

# Yang Bodu: In the Court

Curator: Cui Cancan

2023.9.28 – 10.29

Tang Contemporary Art, Beijing 1<sup>st</sup> Space

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Tang Contemporary Art is pleased to announce "In the Court," a solo exhibition by Yang Baodu, curated by Cui Cancan, opening on 28 September 2023 at 4pm at Beijing 1<sup>st</sup> Space. The exhibition will feature the artist's new "In the Museum" and "In the Court" series, as well as her latest "Luo Yusheng" series, totalling nearly twenty works.

## The Court of Memories

### 1

"In the theater of my mind, a tableau unfolds like this: it's three o'clock in the afternoon, and I walk into Museum Island in Berlin. It is windy outside but the sunlight gently streams through the windows into the hall. Standing here, I am acutely aware of the present moment, the place, and my purpose for being here. Facing the carefully curated sculptures, I contemplate, not so much as an admirer of art, but savoring this serenity."

– Yang Bodu

I often feel that Yang Bodu's artwork stems from my past experiences and memories of visiting art galleries abroad. The vast exhibition hall transformed into a fleeting glimpse in my mind, perhaps, a memory is formed through a unique chemical reaction. When you are in a museum, it is hard to determine which "sense of space" or among the many "masterpieces" will remain in the memory. "A glimpse" at that moment was just one among many, and years later, this distant look at the paintings inadvertently became the only thing in this memory.

Memories are always random. I often associate Yang's "Museum Series" with narratives about memory. Unlike a "story," it lacks a complete plot and doesn't reveal any particular truth. It's more of a "scenario," somewhat abstract and brief, a glimpse, like something caught in the corner of the eye. I prefer to call it a "semblance" – it's the atmosphere of a space, traces of events, the shell of memory, or the virtual image of reality.

The concept of "space" carries an artist's particular vision. The scenes within an art museum are not only the subjects the artist portrays but also a reflection of personal emotions and consciousness. Over a decade, Yang has meticulously depicted various spatiotemporal facets of the art museum. A world that vastly contrasts with reality, where no matter how evocative a lament might be, the tumultuous history and upheavals of the past settle like dust inside the museum. Here, "observation" maintains an optimal distance. When we look back 500 years, events seem so remote that we can scarcely witness their genesis and conclusion. As we draw closer, within a few years, the haze of reality remains, and we find ourselves within it, lacking the accumulation of distance and time essential for profound observation.

The art museum stands as an antithesis of reality, like a quiet room within the bustling city, a form of insinuating language. Regardless of the stories unfolding outside its windows and the anxieties and encounters of reality, you can always purify your sensations in its overlapping spaces to gain a unique sense of time. People stand still within, gazing at the worlds depicted in the artworks, reaching out to the distant tales of history. However, due to the scale of time, it creates a barrier to the present, making sensations elongated and enduring.

In a sense, what Yang portrays is the rhythm of time. And within the narrative of 10 years, this rhythm undergoes its own reduction. From the vast and open exhibition hall to the barriers of layered walls, and further to the intimate turns within, the space gradually condenses, and the gaze becomes subtler.

In the beginning, there were walls adorned with artworks, rich in content. Using a realistic approach, Yang recorded the history of art and the gains of artists during their visits to the museum. Over the years, her art evolved towards an apex, with fewer objects and gradually shifting from spaciousness to intricacies. In 2019, Yang painted museum display tables, already empty, along with the white walls in the background, completely lacking the narrative and plotlines. Space reverted to its original essence. Then came the "Floor Ocean" series, where walls turned into the sky, and tangible forms vanished into nothingness. This decade-long museum series found its way back to its origins. The history and information it once bore transformed into a more abstract concept: the floor resembling endless ocean waves, pointing towards distant and vast realms of time. The walls became the heavens, with only two islands on the sea surface, faintly holding the potential stories. At the edge of the sea, carrying these islands, relentlessly erasing the fringes of memory. Yet, the sea remains the sea—indifferent to human pleas, much like destiny disregards arguments. The sea never leaves behind any trace worthy of remembrance.

While Yang's works depict some paintings within the art museum, the works hanging on the walls are not the focal point of her narration, nor were they her initial inspiration. Unlike the classic "painting within a painting" and "metaphor within a metaphor" found in art history, Yang is more concerned with the unique spatiotemporal relationships within the museum: how masterpieces from history freeze in a moment, how architecture accommodates the dimensions of works, the flow of the audience within the layered space, and what kind of relationship exists between the memory of reality and the gaze of observation.

In Yang's memory, there is an unforgettable scene. It was the late 1980s, and she resided in Zijin Beili, Tianjin, not particularly distinctive, resembling most urban neighborhoods with similar streets, views, and structures. It was not until 1991 that the peculiar sight of the immense Tianjin Radio and TV Tower being constructed right before her eyes altered this mundane landscape. The towering structure loomed over the lake, profoundly dividing the world outside her window and becoming a barrier in the sky. This was her first view as a child—the perspective from the window, the towering structure, and the obstructed view—all of these early impressions etched into Yang's gaze. Many years later, a similar experience rekindled this memory linked to "sight." While studying in the United States, Yang, amidst the streets of New York, glimpsed a narrow stretch of sky between two tall buildings.

