

# Interview with Hu Qingyan

by Karin Seiz

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Karin Seiz: You grew up in Weifang in Shandong Province, attended the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, and later studied sculpture at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. What made you decide to become an artist?

Hu Qingyan: Actually, I simply loved drawing at the beginning, but I didn't really have an overwhelming desire to become an artist. It was when I started studying sculpture at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts that I decided to do art in the future.

During my undergraduate years in Guangzhou (2002–2006), my education was mainly focused on the aspects of technique and craft; there was less instruction in theoretical and conceptual issues in art. In 2007 I started my graduate studies at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), also in the sculpture department. Compared to Guangzhou, the artistic environment in Beijing was far more lively, inspiring and informative. I saw a lot of exhibitions and explored post-1950 art history. While I was in graduate school I spent most of my time thinking about art and did not actually produce many works; my first works, such as *Story of Imitation* (2008–2010), *My 11 Stools* (2009–2010), and *Wood Pagoda* (2010) were made toward the end of my studies. I quickly received good feedback about these works, which, of course, reinforced my decision to become an artist.

KS: What kind of information did you get about events in the contemporary art scene during your studies? Did you know anything about the contemporary art discourse in New York or Berlin, for example?

HQY: Western art history (until about 1950) was taught at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. In Beijing it was easier to get information about international contemporary events through different channels, such as magazines, websites and exhibitions.

KS: One of your first works of art was *Story of Imitation*. The piece is composed of a series of photographs and fragments of marble. Can you describe what you were doing with this work?

HQY: *Story of Imitation* (2008–2010) was done over a good two-year period. I started with a marble block (55 x 65 x 30 cm), out of which I sculpted various everyday objects:

a cardboard packing box, a bone, a piece of soap, a die, and a soybean that was finally ground into powder. Each of these objects became the starting material for the next one, so fragments of individual objects remained, while the new objects became smaller and smaller. I documented the whole process in photos, and the piece itself consists of this twenty-part photo series, as well as the remaining fragments of the previous objects.

The work was made during the boom years of contemporary Chinese art. At that time, prices were exploding and sculptures by many artists were becoming increasingly large; in order to present them, you needed increasingly large spaces. *Story of Imitation* reflects upon this situation: my idea was to make my work smaller and smaller, finally allowing it to dissolve into fragments.

KS: Why sculpture?

HQY: In China you have to decide what you're going to major in before you start your studies. I come from a very rural village in Shandong Province, where most of the work is still done by hand. Somehow I got the idea that studying sculpture wouldn't be very expensive, since I could use my hands as tools and wouldn't have to buy expensive painting materials. At the time I didn't think about the fact that sculptures could also be made with very costly materials, such as marble and wood.

Traditionally, painters were more respected than sculptors in China, because for a long time sculpture was considered more of a handicraft; the names of traditional sculptors have largely been forgotten. In contemporary art, though, sculpture is an established art form, although compared to painting it still occupies a more difficult place in the art market. But I happened to be interested in precisely these things, because I think that means that the field of sculpture is far less influenced by market ideas and is therefore more experimental.

KS: In your first solo exhibition outside of China, you are presenting works made from wood, marble and paper, among other materials. What kind of significance do these materials have for you?

HQY: The materials that I use to make my works have no specific significance for me. Marble and wood, for instance, are materials I'm familiar with, and I'm well acquainted with their characteristics.

For the piece *Mountain of Gold* (2012), I worked with paper for the first time. Yet, because the method of folding paper comes from a Chinese tradition, even this material was not unfamiliar to me. In other words, the significance of the materials comes from the specific processes used by the artist during the creation of the pieces.

KS: Two of your works are also shown in the exhibition “借尸还魂 Reincarnation in a New Guise”: canvases painted on both sides, each thirty meters long. Sculptural paintings?

HQY: Yes, but I would actually call the two works *painted sculptures*, because to me the sculptural aspect is central. Painting is a two-dimensional form of art, regardless of whether it's an abstract or figurative painting. In this work, I try to go beyond that. The abstract patterns on both sides of the canvas reflect each other. In this work, I'm interested in the new relationship that arises between the painting and the canvas. The two works, *A Roll of Blue and White Striped Cloth* (2012) and *A Roll of Plaid Cloth* (2012), are indeed paintings, in a certain way, but they're more like three-dimensional objects than two-dimensional images.

KS: *Firewood* is the title of a monumental work made out of wood (200 x 200 x 200 cm; 8 m<sup>3</sup>). What at first glance appear to be regular pieces of firewood, piled into a six-foot stack, are actually hundreds of logs, hand-carved out of camphorwood. Furthermore, the inner part of the cube is not empty space, as suggested by the immense amount of material and labor; rather, it is filled with the same carved logs. Here, you are deliberately playing with the visual and perceptual habits of the viewer.

HQY: For *Firewood* I processed more than eighty pieces of camphorwood; each piece was at least two meters long and had a diameter of around forty centimeters. First we cut the wood into smaller pieces and then carved it by hand into the shape of firewood. The wood could have been used for many other purposes; for instance, you could have made building material or furniture out of it. In this case, there was more handiwork involved in the artistic practice, and this made two things out of the wood: first, a work of art, and second, firewood.

KS: The first time they see the work, many people think that the cube is empty on the inside. Contemporary artists know how to realize artistic ideas so that the presentation is interesting and attractive, without involving too much material and handiwork.

HQY: Perhaps my attitude toward reducing the conceptual elements to a minimum and employing this elaborate, workmanlike process is somewhat stubborn. But when I'm doing this work, it is important to me to think that the wood that comprises the installation is basically firewood, both before and after, even though during the creation of the work every piece of wood was carved by hand in a meticulous process.

