

Memory of the world

From political violence to forced displacement, Young explores the legacies of historical trauma on communities in the present; how silences and gaps shape our collective memory of the past. He transforms archival photographs into abstract shapes, building compositions that are ambiguous and polyphonic. Recalling his interest in the humanitarian themes of Hong Kong and Taiwanese film, the visual image is imbued with grief as well as hope.

Carolyn Barnes and Jacqueline Lo, *John Young: The Bridge and the Fruit Tree* (Canberra: Drill Hall Gallery, 2013).

Flower Market (Nanjing 1936) #1 and #2 (2010) form part of a monumental triptych, layering semi-abstract scenes of obscured figures, denuded branches, and budding foliage. In an almost cinematic fashion, Young alludes to Japanese atrocities perpetrated against Chinese civilians and disarmed forces mere moments after the original photographs were shot.

Feeling states

Young's abstracted, dreamlike forms explore metamorphosis, loss, and belonging. His works have often combined vibrant geometric colour with stock photographic imagery, landscapes, and historical painting. Evoking subjective experiences of migration and cross-cultural encounter, an interplay of the material and the virtual reveals time as fragmentary, yet deep and multilayered.

John Young, *This is a Shelter* (Sydney: Olsen Gallery, 2018).

Painterly analogues of computer-generated colour wavelengths, Young's seven *Spectrumfigures* (2010) meditate on relation, chance, and belonging in the digital age. In fine brushwork, Young and his studio assistants create languid, almost corporeal forms that pulsate on the canvas.

The Archive in Diaspora

John Young Zerunge and the Sherman Galleries Collection at Schaeffer Library

*To live in diaspora is to be haunted by histories that sit uncomfortably out of joint,
ambivalently ahead of their time yet behind it too.*
Lily Cho¹

Between archive and art

The art of John Young recalls what cultural theorist Lu Pan describes as ‘a topology of multilayered temporalities, media, subjectivities, representations and presentations’.² It lays bare the archive in time: as heterogeneous, cyclical, spiral. This recursive nature of form and concept engenders a sustained philosophical inquiry throughout Young’s body of work, at once oscillating between and melding processes of abstraction and themes of migration; what it means to live at once within, between, and outside cultures. Haunted by the legacies of violence and displacement in an interconnected world, an anachronic logic underpins the continuing resonances and contemporary relevance of his art.

Archival temporalities

In their 1987 essay, ‘The Art of the Third Man’, Keith Broadfoot and Rex Butler foreground the paradox of a layered, ostensibly singular space, of belonging simultaneously to more than one culture and place.³ This convergent sensibility informs what Young himself has described as ‘an overabundance of processes ... a superabundance of means’, albeit one frequently camouflaged so as to appear seamless.⁴

Intellectually rigorous and playfully rhetorical, Young’s early writings grapple with questions of artistic autonomy, the philosophy of language, ontology and epistemology. At the University of Sydney, he had studied mathematics, aesthetics, and the history of science with an honours thesis in 1977 on Ludwig Wittgenstein, before enrolling at the Sydney College of the Arts to study sculpture and painting the following year. Among his contemporaries were the conceptual artist Imants Tillers and avant garde composer David Ahern.⁵

In 1981, Young co-wrote with Terry Blake the first Australian article on Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacrum and Simulation*, published in *Art and Text*.⁶ In the article, they reject a straightforward relation between the artist and their work, deploying Paul Feyerabend’s rejection of scientific hegemony to propose a non-coercive pluralism ‘without foundations, not bound to any fixed method’.⁷

¹ Lily Cho quoted in Jacqueline Lo, ‘A New Introduction to “Diaspora, Art & Empathy”’, in *The History Projects*, ed. Olivier Krischer (Sydney: Power Publications, 2025), 137.

² Lu Pan, ‘Introduction’, *The (Im)possibility of Archives: Theories and Experience in/from Asia*, ed. Lu Pan (Hong Kong, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), vi.

³ Keith Broadfoot and Rex Butler, *Objective Gesture: John Young Selected Works 1986 – 87* (Hong Kong: Derby Press, 1987), unpaginated.

⁴ Pam Hansford, ‘The Future is Now: An Interview with John Young’, in *John Young, Selected Works* catalogue (1989), unpaginated.

⁵ John Young, ‘Biography’, <https://www.johnyoungstudio.com/t/about/biography>, accessed 25 May 2025.

⁶ John Young and Terry Blake, ‘On Some Alternatives to the Code in the Age of Hyperreality, the Hermit and the City Dweller’, *Art and Text*, No. 2 (Winter 1981).

⁷ John Clark, Patrick D. Flores (contrib.), Phoebe Scott (contrib.), and Julie Ewington (ed.), *The Asian Modern* (Singapore: National Gallery of Singapore, 2021), 390.

