

"Forget About Doing Art"
KATY MARTIN - Interviewed by ZHU DENIS (Zhu Haijian)
-- New York/Shanghai, December 21, 2004

Published in Chinese translation in
Art World Magazine (Yishu Shijie),
January 2005, pp. 46-50, ill.

1. As I know, you've begun making avant-garde films since 1970s. You got the bachelor of art in 1973. How did you enter this field step by step? Do you mind tracing your past experience?

I got my bachelor's degree in 1973, from Antioch College, with a double major in literature and painting. At Antioch, I took a course in experimental film with Paul Sharits. It was not a filmmaking class, but rather, a class where we looked at films – many, many films since Paul believed in throwing students off the deep end. For weeks, the films he showed made no sense to me. But I kept going back, and then one day, after all that looking, the moving image as an abstract form opened up for me. I got really excited by a film installation of Tony Conrad's. And after that, I was hooked. As I remember, what Conrad did was to project vertical bands of black and white onto big gallery walls. So I was surrounded by these flickering stripes that when they shimmered, set up optical illusions, patterns, and colored afterimages. Perception, reality, and illusion elided, and the experience was amazing.

Maybe the best way to explain these pivotal moments is to compare visual art to language. When you're learning a foreign language, the sounds at first are undifferentiated, but then you begin to hear distinct words and meaning starts to emerge. Here, the visual field began to make sense, as it unfolded over time. A year or so later, at the Museum of Modern Art, I had similar kind of epiphany when a Pollock painting opened out, and its shapes, perspective, and visual structure became clear.

As I was leaving college, Paul Sharits had mentioned to me that no one had ever translated the puns of Marcel Duchamp from his 7-minute film, *Anémic-Cinéma*, made in 1926. Little did I know that, for me, it would become a two-year obsession, figuring out those nine puns! I prided myself on my French. But to approach Duchamp, that only got me so far. I had to learn everything I could about the artist, and question the prevailing interpretation of his work (Duchamp at the time was a craze in New York). I also had to learn about early cinema, and then think and think about what those nine, spiraling lines could mean within the context of the moving image. Within those spirals and undulating circles, I discovered a dynamic world that challenged fixed ideas, dualistic hierarchies, and traditional mind/body splits. I also picked up on Duchamp's romanticism, contained and deflected within an acerbic wit.

I moved to New York City in 1973, where I went to see avant-garde films any chance I could. I also got my first job, and continued to work on my interpretation of Duchamp. At screenings, I met filmmakers, among them the British filmmaker and writer, Malcolm LeGrice. Malcolm took my Duchamp piece to London, where it was published in 1975 by *Studio International*. I started making films in 1974.

A year later, I was still in touch with Paul Sharits, who told me about a job opening at Paula Cooper Gallery. I worked there, part-time, from 1974-76, where I met painters and sculptors including Joel Shapiro, Lynda Benglis, Jennifer Bartlett, and Jackie Winsor. Later, I worked for Joel Shapiro (from 1976-1982), going to his studio one day a week to take care of his office work. Seeing Joel's work on a weekly basis, as it developed over the years, also turned out to be a formative experience. It was my first prolonged exposure to sculpture. At the time, Joel was thinking a lot about Giacometti and the void, about violence and physicality, and about how a sculptural object implicates the space around it. I'm not sure how that relates to my development as a filmmaker, but perhaps in making a film about Jasper Johns, which I did in 1981, I was also reflecting on the experience I'd had observing Joel Shapiro's work.

2. *In Daffodils, it seems that you met Bill in 1981. I know that Bill began his avant-garde filmmaking in the early 1970s. Is it his influence that made your choosing this way?*

I met Bill Brand in November of 1974. The filmmaker, Hollis Frampton, introduced us. He was matchmaking, and he was probably more surprised than anyone, when it actually worked! Bill and I had both gone to Antioch and studied with Paul Sharits, but we had never met in college. When we were first together, we had such a shared history that we had to remind ourselves we'd only met. It was indeed love at first sight, although it took years for us to grow together as a couple. We began living together in 1977, in a loft on Worth Street, where I shot *Daffodils*. We moved to Franklin Street in 1980, and we live there still. We got married in 1981, the same year I edited *Daffodils*.

