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## Chen Danqing: Painting After Tiananmen

*Ackbar Abbas*

Chen Danqing's New York studio is on Forty Second Street, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, a few steps from the urban maelstrom of Port Authority. He may not have it for much longer, as it is one of those "artist spaces" in midtown Manhattan facing demolition, to make room for the long delayed rehabilitation of Times Square. The Walt Disney Corporation is preparing to move in, and besides artists' studios, the X-rated cinema houses, video shops, and strip joints that the neighbourhood is notorious for are also being emptied out. Some porn is still there, but it coexists now with cinema houses showing family films ("the best value for money in New York City"), or video shops that the city has turned into tourist information centers. With its mix of the derelict and the opportunistic, the area exudes an aura of contradiction, depressing and exhilarating by turns. On some of the abandoned cinema marquees, long-gone come-ons like "Hot Pants" or "Freddie Kruger's Wet Dream" can still be seen, like remaindered promises; while other marquees have been appropriated, in the style of Barbara Kruger, to carry consciousness-raising slogans like "Art is Either Revolution or Plagiarism."

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Walking along Forty-Second Street, one is subject to a sensory overload which obviates the need for private fantasy. Fantasy is all on the outside, as it were, and it is just a question of catching up in imagination with what is there. Nor are such reversals of inside/outside unique to New York. Its equivalent, or some version of it, is now being produced in any number of Asian cities—Beijing, Guangzhou, Taipei, Hong Kong—cities which are going through unprecedented spatial transformations. Is it a coincidence that there is in Hong Kong a luxurious mall-cum-office block, rising almost like a Disney castle right in the midst of a rundown area of residential housing, that calls itself Times Square?

### The Space of the Triptych

To the puzzlement of some of his Chinese admirers who know him as the most outstanding realist painter of his generation and who remember his haunting series of images from Tibet, Danqing has done no painting in oil that takes New York City directly for its subject. Nevertheless, the experience of spatial disparities which I have just evoked does have an important if indirect correlate in his work, and it can be located in his use of the diptych and triptych forms. Each panel of these diptychs and triptychs is in itself quite comprehensible and recognizable, whether it is a copy of a classical painting or a media image or a newspaper photograph of events concerning Tiananmen Square. Each panel gives a detailed figuration, without the use of distortion, of some level of the “real,” in a style that has mastered the techniques of academic painting and uses them with complete assurance. Yet at the same time—and this is where the fascination begins—when you look at the panels together, the various levels do not quite add up, they do not “figure.” As the eye moves from one panel to the next, which of course is what the diptych/triptych format requires us to do, there seems to be some invisible shift of spatial grids, as if some very subtle kind of anamorphosis has occurred. *The space in between is not neutral.* It is here—as much as in the representations contained in the panels themselves—that betrayals take place and promises are broken, that minds and bodies are violated, that secret violence unfolds. The diptych/triptych format allows for this space in between, thus bringing what is usually regarded as the “outside” into the diegetic space of the painting.

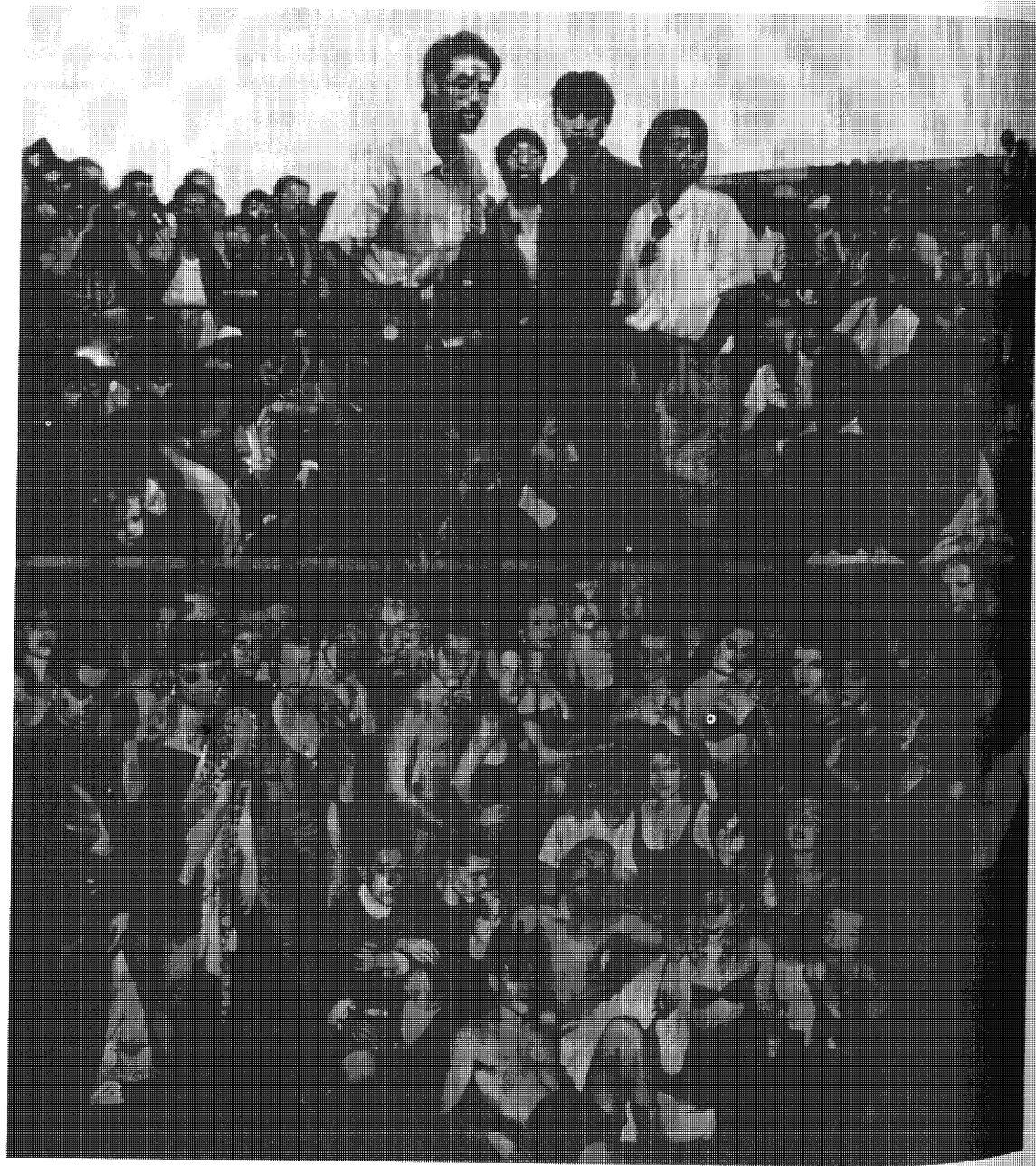
The diptych/triptych form encourages comparison, but as Danqing uses it, something happens to comparison. As we compare the positions and dispositions of human bodies between one crowded canvas and the next, the first impression might be that the panels are like mirrors for one another. For example, in one vertical diptych, *Group Portraits of Youth* (Figure 1, p. 412), the top panel shows

young Chinese students gathered in protest on Tiananmen Square, with four student leaders (who have since become well-known) standing prominently in the middle; the lower panel shows a much less soberly dressed crowd of revelers posing for a group photograph in a New York night club.

In the vertical triptych, *Body Language* (Figure 7, p. 438), each panel makes a variation on the theme not just of violence, but of violations registered on the body: whether it is the adaptation of Guercino's early seventeenth century painting *Samson Captured by the Philistines* (top panel); or an image of a woman's violation adapted from Jack Smith's film *Flaming Creatures* (middle panel); or a painting based on a newspaper photograph of some violent incident from Tiananmen Square showing in its central portion a young man being pulled out of shape (lower panel). It is also obvious that this mirroring is ironic. If each panel is a mirror for another, it is a *negative* mirror showing what is *not* there in the other panel. The mirroring is a kind of juxtapositioning which might bring to mind, say, different kinds of historical/cultural space: the old "high culture" of Europe, suggested by classical paintings; the new "pop culture" of the United States, associated with the cinematic or media image; the transformations of culture in the violent upheavals on Tiananmen Square captured in news photographs.

