trying to navigate my identity as a foreigner, I began to realize that this is a collective experience that many other Chinese students may feel a similar way. In this series of works, I wanted to relate this contrast of the specific and shared experience by depicting my specific body, but painting figures that are faceless and blurred. By hiding the figures' faces under clothing, the identity of this person is unknown; the figure could be anyone.

While creating this series, my understanding of painting techniques began to evolve too. Previously, I only considered painting techniques as a tool of creation; however, after my first year, I realized that this was not as simple as I thought. Different techniques can refer to a particular artist or specific periods in art history. For example, Wyeth used tempera paint to control every detail of his paintings and create incredibly delicate scenes. In *Christina's World*, Wyeth painted every single piece of straw and small details on the house in the distance. In my painting *Thunderstorm*, I used oil paint mixed Liquin, a contemporary fast dry painting

medium. Using Liquin drastically shortens the dry time between each layer, which enhances the efficiency of the painter's work. This technique allowed me to build layers within my paintings much faster. More importantly, it lowered the viscosity of the sticky, thick oil paint so it became thinner and smoother. This feature lets me to draw long and smooth brush works and hatchings, like seen in *Thunderstorm* (fig.8), which is similar to what Wyeth did with tempera.

Solitary

After the *Undressing* series was complete, I felt that I was finally on the right track. I was continuing a journey of self-discovery by creating art and exploring new ideas about painting. I also kept researching on isolation and loneliness. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, Professors Theo G. van Tilburg and Pearl A. Dykstra published a chapter titled “Loneliness and Social Isolation”. In this chapter, the authors state that, “loneliness is a subjective and negative experience...” and that “Social isolation concerns the objective characteristics of a situation and refers to the absence of relationships with other people.” They continue: “Socially isolated persons are not necessarily lonely, and lonely persons are not necessarily socially isolated in an objective sense.”⁶ Their thoughts inspired me to further explore and define my experiences and feelings of loneliness and isolation.

In my *Solitary* series, I further explored the relationship between posture, props, and theme. My subjects changed from “undressing figures” to figures wearing virtual reality headsets performing indiscernible movements. The shift in props and posture was linked to my personal interest in the virtual world and video games that highlighted the barrier between what is real and virtual. In addition to the headset, I also focused on bringing attention to the identifying characteristics of the figure, such as mouth, hair style, and clothing, to help the viewer become aware that the character in each of the paintings was an actual person. Through this transformation of

⁶ Gierveld, Tilburg and Dykstra. “Loneliness,” 486

depicting my subjects, my paintings reflect my personality as a “foreigner” and question how we define solitude and isolation in the internet age.

Michaël Borremans once compared painting to photography, stating that, “a lot of contemporary painting looks like photography...” He claims, however, that his “...photographs look like paintings – the camera serves to make a painterly composition.”⁷ This notion of photography releases me from the infatuation of photographic manipulation and allows me to take staged pictures. In *Online #1* (fig.9), I carefully staged and crafted the image. I am wearing pajamas and am standing in front of the closet, arms outstretched as if I am hugging or dancing with an invisible person. The upper face is covered by a VR headset but peeking out just below the headset is an almost imperceptible smile. The entire room is illuminated in amber by the rising sun. This dramatic image is not captured accidentally, but from a staged scene. The bottom-up perspective suggests a spectator and the VR headset plays a role in creating the barrier that separates the painted figure and viewer in both the physical and psychological world. By creating this absurd sense, I am narrating my ambivalence to daily life as an addicted video gamer. On the one hand, I want to be alone and play games without any distraction, which is the positive type of loneliness to me. On the other hand, a lot of people associate gamers, or people who enjoy being alone in general, as antisocial and escapist, thus lending to a negative connotation. In addition, the experience of living abroad amplifies my passion to stay away from the physical world and look for comfort in the virtual Chinese community.

⁷ Martin Herbert “Michael Borremans,” *ArtReview*, Accessed April 2, 2021, <https://artreview.com/may-2015-feature-michael-borremans/>.

Pandemic

It is now commonplace to say the outbreak of COVID-19 drastically changed everything. As a society our understanding of lockdowns, masks, disinfects, and politics all changed during the pandemic. On top of this, the already shaky relationship between China and the U.S. has been getting even worse. As a Chinese student, my family and I are standing at an intersection of these different experiences and pressures. While it was not my plan to make work my related to the pandemic, I felt I had to make paintings that embodied these experiences.

