Two Conversations with Miao Xiaochun

Interviews by Wu Hung with Miao Xiaochun

Conversation One:

Record and translated by Wu Hung, Beijing, August 2, 2004

Wu Hung (hereafter **WH**): Let's start from your education and career. Yesterday you said that you first studied art history. That's interesting.

Miao Xiaochun (hereafter **MXC:**): Actually my college major was German. Although I had always loved to paint, I was turned down twice by the Nanjing Art Academy -- my paintings showed too much influence from modern Western art, and people in the academy decided that I was not the right student for them. But because my grades in humanities were good, I was able to pass the entry exam to enter the German Department at Nanjing University. I still couldn't forget art, however. So after graduating from college I applied for the Master's program in the Department of Art History of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and was admitted. In that program I focused on the history of modern Chinese art. But I continue to paint and eventually became a freelance painter after graduating from the Central Academy.

WH: Which years were you a freelance artist?

MXC: From 1989 to 1995. But toward the end of this period I decided that I should study art abroad. So I went to Germany.

WH: What kind of painting were you doing then? Are your later photographs related to these paintings?

MXC: The paintings were oil and semi-abstract. My photographs have a strong emphasis on composition, and I think that this comes from my training as a painter. Actually, I've always wanted to practice traditional painting but have never been able to fulfill this hope. Many of my photographs have elongated compositions similar to a horizontal handscroll or a vertical hanging scroll. Other features of traditional painting, such as a moving view point, also have a definite impact on my photographs.

WH: What did you study in Germany?

MXC: My training there included various art forms, not just painting but also sculpture, ceramics, and photography.

WH: Why did you choose to study in Kassel?

MXC: At that time a professor from Kunsthochschule Kassel had just established an exchange program with China. Through him I went to Kassel as an exchange student. I was attracted by Kassel as the location of the Documenta exhibitions, and thought that it would be a good place to learn new developments in contemporary art. After I got there I found Kassel a quiet, mid-sized town. It was easy to travel from there to other cities in Germany and Europe, to see museums in surrounding areas. In Kassel I developed an art project, which then became my first photographic series.

WH: Was it your graduation exhibition at Kunsthochschule Kassel?

MXC: Yes. It's a set of black and white photographs, which marked the beginning of a much larger project. After I returned to China I continued this project but in a new direction.

§

WH: Now we can move on to discuss your photographic works. For example, from your point

of view, how has your photography developed? From the very beginning you included a mannequin in your photographs -- a Chinese gentleman with your face but dressed in ancient clothes. Of course the meaning of this figure may have changed over the years. But what was your original impulse to create and photograph this figure?

MXC: At the time I was a Chinese living in Europe. I wanted to express some of the complex and deep feelings I had there in my photographs. Then the question became how I could achieve this goal. I couldn't simply photograph myself because my appearance---my clothes, etc.---had nothing special and couldn't really reveal my inner feelings. People who saw me might think I was Korean or Japanese, for example. Than I began to think what kind of "self-image" I should represent in my pictures. I hoped this image would make me feel proud---I wanted him to represent Chinese culture at its prime moment, such as the Tang or Song dynasty. To me, this image is about Chinese culture.

Of course, there have been contemporary artists who have photographed themselves in disguise. I didn't follow their example because I felt that it was important for me to have complete control over this "self-image" and the entire composition at the same time. There is a major difference between my work and a disguised self-portrait: while a disguised self-portrait focuses exclusively on the figurative image, my pictures exist even if you cover the figure. The mannequin is only one of many elements in the picture, not the whole. This feature is again related to ancient Chinese painting. Many old landscape paintings have tiny figures called "dianjing renwu" in them. Although these figures are very important to the composition, the whole painting still remains coherent and expresses the artist's intention when you cover them.

WH: So this figure represents both an individual and a cultural tradition, and he is part of a larger pictorial construct. This seems to have become very clear from your first series. But these works created in Germany also differ from your later photographs, as they often situate the figure within social occasions such as a classroom seminar or a family

gathering (As a Guest of a German Family). It seems that these pictures are about communication and focus on the figure's relationship with real human beings.

MXC: Cultural communication is indeed a dominant theme of these photographs from my German period, which have a strong narrative flavor. But later, especially in the works I created in China, this figure has become increasingly merged into the surrounding environment, becoming one of many elements in a picture.

WH: So if your earlier photographs are about your relationship with an alien culture, your later photographs are about your relationship with Chinese culture itself. But it seems that these later works shows a consistent "disharmony" between the figure and the environment. So my question is: If this figure represents Chinese culture, then what is the source of such continuous disharmony?

MXC: Actually, the relationship between this figure and contemporary China is even more "disharmonious" than in my German pictures---its appearance in a Chinese city seems even more abrupt and illogical. I think this is because China's changes in recent years have been extremely abrupt and sudden.

WH: Yes. In these pictures this figure looks blank and seems at a loss.

MXC: When I first made this figure I was attracted by the unchanging, mysterious look on his face. This is also why I didn't want to photograph myself: I would have had too many expressions responding to various situations.

WH: How did a German audience react to this figure? I'm thinking that although you created this image as a more authentic representation of Chinese cultural tradition, could it also be perceived as another stereotypical image of China? Does it only reflect your own notion of China? Can it also reflect an alien culture's conception of China?

