

## Miao Xiaochun's *Last Judgment*

By Wu Hung

In praising Michelangelo's *Night* in the Medici Chapel, Giovanni Strozzi – a contemporary of the sculptor -- imagined the stone statue being a “living image” of a sleeping woman conjured up by divine power. As if talking to a fellow visitor to the chapel, he promised that the statue would awake and speak upon a light touch:

Night, which you see sleeping in such sweet attitudes, was carved in this stone by an angel; and because she sleeps, she has life. Wake her, if you don't believe it, and she will speak to you.<sup>1</sup>

To these clever (but rather conventional) verses Michelangelo responded with a blunt epigram. He indeed let the statue speak, but only to reject any disturbance from an intrusive visitor:

My sleep is dear to me, and more dear this being of stone, as long as the agony and shame last. Not to see, not to hear [or feel] is for me the best fortune. So do not wake me. Speak softly!<sup>2</sup>

These lines, however, also beg the question -- What would a painted or sculpted figure see, hear, and feel if he or she is *not* sleeping? This question becomes more tantalizing if the figure belongs to a large composition charged with strong emotion and dramatic intensity. The significance of the question lies in its redefinition of a painting from an external object of viewing to an organic body of internal visions, actions, and feelings. Once we accept the logic of this question, we begin to combine our seeing with active imagination. It is at this point we can turn to Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, which has inspired Miao Xiaochun to create the multiple, large-format photographs and video work in this exhibition. Commonly upheld as the most ambitious and turbulent pictorial work from the Renaissance, Michelangelo's fresco has been skillfully described by S. J. Freedberg:

In place of the actionless and hieratic scene of earlier *Last Judgment* illustrations, Michelangelo conceived an exalted drama, moved in every part, which is enacted by a multitude of beings in their essential nudity, still more superhuman in their breadth and muscularity of form than in the last stages of the ceiling (in the Sistine Chapel), and as exaggerated in their grandeur as the figures of the Medicean tombs. A youthful beardless

Christ, compounded from antique conceptions of Hercules, Apollo, and Jupiter Fulminator, turns sinister towards the Damned, and makes the awesome gesture of their condemnation. Gathered tensile against His side beneath the gesturing arm, the Virgin averts her gaze and looks down on the Blessed. She cannot intercede for those whom Christ damns, nor can the surrounding agitated assembly of Saints. Christ's gesture generates their complex responses, which are those of giant powers here made powerless, bound by racking spiritual anxiety. The force and meaning of His gesture pass through the Saints and through the tangled Damned, who fall towards the crowded nightmare bark of Charon just below. Underneath the Christ, but in some immeasurable distance, angels summon the dead with trumpets, and they emerge and take on form as if from the very earth. Opposite the falling Damned, the Blessed levitate towards Heaven, most of them still numbed or half in sleep. In places wingless angels help them rise, and on the fringe of the ascending group one weightful, negroid pair are lifted by an angel on a rosary that denotes prayer. Christ's gesture sets in motion – not by its physical value but by its meaning – a gigantic slow rotation on the wall: descending, turning, and rising up to Him again. It is a motion subdivided almost endlessly into the convolutions of the densely grouped forms, but absolutely ineluctable: the great bodies are moved by and with it. The pattern of the whole movement and the way in which it functions in its parts appear to make a cosmic simile. Christ is seated in the heavens like a sun; the heavenly host around Him seem dense clouds made of human forms. Below, in a luminous aether, bodies fall to one side towards the water like clouds dissolving into rain; on the other they rise from the earth like moisture gathering again into clouds.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, Freedberg describes the figures in the fresco as though they were living sentient beings and as though the whole painting were in motion. This passage from a standard art historical book thus legitimates the question – “What does a painted figure see?”