The stress then is on difference and incommensurability, even as the panels are held together like the different parts of a musical fugue. But there is finally something else, something that goes beyond mirrorings, juxtapositionings, and even irony. The panels are also fugues in a more special sense: not just movements organized around a theme or center, but centrifugal movements that go elsewhere. Each panel—even the "Chinese" ones—represents a flight elsewhere, just as there is something fugacious about these all so naturalistic images. The mirror becomes a fugue, in this sense of fugue as going somewhere else; fugue as a disappearance from home, not as a home base for comparison. It is this glimpse of fugacity appearing amidst the comparison and juxtaposition of images represented in full "photographic" presence that gives these panels a paradoxical quality. We will have to come back to this question of paradox when we discuss Danqing's art in detail.

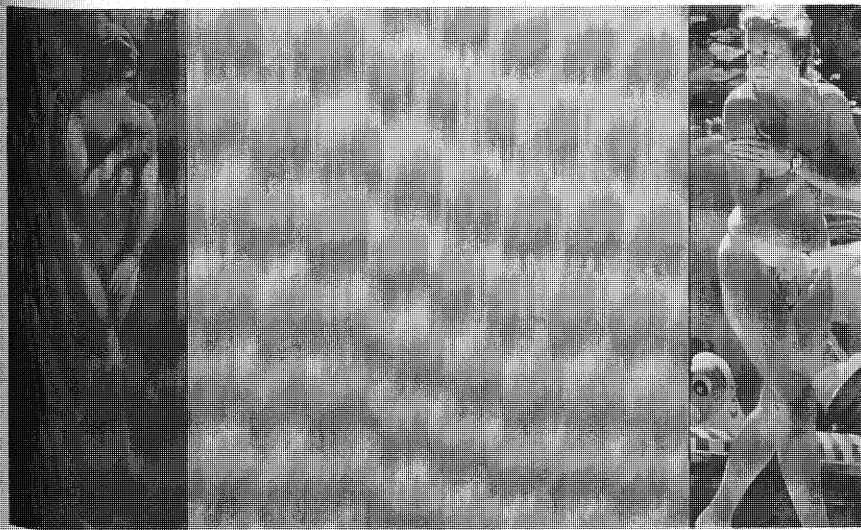
Meanwhile, a third feature of Danqing's diptychs/triptychs, their specific relation to liturgy, should be mentioned. This can be brought out by comparison with the work of a modern figurative painter he happens to admire, Francis Bacon. In a brilliant essay on Bacon, Michel Leiris finds in his work what he suggestively calls "blank liturgy," particularly in Bacon's use of the triptych form "as if for the purpose of some edifying ceremonial that has lost its content but kept the pattern of its ritual." Furthermore, Leiris associates "blank liturgy" with





**Figure 2.**  
*To Be Named #1* (1994)  
 118" x 62" Left: black  
 and white. Center: color.  
 Right: black and white.

**Figure 1.** (Left Page)  
*Group Portraits of  
 Youth* (1991) 90" x 100"  
 Top: black and white  
 tinted blue. Bottom: sepia.



**Figure 3.**  
*To Be Named #2* (1994)  
 104" x 64" Left: color.  
 Center: taupe.  
 Right: color.

that process in Bacon of stripping and paring down content "so as to retain only its naked reality," in much the same way perhaps that Samuel Beckett pares down the elements of theatre. The result is that while what we see in Bacon's paintings might look like sorry bits and pieces of modern life, banal objects and misshapen human figures, Bacon nevertheless treats "the reality he creates in his paintings as others might treat a sacred entity." "Blank liturgy" in Bacon refers therefore to how paring down promotes banal objects and figures to the level of the sacerdotal, thus blanking out differences between sacred and profane. Moreover, the particular intensity of Bacon's ritualistic paintings is achieved by what Leiris calls a "paradoxical conjunction of two procedures: a more or less marked distortion of the figures, combined with a fairly naturalistic treatment of their surroundings."

The "blank liturgy" in Danqing's diptychs and triptychs is different from Bacon's. Danqing's procedures are precisely opposite of paring down. His canvases more often than not are full and crowded, the sense of visual repletion being emphasized even more by a ruthless cropping. Hence, though the canvases are large, they seem constantly to run out of space. At the same time, the "blankness" is even more literal than in Bacon. It is not just that attention is devoted to banal figures, but that every part of the canvas is treated with equal attention. Unlike Bacon, Danqing does not use distortion. Everything is clear and visible. But if this is the case, in what does the liturgy or ritual of looking consist? It consists in the way in which Danqing's canvases involve us not just in a process of looking, but in the very different process of *looking again*.

We might begin by making another comparison, this time with the nonfigurative projects of someone like Xu Bing, a compatriot of Danqing's, with whom he has exhibited at the Williamson Gallery in Pasadena, California in 1994, even though it is the figurative work of Bacon that Danqing may be more in sympathy with. I have in mind Xu Bing's much admired installation entitled *Tianshu* (*A Book from the Sky*, originally called without false modesty, *A Mirror to Analyze the World: The Last Book of the Century*). Xu Bing's project aims at nothing less than the subversion of the Chinese written character itself, perhaps the most visible and enduring bulwark of Chinese culture and civilisation. For the project, Xu Bing made woodblock carvings of over a thousand characters, and used these blocks to print the pages of his *Tianshu*. These pages with Xu Bing's characters are bound into books or produced as huge billowing sheets which are hung from the ceiling. The twist is that all the characters are subtly unrecognizable. They look like Chinese ideograms and they contain elements that make up authentic Chinese characters; nevertheless, they are all invented characters that look deadpan real, but are unreadable. The subversion is achieved not through stripping

or paring down, but through embarking on a process of encyclopedic, exhaustive, and gigantic proportions.

These highly visible, formally printed, and familiar looking characters are literally absurd. But their absurdity also raises questions about the meaningfulness of the slogans, also highly visible and ubiquitous, that organise so much of Chinese society. What Xu Bing does with the shape of Chinese characters finds a parallel in the figurative images of Danqing's paintings, which pose in their own way the question of *how readable* are the familiar images that surround us and are so inescapably a part of our culture of the visible. In the work of both artists, though in very different ways, it is never just a question of looking, but of looking again; that is to say, of problematizing visuality through the visual itself. In this regard, looking again has some affinities to conceptualism. The important difference though is that while conceptual art problematizes the visual by directing attention *away* from visual experience, looking again works with and through the visual, to render the experience paradoxical.

What encourages, indeed requires, us to look again is the *flatness* that Danqing cultivates in his pictorial space. This is not the flatness of the picture surface associated with the figurative Pop Art style that is becoming influential in the work of contemporary Chinese painters like Wang Guangyi or Yu Youhan. Nor is this the flatness of modernist abstraction with its anti-illusionism. Rather it is a flatness located within illusionism itself: while objects and figures may be represented in the round, the flatness comes out in the painter's equal and complete devotion to whatever happens to be the object of representation—an old pair of shoes, the intricate chiaroscuro of a classical painting, the grisaille of a photograph. Another word for this devotion is—indifference. The subjects of Danqing's paintings are treated with equal attention and equal indifference, a quality that reminds us of the pointillism of Seurat.

One good example of such indifference is the diptych *Group Portraits of Youth* (Figure 1, p. 412), where on the bottom right hand corner of the upper panel and on the top left hand corner of the lower panel we find a pair of winged and chubby-faced cherubims. Courbet once said he could not paint an angel because he had never seen one. Danqing suffers no such inhibitions. The cherubims in the diptych, which by rights do not "belong" to either panel, are neither decorative nor even ironic; they are there without apologies as part of the picture. But their presence functions to level the order of representation, not just reverse the hierarchy of sacred and profane, as in Bacon. Implicitly, the various styles and forms of representation are submitted to a kind of *blind test* (as in that other ritual of wine-tasting), where established or fashionable labels like "realism" or

"photorealism" count for little. Looking therefore consists of looking at visible figures blind, which is also what gives Danqing's figures their strong *tactile* feel, as if we had to supplement looking at them by touching them. The figures often have a frozen quality to them, as if caught in a snapshot or preserved in a classical painting. Everything remains steadfastly recognizable, but it is now the space surrounding them that moves. Realism becomes paradoxical. This quality of Danqing's painting can be related to his particular use of the diptych/triptych form and what it implies (fugacity, looking again). But it must also be understood in terms of what I shall call an experience of spatial dis-location, which we can begin to approach by considering the question of photorealism in his work.