MXC: In Germany I read many books about China. Most of them describe Chinese as Manchus of the last dynasty, with a queue and thin mustache. But to me, Chinese people should be represented by a different image from a glorious and brilliant period, such as Han or Tang times. But Westerners know little about these periods. They know more about those declining and chaotic periods such as the late Qing or the Cultural Revolution. This is regrettable. I didn't want to use these declining periods to represent China. I prefer to see and depict Chinese as shidafu -- people who are cultured and intellectual. I think that if I had been born a thousand or two thousand years ago, I would have probably been this kind of person, to whom learning is more important than anything else.

WH: This could be your conceptualization of this figure. But the pictures you made in Germany seem to tell something different: arriving at a train station or standing in a telephone booth, this figure seems lost and misplaced, while the people around him look real and active (Telephone Booth). One feels that he does not have a language; and thus he keeps silent while other people are talking. It seems that you want to glorify a great tradition, but this tradition doesn't have a place in the situations you represent.

MXC: Yes, we can say that this is a "state of losing language" (*shiyu zhuangtai*), which was related to my personal experience in Europe. In that environment it was very difficult for me to express my feelings and to communicate with other people. For example, if I were triggered by a situation to recite Tao Yuanming's famous lines---"Picking chrysanthemums beneath the eastern fence, I leisurely turn my eyes to the southern mountains, "few people would have understood what I was thinking and talking about. It is a "symptom of losing language" (*shiyu zheng*) because the context of language (*yujing*) has disappeared. You are right to say that it is a kind of displacement -- the context of Tao Yuanming's poetic expression has been displaced.

WH: I can understand this problem well because I have also spent a long time in the West. Discussions of your early work have often focused on the issue of the gaze. This is

certainly an interesting issue, because in my view, this figure actually doesn't have a gaze or a clearly directed vision. But language and communication are equally important to understanding these works. Now, if we move on to examine your later works, does this "losing language" problem still exist?

MXC: I think that it still persists---at least partly.

WH: In what way has the figure partly recovered his ability to communicate?

MXC: Perhaps I should first talk about the part in which the "losing language" problem continues. Let me use the photograph Ferry as an example. This picture represents a modern bridge over the Huangpu River. Now we can drive a car across the river over this bridge. What made an ancient poet write this line – "At an empty ferry in the wilderness, only a boat floats on the water" ("*Yedu wuren zhou ziheng*") clearly no longer exists. If someone now crosses the river on a small wooden boat, it can only be an art project.

WH: So here we return to the concept of *yujing* -- the context of an expression. Once this context has disappeared, although you can still cite one or two sentences from an ancient poem, their meaning is entirely different. But as you have said, this problem is partly cured in China. How is this so?

MXC: I think that in China, an ancient expression can still be somehow related to a current situation, although such connections are not straightforward and must be established by a kind of "indirect imagination." For example, my photograph Fly represents an aviary in a zoo. When I saw birds flying around in it in the evening light, I immediate thought of the poetic line "Flying birds return home in pairs"("*Feiniao xiangyu huan*"). In the photograph Lingering Under a Lone Pine, in the center a cement road leads to a modern high rise and a TV tower. Suddenly there is a lonely pine tree standing along the road. It made me recall the line "Lingering in a spot to caress a lonely pine" ("*Fu*

gusong er panhuan").

WH: Talking about this last picture, your mannequin is small and facing inward, away from the audience. It's unclear whether he's looking at the pine tree or the modern buildings. If he's facing the tree, then the situation seems closer to his original cultural context; but if he's looking at the buildings, then his relationship with the environment is disharmonious and ironical. These three images -- the figure, the buildings, and the pine tree -- form a triangular relationship which is . . . This type of relationship also seems to exist in other works you have created in China. For example, in Transmission, the figure faces a small river in a traditional city; the mood seems closer to his own time and space.

MXC: Yes. But then there are other images that disrupt this harmony. For example, a western-style church stands beyond an old wooden bridge, and a young woman is making a call with her cell phone. Other details in the picture, such as the kids running in a narrow lane, are also important to me. Perhaps they have just finished watching a TV program and were imitating the story -- running out of their house with toy guns in their hands.

WH: This leads us back to a point you made earlier, that the horizontal composition of these photographs is related to traditional handscroll painting. Like a handscroll, a photograph like Transmission has multiple focuses and vanishing points that correspond to different images? the ancient gentleman contemplating the little river, the modern woman making a phone call, the kids running out of the house. When did you first make such long pictures?

MXC: I developed this style after I mastered digital technology. I could then realize my artistic vision based on classical Chinese painting. A picture made from a conventional camera necessarily has a single vanishing point. My later photographs are entirely different because each of them pieces together several images to form a single composition. In

this way I can show aspects of an object that are absent in a conventional photograph. To me, it's not enough just to represent an object, such as the bridge in Transmission. Rather, it's important to show various aspects of this bridge in a single picture. This is actually based on the "multiple view point" perspective (*sandian toushi*) in traditional painting. Take a vertical photograph such as Capital for example. It's close to a traditional hanging scroll in which images are depicted according to the principle of "three distances" (*san yuan*) where you have a focus on high mountain peaks (*gao yuan*), the "middle distance" scenery (*zhong yuan*), and the flat, far-away vista (*ping yuan*). If you used a conventional camera to take this picture, the old woman in the foreground would inevitably be much larger, blocking the view behind her. The horizon would be in the middle of the composition. This goes against my intention to represent different views. So what I have done in this picture is elevate the background and lower the figure in the foreground. Their size and spatial relationship also change correspondingly. In an ancient Chinese painting, the images in the foreground, such as a figure or a pine tree, are often quite small. This is "incorrect" according to a linear perspective system, but correct in one's subjective perception: a person or a tree is always smaller than a mountain. I hope to emphasize this subjective perspective in my pictures.