### **Looking from Within**

What do the figures in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* – not only Christ and the Virgin but also the angels, the saints, the Damned, and the Blessed – see at this fatal moment? -- What do they behold within the vast, mythical space in the fresco amidst a cosmic movement that is simultaneously orderly and chaotic? To Miao Xiaochun, to answer these questions means to *enter* the painting and to assume the varied gazes of the painted figures. Two pictures in his five-composition series result from this adventure, as they embody the *internal positions* of two figures and re-represent Michelangelo's masterpiece from their eyes. The picture entitled *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace: The Upward View* is supposedly beheld by Figure I.35 (according to the numbering system in *The Last Judgment*, The Vatican Museums, Rizzoli). In the original painting, the figure, a naked man lying on the ground, is looking up at the

divinities while raising his left hand to cover his face. In Miao Xiaochun's composition, a large hand protrudes into the pictorial space from the lower edge, blocking the multitude of figures that recede into great distance. He explains:

This man seems to be tormented by great apprehension with the approaching final judgment, not knowing whether he will enter Heaven or be thrown into Hell. From his position he would first see his own hand and then a scene of salvation -- a group of angels are rescuing suffering souls from the possession of hellish monsters. More angels appear further away, blowing their trumpets. Christ can be seen only at the edge of the sky in a greatly diminished size.<sup>4</sup>

The other picture, entitled *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace: The Downward View*, is composed from a similar *internal position*:

Figure C.1 shows an old woman holding open her hooded mantle with both hands. She occupies the upper left-hand corner of the picture. I suspect that Michelangelo placed her at this corner, holding open her hood, as a way of allowing her to witness the entire process of the last judgment as he imagined it. From the back, the old woman's position resembles a modern person holding up a camera and taking photographs. Thus, I would very much like to look down at the entire last judgment scene from her point of view, an angel from heaven looking down into Hell through a billowy human tide. In a split second of judgment, one could either fly into Heaven or crash into Hell. If a modern person came upon such a scene, he would certainly, either subconsciously or consciously, look for a tool with which to record it. This is like when the first moments of September 11 were subconsciously recorded by an amateur photographer and when the Gulf War was consciously recorded by a professional journalist. Such pictures have been presented over and over again before humanity.<sup>5</sup>

These and other photographs in Miao Xiaochun's series resulted from a complex process of image translation and manipulation. The first step in this process was to create a 3D digital model of a figure based on his own image: he photographed himself from various angles, and assembled the fragmentary shots into a 3D-image on the computer. The next step was to use this model to copy all the figures in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, from Christ to a sinful soul. Employing the 3Dmax software, Miao Xiaochun was able to manipulate the model into different gestures and movements. The third step was to integrate these 3D figures into a virtual space according to the composition of *The Last Judgment*. Once Miao Xiaochun had achieved this 3D spatial construct, he could traverse it at will. (In his words, "I feel I can now move inside this space, selecting angles and taking pictures."<sup>6</sup>) More specifically, he, or a

built-in camera lens controlled by him, could not only view the composition from numerous *internal positions*, but could also assume vantage points outside the constructed pictorial space.

### Looking from Without

Unlike *The Upward View* and *The Downward View* which are supposedly seen by specific figures in the painting, the remaining three pictures in the series are composed from positions outside the painting. We may compare these two types of viewing/representation to our relationship with the Milky Way: we are *inside* this enormous heavenly body but we can also see its objective existence in the sky. In Miao Xiaochun's case, the desire to see Michelangelo's painting from alternative *external positions* may have first motivated him to envision the project. Only later did he discover the potential of his 3D model in re-representing the painting from *internal positions*. His initial proposal thus started with a passage in which he imagines to seeing *The Last Judgment* from behind:

A sculpture can be looked at from multiple sides, whereas a painting can only be viewed from the front. Imagine what would happen if we looked at a painting from the back?

How would Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* appear from behind? I think the figures considered important in the original work would become less conspicuous, while the secondary figures situated on the edges of the picture plane would assume principal roles. The original meaning of the fresco would be dramatically transformed. Perhaps Michelangelo himself never imagined such a way of looking at his fresco.<sup>7</sup>

The attempt to re-represent the painting from this and other *external positions* led to the creation of three of the five compositions in the series, including *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace--The Front View*, *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace--The Rear View*, and *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace--The Side View*. Among these, *The Front View* is special because its composition largely coincides with the original fresco.<sup>8</sup> It can thus be considered a *translation* of Michelangelo's work from a two-dimensional painting to a three-dimensional digital image. This image is particularly important because it provided the basis for composing other pictures in the series: as a *translation*, this digital image replaced the original fresco to become the subject of subsequent external and internal viewing.

