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THE CRITICAL STATE OF VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK

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How Painting Transcends Painting

By Eileen Tabios

"In order to use color effectively, it is necessary to recognize that color deceives continually . . . What counts here - first and last - is not so-called knowledge of so-called facts, but vision - seeing. Seeing here implies Schauen (as in Weltanschauung) and is coupled with fantasy, with imagination."

- Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color*

I. Art As a Process of Risk

". . . being the champion is not defined by who you beat. It is the path you take to get the belt that matters."

- Evander Holyfield



Portrait # 54 (Serious Yellow John), 2000/01

To be an artist is to welcome - and delight - in risk. To be an artist is to embrace everything inherent in the process of risking: desire, effort, pain, loss and, finally when one is blessed, exaltation in having created something through which one realizes that everything Art demands is appropriate. To be an artist, one falls in order to fly - one plunges in order to soar.

This process is evident in Brenda Zlamany's current exhibition at University of Massachusetts-Amherst's University Gallery: *Figure Ground - Color Studies of Chuck Close, Evander Holyfield, and John Yau*, which runs through March 16. The exhibit features the latest works from her nearly two-year-old series through which she explored the grid and the monochrome. Though all of the paintings deserve perusal as individual works, their grouping illustrates the process of Zlamany's investigation - a search that culminates in *Portrait # 54 (Serious Yellow John), 2000/01* as, for me, the stand-out achievement. *Serious Yellow John* is

comprised of four yellow panels laid out in a square grid; the bottom right corner panel features Yau through a nude upper torso and face wreathed in melancholy. It seems apt that *Serious Yellow John* is special because it is the portrait that demanded the most from the artist. Not only is the work her "most difficult portrait" to date but, indeed, Zlamany said that for most of the time she labored over the painting, she felt that she was "failing."

"When I do a series I usually have a work that may end up being my 'failure-painting.' I thought it would be this Serious Yellow John. While painting it, I always felt like I was losing it. But the ones that I think are my failure-paintings often end up being my favorites," she said during an interview in her studio a few days before the paintings were due to be shipped to Amherst.

There is no short cut to perseverance. Perhaps all artists in all disciplines know - and want to know - that moment when we pull back from the work to see it seemingly with fresh eyes and witness a work that is its own self, an entity which we never again may replicate and about which we sometimes will whisper in years to come, "I don't know how I did that." *Serious Yellow John*, in fact, manifests exactly what poet and art critic Yau told me years ago about why he likes certain works by Jackson Pollock, Jasper Johns and Pat Steir: "You can see that the painting take over."

The process exhibited in Zlamany's exhibit reflects an investigation that Zlamany - long respected for her portraits and glazing techniques - began when she wished to embark on a new direction. By targeting the grid and the monochrome, she shows herself to be an artist who recognizes artmaking as not about repeating the past but creating a future. Such risk taking requires an openness that is evident in another of Zlamany's statements during my visit: *"When you don't like a certain artist's work, you should address it. For instance, I used to hate El Greco, but after closely studying his work I now like him."*

To date, Zlamany's body of work - with their figurative references and opulent surfaces - have been aligned with seventeenth-century Northern European painting or other representational painters. Her latest series allows Zlamany to project a different facet among her concerns: minimalism.

"I consider myself a minimalist because there are not many things in my portraits," she said, reminding me that her portraits usually feature subjects against a dark or single-color background. Many of her portraits, therefore, are as much about her exploration of light and color through the tones of flesh, hair and clothes as they are about portraying her subjects. Zlamany's minimalist orientation has not received as much attention undoubtedly because her evocative images nonetheless reflect her thought that "portraiture is about psychology."

"For a long time, I looked at Rembrandt, Holbein and Vermeer. In fact, I'm self-taught as a representational painter because performance art, video, minimalism and feminism were the 'academy' when I was in school, with no attention given to portraiture. But with this series I also began to look closely at Ellsworth Kelly, Ad Reinhardt, early Brice Marden and Mondrian. I wanted to play with the rectangle shape," she recalled.