### Paradoxes of Figuration

Besides the use of diptych/triptych forms, Danqing also uses photographs, and this has led many critics to describe his work as photorealist. Danqing indeed paints from photographs, postcards, and other printed material, using these like a musician uses a musical score. But painting from photographs is by no means the same thing as photorealism. His work points to the long history of painting from photographs—from Delacroix, Courbet, Degas, through to Magritte, Bacon, and after. The significance of the photograph for these artists may vary, ranging from being an *aide-mémoire* reminding them of objects, to a radical collapsing of image and object into each other. But in these cases of artists working from the photograph, the camera eye has not quite replaced the human eye. However, the deliberate adoption of the camera eye with its alienating effect is perhaps the chief distinguishing feature of photorealism.

This point is worth emphasizing, not only because Danqing does not feel any strong affinity for photorealist art, but also because his own work follows another trajectory that needs to be carefully defined. To assimilate Danqing's work to photorealism is not only misleading, it also has the effect of foreclosure. It constructs a stereotyped progression for the artist, seeing him as moving from Socialist Realism in China to Photorealism in the United States, from working on scenes of Tibet "copied from nature," to other scenes "copied from photographs." Such an account is reductive because it largely avoids the challenge presented by the work. If Danqing's recent paintings may be puzzling to one kind of audience who do not see the point of "copying from photographs," then an audience familiar with photorealism may find them all too easy to comprehend, and this response has its own dangers. Incomprehension and too easy comprehension are both forms of noncomprehension.



Another possible reason why the photorealist label is sometimes pinned so uncritically to Danqing relates to the ideology implicit in the perennial formula of "East meets West." It is the fate it seems of every non-Western cultural practitioner, whether painter, writer, composer, or theorist, to have to endure some version of this formula. Those who resort to it are often well-intentioned if careless, because the well-worn phrase carries with it the assumption that innovative forms and methodologies always derive from the West, while all that the East can provide is subject matter, or grist for the mill. Such cultural geographies, while they seem to thematize difference, inadvertently fix cultural identities into rigid molds. They cannot respond therefore in any adequate way to the challenge to cultural identities that is one of the most significant aspects of the Tiananmen series of diptychs and triptychs. This is not to deny that there are some features of Danqing's technique, like the highly detailed and accurate reproduction of human figures, which do have something in common with photorealist techniques. What needs emphasizing though is how differently these techniques are put to use and the different issues they raise. In other words, if there is a relation to photorealism, it is more negative than positive. The label should not sidetrack us or interfere with our response to the work.

The case of Danqing is particularly complicated, but even in the case of an artist like Luo Zhongli, where the direct influence of photorealism can be documented, the situation is not entirely straightforward. Consider for example his famous painting, *My Father*, which caused such a sensation in China when it appeared in 1980. Luo happened to see the portraits of the American photorealist Chuck Close in a Chinese art magazine. He carefully studied his techniques, including the dimensions of his portraits, and applied them to a painting of an ordinary Chinese peasant. But even in this case where we can document a direct influence, the visual point is very different. American photorealism has to be understood in the context of the return to figuration and easel painting that followed on from modernist abstraction, performance art, conceptualism, and so on.

Not surprisingly, photorealist figuration retains something of this recent history of nonfigurative art: photorealist figures always have something uncanny about them. In the work of Chuck Close, Richard Estes, and Malcolm Morley, adoption of the sharp focus of the camera eye produces an eerie effect of absence and abstraction—illustrating Karl Kraus's remark that the more closely you look at an object, the more distantly it looks back at you, or Baudrillard's theory of the "hyperreal." There are no such uncanny effects in Luo's portrait. The surprise comes from the fact that Luo has produced a portrait of a peasant on a scale usually reserved for important political leaders, and from the fact that he has

deromanticised the figure from the poses Socialist Realism confers on it: every magnified feature of the peasant's face, said to be modeled after a manure collector's, merely proclaims his ordinariness. In other words, photorealist *techniques* were another means of recognizing and celebrating the presence of the peasant, everybody's "father." What we do not find however is that peculiar photorealist *effect*: the hide-and-seek of presence/absence. The cultural space of China in the 1980s gives photorealism a very different inflection than in the United States.

If this is already true in the case of Luo Zhongli's *The Father*, it is even more true of the recent work of Danqing where the relation between painting and cultural space is so much more complex. The visual difference can be suggested by pointing to the latter's use of the diptych/triptych forms; but what is more important to understand is the spatial experience which these forms mediate and from which they derive. It is, as I shall show in some detail, a new and specific experience of exile and deterritorialization, of dis-location in both a psychic and geographic sense. To grasp such a space, which is fast becoming the space of so many of us, wherever we come from, it is necessary first of all to jettison rigid notions of East and West either as meaningful points of reference or as putative proofs of identity.

Even more importantly, dis-location should not be regarded as a pathetic condition; on the contrary, it creates the circumstances under which new kinds of work can begin. "To flee," as Deleuze and Guattari say, "but in fleeing to seek a weapon." Or better still, to turn the space of flight itself into a weapon, to turn flight into insight. Working in such a space results in a number of paradoxes. Part of the fascination of Danqing's work, its power to disturb, comes from the paradox of how we are made to feel a space of dis-location by means of figural forms which eschew the use of distortion. The figures are at the same time set up in and upset by a problematic space, and this creates the exact opposite of a sense of *déjà vu*; it creates the tension that invites us to *look again*. Another paradox of dis-location: how to grasp the fact that in a very real sense the road from Tibet to Tiananmen Square in Danqing's work passes through Times Square? To follow such a trajectory, we need a cultural history that has yet to be written.

With some of these considerations in mind, let us try to trace the relation of Danqing's work in China to the New York work, and more generally, see how his project can be understood. Before he left China for New York in 1982, and after an early period of hardship during which he survived by painting innumerable portraits in oil of Chairman Mao and decorating coffins, Danqing became well-known for his series of Tibetan paintings which were contemporaneous with Luo Zhongli's *My Father*. Danqing began the Tibetan series, on which his fame in

China rested, in 1979–80, and it represented his graduate work at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts. These paintings are notable in that they seem to adopt a self-consciously apolitical posture which departs from the ideals of Socialist Realism. They even seem to mark a departure from Danqing's own use of Tibetan subjects in earlier works, like the famous *September 9, 1976* which depicts Tibetans mourning the death of Mao, a painting that has been reproduced many times in Chinese art magazines. However, a comparison of this "political" 1976 work with the "apolitical" Tibetan series only shows how complexly mediated a term like "political" is, especially in China: there is in fact much in the 1976 work that looks forward to the Tibetan series.

The original Chinese title of *September 9, 1976* was *Leishui saman fengshou-tian* (*Tears falling in the harvest field*). It shows in full face and in profile a group of Tibetan peasants—men, women, and children—in various postures, apparently taking a break from work in the fields. Roughly in the middle of the picture is a standing male figure holding a transistor radio. Only the title of the painting provides a clue to what is happening. September 9, 1976 was the day Chairman Mao died, and this group of peasants, like everybody else in China, is listening to the news of his death. Formally speaking, this gives the painting a narrative point not found in the Tibetan series, but the remarkable thing is that the absence or presence of a narrative element hardly matters even in this work. The painting's nondramatic depiction of this crucial event, the quietly individualized expressions on the peasants' faces, the emphasis on the everyday and the ordinary, are what make it striking and point it forward to the Tibetan series. These images may still be identified with Socialist Realism in that the subject matter is the same; but for Chinese viewers at the time, what was fresh and indeed radical about them was that the *content* that emerged was somehow already different, introducing the possibility of another kind of realist space. They showed how there could be a realism that could dispense with the tiresome shibboleths of officially sanctioned art—the requirements of typicality, didacticism, political correctness.

