

Adding oil to virtual reality

Hand-painted VR work shown recently in Beijing is reportedly the world's first and represents artist Yu Hong's digital debut

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The darkness is broken by a sharp light. All of a sudden, a newborn baby is brought into the world, kicking and screaming. The doctor holds the baby in her arms, walking toward a set of scales.

Everyone in the delivery room — the mother lying on the bed, the doctors in attendance and the infant herself — can be viewed from every angle, just as in the real world. However, these are not actual three-dimensional characters — they have been meticulously painted in oil, and yet can only be viewed in virtual reality (VR).

This is the first scene in artist Yu Hong's VR work *She's Already Gone*. It was exhibited at Beijing's Fauschou Foundation gallery from Jan 6 to Feb 3, in what was reportedly the first hand-painted VR work in the world. In it, the Beijing-based artist painted four scenes depicting the four stages of life, from birth to burial.

"Virtual reality allows viewers to immerse themselves in an imaginary world, something that literature, film and traditional painting have been trying to achieve for a long time," said Yu, 52, at her studio in Beijing.

With imagery, sound and music, the eight-minute VR artwork provided the viewer with an immersive experience bearing witness to the four phases of a woman's life, set in different eras of time: A newborn baby in the 1990s; a girl looking out of her bedroom window in the 1970s; a woman from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) unfolding the cloth that had bound her feet since childhood; and a priestess singing at a funeral ritual in the Neolithic era, nearly 5,000 years ago.

Viewers could walk into each of the individually created rooms and view the work from whatever angle they chose.

It took Yu almost a year to finish the work. She had to plan and paint countless details to create each character, from their faces and skin down to locks of their hair. She completed more than 60 individual oil paintings to finish the artwork.

Working closely with a VR art company based in Denmark, she was in constant touch with the tech team in Copenhagen, e-mailing them on a daily basis. As she painted, she scanned the images and sent them to the team to "put clothes on the naked virtual figures".

"I did my best to push the boundaries of my imagination. It's difficult to transform oil paintings into three-dimensional works," Yu said of her yearlong collaboration with Khora



Visitors watch virtual-reality artworks at Fauschou Foundation gallery in Beijing where a series of VR art exhibitions have been held, including the show of oil painter Yu Hong's hand-painted VR work. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



The delivery room in Yu's VR work *She's Already Gone* (left) and the bedroom where Yu spent her childhood in her work's second scene (right).



Contemporary, the Danish team specializing in VR art.

At the opening ceremony on Jan 6, many of Yu's artist friends came to experience the work, and they seemed impressed. Oil painter Su Xinping said he could feel the pain when he watched the woman from the Ming Dynasty remove the strips of cloth binding her feet. He also expressed an interest in making a VR artwork.

Yu said her peers from the art world were impressed by the visual interaction of the work, and described the future trend of combining art with technology as both inevitable and unpredictable.

She described the Beijing art space showing her work as a "hospital with many cubicles housing people wearing headsets" and a totally different experience from traditional exhibi-

tion halls with art pieces mounted on the walls.

"I don't know how art will be presented in the future. But I do know that art gives cold tech a warm hue," Yu said.

In *She's Already Gone*, Yu focused on women and explored their social status and experiences, a recurring topic for the artist, who is one of the most important oil painters in China.

"The priestess in the Neolithic era enjoyed the highest social class in a matriarchal society," Yu said.

The three other scenes reflected Yu's own life experiences: Her grandmother was forced to bind her feet from childhood; the girl sitting on a windowsill watching a parade was Yu at the age of 6 in 1972 during the "cultural revolution" (1966-76); and the opening scene depicted her giving

birth to her daughter in the 1990s.

One of the artist's own paintings appeared on the wall in the second scene of the work, which depicted Yu's childhood. The work is part of her ongoing Witness to Growth series, an annual biographical series where she produces a self-portrait and pairs it with an image from a news article recording a key event that year. Another work from the series depicting the year of 1992 was exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum's Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World.

In the 1992 painting, Yu is seen cutting her hair in a portrait taken from her movie *The Days*, the debut by filmmaker Wang Xiaoshuai. Yu and her husband, Liu Xiaodong, who is also a famous oil painter, played the lead roles as an artist couple in the movie.

"Every year, I paint a work to record my life, often just to document common things or interesting moments that I think deserve to be remembered," Yu explained.

Yu gained fame early on. When she was still a freshman at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, one of her sketches was selected as a painting for an educational art book aimed at teenagers. After graduation, she became an art teacher at the academy, where she still works.

Painting has become an important part in Yu's life — one she regards as a refuge from the rapidly evolving technological world outside.

And while her first foray into virtual reality has proved to be an interesting experience, it is unlikely she will pursue the emerging technology as her career. Oil painting is, after all, her life's work.