WH: The tiled ground in this picture is very intriguing: the angle of perspective changes gradually and the ground seems to move.

MXC: This is because I used two different lenses to photograph the ground and pieced the pictures together seamlessly. Again, here I was inspired by traditional art.

WH: How many images were used to compose this photograph?

MXC: Many. Two images would only produce an awkward combination. Only many images can create a subtle transition.

WH: Yes. This is why the ground forces the viewer to shift his gaze. Very subtle and interesting.

MXC: It then occurred to me that there are two kinds of truth: the truth of the camera and the truth of the photographer. Now I hope that the camera will serve my inner vision. Zhang Zeduan's masterpiece Spring Festival Along the River must be "scientifically" wrong in many respects. But I prefer to believe that the Song dynasty was exactly the way he depicted it in this marvelous work. The painting is encyclopedic, representing a whole city. To me, it's more truthful than a picture that represents reality objectively.

WH: How about the photograph Opera (in the exhibition Between Past and Future)? Is it a single shot?

MXC: No. It also integrates many images. If I had only used a powerful telephoto lens to take the picture from a distance, the perspective would be different. The figures would show a greater difference in size and their expression would be impossible to make out.

WH: This kind of reconstructed photograph raises an interesting problem. Like Zhang Zeduan's scroll painting that synthesizes many details, your Opera, though combining many individual shots, seems still to represent a single moment. While other types of reconstruction in modern art often result in abstraction, your pictures are rich in detail and convey a strong feeling of spontaneity -- as we find in Opera, in which each person has a vivid expression on his or her face. When we realize that this picture actually synthesizes many individual shots, we start to wonder about the temporality of such a reconstruction.

MXC: I've discovered that I can use photography -- a modern visual technology and medium -- to represent ideals in traditional Chinese art. Although I'm not using traditional brush and paper, I can certainly employ traditional concepts and aesthetic principles. Traditional viewing focuses on details. When a viewer unrolls a scroll painting, he

examines it section by section, detail by detail, synthesizing fragmentary mental images into a continuous viewing experience.

Here I should also comment on a difference between photography and video art. Viewing a video is an ongoing experience in real time. Viewing a single photograph is essentially an instantaneous act. My hope is to integrate many moments into such instantaneous viewing. This has become increasingly clear in my latest works. For example, my work Stumble represents a young girl walking up a staircase and falling. I separate individual moments in this process and organize them into an overlapping sequence in a single frame.

WH: This picture seems to be related to Duchamp's Women on the Staircase.

MXC: Yes. I actually made this picture in reaction to Duchamp's work -- an oil painting created exactly 100 years ago. I tried to refashion it through photography. At the same time, this picture also deliberately interacts with Rodechinko's photographs, which frequently use diagonal compositions.

WH: It's interesting that you self-consciously relate your work to these historical works that have a strong emphasis on reconstructing visual elements. Are there other Western photographers who have had strong influence on you?

MXC: I very much like Jeff Wall and Andreas Gursky's works.

WH: Which aspects of their work do you value the most?

MXC: Jeff Wall impresses me with the depth and breadth of his social representations. Although he finds his subjects mainly in a limited area around Vancouver, his photographs capture the spirit of an entire historical era. Gursky's sensitivity in "seeing a composition" (*kan changmian*) is quite extraordinary. While a painter can demonstrate

his style through brush work and other means, it's difficult for a photographer to develop an individual style. In my view only great photographers can reach this level of artistry, and Gursky is one of them.

WH: Style cannot be separated from progress -- it implies continuous artistic experiments. Gursky's stylistic development is very convincing.

MXC: It also means developing an unique way to see the world. I feel that photography is more about "seeing"than "making."One only photographs what one sees.

§

WH: Now can we talk about Wuxi---your hometown and the subject of many of your photographs? How long did you actually live there?

MXC: I lived there until I went to college. Then I spent more than 10 years in Beijing and about 5 years in Germany. But whenever I return to Wuxi I gain a lot of inspiration. It's not just because I grew up there; the city is an interesting mixture of tradition and modernity. On the one hand, it's full of classical beauty; on the other hand it's a middle-sized industrial city known as Little Shanghai. So every time I go there I find many things I can photograph.

WH: Is your family originally from Wuxi? Are your parents still living there? Where did you live before you left the city?

MXC: My family is from Wuxi and my parents are still there. When I grew up we moved several times, but never left the area around the foot of Mt. Hui. So I'm very sensitive to changes in this area. I remember that when I was a little boy, I made my first "serious" painting from the top of that hill. I have just created a large photograph from that exact spot. You can see the pagoda on Mt. Hui in the photograph.

WH: How old were you when you made the painting?

MXC: About seven or eight. I was in elementary school.

WH: Was it a pencil drawing or a watercolor?

MXC: A watercolor. After almost 30 years I returned to the spot and took the photograph *Haishi shenlou*.

WH: Did you take an earlier version of this photograph in 2001?

MXC: I've actually made two photographs with this title. When I made the first one, *Phantasmagoria*, I still faced many technical difficulties. The concept of the photograph is clear, but compositionally it only shows a small section of the view from the hilltop. The recent version, Mirage, took a lot of work to finish. It combines many individual shots. I climbed the hill day after day, using two tripods to support a large-format camera with an enormous lens. The guard on the hill got to know me quite well. This work is very important to me because it's imbued with many of my memories of the city.

