

The “Presence” and “Trace” of Media: on the Reconstruction of The Materiality of Oil Painting in the Digital Age

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Abstract: In the “post-media era” where digital image production, dissemination and consumption dominate, virtual images have constructed a universal “virtual presence”. This article focuses on the inherent materiality of oil painting, arguing that it is not a remnant of nostalgia, but an aesthetic resistance that confirms “real presence” in the digital void. It evokes the embodied perception of the integration of body and mind through the visuality of touch, the condensation of time and the decisive traces of creation. The article reviews the revival of materiality theory from modernism to contemporary times. With the help of phenomenology and material culture research, it analyzes the contemporary return of the “aura” of oil paintings. Through artist cases and personal practice, it explains how materiality is actively “reconstructed” into a positive aesthetic strategy and philosophical statement.

Keywords: materiality of oil painting, digital age, presence, traces, phenomenology, media theory

1. Introduction

Digital images, with their properties, construct what Jean Baudrillard described as a “hyperreal” landscape. In this context, this article demonstrates that the materiality of oil painting has instead acquired new meaning in the digital age. It does not simply resist digitalization, but is reconstructed in dialectical dialogue as an aesthetic strategy to resist the flattening of perception and confirm real existence. The discussion of this issue needs to be placed in the context of the development of art theory. Greenberg’s modernist theory has become insufficient. Since the late 20th century, “material culture studies” and “new materialism” trends of thought have developed Bill Brown’s concept of “thingness” [1]. The phenomenological tradition, especially Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, provides the philosophical basis for understanding the relationship between the body and the material world. Benjamin’s diagnosis of the fading “aura” sparked new thinking in the digital age.[1]

2. The historical dimension and aesthetic connotation of oil painting materiality

“Materiality” in the context of art refers more to how materials become active participants in the generation of meaning. In the Western oil painting tradition, the understanding of materiality has undergone an evolution. In classical oil painting, materiality often serves illusionism. However, materiality never completely disappears, as Rembrandt’s impasto brushstrokes become the solidification of emotion. In the 19th century, materiality came to the forefront, and Impressionist brushstrokes corresponded to the experience of light and color. During the modernist period, materiality gained autonomy. The understanding of materiality in Chinese oil painting is integrated with traditional Chinese aesthetics, such as the practices of Wu Guanzhong and Chu Teh-Chun. These historical clues indicate that the materiality of oil paintings was redefined as the context changed.

3. Challenges in the Digital Age: Virtual Presence and Flattening of Perception

The characteristics of digital images determine their essence: infinite reproducibility, non-linear editability, dematerialized communication and interactive immersion. These construct a “virtual presence”, but they also bring dilemmas: flattening of perception, a sense of historical rupture, and real anxiety. French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy distinguished between “image” and “portrait” in “The Roots of Image” [2]. In the era of proliferation of digital images, oil painting, through its materiality, has the potential to return from “image” to “portrait” and allow existence to be “present”.

4. Reconstruction Path One: Materiality as Proof of “Embodied Presence”

Faced with the challenges of digital culture, the materiality of oil painting is first reconstructed as proof of embodied presence. The key theoretical resource comes from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception[2]. Oil painting creation is a highly embodied practice, and physical experience is encoded in the work. When viewers face the oil painting, they

touch the texture imaginatively through vision, forming a “synesthetic” experience that resists the “smooth aesthetics” of digital images.

Contemporary oil painters deliberately emphasize the “roughness” and “imperfection” of materials. For example, Anselm Kiefer integrated lead, ash, straw and other materials into oil paintings to create a heavy material surface like ruins[3]. Material is a direct perceptual impact and a materialized representation of historical trauma. Marlene Duma’s paintings are characterized by thin paint and seemingly random lines. The unstable state of materiality corresponds to the flow and uncertainty of identity and memory[4]. These works create a “body field” that establishes an aesthetic experience beyond mere vision, insisting that artistic experience must occur in the encounter of the body with material objects.

5. Reconstruction Path 2: Materiality as the Archive of “Trace of Time”

The second way in which the materiality of oil paintings is reconstructed is through archives as traces of time. It transforms time into tangible and visible physical traces, constructing an aesthetic archive that resists the digital view of time.

First, there is the inscription of physical time. Oil painting materials are natural recorders of time. Natural changes such as the aging of paint are seen as a diary of the life of the work. Italian restoration theorist Cesare Brandi points out that the signs of aging of artifacts are part of their “historical materiality.”[4]

Secondly, it is the irreversible trace of time in the creative process. The digital “undo” function removes the weight of “decision”. Oil painting creation is irreversible, and the decisive sequence is solidified in material form. Gerhard Richter’s “blurred” effect is achieved through material actions such as scrapers, leaving a temporal event record of “how to depict”[5].

Furthermore, it is the carrier of historical time. Anselm Kiefer uses lead, ash and other materials to transform historical trauma into material dialogue[3]. Time is not “depicted” but “embedded” in materials. Kiefer’s studio serves as an alchemical laboratory, solidifying spiritual materials in the “geological layers” of the canvas.

The materiality of oil painting, as an “archive of traces of time,” reconstructs a profound aesthetics of time in the digital age, providing a solid and slow anchor.

6. Conscious reconstruction in creative practice: personal case analysis

As a practitioner, my creations are conscious experiments in “materiality reconstruction”. The series “Geological Memory”(Figure 1)and “The Body Temperature of Pixels”(Figure 2) are products of this exploration.



Figure 1. “Geological Memory”



Figure 2. “The Body Temperature of Pixels”

In “Geological Memory”, I introduce non-traditional materials, such as “local materials” collected from specific places, so that the materials become “witnesses” of memory. The creative process emphasizes the generative nature of “traces” and adopts the “sedimentation-erosion” method to accidentally expose the underlying texture and record the interaction of materials. This is a “material event” that cannot be preset by any digital brush.

Digital technologies are dialectical interlocutors. I use digital tools for preliminary conception, but insist that the final expression must be completed through physical labor. In “The Body Temperature of Pixels”, I manually “translate” low-resolution digital forms onto the canvas, making each “pixel” full of material details, a metaphor for the coexistence of digital perception and physical experience.

For contemporary creators, materiality has become an aesthetic ethics, related to honesty and resistance. Creation itself is the construction of an “island of existence” in the digital torrent.

7. Conclusion

This article reveals a core paradox: in the most radical era of digitalization, the materiality of oil painting has been reactivated. Through the two paths of “embodied presence” and “trace of time”, oil painting has established a unique status[6]. It reconstructs the integrity of the body and mind, creates a “painting time” with depth, and confirms “reality” in the phenomenological sense.

From Greenberg to contemporary times, the theoretical focus has shifted. Theories such as Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception provide tools for understanding this turn [2]. In the future, the relationship between art and technology will be more complex, but the value of traditional media such as oil paintings will become increasingly prominent, as they calibrate basic sensibilities that have been forgotten by digital life.

The contemporary reconstruction of the materiality of oil painting has a significance that transcends the ontology of art and points to the defense of diverse modes of perception. In the digital torrent, every painting that takes materiality seriously is a precious source of resisting nothingness and maintaining true sensibility.

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Author Bio

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