

Holding Breath

Hu Qingyan interviewed by Jérôme Sans
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Jérôme Sans (hereafter abbreviated to JS): You have a multiple practice ranging from videos, sculptures, installations, to objects. How would you define it?

Hu Qingyan (hereafter abbreviated to HQY): Actually, it's not that I sculpt, paint or make videos. I think of all my work as sculpture. Perhaps they're expressed as a video, a painting, or an installation, but all these are just different aspects of my sculpting work.

The way I look at it, sculpture is not just a simple imitation or copy of reality; a sculpture is no different to another living thing or a person. It stands alone, it doesn't attach itself to anything else; it has the flesh and blood of life.

JS: Copying may be a misunderstanding of your work. Yet, some of your work employs duplication, for example, *The Story of Imitation*, and you said a few times that you are interested in such ideas of duplicating real things into something else.

HQY: It starts off by being an imitation, but it's not a work that's focusing on the issue of "imitation." Relative to other objects, a sculpture appears to be very solid; it looks like it will last forever and actually it's this aspect that the artwork is mainly focusing on. It's intended to express the idea that sculpture is also fragile, the image of sculpture just exists in the temporary state and there will also come a day after its creation when it is damaged or even destroyed, and it won't last forever.

JS: It makes me think of the title of the show, *Eternal Glory*. It looks like it's talking about the notion of death and life. What is eternity? What does glory mean?

HQY: *Eternal Glory* refers to the Chinese word yongchui buxiu. For example, we wish yongchui buxiu for a person or a situation; that it will exist forever. We're hoping to keep their memories fresh and alive, with statues of great men or commemorative statues, so that we will never forget them. In fact, I'm not using that sense of yongchui buxiu at all. I really don't think a sculpture can last forever, even less be immortal. By focusing on yongchui buxiu I'm saying that it is fluid, it will change, it will be destroyed, but it won't disappear. Perhaps it will exist in a different form. It may even be transformed into another object: it's like the circle of life.

JS: Transformation seems to be at the heart of your work, it is almost like a body; a body never stops, always moves, and changes, in the spirit of transformation. Even if man wants to stop time, it permanently keeps moving, changing.

HQY: Everything without exception (people, situations, objects) is in a state of “transformation.” I try to reflect this idea in my artwork. I define sculpture as an “eternal object.” It actually belittles sculpture to think of man as having life, having blood and flesh, and having thoughts, while seeing sculpture merely as a mirror to reality, or a physical proof of reality. But I am trying to make sculpture and man equal.

Sculpture also has flesh and blood; it is the same as man: it has life, it is born, it grows old, it gets sick, and it dies.

JS: But most artists would do pieces that keep a work in a verging moment, time is no time, stopped like a photograph. Jeff Koons, from the 1980s to now, made work that would always look the same, but will never be damaged, or become yellow. It will always remain polished. Here in your work, there are traces of time, and it may change again, so that is quite real; nobody even keeps it, creating a type of change that in a physical sense cannot be realized, so it's permanent mutation.

HQY: I think the most fundamental thing is that the ideas about, and the attitude towards, a sculpture are not the same thing. Many artists use sculpture to express their ideas; in fact sculpture is just a medium through which to convey their ideas. I have no wish to use sculpture to convey my ideas. Usually, I first have an object that serves as a “sculpture” and then I give it a reason to exist. It's not that I first have an idea, and then go and find the material to make the sculpture. So, I renounce myself when I unearth this pure object, this sculpture, rather than asking the sculpture to conform to me.

JS: The approach is different, but the thing is that almost everywhere there is a presence of body, the presence of the human body going through all the works.

HQY: I don't use the body as a proposition on purpose. There are two possible reasons why it keeps coming out: firstly, within China's education system, especially in sculpture, most of the time basically you will be making realistic sculptures. The model is always a human figure. So, all along you are faced with a real flesh and blood body, and then you use clay to copy this body of flesh and blood. Secondly, while making a sculpture, there will be a struggle between your body and the sculpture, or say, an exchange. During the process of sculpting, the sculpture will also sculpt your body. So, in terms of these two, a knowledge of and interest in the body will develop imperceptibly.

Speaking of the body, on the one hand all my works may be about my body, and when the audience views it, it may arouse an understanding of their bodies, but what's more important is that the sculpture possesses its own body. First of all, it's connected to our own bodies, perhaps it originates from our own bodies, but once the work is finished, it has become a separate body in itself.

JS: Your video *From the Studio to the Gallery* is a very interesting performance because it is a natural road from the work to group: to fly from your studio to the gallery. It shows very simply where the piece was produced, and where it somehow goes to exist: from birth to development. It talks about the source, preparation, and taking it to the light. The piece can then go to a museum, a collector, or go to other

shows. The white cube space functions as the platform to give life to the work. It's almost like a walking mirror. Your performance reminds me of the work of Michelangelo Pistoletto, from the 1960s, walking with a mirror in a city in Italy, so all the city was mirrored in it.