WH: The photograph's title, *Haishi shenlou*, has many meanings. Can you say something about your use of the phrase? Sometimes it means something transient and unreal.

MXC: It has less to do with this meaning, but more to do with the abrupt change in the place. It seems that all those modern buildings you see from the hilltop shouldn't be here, but they've suddenly emerged before your eyes, like a mirage in the ocean or desert. I use the phrase *haishi shenlou* to indicate the seemingly surreal feeling of such modern architecture in the East.

WH: A *haishi shenlou* or mirage is also attractive and alluring. Your photographs don't

criticize what they represent. Rather, they problematize reality.

MXC: There's a great deal of uncertainty in them. It's not easy to figure out where these buildings come from and what they are leading to. They also can't be judged easily. The uncertainty of the scene resides in their historical ambiguity.

WH: What is your next project? It seems that your recent photographs show a strong interest in the development of the city.

MXC: My next project will focus on the notion of temporality. I've basically completed the series with the statue of the ancient figure in it. This series is now finished because it has run a circle from East to West and then back East. Unless some great new ideas emerge, I will probably not use the figure again. My newest works focus instead on the momentary nature of contemporary events.

WH: You recently made a photograph called Celebration, which represents the inauguration ceremony of a large real estate project in Beijing. Does it belong to this new series?

MXC: Yes.

WH: Then why does the ancient figure disappear from this picture? It seems that the subject of this photography is still changes in a Chinese city.

MXC: In fact, many people have tried to find the figure in this photograph. But this picture is different. Instead of showing the mannequin, it represents real people reappearing multiple times here and there -- the idea is that these people were moving around during the event. It's usually considered a taboo to repeat the same figure in a photograph. How can a person appear twice or three times in the same picture? But this is exactly what I hope to represent. For example, there is a journalist who photographed the inauguration from different spots; and an organizer of the ceremony was at one time

on the stage and at other times below the stage. When I have combined these moments in the photograph, it's as though this organizer is watching himself directing the program on the stage. This photograph thus conveys a different sense of reality because it represents the whole process of the event. I no longer need the ancient figure because the connection between the photograph and traditional culture is now found in the style of the photograph. In an ancient painting, such as those depicting Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring* or his *Home-coming*, a figure often appears multiple times in representing a sequence of events. This is a particular pictorial language or style, which I have absorbed into my photographs.

WH: This leads us to reexamine your photograph Opera. We have discussed that it also integrates many individual shots taken at different moments. But the result still conveys a strong sense of a simultaneous happening. Your new works seem to have a different goal. Instead of integrating multiple images into a single moment, they preserve the sequential nature of the separate shots. Do you see this development in your art?

MXC: Yes. That's correct.

WH: Then I agree that the ancient figure would be superfluous in these new works.

MXC: As I said earlier, even in my older works this figure is one of many elements, not the only subject or even the dominant subject. Its main role is to lead the viewer to imagine something behind the immediate physical surroundings. This figure disappears from my art when the representation of the environment begins to tell its own story.

--- Wu Hung, *Phantasmagoria: Recent Photographs by Miao Xiaochun,* Walsh Gallery, Chicago, 2004

Conversation Two: Re-imagining H_2O in Art

Record at Renji Shanzhuang, Beijing, on September 6, 2007

Translated by Wu Hung and Peggy Wang

Wu Hung (hereafter WH): We mentioned last time in our discussion that starting from your works *Mirage* and *Celebration*, etc., you had basically parted from the sculptural figure that appears in your previous photographs. Today, let's begin our conversation from there and focus on your two most recent projects: *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* and *H_2O- A Study of Art History*. Perhaps we can center more on the latter work, because we've already done an exhibition together on *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace*, and I've written an essay about it. This time, let's concentrate primarily on *H_2O*.

Miao Xiaochun (hereafter MXC): All right. These two works really represent a turning point in my art. Before I started these two projects, when I was working with conventional photography, I was shooting three-dimensional scenes in reality. And I was thinking about how to find the most appropriate angle from which to photograph a real situation and transform it into a flat, two-dimensional thing. One day, while looking at two-dimensional paintings in art history, a thought suddenly occurred to me: What would it be like if we changed it anew into a three-dimensional scene? I thought that if I could restore it, it would lead to very interesting results. So, I selected Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*. I first transformed it into a three-dimensional scene in the computer and then attempted to "view" it from different angles while also "photographing" these views. The process is the complete opposite from conventional photography.

Additionally, three-dimensional scenes in reality are constantly changing and moving, but photography can only show a static moment. As Michelangelo's Last Judgment was originally motionless, my goal was to make it three-dimensional

and then imbue it with movement. Thus I also made a three-dimensional computer animation to company the digital photographs, thereby realizing the reversal from immobility to mobility.

After completing *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace*, a lot of people asked me, "How could you make something so completely different from your earlier work?" Although on the surface, this work appears unlike my previous work—two different mediums, two different ways of making things—I think that the two are actually still very much related. If in photography I had never taken a three-dimensional thing and made it two-dimensional, then maybe I would never have made something two-dimensional three-dimensional, and have the idea to photograph it.

WH: As I see it, these two stages—and I think I understand these works relatively well—have a very strong relationship. Although on the surface, they seem to have nothing to do with one another, in reality they are quite related, especially with regard to the question of "looking." Your photographic works already emphasized shifting viewpoints, with implications of movement and temporal concepts visualized on one plane. I remember in our last discussion, we brought up the relationship between your photographs and Chinese scroll painting, and the question of movement, etc. In these new works "movement" persists, but its appearance is different.