In these new paintings, I focused on the face. At this point, I don't think I am able to speak for any group of people. I can only speak for myself since everyone is forced to stay at home. This forced isolation made me re-examine my relationship with loneliness and isolation once again which effected how I constructed the paintings.

When photographing my subject matter, I covered the face with translucent polyethylene film. The polyethylene film serves as a symbol of insulation and self-quarantine. In terms of painting, I used the film to create a blurry and abstract-like image that was inspired by Gerhard Richter. Richter became known for photorealistic, but blurry, paintings such as *Betty* (fig.10) and the cycle of *October 18, 1977* (fig.11). In these paintings, Richter wanted to "...blur things to make everything equally important, and equally unimportant."⁸ He blurred his subject matter to make the

⁸ Gerhard Richter, and Hans Ulrich Obrist. *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews, 1962-1993*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1995. 37.

paintings appear more technological, and to eliminate unnecessary information.

Although the function of the blur in my painting is not necessarily the same, I do find this technique helpful because the blur creates a psychological barrier between the viewer and the figure in the painting. I also found a series of relatively unknown paintings made by Richter between 1986-1987 that caught my attention. These paintings, named *Alps* (fig.12), are black and white representations of the magnificent Alps mountain range. Unlike many conventional paintings that usually focus on the imitation of nature and creating grand depth, Richter's painting is formed with a few limited values of black and white patches on a huge canvas. This more abstract and mosaic-like process places these paintings into the space between photorealistic and pure abstraction. This idea was very illuminating to me; it allowed me to break my conventional thinking about representational painting. In my *Pandemic* series, I pressed and stretched the plastic film across my face, and adjusted the direction of force to create drapes and geometric shapes that fractured the structure of the face, which weakens its recognizability. The use of a grisaille color palette further intensified the abstract attributes in these paintings by blending the plastic film with the skin. Additionally, the gray color naturally lends itself to feelings of loneliness. As Richter stated, gray is "...the ideal color for indifference, fence-sitting, keeping quiet, and despair."⁹

In addition to the use of film and a gray palette, I painted these works on smaller canvases to enforce a sense of isolation. The max cropping of the subject matter

⁹ *Gerhard Richter: Text. Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961-2007*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2009, p.92

further this effect. In my thesis exhibition, I arranged two of these paintings, *He* (fig.13) and *She* (fig.14) in the center of a large gallery wall, isolated and standing alone, yet together. The two paintings were flanked by larger paintings on the walls running perpendicular to them. The contrast of the smaller canvases next to the larger paintings created a dramatic tension that is reminiscent of the forced cramped space dynamics that many people are now experiencing.

Conclusion

My seven-year journey in the United States has been the most important time in my life, and I used my thesis show to mark the end of it. During this period, I have not only learned a deeper knowledge and respect for the history of painting, but I have also been given opportunities to have a deeper insight into the cultural differences between China and the U.S. My painting skills and knowledge of Western art theory and history was dramatically changed during my time at West Virginia University. Furthermore, teaching at WVU provided me with an invaluable chance to prepare for my future career as an art instructor. My thesis is a culmination of all of these life experiences and knowledge that I have gained while living in the U.S. as a foreigner. Through my four series of paintings, I embody my feelings of loneliness and isolation. By installing select paintings from each of these series in my thesis exhibition, I invite the viewers to walk into my memory, read my story, and witness my development as a student, artist, and foreigner.

Figures



Fig. 1. Cancan Huang, *Dolma*, Oil on Canvas, 2018, 30" x 40"



Fig. 2. Cancan Huang, *Lamu*, Oil on Canvas, 2018, 36" x 36"



Fig. 3. Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, Tempera on panel, 1948, 32" x 47"



Fig.4. Caspar David Friedrich, *Der Winter*, 1807 (burned in the 1931 exhibit in Munich's Glass Palace)



Fig. 5. Cancan Huang, *The Setting Sun*, Oil on Canvas, 2019, 24" x 30".



Fig.6 Cancan Huang, *Thunderstorm*, Oil on Canvas, 2019, 24" x 30".



Fig.7. Michael Borremans, *The Avoider*, oil on canvas, 2006, 141 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 71".