Compared to her Museum Series, "In the Court" represents Yang's more ideal space, for the artworks. The space is structured using the concept of a maze, comprising 9 square rooms of the same scale, volume, color, and texture. The exhibition hall is accessible through four entrances, with each side leading to three rooms. White walls and doorways divide each identical structure, requiring the viewers to pass through tall, narrow doors to access the sole 8 pieces of art within the exhibition hall.

The name "In the Court" stems from a factual description. Despite the space has square exterior, if a viewer walks through all of it, the trajectory forms a circle. Therefore, this name serves as a description of bodily movement and viewing paths, representing a subtle psychological clue. It also encapsulates a certain imagery; the four doors, neither entrance nor exit, resemble a never-ending circle, where time has no endpoint and one cannot reach a conclusion. This aligns with the artist's initial intent—to utilize spatial design in providing a realm where viewing extends limitlessly through both time and space.

This labyrinthine space isolates reality, providing a sanctuary of abstract ambience, perception, and consciousness. With each passage through a layer, the external world peels away a bit, and each doorway and subsequent space acts as a refined filter. Walking through the exhibition hall becomes a process of purifying perception. In "In the Court," Yang trades the intricate layers of space for the elongation of time, allowing it to comment on time itself. It becomes a reference and commentary of one spatiotemporal segment on another, leading us to a distinct way of perception—a contemplation of time and space.

The "labyrinthine" structure of the exhibition hall offers the audience a tranquil and pristine reading experience of the artworks. The interplay between the real space and the imagined constructs within the paintings creates a seamless transition, crafting a sustained and nuanced ambience. It also signifies the intimate integration of art with architecture, visible to all, where the imagery and interwoven spaces create a compelling collaboration.

The "doorways" in the paintings serve as both entrances and as "corners" and "frames" through which the perspective of the next space is revealed. Eight pieces depict two outdoor scenes, inspired by Yang Bodu's journey to Gaochang. These ruins, dating back over 2000 years and weathered by centuries, witnessing the rise and fall of many dynasties and kingdoms, still evoke a sense of the once flourishing and boundless magnificence. However, the original builders' aspirations for enduring grandeur have now dwindled to remnants of imperial power. Regardless of the stories they hold, these ancient relics share a similar monumentality, embodying an epic quality. Like Epang Palace, Ming Tang ("Hall of Light": the central hall of ancient Chinese royal and imperial palace), Temple of Heaven, and the black monolith in Stanley Kubrick's films, they seem like altars ready to receive signals connecting them to the heavens, becoming mediums in the fabric of time and space, bridging the future and the past.

The 8 paintings within the "In the Court" represent Yang's variations of two landscapes. The different moments in these paintings form a lengthy chronicle, resembling a grand clock. The hour hand at times points towards dusk and sometimes towards dawn. Between dusk and nightfall, the shadows from the lingering sunlight persist. During noon, when the sun is at its peak and blazing, the intense brightness can make one's head spin, creating a somewhat oppressive greyish atmosphere. Time seems frozen here as if nailed to the wall, while the second hand hovers between the "moment" and "eternity." Hence, dusk emerges as a turning point, brightness quickly turns into monochrome.

The hour hand also signifies space, like a star in the night sky over Gaochang depicted in the painting. This star, despite being thousands of kilometers away, is akin to the one outside Yang's studio. The sense of space originates from within the "In the Court." Unlike most landscape paintings, Yang's portrayal of space doesn't offer an exit; the distance is perpetually blocked. The perspective in the painting invites us in through the doorways but continually pushes us out. The foreground in the painting is real, and materiality matters; it allows you to enter the scene without reservation. However, the overlapping space, the walls on all four sides, beckon us to seek an end, but the distant view is either obstructed or illusory, and the end is emptiness. Perhaps, it is for this reason that we can grasp the enduring sense of freeze in Yang's works. What she conveys is not merely the emotions of the scenery, but a latent interest in the "turning points" inherent in consciousness.

It was not until the very end of the space that the mystery of transformation was finally revealed. The paintings, resembling a "narrow stretch of the sky" when seen from a distance, align with the "gaze" of childhood memories, the obstructed view of the Tianjin Radio and TV Tower at the lake's center, and the sky between two buildings in New York, all came together within Yang's experiences. However, regardless of the concept, "In the Court" isn't a product of logic or art history, but an expression of the artist's profound emotions. In 2014, by her father's sickbed, Yang went through day and night, facing the approach of death, where the illness seemed like a protracted dusk. It was then that Yang, for the first time, started to envision a space with no entrance and exit: a room without doors, no beginning, no end, devoid of cardinal directions, only an endless wandering. Perhaps having no choice can bring peace to the mind. What the soul truly seeks in its depths isn't "possibility" but rather extremity and fate itself, allowing you to find solace.

