

Mapping Snowball World
—On Miao Miao's Painting and Other Matters
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Everyday life today feels in some ways like living in a giant device for the storage and editing of images, with the velocity of all manner of stylized visual effects increasing. It feels as if we are being swept up, like clothing we can wear and discard at any time. Miao Miao's creations, made through a painting practice she calls "snowballs," can be seen in a certain sense as a salute to this everyday: she is always picking up interesting materials or source images on her travels, and attempting to translate these glances which have replaced the sustained gaze,¹ into her own visual world. This makes it easier to understand why her pictures are often full of a difficult-to-grasp dynamic, wherein no matter where you enter into the picture, you can slide to anywhere else along the surface layer. Moreover, this snowball world is often filled with dazzling colors, the light and shadow transitions of colors on the surfaces of objects shaping highly minimalistic forms resembling basic geometric patterns swelling and distorting on the picture, the most common being the sphere. Miao Miao often also uses the contrasts and disparities between color fields to render spatial relationships and depth, while choices in color tone effectively convey different emotional atmospheres, with dark and bright like two poles on the color spectrum, all within the artist's grasp. Miao Miao, who has another identity as a researcher of paints and pigments, is also adept at employing the material textures of paints, bringing forth a richer sensory experience, but she has never requisitioned them from the perspective of material cultural history, which would turn her art into research-based art or give it critical implications. Instead, she engages in a more intuitive, emotional form of judgment based on her experience as a painter. Thus, when we delve deeper into the "snowball," we find its unique material feel to be so loose and soft. Though it also comes from water, it is entirely different from the rigid, shiny heft of solid "ice balls," something approximating the high matte and slight granularity of the light paintings that result from Miao Miao's unique paint mixtures, while also possessing that sense of light unique to snowy days, the even, refracted light adding to the sense of flatness of these non-highlighted objects. The distance between light and darkness has contracted. When we try to clump together a snowball in our hands, the warmth of our bodies makes it moisten, melt, and shrink. It disperses when we throw it. The joy of snowball fights, making snowmen, and writing words in the snow, is all tied up with the experience of snow's unique texture. Along these same lines, snowball world is Miao Miao using her unique movements to clump together a refinement of everyday vision. Those who are versed in the softness and flow of snow will certainly find a similar sensory joy in Miao Miao's painting language. Moreover, the snowball's fragile destiny of inevitable dissolution is an embodiment of a sense of fleeting time, which is perhaps the true message in Miao Miao's ever-fluctuating painting style. In this infinite glimpse, all ideas and forms captured emerge in undifferentiated equality, all in a cycle between formation and melting.

The formation of snowball world is due, to a great extent, to the fact that her picture contents are pulled from everyday life and from observation of life, then mixed together with the artist's imagination. They are the result of free, spontaneous growth, rather than "planned" through documentary research, thus filtering out the excessive bloat of textualization in contemporary art, bringing it closer to the self-confident autonomy of visual language in modernist art, though it is of course richer in visual delights. The pictorial content provides the viewer with recognizable information regarding travel, eating, hairdressing, driving, mountain climbing, practicing yoga, and so on, and the viewer enjoys taking in the ways in which they have been distorted and bestowed with more vitality and interestingness in the world of the painting. In the sketchbook *Mount Huang* (2023), and the burst of works such as *Big Turn* (2022) and *Sunset* (2022) that followed, we see everywhere a freshness that is inextricably linked to contemporary life. It is in the way sketching as a form naturally captures the thrust of the wind and the falling of rain, and pulls the mountain climbers from that one moment and place within it, freeing Huangshan from the art history textbook visual schema to become a mountain that belongs to people, rather than an ancient landscape in keeping with stereotypical impressions. Most of Miao Miao's paintings emerge from sketches or mobile phone snapshots. Her capturing and observation of the landscape along the way, and the imagination she attaches to it, are the wellspring behind the snowball world she builds. In other words, Miao Miao is engrossed by the act of

graphically rendering the ephemeral world, and she has discovered a visual experience that differs from life painting in the studio. Those eyes are endowed with all kinds of action and speed, and when they observe an object in motion or in flux, the eyes of the observer are also moving at various speeds from walking to riding in vehicles. The roadside scenery that has drawn in the artist may just be a fleeting glimpse, but it can be reasonably preserved in a cell phone snapshot to become part of the source material repository.