I chose the cube as the presentational form because, for me, it is a pure, simple form, in the same way that I see wood as a pure, simple material. I tried to reduce the conceptual side as much as possible, and to remain as close to the material as possible. Often a material will be used to create something else, but in this piece the image of the firewood and the material concur.

KS: Actually, your wooden logs are “fakes,” like the bamboo rods you carved out of *jinsi namu* wood beams taken from old houses (*A Bundle of Bamboo*, 2011). Your imitations are so close to the original that, without further information, the viewer might not become aware of the deception. Nevertheless, it discloses a whole field of tension between the original and the copy. To what extent do you see your works in the Chinese cultural tradition of copying?

HQY: As students, part of our coursework involved copying works of art, both Chinese and western, and our copies were supposed to resemble the original as closely as possible. Through this process, students could grasp the essence of the original pieces and understand the perspectives and processes of the original artists.

In my works, I have tried to demonstrate the tensions between the original and the copy, which is very different from making a work that resembles the original as closely as possible.

After copying western and Chinese pieces during my studies, if I were to compare the western approach to art with the Chinese approach, I would say that the former is more of an objective, precise way of seeing things, while here in China, emotion tends to be at the forefront, and the approach is far more abstract. But to come back to the theme of the copy: this distance between the original and the copy is something very delicate, and it is precisely this ambiguity that interests me in my own works. For me, it is much more interesting to make an object which is in some ways very distant from its original form in reality, while in some ways very close to it, than to make a figurative sculpture in the perfect form.

KS: It actually appears that transformation, the transition from one shape to the next, is an important theme in your artistic practice. For the photo series *Narrative by a Pile of Clay* 41–80, 2011–2012 (c-print, unique, set of 40 photos, each 20 x 30 cm), you use a given amount of clay, which you keep re-shaping over and over again. In the photographs you document the entire process, from the creation to the destruction of the different shapes. Can you explain what interests you in this process of progressive modification?

HQY: During my student days I made a fiberglass sculpture, *Dialogue: “I” Explained Art to Joseph Beuys (Pictures)*, 2006. The piece features an outsized hare holding Joseph Beuys in its arms and explaining the history of art to him. My goal was to make the form as perfect as possible. In my further explorations of sculpture as a theme, though, I was no longer interested in this search for the uniquely valid, perfect form. I think that sculpture has to go beyond that. So I got the idea of working with a limited amount of clay, and to keep making new shapes out of it, and destroying them later on in the process. After all, a sculpture is normally modeled in clay first, then you make a plaster cast of the object and ultimately cast the sculpture in fiberglass. But I shortened the whole process for *Narrative by a Pile of Clay*. Here I no longer cast the sculpture made

of clay into the solid material; therefore, the form is not eternal anymore, but only demonstrates the temporary state of its existence.

The piece is set up as a multi-part photo series; over the course of a year, from 2011 until 2012, I produced forty relatively small photographs. The process of selecting objects to model in clay was somewhat random. Generally, they are things that are around me in my everyday life, like a pumpkin or one of my shoes. In *Narrative by a Pile of Clay*, images are constantly appearing and disappearing, so that the significance of the image gets smaller and smaller until it almost disappears completely, and the focus remains entirely on the process, on this eternal cycle. While other sculptures are static objects, this sculptural work of art tends to manifest the process of sculpting during a defined period of time. And because the aspect of time is so central to this work, I plan to continue it and perhaps realize one series per year.

KS: Initially, the material for your work *Cloud–2012* (2012, marble, 45 x 96 x 55 cm) was the amount of clay corresponding to your body mass. Can you further explain this loose series of self-portraits?

HQY: One of my dreams provides a good way to approach this work: a while ago I dreamed that I could fly in the sky like a cloud. So I tried to find a way to express this image through the language of sculpture. Since mass is a central aspect of sculpture, I used my own body mass as the starting point for *Cloud*. Naturally, I could have made a precise, life-size fiberglass copy of my body, but here, too, I was interested in the relationship between the *image*, the mass, and the sculpture. Besides the medium of sculpture, painting and photography provide other, perhaps simpler, ways to express something through the creation of an *image*. I am interested in what is specific to sculpture, the thing that other media have no access to, and that is the third dimension, the volume of an entity.

KS: The works from the series *One Breath* are conceptually close to *Cloud*.

HQY: Yes, the two series of works have similar set-ups. *One Breath* is even more about making something invisible visible, since you can't imagine the mass of a breath, whereas even though you can see the mass of a human body, you can't really perceive it as such. For *One Breath* I ask the people I'm depicting to breathe once into a plastic bag. I then take the volume I receive like this and realize it in a marble sculpture.

KS: In your art you find forms for the ephemeral, which is in accordance with your dynamic processes. Within the scope of conceptual art, European and American artists have been struggling with artistic concepts and the visualization of mental processes since the 1960s. Is there a similar tradition in China's fine art?

HQY: Many of the themes that interest me in my art today have been discussed by artists all around the world for centuries; however, I have always tried to interpret or present these issues in new ways.

I've never really thought carefully about whether my major influence is conceptual art, although, as I said, I've studied a variety of art movements. Since I grew up in China and studied here, I feel very connected to the local situation here. Traditional Chinese art was our starting point, but things changed in the field of sculpture with the generation of Sui Jianguo and Zhan Wang. My generation, in turn, is developing things even further, and I think that my artistic practice primarily reflects the situation and the environment in China.