

Spring 5-18-2012

## Everyday Rituals

Chen Gu  
*University of New Orleans*, [chengu08@gmail.com](mailto:chengu08@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gu, Chen, "Everyday Rituals" (2012). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 1441.  
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1441>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

5-18-2012

# Everyday Rituals

Chen Gu

Everyday Rituals

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Visual Arts

by

Chen Gu

B.A. Brown University, 2008  
M.F.A. University of New Orleans, 2012

May, 2012

## Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Portraiture.....	1
Painting.....	2
Composition.....	3
Nostalgia and Memory.....	7
Memories of Flight.....	12
Abstracting the Image.....	13
Abstraction in Installation.....	16
Works Cited.....	19
Vita.....	20



## List of Figures

Hermenegildo Bustos, <i>Portrait of Dolores Hollos</i> , 1864.....	2
<i>Flight</i> , 2012.....	2
<i>Girl in White Dress</i> , 2011.....	4
Hermenegildo Bustos, <i>Still Life with Fruit and Frog</i> , 1874.....	5
Hermenegildo Bustos, <i>Unknown</i> , 19th cent.....	5
<i>MondayTuesdayWednesdayThursdayFridaySaturday</i> , 2009.....	6
<i>Apple Girls</i> , 2011.....	8
Loretta Lux, <i>Isabel</i> .....	9
<i>Woman Without Man</i> , 2011.....	10
Detail of <i>Cake/Dress</i> , 2011.....	11
<i>LashFish</i> , detail, 2011.....	12
closeup of <i>Sisters</i> , 2011.....	13
Marlene Dumas, <i>Measuring Your Own Grave</i> .....	15
<i>Trueblood</i> , 2012.....	16
<i>Wallpaper Girls</i> , 2012.....	18

## Abstract

This thesis traces the trajectory of Chen Gu's work over a three year period, looking at major influences such as Bustos and Saville, on her painting and film projects. She explores the concept of childhood, memory, and portraiture.

Painting, video, installation, rituals

## Portraiture

The figure, and in particular, the face has become exceedingly important to me. The idea of portraiture is fascinating because of the exchange between the sitter and the artist. In my work "Flight" I explore this interaction through video, a thirty minute version of the exchange between artist and model that takes hours or days for a portrait painting. In my painting work I take a different approach to portraiture as well. I take photos of people from the internet and paint them, so that there is never actually a personal interaction between artist and model, yet the paintings seek to achieve a candid, intimate quality.

For "Flight," I ask people, sometimes complete strangers, sometimes friends or acquaintances, to mime the gestures of a flight attendant. I am intrigued both by the commonality of the gestures and the slight differences between them, evoking each individual's personality. There is a moment at the end of each sequence when I ask the "sitter" to stare into the camera. This stillness references the stillness the model has to maintain in portrait painting sessions. I think of the retables of Hermenegildo Bustos, the Mexican portrait painter, who poses his sitters against an even-toned ground, emphasizing the luminous faces of the sitters.



Hermenegildo Bustos, *Portrait of Dolores Hollos*, 1864



*Flight*, 2012

## Painting

As the source material for my paintings, "bad photography" is particularly attractive because the degradation of the image allows me to imagine new color schemes. Compositionally the haphazard shot is appealing because it is usually not classic or conventional. A limb enters the scene inadvertently; a body is truncated or a face missing from the neck up.

The grainy or dark photo, whose figures have red-eye and may be almost completely immersed in shadow, inspires me to render them "beautiful," to extract or add certain components so that the casual image becomes completely seductive, heightened.

At times, I am interested in denoting as little as possible so the figure becomes abstracted and focus is given to color and form, making the image more sensual.

With the advent of digital photography, it is much easier to take a casual picture and with the advent of the internet, to propagate these sometimes very private images. With websites like Facebook, there is the expansion of the social network where people do not necessarily speak to each other face to face, but have the ability to browse images from other people's childhood photo albums. These childhood photos from people of my generation are starting to attain a vintage sensibility. The eighties Glamour-shot and graduating school portraits are both historic and nostalgic for me.

