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No One's Wonderland

Zhang Xi

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Thesis by Zhang Xi

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Committee Members

Joo Yeon Woo (Chair)

Francoise Duresse

Alvin Gregorio

Mike Womack

Introduction

The painting *No One's Wonderland* is designed as my conceptual self-portrait, reflecting my personal history of living in two different countries and interacting with two different cultures. I employed the pop culture images that surround all of us, but interpreted them through the unique associations in my own mind. For me, creating a painting is like the anticipation of watching a movie come onto the screen, where I enter another world. *No One's Wonderland* is created in four panels with the linear story and longer horizontal canvas referencing the scale and shape of a movie screen.

My autobiography provides the contextual background for the painting. Until I reached the age of 6, my family lived above a movie theater in the city of Kaifeng in China. The outside world was a landscape of gray and brown, and all the people wore dull colored uniforms or similar looking clothing. It was different inside the theater because I was able to see American films in color. As I grew up, I discovered cartoons, comic books, and video games. However, these materials were banned and my access was limited both by the school in China and by my father, who wanted me to practice calligraphy rather than "wasting my time" with entertainment. As a result, I started to copy animated cartoon characters as a rebellious act. In high school I discovered China's black market of American culture, so my understanding of America came in pieces and out of context.

At the age of nineteen, I was able to realize my dream of moving to the United States to study art. The picture I had in my mind of the United States and the reality of this country

were very different. I knew very little English when I came to the U.S., so it was hard to communicate with others and I learned to use pop culture references and social media to make connections to people in the U.S. An article in the New York Times, *From Kaifeng to New York--Glory is as Ephemeral as Smoke and Clouds,* compares ancient civilizations, including Egypt and Kaifeng with today's New York. This article was written in 2005, but I found it recently through a Google search for "Kaifeng"; I missed my hometown and wanted to see there was any information about it online. I was surprised to find an article in the New York Times about Kaifeng, because most people would have never known about this city. So finding this article started my thought process of portraying my experience of living in two cultures on canvas. My personal history and the content of the painting are intertwined. I chose to depict three different civilizations and time periods: ancient Egypt, ancient Kaifeng, and present-day United States. *No One's Wonderland* is a multi-layered narrative painting mined from personal, cultural and virtual media sources that become clearer through understanding the many stories that are "written" on the canvas.

Chapter 1: The Movie Theater in Kaifeng, Henan Province, China

My memories of watching American films in the theater of my hometown became the first source of the images in *No One's Wonderland.* For the first six years of my life, my father was employed as an artist for the local movie theater in Kaifeng. My parents and I lived above the theater in one of the small apartments built for employees. In China, the

movie theaters do not have posters sent to them from film companies to promote their

movies. Instead, artists like my father paint the posters advertising the movie, using a

postcard or small picture as a reference. Both my parents were busy working during the

day. At that time, I was too young to be in school and I did not have anyone else to talk to

because there were no other children around. I was not allowed to go outside by myself

because my parents had told me that there were many kidnappers outside of our home

and I was terrified to go out. Also, I despised what I saw beyond the theater wall. The

pollution from chemical plants and sandstorms dyed the landscape of Kaifeng in shades of

gray and brown, which are similar to the colors used in the background of many

traditional Chinese paintings. There was aged and weathered architecture throughout

the city. All the people wore uniforms and similar clothing. It was hard to distinguish one

person from another. I thought the citizens of my hometown were all created in the same

factory when I was little.

Kaifeng in 1970s

Since the outside was a hostile environment, I spent all of my early childhood watching

movies in that theater. At that time movies were my only friends. I remember that there

were only two types of films shown in that theater: Chinese black-and-white films and

American films in color. I felt these two types of movies were completely different from

each other because the standard subject matter of the Chinese black and white films dealt

with wars among the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese Nationalist Party, and our

Japanese Aggressors during World War II. The storyline was often about how the Chinese

Communist Party had suffered from defending against the Chinese Nationalist Party or

Japan. The Chinese Communist Party would inevitably win the war by the end of the film.

For example, there was a film that showed frequently in the theater called *Tunnel Warfare*.

The film depicted the war between the Chinese Communist Party and Japan in the Middle

North region of China during 1942. In the movie, the Chinese soldiers defeated the

Japanese soldiers by digging a tunnel underground. Another Chinese film that was also

shown often was titled *Landmine Warfare*.