Though Zlamany began the series in 1998, her concerns with the rectangle have deeper roots, as evident in some 1996 portraits of snakes, which she painted on "extreme rectangles" such as the 4 x 60 inch scale. Her concern is also reflected in landscape paintings from a 1997 trip to Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Some of the landscapes are painted on canvases that she turned 45 degrees on their side so that they hang as diamonds versus squares - a decision that hints at the same restless spirit that pushes her to renew her work.

For this series, Zlamany painted portraits comprised of multi-paneled squares. Some of the panels offer single-color monochromes while others feature faces painted at twice their real-life scale. The size of the images, Zlamany said, is "large enough [for the face] to assert itself but not in a billboard way."

Except for a subject like Holyfield whom she never met, Zlamany typically asks her subjects to sit for her in a photo shoot. She then makes several drawings on white paper in the same size that they would appear on the painting. She experiments with positioning the drawing against

a brown piece of paper sized like the panels as a 24-inch square. Moving the drawing around the panel's paper facsimile enables her to determine the subject's final position in the painting. Positioning the image against the side instead of in the center of a panel, for instance, may affect the viewer's perspective of whether one is looking at or into a subject.

The panels' manageable size enabled Zlamany to investigate her concerns by physically moving panels next to other panels to determine the grid effect based on positioning or the impact of different colors interacting with each other. Reflecting her interest in the grid, *Portrait #53 (White Chuck)*, 1999/01, *Portrait #46 (Red Chuck)*, 2000/01 and *Serious Yellow John* are each a series of four panels laid out in a square that allow their internal edges to define a cross. *Red Chuck* was directly inspired by Reinhardt's *Abstract Painting, Red*, 1953. Zlamany noted, "I do consider that cross to be part of the work in how it takes up negative space."

The distance between the panels is also significant. The ten panels in *Portrait #51 (Black Evander, Blue Evander, Red Evander, Yellow Evander, and White Evander)*, 2000/01 are hung three inches apart; the *Serious Yellow John* panels are hung one inch apart. A wider distance facilitates what Zlamany called "monochrome moments" whereby the viewer can focus individually on the nature of each panel. She noted that each panel also should succeed as a stand-alone painting - to which rule *Serious Yellow John* is an exception as she thought that the lower-right panel featuring Yau's face needs to interact with the other monochrome panels.

The span between the panels also offers an effect beyond their formal integration of negative space or adjusting the color interaction between panels. By incorporating the wall into the image, a work like *Black Evander, Blue Evander, Red Evander, Yellow Evander, and White Evander* becomes more grounded into its environment, which is to say the world becomes part of the painting. On the other hand, the narrower spans between *Serious Yellow John*'s panels is appropriate as the work is more inward-looking - the portrait is very much of Yau's internal world separate from the realm Yau shares with the painting's viewers. For Yau's melancholy is so complete that it becomes something with which a viewer may sympathize but cannot empathize. Whatever the causes were for the melancholy on Yau's face that Zlamany caught and depicted is no one's business but Yau's - even as we see it displayed on his visage.

Just as Zlamany's concern with the grid or the rectangle has deeper roots than the date she actually began this series, so do her concerns with color. She said, "I've worked so hard on my tinted glazing technique that it was a logical step to do monochromes." Zlamany's paintings in this series underwent nine-to-twenty, "tea-thin" glazings to create the desired color and tones. For each painting, she records a glazing history in a notebook that specifies the color and shade used in each layer. Painting a panel a single color, she remarked, has allowed her to research the psychology of color.