In utilizing these types of photos as source material, I maintain a sort of portrait-sitting tradition, in the sense that these individuals never sat for me, yet I attain a level of intimacy with them by recording their faces. The subjects are sometimes strangers, but more often than not they are people who I have known personally at some point in my life but have since lost touch with. By painting them I feel once again I am getting to know them.

Many times I choose photographs that are taken when the subject is unaware or not self-conscious. They are not posing for anyone, for the camera or for a painter. I find these moments to be particularly interesting to paint, because I see in the process of painting them a transformation from the mundane to the ecstatic or ritualistic.

## **Composition**

By zooming in on the face and cropping the family portrait, I seek to establish an alternative composition. The close-up denotes not only those of faces but of limbs and torsos. The odd cropping which, in a portrait of a family for example, deletes certain heads but leaves in hands on a shoulder, emphasizes the strange intimacy between family members. Hands on the

shoulders, normally a gesture of reassurance, become menacing because the face cannot be matched to it.

I am influenced by the Mexican portrait artist Hermenegildo Bustos, who often painted fruit as if he was painting portraits. The lack of an environment or physical space for the fruit renders them more "portrait-like," but inversely my cropping of figures and faces renders them more object-like. By de-emphasizing facial features, yet maintaining a dimensionality, figures and faces become like fruit.



*Girl in White Dress, 2011*



Hermenegildo Bustos, *Still Life with Fruit and Frog*, 1874



Hermenegildo Bustos, *Unknown*, 19th cent.

In my installation work "MondayTuesdayWednesdayThursdayFridaySaturday," I collect personal products such as perfume bottles and soap and organize them in a catalogue-like way. Each item stands isolated from the others, like the fruit in Bustos' paintings. Each item contains traces of my personal history or a stranger's personal history.

Like Richard Aldrich's gallery installations, my choice of the items and their arrangement are largely idiosyncratic, based partly by organizing shapes and colors and partly by my attachment to the object. I believe the items attain a relic-like quality when displayed in the glass case: the half-used bottles of lotions and perfume standing in for their owners, like saint's bones.



*MondayTuesdayWednesdayThursdayFridaySaturday, 2009*



## Nostalgia and Memory

Often I use as source material images of childhood and adolescence. Time seems to freeze in the original photographs I find, a visual equivalent to the philosopher Rainer Maria Wilke's conception of childhood, in which children are able experience "eternity" because they have no conception of the future or the past.

It would be good to give much thought, before  
you try to find words for something so lost,  
for those long childhood afternoons you knew  
that vanished so completely -and why?

We're still reminded-: sometimes by a rain,  
but we can no longer say what it means;  
life was never again so filled with meeting,  
with reunion and with passing on

as back then, when nothing happened to us  
except what happens to things and creatures:  
we lived their world as something human,  
and became filled to the brim with figures.

And became as lonely as a shepherd  
and as overburdened by vast distances,  
and summoned and stirred as from far away,  
and slowly, like a long new thread,  
introduced into that picture-sequence  
where now having to go on bewilders us.

- Rainer Maria Rilke, *Childhood*

In one series I paint over photographs of adolescent girls playing with water, heightening or distorting the emotions of the moment. The photos themselves invoke classical compositions, conjuring up images of baptism or sacred rites, which I then reinforce by painting over certain figures and emphasizing others. By creating an alternate composition, the figures' relations to each other changes in space and in meaning.



*Apple Girls, 2011*

The "glorifying" of high school portrait sittings or lackluster digital photos through painting make tangible my emotions for that particular place and person. I am influenced by the work of Loretta Lux, who begins with photography and then manipulates the images in an editing program to alter the color, change the background, and create a sense of timelessness surrounding her "quiet" depictions of children.



Loretta Lux, *Isabel*

In a work such as "Man without Woman" and "Sisters," I am interested in the domestic setting of the living room and its casual and intimate quality. This is a space where Americans spend so much of their time, watching TV or at play. It is mundane but also iconic. To look and engage with someone sitting on the couch is to be in their intimate space, an intruder of sorts, or invited into personal territory.