HQY: The relationship between the image and the canvas is very important in this artwork. *Narrative by a Pile of Clay* changes the sculpture into something carefree; the relationship between the image and canvas here also becomes looser. In a painting, the image that falls onto the canvas is frozen. But in this artwork, the image on the canvas is constantly flowing, and finally, when this canvas is put down, if there isn't a projection, it itself is blank again.

JS: There's as well the permanent presence of air in your work, like in *One Breath*. Breathing is of course a sign of life and it's like it holds a breath, putting it into the sculpture here, or inside the material here, like in *The Empty Room* and *The People*. There is a recurrent obsession of holding the breath and storing that breath within the material forever: the obsession of keeping that moment of life, the thing that has no form and taking it into a form.

HQY: In the beginning I didn't realize but I am really interested in "air." At first, I thought of sculpture as an object; it's placed in air; it's an object in a space. It's the air that wraps itself around a sculpture, or you can say that it's only when you have the space around a sculpture that it can fill that space in the air. Up till now the earliest sculpture discovered is a stone carving, the Venus of Hohle Fels. Later on came the technology to make bronze castings. Because copper is very hard, the center is hollow, so it's lighter, and bronze sculpture became widespread. In the last few decades, people have started using fiberglass, a more convenient and also less costly material. Until now, air has been consciously or unconsciously slipping into the inside of a sculpture. Everything from bronze sculpture to fiberglass sculpture has existed as hollow shells. Although this isn't directly shown, air fills the inside of a sculpture.

JS: Air, the source of life, is immaterial. But here, in your work air is with weight. Are you somehow building a monument to air?

HQY: This can be understood as one aspect of it. A sculpture's space is very important, and specifically, it's this space that's very important. But how can we make this air less virtual? How can we make the air less empty?

On the other hand, for a very long time sculpture has existed in the form of an empty shell. We are just more used to looking at the external form of a sculpture, while overlooking the space inside. Actually, I erased its exterior, leaving only a husk enclosing a space and in this way we can see the empty shell. For example, Rodin's bronze sculptures and Jeff Koon's stainless steel sculptures are all hollow inside. But it's the exteriors of these artworks that give them their meanings. What I've been doing is erasing all the concepts and meanings coming from the exterior, and just leaving a hollow shell. I'm using an "air statue" as a metaphor, with this shell there in place of the exterior.

JS: When I look at these two works, *The Empty Room* and *The People*, it's a metaphor of us living in the digital time. You think you are connected, but you are disconnected. It's an illusion of connection. In these pieces, everybody is connected, but disconnected at the center. In the work *The People*, there are a lot of people, they are lying next to each other, almost like a group of friends, or a population of a country, or related, and everybody is connected. Are you showing the contemporary paradox of hyper proximity with huge distance?

HQY: Although the bodies are pushing down on each other, and leaning on each other, they are all independent of each other. Although their shapes and colors vary, they are not inherently different. The individual only exists as an abstract idea.

JS: Nothing looks new, everything looks used, not freshly made but recycled, showing traces of life. Those things are not perfectly made. What does it mean to you to use second-hand materials?

HQY: Second-hand materials are inexpensive—they could even have been thrown out—but the ultimate effect is still serious. There is some kind of internal conflict. This kind of paradox also exists in the artwork *The People*. Sometimes people are looked at as lowly, at the bottom rung, pitiful, and they're not respected. But sometimes people are looked at as beneficiaries of *Serve the People*, they are remarkable. But is the real essence of people in the end their beauty, or that they are trampled on? We all have our own experiences.

JS: I see as well this kind of connection between empty and full, almost like Yves Klein. What do you think?

HQY: Sometimes in fact when you go to the extreme, empty is full and vice versa. For example, when sculpting, if you render an image in very great detail, extremely realistically, like a wax figure, so that it couldn't be richer, it becomes a photograph, like a real person. But you can go to the other extreme; that it's already a complete empty shell, an idea. If you are not wrapped up creating the perfect object, and just get on with making it, there is an unbroken flow, a constant transformation, and in the end there may not even be anything left, but your heart is very full and enriched. Instead what's left is the infinite imagination.

JS: Most of the pieces that you produce need a very long and slow process, though it looks very simple. What is your relationship to time?

HQY: In fact my most immediate personal experience is that after sculpting, one has to be very patient. Perhaps it's easier to see a completed work with a painting or an image. Also, making a sculpture is a fairly long process; a very modest sculpture often involves a combination of complicated procedures and a lot of labor to form the armature, building up clay, modeling, formwork, sanding, and applying color. Slowly, I got used to this, working day after day until I could rest.

JS: Going back to the title *Eternal Glory*, don't you think it is a paradox in a country where everything is now so fast? So, is it a reaction to an over fast development or economy in your country that sometimes has forgotten its long history? The slow

process is clearly a way to resist the fast rhythm in China (economic development, social changes) and a way to resist the overproduction that the art world and the market are asking for.