Still image from *Landmine Warfare*
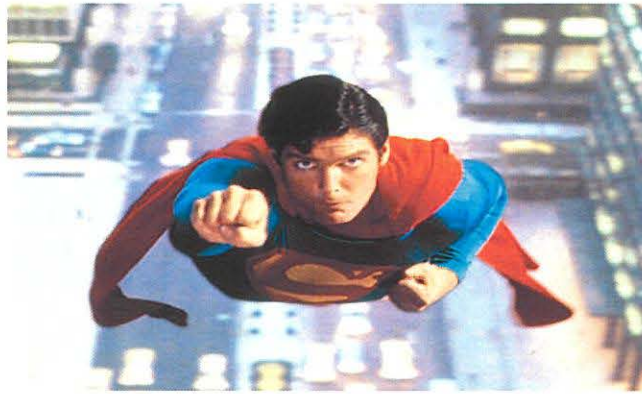
Still image from *Superman*

The story of *Landmine Warfare* and *Tunnel Warfare* were similar. The only difference between the two films was that in *Landmine Warfare*, the Chinese soldiers used landmines to defeat their Japanese enemies. So during this time of my life I would sometimes confuse and mix these two interchangeable narratives. There were a great number of Chinese Films that shared a similar storyline such as *Railroad Warfare*, *Guerrillas on the Plain*, and *Heroic Sons and Daughters*. These films were made with poor-quality film so over time, the film would become brown and white, rather the black and white.

The American films were completely different because the movies had storylines that were dramatic or romantic, and there were different genres like science fiction and Westerns with cowboys. Most importantly, the American films were full of bright colors. Among all these American films that I watched in the theater as a small child, *Superman* and *Terminator* were the two films that I remember the most. The landscape and culture in the both movies seemed so improbable in comparison to my surroundings. I liked the new idea of imagined realities; both of these movies are science fiction movies set in the future with technology that does not currently exist. The movie *Terminator* was terribly

convincing to me, even though it seemed totally impossible that there was a robot from the future that looked human. The culture that I saw similarly did not exist in China. For example, there was a scene in the beginning of *Terminator* that took place inside a dance club filled with neon lights and all of the young people were dancing while wearing leotards, torn sweatshirts, tank tops, and jeans. Every character had a unique look, such as a wild hairstyle or colorful clothes, so I could easily distinguish one character from another. These two movies were unlike the Chinese movies in every way, from the storyline to the types of characters. For instance, Superman came from a different planet to save Earth from evil enemies, but he defended us with his superpowers, not weapons or an army.

All of these new images and ideas really enriched my imagination. For me, the giant film screen was a window that connected me in Kaifeng to another completely unfamiliar planet inhabited by American culture. I could not physically go through the window, but only enter with my eyes and my mind. Whenever I watched an American film, before it started or after it ended, I would stare at the blank canvas with expectation or relish. I often asked myself before the movie started, "What will be on that screen?" I was filled with a mixture of emotions such as desire for the unknown, excitement, and longing. It became an in expressible experience for me. When I first began to paint at the age of four, I had the same experience as I did while sitting in the movie theater, because I had a vision in my mind about what the painting would look like, but I didn't know if my vision would be accurate in the finished painting. There was an excitement in seeing this blank

canvas, because I didn't know what was actually going to happen. After I finished the painting, I would compare it to the envisioned imagery I had had in my head before I started the painting. The transition between the empty giant canvas and the colorful world that encompassed everything I thought was magical became my first inspiration for creating art.

The experience of sitting in the movie theater is the first layer in my life that went into creating the painting *No One's Wonderland*. In this painting, I try to give the viewer the feelings I had when I was in that movie theater in Kaifeng through scale, color, and an overall visual experience. So I selected a six-foot by twenty-foot canvas to emulate the scale and shape of the movie screen in the Kaifeng. While the size of the canvas is not the accurate size of a movie screen, thirty-feet by seventy-feet, I chose the size of the canvas based on memory from when I was a young child. Memories tend to have distortions when we recall them because the physical object is no longer there so it becomes more about how we felt in relationship to it. Often I watched the movie in the projection room, where the screen is further away so it appears smaller than it actually is, and that may be one reason for the distortion of the size in my memory. Then after making the choice about canvas size, I transferred my impression of the color contrast between the gray and brown shades of the landscape in Kaifeng and the vibrant colors of American films by using shades of brown for one half of the painting and bright colors for the other half. By using brown, I refer to what I felt when watching the aged brown and white films and similar storylines of Chinese movies. From a distance, the viewer will see the bright

colors in one half of the painting coming towards him or her and the subdued brown colors of the other half of painting pushing backwards to recreate the sensation that attracted me to the American movies when I was little.