Portrait # 52 (Laughing Blue John), 2001

Portrait # 52 (Laughing Blue John), 2001 was originally painted in yellow. But she switched palettes as the brightness of yellow seemed ineffective for the image of the poet laughing uproariously. She then remembered how Reinhardt had painted blue and switched to that color - a wise choice as blue emphasizes Yau's image. She had noticed earlier through *Serious Yellow John* how Yau's features seem to disappear within the color yellow. Though such melting against the backdrop fits the reflectiveness of *Serious Yellow John*, more clarity is

required to focus on the hilarity of *Laughing Blue John*. The contrast between figure and ground enhances how laughter compresses the upper half of Yau's face so that the eyes have become slits while the bottom half of the face is dominated by an open guffawing mouth.

Initially, *Laughing Blue John* was laid out as a horizontal panel with, from left to right, three monochrome panels and the panel with Yau's face at the far right - a positioning influenced by how she recalled Reinhardt elongated the grid in *Blue, 1954* by using a rectangle instead of a square. As she played with the positioning, Zlamany took one of the monochromes and placed it above the panel with Yau's image, transforming the rectangular form into an inverted L-shape.

"I immediately did a double-take as I thought: 'That's it!'" she recalled. The inverted L-shape allows for an image of Yau flinging back his head seemingly towards the sky, as symbolized by the blue panel over him. But to enhance the painting's cheer, Zlamany did another glaze on the "sky" panel to switch the blue from ultramarine to a brighter cerulean shade. The last-minute switch reflected Zlamany's discovery: "*The simplest monochrome can contain many possibilities, including how significance and resonance change with the slightest variation of tone.*"

Zlamany added, "*I also came to realize how color can become political. I now have a white Chuck, a black Evander and a yellow John. And if, say, I hung them together in the same room, there could rise a political component that I had not directly intended.*"

However, the grid - not politics - dictated Zlamany's decisions to paint Close and Holyfield. Because of the grid, Zlamany said it was logical that she would include Close in the series due to his manner of painting portraits. In fact, she pays homage to Close's painting style by incorporating three small, parallel brushstrokes of yellow, blue and red atop his eyeglasses; the marks offer an impression of having been stained from one of Close's stints in his painting studio. A boxing fan, Zlamany chose Holyfield because she remembered how the boxing ring forms a square. On the other hand, she chose Yau because she wanted a seemingly "ordinary" guy who just showed up in my studio, versus the icons that Close and Holyfield have become."

"John didn't even know how to pose; he didn't know how to present himself. Chuck gives you Chuck," she said, referring to the artist's posture of a full-frontal face with a chin slightly chin towards the viewer. Though Holyfield did not pose for Zlamany, she accessed his image in the Internet where over 500 images of the boxer are available. (At the time of our interview, the boxer was unaware he had become one of her subjects; she planned to inform Holyfield after the exhibition opened.)

After being inspired to paint a boxer, Zlamany chose Holyfield as she anticipated that his darker-colored flesh would expand her investigations of color. Nonetheless, she also appreciated him for psychological reasons, which facilitated her Holyfield portraits' conveyance of power and strength. She said, "*I can relate to Evander because he came up the hard way through determination. He's religious. He's an artist, not a street fighter. He's even got a little bit of his ear missing, like Van Gogh.*"

(In a previous fight, Mike Tyson had bit Holyfield's ear.)

As part of her research, Zlamany read his biography, *Holyfield: The Humble Warrior* written by the boxer's brother Bernard Holyfield. The book's description states, "Some of the toughest fights are won by spirit - not by power and might! Evander Holyfield proved that when he was unfairly disqualified three rounds short of a gold medal in the '84 Olympics, accepting the bronze with grace and dignity. And proved it again when he sank reigning heavyweight champion Buster Douglas in three rounds - despite the so-called experts' predictions - to claim boxing's coveted heavyweight title. *The Humble Warrior* offers an intimate and inspiring portrait of a determined man who refuses to let defeat have the final word."

At one point of moving panels around within her Holyfield portraits, Zlamany placed a monochrome on top of a panel featuring his image, just as she had done for *Laughing Blue John*. The positioning, however, did not work given the visual heft to Holyfield's face, which has a more powerful presence than Yau's or Close's miens. She recalled, "*The eye can't really travel*

upward from Evander's face."