Fig. 8. Detail of *Thunderstorm*

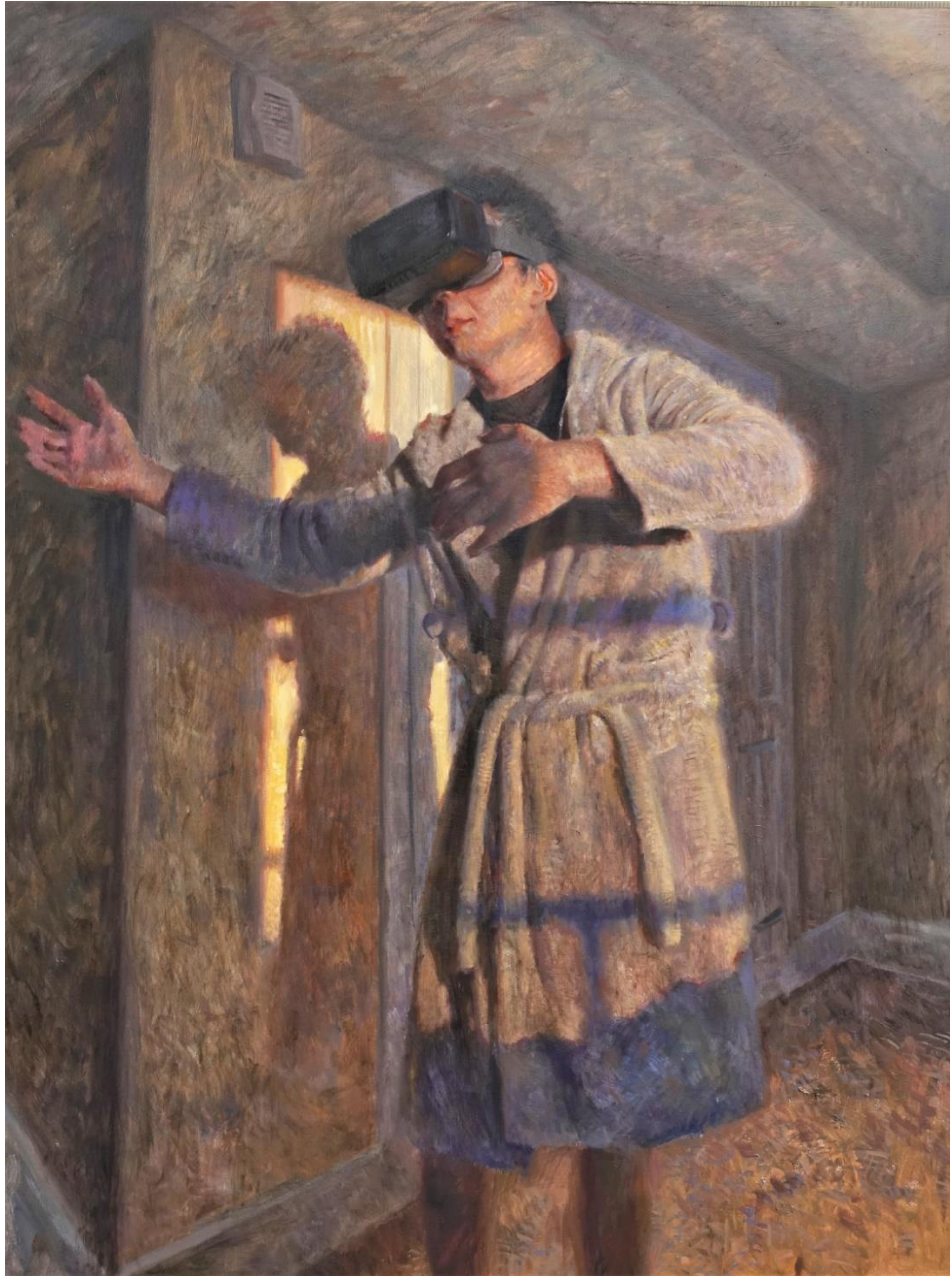


Fig. 9. Cancan Huang, *Online #1*, Oil on Canvas, 2020, 36" x 48".