Early works like Young's chance photograph *A Local Mirage* (1982), exhibited in Paris during his residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts, foreground such plays of indeterminacy.⁸ *Socialite Realism II* (1986) similarly materialises the 'impossible meeting of the virtual and the actual' that appears throughout his body of work.⁹ Here, Young manipulates the photocopier's optical scanner by sliding images of André Derain's Fauvist paintings across the platen glass; of this gesture he describes 'taking care in understanding the decayed and spectral Derain image and psychologically coming to its being, before requesting its presence on another surface'.¹⁰

Such techniques recall how, in Derrida's words, 'the archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself ... except if it can be disguised, made up, painted, printed'.¹¹ In a 1985 catalogue for the now-defunct biennial *Australian Perspecta*, Young admires the juxtaposition of a white page printed with the 'photograph of a painting, a painting once painted', a non-space both of erasure and accretion.¹² Observations like this one capture his flair for paradox but also, perhaps, a nascent impulse towards its resolution. The critic Paul Taylor, founder of *Art and Text*, concluded in 1983 that painting had become 'a gratuitous act, the surfeit of representation ... available to render the iconic, the meaningless, and the epic, all by means of quotation, bricolage narrativity and a love of the particular'.¹³ Yet Young's observation hints at working against a sense of the loss technology engenders, such that if painting is not really (that is to say, materially) an act of recuperation, it is nonetheless a gesture of the artist's openness and care; a generous act that works to bridge time and place.

Feeling states

In the age of technological reproducibility, to hand-paint the virtual surface is a gesture of repair, an intentional act that remains faithful to the 'overall schema of the digital image' in preserving its contingent form.¹⁴ Since these very 'inaccuracies, and bodily tremors in the mark-making ... resuscitate a corporeal presence', our contemporary condition of virtual immediacy remains malleable to the artist's 'hope for a sort of rescue ... some human elements from the residues of the technological rout'.¹⁵ Although bleak, such remarks highlight the allure of the aleatory and algorithmic to the artist's process. As his *Propositions for the Polychrome Paintings* (1989) suggest, Young's work resonates as an experiential 'third

⁸ Broadfoot and Butler, *Objective Gesture*, unpaginated.

⁹ Broadfoot and Butler, *Objective Gesture*, unpaginated.

¹⁰ John Young, 'The Silhouette Paintings: 1986 – 1989', <https://www.johnyoungstudio.com/w/silhouette-paintings/5>, accessed 1 June 2025.

¹¹ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 14; Annette van den Bosch, 'Ten Years On: The Provincialism Problem', *Art Monthly*, Issue 86 (May 1, 1985), 9.

¹² Broadfoot and Butler, *Objective Gesture*, unpaginated; for more on the history of *Australian Perspecta*, see Annette van den Bosch, *The Australian Art World: Aesthetics in a Global Market* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2004).

¹³ Bosch, 'Ten Years On', 9.

¹⁴ John Young, 'Artist Statement', in *The History Projects*, ed. Olivier Krischer (Sydney: Power Publications, 2025), 369.

¹⁵ Young, 'Artist Statement', 369.

space' (lending Homi K. Bhabha's term) that invites the ongoing reciprocity of an interlocutor or witness.¹⁶

In everyday life we tend to assume, as scholar Jacqueline Lo reminds us, that 'the spatial diffusion and extensiveness achieved through global media and markets give rise to a shared world, when one might argue that such developments lead instead to greater polarization and division of nations and regions'.¹⁷ While multivalent, resistant practices of archiving entail a field of 'potential activism and socio-political advocacy' endeavouring to mitigate the alienation of our global condition, Young's body of work oscillates between a measured and nuanced avowal of this sensibility, and more hermetic explorations of affect through colour gradients, grids, and abstracted, amorphous shapes.¹⁸ In these ways, the archive is a 'spontaneous, alive and internal experience'.¹⁹

Memory of the world

The ethical sensibility underpinning Young's work eventually surfaces as a humanitarian impulse, confronting the nature of human agency and complicity.²⁰ Subjects of this inquiry include the murder of Chinese civilians by Imperial Japan during the Nanjing Massacre (1937 – 38), the legacies of settler-led anti-Chinese violence at the goldfields near Lambing Flat in New South Wales (1860 – 61), and the execution of dissident Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, by the Gestapo in 1945.²¹ In an early interview with John Clark in 1989, Young presciently remarks that 'work which interests me avoids [the] construction of a complete identity'; the 'more interesting question is the type of viewer that the work constructs'.²²

What does it mean to bear witness? Exploring transculturalism, memory and diaspora, *The History Projects* begin with his 2008 series *1967Dispersion*, documenting the political and social upheavals of colonial Hong Kong that led to his arrival in Sydney in 1967 as an eleven-year-old.²³ Juxtaposing monochrome photography with a swirling haze of colours, the compositions recall the layering of his *Polychrome* and *Double Ground* paintings, and even the surreal qualities of *Macau I* (2006). By contrast, however, the individual figures who appear in images of riots, flooding and labour exploitation are metonymically tied to Anglo-European modernity as a precipitating force. Young harmonises the figurative and the abstract, while simultaneously confronting the viewer. Here, the condition of transculturality and diaspora

¹⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Broadfoot and Butler, 'Objective Gesture', unpaginated.

