

Miao Xiaochun and His H_2O

By Wu Hung

Miao Xiaochun's newest art project, *H₂O- A Study of Art History*, contemplates on the continuity and metamorphoses of life and art. Philosophically it responds to a question he posed in his previous project, *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace*.¹ As indicated by the title of a video in that project, the question is "Where will we go?" after human history. Using the technique of computer animation, the video features a person---a digital reconstruction of the artist himself---traversing the vast cosmic space inside Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. Like a lost shooting star, he emerges from the depths of cyberspace and transforms into an infinite number of identical figures, both the divinities and the mortal beings who once lived. In Christian eschatology, on the day of the Last Judgment, every man and woman will present him or herself before Jesus Christ to have their conduct reviewed by their Lord. The meritorious ones will ascend to Heaven; the sinful ones will descend to Hell. But in Miao Xiaochun's computer animation, all the figures finally disperse, vanishing into the shapeless space from which they originally came. Their origins are beyond our knowledge and their future destinations are totally unknown. The video thus does not offer an answer to the question "Where will we go?" ---but only raises it. On the other hand, by erasing any difference between Heaven and Hell and making all divine and human images identical, the artist effectively rejects the traditional Christian solution. *Constancy* and *continuity*, not differentiation and hierarchy, underlie the narrative structure and visual presentation of the computer animation. In this way, this work bridges *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* and *H₂O-A Study of Art History*, because constancy and continuity now appear as the explicit theme of the later project. This also explains why Miao Xiaochun focuses on H_2O , a natural element which he believes best embodies these two concepts. He explains this idea in a "self-statement" about this project:

I really don't know where I was from or where I will go, but I know many substances go into and out of my body every day, among which is water- H_2O . Before entering my body, it has gone through numerous living things: plants, animals, and human beings; and it will again go through numerous plants, animals and human beings after being released from my body. I am just one of the containers holding it temporarily, or one of the points it flows by. Water has been recycling through oceans, the sky, and the land. The process has begun ever since remote ages, continues to the present, and will continue into future, never stopping, repeating forever in an endless way. Does it carry and deliver certain information about the source and destination of life? All forms of life and water vitally

interrelate with each other. Do they thus show compassion and concern for each other? Is it [not clear what “it” refers to] constantly changing life, which is delicate and subtle like water, recycling endlessly as water does? Will life that has vanished condense again at some other place and return to earth, just like evaporated drops of water condensing into rain, snow, or frost?²

The project does not attempt to document the natural transmission and transformation of water, however. Rather, Miao Xiaochun has selected a group of famous paintings as his “materials” for re-presentation. The rationale is that these images created by some of the greatest painters in art history, rather than natural phenomena in the objective world, more profoundly reveal the essential roles that water plays in human life. Just as in his creation of *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace*, Miao Xiaochun has replaced all the figures in these paintings with a single 3-D digital image of himself. But unlike *The Last Judgment in Cyberspace*, the meaning of this image has changed from unifying individual characters in a single work to connecting various historical paintings into “a kind of *metabolism*” (Miao Xiaochun’s words³). In his view, if water flows from one organism to another in the natural world, then this project makes him (or his image) a neutral element “flowing” through works of art created in different times---a process which generates new works based on old themes.

Regenerating or Destroying Life

H₂O-A Study of Art History thus has a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, this body of works, including a series of digital photographs and a computer animation, can be comprehended as an elaborate metaphor for the organic process of life, in which water is indispensable. On the other hand, these images re-present existing images based on “a study of art history,” and can be considered “meta-images”---“representations of representations” that articulate the artist’s critical reflection on art making. It should be pointed out that although Miao Xiaochun formerly studied art history in Beijing’s Central Academy of Fine Arts---he actually obtained a Master’s degree from the Department of Art History in that school---his selection of the European masterpieces for *H₂O* is not based on a standard art historical approach. Rather, he is guided by an artist’s instinct---in his words, the idea of water in these works “touches him to the heart.”⁴ Not all these works feature water explicitly, however; one should therefore explore hidden factors that have contributed to his selection of them. An analysis of the selected examples and his re-representations reveals that he is “touched” by at least three kinds of symbolism of the water in these works.

