

Revealing the Ruse

by Liu Libin

Devotion to imitation is tantamount to deliberately emptying yourself, wearying the search for inspiration after exploring ideas, and dedicating yourself only to reproducing a thing, just like the even thoughts induced by a “deep breath”.

Dedication to copying is equivalent to constantly grinding yourself down. When fashioning a work, you shape yourself at the same time; this renders this process similar to an exclusive “training room”. This process is forever open and unending; it is a process of internalization.

It is difficult to avoid revealing the ruse. As it undergoes crafting, the work comes ever closer to the original object, yet it remains a “fake”. If the copy’s primary characteristic is likeness or similarity, its secondary feature is certainly a lack of authenticity. Therefore, when the original and the copy are juxtaposed together, this may “reveal” a bit more entertainment to viewers. Because it is inevitable that Hu Qingyan (*1982 in Weifang, China; lives and works in Beijing, China) can infuse a more relaxed state of mind into the process of copying and is not anxious to engage in various covert acts, he is more concerned with those ideas that the act of imitation itself brings in its train.

Narrative by a Pile of Clay 1-40 (2010 - 2011) is a body of photographic works based on a practice that combines sculpture and performance; this exhibition presents the first group of works in this series, consisting of 40 panels (20 x 30 cm each). The visual impression it imparts to us at first glimpse is one of “duality”. A pile of clay becomes in turn such utterly unrelated objects as rocks, effigies of Buddha, spheres and stumps. Each photograph consists of two grouped items that are identical, the original and the copy, but one is unquestionably the “work reproduced” in sculpted clay. Some of them are the same size, others are magnified (based on the volume of clay) so that, with this combination of big and small, revealing the ruse becomes self-evident. Hu appears unconcerned about this low-level revelation of the ruse, because what he shows us is not absolute consistency between the original and copy, but the process of copying itself.

Imitation constitutes a kind of “addiction”; this stems from a realism complex that cannot be shed. In China, one is destined to “render it realistic”, because this is always the standard applied to assess whether a painting student’s ability is “excellent” or not. Thus when imitating, it behooves one to “make it real”.

“Two Bundles of Bamboo” (*A Bundle of Bamboo No. 1* and *A Bundle of Bamboo No. 2*, both 2011) stages a wonderful “camouflaged” scene. Each stalk of tough jointed bamboo is smooth in texture, stacked up in bundles in the exhibition hall. Unobservant viewers may think it is just bundles of commonplace bamboo, but after careful scrutiny they will discover that it is marked by the sea changes of worldly vicissitudes. Actually, this is *jinsi nanmu* wood from old roof beams. After being carved and chiselled by Hu, it transforms into “bamboo poles.” But sometimes, even if you observe it intently, you may still not be able to see through it; perhaps it is only its minute detail that may serve to reveal this ruse.

“Two Bundles of Bamboo” employs wood to represent objects of differing materials, so there is no real comparison between them and the work; this thus concentrates all the more focus on its “bogusness”. Here the desire is to display not the process of imitation, but its result. Does this sole focus on the background of the “addiction” to imitation enable the even deeper excavation of its significance? Hu Qingyan’s *Narrative by a Pile of Clay 1-40* and *Narrative of Imitation* (2009 - 2010) display the form of a comic book, whose language of expression, in addition to imitation, is also one of “reconstruction” and “breaking”. “Breaking” is even more prominent in *Narrative by a Pile of Clay 1-40*. To break a well-formed sculptural work, and then to create a new sculpture from its material, or to immediately deconstruct or destroy it, is thus to break the eternal nature of sculpture. Often breaking one work marks the start of constructing another, a process that can be repeated over and over again. This dilutes people’s desire to interpret the concept of a work of art and signals a return to the work itself. This is a wake-up call to our indulgence in our concept of art, and highlights the inertia of our mode of thinking as sheer ignorance in the presence of this work, which thereby reveals this as a ruse.

The work *Cloud* (2011), in which Hu uses rigid stone material to express a light, fluffy white cloud, and his work *A Breath* (2011), wrought in white marble, exhibit both similarities and differences in treatment. *Cloud* has as its source a dream in which the artist saw himself turn into a cloud and, after waking, resolved to manifest this dream in sculpture. He used displaced water to quantify his bodily volume, then created a clay sculpture of the same volume as the water to form the cloud from his dream, and then created the final work from a stone material. *A Breath* also stems from Hu’s replication of his own respiration. He drew a deep breath, exhaled all of it into a plastic bag, and then used the bag as a mold to create the work in white marble. In *Cloud* and *A Breath*, he seems to challenge the inclusiveness and expressiveness of white marble, and the contradistinction between the differing natures of the materials and even the antagonistic manner in which they interact with one another. Secondly, he integrates himself with the sculpture. The cloud is the same volume as the bodily load he carries, while the plastic bag contains the same volume of gas as his breath; he thereby employs sculpture to express his own body mass, and so he blends his heart and soul with it. These copied sculptures at this time cease to be solely concerned with the result, but extend it, and his works reinforce the perception of sculpture, and so reveal the ruse, while also adding another layer of depth to its interpretation.

To choose imitation is to incur the simultaneous risk of revealing the ruse, but this act of revealing is not inadvertent; to the contrary, it is quite deliberate.

Translated from Chinese: Benedict Armour