

MODERN PAINTERS

Flink of an Eye

by James Westcott

December 2009



Navid Nuur's elemental color theories, almost-invisible sculptures, and skewed aphorisms could reveal themselves in an instant, or pass you by completely — and that's OK.

Within a few moments of entering Navid Nuur's studio, I am munching dried bee pollen. "Bees eat pollen to keep fit," Nuur says in his idiosyncratic Dutch-English, going on to explain that he recently discovered that humans too could eat pollen, from health food stores. This revelation meshed with a years-old notion, hitherto unexpressed, that Nuur harbored about a relationship between pollen — collected by bees from a diversity of flowers and fields and then condensed into fuel — and the nature of cities. He formed the tiny multicolored granules — which taste sweet but overly healthy — into small flat rectangles, fixed them into shape with hardener, then stacked the thin layers so they sort of resemble an apartment block. Normally when you think of bees and structures, you think of hives and hexagons. Not Nuur.

Nuur was born in Tehran in 1976, and his family moved to Holland shortly before the revolution. His English, unlike that of most Dutch, is a bit askew, which gives it a certain allure. He translates idioms literally, forming phrases that tend at the same time toward extreme cuteness (bees keeping fit) and blank utility. His understanding of language — which is the engine of his koanlike work in sculpture, drawing, performance, text, and customized publications — is rooted in his dyslexia, whose severity was tripled by the strain of having to master three tongues growing up. He learned words by creating associations with the shapes of their letters rather than by memorizing their linguistic meanings. Words felt like trapdoors: thin surfaces barely hiding bewildering but fertile depths.

"Most people already filtered this kind of perception when they were five," Nuur says. "It was taken out of their system. But others still have this opening. It's something you have to allow yourself." He is continually creating graphic puns and aphorisms — the latter sometimes consisting of a lone word. He writes "theory" in block caps in felt-tip pen, then drains the black lines of their composite

colors through the gradual application of water — a beautiful color-washing technique I haven't seen or thought about since primary school. "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence" is given a similar treatment, although this time leaving ghostly voids where the letters once were. On an invitation to an exhibition — which he always turns into an "extra arm" of his installations — he wrote, "The ink of this invitation smells so bad that no image of my artworks can survive here." In pages from his notebooks, printed in his one-off publication *Etiolation*, he innocently scrawls: "Black is actually an inside-out rainbow. . . . White reflects all color BUT where does the color go?"

Nuur's techniques have a compelling do-it-yourself simplicity — a series of photographs show two balls of Play-Doh, turquoise and pink, gradually melding into a purple lump — that he inherited from the skateboarding and graffiti world that was his crucible. At college in Utrecht, his only disappointment in switching from illustration to fine art was the lack of determination he discovered in his new fellow students. Graffiti and skateboarding requires an unequivocal physical and mental commitment — "You might have to do something like cut a fence; you just *do* that stuff." This commitment is evident in a piece he conceived, which he explains "could only be presented within a public context like a magazine, for instance." For the work, Nuur stood for nearly two hours outside a bookstore in The Hague (where he now lives), hanging his head in shame and wearing a sandwich board that read: "At this bookshop I have been stealing concepts for my own art/I am a thief not an artist." The police arrived and asked him what exactly he had stolen. "Be more clear," they insisted, but eventually they gave up.

"I was feeling superashamed to go in front of that store. I only do the performative part of my work when it serves the work. It's not because I *want* to do it, no way. I was *pffff*," he says, ending characteristically, as words fail him, with a sound effect, in this case evoking embarrassment and exasperation.

Nuur made the piece not just as penance for his own sins of appropriation but to redeem his entire generation (he hardly cares what his forebears in Conceptual art got up to, drawing inspiration rather from scientists such as the quantum physicist, philosopher, and neuropsychologist David Bohm). "I did it for others as well," he explains. "It's me paying for it. I did it to show that authenticity is something we share together. We all chip in to make it happen."

Nuur recently used a sandwich board as a form of atonement not for himself but for his audience: If people coming to the Museum De Hallen, in Haarlem, touched his eight-foot-tall wall of floral bricks — the kind used in flower arrangements, whose spongy texture can be indelibly marked by the pressure of fingers — they had to either pay a €200 fine for damaging it or stand in front of the museum for an hour clad in the sign: "At this museum I damaged Navid Nuur's art. I failed as a visitor."

The reproach was sincere. Nuur really does consider his work to be that fragile, often expressing the outcome of what he calls "one *flink* of a second," like the thin planks of wood carefully bent so that they crack on the outside but not the inside. He sat in his studio all day trying to grasp the exact moment when this almost magical kind of breakage occurs, forming a weirdly smooth bend in the wood.

Nuur suddenly leaps up to show another work, but it's so tiny he can't find it. He starts intently tracing the texture of the wall with his fingers until finally he locates a minuscule indented word: "Even." It is part of the letter-stamped phrase "Even a single spark of thought can turn into a lifetime memory," which he first pressed into the wall of the Martin van Zomeren gallery, in Amsterdam, where it went largely unnoticed.

"We all can remember one *flink* of a second," Nuur explains. "So why can I not use that kind of *flink* as a power? If a work can only live for three seconds, OK. Those are the best seconds — just as good as 300 years."