Long ago during the early days of modernism's rise, the use of photography as an aid in painting was quite common, while in contemporary painting, the use of painting to explore photography and the reproduction of images, while also reflecting on our relationship with the world, is not rare.² The photographs that Miao Miao extracts from everyday reality, however, are apparently more closely connected to her interest in flatness³ and the perception of time⁴. For this reason, snowball world resembles a giant assemblage of different degrees of flattening. These observations stacked together with speeds of action will sometimes become compressed or simplified into impressionistic patterns, as with *Moon in Prague* (2018); sometimes like the silhouette style of *Star* (2022); or sometimes as collages of basic geometric shapes, especially spheres and curves, where concave and convex effects are used to call attention to their connections to ways of seeing the three-dimensional world. Among these paintings is one which draws attention for the sheer length of its title, *When the orange ball jumped from the light blue ellipse to the dark blue sphere, it immediately bounced up to a height of 5 cm, and the electronic clock just arrived at 18:32. The sky suddenly tore apart and the red sun set slowly* (2022), which perhaps provides us with a convenient route for approaching the artist's observation method and focus of interest, which is the use of the visual impact created by speed and velocity to mend the world of appearances with its synchronicities not linked by any logical relationships, just like the orange ball and the setting sun in the painting, which is transformed into a rational part of the picture's interior, while of course the interplay between cold and warm tones is another reason this painting is full of vitality. The interesting thing about this assemblage is perhaps that it also broadly includes the flat visual experience of our time. Miao Miao has also picked up the various iconified forms that fill our everyday lives, as with the work *Man* (2020), which appropriates the sign for men's bathrooms. But the deepest impression is left by the various swelling spheres, which could be heads, posteriors, fruits, footballs, or snowballs, forms and notions pulled from the everyday and further fostered into being in Miao Miao's mind. The term "snowball" is a conceptual model of Miao Miao's self-refinement. It also refers to this form, and as a simple catch-all term for the process of falling, condensation and melting. Like the constantly-shifting appearance of the outer world, it may not last forever, but this very process of organic transformation between solid and liquid reveals its vitality.

When we delve more deeply into the interior of the images, we discover that the creation of snowball world not only reveals Miao Miao's methods for transforming visual experience, but may also contain many of the values through which she sees the world. The themes found in such works as *Dream* (2019), *Egg* (2016), *Absence* (2017), and *Facemask* (2020) focus on the complex emotions of close relationships, revealing the artist's tender feminine qualities. But in many other pictures, the people who appear are often common people, the masses, lacking specific identity and with unclear faces. The individual differences between them are highly superficialized. She has intentionally simplified and generalized these images encountered on her travels, focusing on grasping their postures and movements, drawing the viewer into a living dynamic, while the trappings of flat graphic style lend them a touch of fantasy. Here, "fantasy" can be understood as a means for creating a sense of distance or estrangement. The denizens of snowball world are nameless and equal to the extreme, existing solely as a scattering of focal points on the surface of the snowball, maintaining equal distance from the viewer. It is as if the viewer has been granted a central position, viewing things from the heart of the snowball. In the example of the *Walk* series (2019), four pictures come together to form the imagery, including the silhouettes of two people treading carefully side by side as seen from behind, portraits of those two people from the front (titled *A and B are Walking*) and a painting of the two characters that make up the painting's Chinese title. The two frontal portraits do not necessarily provide more information on these figures but instead stoke more curiosity, forcing us to return to their rear silhouettes, and to realize that the painting of the two Chinese characters has been meticulously bestowed with a sense of naivety, responding to the scenario with a high level of precision. Aside from figures, Miao Miao also has paintings with "fruit" themes, including the *In the Fruit Store* series (2023) and *It Started With a Kiss* (2022). The colorful, saturated look of fruits is the most direct reason Miao Miao likes them so. Moreover, as everyone knows from the experience of selecting fruits, they are always able to convey core information about themselves—their flavor—through their surface appearance. For this reason, Miao Miao sees each fruit as a crystallization of place, a database of sunlight, latitude, and precipitation,

and in this way, fruit takes on meaning as a marker of different locations. When fruits are brought together from different places, they also have a kind of equality between them, but they also form an assemblage that compresses and juxtaposes time and place. This is similar to the logic by which Miao Miao presents people in her pictures. In abstract terms, the values of snowball world aim to achieve diversity on a foundation of respect for equality.

This can be seen more clearly in the individual projects and installation works that are an outgrowth of Miao Miao's painting, as they accept and interact with the viewer more. In the fruit-related "picking garden" project, presented at the Tank Art Festival in 2022, Miao Miao infused to key terms relating to her everyday painting labor, "hanging" and "picking," into the project, while printing out the slogans "low-quantities," "not a bargain," and "more expensive for a limited time." Her interest wasn't in actually selling anything, but in using the lowly fruit stand to temporarily knock "art" down from its privileged, lofty position, and achieve an atmosphere of equal exchange with visitors. In "Grass" (2022), a residency project at Boxes Art Museum, she sewed with colored threads to create abstract pictures on the front sides of pieces of paper, while the reverse featured vulgar Cantonese phrases the artist had collected locally. The artist hung them up with clothespins in hopes that the viewers would discover the words, and thereby discover the sharp critique behind the ornamentation. In this project, the female subject, often seen as the one responsible for household chores, and the male subject, often seen as the user of linguistic violence, see a clever, simultaneous reexamination of their stereotypical gender positions, while the value hierarchy of noble art and everyday life come under humorous interrogation. If Miao Miao's rich researches into flatness, painterliness, and color in her painted world give her a tendency towards the autonomous aesthetics of modernism, then the projects described above more proactively place this world in the contemporary context for consideration. The conscious picking and selection of everyday details results in the conceptual aspects being conveyed by basic acts, which also shows the multifaceted nature of Miao Miao's talents. Snowball world is not just a painted world established beyond the real world. It is warped from the real world, but at the same time, it also radiates its ideas and energies towards the real world. The worlds created by art are often forward-looking discursive realities at once in and out of sync with the outer world. They could even be described as hints at vision.⁵

