

# The Moving Slave Ship

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*“Art is not about finding a core: you cannot gain a core by opening a dozen of boxes one by one; instead, you start from a small box and finally obtain a vast and unexpected universe.”*

I still remember once I was told by a foreign artist, “art is not about finding a core: you cannot gain a core by opening a dozen of boxes one by one; instead, you start from a small box and finally obtain a vast and unexpected universe.” As a literature learner, I usually have the same feeling when I’m reading literary works. Oneness, absoluteness, and objectivity seem unsuitable for art and literature.

In the summer of 2017, I went on a fantastic journey in London through twenty-two museums and galleries. An installation video that showed a pensive oceanic epic evoking the history of slavery impressed me a lot. That was Theo Eshetu’s artwork, “The Slave Ship”, which was displayed in Tiwani Contemporary Gallery. This is one of my favorite artworks; it demonstrates how the modern digital media technology can make history come alive.

As a British video-art pioneer, Theo Eshetu attempted to explore how to use moving images to examine the notion of culture and to shape people’s perception. He devoted himself to learning and presenting the diversity of world culture; the relationship between European and African culture is one of his favorite subjects. In “The Slave Ship”, he uses modern digital technology, taking the viewer on a voyage across and beneath the seas to unveil the silent history of the slave trade. Time, darkness, light, and movement are important components of the video. Although Tiwani Contemporary was very quiet, it created a great visual experience for the viewers.

Viewers were invited to watch through a large windowed hole in the wall that opened into a pitch-black space. With a mirrored floor reflecting the semi-circled projection of Eshetu’s video, we watched a round digital

screen within a completely dark and silent space. Just like in the cinema, the video moves from scene to scene, making the journey extremely hypnotic, peaceful with a sense of suppression. This vision design reminded me of the window of a ship, which is usually set on the bottom floor of a ship, and the darkness of the room seemed to swallow me whole, making me feel depressed and suffocated.

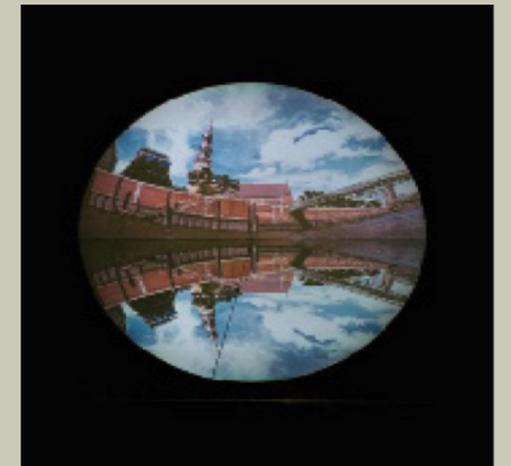
Through this round-shaped window, I immersed myself in the colorful undersea world and the roundness of the earth merged with sequences of urban landscape. There were around ten scenes that played circularly, presenting the scenery of a busy shipping lane. Following the voyage, we could see busy ports and marvelous city buildings passing by, and then we could see the blurred blue seabed, with a number of fish, jellyfish and coral reefs; we could also accidentally perceive a silhouette of a black man sinking down in the dark depths of the sea with some jellyfish surrounding him. This video installation presented tragedies and histories that occurred on the ocean hundreds of years ago through the visual angle of a moving window. Eshetu used the video installation to present the historical forced migration from Africa to Western Europe, via the Hamburg, Germany and other European port cities, which traded in slaves, gold, ivory and sugar. The Atlantic Ocean witnessed the whole process and history in silence, leading the unnamed passengers through a journey into the deepest abyss. The ghost-like colored man implied the deceased enslaved people who were severely tortured to death and finally cast into the ocean during the transportation.

In fact, the name of the video installation were referenced to the 1840 painting by J.M.W Turner, “Slavers Throwing Overboard and Dead and Dying-Typhoon Coming On”(also known as “The Slave Ship”),

which depicted the captains of the slave ship threw over 100 slaves overboard for insurance payment. If those slaves died, the trader would receive no compensation, but if they were “lost at sea,” the captain could profit from the lost cargo (Bailey p.550). In the painting ‘The Slave Ship’, Turner used churning deep-red color and light to capture the horror and death. The sunset in the painting shaded the maroon of the bodies and hands of the sinking slaves.

Inspired by Turner’s painting, Theo Eshetu used the visual technology to present a dynamic and deep underwater view of slavery in history. The video installation imparted mixed feelings: terrible injustice, vulnerability, and a sense of abandonment, which are contrasted with the interaction of bright colors and splendid scenes. When I think of the audience or even those who had been on the ship saw humans being abandoned by others, I always feel shocked and upset.

The Tiwani Contemporary Gallery created a special environment for viewers to connect themselves with such a depressed, dark, narrow, and helpless journey, and with the use of modern media, “The Slave Ship” was able to “move” again. As a viewer, I could really feel that I was on that slave ship. This artwork enables a global audience to see, to feel, and to experience the silent and unforgettable human history. Just like J.M.W Turner’s painting that inspired Theo Eshetu, Theo Eshetu’s “The Slave Ship” is going to inspire, affect or even change the viewers’ perceptions of the world and history. With the help of modern technology, greater possibilities are given to the creative expressions of art. Artworks do not have to be hanging on the wall or need protection from glass and barriers. Through diverse and innovative ways of expression, we involve, examine, and enrich the notion of history and culture itself.



Photographs from Weilin Zhang, London, the UK, Jul., 2017



Photograph from Weilin Zhang, Guangzhou, China, Jul, 2018