Black Evander, Blue Evander, Red Evander, Yellow Evander, and White Evander consists of ten panels lined up horizontally and with each of the five colors represented by a monochrome panel and a panel featuring Holyfield's face against a background of the same color. The panels - in the order, left to right, depicted in the title - provides an excellent color study for showing how the impression of the same Holyfield image changes with each color. I mentioned that I was glad she featured as much as five colors as I thought a fewer number would have diluted the presentation of a color's (psychological) impact. I was particularly taken by the yellow panels that also turned out to be Zlamany's favorite. While she said she appreciated how the yellow allowed her to explore and depict light, I liked the way the yellow-gold effectuated a Byzantine icon-like background. The result also could be considered political because the yellow suggests the creation of a religious image depicting a black man.

Zlamany replied, "I'm glad you said that because I had finished four colors and then I stopped to have my baby, Oona. Afterwards, the last thing I wanted to do was paint two more panels [to feature a different color], but I also felt it had to be done."

Portrait #45 (Black Chuck with Primary Colors), 2000/01 also illustrates the way colors interact against different colors, evoking Josef Albers' groundbreaking investigations of color relationships. The monochrome panels hang left to right, respectively, as blue, red and yellow; the panel of Close's face against a black background hangs on the far right. During our meeting, Zlamany moved the monochrome panels around to show how a different effect occurs based on the color of the panel hanging next to the panel with Close's image. For instance, the overall effect is more somber when the yellow panel is moved away from Close's face and replaced with the dark blue panel.

Color relationships not only affected installation but Zlamany's manner of glazing to create different shades of the same color. In *Serious Yellow John*, she used cadmium yellow lemon on the upper-left panel as well as for the background to the lower-right panel featuring Yau's image. She applied cadmium yellow medium on the upper-right panel and cadmium yellow deep on the lower-left panel. The lighter yellow background helps dilute how, as Zlamany put it, "John's face sort of disappears against yellow. Yellow is so bright that it dazzles your eyes so that you see him as a silhouette." Moreover, the grades of yellow serve to offer an interplay of light across the four-panel surface despite the inch-wide division between the panels.

Zlamany obsessed as much over the glazings for *White Chuck*. She used a zinc white panel on the upper-right panel as well as for the background to the lower-right panel featuring Close's face. The lower-left panel is lead white while the upper-left panel is a titanium white. The slight variations helps to obviate a potentially flat effect of the white being the dominant color, particularly when the painting is hung against a white wall. In addition, Zlamany used titanium (the brightest white) for the upper white panel after she noticed a highlight on Close's upper right skull; she felt that the bright white would suggest a light source for the seemingly spotlighted area on Close's head.

The exhibition clearly rewards the viewer as well as Zlamany's efforts to investigate the grid and monochromes. Yet Art is often more than a formal concern, especially when portraiture is involved. When I cite *Serious Yellow John* as the standout in the exhibition, it is partly because this work - more than the others - rises above Zlamany's intended investigations: *Serious Yellow John* transcends the artist's self to become its own. The process underlying this effect of, as Yau put it, "the painting taking over," is not scientific. But a closer look at the forces underlying this particular work offers certain revelations about the uncertainties inherent in - and the extent of the artist's desire required for - creating a masterpiece.

II. On Portraying John Yau's Ever-Shifting Identity

"We are never satisfied with the portrait of someone we know."
- Goethe

"John Yau doesn't photograph like himself."

- Brenda Zlamany

"Acceptable parameters in which 'he' is an illusion"

- John Yau, *GIANT WALL (A Notebook)*

John Yau posed an interesting challenge to Zlamany. Despite being a friend, he was an elusive figure. In fact, she painted a second portrait of the poet because she felt one could not capture him fully. But after finishing the two portraits, which depict Yau at almost opposite psychological extremes - the hilarity in *Laughing Blue John* and the melancholy in *Serious Yellow John* - Zlamany concluded, "The real John exists somewhere in between these two paintings."

