

Young Artists Emerging in America: Place, Body, Technology

Featuring the work of students from New York University, the International Center of Photography, and Parsons The New School for Design

Curated by Sean Justice

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The underlying theme of this project is an exploration of the education of artists in America. The topic engages me because it challenges me. Teaching is the most fulfilling part of my career because every day brings new puzzles, new questions, and no two of them can be answered or approached in the same way. This requires flexibility and patience, and lots of practice. Over the years, in fact, I've come to see teaching art and photography as a performance, a kind of choreography that blends material with technique with idea. It's exhausting and sometimes frustrating, but when students begin making pictures that come from a place of rich context and response—those are the best days. It seems that during the past twenty-five years, no matter what else I've been doing, the most satisfying part of my work has been in the role as an educator.

The English verb “to educate” is rooted in the Latin “educere,” which combines “e-” meaning “out,” and “ducere” meaning “to lead” or “to bring.” The idea that emerges is at the core of the American educational process, and you can hear it discussed in conversations with teachers from across all levels. In practice we call it “student centered,” and it gives rise to our “need-to-know” and “self-paced” methodologies. There are many interpretations of this philosophy, of course, but generally, the distinction is between old fashioned ideas about stuffing knowledge into students' heads and our current approach that emphasizes problem solving and critical thinking. Today we see our teachers as leaders who bring students out of unknowing and into a place of knowledge.

College educators work from a similar place, but with an additional idea. The root of our practice is the same—“to bring out”—but the location has been clarified, that is, to bring out from where? The answer: to bring out from within. At the university level we talk about the cultural conditions that produce picture-making, and we discuss the history and structure of art in that light. In this way we encourage students to recognize their roots and to explore their place within the shared society.

As a result, in America today the goal of higher level art education is broadly seen as training in a way of thinking. Our education programs are sometimes discipline specific—such as photography, or painting, or filmmaking—but more often they are multidisciplinary. That is, while making art is important, the choice of tools and technologies is contingent and subjective. And since there is very little agreement about what art looks like, or where it comes from, we talk instead about art as a response to culture.

This idea of response is important. I see it as a loud conversation with many different speakers, like a noisy party or a raucous debate. My goal as a teacher is to get students to participate in that conversation. What they say and how they say it, however, is their decision: it comes from inside them. My job is simply to bring them to a place where they have the discipline and confidence to join in.

The work in *Young Artists Emerging in America* is of two kinds: picture and text. I see these two parts as dependent on each other, intertwined like branches on a tree, or woven together like the canopy of an old forest. To understand the project as a whole I propose that we consider the pictures as artifacts of a dynamic journey, that is, as the physical residue of each students’ passage through the American educational system. And to guide us in understanding what we see in the pictures, let’s read the texts as a map, a word-map that locates them (and us) within the geography of culture and experience.

The pictures in YAEA were selected because they spoke to me about the sub-themes of Place, Body, and Technology. The individual artists did not necessarily see these ideas as

central to their projects, but in thinking about my work as a teacher and as an artist I realized that much of what motivates me can be summarized by these words. This is subjective, of course, as every act of direct response must be, and I realize that another curator thinking about art education in America would chose different entry points. My goal in highlighting these ideas, however, is to suggest the interwoven fabric that emerges from the specific conditions of our lives. That is, we didn't chose to be born here, now, among these people, using these tools. We find ourselves among strangers, and we make the best of it. We're here now, and each of us must respond to that fact.

The text came out of a multifaceted process. First, I asked the artists to write about their education and art practice within the context of the sub-themes. Next, I prepared each statement for translation into Chinese by editing for clarity of meaning, simplifying syntax and, where possible, removing compound verb-adjective structures. The edited statements were then sent to volunteer translators who had answered a request for assistance that had been posted on a very famous photography blog (<http://renyue.ofpix.com/>) written by Ren Yue, a Chinese scholar of photographic culture. (As an aside, I'd met Ren Yue in New York when she was researching her doctoral dissertation. When I told her my idea about looking for translation assistance, and asked her to post an invitation on the blog, she thought I'd be lucky to get a dozen responses. As it turned out, I had more than 60, and more keep coming even as the project is wrapping up altogether!)