In "Man without Woman," the woman on the couch is painted almost life size, so she is able to confront the viewer directly with her gaze. In "Sisters," the painting looms much larger than the viewer, their gaze directed towards an unseen television, so it is as if one has happened upon a monolith, rendering the familiar unfamiliar.



*Woman Without Man, 2011*

In my fabric pieces, nostalgia also comes into play. In "Cake/Dress," I sew small flower-shaped candle-holders into the body of the dress and place candles in them, so the dress becomes a sort of birthday cake. The "Cake/Dress" conflates two iconic moments during a girl's birthday: the donning of a special dress and wishing on the lit candles of a cake. The intrusion of candles on the dress create a sense of danger: there are holes in the dress and the potential of catching on fire.

The inspiration for "Cake/Dress" comes from a birthday photograph: I am wearing a polyester dress holding a knife in my hand, but all I remember is the discomfort of that particular dress.



Detail of *Cake/Dress*, 2011

In "Sequins" and "LashFish" I hope to create the seductive, disturbing object. The plastic nails operate as sequins and design but also signify cast-off parts of the human body. I want to create a feeling in the viewer that the object is precious and loathsome at the same time by using an every-day material in an uncommon way.

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk - harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail pairing - I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire.

- Julia Kristeva

The object itself is seductive, a fabric sample a teenage girl might want created into a full-length gown, but the sequins themselves are tiny fake nails for even younger girls. These nails operate as a vestige of the past, something one cannot cast off, something that remains somehow still glamorous.

In my fabric work I am influenced by Anya Gallacio, particularly her work with organic objects. I admire her use of unconventional materials in sewing, such as a work in which she takes orange peels and stitches them back together into an orange. The thread used in re-assembling the orange gives the orange peels a skin-like quality, as if she were suturing wounds. This "Frankenstein" take on the organic world reminds me of the abject, because she is interfering with the natural process of life and death, growth and decay.



*LashFish, detail, 2011*

## **Memories of Flight**

In my audio piece "For You," I think of my experiences of flying, in which I am alternately restless, bored, and cramped. Yet occasionally the memory is good: I am talking to a



stranger, making a temporary connection that propels me forward into my next leg of the voyage. I re-imagine flight instructions in three languages, giving the listener/voyager an insight into my own experience, reminding them of the best and worst parts of the quotidian miracle of flying. These flight instructions become a manual on living.

### **Abstracting the Image**

Though my paintings are figurative, I am also interested in flattening some areas and in a sense abstracting them so that the expanses of color become as important as the content depicted. I think of medieval paintings in which gold paint and patterns render the figure flat, destroying perspective. These flat and sometimes thick areas of color allow the viewer to engage with the sensuality and tactility of the paint, obstructing and defining the figure at the same time.



closeup of *Sisters*, 2011

I think the physicality of paint can evoke horror as much as the content of a painting. In bleeding the boundary between figure and background, one feels the environment encroaching on the body. For example, in "Sisters," the same linework used to depict the wallpaper extend into the shoulder of the figure itself, and in "Pink Baby" a flat expanse of black denotes the child's shoe. So, while my work references photography there exists also the destruction of illusionistic space and a use of vibrant and metallic colors that emphasize the physicality of paint itself.

In my earlier paintings, such as "Woman X," I explored the abstraction of the figurative by using a minimal number of brushstrokes. I strived for creating dimension that was upheld by negative space in some places and denied by negative space in others. The woman's body becomes sculpture-like, architectural while the black X's abstract the painting and emphasize the surface. While making this work I looked often at Marlene Dumas' paintings which are very spare in their use of brushstrokes and attentive to the space of the painting itself, and the relation of the figure to the edges of the canvas. Dumas' handling of space and the interaction of her figures with the dimensions of the canvas create a psychological realm.





Marlene Dumas, *Measuring Your Own Grave*

In my most recent work, I continue exploring the spareness of the brushstroke, sometimes using pieces of cut paper to replace paint marks or stencils to create areas of color.