The next composition Miao Xiaochun created was *The Side View*. He made this composition before *The Rear View* because when he rotated the 3D image of *The Last Judgment* in the

computer, a “side view” caught his fancy. He wrote to me that he was struck by similarities between what he saw and a traditional Chinese landscape painting. He imagined that if one were looking diagonally at Michelangelo’s fresco from the balcony in the Sistine Chapel, it would be “like looking at landscape from an open pavilion half-way up a mountain peak” and one would see something similar to this photograph.

Technically, *The Rear View* could be achieved by rotating *The Front View* 180 degrees. But one such experiment only showed the backs of figures and created a incoherent composition. To make the photograph aesthetically appealing, Miao Xiaochun selected a slightly off-center vantage point to the right. From this angle, images become concentrated on one side, leaving the other side relatively empty. This compositional imbalance generates visual tension and stimulates imagination. Like a hole suddenly opening up in the sky, the empty space seems to reveal hidden dimensions in the original painting. It prompted Miao Xiaochun to ask: “What exists *beyond* the space of the Last Judgment? What will happen *after* the moment of the Last Judgment?” Instead of seeking answers in religion or metaphysics, his response to these questions is strikingly *historical*:

I recall that when Giotto designed a version of *The Last Judgment* before Michelangelo, he painted the sun and the moon in the sky in the background. Even today, we modern people still wish to “behold” and “touch” remote cosmic entities. After Michelangelo, artists like Rodin and Delacroix all painted scenes of Hell (such as Rodin’s *The Gates of Hell* and Delacroix’s *Dante’s Boat*). Following their precedents, in this composition (i. e. *The Rear View*) I added three flying figures which are absent in Michelangelo’s original composition – they could have been there but were concealed by the painting’s frontal image. Like the three figures standing atop Rodin’s *Gates of Hell*, they point to the calamities happening on earth. I also filled the lower part of my picture with a huge flood; some men and women clutch onto a wooden board in the water, struggling for survival. People who are familiar with art history should be able to connect this scene with Delacroix’s *Dante’s Boat*.<sup>9</sup>

The *external position* that Miao Xiaochun adopted in composing this scene is thus not simply perceptual, but also historical and intellectual. Whereas the digital technology allows him to see Michelangelo’s work from an unexpected angle, it also implies a historical distance, across which he can *reflect* upon the Renaissance masterpiece critically. This critical position makes him a modern-day interpreter/translator of *The Last Judgment*. Unlike an art historian or art critic, however, he conveys his observation/interpretation through images.

### **Alternative Perception: Historical Precedents**

The concept of *alternative perception* pertains to a conscious effort made by artists to expand viewing experience beyond conventional ways of seeing. In China, such effort can be traced back at least to the first century BCE. For example, Han dynasty tombs frequently contained murals depicting heavenly bodies and cosmological symbols -- images which transformed an underground grave chamber into a microcosm of the universe for the dead. Interestingly, in many instances, such murals appear as mirror images of normal representations of the cosmic order. Thus if the Green Dragon conventionally symbolizes East and the White Tiger signifies West, their positions are switched in tombs. The unspoken message of this reversal seems to be that the underground -- the realm of death -- demanded a perceptual mode opposite to that of the world above. By reversing the logic of the living, a different space was created for the dead beneath the surface of the earth.

Similar perceptual reversals also characterize the designs of certain above ground images, inscriptions, and architectural structures. One group of such examples consists of stone columns erected in front of the royal tombs of the Liang dynasty near Nanjing. Bearing identical inscriptions on rectangular panels near the capitals, the two columns in each pair together define the entrance to a sacred burial ground. In one example the inscriptions read: "The Spirit Road of Grand Supreme Emperor Wen". There is nothing strange about the content of these inscriptions; what is puzzling is the way they are written: the inscription on the left panel is a piece of regular text, but the one on the right panel is reversed.