For Zlamany, part of the challenge began with how she felt Yau had no public image. I was intrigued by Zlamany's assessment about Yau who has published twelve books of poetry and three books of fiction; contributed to more than a hundred catalogues and monographs on contemporary art and artists; edited an anthology of innovative prose entitled *FETISH* ; and publishes European and American authors through his imprint Black Square Editions. But I understood Zlamany's comment as Yau's image is not one that is easy to pin down. Yau's work as a poet, fiction writer, literary and arts critic, editor, teacher, publisher and frequent collaborator with other artists has resulted in his subverting of categories through which a public figure conveniently can be defined. (For this reason and notwithstanding what renown he has achieved in the poetry world, Yau remains one of this country's most underrated poets).

Nonetheless, Zlamany's uncertainty towards Yau as a subject is significant. Among other things, her doubtfulness resulted in having to photograph the poet on three different occasions versus the one photo shoot typically required of her subjects. She also ended up making about 15 different sketches of Yau; in contrast, she only drew Close once.

Yau's difficulty as a portrait subject is also evidenced in *Serious Yellow John*'s glazing process. Unlike with *Laughing Blue John* that began as a yellow study, *Serious Yellow John* began and ended with the same color. Nevertheless, Zlamany had to conduct about 16 glazes for this portrait, which is at the high end of the range of glazings usually required by her paintings.

Initially, Zlamany began *Serious Yellow John* before *Laughing Blue John* partly because Yau specified that he did not wish to be portrayed laughing. Zlamany said, a bit bemusedly, "He said he doesn't ever smile but I actually feel he smiles a lot."

IDuring the photo sessions, however, Zlamany coaxed Yau to relax while promising she only would paint him with a serious mien. She remembered, "I kept asking: Can I just see a smile? I promise I won't paint it."

Not only did Yau smile but, once, he ended up laughing exuberantly. Zlamany subsequently recorded that moment in *Laughing Blue John*. Her "betrayal" reflects, I believe, the rebellious spirit not uncommon in artists. *Laughing Blue John*, after all, allowed Zlamany to do several things for the first time as an artist, including painting a portrait without depicting open eyes. Consequently, Zlamany said she thought that "the information a viewer might normally find in the eyes is now found through Yau's teeth as visibly portrayed through his open laughing mouth." Indeed, Zlamany said Yau is the first writer she's ever painted and she realized after finishing the painting how appropriate it is to emphasize his mouth: "writers talk; they use words."

Unbeknownst to Zlamany, she thrilled me with her statement about Yau's teeth - for me, her statement offered one of those moments when, inexplicably and unpredictably, the universe seems to shift as an unexpected nugget of revelation surfaces from nowhere. For, Yau's teeth reveal a lot about him - specifically how their fragile state reflect his history as both a human being and poet.

The great humor displayed in *Laughing Blue John* does not hide the effects of time on Yau's body. His flesh and hair reveal the marks of robust living. Through laughter, time stops through the momentary focus on the hilarious instance. But any cessation is as temporary as the inevitably temporary duration of laughter - through *Laughing Blue John*, Zlamany said

that she painted her "first facial expression that cannot be held." Time, nonetheless, continues to unfold, complete with the tolls it takes on our bodies and psyche. To know Yau's teeth is to know that Yau suffers. He needs the significant services of a dentist - a bit of information I unearthed when, a few months ago, I mentioned to Yau that I was reading the poet Keith Waldrop's book *The Silhouette of the Bridge (Memory Stand-Ins)*. In his book, Waldrop reveals how a bicuspid has become rotten and needed to be taken out. Waldrop writes about the tooth's impending loss:

And yet I'm sure I will regret it, as I regret whatever is lost while passing even briefly through my life, let alone a part so intimate, thrusting itself daily into my consciousness, my irritation.// If I could express all such irritations, those rough or tender spots on the otherwise unfelt surface of my time on earth, it would come to a list of the things I cannot, as they say, take with me. And since once left, in their totality, untaken, they include the very faculty of regret, I must mourn now or never my whole passing world.// And I do in fact, in advance, regret it - the encompassing, the encroaching . . .