There's a question that we can talk about more in depth, which is the very interesting shift from two to three dimensions. But, the three-dimensionality that you have produced is not actually a concrete three-dimensional objecthood, right? You created a three-dimensional model on the computer, but the work that emerges from this computer model is still a two-dimensional image. That is to say, the photographs made with this method are still two-dimensional, although they are clearly distinct from conventional photography. Exactly what notion of three-dimensionality are you referring to in this shift from "two-dimensional to

three-dimensional"? ---Certainly, it's different from a sculptor's concept of three-dimensionality.

MXC: To be sure, a sculpture's three-dimensionality is a truly existing one, whereas one shown on a computer is virtual. When you turn the computer off it's gone, you can neither see nor touch it. Even if we use a projector to project it into a space, it's still not the same as a traditional sculpture.

Three-dimensionality as it exists in reality seems limitless, infinite in time and space. Three-dimensionality in a computer, however, is limited and reached only based on a computer's operational capacities. Of course, following technological advancements, this space has become bigger and bigger, but it's still differentiated from reality. It's also temporally distinct, as it can't be endless, and instead must have a specific duration. Thus, in the titles of all of these works, I have added the word "virtual" (the literal translation for *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* is *The Virtual Last Judgment*).

WH: If we consider it like this, then we can go back and rethink the so-called two-dimensional works. For example, we all learned in Western art history that there was the development of a very strong sense of purpose towards subjugating two-dimensional space by integrating the third dimension into the depiction of space in a painting. Thus, taking a flat material medium—a canvas or a wall—and "conquering" it by transforming it into a fictitious three-dimensional "pictorial space." To contemporary viewers, the result was a fantastical space. So, from this historical viewpoint, perhaps what Michelangelo was doing at the time is a little bit like what you are doing. To his contemporaries, perhaps the *Last Judgment* was a virtual space. But, in the twenty-first century, we regard it as a "fresco." Your work pushes this pursuit of "virtual space" into today, guiding it into contemporary art. Just like Michelangelo, however, your work also has its historical limitations. We see Michelangelo's work as a painting, but at that time, people described it as if

seeing the real last judgment, the real Jesus Christ, etc…what they saw was also a virtual three-dimensionality.

MXC: Along these lines, five hundred years from now, when people see our present work it will be just like how present people see Michelangelo's painting. Perhaps they will also think of this as a kind of "flattening."

I think, in every period, people endeavor to attain the very highest plane that their technological conditions allow. We are currently constrained to many technological elements, and can only reach a certain degree. For example, photography and video actually have a lot of shortcomings. Although they are more authentic instruments for documentation, they are still far from perfect. There are still limits to recording the real in a comprehensive way. Perhaps in the future, the technology will be available for documenting an entire scene, even the temperature and smells, etc. so that we can record and restore all of it. At that point, we will look back and consider today's technology to be very primitive.

WH: In the future, the greatest breakthrough might be the breakthrough of the scope of the "visual." From ancient times to the present, art has revolved around the visual. It is still this way. You just mentioned some other sensations like touch and smell. If they can enter into artistic expression, then that would truly transform a fundamental concept. In real life, hearing, smelling, seeing, etc…they are all sensed and aren't separated. But in traditional art, the visual along serves as the foundational basis. Now, some artists are beginning to pursue senses outside of the visual.

You just explained how *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* was a restoration of two-dimensionality into three-dimensions. But, with regard to the *H20* works, it seems that this shift is not the primary objective of these pieces. Is this right? Because the experience of a virtual three-dimensionality seems to have been

achieved in *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace*, is the *H20* series now absorbed in a new purpose?

MXC: Technologically, it is a natural continuation of the earlier works, as it also takes flat art historical paintings and makes them three-dimensional. It then views them from two angles: their similarities and differences with the original. This second angle is important because it is an entirely new perspective of looking; the consideration of differences from the original is a view absent from art history.

The content then attempts to offer a reply to the question posed by the previous work. The question raised by the last work was “Where will I go?” This is related to the question of where life comes from, and where it is going. But in reality, this is very difficult to answer. Even the wisest philosophers have difficulty in providing an ultimate answer. I wanted to use art to indirectly address and respond to this question, so I made the *H2O* series.

WH: The continuation of technique is very clear. In terms of content, the previous work raised the question “Where does life come from? Where is it going?” You said that your answer is related to water, why is this?

MXC: Although we live in modern times, our current scientific knowledge still cannot answer the question “Where does life come from? Where is it going?” It is also hard to locate an answer in religion. Because some theories and doctrines have been shown to be incorrect in some areas, it is difficult for modern people to place a firm belief in them. Because of this, it is now very difficult to be a Christian or a Buddhist, and there is no theory or doctrine that can guide us completely. In the end, I could only use the simplest things, things that appear to have no problems, to find answers for myself. For example, “water”: the water that I drink today has flowed through millions of years, through countless living beings, cycling through everything, and after it leaves me, it will continue to stream through millions of

years, into countless living forms, sinking into the earth, going into the sky, and moving back and forth. But, H2O, this element itself doesn't change. It has flowed through primitive cells, dinosaurs, Confucius, cows, Louis XV, apples, Newton, potatoes, Beethoven, etc…innumerable animals, plants, and people are connected through this element. I think that this by itself is significant; I am somehow connected to many lives. I can't answer this question "Where does life come from? Where is it going?" but its relationship with water is evident. I wanted to use this kind of thing to create some works!