First, two photographs based on Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Fountain of Youth* (1546) and Michelangelo's *The Deluge* (1508-1509) vividly exemplify water's power in regenerating or destroying human life. Many ancient cultures developed the idea of "magical water;" bathing or imbibing in it would confer immortality or bring youth back to the elderly. Alexander the Great therefore traveled to the world's end to search for the Fountain of Life. Even as late as the early 16th century, the governor of Puerto Rico, Ponce de Leon, set off with three ships to find a similar fountain in the land of Bimini, but discovered Florida instead. Cranach's work stemmed from the same fantasy: in the painting, old women who had entered a "fountain of youth" now emerge on the other side as young girls again. Miao Xiaochun tries to reinforce the sense of a magical happening in his photograph: the water in the fountain embraces the bathers with energetic waves, and the changing color of the human figures discloses the progress of their transformation.

But water is not always benign toward human beings; it is also famous for its destructive ability to take life away. There have been many stories and images describing the Deluge---a terrible flood which almost destroyed the human race completely. The flood story told in *Genesis*---the source of Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel---is frequently depicted in western art. But accounts of similar apocalyptic events also existed in many other ancient traditions, such as the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh and the legend of the devastating flood that took place before the first Chinese dynasty Xia. Although Noah's story tells that God sent down the Deluge to punish the wicked and evil-doers, Michelangelo's painting focuses on innocent women and children, who are terrified by the calamity and struggle to escape it. Miao Xiaochun's version further dismisses any difference in gender, age, and conduct; all figures now constitute an anonymous race threatened by extinction. He has also enlarged the proportion of water---in fact, because the figures' individuality is no longer the subject of representation, the powerful, ocean-like flood has become the focal character of the composition.

Water Makes Man

A second group of classical models that Miao Xiaochun has selected for making new works includes three masterpieces: Titian's *Bacchanal* (1520-1521), Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo's *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian* (1475), and Pieter Bruegel's *Christ Carrying the Cross* (1564). Unlike *Fountain of Youth* and *The Deluge*, water does not play an important narrative role in these paintings. But water is given heightened symbolic significance in Miao

Xiaochun reworkings, so that this natural element now signifies a person's bodily functions, and by extension is connected with his desire, emotion, and spirituality. Titian's *Bacchanal*--- or feast of Bacchus--- is most closely related to physicality and desire: the painting illustrates the mythological scene of the arrival of the god of wine on the Isle of Andros. The island's excited inhabitants await Bacchus' arrival---his ship with sails unfurled can be seen in the distance. Already merrily drunk, they raise wine cups to welcome their patron god. When Miao Xiaochun first saw this painting, he was struck by a minor image: a little boy is lifting up his robe while urinating in front of the audience. To Miao, the boy's uninhibited behavior highlights the physical nature of the entire Bacchus cult: its material basis is nothing but the transformation of a liquid substance.

Water does not just fulfill bodily needs and desires, but also signifies spirituality, thought, and emotion. There are Chinese proverbs like "Supreme virtue is like water" (*shang shan ruo shui*) and "The association between wise men is pure like water" (*jun zi zhi jiao dan ru shui*). Such spiritual association is the theme of Miao Xiaochun's re-presentations of Piero del Pollaiuolo's *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian* and Pieter Bruegel's *Christ Carrying the Cross*. Most strikingly, certain characters in both paintings are refashioned into figures made of crystallized water, while others remain solid and opaque, or are clothed in the ordinary attire. Among these special characters is St. Sebastian in Pollaiuolo's painting, who has been sentenced to death for being a Christian. Bound to a stake and shot with arrows, he is surrounded by six archers, whose varying poses and gestures nevertheless reinforce the centrality of the suffering saint. Miao Xiaochun not only represents these two groups of figures in different material forms, but has also altered the original composition to highlight the significance of water: the arrows that had pierced St Sebastian's flesh are gone, and in their places is transparent fluid spilling out from the wounds. He has also added an image as a visual metaphor: a glass vase toppled over with liquid leaking out. The message is clear: the body is like a vessel; life stops when the "water" inside it have all poured out.