To put it another way, the new thing these paintings explored was *what art could do without*. In this respect at least, these early paintings could be compared to the early writings of Liu Sola, the Chinese writer and composer, in spite of their different mediums and social contexts, Liu Sola's being the much more urban sensibility. A text like her *You Have No Choice* (1984) is remarkable for the way in which it could dispense with most of what were considered at the time to be essentials of good literature, a plot, uplifting characters, clear moral direction, keeping only the inflection of a voice that could be by turns insolent and vulnerable, but always credible. But both artists, exploring what art could

do without, struck a chord with Chinese audiences tired of orthodox pieties, and became cult figures in the 1980s. From time to time, Liu Sola's work has been accused of "decadence" and "spiritual pollution"; it is more accurate to say that both her writing and her music follow another cadence, a de-cadence. Like Liu Sola, Danqing too does not turn away from the destructive – that is to say, contestatory – side of culture.

In the Tibetan series, "content" appears as what is surprising, as what we are not expecting. However, it does not mean simply the unmediated "real." In this regard, an important aspect of the content of the Tibetan series needs to be discussed: its relation to Millet. Danqing has been called, inaccurately, "the Chinese Millet." What then is this relation to Millet? John Berger says of Millet that his achievement was to have introduced a new subject matter to the old idiom of oil paint, "the peasant as individual *subject*," and explains Millet's ultimate but magnificent failure in terms of the ideological resistance of the medium to the subject matter, its built-in elitism. A Chinese artist, however, does not need Millet to establish the peasant as individual subject.

The presence of Millet in Danqing's Tibetan work served another purpose. It had less to do with subject matter than with oil paint, with the status of the medium itself within the discourse of Chinese modernism. Ever since the 1920s, oil painting in China was associated with modernism and was not seen as an old medium. However, the major direction that oil painting took was laid down by Xu Beihong, who rejected the modernism of Renoir, Cézanne, and Matisse and advocated a form of academic realism. The interest in post-impressionism and Fauvism shown by Lin Fengmian was overshadowed by the Xu Beihong line, which after 1949 meshed with the tenets of Russian Socialist Realism. Art then embarked on its career of serving politics and building the socialist state. In this context, paintings that portrayed the Tibetan peasant in the manner of Millet were not a direct challenge to prevailing orthodoxy – who could criticize realism as style and the peasant as subject matter? – but more subtly subversive: an alternative modernism where the very absence of political content was also politics.

It was the politics of looking for a *space elsewhere*. This elsewhere was not simply Tibet itself, though it included it. It was essentially the promise of oil as medium which opened up a space in which different kinds of images could emerge. In these Tibetan images, the figure of the peasant in the manner of Millet finds a space outside officialdom. It was this implicit conflict of realisms, this composition of an image that was also a de-composition of more established images that made these early paintings exciting, and not to be confused with the institution of a "rural realism" by the imitators of Danqing's style.

The Tibetan paintings prepare us for the New York work insofar as they already recognize the play of styles in the representation of objects, even when objects themselves are so emphatically foregrounded as in realism. That is why we can speak of the conflict of realisms, one effect of which is to cast doubt on the directness of visual experience. The next step, which we can witness in the New York work, is what we might call the *textualization of the figure*, one sure sign of which is the growing importance of the Museum as a source of images; the Museum as a kind of second nature on the point of supplanting in importance nature itself. In his essay, "Fantasia of the Library," Michel Foucault has given us the classic formulations of these marks of modernity with reference to Manet and Flaubert:

Flaubert is to the library what Manet is to the museum. They both produced works in a self-conscious relationship to earlier paintings or texts—or rather to the aspect in painting or writing that remains indefinitely open. They erect their art within the archive . . . every painting now belongs within the squared and massive surface of painting and all literary works are confined to the indefinite murmur of writing. Flaubert and Manet are responsible for the existence of books and paintings within works of art. (pp. 92–93)

In this "new imaginative space," Foucault points out, something happens to the fantastic and the imaginary, which now begins to have a closer relationship to books, scholarship, and erudition than to the irrational:

This domain of phantasms is no longer the night, the sleep of reason, or the uncertain void that stands before desire, but, on the contrary, wakefulness, untiring attention, zealous erudition, and constant vigilance. . . . The imaginary now resides between the book and the lamp. The fantastic is no longer a property of the heart, nor is it found among the incongruities of nature; it evolves from the accuracy of knowledge, and its treasures lie dormant in documents. Dreams are no longer summoned with closed eyes, but in reading; and a true image is now a product of learning: it derives from words spoken in the past, exact recensions, the amassing of minute facts, monuments reduced to infinitesimal fragments, and the reproductions of reproductions. In the modern experience, these elements contain the power of the impossible. Only the assiduous clamor created by repetition can transmit to us what only happened once. (pp. 90–91)

The Museum then, as Foucault understands it, refers not only to textualization but also to a number of new and paradoxical conjunctions of what are usually thought of as opposites: conjunctions between art and the archive, the unique and the repetitive, imagination and erudition.

When we examine Danqing's recent paintings, we will see how many of these features of textualization and the Museum are found in his work. Moreover, perspectives like Foucault's help explain Danqing's practice of "copying," his use of artworks from the history of European art, the carefulness and detail, i.e., the "erudition" of his imagination, and so on. But to stop here would be misleading, because it would simply suggest how far this Chinese artist has "caught up" with contemporary art. We need to consider another history that will allow us to situate these art historical features of Danqing's work in a different way; it is not just a question of noting the problematic of textualization in Danqing's work, it is also a question of placing it.

A brief comparison with the paintings in monochrome of the American artist and friend of Danqing, Mark Tansey, is useful for approaching this second question. In Tansey's figurative work, the figure is very clearly textualized, to such an extent that the category of nature has been completely and wittily exploded. In its place are the Museum and the Library. For example, his monochrome painting of 1981, *The Innocent Eye Test*, shows a group of museum officials clinically unveiling a portrait of a pair of bulls by Paulus Potter, the seventeenth-century sentimental portraitist of bulls and horses. In front of this picture-within-a-picture is a huge bull whose "innocent eye" is being tested, while next to it is another smaller picture-within-a-picture, a version of Claude Monet's *Haystack*. The ironic title of Tansey's painting, the intertextual references to Potter and Monet, the structure of the viewer looking at a painting of a bull looking at Potter's painting of bulls, which points to different levels or allegories of reading—all these place Tansey's figurations in the playful field of textuality. Allusions to literary theory are everywhere. It is as if Tansey were determined to give a figurative form to the elusive aporias of deconstructive argument, which incidentally serves to bring out the humorous side of deconstruction. For example, another monochrome shows two figures locked in mortal combat on the edge of a precipice against a bluish background of misty mountains, an image clearly based on the famous illustration in the Conan Doyle books depicting the final struggle between Holmes and Dr. Moriarty. On closer scrutiny, we find that the "mountain" has a text inscribed in it; in fact, the mountain is a text, some pages from that modern classic of deconstructive criticism, Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight*. So much then for wild nature: it is the high ground of reading and

perception that presents real hazards. *Derrida Queries de Man* (the painting's title) just before both are *mise-en-abyme* presumably by each other.

Tansey's work can be seen as one attractive example of the ambiguous return to figuration in contemporary art after a period of modernist antifiguration. This return to figuration has received a wide range of commentary in recent years by critics like Donald Kuspit and Benjamin Buchloh, who greet the phenomenon with different degrees of approval and disapproval. Thomas McEvilley has called this reappearance of figuration *The Exile's Return*, the title of his book of essays on contemporary art. The exile returns in different guises: accompanied by the alienating camera-eye as in photorealism; as a species of neo-expressionism in the recent German paintings of Georg Baselitz, Sigmar Polke, and Anselm Kiefer; in neo-classical shape, as in Carlo Maria Mariani; or under the sign of textuality, as in Mark Tansey. In all these cases of a return to figuration, figuration neither means nor looks the same.