It was also this experience, the awareness of doors and the sensitivity to exits and possibilities lost, that lay deep buried within Yang and shaped her perspective. Several years later, a scene in a hotel, in a mysterious way, provided answers to Yang's imagination of space. It was

a dimly lit corridor. Stepping out of the elevator, the spaces on either side were exactly the same — same doors, same dimensions. You couldn't distinguish, and you had no choice. This seemingly enclosed space provided Yang with the most genuine, profound comfort, where the surface and hidden threads of life converged.

Perhaps there's another, more artistic interpretation. The painting "Isle of the Dead" by Arnold Böcklin, created in the late 18th century, stands as the most fitting commentary for "In the Court." With seven versions existing in Yang's memory, it represents not only personal redemption from suffering but also a voyage toward ultimate tranquility within a broader expanse of time and space. Much like Friedrich's depiction of the new moon, the night fog, and the cycles of death and rebirth on the ruins, it embodies a solemn, tragic essence and an eternal, epic quality. However, "In the Court" is distinctly contemporary. It doesn't pay homage to history or strive for a sublime belief. Instead, it embodies a sense of fluidity found in modern society—a convergence of time and space, a progression of spatial dynamics, and a descent of light. Emotionally, it veers towards neutrality, approaching a point close to zero.

### 3

"Sleep after toil, port after stormy seas,  
Ease after war, death after life does greatly please."

—Epitaph on Conrad's Tomb, quoted from Spencer's poem

At the end of the exhibition, the "Luo Yusheng" series offers us a new perspective—a narrative about the very essence of passing away.

A few years ago, Yang accompanied her grandmother to a performance of Jingyun dagu (a form of Chinese opera where stories are often sung in a Beijing dialect accompanied by a drum along with one or two other musical instruments) in Tianjin. The order of performers' appearance was determined by age, starting from the youngest and ending with the eldest. Initially, traditional performances like these didn't pique her interest much. Instead, her attention was captivated by the backdrop of the performers, the stage resembling a theatre, possessing qualities akin to an art museum. Unlike artworks in a museum, the sounds on the stage were ephemeral, fleeting. Yet, sound carries a deeper antiquity than paintings; the rhythms and imprints it etches in the mind resonate far longer than visual imagery.

A drum, a corner of a furled curtain, a spread-out carpet, and a curtain of sound waves were a few symbolic elements in "Luo Yusheng 8:08." The painter portrays a moment that could signify the beginning or the end of a performance. However, this evocative trace of the "occurrence" is derived from the final act of the performance: an elderly, slightly trembling figure about to make her last appearance on stage in her life. Perhaps influenced by the emotional resonance of the narrative, Yang listened attentively, recognizing a certain serendipity—the old lady's final bow, which she happened to witness by chance. This particular moment would not repeat itself. The lyrics and melody echo a fleeting sensation, akin to losing a phrase with every sung note. Each verse just heard slips into the past. At this juncture, the significance no longer resides in what is being sung. Instead, it's about sensing the essence of the energy, capturing the transient. Yang's heart resonates profoundly with this poignant perception of passing.

Perhaps this performance left a profound impression on Yang, echoing her past works on the fleeting nature of time and space. The scattered petals in the artwork could symbolize the metaphorical essence of the elder's life, while the lingering echoes of the drumbeats represent the enduring resonance of the story. One person can deliver a whole performance, using a drum, or a hammer—just a few items, yet can transform into endless variations, eloquently narrating all the vicissitudes of life.

However, "Luo Yusheng" carries metaphors related to femininity. She shares a certain temporal and spatial resemblance with "Cheng Dieyi," portrayed by Leslie Cheung. They both have their own *mise en abyme*. Her vocal style embodies captivating androgyny, maintaining a poised distance akin to a discerning observer, with intonation flowing gracefully, fluctuating in mellifluous arcs. Within the lyrics and melodies, she embodies her unique philosophy.

Curator: Cui Cancan  
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#### About Artist

Yang Bodu (born in 1986, Tianjin, China) explores an "art landscape" that is spiritually dissociated in her works. In her art practice mainly in painting, she depicts a series of building landscapes of museums, galleries and art institutions, blending the privacy of viewing works with the public nature of art space, exploring the theatricality, mystery, and relationship structure of these abstract and empty but somewhat idealized spaces. In her recent creations, Yang Bodu has been observing some "architectural moments" formed by the interaction of light and structure, and using them as the basis of her personal observation and ultimately painting elements. Her creations take place within these mysterious spaces, wandering between private and public, creation and gaze, and watching and being watched.

#### About Curator

Cui Cancan, a curator and writer.