His reworking of Bruegel's masterpiece is more complicated. The original painting depicts a fatal moment in Jesus' life: "Christ carries the cross, on his way to Golgotha. Behind him is Simon of Cyrene, who helps to bear the weight of the cross. The fainting Virgin is supported by the three other Maries. Saint John the Evangelist, beside her, wrings his hands." (Matthew 27: 30-3) Bruegel's painting is famous in art history for having transported this Biblical story into the present, giving it an immediacy to his contemporaries and simultaneously making a general statement about human actions. The ritual procession, hurried at the beginning and end, comes to a halt where Christ falls under the heavy weight

of the Cross at the center of the painting. Confusion breaks out among his ragged tormentors and sorrowing followers. In the foreground is a remote, isolated group, consisting of the desperate Virgin and her companions. In making his new version, Miao Xiaochun's goal is not simply to retell the story, as numerous artists have done before and after Bruegel. Rather, he focuses on those deeply spiritual characters in the painting and distinguishes them from the chaotic crowd. By transforming the Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the figures on the foreground into crystallized "water images," he has devised a unique method to represent suffering, vulnerability, and purity all at once. He explains: "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." Again: "(Jesus) too is frail, and endures extreme harm. He sacrifices himself for all, 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."⁵

Man Creates God

Paintings in the last group of examples Miao Xiaochun has selected, including Giotto's *The Washing of the Feet* (1304-1306), Michelangelo's *Genesis: Creation of Adam* (1510), and Nicolas Poussin's *Landscape with Diogenes* (1647), have varying themes, but all feature water as a bonding *agent* between people and divinity, between people and Nature, and among people themselves. Giotto's original painting does not actually represent water, which is only implied in the narrative. It is Miao Xiaochun's reworking that reminds us that this natural substance must have symbolically connected Jesus with the aged apostle when he washes the latter's feet. Poussin's painting depicts a well-known anecdote about the ancient philosopher Diogenes, who, after rejecting all worldly goods, threw away his last possession---a cup---when he sees a man drinking water directly from a stream by cupping his hands. While Miao Xiaochun's new versions reinforces the significance of water in these two works, his treatment of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* is the boldest in the entire project. Consisting of two photographs and a computer animation, this mini-series departs considerably from the original work in both pictorial composition and symbolic significance.

Most important, the relationship between God and Adam is reversed. The latter, though encapsulated inside a transparent capsule and not yet come to life, cups a ball of crystallized water with both hands and thus symbolizes the source of life. It is God who draws life (i. e. water) from the space inside the capsule through a long straw. He then transmits this precious substance to the chorus of angels who surround him. Miao Xiaochun imagines that the setting of this suspended capsule can be either microscopic or macroscopic: the capsule can be a tiny cell in a much large organism, or can be an imaginary spacecraft in the vast space. In both cases it represents a sealed container carrying and protecting life. He says: "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."⁶

In other words, it is Man who has sacrificed himself to create God.

1 For a discussion of this project, see Wu Hung, "Miao Xiaochun's Last Judgment," in *Miao Xiaochun: The Last Judgment in Cyberspace* (Chicago: Walsh Gallery, 2006).

2 Miao Xiaochun, "About H₂O- A Study of Art History." Manuscript provided by the artist.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 From "Re-imagining H₂O in Art--A Discussion between Wu Hung and Miao Xiaochun."

6 Ibid.