Then, during a time period of a few weeks, as each volunteer translator responded with their work, I posted the statements to a Google group wiki. The goal of the site was to initiate a discussion among the translators and the artists in the exhibit, so that everyone could check their understanding of the statements. As an observer—since I can't read Chinese—I was amazed at the number of posts asking for clarifications and alternatives. The artists also got involved with direct email conversations (and even some phone calls!). The text presented in the exhibit is the product of this back-and-forth process.

So, it's fair to ask: what comes from these multiple intersections of picture with word, text with text, America and the West with China and the East?

Emergence, emerging, to emerge: the word is everywhere in America these days. In its common and most general meaning, as in "appearing gradually" or "becoming known," it is attached to gallery shows, photography contests, and special issues of major art magazines whenever curators or publishers want to introduce new artists to their audiences. In this respect I'm hoping for that kind of good luck—perhaps these Western artists will become known to a Chinese audience! I also hope that the exhibit will spark conversations between artists of different cultures, and that these conversations might become rich and interesting and long-lived. Most importantly, I hope that these young artists from New York will be fascinated and stimulated by their cultural interactions with China.

But there's another meaning of emergence that I want to highlight, a more precise and careful meaning. This meaning comes from the physical and biological sciences; it describes the appearance of a new structure that seems to rise from the interactions of existing structures.

For example, think of a new sprout that pokes up from the earth. We can point to the seed and to the dirt and say that the plant emerges from the dynamic relationship of these two parts. To a careful observer it's impossible to say that either the seed or the soil was most important; the existence of the plant requires both. This idea of a third structure evolving from the existence of two primary structures is an underlying principle of scientific investigation. It helps organize investigations into phenomena as seemingly distinct as oil and gas exploration, insect behavioral studies, and the untangling of the neural basis of consciousness itself. My opinion is that we can also use this idea to understand the emergence of cultures, and of pictures.

Consider the example of tree rings. In many American museums we find a favorite exhibit: a giant old tree cut across the grain of its trunk and displayed so that the

concentric growth rings are easy to see. Often the rings are labeled with famous dates—the end of World War II, the founding of America, the discovery of New York harbor. Very ancient trees have markers that go back thousands of years, all the way to the fall of Rome, or to the birth of Christ.

Standing next to these giant trees a visitor feels both insignificantly small and, at the same time, delightfully connected to history and to humanity. It's a strange and wonderful experience, but certainly not the purpose of tree rings. In fact, it's clear that tree rings themselves are not an essential but rather an emergent structure. That is, the rings exist because the tree grew in the way that it did, but the tree didn't grow for the purpose of making tree rings. And yet, this doesn't make the rings insignificant. On the contrary, for careful observers who understand the interrelationships of rain and soil and the passing of centuries, the tree rings create a highly revealing picture of climate and ecology. In fact, with close observation of many different trees and their rings, experts can even make predictions about the past and future climate of entire regions.

Are pictures like tree rings? That is, can pictures illuminate cultures like cross-sections of trees help explain forests? With regard to the work an artist does, I'm wondering if we can glimpse the foundational conditions that motivate and concern a nation if we look closely at that nation's pictures. And, if we study a wide selection of pictures, and think carefully about the conditions of the culture that produced them, is it possible to know something about the path of that culture?

I'm not sure these questions can be answered with this small exhibit, especially not with a sample set of only 55 pictures from a narrow selection of New York City schools. However, I do think that considering pictures as emergent structures can teach us about the work that artists do in ways that otherwise might remain hidden. Looked at like this, perhaps, the pictures of YAEA can be understood as emotional responses to the condition of America today. With different methods and with different technologies each artist is showing a small piece of who we are. For myself, I think I can see uncertainty and

perhaps even a kind of fear, as well as a desire to test and play and engage with a world that might not be fulfilling every expectation.

I wonder what China will see in these pictures. And I wonder what can be learned about America by looking at them. That is, though some of these pictures echo pictures that are familiar to Western culture, they might feel strange or unfamiliar to Chinese viewers. Likewise some of the motivations behind the pictures—as described in each artist’s text—will feel new and strange, perhaps even surprising, while others will seem knowable and ordinary.

This is because, as picture-makers, we have much in common with each other. The body and text of our work emerges from our engagement with the culture and land of our homes. If we respond to these conditions honestly and with clarity then we share ourselves with neighbors and the world. In this way our mutual work is knowable even if the visible surfaces seem unusual or foreign.

My hope is that for both of us—the artists in the West and the viewers in Pingyao—the conversations that come from this project will provide a foundation for a truly cross-cultural dialog and a new kind of emergent understanding.