Danqing's New York paintings are figurative, and in a way that cannot escape entirely from this history of contemporary art in Europe and America. We have noted a logic of the Museum and a textualization of the figure in his work that make it comparable to Mark Tansey's. But it cannot be too strongly emphasized that this work must also be seen and understood in relation to another history which will cast everything in a very different light. To begin with, in the modernist culture of China, nature is more an ambiguous than an exploded concept. This is apparent in the new Chinese cinema, in the work of its international filmmakers like Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. For example, in Chen's early film *Yellow Earth*, modernist montage techniques highlight rather than downplay the natural setting, which continues to play a dominant historical role: mountains are mountains and not texts. Only in a recent film like *Farewell My Concubine* does history begin to be coded in cultural rather than natural forms, namely the forms and artifices of Chinese opera. It takes more effort accordingly for nature to become second nature in Danqing — as indeed it has done — because it goes so much against the cultural grain.

Furthermore, modern Chinese oil painting, because it was working largely under the aegis of realism and the exigencies of societal modernization, never got rid entirely of figuration. Because of this, while textualization of the figure clearly distinguishes Danqing's work from traditional Chinese realism, at the same time, textualization in this work cannot be seen in terms of a history of art that has exiled figuration and that now allows it to return. It can only be understood in the following terms: not as preparing the way for an exiled figuration to return, but as giving a figurative form to the *experience of exile*. In other

words, textualization allows the figure to be both there and elsewhere, and works together with the fugal-as-flight of the diptych/triptych form. This conjuncture of figuration and the experience of exile is crucial, rather than that of figuration and literary theory.

Exile then is this other history, this contemporary history other than the history of art. However, to see exile as contemporary history, we must free it from the vaguely sentimental pathos of diaspora, which would implicate us still in the imaginary geography of an older imperialism with its localized centers and margins, and connect it with the specific experiences of spatial disparity and cultural dis-location. In Danqing's New York work, exile is *in the work*; it is not what the work speaks about. It has to be distinguished from those examples of "Art in exile" which all too often speak of exile in a self-serving way. *His textualization of the figure joins the experience of the Museum/Library to the experience of dis-location.* The tacit rule is to speak tacitly of one experience only in terms of the other. The greater the sense of dis-location, the more detailed, meticulous, and erudite the work; in much the same way that, sometimes, the more precise and individual the feeling, the more it expresses itself in the copy.

This experience of exile as cultural/spatial dis-location inevitably brings up the question of Tiananmen and the multiple implications of "painting after Tiananmen," and can best be discussed in those works that include scenes from Tiananmen; but it is documented even in the two triptychs which do not have any overt political references in them, and which seem to exemplify only the problematic of the Museum and that other museum without walls, the media. We can begin by looking at these. They seem to lie apart from the Tiananmen series but are intimately related to it. They can also be seen as companion pieces, as the structural function of the central panels turns out to be very similar.

The first of these triptychs, *To Be Named #1* (Figure 2, p. 413), has as its central panel a copy of Millet's famous painting *The Gleaners* (1857), which shows three women in a field bending down to pick wheat. In Danqing's version, the top part of Millet's painting has been cropped, so that much of the sky and the crows in it have been removed. The result is that greater attention is directed to the human figures than to the milieu. This central panel is flanked and dwarfed by two larger ones, painted after black and white photographs from *Bazaar*, a fashion magazine. They show an elegantly androgynous model in a flowing black dress, bending over to pick seashells on a beach, in poses remarkably similar to those of Millet's peasant women. Before we discuss this juxtaposition of Millet and *Bazaar*, consider first the status of the Millet in this triptych, which is very different from the use of Millet in the early work. No attempt is made here to



update or to adapt a style. Millet is not drawn into the painter's own figurations (which no longer exist as such), but copied exactly and hence held at a distance. It has the same status as it has hanging in the Louvre: of a Museum piece that must be carefully preserved. Millet's painting does not signify an image from nature, but is used as an example of second nature. It alludes to the fact that, as Danqing says, "We never see with our own eyes."

Here the spirit of Manet (at least as Foucault explained him) is more evident than that of Millet, marking a change in visual experience. Vision is mediated or "damaged"; and the care expended on preservation is a displaced indication of the extent of the damage. The careful copy we might say is a means of keeping up appearances; it defines the rules of behaviour in second nature, the appropriate forms of courtesy. This special sense of courtesy is important, because it frees the triptych from moralizing. The juxtaposition of Millet and *Bazaar* may suggest a number of moral contrasts, like the world of work versus the world of leisure, the different relations between body and clothes, nature set against the artifice of fashion, and so on. But to insist too much on these contrasts, which are obvious enough, would be to read the triptych as a kind of Eisensteinian montage, where irony goes together with moral tendentiousness.

Danqing prefers to say that the juxtapositions are "not true," they are not even his. They result merely from chance and the workings of memory, from a chance remembering of dispersed bodily experiences, where the perception of a similitude merely initiates a flow of memory. "What is true in second nature?" asks Danqing. And one is tempted to answer for him, appropriating Adorno's words on psychoanalysis—nothing is true except the exaggerations. In other words, nothing is true except the experience of spatial dis-location. And such a dis-location has in turn an important effect on subjectivity. The painter who paints these images with such care and devotion does not own them. They neither belong to him nor do they express him. There is no hint of the *expressionistic* in any of these paintings, no matter how violent some of the images may be, as is the case with the Tiananmen series. At the "heart" of these panels is a blank space, to be named.

In the next triptych, *To Be Named, #2* (Figure 3, p. 413), the theme of exile is more directly staged. The left panel is painted after the early fifteenth century fresco by Masaccio, *Adam and Eve Driven from Paradise*, one of a number of marvelous frescoes decorating the walls of the Brancacci Chapel in Florence. In the panel, the top part of Masaccio's fresco, which shows a stern but sympathetic Angel in red with a sword hovering over Adam and Eve, has been left out except for a red patch in the top left-hand corner. Also left out are the vine leaves added

later to the fresco for the sake of propriety, and only one-half of the figure of Adam is included. Attention is focused on Eve, one hand covering her breasts, the other her genitals, her face a contorted mask of guilt, shame, and suffering. The background remains simple and symbolic: the brown of the earth, the blue of the sky, the red of the Angel all dramatise the successful conjugation of religion and humanism in Renaissance Italy.

On the right hand panel of this triptych is a copy of a notorious tabloid photograph of Fergie, the Duchess of York, caught topless beside a swimming pool by some paparazzo while she was vacationing in the United States with her Texan financial advisor. Her arms are crossed to cover her breasts and her head turned to one side, more in surprise than guilt. Her whole posture strikingly resembles Masaccio's Eve. The background, as often happens in snapshots, consists of accidental and garish details, the most conspicuous being an inflated vinyl toy with a big, red-encircled eye leering up at the Duchess, like a surrogate for the leering photographer who invades the privacy of celebrities for the titillation of the masses. As with the previous triptych, one finds a number of ironic contrasts. If Masaccio's fresco is the representation of an event that marks the beginning of human history as such, then the tabloid photo represents that increasingly common phenomenon, the inflation of the nonevent which accompanies what some postmodernists call "the end of history" and whose symbol might be the inflated toy with the leering eye. While Adam and Eve are exiled from the House of God, Fergie may only be exiled from the House of Windsor.

Can we say therefore that in marking the distance between these two "exiles," the triptych gives us a history of moral space with a trope of decline? Not quite, because there is still the central panel to consider, by far the largest of the three, and it is blank. How to read this blank panel? Structurally it not only occupies the same central position as the Millet in the other triptych, but it also has a similar role. Its blankness invades the space of the left and right panels, and allows a *distancing* from the moral milieu of either. However, while the blankness of the central panel may suggest keeping a distance from both left and right panels, it is neither neutral nor negative. Rather the blankness makes it, as the title precisely indicates, a space *to be named*. This blankness is crucial. It suggests that ethics is different from a morality that names rights and wrongs, that there could still be an ethics after all moralities—whether derived from Renaissance humanism or from the frivolity of media culture—have exhausted themselves. Such an ethics—an ethics of exile, one might say—is one link between these two triptychs and the Tiananmen series.

