

Lucie Chang Fine Arts

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Since the better artists of today are always those who have a clear grasp of the world that surrounds them, it would obviously be absurd to state that only university studio art educators are more aware of the present than artists who do not have the responsibility of engaging with young people. The work of Shi Jin-hua, for instance, who is not attached to an art education institution, is so deeply rooted in the demands of his physical condition and his understanding of human relations that it belongs just as much to the present as that of Ho Siu-kee and Wei Qingji who are both full time academics. And yet, it could be argued that, beyond their own personal intellectual pursuits, it is partly thanks to their everyday involvement with much younger students that artists like Ho Siu-kee and Wei Qingji have been able to renew and reinforce their own practices. As for Shi Jin-hua, we will see that his take on art as healing and connecting makes of his practice an ideal way to unite with the present. The involvement of these teachers and healers takes place within a vast and complex environment that has been called the 'artworld' (in one word) by the American philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto (1924-2013), who thus defined the aesthetic, intellectual, institutional and commercial context where art itself is created. Today, very few studio art teachers at university level would be taken seriously if they did not have their own professional practices and if they did not engage directly in the artworld. All the same, since the two teachers of this exhibition also constantly resist the conservatism that often appears in the institutional structure of art education, it cannot be said that the works on display here come merely from their engagement as art educators. Since they are first and foremost artists, their art practices allow them to resist the institutions of art education from the inside and renew it in the process. The same can be said of Shi Jin-hua whose conceptual performative projects have also engaged some aspects of the artworld in order to change it from the inside. This show gathers three artists who can claim prominent places in the very artworld they have helped built over the years as artists, teachers and healers.

Born in Hong Kong in 1968, Ho Siu-kee 何兆基 studied art in the Fine Arts Department, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (香港中文大學) and at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in the United States and has played a major role in the artworld and the art education of the territory since the 1990s. While working as a teacher and academic head of the Art School of Hong Kong (a division of the Arts Center), he studied for a Doctorate of Fine Arts with the Royal Melbourne Institute of Education. His academic career led him to the position of Associate Professor at the Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University, where he is also director of the Master of Arts Programme. For a long time, his artistic research has been based on his profound interest for phenomenology, and especially the work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who is often credited for the reintroduction of questions related to the body in Western philosophy. As a result, Ho Siu-kee has worked for a number of years on a reflection taking the shape of sculptural objects directly related to his own body and, not surprisingly, this reflection is an essential part of his educational activities. Conceived according to a form of circular thinking

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that often appears in phenomenological writings, these objects are conditioned by the body of the artist while the body of the artist is constricted by these objects. With hands up hands down, the artist and his own son stand as the matrixes generating the geometrical forms of the final sculptures. The limited range of movements allowed to these two bodies, made visible by the life-size photos that often appeared in the exhibitions of these objects, are thus enacted in the form of circumscribed space. The same notions produced the object titled sit stand lie, but this time, Ho Siu-kee also introduced the notion of ritual and austerities. In the text written for this object some years ago, the artist referred to how ascetic Buddhist monks related their ritual practices to their daily lives by thinking of every gesture (sitting, standing and lying down) as part of the same religious practice.

Even though Ho Siu-kee does not take a religious stand in his work, he often uses the visual vocabulary of religion to reinforce the philosophical reflection he started when he was still a student in the USA. With the series of objects titled Aureola, Ho Siu-kee has played with an almost universal representation of the particular state referred to as holiness in many religions. An aureola, or halo, is a circular or flame-like form generally represented behind or above the head of the most important characters of religions like Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. With this series, Ho Siu-kee has designed ways to relate the body to this visual device and thus provide both the artist and the viewer with a spiritual significance they are always in danger of losing in the banality of the everyday. Even though some of the earliest sculptures of the Aureola project were also patterned on the body of the artist himself, thus turning them into an object of viewing and not participation, aureola no.4 a – place for the mind has been conceived to give anyone the chance to engage in meditation and maybe achieve a certain degree of spiritual enlightenment. Conceived as a reading room, it relates to the ancient cells of monasticism, small rooms where ascetic monks could meditate and sever their ties with the world. While the viewer's body is contained within this place for the mind, small holes drilled in a radiated pattern on the back panel reveal the lights emanating from inside and display the contours of the viewer's head with a halo. Aureola no.10 was conceived for a series of performances involving the artist interacting with his own sculptures. Taking the form of a sort of blessing, it is the carving of a hand pierced by a hole that allows light to shine on the forehead of a viewer standing in front of it.

If Ho Siu-kee often relies on performance to enact the relationship of his body with the objects he conceived, the Taiwanese artist Shi Jin-Hua 石晉華 does not himself make the items he uses in his own performances. Born in Penghu, Taiwan, in 1964, he studied at the National Taiwan Normal University (國立台灣師範大學) and obtained his Master of Fine Arts in the University of California, Irvine. He is now based in Kaohsiung and defines himself as predominantly a practitioner of conceptual art and performance. Shi Jin-hua was diagnosed with diabetes at a fairly young age and he has been forced into a constant monitoring of his insulin levels for many years. This necessity for constant measurement, far from being taken as a passive impediment to his everyday life, has become the center of the choices he has made as an artist. If measurements have to be made, they would also be made as part of an active engagement in the form of an art practice. This extremely personal necessity of healing through measurement has thus been turned into an engagement with all those who are willing to take part in his performances. In the video on display in this exhibition, Hugging Project, Shi Jin-hua used his own body to

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measure and heal people: by marking on his own arms and body the places where they have touched him, he preserves in visual form the tactile impression left by others. Measurement can also be made through the use of objects though and one of his most famous conceptual performances, Clothing project, is not only underpinned by this act, but is also typically a strategy that tries to make sense of the artworld.