WH: In the treatment of water as a ceaselessly circulating element that manifests the continuity of life and connectivity in all living things, the content in this series of works possesses a philosophical layer. But, what is interesting is your choice to approach water from the angle of art history, rather than representing it as it appears in the real world. In this way, you again create another kind of continuity, which is the continuity of art—the "water" in your series only exists in art. So, there are two parallel levels of continuity: the circulation of water in the actual, physical world, and the circulation of images of water in art history. Is that right?

MXC: This is correct. Both kinds of continuity do exist. The continuity of artwork from different eras and in different regions is an interesting and important question. Sometimes, it is direct, while at other times it isn't; it can be indirect to the point of not leaving behind any traces. We really don't know how that first brush stroke ended up on a grotto wall, and we don't know how when the second person faced this first painted image, how he produced the second image. Was it by copying? Or, was it a competition to make something better? Or, was it via another path? After so many works of art, images, and concepts have "flowed into" my brain, I cannot help but link together ancient and modern, Eastern and Western pieces. What I produce is absolutely a continuation of earlier art; while it takes a small step forward to expand new possibilities. When we choose exchanges with past generations, we reveal our individual way of looking at things. We reveal our own

taste and disposition to the degree that continuity itself can create a new beginning.

WH: The function of representations of "water" in art is a very interesting question, and one that is emphasized in your readings of the ancient masterpieces. In fact, I think that art historians can learn quite a lot from your series. For example, in Giotto's fresco of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, most art historians have focused on the narrative and characters, but you bring people's attention to the basin used for washing the feet. This is certainly very important.

MXC: On the one hand, I see some things that people wouldn't normally notice. On the other hand, I also intentionally avoided works that most people would see as being obviously related to water, for example images of baptism. If a tableau doesn't trigger my personal feelings, then I abandon it. I wanted to use a completely personal way of viewing these works. The principle guiding my selection of artwork was based on those that "gave me a particular thought and feeling." Moreover, this "researching" did not have to result in the attainment of some verdict of art historical meaning. It was just a means to expressing some of my own realizations.

The original paintings that I selected can be roughly divided into three categories. In the first category, the works have a very particular relationship with water, for example *The Deluge* and *Fountain of Youth*; as soon as you see it, you know it's related to water. The second category of works doesn't share such a relationship. Instead, the works have an indirect link to water, for example *The Martyrdom*. These need to be transformed in some way to make that connection clear. The last category of works seems to have no connection at all with water, but I selected them anyhow and forged a relationship with water. As such, I had to ask myself: Why did I select these works to enter into the series? Viewers will also ask: Why have these been selected? When I answer this question (sometimes, even

giving a strained interpretation), I am making my own viewpoint known. An example of a work in the last category is *Carrying the Cross*, which appears to be completely unrelated to water.

WH: This is Peter Bruegel's *Kreuztragung* from 1564.

MXC: This painting depicts Jesus bearing a cross on his back, going to his execution. This motif was very moving to common people in later generations, for here Jesus is not regarded as a deity, but as a normal person going to be crucified. A deity would have possessed boundless supernatural powers, and wouldn't sustain any injuries. Viewing this scene would suddenly make people conscious of the fact that Jesus was originally like us, a person of flesh and blood, a person capable of dying. He too is frail, and endures extreme harm. He sacrifices himself for all (of course, he is also resurrected), and it is this point that emotionally moves and captures so many people.

I took all the weeping people in the foreground, including the Virgin Mary and the apostles, and made them all like crystallized water, as a metaphor for their "crying until they become weeping figures." The other people there, like the soldiers who are to execute the sentence and the indifferent spectators, all wear clothes. In the center, only Jesus has a completely transparent body. Life is transparent and frail like this. It's easy to be attacked and die. People only have a very thin layer of skin binding their flesh together, and their body is 70% water. When people are at their weakest, fluids flow out of these bodies: tears when we are sad, blood when we are injured, sweat when we are exhausted.

WH: You have taken bodies of flesh and blood and made them transparent, like crystallized water. This makes me think of in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, when Jia Baoyu says: "Men are made from the earth, women are made from water." In your reworking of Bruegel's painting, some of the people seem to be made from

the earth, while others are made from water. This latter type is different from other living things in the painting. The Virgin and her companions are situated in the foreground, and their forms are particularly large, proportionally distinct from those in the midground. We can regard them as a kind of narrative "frame," and take the entire painting as a "framed tale."

MXC: Yes. In my work, the soldiers in the middle who have been sent as escorts and the indifferent bystanders at the side are all wearing clothes. The original painting is itself extremely interesting, it's vast and some of the figures seem to have nothing to do with Jesus's execution, some even appear to be laughing and joking. Bruegel's painting is very profound; it touches on many different aspects of human nature. When I saw the original work, it generated many thoughts and feelings.

WH: The meaning of water continually changes in this series. Sometimes it points to the materiality of water, but your use of "H2O" in the series' title seems to place an emphasis on its meaning as an essential element, not as a tangible substance. Jesus, Mary's sorrow, frailty…it seems that the meaning of water in this work changes again. Although they are all related to water, there is not a straightforward classification that can be completely expressed.

MXC: Right, so I call the series H2O. Its meaning as an element is more abstract and more pure. Once H2O is contaminated with foreign matters, it turns into something else: when carbonic acid is added, it becomes Coca Cola; when a little bit of protein is added it becomes blood; when salt is added and flows out of us, it is perspiration. In ancient times, water carried a lot of impurities, not like the kind we drink today. But as an element, H2O remains the same.