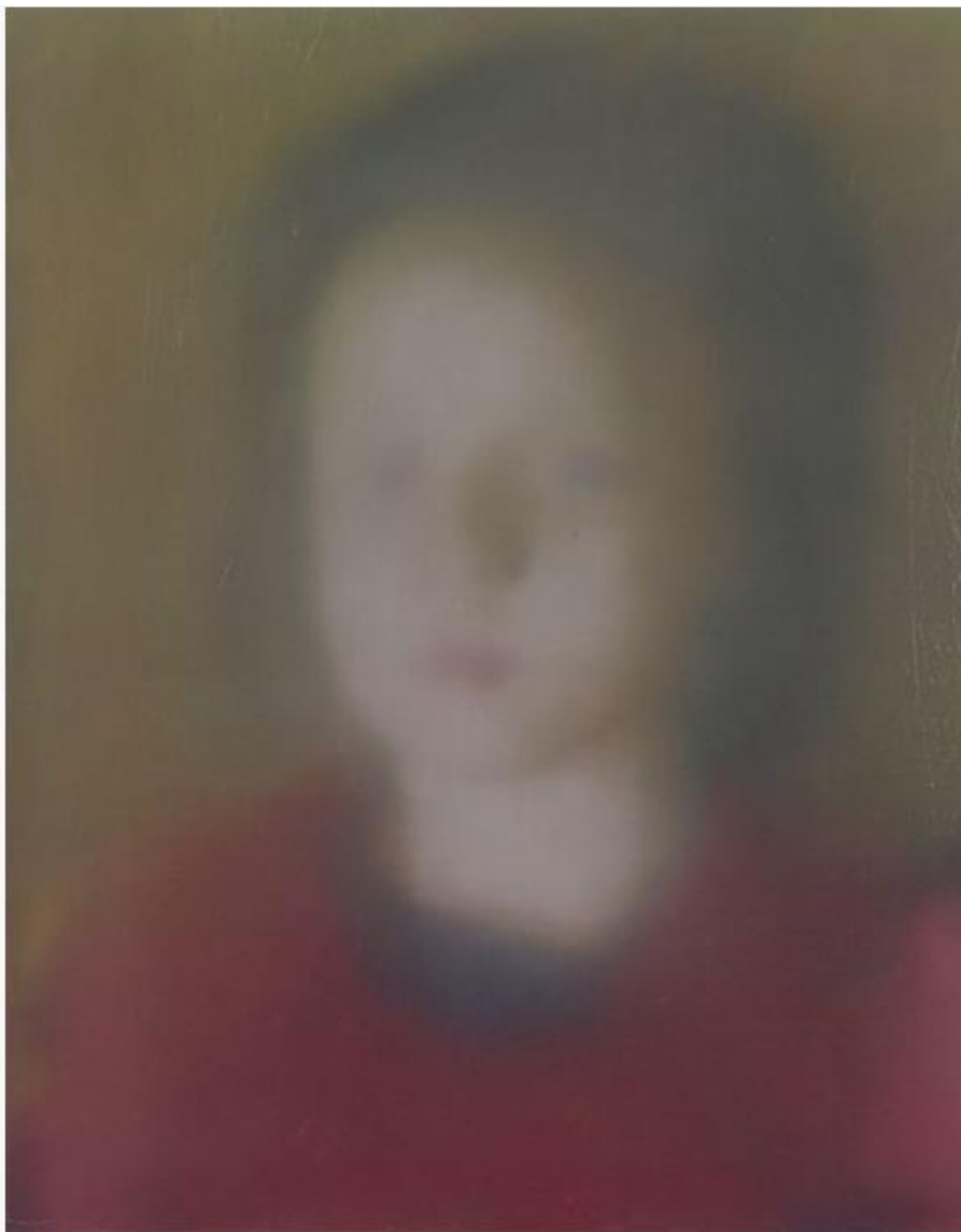


Fig.9. Gerhard Richter, *Betty*, Oil on canvas, 1977, 19 11/16" × 15 3/4".



Fig.10. Paintings from *October 18*

Left: Confrontation 2 (Gegenüberstellung 2). Richter Gerhard, Oil on canvas, 1988, 112 x 102 cm.

Right: Confrontation 3 (Gegenüberstellung 3). Richter Gerhard, Oil on canvas, 1988, 112 x 102 cm.



Fig. 11 Richter Gerhard, *Alps*, Oil on canvas, 1968, 5 parts, in total: 200 cm x 650 cm.



Fig. 12. Cancan Huang, *She*, Oil on Canvas, 2020, 20" x 16"



Fig. 13. Cancan Huang, *He*, Oil on Canvas, 2020, 20" x 16"

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