*Trueblood*, 2011

I look often at the work of Jenny Saville, whose treatment of paint mimics the weight of flesh. In my paintings I am also interested in the three dimensional quality, but more often than not it is not paint but negative space that create these forms.

### **Abstraction in Installation**

In my first installation, "Office," I created a public space (screensavers, wallpaper, framed images) for a private act (masturbation). By inserting pornographic elements into a public space I am in a sense making formal graffiti, which often contains pornographic images. I want to create an environment that is disruptive and embarrassing, but within the boundaries of everyday display items: the computer screen, picture frames, whiteboard calendars, etc. The audience

who observes the installation will also have to confront the pornographic elements as a group, so private desires become shared moments.

The decorations and immaculate, almost too-clean nature of an office are interrupted by pornographic motifs. I hoped to aestheticize and alter pornography and in so doing, add an element of humor or play to it. I am influenced by the wall pieces of Fabrice Langlade, whose elusive metal works evoke sex and nature. His erotic Rorschach blots mounted on wallpapered walls surprises the viewer, who may expect something merely decorative but instead find explicitness on further inspection.

"Office" has led me to further explore the idea of public and private in my piece "Wilderness," where small cut-out images of women from Maxim are inserted into 70s wallpaper and mounted in a bathroom. I want to rethink the intimacy of this public gallery bathroom, so that people feel more "at home" within it, even to the point of appreciating the women on the wall as pinups in a magazine spread. At the same time the bathroom remains public and a series of strangers will use it.



detail of *Wallpaper Girls*, 2012

## Works Cited

- "ART : Mexico's Unsung Master : Hermenegildo Bustos' Brilliantly Perceptual Paintings--once Solely the Pride of His Town--are Beginning to Gain Due Appreciation - Los Angeles Times." *Featured Articles From The Los Angeles Times*. 15 Dec. 1991. Web. 19 Oct. 2010. <[http://articles.latimes.com/1991-12-15/entertainment/ca-939\\_1\\_hermenegildo-bustos](http://articles.latimes.com/1991-12-15/entertainment/ca-939_1_hermenegildo-bustos)>.
- Artinconnu. "Portrait of Dolores Hollos (1864)." *Flickr*. Yahoo!, 13 Sept. 2010. Web. 23 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/37892495@N08/4985690691/>>.
- "Bustos: Still Life, 1874." *Fine Art America*. Web. 23 Apr. 2012. <<http://fineartamerica.com/featured/bustos-still-life-1874-granger.html>>.
- Langlade, Fabrice, and Laurie Hurwitz-Attias. *Fabrice Langlade: La Voie Lactée*. S.l.: S.n., 1999. Print.
- "Le Flaneur." *Le Flaneur: New York: Marlene Dumas at MOMA*. Web. 23 Apr. 2012. <<http://leflaneurblog.blogspot.com/2009/01/new-york-marlene-dumas-at-moma.html>>.
- "Lehmann Maupin Gallery - Anya Gallaccio." *Lehmann Maupin Gallery - Artists*. Web. 19 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/artists/anya-gallaccio/>>.
- "Loretta Lux-Isabel 2." *Loretta Lux Hypnotising Photography Signature Illustration Blog*. Web. 23 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.signatureillustration.org/illustration-blog/2010/05/loretta-lux-hypnotising-photography/loretta-lux-isabel2/>>.
- "Painting by Hermenegildo Bustos." *DSpace Home*. Web. 23 Apr. 2012. <<http://dspace.nitle.org/handle/10090/2440>>.
- Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. Print.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. "Childhood." *Poemhunter.com*. Web. 08 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/childhood-2/>>.
- Saville, Jenny. *Jenny Saville*. New York: Rizzoli, 2005. Print.

## VITA

Chen Gu was born in Sichuan, China. She obtained her undergraduate degree in playwriting from Brown University in 2008. She joined the University of New Orleans's graduate program to pursue an M.F.A. in visual arts.