Xi Zhang in Kaifeng in 1980s Photo by Zhao Guo Yuan

Chapter 2: My Education

When I was seven, my father started working at a government art center where artists would create or design whatever was requested, such as a mural or theater stages. My parents and I moved out of the apartment above the movie theater to another apartment in the city. The American pop movies were no longer a part of my everyday life. From the ages of seven to thirteen, my precious moments came from watching cartoons, reading comic books, and playing video games. However, I did not have the same freedom and access to these new forms of entertainment that I had enjoyed with movies in the theater. My father is a rigorously disciplined artist and teacher. He did not want me to "waste" all

my time with these activities, so he required me to practice traditional Chinese calligraphy every day. I truly hated it because the process was boring and if I did not complete the calligraphy well during the practice or was not able to finish the work on time, he would not allow me to watch cartoons. I remember that I was only able to watch cartoons a few times during each week. I was really jealous of my friends who did not have to practice calligraphy. For a long time, I wanted to tear the calligraphy textbook apart or to paint over it. Because of my father's rules, I started to copy animated cartoon characters so that I could see them even if I could not watch them every day on TV. I stored my happiness in the still images that I created and collected.

The other change in my life after my family moved out of the theater was that I started going to school. In addition to my father's rules at home, I also had rules to follow at school. In China, school started at 7am and ended at 6pm. This rigorous schedule starts in fourth grade and lasts throughout high school. After school, we had to complete at least three to four hours of homework. The worst thing about school was the censorship of entertainment. Whether the students were in school or not, video games and comic books were forbidden. Students were punished quite often because they were caught with these forbidden items. Our teachers called our parents if they thought we played video games and questioned students about what other students might have been doing. However, video games and comic books were the source of my happiness. Even with the risk of punishment, many students and I would hide comic books in class and play video games outside of school. During the school day, I would draw the characters from comic books

and video games to show my discontentment with the censorship as silent protest. This habit of drawing the characters that I loved developed into my art practice and I still continue to paint what I love in pop culture.

Transformers Cards from 1980s in China

From this memory of growing up, I created the second layer *of No One's Wonderland* using the idea of collecting happiness from painting pop culture characters. While I used some of the characters I loved to draw from my childhood, I also used many characters from animated cartoons and movies that I love as an adult. I am sharing my childhood collection of secret notebooks filled full of drawings with the viewer. I did not put every character that I have drawn in this piece, but instead used the ones I have drawn over and over again in order to clarify my collection of happiness from that time. For example, I used the cartoon characters *Tom and Jerry*, but in a stylized form. The video game characters of *Super Mario Brothers* and *Contra* are there as well. However, I wanted to update my story by adding some of the characters that influence my work now, such as
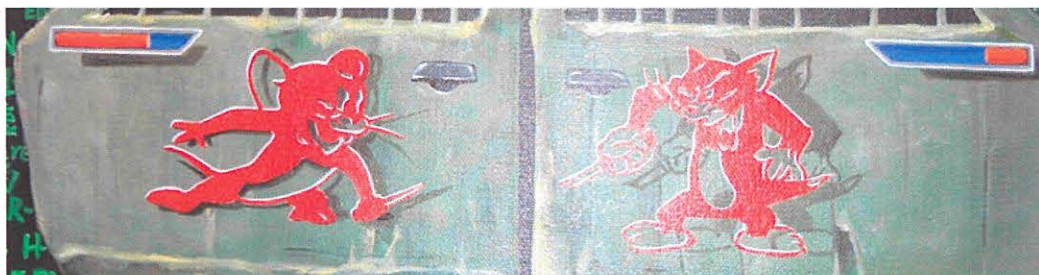
Stewie Griffin, the talking baby in the Griffin family from American cartoon *Family Guy,* the main character from the Japanese animation movie, *Ponyo*, and Patrick, a friend of the main character from the American cartoon, *SpongeBob Squarepants.*

Tom and Jerry, artwork by Feng Jian

Tom and Jerry from *No One's Wonderland*

Chapter 3: The "Cracked Generation"

When I was 15, I went to a high school that was specialized for students working in the visual arts. I left Kaifeng and went to Beijing. It was there that I learned about the "black market" and became part of the "Cracked Generation" in China. The black market existed because during the 1980s and 1990s, there were few imported cultural products.