HQY: It really isn't from artistic logic of doing the opposite. But, regardless of whether you are talking about the whole country or the art world, so much unnecessary waste is produced when we go too fast. Moreover, I'm not very suited to a fast pace. Many artists work quickly; they take part in lots of events every year. I don't think I'm suited to working at such a fast pace; I'd lose control if I worked like that. So, I'm always giving myself some problem to deal with so as to slow down the pace; perhaps I'll do a single solo exhibition every one or two years, and two or three group shows in one year. That way I can just tinker about with my work in my studio.

JS: What is your relationship to scale? Like in *The Story of Imitation*, the piece is from one size, to a smaller size, and then almost disappearing. In all of your works there is a humble scale. Is it a way here as well to resist the contemporary tendency of occupying large exhibition rooms with spectacular, gigantic pieces?

HQY: Chinese society is always making you doubt your own size. Sometimes the reality of the whole of society is very humbling. Just look at my character, particularly when I was still young, I often had feelings of low self-esteem; I felt insignificant, like a tiny ant. Occasionally I would encounter something that would make me feel a bit better, and then my mood would improve a bit. This is just like in *The People*, sometimes people are trampled on and sometimes they feel like they are standing up tall. All of these would have influences to the work. Of course, *The Story of Imitation*, the only work that I finished during the three years between 2008 and 2011 is indeed a reaction to the trend of blindly pursuing gigantic pieces.

JS: *Mountain of Gold* is a mountain, but if you put pressure on it, then it produces almost nothing. In *Fruitless Trees*: nobody even sees trees, when you say trees, you would think high, here they are super small, like Bonsais. But there is a very interesting connection between the two pieces, somehow both talk about death: trees that would never grow, just stopped in their kind of beginning, whereas in *Mountain of Gold*, it's like the memory of death. What do you think?

HQY: I can see the connection with death in the work *Mountain of Gold*. As for what you said about trees, perhaps I haven't realized it yet. When we talk about trees, I immediately think they should be very tall and very big, and this is the thinking and the concept behind the original sculpture. Actually there are many elements to trees, and in my opinion, perhaps trees are more about growth and spreading than having a large size. In *Fruitless Trees* every branch is the result of molten copper growing or flowing from the trunk to the branches; this is how I understand a tree. You can also understand it as the corpse of a tree: it has experienced a period of growth, and then it died, leaving behind the corpse.

JS: Could you explain a little more about the Chinese meaning of the golden papers in *Mountain of Gold*?

HQY: You don't get these in the West, and many of my Western friends think it's chocolate. But in China it's completely different. Every Spring Festival or the Qingming Festival, we use golden paper folded into ingots. We burn them outside as a way of passing them on to those who have died. Chinese people believe that by burning these golden paper ingots, they travel to the place of the dead, and become real money so that the deceased will have money to spend.

Why did I make this artwork? It's because we're always talking about the "concept," using an artwork to express a "concept." Actually I have my doubts about all this. In the artwork *Mountain of Gold* we can see Chinese people's concept of the world; it's a more specific concept compared to the so-called artistic concept, and it's more deeply entrenched in people's hearts. Although it is illusory, many people believe in it.

So, I am using this concept of the world to reveal how illusory conceptual art is. Worldly concepts are themselves conceptual art; I believe that artistic concepts are in fact inferior to worldly concepts.

JS: It looks very similar to Felix Gonzalez-Torres's mountains of candy, where audiences could take candies. Here it's very different, you are not inviting people to take a piece of the paper. What is your relationship to this American artist?

HQY: If you say that *Mountain of Gold* is like Torres's work, then you really haven't understood the work. These are two completely unrelated pieces. Of course if the audience doesn't mind, if they're not superstitious, and they want to take one, then it's fine. But Chinese people absolutely wouldn't take one. Even if I offered one to everyone, nobody would take one.

JS: What are your references in terms of contemporary artists?

HQY: There are definitely reference points, there's no doubt about that. I believe that as art develops, it's actually cross-referencing: it's a continual process. Sometimes they might look like they are related but they are actually exploring a completely different issue. If there's no reference point then it doesn't matter if it's a new issue or an obviously old issue but we think it's a new issue. I don't avoid referring to this. As for China and the West, it's really hard to differentiate. I've been educated in China, so my artworks will definitely have some relationship to the reality of China, but the development of Chinese contemporary art has been brief, so the West has also heavily influenced me. So, it's definitely a mix.

JS: Is there any artist generation that you feel close to with shared ideas?

HQY: I really don't believe that you can only share ideas between artists of the same generation. Sometimes it's even easier to create an exchange of ideas with people who have no connection to art.

JS: What is your next project after this exhibition?

HQY: Perhaps I'm different from many other artists in that I don't usually immediately start working on the next exhibition once I finish a show, because after each exhibition it's like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff. I think about what will the next work be, and I feel helpless yet very excited. I'm always pushing myself to that point, feeling like I can't make any new art, but then, in those circumstances, I take a step forward. I think now that if there comes a day when I really can't do it, then alright, I surrender!

Translated from the Chinese by Dinah Gardner