For my 24th birthday, Bill gave me a regular 8mm camera. This was just a week after we first met. Although Bill gave me my first movie camera, it's hard to say whether or not he was an influence, at least in the beginning. Certainly, his circle of friends became mine. And his interests and preoccupations have guided his life, and mine. When I first met Bill, he had just arrived in New York, after finishing graduate school at the Art Institute of Chicago. His friends were musicians, video artists, performance artists and filmmakers, and these people soon became my friends as well. We hosted film nights where, as a group of artists, we would get together and show each other what we were working on. This grew somewhat organically into public events and exhibits together in galleries and alternative venues. And, of course, we all went to films and performances together.

3. You keep working on avant-garde from 1978 to 1981. And you created four works in just four years, each of which lasts 30 minutes. How productive! How did you feel at that time?

That was an exciting time. I was active in a community of artists, who were making art in new ways, shapes, and forms. I still think it's critical to stay in dialogue with other artists. Connecting with an audience is key, and that is easier to do when you have an active network of people around you, that you can include in various stages of your process.

From 1978 to 1981, with so much going on around me, I had a lot to do, just figuring out how to be an artist. Perhaps, instead of "be," I should say, "become," since an artist is always reaching, or becoming. In the years that you mention, basic questions about art, and how it is made, became the primary subject of my work. That mirrored my own search.

In the 1970s and early 80s, conceptual art was a strong presence in New York, and Duchamp was – I believe – mistakenly used to justify an end to the creation of art objects. In my view, this championing of conceptual art smacked of placing mind over body, reinforcing the same dualistic views that Duchamp's art undermines.

Here is an example of what I'm talking about. At a certain point in his life, Duchamp claimed he had stopped making art, in order to breathe and play chess. Meanwhile, he continued to make quantities of art. What is striking, and funny, is that even though Duchamp placed so much art in public view, everyone continued to echo his words, saying, yes, he's stopped making art, he's succeeded in the metaphysics of pure being as an artist. Meanwhile, in 1973-74, there was a huge Duchamp retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. The museum was filled with art objects and they published a very fat catalogue. Even so, the myth that Duchamp had created persisted despite all evidence.

Now, I continue to be drawn to an art of contradictions, where what you see and what you are told may or may not be the same. I'm also drawn to the chance encounter where the viewer's perspective and preconceptions shape new, unexpected readings. Duchamp's art is structured like a puzzle, where one follows clues on a search for hidden meaning. For me, even now, figuring out what it means to be an artist is still an open question.

That, perhaps, is why in my current work, I use my own body. I'm trying to locate art within visceral experience, or experience I can verify. I place myself, front and center, in my work so that I can figure out what I'm doing there. My nakedness, or presenting myself "in the raw," is to coax myself forward, to move toward something raw and essential that drives our collective need to make art.

4. *You've been in that silkscreen print shop for seven years, making out two works. What was your main job there? What made you stay so long time?*

The shop was called Simca Print Artists, and I loved it there. It was very much its own scene. Aside from the print publisher, Hiroshi Kawanishi, the two other printers (Takeshi Shimada and Kenjiro Nonaka) came from Japan, and they lived at Hiroshi's for however long it took to proof the prints they were publishing. Then they went back to Japan, where they worked for Hiroshi's mother, Madame Mukai, who published prints in Tokyo and ran a gallery there.

During the years I was at Simca (1977-1984), they worked with Alex Katz, Jennifer Bartlett, Joel Shapiro, Keith Sonnier, Nancy Graves, Brice Marden, and others. It was interesting to see how differently each artist used the shop, and the printers' labor and expertise, to make their art. Johns, I sensed, was really inspired. He did some very exciting work there.

I made two films there, on my own time. That wasn't part of my job. I had access as a filmmaker because I worked there, part-time, as an administrative assistant for Hiroshi. Otherwise, Jasper never allowed himself to be filmed. I think that was mostly because he got asked all the time, and found it disruptive. And he'd had an unpleasant experience. In this case, though, I was already part of the shop, and like me, Jasper loved being there.

I only quit that job because I had to. When I got pregnant with my first child, the fumes from the solvents they used made me ill. I am still very fond of Hiroshi. From what I hear, he moved back to Japan. I haven't had any contact with him in years.