During that conversation mentioning Waldrop's poem, Yau revealed, "My teeth are in pretty bad shape." In *Laughing Blue John*, however, Yau is not felled by his - and our - inevitable decay: he has stopped time through laughter. He is surviving - and doing more than merely surviving: he is continuing to create his own art through poetry. Does this make *Laughing Blue John* an accurate portrait of Yau? Yes and no - and both answers are appropriate for, in both his critical and creative work, Yau frequently reveals his belief in the shifting nature of identity. Critic Juliana Chang once said that Yau's writings "question the notion of a wholly knowable self that one can thus evaluate" - certainly a relevant notion as regards the art of portraiture with which Zlamany engages.

Despite its revelations about Yau - including inadvertent ones such as the focus on teeth - *Laughing Blue John* ultimately cannot capture Yau. The eyes are closed - we are prevented from peering into what many consider the "windows to the soul." Yau, in *Laughing Blue John*, slips away from Zlamany and the viewer despite the amicable atmosphere of perusal and engagement. In this painting, he remains hidden even as his cheer allows the viewer to believe otherwise. If a letter is an important component of a writer's raw material, then the inverted L-shape of the painting also may be interpreted as the erroneous depiction of a letter ("L").

Laughing Blue John also gave Zlamany her first opportunity to paint a smiling or laughing face - for which she had to look closely at a painter who has not been among her favorites: Frans Hals (c. 1580-1666). Hals' specialty was combining psychological perception with the comic genre. Specifically, Zlamany perused Hals' *Malle Babbe, c. 1650* - a portrait of a woman laughing as she hoists a tankard and sits with an owl on her shoulder, perhaps holding boisterous court in some tavern. From considering *Malle Babbe*, Zlamany said she learned to use short, quick brushstrokes to depict Yau's image - evoking how Hals had matched the informal and intimate nature of his subjects with light and fleeting brushstrokes.

While painting *Laughing Blue John* and the other portraits, Zlamany had kept toiling on *Serious Yellow John*. After continuously failing to grasp the work and anticipating that *Serious Yellow John* might become the series' "failure painting," the work suddenly came to life. It became alive by transcending Zlamany's formal concerns to provide acute psychological insight. The transformation of paint to a living, breathing creature is a moment for which there is no shortcut in the artist's process - a moment resulting specifically from the artist's stubborn passion to continue painting even as the goal seems impossible. It is a moment for which the artist must maintain faith. And it is a moment that rewarded Zlamany by transforming the painting beyond its genesis as a study of the monochrome and the grid. *Serious Yellow John* is as effective as its underlying inspiration: Rembrandt's *Self Portrait, 1630*.

T should reveal Yau's particular significance to me. I became a poet partly as a result of reading Yau's poems. Though I had read other poets' words before Yau's, his poems were the first to show me how a word can possess a materiality beyond its formal definition - and that such materiality, given the subjective nature of meaning, is something that

┌ can be useful to a poet's exploration. Yau, however, is not only a significant poetic influence. He offers me a role model for how one may live as an artist. As he most recently displayed to me by providing advice and encouragement about how one may write about the visual arts, to live as an artist is to know how to be generous and compassionate - and to retain such qualities within a culture that generally shows little respect for poets and poetry.

During my trip to New York to interview Zlamany, I met the artist Max Gimblett with whom Yau has conducted numerous collaborations for many years. In one of his acts of generosity towards me, Yau instigated my meeting with this artist I've long admired for works that juxtapose opposing forces - movement and stillness, monochromes and calligraphic brushstrokes - to create evocative paintings whose surfaces often shimmer from his use of gold leaf. At one point, while we looked through their collaborations - wherein Gimblett drew or painted images next to words from Yau's poetry - Gimblett observed, "Sometimes Beauty hurts."