Why was the regular writing reversed on the juxtaposed panel? Who was supposed to be in a position to read the reversed inscription "obversely"? In other words, who was thought to be on the other side of the stone column looking out? A gate always separates space into an interior and an exterior; in a graveyard these are commonly identified as the world of the dead and the world of the living. The pair of inscriptions on the twin columns thus signifies the junction of these two realms and the meeting point of two gazes projecting from the opposite sides of the gate: the "natural" gaze of the mourner proceeding from outside toward the burial ground, and his "inverted" gaze, which is now attributed to the dead at the other end of the spirit road, where his body was buried and his life was recorded on memorial tablets.

Such mirror inscriptions were created during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (386-589 CE; the Liang is one of the Southern Dynasties), a period which witness profound changes in visual perception and representation. One such change, as I have suggested elsewhere, is the appearance of a "binary" visual mode, which characterizes not only the Liang funerary

inscriptions discussed above but also a famous scene in the celebrated handscroll painting, *The Admonition of the Instructress to Palace Ladies* attributed to the master painter Gu Kaizhi of the fourth century.<sup>10</sup>

This scene is divided into two halves, each with an elegant palace lady looking at herself in a mirror. The lady on the right turns inward with her back toward us, and we see her face only in the mirror. The lady on the left faces us; her reflection in the mirror becomes implicit (only the mirror's patterned back is visible). The concept of a "mirror-image" is thus presented literally: each group is itself a pair of mirror-images, and the two groups together again form a reflecting double.

This "binary mode" reveals a strong desire to see things that had never been seen or represented before. The perspectives the artists pursued were not necessarily actual places on earth. The mundane achievement of seeing and representing things "naturalistically" could hardly fulfill the artists' high aspirations, for art, they claimed, should allow them to transcend observed reality with its temporal and spatial boundaries. Thus when the poet Lu Ji tried to articulate the image of an ideal artist/writer, he described him as an immortal who "moves along with the four seasons and sighs at their passing on, and peers on all the things of the world and broods on their profusion." He continues:

Thus it begins: retraction of vision, reversion of listening,  
Absorbed in thought, seeking all around,  
[His] essence galloping to the world's eight bounds,  
[His] mind roaming ten thousand yards, up and down.<sup>11</sup>

It seems that Miao Xiaochun was motivated by a similar ambition to "peer on all the things of the world and brood on their profusion." Living in the twentieth-first century and armed with digital technology, however, he can actually "gallop to the world's eight bounds" in *cyberspace*.

### **Visual Translation as Performance**

If there has always been a desire in art to see and represent things beyond common visibility, contemporary digital and video technology provides new possibilities to create images with seemingly autonomous power. When used to re-represent existing images, this new technology allows contemporary artists to reflect upon and respond to earlier art forms, transforming paintings and sculptures into animated images with enhanced visual immediacy.

As works of this kind proliferate and are produced by artists from different countries and art traditions, they begin to constitute a transnational sub-category of new media art aimed at forging a dynamic dialogue between the past and the present.

Several such works were featured in the exhibition *Visual Performance*, which Julie Walsh and I co-curated in 2004. Among them, Nalini Malani's video piece *Unity in Diversity* recontextualizes a painting by Raja Ravi Varma exhibited in Chicago in 1893 at the World Congress of Religions. Shown within the golden frame of a traditional easel painting, the video juxtaposes the harmonious performance of eleven Indian women with an account of the 2002 genocide in Gujarat. Jongbum Choi's video *Sikaku* is an odyssey into the world of Dali's fantasies. Famous images of the surrealist master, now animated, are recomposed into a dream sequence with exaggerated temporal/spatial disjunctures.