5. *After 1981, you didn't make films until 1995. Why? Is it because of your experience in the print shop?*

In many ways, yes. The decision to stop filmmaking came when I finished *Hanafuda*. It was somewhat similar to the situation I found myself in, after I finished writing about Duchamp, when I decided not to become "a writer" because I wanted to be "an artist." I'd already figured out that those categories were somewhat useless, but I felt bound by them nonetheless. Now I intentionally work outside categories and purposely challenge the boundaries.

Also, I love painting. I love its substance that, when I look at a painting, I sometimes feel like eating. I also love its beauty, its seductive color, and its almost frightening ability to transport you into a world apart. In 1981, although I had majored in painting in college, I had not yet given painting the time it takes to develop a sense of voice. However, with its emphasis on new media and forms, the climate of the 1970s was not conducive to painting. It took some digging in, just to do it. In a way, observing Jasper at work was an elaborate ritual aimed at giving myself permission to paint.

6. You kept an eye on painting all along from 1981 to 1995. What did you do during these ten years? I fail to find the works of this time.

As always, I spent a lot of time in my studio. I made several series of gestural paintings, with more or less success, that drew on a range of influences from Chinese painting to abstract expressionism. I was also influenced by minimalism, so I set up strategies for making work that involved repeating a simple gesture – often following a circular form – almost as a form of meditation.

Actually, lately, I feel more connected to that work than ever, since I'm finally achieving what I was after during those years. For the past year, I've been studying dance as part of my investigation of gesture, and incorporating full body movement into my painting and film. This, in turn, is making my painting – which I now do directly on my nude body, while filming or photographing the process – it's making my painting looser, more lyrical, and more playful than ever. Emphasizing painting, as physical movement, connects the act of making marks to cinema. Film then becomes a context for the painterly gesture.

With regard to painting, though, during those years, I also grew increasingly frustrated. This may simply be part of the love/hate cycle I tend to go through that somehow drives my work to the next stage. But, I wondered then why I was so attached to this medium, when I questioned the preciousness of what it produced, and so many of its basic premises.

Finally, in 1995, I enrolled in the MFA program at Vermont College. When I got there, one of my professors, Steve Kurtz, astutely observed that I was “into crisis.” With Kurtz, I embarked on a two-year study of faith and doubt, focusing on European literature of the 19th century, a time of irrevocable change and widespread crises of faith. I also tried new approaches in my studio. I stopped painting on canvas and began combining painting, sculpture, and photography.

At first, to solve problems in composition, I began sculpting and painting small objects that I moved around on small sets and then photographed. The photos had so much energy that I immediately reconnected with my past as a filmmaker. It was uncanny. What a charge! So I kept on taking pictures. Soon after, I realized that the sculptures were a stand-in for me. So I thought I would stand in for them. I began to treat myself as a sculptural object, one that I could paint, move, and photograph. I began to paint directly on my skin, photograph that, and print the resulting images as color Xerox. At first, I wanted to get painting off its high horse, and I loved the cheap, brassy colors of photocopy.

7. You began to shoot the painting on yourself after 1995, as you described “Combining the forms of painting and photography shifts the expectations for each, since it questions the subjective nature of painting as well as photography’s objectivity.” Would you please explain it in detail?

The process of painting – or for that matter, making art – splits you in two. On the one hand, you fall in headlong and lose yourself in your work. On the other, you stand back, keep a critical eye, and take the role of director. Both are necessary for the work to have resonance. But it can make you feel like you are in two places at once. One subjective, one objective. One private, one public. What I do, in painting and photographing my own body, is to dramatize the artist's narrative by acting out those pulls and conflicts.

Also, by casting myself as an art object, I'm playing on illusions of control and the pathos of inevitable change. My body functions as both the subject and object, the agent as well as the physical surface on which the viewer's gaze and fantasy is projected.

When I wrote the lines you quote, I was thinking a lot about the surfaces in the finished art I make. For the past decade or so, my finished work consists mostly of large-scale digital prints, based on photos of my nude body, painted. What I'm after is a split second of ambiguity about whether what you're looking at is a painting or a photograph. In the digital prints, you see drips and splashes, and the colors are very rich. The painting links to abstract expressionism, with its lyrical, open structure and its steamy, somewhat questionable history associated with the "heroic" gesture. Now, giving the smooth surface of photography to that kind of highly subjective painting has the effect of cooling it down. The intervention of the camera also disconnects painting from the hand. There is a whole mythology about the hand, as an indicator of artist's psyche and presence, that my current work critiques.