The two triptychs just discussed came at the end of a series of diptychs and triptychs that began with the shock of Tiananmen. Let's backtrack a little in order to situate this important moment.

For some years after Danqing arrived in New York in 1982, he could not do any major work. Reasons could be found for this, like the difficulties of adapting to a new environment or the absence of a studio big enough for him to execute the paintings he had in mind. But these are insufficient and cannot hide that something was in the way, some creative block that had to be removed before new work could begin. It is possible to say now, after the event, that it was a matter of learning how to work again not only in a new environment but in a new space, of learning how to see again not only in a new city but from a new perspective. Meanwhile Danqing visited the art galleries of New York, and made copies of western masterpieces in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His work during this period was of three kinds, all of which he had done before in China.

The first kind consisted of small-scale oil studies of everyday objects—"still lives" in the realist manner—as if the question posed to them was whether there *still* was life in the objects around us. The best examples of these are the two pieces, *Boots* (1987), and the smaller but more finely executed *Boots* (1988). They remind us more than a little of those boots by Van Gogh, in the footsteps of which these latter-day boots are trying to follow. Another kind of work were the hundreds of quick pencil sketches done of people in the subway, in the park, in theatres, or go-go bars. Some of these sketches would later be elaborated on at home, and sometimes watercolours would be added to them. Looking back now, there seems to be something fragmentary about both types of work, something missing. The choice was between painting a small selection of objects that could be studied at close range over a period of time; or a wide variety of clothes and faces that could only be observed fleetingly and at a distance. In either case, something seems to have been compromised, perhaps as a result of some damage in the processes of visual perception itself. Though the small oils and the sketches were accomplished enough in their own right, they still seem like just so many ways of marking time. The third type of work was even more unsatisfactory. Danqing continued to produce for a while large-scale paintings on Tibetan subjects for a New York gallery, drawing either on his earlier work or on photographs and sketches. But unlike the Tibetan series, these paintings gave no intimations of a space elsewhere. It was rather the *intimidations* of such a space that now

produced an anxious desire to revisit more familiar territory, to revisit in the sense of to revise and to resite.

The first innovative work in oil that Danqing painted in New York was begun as a response to the Tiananmen massacre. It was a triptych—his first use of the form—called *June 1989, China* (Figure 4, p. 431). After this, a major series of diptychs and triptychs followed, and in each of these (with the exception of the last two in the series which we have discussed) there is one panel depicting a scene from Tiananmen based on a news photograph. Even the large work that he has finished, a ten-panel installation called *Still Life* (1995), has as its central panel a Tiananmen scene painted after a Peter Turnley photograph of a burnt tank and crushed bicycles. The crucial question that we have all the while been leading up to is the significance of Tiananmen in Danqing's recent and major work. Tiananmen is obviously a catalyst to new work for Danqing, but in what sense?

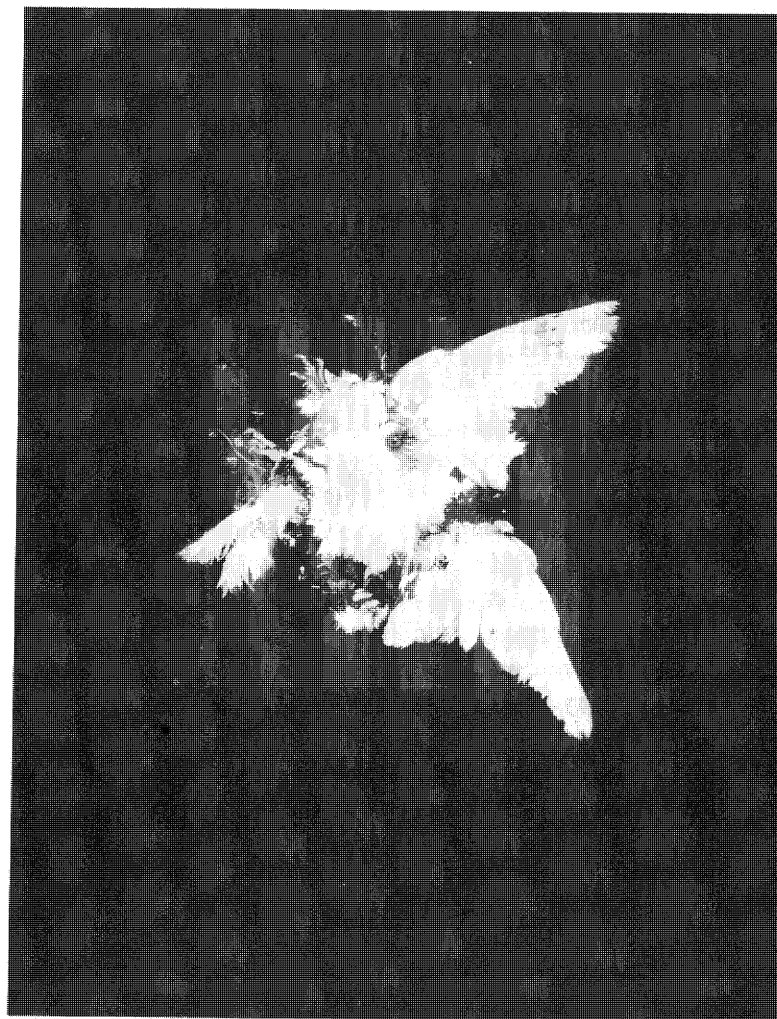
Like almost every Chinese person in the world—whether in China, in Europe and America, in Hong Kong—Danqing's initial reaction to Tiananmen was one of disbelief. The spectacle of the authorities sending in the tanks of the People's Liberation Army against its own people was seen as an act of betrayal, the breaking of a promise. But for Danqing the painter, Tiananmen had another consequence as well, and precipitated a crisis of another kind. It was a crisis centered on the question of whether painting itself would also break its promises, namely, the question of why in the elsewhere of New York, no new images had yet emerged. June 1989 for Danqing was therefore a double crisis, a moment when the political crisis and the artistic crisis exacerbated each other. This extreme situation could easily give rise to depression, self-pity, and empty rhetoric, unless a kind of transformation took place. In Danqing's case, the transformation developed roughly along the following lines: Tiananmen confirmed in the most graphic manner possible the reality of exile and spatial dis-location, but it made it plain as well that doing work now meant learning how to operate under these conditions of damaged vision and shattered beliefs, because no other ground was available.

Dis-location now must be understood not simply as the displacement from one site (China) to another (the United States), but as a generalized sense of ungroundedness, a sense of the problematic nature of *all* locations. This allows us to see as well that the plain phrase "painting after Tiananmen" refers not just to visual reportage and moral condemnation, but holds its own paradoxes. In the first place, it is after Tiananmen that Tiananmen became the subject of Danqing's paintings, but in two different senses: first as subject matter, but also as a transformation of the painter's subjectivity. The two senses are interdependent. It requires

the extreme experience of Tiananmen to transform subjectivity, at the same time as it is only a transformed subject that can deal with the extreme nature of the experience without sentimentality. Art is always extreme, or as Nietzsche would say, tragic. Only an extreme art could evoke the *sensation* of Tiananmen. Anything less than the extreme would produce only *sensationalism*. After Tiananmen also refers to Danqing's predilection for copying, that is to say, for reproducing the infidelities of faithful appearances. Finally, it is after Tiananmen that Danqing began to use the diptych/triptych form, which, working together with copying, so powerfully evokes the groundless, shifting, paradoxical cultural spaces of today. Let us turn now to the paintings of the Tiananmen series.