In the same exhibition, Wang Gongxin's video *Always Welcome* showed a pair of stone lions greeting the visitors at the gallery's entrance, in the same manner that such statues guarded traditional temples and palaces (and nor also adorn modern hotels, museums, and libraries). As the visitors to the exhibition entered the gallery's door and watched the lions, the sculptures began to move and talk. The video thus takes the idea of "miraculous images" in Buddhist and Taoist legends literally as the subject of a visual representation. Deriving inspiration from another type of Buddhist legend, Zhou Xiaohu created multiple frames of representation in his video *The Goopy Gentleman*, in which a man draws a cartoon woman on his naked torso with a traditional brush. She comes alive and rebels against her creator, then enters the man's torso and turns him into an image on her own body. The video ends with a duel between the two figures and the erasure of both. In a deeper sense, this work comments on both collaboration and tension between art mediums.

Among contemporary works which re-represent traditional images, Eve Sussman's 2003 video, *89 Seconds at Alcazar*, is an important landmark because of its mature negotiation between different mediums and spaces of representation. Like works by Malani, Wang Gongxin, and Jongbum Choi in the *Visual Performance*, the basic concept of Sussman's piece is *translation*; what emerges from such a translation is a visual performance in a temporal sequence. Restaging Diego Velasquez's *Las Meninas*, *89 Seconds at Alcazar* "unpacks" the 1656 masterpiece into a series of actions leading up to, and immediately following, the creation of the painting. The camera explores the imagined actions taking place beyond the canvas as well as the image in the painting. The viewer travels inside the Palace

of the Hapsburgs, not only encountering King Philip IV, his wife Mariana of Austria, Velasquez, and other figures, but also see things from their eyes.

*The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* adds another important example to contemporary negotiations with art history. Instead of simply converting Michelangelo's fresco into an illusionistic three-dimensional presentation, Miao Xiaochun's recreation of the historical painting emphasizes the individuality of a contemporary artist. As he says:

The digital technology which I employ in making this work has been used in architectural design and Hollywood film-making... But my purpose is entirely different. This work consists of individualized images imbued with subjective experience. (The different angles all emphasize such experiences.) What I hope to achieve is not a more realistic representation of the original work, but a visual and intellectual recreation of a different order -- (in which a painting is transformed into something resembling a sculpted complex, a two-dimensional representation is translated into a three-dimensional representation, a standard religious theme becomes the subject of personal speculation, a conclusion is turned into a question, a still canvas is made into active images, and an ancient work is taken as the site of a contemporary discourse). Thus technically I have also avoided illusionistic effects, but have tried to preserve the "rough" flavor of a digital reconstruction, such as the geometrical shapes and harsh surfaces of the figures.<sup>12</sup>

For this exhibition, Miao Xiaochun has also created a video version of *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace*. While the five photographs refashion Michelangelo's fresco into a new type of two-dimensional image, the video leads the viewer into cyberspace: he feels that he is traversing a vast, shapeless space within *The Last Judgment*. Constantly stumbling into various figures and encountering different scenes, he nevertheless remains ignorant about the larger event beyond such fragmentary experiences. Probably this feeling of vulnerability, frustration, and suspension is close to the heart of Miao Xiaochun's rethinking of *The Last Judgment*, as the video ends with the question he has kept asking: What lies *beyond* and *after The Last Judgment*?

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**Bibliography:**

<sup>1</sup> The original text is given in Giorgio Vasari's *La vita di Michelangelo nelle redazioni del 1550 e del 1568*, ed. Paola Barocchi, 5 vols. (Milan: Ricciardi, 1962), 1:63. Translated by, Kenneth Gross in his *Dream of the Moving Statue* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 92.

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- 2 Translated by K. Gross in *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, p. 94.
- 3 S. J. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy 1500-1600*, Penguin Books, 1975, pp. 471-2.
- 4 Private email communication.
- 5 Private email communication.
- 6 Private email communication.
- 7 See "Artist's Statement" in this catalogue.
- 8 Private email communication.
- 9 Private email communication
- 10 See Wu Hung, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 261-76.
- 11 *Lu Shiheng ji* (Collected writings by Lu Ji), "Sibu beiyao" ed. Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1930, I.1a-4b; translation based on Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 90-110.
- 12 Private email communication.

--- Wu Hung, *Miao Xiaochun: The Last Judgment in Cyberspace*, Walsh Gallery, Chicago, 2006