For me, Zlamany captured in *Serious Yellow John* the portrait of John Yau as Poet. The exposure depicted through Yau's unclothed upper torso speaks to the often fraught unveiling artists must undergo by plumbing their psyches to create their art as well as in the releasing of their works to a potentially indifferent world. In addition, the melancholy on Yau's face that the viewer cannot penetrate aptly fits Yau. In a number of his writings, Yau long has noted the inevitable solitude in which an artist must work and live. In the title essay to his forthcoming collection of essays on art and poetry, *The Passionate Spectator* (University of Michigan Press), Yau discusses poet-critic Frank O'Hara's manner of protecting himself from the vicissitudes of the art world by building around himself the "appropriate space" which he needed as a poet and human being. Yau writes, "Whether it comes in the form of an official seal or a critical review, you don't need that external authority to tell you that you have written a great poem. You have had an experience that no one else has had, and it's right there in front of you, plain as words on a page. The solitariness that O'Hara experienced was both ecstatic and isolating."

Yau's words about the privacy of an artist's creation can be as true, I believe, for painting as for poetry. But Yau is also referring to the marginalization of poetry within society - including the contemporary separation of the poetry and art worlds, unlike in the post-WWII decades in New York when poets and artists were more involved in each others' arts. As a working poet for nearly four decades, Yau inevitably understands how poetry is not just "isolating" through its means of creation but also through the limits imposed by (the lack of) culture.

It is through *Serious Yellow John*'s combination of beauty and pain that Zlamany most captures Yau. Zlamany may have thought of the color yellow to feature a part-Asian man like Yau. But the painting's tonality ultimately came to offer a certain shimmer as might be found in burnished gold. *Serious Yellow John* could be titled *Gold John* and it would be equally fitting. The combination of that opulent yellow or gold tone with the melancholy in Yau's expression manifests for me what Gimblett stated and what Yau has experienced: the poet creates Beauty but, sometimes, it hurts.

But if Beauty hurts, what is at stake is Art. In *Serious Yellow John*, the edges of Yau's figure melts back against the background. The melting fits Yau's inclination to make his "I" disappear in much of his writings, whether as a poet or critic. The fusion of his flesh into the yellow backdrop is also appropriate for, as Gimblett also told me, "Gold is consciousness." Yau, I believe, understands that pain is not a price when it comes to artmaking. This is a mature artist who, as a mentor, once told me: the ability to create - whether in art, poetry, music or dance - is nothing less than a "blessing."

I read Yau's poems for years before I met him. A self-taught poet, I read his works as closely as I imagine Zlamany perused Rembrandt and his peers to determine the elements of her art and craft. One of my first meetings with Yau occurred in 1997 when he conducted a book signing at ACE Gallery - NYC of his then recently released groundbreaking monograph *The United States of Jasper Johns*. Anxious at meeting the poet who had greatly influenced me, I immediately left the gallery as soon as he signed my work - I felt that the longer I remained, the greater the chance I'd sputter something inane, and I certainly did not wish to embarrass myself before someone I'd long mythologized on a pedestal. I didn't see Yau again for a long time as I continued my close readings of his work in private. In my readings, I often felt pain or loss surface as

strongly as desire in Yau's lyrics, including in this prose poem *Each Other 5* :

"We melted into each other like snow. We crashed against each other like rocks. Neither accumulation held us within its orbit. I am between the here and the there, and I am trying to return to the moment of sunlight filling the doorway, where you are standing, looking at this form you think I always inhabit."

Indeed, Yau's image in *Serious Yellow John* offers similarities to the expression in the eyes and outlining the lips in Yau's author-photograph (by Peter Muscato) used for his 1992 poetry collection *Edificio Sayonara* and 1995 short story collection *Hawaiian Cowboys*. A sense of contained, private hurt lingers in both the painting and photograph. If, as Zlamany said about her portraits, "It's about me seeing the subjects," then Zlamany saw Yau with much perception - and even more accurately than she realized based on how she felt her portraits never fully captured Yau.