8. Does the experience from 1981 to 1995 have an impact on your avant-garde filmmaking?

Yes, definitely. I first began painting directly on my body as an act of frustration and defiance. For one thing, as I mentioned, I felt as if I'd gotten lost in the process, so quite literally I was trying to find myself in the picture. For another, I thought that the language of abstraction had become alienated. So I began painting directly on my skin in order to reclaim that language. In so doing, I could shape it to my time and place, and assert my presence within it.

My premise, through film, is to re-consider painting as a performative, time-based medium. This aesthetic grows out of the 1970s, when notions about the "dematerialization of art," were first put forward by the critic, Lucy Lippard. Many of those issues remain unresolved. Or more precisely, for me, they are unresolved. So I am still interested.

Lately, I am re-thinking the film and photography I do in relation to such artists as Ana Mendieta and Vito Acconci, whose work during the 1970s and 1980s used photography to re-contextualize sculpture as process-based and performative. For example, in her *Silhueta Series*, Mendieta would lay down in a landscape, and then outline her body using

natural materials. Then she photographed the sculpted outline, even as her silhouette faded away.

9. *It seems that Silkscreens and Hanafuda/Jasper Johns are the most important of all. There are a lot of documentary elements in these two films. What was your opinion in the beginning?*

With *Hanafuda*, I knowingly set up a contradiction. My film was a documentary about Johns, yet it sought to create its own visual language. Was it art, or a film about art? And what did that make me, in the mix? The idea, through art, is to pose such questions, and not to give any simple answers. So, maybe, I have to leave it at that. I don't know.

Maybe this will help. In the beginning, when I first started making *Silkscreens*, I had been making films, as diaries, based on everyday situations where I found myself. I also made portraits of the people around me. Is a film portrait a documentary? *Daffodils* was a portrait of Bill, and that film is clearly not a documentary. With *Silkscreens*, however, I got involved in the balletic, highly choreographed movements of the printers engaged in a repetitive process. That process was pulling the edition of a silkscreen print. So does filming such a process make for a documentary?

I got the idea of work as a kind of dance from the French impressionist painter, Edgar Degas – although in his work, it is rather the reverse, since he treats dance as labor. Also, at that time, minimalism was influential, so the idea of using common, workaday gestures in art was being explored by artists such as the choreographer, Yvonne Rainer, and the sculptor, Richard Serra. As it turned out, though, in *Silkscreens*, the gestures weren't so ordinary. These were master printers, and my film took on aspects of a documentary, in that it recorded an extraordinary event. When that happened, I decided to follow where my work was taking me. I decided to make my next film starting earlier on in the silkscreen process, and to focus on Jasper Johns. That took on its own momentum.

As I wrote you before, once I'd made those decisions, the camera became a pretext for structuring an apprenticeship with a major American artist and three Japanese master craftsmen. The finished film, *Hanafuda*, recapitulates my process of learning, gleaned over time, as I observed Jasper Johns at Simca Print Artists. What I wanted to know was how one generates a work of art – and for that matter, what is art, what work is involved, and how do ideas as opposed to physical labor drive the decision making process. The film became a meditation on art and craft, as well as on the dialectic of mind and body, concept and labor, or actual work.

Around that time, I saw a very odd film by Susan Hartnett. It was 5 or 6 hours long, and it didn't fit in any known category for film. She used a super 8mm camera to document her daily travels, and what she noticed along her way. I remember deciding then that avant-garde art is a paradox. With its imperative to continually re-think and re-define what is art, you can only approach it if you forget about making art. Based on that decision, I put aside my worries, and got on with making the film that I needed to make.

10. You began your try on painting on yourself from Skinside Out. It is an avant-garde film experiment, also a documentary of your painting experience. Is it?

Is *Skinside Out* a documentary of my painting experience? Again, I have to leave this as an open question. But if *Skinside Out* is a documentary, then so is all the rest of my art. The painting I do, I wash off after each session, and there is nothing to it, other than the digital image, in its final incarnation.