So a large number of young people who were born in the 1970s and 1980s and interested in American music and films found what they desired from the Chinese black market. The American music and films that we purchased were cracked CDs or cracked VHS tapes, which were supposed to be destroyed by American music industry/companies. Instead, they either drilled a hole in the CD or cut a small chunk on the edge and then sent it to China as American trash. This is how the name "Cracked Generation" came about in China. However the selections of these products were quite random. As a result, our understanding of America came in pieces and out of context. I never knew what products would end up on the black market. Most of time, I just went to the market and selected these product based on my intuition and whether I liked the artwork on the CD cover.

Because my introduction to American pop culture was both random and out of context, I find that many times the images that I choose to combine in a painting may only make

Chinese Black Market, photo by Pat1982

sense to me and could be confusing to others. My process of learning American pop culture causes me to make associations that others raised in the culture may not understand. All of these products from the black market only fueled my desire to move from my hometown of Kaifeng to the U.S. I longed to be part of a new lifestyle and the fantasy life that American pop culture seemed to provide. The center panel of *No One's Wonderland* illustrates this experience of learning bits and pieces from the Chinese black market.

Cracked CDs, Photo by Shi Guang Wang

Cracked CDs, Photo by Shi Guang Wang

Chapter 4: The United States, a palace of pop culture

In 2004, at the age of nineteen, I moved to United States to study art. The image I had in

my mind of the United States was like Disneyland from the TV commercial. I thought that, by coming to America, I could understand American pop culture in a more complete context, but this country was not like what I expected. On the one hand, the infinite amounts of information and pop culture entertainment filled my desires; however, at the same time, it overwhelmed me. First of all, I knew very little English when I came to the U.S., so it was really hard to communicate with others. I always felt like an outsider back then. Most of the time, I had to merely guess what people were talking about. So miscommunication happened quite often. It was hard for me to converse with other people because I did not know what to say. So I would randomly choose some American Pop culture reference I knew to start a conversation, such as "Do you like Michael Jackson?" and "Have you heard Tom Waits?" The person I addressed would usually respond to my question, but the conversation would not progress very far after that. I feel that these early attempts at communication were a continuation of being part of the "Cracked Generation".

Another new experience for me after arriving in the United States was the online virtual world. I rarely used the Internet while I was in China because computers and Internet access are expensive and most of the people cannot afford them. But in the U.S., the cost of accessing the internet is more affordable and plentiful, and everything can be done in the virtual space. In this country, there are libraries with computer stations with Internet access that are free to the public and schools have free computer and Internet access for their students. In addition, there is Wi-Fi Internet in many places such as coffee shops that

you can use for the price of a cup of coffee. In China, these options are not available or the cost of using the Internet in a public place would be more than a cup of coffee. One has to consider that even many restrooms are "pay only" use in China.   In the U.S., I saw that people could complete their education, conduct business, access entertainment, health care, banking, and social interaction, or even get married through an online portal. More importantly, the Internet allowed me to communicate with my family, old Chinese friends, and new American friends. I found out that talking to people online was much easier than in person. I could have a moment to think through what I wanted to say. If I did not understand what someone said, it was easier to look up words you could see, rather than words in conversation. Therefore, I relied on social networks such as Facebook and MySpace in order to socialize.

I used the online visual formats of Skype, Yahoo Messenger, and Facebook to shape my form of communication in *No One's Wonderland*. Using online forms of interaction changed the way I saw people. Whenever I use Messenger, there is only a digital icon representing a real person. When I only communicated with someone via Messenger, I began to get used to a person as the still portrait icon that he or she chooses. So I use the imagery of Messenger digital portrait icons in my work frequently. Also, many of my friends and I use a pop idol's portrait as their profile photo in online social media such as Facebook, MySpace, and blogs. Many of my social network friends do not know what I look like because I was using portraits of pop idols for my profile picture, so these icons became my online identity. Using pop cultural figures as a basis, I chose Kurt Cobain using

Skype and Billy Corgan and Nick Cave chatting in Messenger.