With *Serious Yellow John*, I believe Zlamany successfully portrayed the essence of Yau. She saw and painted a Poet.

III. The Extra-Ordinary Way

The true calling of a Christian is not to do extraordinary things, but to do ordinary things in an extraordinary way.

- Jan. 22, 2001 "Quote of the Week" from the Evander Holyfield Web Site

In our interview, Zlamany professed nervousness at Yau's reactions. She said, *"I knew I betrayed John by lying to him about not painting him smiling. And that is intense because so much about portraiture is trust."*

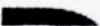
I replied that I thought there would not be a problem. I suggested that, ultimately, she wouldn't have painted *Laughing Blue John* if she truly anticipated that Yau would object. I also said that I didn't think Yau would have a problem if it was something she felt she had to do as an artist. I didn't explain my thinking to Zlamany at the time, but I was considering how Yau himself crosses so many boundaries in his own work that I thought he would understand Zlamany's expansive way of exploring her aesthetics.

Coincidentally, while finishing this essay I received an e-mail from Zlamany that stated, among other things, *"John's response was positive, with him preferring to be remembered by the serious yellow but definitely loving and understanding the need for the 'laughing blue.'" I wouldn't have expected Yau to respond otherwise.*

And as I continue to finish this essay now, I sit here smiling over these experimental artists with whose intersection I came to briefly share. In something else I learned from Yau: there are no rules to artmaking. Even the word "betrayal" becomes a subjective definition. The route the artist must travel to attain something as great as *Serious Yellow John* is one without a map. It is a path as unpredictable as the point from which I met Yau years ago at ACE Gallery to this point of writing this essay. In Zlamany's case, she had to paint *Laughing Blue John* - and the other portraits in the series - before she could come to create the painting that nearly failed but then overcame all of her intentions to become a self-sufficient masterpiece: *Serious Yellow John*.

Finally, it is worth noting that, by choosing a subject with whom she lacked the certainty she felt toward the more iconic images of Close and Holyfield, Zlamany engaged in a process similar to a mode that Yau, as teacher, has suggested to other poets: rather than trying to manifest an intent, use the writing of a poem to explore. The greatest rewards often are derived from taking the greatest risks.

IV. P.S.

 uring our conversation, Zlamany conceded that she also wanted to paint

D *Laughing Blue John* because she thought that Yau might write on her exhibition and was interested to see what he would say about being a "victim" - both as the subject of a portrait and through her lie of only painting him in a serious pose. Fortunately for Zlamany, she picked a subject most likely to understand or be receptive to her "betrayal." For, as has been said numerous times: Poets always lie.

"I burned the letter, but kept the ashes in a jar beside the bed. Flowers bloomed beneath the moon, flimsy sickles of color separating the wind into dried insect wings, each wrinkled and ready to use. Then you came out of the shower, a towel wrapped around your favorite mirage. Are we ready to send and receive each other's images?"

- John Yau, *Big Island Notebook 5*

V. P.P.S.

Poets always lie. Thus, if - as I maintain - *Serious Yellow John* is an accurate portrait of John Yau the Poet, would this not mean that the painting is portraying a liar?

What kind of truth is portrayed by a liar? Whose identity is portrayed by a liar?

Perhaps *Serious Yellow John*, as a portrait of melancholy, is also a portrait of all of humanity. For how many of us have ever avoided lapsing into a lie? As humans - that is, as imperfect beings - do we not sometimes disappoint each other and ourselves either by being dishonest or by being unable to recognize truth? Is not the melancholy of *Serious Yellow John* something familiar to us? Is not melancholy inevitably part of us all?

But what is Truth: Is it something recognizable or based on our subjectivity? Is Truth something we humans can grasp?

Sometimes, Beauty hurts.

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