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Snow Yunxue Fu Interview

Noah Fornear
15fornearn@gmail.com

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Interviewer: Noah Fornear
Artist: Snow Yunxue Fu
Location: Telephone interview
Date: February 17 2016

Bio: Snow Yunxue Fu (b. 1987) is an artist who lives and works in Chicago. Her work approaches the subject of the Sublime using topographical computer rendered animation installation. She exams and interprets the world around her through virtual reality, where she draws a parallel to the realms of multi-dimensionality, the physical, the virtual, and the metaphysical. Fu has exhibited her work nationally and internationally including Hong Kong Arts Center, Yellow Peril Gallery, Expo Chicago, Digital Culture Center in Mexico City, Zhou B Art Center in Chicago, Chicago Artist Coalition, Chicago Filmmakers, Kunsthalle Detroit Museum of Contemporary Art, MoMA PopRally Online Screening, NURTUREart Gallery in Brooklyn NY, TEMP Art Space in New York, The Gallery C Space in Beijing, Prak-Sis New Media Festival in Chicago, Currents: Santa Fe International New Media Festival, Gene Siskel Film Center in Chicago, West Village Art Gallery in Chengdu China, SIMULTAN Festival in Romania, and 9:16 Film Festival in Australia. Fu is teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in both the Film, Video, New Media, and Animation Department and the Continuing Studies Department, as well as working as a faculty portfolio reviewer for Admissions at SAIC. She obtained a M.F.A. degree from the Film, Video, New Media, and Animation at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She also obtains a B.F.A. degree in Painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Southeast Missouri State University, and a B.A. in Fine Art from Sichuan Normal University in China. — bio courtesy of the artist.
**Noah Fornear:** Alright, where there’s no easy way to start the interview process. We can start off with some basic background information what year were you born?

**Snow Yunxue Fu:** 1987.

**NF:** Have you always lived in Chicago or if not, did you grow up somewhere else?

**SY:** Yes, I was born in China and I came to the US for exchange student for undergrad and grad school and now I’m teaching here.

**NF:** What college did you attend?

**SY:** For undergrad I partially attended a college in China called Sichuan [Normal] University when I first came to America I studied at Southeast Missouri University and then SAIC [School of the Art Institute of Chicago].

**NF:** Has art always been your passion even picking a major for where you went to college?

**SY:** I grew up in an environment where both my parents were art educators so I was definitely very exposed to it. They run an art school in China. I was also sort of good at it but I actually took a detour for quite a while. I didn’t think I wanted to do it because everyone else is saying you should really do this so I actually went to undergrad as an English major, but after I came to America is finally when I decided to change my major back to art, and I’ve been doing it ever since.

**NF:** That’s incredible. Two art enthused parents has to be a good support, right?

**SY:** Yes, it’s definitely nice that way.

**NF:** How would you categorize your art?

**SY:** I would call myself a media installation artist. I do have a multidisciplinary background. I definitely found influence from painting, which is what I was studying when I was undergrad— also lots of sculpture elements, and definitely experimental film cinema and new media. Yes, I think it’s a contemporary condition for artists. We’re all very multidisciplinary so that it’s not just like, “oh I’m just a painter.” It’s very much about the work that you want to make and the tools that you use to make it.

**NF:** When, how, and why did you first get started with three-dimensional animation?

**SY:** I’ve always had interest in it but I wasn’t able to get my hands on it until I was at SAIC because I had 5+ years as an undergrad, as I mentioned. I started in China, was an exchange student in Missouri, and finally came to SAIC to finish it. When I came to SAIC, I had a lot of options to take classes on different things. Basically I took this intro
to experimental 3-D out of the blue which is very different from my normal practices and sort of really clicked with it and converted! It really transported my painting process to experimental 3-D. So I would say is around six years ago when I first started doing it.

NF: I was going to ask has computer animation always been your intended art form but in a way you already answered my question. It sounds like painting was first and then 3-D was second.

SY: I think in a way I replaced it. A lot of the things I was trying to do with media wasn’t able to come through or maybe the conversation the painting world is interested in right now isn’t so much what I’m trying to do and think conceptually. So when I came to 3-D experimental animation it’s almost like a better tool for me to say the things I want to say because there’s a lot of burdens in the medium [painting] as it’s been around for quite a few centuries, so being a contemporary painter you almost have to carry that baggage or dismiss that baggage first. But when I came to working with Experimental 3-D, it was sort of a refreshing conversation. There is of course still history to be dealt with but a younger and more energetic one. I found and I was able to find a better way to get into the juicy part [laughs]. I would say that my process is still like painting in a lot of ways. I think the painter in me still hasn’t died, it’s just a different expression of forms.