Constructing No One's Wonderland

My autobiography informs all of my work, so the basic building blocks for this painting were already there. The article in the New York Times, *From Kaifeng to New York-- Glory is as Ephemeral as Smoke and Clouds*, compares ancient civilizations including Egypt and Kaifeng with today's New York. This article gave me more information and another access point for the painting because it mentioned my hometown of Kaifeng and compared it to New York and other cities that were centers of ancient civilizations. So I started to think about Kaifeng in relation to New York or the U.S. and the ancient civilization that was familiar to me, Egypt. The basic construction of this painting started with these three places and translating my life experience into a visual language. Each panel represents a different place and culture.

Chapter 5: Kaifeng, my home in China

In 1000 AD, Kaifeng was the capital of the Song Dynasty and had a population of one million people. Today, it is no longer an important city in China; it is a poor and disintegrating. The painting *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* is a documentation of ancient Kaifeng. It captures the daily life of people from the Song period at the capital, Bianjing, which is today's Kaifeng. The overall content celebrates the festive spirit and commerce at the Qingming Festival. The entire piece was painted in hand

scroll format and includes people from all levels of society from rich to poor, as well as different economic activities in rural areas and the city. As an artistic creation, the piece has been revered and court artists of subsequent dynasties have used this painting as inspiration to create new versions for the dynasty in power. The painting is also known for its geometrically accurate images of boats, bridges, shops, and scenery. Because of its fame, it has been called "China's Mona Lisa."
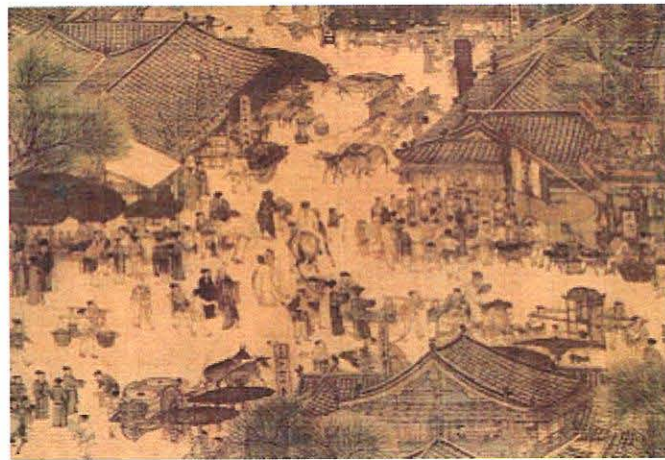
Detail of Painting, *Along the River During the Qingming, by Zhang Ze Duan*

I used the market scene from this painting as the background of my painting to represent unchanged Kaifeng. You can see much of the lifestyle, trading goods, and traditional architecture in *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* that still exist to this day. On one hand, this shows how advanced Kaifeng used to be a thousand years ago. On the other hand, since there have been few improvements to Kaifeng since its time of prosperity, it shows how the current Kaifeng has been under-developed for centuries. For the Kaifeng section of my painting, I did not replace everything in the *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* with new contemporary elements. On the contrary, I kept most of the imagery as it was, in order to emphasize how few changes Kaifeng has

undergone throughout the years. However, the American influence has finally reached this city, since companies such as Nike, Sony, and McDonald's are commonplace, as well as Internet use. The Nike store in Kaifeng was built in the old style of architecture. Although it is understandable for an American company in Kaifeng to appropriate the particular architecture style unique to the location, I find the juxtaposition awkward. The modern lifestyle represented by Nike does not sit well behind an ancient facade. This uncomfortable juxtaposition is something that I hope my painting captured.