Danqing painted *June 1989, China* very much under the immediate impact of Tiananmen. It is making a statement both about Tiananmen and about painting and is Danqing's first use of the triptych form. Measuring ninety by forty inches, it is also the smallest of the triptychs. Though this can be said to be the painting that initiates the series, it gives us only a glimpse of what was to follow. The potential of the subject, in the double sense of subject matter and form, had yet to be realized. The central panel is divided into forty-eight squares and except for one square showing a clutching hand, it is a portrait gallery of faces. Some of these faces we will see again in subsequent diptychs and triptychs. These faces—serious, smiling, grimacing in pain—are those of the young who are presented as the heroes and victims of Tiananmen. By contrast, the left and right panels each contain one sole image, dramatically surrounded by very wide black margins which give the whole triptych an obituary tone. The panel on the left shows a smashed up and bloody white dove; that on the right, the tranquil face of an old peasant woman.

While the triptych does have a certain emotional directness to it, the emotion is presented a little too rhetorically. To put this another way, there is more subject matter than subject. The intensity of the subject matter has not been matched by a transformation of subjectivity. This shows itself in the handling of the triptych form, in the way in which the irony of the symbolism comes across as a little too obvious and ready-made: heroes and victims in the portrait gallery; a peaceful movement brutally crushed and repressed in the image of the bloody dove; and in the image of the old peasant woman, the difficulty of arousing the rest of China from its lethargy, which is what allowed these events to happen in the first place. The sentiments are strongly expressed, we might even agree with them, but they are expressed through symbolic means that do not dislocate. One panel supports the argument of the next, there is no sense of a fugal movement that takes us elsewhere, or any sense of a problematic space in between.





**Figure 4.**

*June 1989, China (1989-90)*

90" x 40"

Left: black background with color image.

Center: color.

Right: black background with color image.

Paradoxically, because the triptych is so single-mindedly focused on Tiananmen and China (though this is understandable under the circumstances), it does not go far enough. What we miss is the kind of extremism and devotion to the real (even if the real is no more than a fanciful image of cherubims), whose marks we have analyzed as flatness and indifference. These criticisms of this first attempt at a triptych, we should note, are made on the basis of what Danqing was able to achieve in later works. In these works, the subject of Tiananmen is presented in another way, through a different understanding of the space of the diptych and triptych, which allows for a different and surprising relationship between the images in each panel.

The work then that could more accurately be said to inaugurate the series is the second work, a diptych entitled *Expressions* (Figure 5, p. 433) which was completed in 1991. It shows quite clearly how Danqing's painting looks after the experience of Tiananmen has been absorbed into the painting. We see this in its greater power to disturb and provoke. The right panel painted in colour shows a group of young people trying to carry a wounded, perhaps already dead comrade from the battlefield. Held up by the arms, his whole head and body are slumped forward, his shirt soaked with blood. The left panel is painted after an old black and white photograph of some flamenco dancers, showing four men in various poses moving around a stout woman. Compared to *June 1989, China*, the relation between images and the way they move between the panels of the diptych is much more complex. Unlike the earlier triptych, the images in this diptych have different tonalities, they derive from different sources, and there is a sense of accident or coincidence in their juxtapositioning that produces a note of dissonance.

It is essential, however, not to read this dissonance as a form of satire or irony that contrasts the seriousness of events in China to the frivolity and decadence of the West. Such a view does not stay long enough with the details of the diptych and so misses what is most interesting. When we look at the details, what we see is a striking resemblance not only between the postures of these two groups but also between their facial expressions. For example, the modeling of the face of the flamenco dancer in the top right hand corner of the left panel, and the Chinese face nearest to him in the adjoining panel, is almost identical. While irony is registered as a *contrast* in meaning, dissonance is registered, and registered precisely, in the perception of accidental *similarities*. The yoking together of *the precise and the accidental* is a very important characteristic of Danqing's style and we will have occasion to note it again in other work.





But consider for now what is signified in these accidental similarities. They point to the hard fact that there is a limit beyond which the human face and body will not go. The face will stretch only so far even if it is stretched in a grimace of excruciating pain; the body will bend only so much even if it is dead or broken. It is this existence of a limit to what can be seen or expressed that makes visual experience so problematic, especially at critical moments. This is why there is also a limit beyond which Danqing's paintings will not go: call it his realism, the courtesy of wanting to keep up appearances, which saves *Expressions* from being expressionistic. Hence while many of Danqing's human figures are severely contorted, they are never distorted. As I stated earlier, there is no use whatever

**Figure 5.**  
*Expressions*  
(1991)  
90" x 80"  
Left: black  
and white  
tinted blue.  
Right: color.

of distortion in his work. This fact relates to what Danqing calls his interest in content. The key point here is that it is the observation of limits that turns content into something very powerful and challenging.

Content has to be distinguished from *ideas* of content: thus what we see in the right panel of *Expressions* is first something red before it is blood; what we see on faces are first expressions before they are expressions of something. Content in this sense has an effect of suspension which in the end is more destabilizing than irony. This suspension of meaning allows the images in the different panels to move across and invade each other's space, and these dis-locations upset our understanding of "sameness" and "difference." The same is not the same: the same grimace expresses a moment in the dance and a moment in a life-and-death struggle, moments which are not the same. The different is not different: the different states of physical exhilaration and pain produce a grimace which is not all that different from the other. It is as if some basic ground rules have been broken, as if some rupture has taken place, whether it is the final rupture of belief in a political system, or in the logic of seeing, or in our sense of what constitutes certainty.

Painting after Tiananmen consists of more than using Tiananmen as subject matter that is represented or documented. It is content in the sense I have described and it is the diptych form. It is dissonance rather than irony. It is the visual challenge of Danqing's painting itself with its own special relation to representation and documentation. And need we add that this sense of limits is also a form of extremism?

We can test some of these observations by turning to the next work Danqing painted in 1991, the vertical diptych *Group Portraits of Youth* (Figure 1, p. 412) which we have briefly introduced above. Like *Expressions*, the diptych shows two groups of people, in this case students gathered on Tiananmen Square and young people gathered at a New York nightclub. There is no depiction of violence. Color is subdued: the top panel is in black and white, the lower one in sepia tones. Once again, we should not belabor the ironic contrasts between Chinese "idealism" and New York decadence—irony is always the most obvious point—but should focus rather on the breakdown of these ironic binaries which would too neatly separate the space of the two panels. More so even than in *Expressions*, this separation is quite clearly violated as we see one raised hand with three upturned fingers playfully projecting from the lower panel into the space of the upper one; and even more playfully, those two pairs of cherubims, modeled after Valesquez, wandering from out of nowhere into the space of both panels. All the while the two panels look like photographs and there is no use of distortion.

But once again, it is as if something has happened, elsewhere; as if the ground rules by which sameness and difference are decided and which allow irony to hold have been broken; leaving us with a dis-located space where, paradoxically, *appearances remain intact*. How to conceptualize such a space? Perhaps the most appropriate way would be to compare it to a joke, specifically, a type of joke that works precisely by not disturbing appearances.

The type of joke I have in mind is what Freud in his treatise, *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious*, classified as the "skeptical joke." Freud himself was very uneasy about this type of joke and gives us only this one example:

Jews met in a railway carriage at a station in Galicia. "Where are you going?" asked one. "To Cracow," was the answer. "What a liar you are!" broke out the other. "If you say you're going to Cracow, you want me to believe you're going to Lenberg. But I know that in fact you're going to Cracow. So why are you lying to me?"

We find many examples of such jokes in the comedies of the Marx Brothers. It is in fact the trademark of Groucho's humour. In *Duck Soup*, Groucho says at one point: "This man looks like an idiot and acts like an idiot—but this should in no way deceive you: he *is* an idiot!" Or take that other famous exchange "You remind me of Emmanuel Ravelli." "But I am Emmanuel Ravelli." "No wonder, then, that you resemble him so much!"

What relates this type of joke to Danqing's paintings is the *vertigo of resemblance*, the disorientations of blankness. It is this blankness however that made Freud uneasy, because it threatens to bring about not just the destruction of this or that, but a general obliteration of both sameness and difference. Hence Freud's moody conclusion was that this kind of joke attacks "not a person or an institution, but the certainty of our knowledge itself, one of our speculative possessions." After citing this one example of the skeptical joke, Freud forgets about it and goes on with his project of investigating the knowledge of unconscious processes that can be gleaned from jokes, a project that the skeptical joke threatens to undermine.