In her latest installation series, titled *Table*, Miao Miao has employed the simple, earnest material of handmade paper clay as a sculptural material, which she then colors. A connection forms between the resulting masses and the stacks of repetitive labor, which is also a continuation of the properties the "Grass" and "picking garden" projects, being the attempt to establish a precise, unified channel linking abstract concepts and concrete, tangible material forms. The themes in the *Table* series are still related to "interaction" between people. The central image is the "table," a platform for exchange. The surprising thing about the artist's thinking is that this choice to use the "table" is naturally aligned with the ideas of political theorists Hannah Arendt. The "in-between table" is a metaphor Arendt famously used in her treatise *The Human Condition*. Arendt believed that a representational space would appear where people gather through words and actions, and thus the creation of a table would mean the creation of a space for participation and communication. The table is also the embryonic form of the public realm. If the theoretician's use of the imagery of the "table" is on the level of conceptual deduction, thereby expanding to encompass all tables, then the artist has chosen a somewhat different path. She makes direct use of concrete, tangible images to create her tables, each one possessing a different surface which determines the locations of the interlocutors, its dimensions and forms determining the distance and postures of the interlocutors, thus alluding to the multiple specific circumstances that could take place in the process of communication. Fluidity and deadlock are both possibilities. The table can be a long, blue ribbon undulating like ocean waves, or orange and red vitamin B pills, or anything... As for how the dialogue takes place along this table, how the people's gazes and limbs come into contact, that must be something the artist delights imagining as she creates. The artwork as material object has no need for proofs, but instead deftly employs the power of perception to pry open the viewer's thoughts on "exchange," yet the artist, with her powers of direct observation, is able to see the original implications of the table with the same sensitivity and precision as the theoretician, to extract it as raw material, and thus expand the channel for entry into snowball world as a participant. On this level, when we look back on Miao Miao's many paintings of written words, we find a similarity here with the *Table* series of installations, in that they both seek to give vivid and concrete presentation to abstract concepts, and Chinese characters, which possess both expressive and visual connotations, are good carriers for such experiments⁶. Facing a cold, ossified, and bloated writing system, she attempts, within the rapid fluctuations

of the everyday, to find diverse images of common people and life, to use fantastical thinking to activate them, and find the vitality within, that core that should be at the heart of snowball world.

1. Relatively early research on the relationship between photography and painting, such as Walter Benjamin's essays and John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, there is much discussion of the difference and relative value of "glance" and "gaze," with the "gaze," a longer, more focused way of seeing, assigned a higher value. But as visual theory has further progressed, and with the coining of such terms as the "male gaze," the revelation and interpretation of the subject-object power dynamics behind the "gaze" has seemingly turned the "glance" into the more egalitarian way of seeing.

2. The most famous examples of this aspect in contemporary painting include David Hockney, Gerhard Richter, and Luc Tuymans. Hockney emphasizes breaking down linear perspective to restore a more everyday visual experience. Richter has cast doubt on the distance between the subject and the viewer, showing that the subject's appearance often dissolves accurate perception of it. Tuymans reveals how the truth of images is utilized by power. In an era of increasingly convenient tools for image generation, the use of painting to reconsider the image remains a wide-open creative territory.

3. Critic Clement Greenberg saw "flatness" as the fundamental pursuit and media characteristic of modernist painting, as well as the theoretical crux upon which he established the aesthetic autonomy of art and the superior status of abstract art, but this also implied that art would establish a new space isolated from the rest of the world, a latent conflict with the social presence pursued by contemporary art.

4. In Miao Miao's personal statement, she holds that frequent travel experiences allow her to sense time with a different quality than the usual mechanical passage and loss, and that she is able to freely edit and collage this sense in her pictures.

5. As contemporary art was growing increasingly socially participatory, Estella Conwill Májozo proposed the creation of "visionary art" in which the light of the artist's own soul lights the way for their art. The essay can be found in the book *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, edited by Suzanne Lacy.

6. Various signs and slogans fill large stretches of Miao Miao's candid photos. The author believes that this can be viewed as an effective accumulation of the artist's thinking on how to rebuild the connections between form and meaning in the Chinese language.