WH: The meaning of water in your *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* (based on the work of Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo, 1475) seems close to that in *Carrying the Cross*. Is that right?

MXC: Right. In the original work, St. Sebastian's body is shot full of arrows, like a hedgehog. In my work, I imagined that the arrows that once pierced his body have flied away, and the wounds are now spilling out bodily fluids. The details at the side emphasize this point: I placed a glass vase toppled over with liquid leaking out of it to imply that the body is also like a vessel, and when the bodily fluids have all poured out, then life disappears. In my variant of this photograph, a "second view," a suit of armor lies on the ground, implying that although man has made solid things to protect his fragile body, it can't save life.

WH: Then what about Michelangelo's *Genesis*? Adam seems to be in a transparent water molecule, lending the greatest sense of H2O as an element. Is the meaning of water here similar to living cells?

MXC: I personally consider this to be a very important piece in the series. Originally, Michelangelo's *Genesis* depicted the relationship between God and Adam. But, as modern people, do we still believe in this story? So, I made a lot of changes from the original work. That transparent bubble is like a cell, and it's also like an abstract spacecraft, a closed container carrying and protecting life through the vast sky. I originally really did think about making a spacecraft, but later decided it wasn't necessary—just making a clear sphere was more abstract and could then be interpreted as a cell, and also as a spacecraft in the cosmos. Inside, there is a precious ball of water, cupped inside both hands. In a spacecraft, water is extremely valuable---water used for drinking, washing one's face, rinsing one's mouth, etc. is all needed and recycled. In the three-dimensional computer animation I have made based on the same painting, there is a group of people who are outside of this container. They are outside of its protection and suffer in a state of dehydration. They use a long straw to draw it over in order to attain life. The person in the clear sphere (i. e. Adam) transfers the water to the others, and in doing so he loses the water, loses life, and in the end becomes a skeleton,

which further transforms into fragments and powder, and vanishes into the universe.

In this work, water is transmitted from one life to another, through a straw. Straws are a common occurrence in modern life; they are everywhere. Through them, we suck water out of sealed bottles and jars into our bodies; I can't help but think about their symbolic significance!

Michelangelo's work expresses the creation of life. But, to me, I couldn't clearly see this matter of how life really was created (as discussed earlier). I could only see water transmitted among lives, and as a result I expressed this "transferring." This is a major change from the original painting, from connotation to content.

WH: It's like the logic of creating the world has been reversed. Originally God gave Adam life; now, this suspended sphere has become the source of life, Adam has become life's power source, connected to God and angels through a straw.

MXC: Modern science has overturned a lot of the ideas and concepts of our predecessors. A long time ago, we gave our most glorious illusions to a limitless vault of heaven. But, when modern people began to have the ability to fly back and forth through the sky, they started to think that there isn't really anything up there; it is bleak, desolate, and without life. The most miraculous and most beautiful place turns out to be our own blue planet, which is full of water and life! Moreover, all of the depictions of hell in paintings from the Middle Ages show a place deep underground raging with flames. But, consider what would happen if a nuclear war erupted and we succumbed to the approach of a manmade Judgment Day. With a sea of fire on the ground, perhaps hidden underground air-raid shelters would be the last sanctuary for life. How many people would be fortunate enough to take refuge in these holes in the ground? At that moment, a lot of our concepts would be completely altered.

WH: I think that this inversion is very interesting. This sanctuary in your work, protecting and sustaining life, is just like a container in the middle of a desolate and boundless cosmos. It has become the fountainhead, the origin of new life. Although this is not the original genesis, it can still be called a "genesis." The meanings found here are quite profound.

In this series there are also two pieces that are based on Titian and Poussin. Titian's work is *Bacchanal*, right?

MXC: Yes. In Titian's work, I noticed that all the people were proposing a toast. They were all drunk, and only one child was urinating. This child moved me: no matter what refined liquor we drink, in the end what leaks out of us is only yellow urine. The old saying meaning "a good-for-nothing" (literally "wine bag and rice pocket") seems to point out that our bodies are only a provisional container, with meat and alcohol passing through our intestines, entering and exiting our bodies. I also noticed that in the painting there was a little dog in the distance; water also passes through animals' intestines, entering and exiting their bodies as well.

WH: In Poussin's painting, water occupies a major position, appearing as it does in the real environment. It has a different form and meaning from other works in this series. Some works display the relationship between man and water—for example, immersed in a bath, containers full of water, bowls for drinking, etc. In Poussin's work, water is a principle subject in the pictorial representation.

MXC: This painting is called *Landscape with Diogenes*. It is said that in antiquity there was a philosopher named Diogenes who passed by a stream and saw a shepherd drinking water out of his cupped hands. Diogenes thought to himself: Why have I brought a bowl for drinking water? Thus he threw it away. He wanted to be the same as the shepherd and be closer to nature. When I made a "second view" of

this work, I added two swans drinking water. Animals aren't civilized: they didn't invent nor have they manufactured utensils, and have never had to select and abandon. This question of discarding a bowl is nonexistent to them as they have always just used their mouths to drink directly. They have always been inseparably connected with nature.

Similarly, in the second view of *The Washing of the Feet,* I added a cat. When people wash, they use water to clean themselves. Animals, meanwhile, lick themselves clean. They also wash their feet, but using a different method, the meaning is also completely different. Moreover, Jesus washing his disciples' feet also carries an even deeper layer of ritual significance outside of cleaning the body.

