A New World of Sights & Wonders:
Cheng Ran's *Hot Blood, Warm Blood, Cold Blood*

by David Spalding

"No philosophers so thoroughly comprehend us as dogs and horses," Herman Melville wrote in *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1849). "They see through us at a glance." It is this elusive possibility of *seeing through* that Cheng Ran's exhibition at Galerie Urs Meile, "Hot Blood, Warm Blood, Cold Blood," confronts us with—that confounded, enduring desire to perceive with the eye what ordinarily remains hidden from view.

As a student, Cheng Ran (born *1981, Inner Mongolia) learned to love the act of drawing by immersing himself in the work of da Vinci. After graduating from Hangzhou's China Academy of Art, he worked for five years as a studio assistant for the artist Yang Fudong, who is best known for his luminous, black and white, five-part film cycle, *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest*, in which Cheng Ran also acted. As an artist, his own video works—often multi-screen installations with a cinematic sheen—have sometimes taken canonical western texts as points of departure. These works thrive on poetic associations, rather than reverent citations, and include references to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (*The Genghis Khan Conquest*, 2008, which uses images of early experiments in airplane flight to suggest a previous age of exploration and conquest); *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (an eponymous, four-channel video work, completed in 2009, in which an assortment of mirrored disco balls and spinning colored lights hang from a large scaffold, incongruously illuminating a dark, lush forest); and a zombie-like Hamlet, whose "To be or not to be" soliloquy provides the voiceover for *What Why How*, 2011.

Cheng Ran is also partial to surprising quotations and visual transpositions, as evidenced in his re-creation of the iconic Hollywood sign near Ulan Bator, Mongolia (*Ghost of Tundra*, 2010). This is coupled with the artist's romance for the quotidian: a song overheard on a Paris subway (*Everything Has Its Time*, 2011) or a butterfly that slips through an open window (*Summanus Butterfly*, 2010) are both likely to inspire a work. He is prolific and gifted, drawing on both research and intuition as he finds his way toward new images.

In his three-channel video installation *Hot Blood, Warm Blood, Cold Blood* (2011), the centerpiece of his solo exhibition at Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing, Cheng Ran uses the notion of a horse's temperament to reflect on our urge to see the intangible. While horses offer the artist a rich visual vocabulary from which to draw, Cheng Ran is less interested in the animals themselves than he is in the question raised by the notion of "temperament"—the perception of qualities that we cannot see or quantify, which are associated with each breed and broken into the three classifications that gives the exhibition its name. "These different tempers cannot be measured by either the horses' bodies or blood temperatures," the artist wrote in an early statement about the project. "They are unchanging, intangible and invisible, but somehow we can sense the difference between hot and cold."[i]

The hot-blooded horse, typically associated with a sleek Arabian racer, is supposed to be bold and spirited, but is depicted in the projection entitled "Hot Blood" as somewhat docile. Images of a golden horse, evocative of the Ferghana breed, extinct now except in sculpted Tang Dynasty pottery, are intercut with a musical performance that provides the installation's sound: a figure strums rhythmically on an upright bass, the fractured skull of a horse tied to his head. The musician's song and costume are emblematic of that pulsing, unknowable condition that drives the horse—an attempt, perhaps, to represent an aspect of that invisible, internal metronome that sets the timing of the horse's temper (interestingly, if the horse's inner-world is being represented, Cheng Ran has chosen to emphasize its aural dimension). In the "Warm Blood" projection, an eagle appears in a hay-filled stable, its true freedom providing a counterpoint to the horse's confinement; a figure in riding clothes saddles and reins the horse. In the most dramatic of the scenes, "Cold Blood," four horses gallop ceremoniously along the shallow edge of a wide river, their riders wearing matching clothes, boots and helmets. While the term "cold-blood" usually refers to a complacent, heavy draft horse, the horses in this segment seem more suited to dressage or armed battles. Defying expectation, the normally calm cold-bloods appear easily panicked, with calamitous results. All three of the videos exude a cool sense of control, deploying cinematic gestures such as tracking, panoramic, wide-angle shots and careful framing. Taken together, they offer up a striking mosaic, revealing a horse's temperament to be as varied as it is unknowable, despite the classifications.