NF: When I was looking at your site I saw the Tunnel animation. I watched that and I thought it was incredible.

SY: Thank you.

NF: You made that last year in September. I was just wondering if there was a deeper meaning to the animation maybe than just the art form itself?

SY: Yeah, so I think I wrote about a little bit on my website so you are welcome to go back and check that.1 But that was originally inspired from an experience I had this past summer where we were traveling to Arizona, which the place was not really that important, but working on that experience as a metaphor going through a tunnel was the inspiration--long story short; Arizona is beautiful with all the different formations of rocks so we were really excited as tourists. The tour guide was like “you will get to see this new kind of rock form after we go through this tunnel, and they are unlike anything you have seen before!” so everyone was excited so when we went through the tunnel which was made in the early 20th century so it was small. Even though we were traveling with a bus, only one car can fit in the tunnel at one time. So for the majority of the time we were “in the dark,” as the tour guide put it. He also mentioned that there are five windows increasing in size so each one will reveal a little bit more about the other side of landscape. I had a feeling that this experience would be unique and I was very excited as we progressed even though for majority of the time we were in the dark, every once in a while there was a little opening outside of the bus and it got bigger and bigger so you did get to see the other side of the landscape more as it goes on. I was also counting them 1 2 3 4… before I was able to count five already we were outside the tunnel and the tour guide welcomed us to the fifth window. I took that experience very metaphorically.
Thinking about this revealed an unrevealed expectation and a parallelization to a sort of the spiritual realm versus the physical and metaphysical realm, which has been a common theme throughout all my work, so the piece *Tunnel* is very much inspired by that experience and of course the making of the work also made it become something else.

**NF:** So talking a little bit more about the techniques that are involved in--such elaborate and meaningful animation--do you have a specific procedure with these animations? Do you go through a process? Just like how you said the painter in you isn’t dead so I’m just curious to see how you go about it.

**SY:** Yeah, totally. So working with experimental 3-D is interesting because in a way you’re very exposed to this blank XYZ space. You might also had some experience with 3-D software or maybe even in Photoshop so when you work with the software, things come from nothing to something. Especially working with software dealing with virtual reality. You start with an empty XYZ space and then you sort of create stuff within that space. Things like gravity, if you do not put it in this space it won’t be there. My approach is very much building the world within Maya. Sometimes it’s very much with abstract shapes and there is a lot of esoteric elements. Living in this world is a more figurative structure and it’s very much swimming in and out so it’s about building this world or building this virtual sculpture first and then relating to experimental filmmaking so I animate them. From there it’s working with the virtual camera like one may work with a real camera in the world and revealing this world that I just made with different camera movements. Of course another really important component of my work is that there is usually a physical outlet of the work. So usually it’s in the installation form. I also want to bring in the image of the physical space where there is a relationship of scale in distance and relationship of light and dark with the viewer and the experience. Most of the installations are very aware of the viewers’ body like it’s usually in relation to the average person’s height.

There’s a lot of gaps, so to speak, in my installation where I deny access of my viewer to fully consume the image and those gaps are very much related to the thickness and width of our bodies so that somebody can understand the fact there’s more image behind the structure but they are not necessarily able to access while I am still inviting them to imagine the more and beyond. So I would say that is my process, with which each of them are very different and address specific issues but by taking inspiration from various experiences, so it’s very much about the specific content in the animation and I am also working with each environments in every the exhibition space and talking to my audience in a spacial ways.

**NF:** I would have never thought you had to put in the gravity for 3-D animations. It’s insane to think how much actually goes in to it.

**SY:** Yeah, it’s very interesting. It’s kind of like a metaphor for how the physical world works and basically you cannot take anything for granted. [laughs] Everything is so intentional. The other aspect of 3-D is this impossibleness. It’s this place that impossible things can happen.
NF: What exactly attracted you to further exploring the unseen soul and its connection to the sublime?