Kaifeng in 2010, photo by Xi Zhang
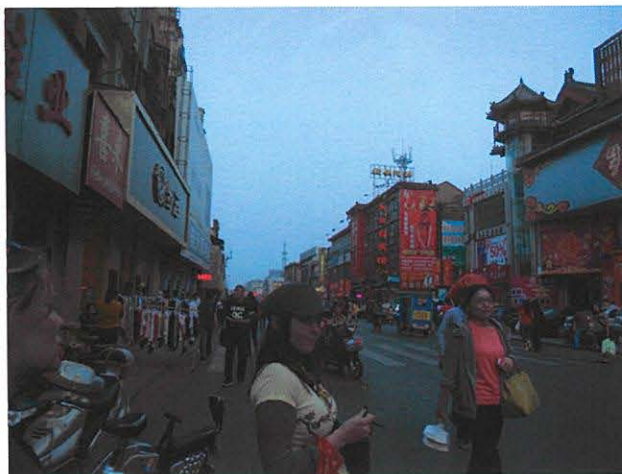

Kaifeng in 2010, photo by Xi Zhang

In this Kaifeng panel, I collaged some black and white documentary photos of an American market onto the ancient Kaifeng market scene. Although the color, content, and actions of the people match, the photography, time period, and American culture do not. These images were chosen because they looked old like the imagery of Kaifeng. I also replaced some of the old signs from the painting *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* with contemporary neon signs to reflect the current city of Kaifeng. These elements were intended to depict the disorientation of culture and time in current day Kaifeng.

Chapter 6: Walk Like an Egyptian

The juxtapositions of time and culture that we create in our own minds are reflected in the panel about ancient Egypt. I thought that modern day Egypt is like the version of Egypt that I loved in movies like *The Mummy* and *The Prince of Egypt*, the video game *Super Mario Bros*, and Michael Jackson's *Remember the Time* music video. In these forms of entertainment, Egypt is shown as the most magical and mysterious place on Earth. Thus, one of my biggest dreams was to go to Egypt in order to explore this magical land that pop culture created for me. However, this dream disappeared after I learned that Egypt is no longer a place where pyramids are being built, priests or shamans are practicing magic, and the dead are preserved as mummies. However, all of the pop culture that I had already absorbed stuck in my mind. Depictions of Egypt as an ancient

and magical culture even in our contemporary time still exist in my mind, even though I

know the images are inaccurate and only exist as entertainment.
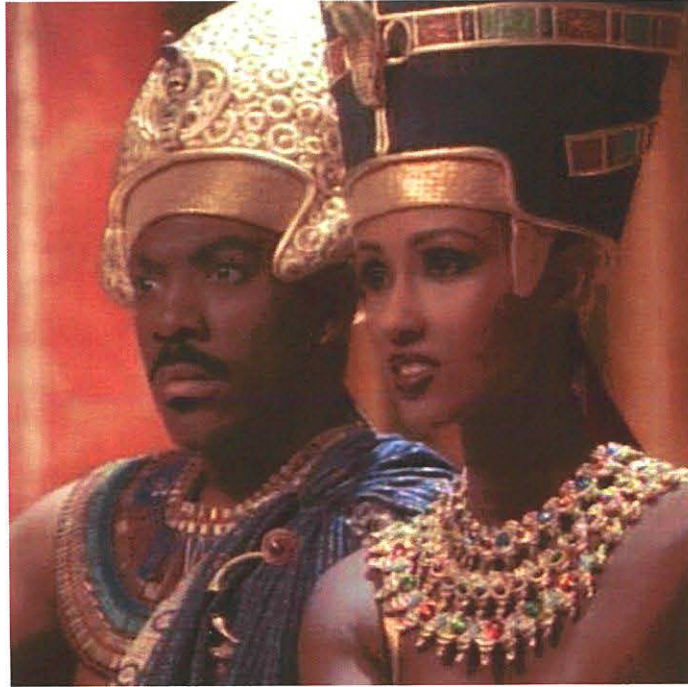
Still image from Michael Jackson's Music Video *Remember the Time*

Therefore, the "Egypt" in *No One's Wonderland* constructed by pop culture is a place that

I want to enter but cannot, except by creating an illusion. So I started by copying an

ancient Egyptian painting commonly found in tombs, and then replaced every element

with some form of pop culture imagery. I deconstructed the designs on their clothes and

replaced them with images found through Google searches using the words "design +

cloth" or "pattern." I replaced the original Egyptian patterns with these newly found

patterns and images. I also chose images that already existed in my memory, such as

optical illusion patterns, LED screens, and patterns from video game landscapes,

because the images are instantly recognizable as contemporary. When I typed in "Egypt