This discussion of jokes brings us back to some important aspects of "painting after Tiananmen." If the skeptical joke signified for Freud a crisis of certainty, so too did Tiananmen for many of us today, which in a much more graphic way obliterated so many certainties. But then, not all certainties deserve to be preserved. This is where the nihilistic comedy of Groucho Marx is so salutary, because in its happy abandonment of dead certainties, in its antinecrophilia, in its refusal to drape tragedy in tragic poses, it moves us on to some new space



where work can begin again. This is also what can be said about Danqing's Tiananmen paintings with their vertigo of resemblance, and the new space that he found with the diptych/triptych form. He could do paintings after Millet, Guercino, or David Turnley because he was painting after Tiananmen. These paintings, it should be clearly noted, are not works of "protest": they are worse. They follow a more complicated and less self-serving political agenda than many paintings that pass for works of protest. That is why it is not possible to assimilate Danqing's project to the project of those increasingly numerous celebrities of exile who speak of "democracy" and "the overthrow of Chinese repression" dressed in business suits complete with braces and newly acquired American accents.

Politics in Danqing's paintings is not an isolated phenomenon, but intimately connected to the rest of social and affective life. We can follow some of these connections by making one final set of observations about the Tiananmen series, revolving around important questions of memory: the politics of memory, the memory of the body, the memory in images themselves. I shall consider these themes of memory by looking in a more synoptic way at the paintings we have not yet discussed, beginning with the third diptych completed in 1991, *Street Theater* (Figure 6).



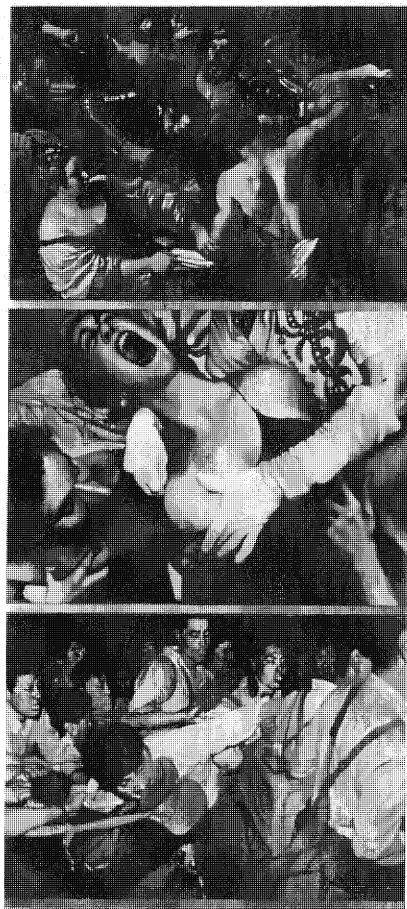
This horizontal diptych which is unusually long and narrow in its proportions (240" x 60") shows in its left panel, painted after a colour news photograph, tree-lined Changan Avenue in the aftermath of the Tiananmen violence. A lone man with a bicycle parked next to him occupies the center of the picture. He sits on red and white stone blocks that used to be street markers, quietly smoking a cigarette. Behind him are damaged blue and white traffic signs. On the ground are track marks of the tanks that reduced everything in their path to rubble. The right panel is painted after a famous black and white photograph by Robert Capa showing Paris soon after the liberation from Nazi occupation. A French woman, head shaven, holds a baby in her arms. She is being marched out of town by an angry crowd that condemns her for having slept with the German enemy. The only item painted in color is the French *tricolor*, which gives it a strident vibrancy; as strident as the morality which condemns the woman. This condemnation is based on the memory of an event, humiliation at the hands of the Nazis, and it is this memory that contorts the faces in the crowd into grimaces of hatred and incipient violence.

The memory of humiliation is certainly right, not wrong, yet in this particular historical example that Capa captures almost accidentally but precisely, the mem-

**Figure 6.**  
*Street Theater* (1991)  
240" x 60"  
Left: color.  
Right: black and white;  
color for the French  
flag.

ory of wrong also perpetuates other wrongs by creating new victims. Here, it is the memory of the event that is used to justify cruelty. This influences our reading of the left panel and turning back to it now, we can see it as showing a moment suspended between event and memory. This is the day after, and the violence of events has receded, but memory is not yet in place. How do we remember a catastrophe? This subject of the panel—the relation between event and memory—is suggested even by its physical dimensions (long and narrow) and by the deep perspectival recession of the pictorial space which seems to open up the field of memory. The drama here, as in the other panel, is a drama of memory but with an important difference: how Tiananmen will be remembered and how this memory will be used are still open questions. It is at this point that we can speak of a politics of memory, and note in this regard the importance of a painting that stresses “content,” that saves the appearance of details which we may not yet understand and preserves them for a future reading.

Memory is also encoded in the body, in the details of the body and its gestures. Danqing’s four triptychs completed in 1992 and 1993 all deal in one way or another with the body and its memories, but in a way which raises questions about memory itself. They all focus on how at the most intense moments, our bodies do not belong to us. It may be during moments of violence inflicted on us by others, as we see in the three panels of *Body Language* (Figure 7), where Samson is taken into captivity by the Philistines, or a woman is being violated, or a young man at Tiananmen is being pulled in all directions. On the other hand, as we see in *Raised Arms* (see cover), even when a gesture is initiated from our own bodies, what unconscious memory is encoded in the “spontaneous” raising of the arms that makes it a common motif in the classical painting of David, in the choreography of a ballet, and in the gestures of Tiananmen dissidents? We might read *Women in a Lying Position* in this way too by noting Danqing’s use of Caravaggio’s *Death of the Virgin* as his top panel. (It is said Caravaggio used the bodies of prostitutes as models for his saints and virgins.) What memory then of virtue and vice inheres in the body? In the bottom panel, we note the presence of the



**Figure 7.**  
*Body Language* (1992)  
 76" x 162"  
 Top: color.  
 Center: black and white.  
 Bottom: color.



western photographer, for whom the suffering body is part of an act of reportage, while in the middle panel showing a New York night club scene of people flaunting their stylised bodies, no one notices anyone else's body in a general culture that adulates youthful bodies. In the formally complex triptych *Ecstasy* (Figure 8), we see how human affect is expressed in that most common and mysterious of human gestures, the kiss, but always inadequately; whether it is the idealistic eye-contact-only of Canova's *Cupid and Psyche*, or the sado-masochistic biting in scenes from Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, or the woman kissing a dead man in a Beijing hospital. Danqing's representations of bodies in these triptychs do not support some somatocentric argument about the body as the "ground" of human history. Rather the body language of these triptychs is a discourse of dis-location, like the series as a whole. But this discourse of dis-location challenges our affective and ethical experience and ensures that they do not weaken into pious sentiments or become reified as moral strictures. It also reminds memory not to let go of what it does not understand.

One final point concerns the memory that is locked in images themselves, even in the images that do not belong to us. This is a theme found everywhere

**Figure 8.**  
*Ecstasy* (1993)  
148" x 78"  
Color except  
bottom left insert  
in black and white.

in Danqing's work, to such an extent that we could call it *the* theme of his work; and what is involved here is the question of the vocation of painting today in a world of reproduction technologies. Is it true—as both the postmodernists and their critics tell us—that such technologies are creating a situation where history is being replaced by images of history, just as memory is being made increasingly redundant by memory banks? Danqing's practice of painting shows us an alternative. It shows how images themselves have a history, not least of all a history of the pleasure that they have given. This is what the painter and the visual artist can help us see again, which may be vocation enough.

In Danqing's work there is a respect for the copy and reproduction of images which have given pleasure and can still give pleasure. But this does not imply a capitulation to technologies of reproduction, just as his paintings refuse to exploit the newsworthiness of images from Tiananmen, their proliferation itself being an example of such technologies. Rather, by means of the diptych/triptych form, he opens up a space where a historical dialogue between these and other images can take place; where the power of these images both to disturb and to give pleasure is in direct proportion to the care taken over their preservation. It is finally this care which allows us to understand painting after Tiananmen to mean not only the documentation of a disaster, but also the initiation into a politics, an ethics, and an erotics of seeing.

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