

Q: Zhou Xiaofei

A: Ding Shiwei

Translation / ChatGPT

1. How do you personally understand “Utopia”? Does its contradiction with reality also serve as the driving force and inspiration for your creation?

I am deeply intrigued by the inherent paradox of “Utopia.” It simultaneously embodies both an ideal realm and a hollow void—it is the double refraction of human desire.

My fascination with “Utopia” led to a series of projects between 2013 and 2014, including *Double Act*, *Goodbye, Utopia*, *Daybreak*, and *Food Chain*. These works spanned multiple media such as animation, video installations, painting, and painting-installations. Through these diverse perspectives, I attempted to infiltrate my own understanding of Utopia, while also engaging with broader questions concerning the relationships between the individual and the collective, and between individuality and commonality.

Of course, events and contradictions reflect the minutiae within a broader context, and these details often make people sensitive. However, I would prefer that my work takes the path of 格物致知 *gewu zhizhi* (investigating things to acquire knowledge), which means to look beyond phenomena to grasp the essence.

2. When curating, how do you achieve a harmonious relationship between installations and spatial atmosphere?

Before an exhibition, I usually study the relationship between the structure of the space and the context of the works. Space is alive, unique, and expressive. At the same time, one must carefully balance the cooperation and contestation between the work and the space—precise control and rigorous preparation are necessary to achieve the best outcome.

In everyday life, I often conduct imaginary experiments with space in my mind. For example, when I enter an unfamiliar environment—regardless of its nature or state—I make a basic judgment based on its conditions and envision how both finished and unfinished works might inhabit the space, though this remains purely within imagination. For me, realizing exhibitions in physical space is crucial, but so too is their realization in the imagination.

Take *Goodbye, Utopia* as an example: the work presents a farewell parade composed of randomly chosen dystopian images. It is a nine-screen video installation with a backdrop of a nebulous, cloud-filled world. When showing this work, I used dry ice to cover the gallery floor, creating a foggy atmosphere that mirrored the imagery. In this way, the boundaries of the video blurred and extended into the physical environment. The space itself became part of the work, and the audience became participants, immersed in a background akin to that of the figures and objects within the imagery.

Another example is *Daybreak*, a painting-installation created for my solo exhibition at Beijing Now Gallery in 2016. Responding to the gallery’s second floor—with its relatively low ceiling and strongly textured walls, floors, and ceiling—I constructed an anti-display landscape of paintings. The works were suspended in midair with their images facing the ground, while the backs of the frames were uniformly covered with black aluminum plates. Audiences could only view the works through mirrors placed on the floor, yet from no angle could they see the complete image. *Daybreak* combined paradox-laden and historically charged paintings

with this unusual display mode to construct a paradoxical site of collectivist implications and layered interpretive contexts. Similarly, in 2017 at the Macau Museum of Art, I applied a related method to the installation of Goodbye, Utopia.

3. It seems that your works reveal an interest in the cognition of life and the depiction of time. When did you start reflecting on these topics and incorporating them into your works?

Between 2015 and 2016, I began reflecting on these questions through the project *Meteor Sonata*. The most important work within this project is the eponymous piece *Meteor Sonata*. In this work, I cut through a dead tree of 17 years of age, treating each pair of adjacent branch nodes as a segment. From this process, I collected 738 branches and 14,464 cross-sectional images, and then assembled them into 738 looping animations. Following the tree's authentic growth path, I ultimately composed these animations into a six-screen video installation.

There were several motivations behind this creation:

- I have always been fascinated by the internal structures and forms of things. While we are familiar with external appearances, each entity possesses a unique inner state. *Meteor Sonata* reveals the intricate and vibrant world beneath an object's surface.
- Based on this fascination, I wanted to merge form with time. Since the tree had lived for 17 years, its cross-sections were filled with temporal information. I therefore transformed the sequence of frames into animations.
- As mentioned earlier, my approach follows the spirit of 格物 *gewu*—investigating things. I sought to reveal the connections between the life of this tree and humanity, the universe, or broader temporal and microscopic realms.

In exhibition, I designed immersive displays and projections. I hoped the audience could immerse themselves in this life form that is simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary. In the animations, I visualized the 738 sequences as a galaxy of luminous points, while each loop evoked the constant splitting and aggregation of cells. This was my creative response during the process of investigating the essence of things.

My exploration of time also extended to another work within the same project: 潜灵 (*Animism*). What interested me most about time was its intangible form and dimensional structure. I compressed the 14,464 sectional images into a single frame to explore the representation of temporal form and articulate the concept of temporal compression. If *Meteor Sonata* presented the dynamic temporality of the tree's 17 years, then *Hidden Spirit* offered a static overview of that timespan.

4. How do you perceive the idea that “an instant is eternal”?

I once wrote a short sentence: “An instant, an eternity.” The temporal gap between the two is infinite. For me, this is not simply a poetic phrase, but an existential fact.

Every moment of perception, when accumulated, forms our life and history. Whether fragmented or continuous, each instant has its unique weight. In my works, I often attempt to capture such fleeting instants and expand them into an eternal perceptual space.

For example, in *Meteor Sonata*, the momentary cross-sections of the tree, when sequenced, become a life-form of time itself. In *Daybreak*, the audience sees only fragmented reflections of paintings through mirrors,

yet within these fragments, there lies an eternal tension. Art, to me, is precisely the medium that bridges the instantaneous and the eternal.

5. Many of your works seem to position the artist as a “bridge.” How do you understand this role?

I see the role of the artist as one of constant mediation—between self and world, individual and collective, visible and invisible. The artist is like a bridge, linking different dimensions, but at the same time, the bridge is also fragile, constantly under reconstruction.

When I was working on *Goodbye, Utopia* or *Meteor Sonata*, I often felt that I myself was both the initiator and the receiver. The questions posed in my works are not only directed at the audience but also at myself. The audience responds in their own ways, adding to or even transforming the work. In this sense, the “bridge” is not a one-way channel, but a dynamic and pluralistic structure.

6. What directions are you planning to take in your future artistic practice?

I am interested in continuing to explore the essence of media and images, but more importantly, I want to push further into questions of life, time, and knowledge.

I plan to expand my research into interdisciplinary territories—drawing from fields such as neuroscience, artificial intelligence, and cosmology. I hope to create works that allow the audience to experience perceptual states beyond everyday life, and to reimagine the relationship between humans, technology, and nature.

At the same time, I want to further refine my methodology of “projects.” Each project is not just a collection of works but also a conceptual laboratory. Through long-term exploration, I wish to build layered, interconnected bodies of work that can address the questions of our era.