WH: There is also the work *Fountain of Youth*.

MXC: This painting shows the magic of water as something that can allow people to temporarily become youthful again. Modern people rush about all day long. When they return home and take a shower, they become invigorated again.

WH: After swimming, one also feels that one's energy returns.

MXC: A moment of temporary youth. We don't know the reason why, but as soon as we get into the water we become relaxed and cheerful. Is it because our body is also 70% water? Or is it because each and every one of us at inception was enveloped in water? Or are there some other reasons? Of course, in the original painting the point is even more extreme: When elderly people pass through the Fountain of Youth, they assume entirely new appearance!

Of course, water also has a ruthless and tyrannical aspect, as in *The Deluge*. Water that creates life also destroys it.

WH: Actually, in all of these aspects, water is cross-cultural. In Chinese literature, we can find many examples---for instance, the legend about Yu the Great controlling the water. But what's more interesting in Chinese culture is the link between water and a person's disposition, for example in the saying, "The wise find pleasure in water; the virtuous find pleasure in hills."

MXC: "Supreme virtue is like water" also equates water with good character.

WH: Or, "The association between wise men is pure like water." But, descriptions of bad moral character also adopt water metaphors, for example, the phrase for "fickle and lascivious" literally means "aqueous." Descriptions of good and bad characters all use water metaphors.

MXC: Yes, this is very interesting.

WH: Let's return to this entire group of works. Besides water, there are other aspects of visual representation. For example, the use of color: in some cases, your coloration is related to the original work. An example is your version of Titian's painting, where the color is kept especially bright. But, many of your versions do not maintain a clear relevance to the source painting; for example in your transformation of Giotto's *The Washing of the Feet*, although the pale ash blue seems to have a feel of the Middle Ages, it is not really connected with Giotto's original work. How did you come to your selection of colors?

MXC: In this group of works, with the exception of *Carrying the Cross*, none of the figures in the paintings are wearing any clothes. I thought about having the colors of the physical bodies fixed to the colors of the clothing in the original work, thus maintaining a direct relationship between the two. For example, in my version of Titian's *Bacchanal*, figures' skin colors are red, orange, yellow, green, etc. If

someone asked why is this person red? I would say: in the original work, figures were wearing clothes with these colors. But, I think the way I ultimately decided upon is more abstract; you avoid entering into an immediate and designated context. Clothes possess a very strong sense of directionality: they can indicate the time period, or a particular ethnicity or country.

Fountain of Youth offers a different case. Since all the figures use the same model, it is hard to show the process of an old person turning into a youth, so I used different colors to indicate this transformation. Elder people are shown in relatively deeper, dimmer colors, while young people are shown brighter and glossier. From left to right, color becomes gradually brighter, implying this change from old to young. I think that this perhaps employs a more "artistic" language, but it is more interesting than using clothes, skin, or hair.

WH: So, can we say that your works are "re-creations" of the originals? Distinctions in gender, age, character and physique are all dissolved as they all use one model.

MXC: Right, I think this is better.

WH: Your two most recent groups of works, *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* and *H2O,* both use an abstracted image of yourself as a digital mold. In your earlier photographs, you used a sculptural figure also based on yourself. From this perspective, are the two different phases somehow connected?

MXC: Yes, they are related. In the first phase of my art, I had a sculptural "me" that existed in reality such that you could see and touch it. Now, this digital "me" only exists in the computer, it can be seen but not touched. But, they can all be called "sculptures," and all are connected to "me."

WH: So, you think of the first set of works as photographs and a record of reality; while

the second set of works are different because they use a digital model, made on a computer, and then completed like a blueprint. Given these differences, how should we call this second group of works? Are they computer art or photographs?

MXC: Perhaps this depends on which angle you view them from. If you acknowledge the software's virtual camera and approve this kind of means of computer photography, then you can call it a type of photography. But, it is still one that sits on the fringes of photography, as it is really quite different from traditional methods. It's not entirely suitable to define it as photography. Perhaps it could be called computer art or digital imagery, but this depends on your point of view.

WH: Perhaps this needs to be determined according to the specific means of realization. I can imagine the development of this kind of digital imagery into a holographic portrait, thereby becoming a complete visual illusion.

MXC: There are a lot of things that still cannot be explicitly defined, or perhaps the rate of its development defines it. A few centuries ago, some definitions persisted for hundreds of years. But, nowadays, a definition from just a few years back might appear imprecise today. Now, when we look at how computers were used as a medium for producing works ten years ago, it seems as simple and unaffected as art from the Middle Ages. I told myself: lose no time, immerse yourself, it doesn't matter what is produced in the end. Using these kinds of new media, what is definite is that one can always attempt new things, and it is always worth it.

The resource works quoted by Miao Xiaochun in his H_2O series：

(1) Giotto: *The Washing of the Feet*，Cappella degli Scrovegni, Padua, 1304-06

(2) Michelangelo: *The Deluge*, Cappella Sistina, 1508-09

(3) Michelangelo: *Genesis*, Cappella Sistina, 1510

(4) Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo: *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian*, 1475

(5) Titian: *Bacchanal*, 1520-1521

(6) Pieter Bruegel: *Kreuztragung*, 1564

(7) Lucas Cranach d. A: *Der Jungbrunnen*, 1546

(8) Nicolas Poussin：*Landscape with Diogenes*, 1647

--- Wu Hung, *Miao Xiaochun: H_2O-A Study of Art History,* Walsh Gallery, Chicago, 2007