Cheng Ran's video installation—both its questioning approach and its chosen subject—are firmly rooted in the history of photography. Over one hundred years ago, a man used a horse and a camera to address the limits of vision, and the result helped to usher in what we now call cinema. It was a series of high-speed photographs of a trotter named Occident, taken by Eadweard Muybridge in 1872, which demonstrated how the camera's mechanical eye could reveal truths otherwise undetectable to human vision. Muybridge's pictures—equine silhouettes echoed in the "Cold Blood" projection of Cheng Ran's video installation—helped the man who commissioned them, railroad scion Leland Stanford, to settle a wager about whether a horse's four legs left the ground while it ran (they did, improbably curling underneath the horse's lumbering body). With Stanford's patronage, Muybridge developed new camera equipment. His wish to animate the images—to stop and start time at will, revealing its secrets in the process—eventually led to his invention of a remarkable precursor to the movie projector. Muybridge's speeding horses finally flew, visibly airborne between each gallop. Following a 1883 demonstration at London's Royal Institution, *The Photographic News* reported, "After Mr. Muybridge had shown his audience the quaint and (apparently) impossible positions that the horse assumes in his different gaits, he then most ingeniously combined the pictures on the screen, showing them one after another

so rapidly that the audience had before them the galloping horse, the trotting horse, & etc. A new world of sights and wonders was, indeed, opened by photography, which was not less astounding because it was truth itself."[ii]

Audiences were astonished, though not all of them were happy. As in Cheng Ran's video, it is debatable whether Muybridge's horses led viewers toward something more reliable than sensory perception, or into a realm of deceptive appearances—the trickery of flickering shadows given life by the latest technological wizardry. "It is the artist who is truthful and it is photography which lies, for in reality time does not stop," the sculptor Auguste Rodin wrote.[iii] But isn't a lie often as revealing as the truth it dissembles?

This disconnection between what we see and what we seek is highlighted again by another reference embedded within *Hot Blood, Warm Blood, Cold Blood*. As the video segment entitled "Cold Blood" reaches its climax, riders on horseback parade alongside a silvery riverfront, but the seductive images give way to a series of dissolves in which the horses and their riders are seen tumbling and crashing to the ground. The color drains away as the violence is slowed and repeated through digital manipulation, multiplied and magnified to heighten its disturbing intensity.

One antecedent to these images in Cheng Ran's work can be found in Leonardo da Vinci's missing masterpiece, a mural painting entitled *The Battle of Anghiari*, which Leonardo began in 1505 in Florence's Hall of Five Hundred and which Chen Ran has sited as inspiration. Images of Leonardo's lost work live on in a drawing Rubens made based on a copy of the painting, as well in Leonardo's surviving preliminary studies for the large-scale battle scene, in which four horses rear, trample and collide with horrible grace, pitching and bucking the sword-wielding soldiers atop them. While the painting's mysterious vanishing during the mid-16th century has inspired countless quests, according to recent reports, the Leonardo may be hidden behind a fresco created by Giorgio Vasari in the Palazzo Vecchio. Vasari was commissioned in 1563 to create a fresco in the same spot; he apparently built a wall in front of Leonardo's original work before beginning his own.[iv] Vasari's fresco now acts like an enormous, elaborately painted mask, preventing us from seeing the unknown "real" face that it hides. Still, the challenge remains: how to search for *The Battle of Anghiari* without destroying Vasari's work? At what point does the curiosity to see that which lies beyond appearances become corrosive?

A careful selection of four giclée prints (made from video stills) compliment the installation at Galerie Urs Meile, transforming the action in *Hot Blood, Warm Blood, Cold Blood* into a series of moments that invite pleasurable scrutiny. As Muybridge's freeze frames of horses running in mid-air revealed something hitherto unknown about motion, Chen Ran's still images beckon with a similar promise of revelation through reverse engineering. Emphasizing the artist's strong instinct for composition, the c-prints linger over details embedded in the installation's poetic interplay of moving images, lending gravitas to a horse's bulging, troubled eye (*Hot Blood*, 2011), or the frenetic kick of hindquarters and tangled tail, seen through a spray of river water (*Cold Blood*, 2011). One scans the stills as if looking for clues. Rather than sating our appetites, the mute beauty of these images only drives us onward.

Vasari's fresco contains a tiny message carefully written on its painted surface: "*cerce trova*" – "seek and you shall find." Vasari's turn of phrase could just as accurately be applied to Cheng Ran's exhibition, where discoveries—about the ontological status of the image as a surface that both reveals and conceals, and about the allure and danger of the unseen—are made with fractal-like regularity, elucidated by surprising scale shifts and unexpected symmetries.

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[i] Cheng Ran, describing the project in unpublished artist's statement.

[ii] Quoted in Rebecca Solnit, "Eadweard Muybridge: Feet off the Ground," *The Guardian*, September 3, 2010 (http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2010/sep/04/eadweard-muybridge-exhibition-rebecca-solnit), last accessed on October 8, 2011.

[iii] Quoted in Randy Alfred, "This Day in Tech - June 15, 1878: Muybridge Horses Around With Motion Pictures," *Wired*, June 15, 2009 (http://www.wired.com/thisdayintech/2009/06/dayintech_0615/), last accessed on October 8, 2011.

[iv] See Rachel Donaldo, "Looking for Leonardo, With Camera in Hand," *New York Times*, August 26, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/27/arts/design/leonardo-mural-in-florence-may-be-revealed.html?pagewanted=2&ref=arts, last accessed on October 8, 2011.