¹⁷ Jacqueline Lo, 'Diaspora, Art and Empathy', *John Young: The Bridge and the Fruit Tree* (Canberra: Drill Hall Gallery, 2013), 38.

¹⁸ Gregory Galligan, 'Re-visioning the Archives: On the Creation and Curation of Relational and Decolonial Visual Art Archives in Asia', *The (Im)possibility of Archives: Theories and Experience in/from Asia*, ed. Lu Pan (Hong Kong, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 29.

¹⁹ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 14.

²⁰ John Clark, 'John Young: Notes, Chronology, Bibliography – Artistic and art theoretical sources', Asia Art Archive, 2016. Accessed 1 May 2025: https://cdn.aaa.org.hk/source/John_Clark_Archive/10-2-john-young-notes-chronology-biography-rev.pdf

²¹ Lo, 'Diaspora, Art and Empathy', 25 – 35.

²² Hansford, 'The Future is Now', unpaginated.

²³ Olivier Krischer, 'Letting the Past In: Reconciling History in John Young's *1967Dispersion*', in *The History Projects*, ed. Olivier Krischer (Sydney: Power Publications, 2025) p. 60.

that for Young once meant to 'endure irreducible differences' opens out into an ethical relation with the world.²⁴

Precursors to this sensibility, *The Persian Paintings* (2004) are themselves continuations of Young's integration of Chinese visual references into his work from the 1990s.²⁵ Paraphrasing the late cultural theorist Paul Virilio, who details the pervasive condition of time-space compression as a hallmark of late- or post-modernity, Young observes that 'speed ... does not require the preservation of human values or that which is human; rather, their obliteration in an instant brings its rewards'.²⁶ Here, he condemns post-9/11 Islamophobia, the banalised atrocities of 'shock and awe' military tactics in the United States-led invasion of Iraq, and the horrific spectacle of prisoner torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib.²⁷ Of the sixteenth-century album illustrations that adorn a number of the *Persian* works, Young writes that 'images from this group of paintings are now nothing more than spectres. However, they are spectres praising that which is beyond technology': still tinged with hope, beauty, and humanity.²⁸

The Sherman Galleries Archive at Schaeffer Fine Arts Library

Part of the rich ephemera collections at Schaeffer, the John Young files document the artist's significant contribution to Australian artistic scenes, including as a co-founder of Gallery 4A (now 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art).²⁹

As a leading commercial gallery, Sherman Galleries (1986 – 2006) played an instrumental role in promoting Asian Australian artists among an established mainstream of Australian artists, maintaining Euro-American ties while exhibiting widely in Asia.³⁰

Reflecting Gene Sherman AO's endeavour to make the material record of this period accessible to the public, this exhibition also seeks to promote access to Schaeffer's extensive holdings for the benefit of students, researchers, and arts community accessing the library.

The Archive in Diaspora invites reflection and dialogue on how we remember and respond to the legacies of history in the present, and the relevance of Young's work in our contemporary moment.

²⁴ Peter Hutchings: 'Now and Then, and Then Again', in *John Young: The Double Ground Paintings*, eds Clark, John, Peter Hutchings, Melissa Chiu, and Frances Lindsay (Sydney: Australian Art Promotions, 1995) 11 – 14; John Clark, 'John Young: Swimming in the Transcultural Sea: An Interview', in *John Young: The Double Ground Paintings*, eds Clark, John, Peter Hutchings, Melissa Chiu, and Frances Lindsay (Sydney: Australian Art Promotions, 1995), 25 – 31.

²⁵ Hutchings, 'Now and Then', 11 – 16.

²⁶ Paul Virilio in John Young, *John Young: The Persian Paintings*. (Sydney: Sherman Galleries, 2004).

²⁷ Young, *The Persian Paintings*, 2004.

²⁸ Young, *The Persian Paintings*, 2004.

²⁹ Lo, 'Diaspora, Art and Empathy', 22 – 23.

³⁰ Joanna Mendelssohn, 'Twenty: Sherman Galleries 1986 – 2006', *Artlink*, Issue 26:3 (1 September 2006). Accessed 4 May 2025: <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/2838/twenty-sherman-galleries-1986-2006/>