SY: As I mentioned when I was a painter I was interested in the art historical aspect of implementing the experience of human beings—the idea of conjuring something infinite in nature—what happen when it was the first time you seeing the ocean or climbing up to the top of a mountain peak?—this encompassing one’s immortality, physically, and timely in this expanding universe. So after I got involved with more with experimental 3-D and had a better understanding of new media and what it can do, I was further interested in this idea of the techno sublime. In a lot of ways, it mimics the experience we have interacting with the natural phenomenon but at the same time sort of parallel to the fact that when we look into our self we see an eternity there too. Even though we’re mortal beings, our imagination can grow; at least we are able to try and understand thing that come before us and things that come after us. There is a parallelization of that extension in the digital world too. Everything, in a way, is formed by binary language in the computer world since everything is 0s and 1s, and that’s how code is made, which grants it an infiniteness especially working with Maya and understanding the XYZ space and each axis X axis Y axis and Z axis is expected to go infinitely or forever. So I definitely draw a lot of connections to that. So when you want to look at the sublime you are in a way looking outwardly but at the same time you can look inwardly too and there is virtual reality that is a parallelization of both the outwardness and inwardness. It’s a good place to hold this kind of conversation.

NF: When I was looking at some of your work I noticed that you added music to all them. So I was curious if you thought that this added to the mystique and intent of the work?

SY: Yeah, so I definitely incorporate sound in my moving image work.

NF: Sound would be a better word to use then music

SY: Yeah, that’s fine. Some probably has more melody than others and some works have the intention of not having sound but when it doesn’t, there is more relation to painting or still images because what a moving image is a sequence of images down a time line. When there is sound in the environment, especially in the installation, a lot of times [what it] does very well, it places the viewer in the space mentally. Some of the works have a very contrary sound to the image. For me sound is another layer, of course there is an illustrative quality with sound, but the way that I want to use sound in my work is to take the viewer even further.

NF: I’m curious to know if you’ve ever received criticism for your art form being that it’s digital or given how the times are changing to a technology based world. Was it ready to be accepted?

SY: Yeah, that’s a good question. There is definitely criticism I hear especially with the technological part of my work. I honestly think some are good concerns but some are
probably just misunderstandings. One thing that jumps out in my mind, many people who come to look at the work, or digital work in general, are questioning the artist’s hand in it, thus the artist’s involvement and therefore the artist’s intention. This is something that is not usually questioned of an artist who paints? This myth about mark marking that traditionally is very related to paintbrushes and empty canvas, and the idea by smearing some paint on the canvas, it somehow makes people feel it’s a stronger human connection verses someone who is sitting behind a computer sculpting, animating, and lighting things. I mean, I definitely understand how it could look a little more distant from the artist hand but I think it’s only because it’s a lack of understanding of how much an artist could be physically, emotionally, and mentally involved in creating a digital artwork. I don’t think it’s... of course technology is more considered as an extended tool, you know. Talking about tool making, paintbrushes and canvases once was a really new tool too. We have developed more as humans over time so of course were using the more advanced tool but I think the motive and intention behind the tools doesn’t necessarily mean the tool would lessen the intent. Of course there is a possibility behind that. It has to do with each artist and how they approach their work and how much meaning and conceptual ideas they put in their work reflect back upon how much are they involved into the work. So that is definitely one of the more general criticisms I often respond to. I think there still is a lot of controversy surrounding the digital art form even looking at the history of moving images, or even before that, photography. There were people for the longest time who were very suspicious that photography could never become an art form besides being a medium of capture and then Walter Benjamin came out and wrote an article about mass production and reflecting that into photography and film making. The medium could become more than a capture tool of reality, but in a way quite different, it very much became about image making that relates to the projection of desire. Nowadays, there is so many programs like Photoshop that there is in so many ways functions even more like that, to manipulate images, which some are for better and some are for worse. [laughs] From my end those are all tools and the grander debate--you can’t really call a tool evil or good, the output of that tools is directly related to the person who is using it--how are they using it? How you can draw a better judgment? There are definitely many different sides to working with technology.

NF: Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes or histories in your artwork? If so, please give a specific example.