During a stay in New York in October 2015, where he worked with the staff of the annex of the Museum of Modern Art called PS1, Shi Jin-hua collected clothes donated by the staff and by visitors. After numbering and tagging each garment, he donned them all at the same time while documenting the whole process through photographs. The resulting 77 photographs, showing different stages of accumulation on his own body, are both touching and comical: growing in size with each additional piece of clothing, he slowly turns into an amalgam of various colors and shapes. The second and third stages of the performance consisted in cutting each garment into strips and stitching them together, the goal being to measure the perimeter of the PS1 building with the resulting multi-color rope (it turned out that only 21 pieces of clothing were sufficient to surround the building). Using this rope made of objects donated by strangers was in itself an act revealing of the public of art who, in the best of circumstances, is supposed to come from all walks of life. But it was also an act destined to emphasize the origin of the building itself which used to be a public school, hence the name 'PS', thus highlighting the idea that there is an educational dimension to art. By measuring and bringing together the remains of all sorts of people, by using the fabric of protective clothes around a place of education, Shi Jin-hua enacted the act of healing always present in the best of art practices. Shi Jin-hua also produces images in the form of a series titled Pen Walking. Each stroke of the pen in these drawings is conceived as a metaphor of human life, which is why they sometimes even include broken pieces of the pencils that produced them. Conceived as a conceptual project just as closely related to the act of healing as his other works, it produces however objects that take the shape of abstract drawings. Rooted in self-reflection, they somehow originate from within the recesses of the artist's mind and body; in that sense, they could even be seen as a sort of opposite of Wei Qingji's practice and its origin in the quotidian of the social world.

Born in Qingdao in 1971, Wei Qingji 魏青吉 studied in the Arts and Design College (藝術與設計學院) of the Wuhan Polytechnic University (武漢理工大學) and now teaches Chinese painting as an Associate Professor at the College of Fine Arts (美術學院), South China Normal University (華南師範大學), Guangzhou. While taking part in many exhibitions like, for example, The Origin of Tao (Yuandao 原道), curated by the famous art critic and historian Pi Daojian 皮道堅 at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in 2013, Wei Qingji has become an important figure in the discussions about Ink Art and what constitutes Chinese painting today. Such reflections have been made by many painters, art critics and art historians in the Chinese world, taking fairly different characteristics in different parts of this world. In Hong Kong particularly, the debate about Ink Art will often relate to the New Ink art movement of the 1960s and 1970s, when artists like Wucius Wong 王無邪 (born 1936) and Liu Guosong 劉國松 (born in 1932) brought this ancient medium into the world of their time. Today, the field of Ink art has taken characteristics that even these artists who made their mark on the late 20th century would not have conceived: it is now perfectly acceptable for

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curators to include sculptures, installations, video and interactive media art in Ink Art exhibition. On his own page of the website of the South China Normal University, for instance, the description of Wei Qingji's lectures are tantalizingly intriguing: 'Ink mixed media and performance, Chinese painting techniques'

(水墨綜合材料與表現、中國國畫技法). Albeit made with the brush-ink (筆墨), i.e. the most noble medium possible in Chinese culture and always celebrated by the scholars of the past, Wei Qingji's painting are always playing with the most mundane of subject matters.

Viewers interested in contemporary philosophy would know that it is in the celebrated books of Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, focusing on the idea of the 'everyday', that one can find a theory of how to approach the mundane and turn it into something else, something where a sense of marvel can be found again. The images of Wei Qingji are not merely mundane, but many of them belong to the popular culture any city dweller would be familiar with in today's China. Two mountains and two trees are the subject of the paintings of this exhibition. The topic of High Mountain (gaoshan 高山) seems taken from a propaganda painting of the 1960s, while the holiness of the other, Holy Mountain 2 (shengshan 聖山2), is contained in the very fame of its subject matter, Hollywood being the source of a large portion of the cinematic entertainment available even today in the People's Republic of China. One of the two trees in this exhibition is a pine tree, a traditional topic of literati painting but made with the characteristic contrast of dark outlines and more loose strokes that is very recognizably Wei Qingji's. The other tree, titled Eclosion (zhanfang 綻放), presents a series of red motives that are also quite typical of Wei Qingji and his efforts to bring the mundanity of design within the elegance of 'traditional' Chinese painting. Even though the works in this exhibition were made on traditional Chinese paper, from time to time Wei Qingji will prefer painting on newspaper in order to obstruct the association with the past viewers will naturally make when looking at his images. The use of newspaper as a surface will automatically move these pictures as far away as possible from the elegance inherent in the literati painting of the past. It is this constant sense of interference, keeping the viewer in the middle of a tug-of-war between the mundane and the elegant, between the traditional and the contemporary, that makes of Wei Qingji's work an ideal topic in today's debate about Chineseness in the arts of contemporary China, a topic I have no doubt is being hotly debated among his young students.