



Victoria Fu's *Velvet Peel*: Through the Forest of Screens
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February 2015

What does a screen do to space? Traditionally, screens hide something; they block the gaze to carve out a space of privacy or concealment: places to dress, or hide the dirty dishes or unmade bed. But at least since the middle of the nineteenth century "screen" has also named the surface on which images are projected, first by the magic lantern, and then movie projectors, migrating eventually to the electronic displays of televisions and computers. Instead of blocking a view, these screens display an image and open onto a different space. The screen merges with the Western tradition of perspective, defined by Alberti in the fifteenth century as "an open window through which I see what I want to paint." But what about video screens in galleries? What do they show-- or hide -- from us, and how do they redefine our space?



At the end of the last century the term "cyberspace" referred to the social communication the new medium allowed, a space of information rather than physical contact. The prospect of an alternate immaterial and disembodied space either seduced or alarmed people, until, like all new media, cyberspace became absorbed into our everyday. Instead of an alternative universe, cyberspace simply offered another means of human interaction as had the printed page, painted canvas or telephone. As it disappeared into daily routines, the excitement of the new medium may have vanished. To explore new media possibilities within our everyday world we need less science fiction speculation than the experience Victoria Fu's installation offers us: making and viewing art, which renews our awareness of the sensual and imaginative possibilities new technology bring us.

Fu's elegant work allows us to wander about in a new environment of screens and images, not by creating an illusionistic experience, but by inviting us to play with our perceptions of depth and surface, space and texture, peeling off layers of the video image like ripe fruit. Far from a disembodied state, her works make us aware of our senses through a game of hide seek, orientation and disorientation, evoking not only sight but hearing and touch and (hinting at smell and maybe even taste). Early video art was contained within the television tube and struggled to break through this piece of domestic furniture. As the possibility of projection and diverse platforms of display developed, this art transformed, no longer tied to its evil twin of TV. Thinking outside the box, Fu gives us screens that redefine our space and allow us to explore this new forest of images.

We are in a forest suffused with vernal foliage, hearing birdsongs. The wide frieze-like shape of the screen recalls nineteenth century painted panoramas, which burst the academic framed landscape and wrapped it around the viewer, making its borders disappear. But Fu's frieze does not abolish the frame; it redefines it. We dwell in the forest for a moment, but then a red-haired head enters, seemingly in front of the landscape. Its scale and texture redefine the space; the forest becomes a screen before which this person moves and then seems to turn its image off with a loud click. Then we discover the surface of this image, redefining it as a screen, as drops of water roll across it in response to a pounding noise. This sequence announces Fu's game of surfaces and depths. It poses a *mise en abyme* in which the role of picture and frame seems subject to an endless regression: where does the ultimate surface of the image lie? Varied textures succeed each other as much as different depths. Fu makes us feel these surfaces, as if her images addressed imaginary fingertips as much as our eyes.

The space of Fu's screen becomes layered with contradiction, or provide overlaps in sound and image that play with our sense of coherence. The extended frame feels expansive when applied to landscape, but in relation to the ladies that cavort close to the camera, it exerts a severe cramp on our visual field, chopping off heads or bodies. Sound sometimes seems to control the image from off-screen (giving directions to actors or manipulating the technology), but at other times it flirts with the image in contradictory relations -- as when the sound of a shower occurs as entirely dry girls seem to mime washing their hair. At every point it is the sensuality of the image that touches us. Observe the various qualities of water we see and hear: rain, shower, a fluid aqueous environment in which things float, or the ocean surf. This multilayered screen presentation allows diverse sensations and situations to crisscross. If our sense of deep space becomes swallowed by a confusion of levels as people pop in and out, or the screen itself wipes or divides, we also delight in the textures of these surfaces. The screen, as Fu reveals it, is not just a barrier or a site for projection, but a sensual skin, an illuminated layer to be touched and marveled at. Fu glories in the textures she evokes and blends, like a painter at her palette: the glassy surface of a window or computer screen on which raindrops bead or frost grows; the worn denim covering a butt that bounces past; rough woven woolen sweaters; the green skin of apples floating by. But the work also makes tangible textures disappear, as in the collage of multiple screens that stream towards us through cyberspace, or the revolving galaxies of outer space. Fu juxtaposes the near and the far, the tactile we can grasp and the infinite we can only imagine.

Eventually the screen ceases giving up images and we see that most sensual (but least tactile) experience: pure color and light, a spectrum of hues that suffuse the screen and then bow out in bright illumination. We have moved through spaces and images, places and surfaces, action and commands, and emerge, I feel, refreshed, as if coming from a forest walk or a shower bath.