+ Background" in Google search, most of the results that came up were the movies and

videogames that I loved from my childhood and teenage years. This also reminded me that when I played *Super Mario Bros* I thought the game world looked like ancient Egypt, so I replaced the background of the original Egyptian painting with this particular video game background. I also experimented with the idea of digital reality versus physical reality in this panel. The idea was based on an experience I had as I was leaving my studio and could not find my keys. My first thought was to run to my computer and type the word "keys" into Google search. Then I realized how ridiculous and strange that was! It made me think about how we often find what we are looking for in the physical world with a digital replacement. For example, I chose to use Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* to replace the video game flower because when I want to see Van Gogh's paintings, I can only do so on the Internet. However, it is a digital representation but not the actual painting. As a painter, I know I am missing the details of the brushstrokes and the other trademarks of something created by hand. The experience of seeing a piece of artwork in person has a powerful intimacy; this is lost when viewing an image digitally. The flower in the video game is a digital image, so I replaced an image that we always see as digital with an image that we normally do not think of as digital. I wanted the viewer to think about reality versus digital images created by a computer. I continued confusing expectations with the video game version of the Mario mushroom painted in the style of a child's drawing, and a realistic person dressed like Mario to replace the digitized version of Mario.

I feel that my first intention during the time I was creating this first panel was to

represent all of the cultures of the world in my painting, starting with a culture other than China and the U.S. that was familiar to me. As a result, some of the selections made for different elements in the panel seem more random to me than my other choices in the rest of the painting. My ideas about the Egypt section of the painting changed in the course of creating it so the element selections do not relate as strongly as I would have liked to the conceptual ideas in the other two panels.

Chapter 7: The Virtual World of American Pop Culture

My ideas became clearer in the center panel because I knew I wanted to show my experience of being overwhelmed in the U.S. and the dreams I had before moving here. I created a background that closely resembles the early video game and movie, *Tron*, which is the one of first American pop culture products that I saw depicting the idea of digital space. I layered an image found through a direction search from Google Maps on top of the *Tron* background to represent digital pathways or a simplified image of a motherboard circuit. Much of the imagery I used has the same duality of meaning, which comes from my hypertext experience in the U.S. I make new associations through how I Google search for information and unrelated topics become related because of search results. Because of how I absorbed American pop culture in pieces, I make connections that may not occur to everyone. It is a reflection of my personal style of working in a "stream of consciousness" while painting. One example of the many instances in which I used this working method in my painting was while using imagery from the Japanese

anime movie *Ponyo*, and Indian women from the miniature painting *Garden and Cosmos* from The Royal Paintings of Jodhpur. The reason I chose two images that seem unrelated is that I was searching for different cultural images and found new similarities that I did not originally intend. Ponyo's mother dresses in clothing and adornments that are traditional Indian fashion. In the movie, Ponyo lives in the sea and the Indian women in the painting are swimming in water. From a strictly visual standpoint, these images relate to one another through clothing, water, and the action of swimming. Another example of this "stream of consciousness" method uses a character from the *Contra* video game that shoots red bullets that reminded me of the character Ponyo because of the similarities in shape and color. Then Ponyo starts to look like red petals, which reminds me of the movie, *American Beauty*, in which Lester Burham looks at the ceiling, longing for love with rose petals raining down on him. Then I thought about the character Wall-E in the movie of the same name, longing for love while watching a scene from the movie *Hello Dolly*. The scene takes place in a park with trees and that reminded me of cherry blossoms. All the pop culture's references that I see come up in my brain like my own personal Google search.

Detail of the painting *No One's Wonderland*, by Xi Zhang

As an artist, I have a complex personal history of living in two different countries and cultures to reference and use as source material in my work. I use images from pop

culture to express my experiences so as to create a dialogue between the viewer and myself, because these images are part of a visual language that we all share. While the viewer might understand the painting on a deeper level if he or she knew the personal history behind it, I do not feel that the experience of viewing the work is lessened without the information, because, like myself, each viewer is free to make his or her own associations with the imagery in the painting based on his or her unique way of looking at the world. I share my visual collection of happiness with the viewer because many of the movies, cartoons and video games that make me happy also make others happy, so our feelings are shared through cultural experiences that create a bridge between our different personal backgrounds. Through my visual language, I am still asking, "Do you like Michael Jackson?" and waiting to hear your response.