Q&A: David Diao On His Productive Anxiety of Influence

BY MOSTAFA HEDDAYA | MARCH 08, 2016

David Diao's "Hanging by Chains," 2014.
(Courtesy of the artist and Office Baroque, Brussels)

"Every artist hopes to have a subject to work on," said (/artists/50640-david-diao)David Diao (/artists/50640-david-diao), "and you're lucky when the subject can extend out of itself and give you new aspects." An uncommonly generative artist as adept at casting an analytical eye toward his own output as he is at working through the history and historiography of modernism, Diao spoke to us on the occasion of two simultaneous presentations organized by Office Baroque, his Brussels gallery, on both sides of the Atlantic.

At the Independent art fair during Armory Week in New York, the gallery showed three large-scale geometric abstractions from the 1970s, executed right before Diao's decisive break with unmediated abstraction and unseen since the late '70s — a pivotal event for Diao chronicled in our profile of the artist (http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1239464/tracing-five-decades-of-david-diaos-singular-abstraction) in the September 2015 issue of Modern Painters, which coincided with his first major retrospective at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing.

Meanwhile, in Brussels, Office Baroque has just opened "Ref:Barnett Newman (http://www.officebaroque.com/exhibitions/97/david-diao-ref-barnett-newman)" (through April 6), an exhibition of Diao's quarter-century of work relating to the late modernist icon, a preoccupation that continues into the present. In our conversation, Diao candidly discussed his relationship to his own history as a painter, and the manifold sources from which he has borrowed and by which he has been influenced.

So how did such two chronologically disparate showings by Office Baroque come about? You're in this interesting position of having, simultaneously, an exhibition of your recent work concerning Barnett Newman in Brussels and an art fair outing at Independent for three of your geometric abstractions from the 1970s ["Provisional Government, "1976-77, "Galileo," 1977-78 and "Division of Labor," 1977-79].

I didn't have any plans to do anything after Ullens, which just took it out of me, it was a year and a half of working on that show. But Office Baroque came to me and said they really want to do another show, since the last show with them was in 2010. Then it occurred to me I had never had a show in a gallery or institution devoted just to my work relative to Barnett Newman. So I said why don't we try to do that. And this isn't a new body of work — I've been working in and around Barnett Newman since 1990.

In going through the Office Baroque press release I realized that I had seen one of the works in your studio, in 2014: "BN: the Unfinished Paintings 2" [from 2014].

I had hoped that would be in the show, but it turned out that there ended up being no room for it. That's one lacuna that I feel if we had it the show would be even more specific to the point I was trying to address. One of the things I'm thinking about is what work can be included in an artist's oeuvre, and it's constantly being contested, particularly with Newman since he had so few works. That the Menil Collection chose to show (https://www.menil.org/exhibitions/4-barnett-newman-the-late-work) his unfinished paintings last February was quite astounding, for example. Starting from this unfinished notion got me very quickly beyond work that had been left unfinished to work that had been destroyed. I worked from a very crude image of the painting that had been cut up but also the story, the fable, the myths surrounding it.

I had a question about that painting, actually — what was the source for the image of that work? Greg Allen, in a post (http://greg.org/archive/2016/02/18/david_diao_barnett_newman_the_cut_up_painting_2014.html) **on his blog, wrote that he believes that Carol Mancusi-Ungaro might have been the source for the image in a presentation she gave at the Getty Conservation Institute.**

She probably is the source, but I didn't get it from her. I got it from Sarah Rich, who is a Newman scholar and one of the essayists at the de Menil showing of the late and unfinished paintings who actually reproduced my painting of the cut up painting in the catalogue.

Could you speak to the evolution of your inquiry into Barnett Newman's career, and the questions that arise from it, beginning with "The Paintings in Scale" [1991], to this current sort of historiographic question of how the paintings have been represented, their afterlives — the work currently up at Office Baroque in Brussels.

I think for most artists you begin blindly, you're sort of taken by a particular instance of something with works such as the painting "Barnett Newman: Chronology of Work," you jump into it. In this case I was very lucky that the subject somehow grew to include other possibilities. In the beginning I wanted to present my astonishment at discovering that an artist I admired so much was so unproductive, at least in the numbers of works. Every artist hopes to have a subject to work on, and you're lucky when the subject can extend out of itself and give you new aspects. I'm not programmatic, I'm just sitting back hoping to alight on something that could further the project. It's very interesting; I myself am amazed that I'm still doing work referencing Newman.

Speaking of your history and evolution as an artist, let's talk a little bit about the three abstractions from the 1970s shown by Office Baroque at the Independent art fair.

If you live long enough, there is also this huge past that governs who you are. That's why for me it's weird that I can be showing these '70s works. I haven't thought about that work in ages. The three pieces we're excavating have all been rolled up because they're so immense they can't be stored stretched. I haven't seen them in the flesh since 1979, when they were last shown at the Arts Club in Chicago. It's out of sight, out of mind, and it's Office Baroque's brilliance to want to bring them back.

When we spoke last year for the Modern Painters profile, you characterized the '70s as a not particularly fertile period for you, and that it augured your conceptual turn.

Well it was a difficult period, because I could not resolve in my mind how to go forward making that kind of abstract work. You could almost say these were three paintings that led me to stop painting for two years, or that body of work. I didn't know how to surpass them being read as boring geometric paintings. And one of the ways I tried to surpass that is to try to go big, but then the paintings just got bigger and bigger without seeming like there was any simultaneous betterment in content.

A part of the discussion about this work that didn't end up making the final version of the Modern Painters profile was that through an appointment at Yale, you came under the influence of Al Held, who pushed you in the direction of hard-edged abstraction. As you put it at the time: "We met in '72-73 because I was invited to be a visiting critic at Yale, and I would drive up there with him bi-weekly. He was a very argumentative guy, we talked about painting the whole time. Somewhere along the way his paintings affected me: I liked the scale of them, I liked the unexpected overlap of shapes, I could say I loved the grandeur of them."

I've always acknowledged the people that I feel I have taken from — it's how I like to be, to be honest with the information and my sources. Al was a really important person for me, though he may not have known it himself. Driving up to New Haven with him was for me an education in itself.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.