When we shot that film, I had already been painting on my skin for five years. As you know, I made *Skinside Out* with my husband, Bill Brand. For both of us, what we had in mind was tracking our movements, between the world of the studio and the world outside. That interplay between interior and exterior is what gave us the title, the soundtrack, and the images of the river, with the reflective surface of the water and the divers emerging from the depths. We intended the film as a metaphor for art, for journeys within and fleeting perceptions. *Skinside Out* is an essay on how we see and how we locate ourselves, within and without, when language, the world, and our place in it are all continually in flux.

When Bill and I first discussed the idea of collaborating on a film, based on my studio process, I wanted to avoid a situation (such as in the films of Stan Brakhage), where a woman's image is used by a man as his muse, his mirror, and his alterego. A possible solution was to paint both of us, and to put both of our bodies in front of the camera. That had several unexpected results. For one thing, it made our bodies interchangeable. I liked that, given that I had been trying to find a way around gender. Another unexpected result was that to make that film, I had to create four paintings – two on Bill and two on me – that could be edited together. Until then, I had never made a series of paintings for the body that were so closely related.

11. Some people think Skinside Out is not a film, but just a documentary of an act. What do you think of it?

Is a painting itself just a documentary, or what is left over after the act of painting is complete? More and more, I'm interested in documenting a process. Or rather, leaving evidence of my passage. Lately I'm thinking a lot about *trace*, and in English, that's a verb as well as a noun, an action as well as an object. My work incorporates both the process and the object, which as digital prints, I want to make big and seductive on the one hand, and delicate and ephemeral on the other. For me, there are conflicts involved in making art, and perhaps a way to get at them is to blow out, magnify, or overrule the contradictions. Clearly, I'm still taking cues from Duchamp.

12? When I interviewed Bill, he told me that you not only made films, but were occupied in painting, sculpture, photography and digital printing as well. What's more, you are a wonderful writer. Wow! How can you keep a balance among all these fields?

Thank you for the compliment. My current work is interdisciplinary. I'm working toward an integrated state, something like what is found in so-called "primitive" art, where painting and performance are necessarily tied to movement, dance, music, and ritual. For the time being, though, to keep my focus, I have to take one aspect of the work at a time, so for a year or two, I'll concentrate on painting. Then sculpture, then performance, and so on. Currently I'm studying dance, since I have to give more thought to what I do in front of the camera, how to move within the paint, and how to make a painting that anticipates movement.

13? Please talk about your works as a whole. And say something about the interrelationship between you and Bill. What do you think of Bill's works?

Over the years, I have worked in writing, art criticism, film, painting, and sculpture. I've been investigating gesture, not only in terms of the artistic gesture but also in relation to my experience. I've also observed other artists, and put myself in their place. Finally, I stepped into the picture, and now use my whole body as a means and a metaphor for making art. Film, in a sense, brings me full circle, since my concerns with art as a gesture and a performance are inherently cinematic.

Regarding my working relationship with Bill, for many years, although we went into each other's studios all the time, we never collaborated, and we were both careful not to interfere with each other's process. Then, in 1996, when I began photographing myself, I asked Bill to be the cameraperson. At first, Bill's role in my studio was highly directed, and we didn't consider it to be collaboration. But then, he proposed that we make a film together, based on my studio work. This was exciting because, although Bill and I had been talking for years, until we made *Skinside Out*, we'd never given ourselves a means to formalize that conversation through art. Now, when we look back, we can see many ways we've influenced each other. For example, over the past decade, I have developed a complex way of working that involves layers, and this is not unlike Bill's approach using the optical printer and masks. We are both now using performance in our work, and we are both making art about the body. Overall, I respect and admire Bill's work, and I can't wait to see what he'll do next. I do have my favorites – *Chuck's Will's Widow*, *My Father's Leg*, and *Moxibustion* are a few.

14? What's your future plan of filmmaking and the digital photography?

I work in digital photography on a regular basis. I just recently completed a new portfolio of digital prints, based on material shot since the summer of 2003. I've also been making a lot of digital prints from video stills. Since I'm now focusing primarily on dance and movement in relation to painting and photography, I will need also to make a

video soon. In addition, I am exploring animation, as a way of analyzing movement. Also, last summer, Bill shot 16mm footage of me, painted, falling and imprinting the black floor. This footage will be his film, alone, to finish, and for me, that is also an interesting possibility as a way of developing our ideas.