SY: So, I grew up in China and came to America for my higher education. I think I approach Asian identity maybe in a more different way then an Asian artist who may be born or grow up in the west. I know there are artist who are more actively working with how to identify themselves as Asians or just Asian identity in general in their work. But what I’m more interested in is more of the humanity in all races and cultures. There are definitely things and morals I hold on to growing up in China. I’m sort of less interested about the conversation of how everyone is different because of their cultural heritage. While I think it’s still very important to allow the difference but it can also become something very arbitrary and sort of trying to take a broader view, I feel like civilizations belongs to every single one of us. Especially while the world is becoming a smaller place, so to speak, with the internet and how easily people can travel nowadays. I think that this
heritage is not necessarily like, “oh, I have the blood of China, therefore I only hold on to the teachings and values from Chinese culture.” Therefore, I don’t think I address Asian identity in sort of a direct way like that. There are definitely certain aspects of my work considered Chinese. A lot of times it’s really interesting, people will look at my work and later come up to me and point it out and I’ll also turn to agree with them. For example, a work I had made was called “Pro,” which is this long gap like animation which is installed in-between two curved walls and somebody came to me after I installed it and they said: “Wow, this is like a digital Chinese landscape painting.” In a way I did connect with that because my grandfather was a very dedicated landscape painter all his life in China. Did I seek out and deliberately said “I’m going to create a Maya digital Chinese landscape animation?” No, I didn’t. However, I think I definitely draw from what my past experiences with Chinese landscape paintings. So yeah, I think my relationship with that is that I’m less interested about the boundaries and I’m less interested when someone only identifies themselves as an Asian artist. But I’m more interested about being an artist and at the end of the day what is the human experience we’re trying to reflect upon but also not throwing out that I do specifically come from somewhere and therefore acknowledge my understanding would be shaped by that. But does it stop there? I do not think so.

**NF:** I would absolutely agree with that. So have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian or Asian American or have you ever been labeled as an “Asian” or “Asian American artist”? If so, was identifying as Asian/Asian American something that was also important to you personally? Please explain.

**SY:** Yeah, definitely. For example, one of my installations was in the Gene Siskel Asian America Film Festival in 2012. It was interesting to see what other people were doing, and I’m a green card holder so I’m not necessarily an American yet. I think there is a larger conversation there again. It is important to consider what Asian immigrants are doing in America, or how American born Asians are similar to me who is Chinese born and raised but being in America for nearly the whole past decade, where have the Asian immigrants been in America, and who they and their children are now, or even to consider the fact that China itself is a really big country with so man differences to begin with. [laughs] So yeah, I was interesting to see all of that and think what influenced me through the educational system of the West as I pursue my higher education here, and also just in general of how each individual become who they are right now through their previous experience, their own determination, and beliefs.

**NF:** What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

**SY:** I’m definitely seeking out larger conversations or the conversation has become bigger and at the same time more specific. I’m going to Connecticut this weekend to attend an art and technology symposium. It’s really nice. They commissioned the project for me; getting some more money and support than I have ever had for my art, which is nice. Since when I first started out as a student, it was hard to have to out money into your work without gaining it back. So there is definitely changes in that and receiving
grants and using it to make the work better and just to be able to have stronger support and better resources for art making. Yes, I’m definitely looking at broader conversations or venues. Not just in Chicago either, even though I love the art community in Chicago, the fact that there is more people and a bigger world out there so I would like to relate to as many people as I can.

**NF:** Are you currently working on anything?

**SY:** Yeah, definitely. So the symposium that I’m working on and the installation side of this piece is a little more complicated than the ones I have been doing, which involves cutting foam that is set according to a shape in Maya--talking about how the physical world influences the virtual world and then how virtual world influences back into the physical world. The symposium is called “Ports.” I think the reason that they are interested in my installation is because they saw this medium as a port. There will be a river like shape where I’m projecting a composite video that includes imageries of water, bubbles, biomorphic shapes, and also stark landscape that stand out. It’s going to be an 8 feet tall installation and the viewer will be able to experience the imagery through this river like gap. I will definitely put some images on my website when I commission it next week.

**NF:** Thank you so much for giving me the time to ask you a few questions and I wish you the most luck Connecticut.

**END.**

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2. Open All Ports: 15th Biennial Symposium on Arts and Technology, Ammerman Center for the Arts and Technology at Connecticut College, Feb 24-27 2016. [http://www.conncoll.edu/cat/symposia2016/#.Vt82uSnJqHk](http://www.conncoll.edu/cat/symposia2016/#.Vt82uSnJqHk)