

Cao Yu: “Passing Through the Human World”
by Luise Guest

Cao Yu’s solo exhibition, *Passing Through the Human World*, focuses on our complicated relationships with the natural world, with each other, and with our desire to find meaning in our lives. It evokes the three cosmological realms of syncretic Daoist/neo-Confucian thought. The concept of ‘*tian di ren beyi*’ (heaven, earth, human united) represents an interconnected triad in which humans endeavour to live in harmony with the cosmos, including with the ancestors in the underworld of the dead. Cao is unafraid of big ideas like this—she examines the messy, painful, sometimes comical business of being human. A conceptual thread that runs through her ambitious, multidisciplinary work is her willingness to reveal things that are more often hidden from view, politely veiled, or camouflaged by euphemism. Cao Yu is, above all else, courageous.

In this exhibition Cao explores gendered experiences of sexuality and motherhood; connections between life and the afterlife; links between species, and across aeons. Perhaps only in China, for example, could an artist procure a fossil from the Ice Age—a mammoth’s enormous leg bone unearthed in far north-eastern Heilongjiang Province—for an installation that examines profound human and post-human connections. In *Nothing Can Ensure that We Will Meet Again* (Ice Age - 2014), Cao Yu asks us to confront our deepest fears, and our deepest longings. She inserted the umbilical cord that once attached her to her first-born child, frozen since 2014 for this precise purpose, into a space dug out of the bone and filled with resin.

Inlaid and preserved like a prehistoric insect trapped in amber, the knotted cord will survive long past Cao’s own life span, and her son’s. It is a time capsule illustrating the powerful connection between a mother and her infant, but also a reminder of their inevitable separation and mortality. She chose the mammoth bone, she says, because they too, long ago, suckled their babies. ¹ For Cao, “The life that has gone is a witness to the connection and separation of the other two lives.” ² With the circular bracelet of her umbilical cord, Cao Yu is closing the circle between animal and human life forms, between past and present, and between death and a kind of immortality.

The range, diversity and conceptual depth of her work is astonishing, but she is also deeply invested in the nature of her materials, from the more conventional – marble, stretched linen, digital media, neon, video – to the appearance of surprising, even transgressive, materials including raw meat, bones, and the artist’s own hair, breastmilk, and urine. This focus on materiality is a distinctive aspect of contemporary art from China. Art historian and curator Wu Hung explored the concept of ‘material art’ (*caizhi yishu*) to analyse how Chinese artists make use of unconventional materials in order to produce works in which “material, rather than image or style, is paramount in manifesting the artist’s aesthetic judgement or social critique.” ³ Such materials, says Wu, “transcend codified art forms.” ⁴ Ever since her Central Academy of Fine Arts graduation exhibition in 2016, Cao Yu has used her practice to expose her own vulnerabilities—and to make us reflect upon ours. To a mixture of astonishment and affront from the audience, she presented her video *Fountain*, which showed the artist in dramatic chiaroscuro as a human fountain of expressed breastmilk. Cao was satirising the ejaculatory masculinity of canonical art historical works such as Duchamp’s notorious porcelain urinal, *Fountain* (1917), and American conceptual artist Bruce Nauman’s *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (1966–1967), a video which showed the artist in the act of spitting out an arc of water. Like Duchamp, she is a provocateur, and like Nauman her work is self-reflexive: Cao’s dialogue with art history inverted gendered expectations in which women were typically represented as passive objects of the male gaze. She may be reclining, bare-breasted, in *Fountain* but she forces us to reconsider the female body as powerfully productive. Having experienced pregnancy, labour, birth, and the sheer physicality of new motherhood, she said: “I felt for the first time as a woman that my body could have an even more violent power to release tension than a man’s.” ⁵

Other works from the same time, shown in previous exhibitions, reveal this same process of inversion, as Cao turned the products of her body—breastmilk and urine—into art materials. For *Artist Manufacturing* (2016) she condensed litres of expressed breastmilk into a malleable, clay-like material from which she moulded small abstract forms. In *The Labourer* (2017) we see the artist trampling on a pile of flour, kneading it into a dough that is moistened by trickles of urine that run down her pale legs. Urinating while

standing, of course, is a powerful signifier of masculinity. These works are raw in every sense of the word. Pungent. Visceral, even. *Undead* (2017) consists of pieces of raw meat wedged between two blocks of marble. Cao Yu is rendering the body at its most primal. Far from the idealised female bodies of Western classical antiquity, or the Chinese classical tradition of painting ‘Exemplary Women’ (*lienü*) and ‘Beauties’ (*shinü*),⁶ Cao Yu cuts to bodily reality—we are flesh and bone.

The Thing In the Chest (2021) extends Cao Yu’s approach to inversion and fleshy embodiment. A series of photographs depicts a slender, pale, androgynous figure (the artist) holding an ox heart in front of her own naked chest. Grotesquely huge and meaty, dripping blood, the heart is tattooed with the face of a tiger. In Chinese folklore the tiger is a protector and guardian, representing strength, bravery, and ferocity. Like other animals with fur, tigers are associated with feminine *yin* energy, and with the earth.⁷ Cao Yu’s work plays with supposed binaries of masculine and feminine, internal and external, *yin* and *yang*. She represents the act of taking her own heart from inside her body, raising it like an emblem of courage—or rather, perhaps, a burden to be endured. Cao says, “Some people tattoo their fierceness on their bodies, but I engraved my ambitions in my heart.”⁸

Dragon Head (2020) continues her subversion of gendered expectations. It depicts Cao Yu, clothed in a black suit, seated on the faucet of an old concrete sink. Water sprays from between her spread legs directly towards the viewer. The photograph, at first seemingly a straightforward, if provocative, inversion of gender identity, on closer inspection reveals nuances of meaning. The sink itself recalls the artist’s childhood in a heavily polluted industrial town in Liaoning Province, where her parents worked in the largest steel plant in Lingyuan City. She remembers the eye-stinging smoke from the factories and the rusty water that sprayed from the schoolyard taps. The work is an elegy to the post-industrial decline of heavy industry, once glorified in millions of propaganda images. Cao Yu, presenting herself as an ambiguous figure urinating—a human ‘fountain’—once again satirises masculine claims to superior power. The title is based on the Chinese word for faucet, 水龙头 (*shui long tou*, literally translated, is ‘water dragon head’). The dragon, with all its associated properties of imperial power, wisdom, and prosperity in Chinese symbology is here controlled by the artist, who reclaims that agency for herself.

The continuing photographic series, *Femme Fatale*, is similarly an intentional, considered violation of propriety and behavioural norms. Large photographs depict men caught in the act of public urination. Framed ornately in the manner of Baroque portraits, they confront us with a social taboo. The artist, accompanied by a uniformed security guard, has covertly photographed these men caught in an act they assumed was unobserved. The fact that they feel entitled to urinate wherever they please is problematic, certainly, but that a woman documents them is a kind of voyeurism that overturns the male gaze. Her subjects, rather than being representations of powerful masculinity, appear ridiculous. She says, “These are not the voluptuous ‘Femmes Fatale’ provided for men to feast their eyes on. Here, these men from different rungs of society have become ‘Femmes Fatale’ for the (woman) artist’s enjoyment, toys for the viewer. A sense of violation erupts at the moment the viewer enters the exhibition space, causing them to divert their gaze.”⁹ The immediate discomfort experienced by the viewer is an extension of the discomfort felt by viewers of *Fountain* at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 2016—an ostensibly private, unseen moment has inexplicably been made public, in the process exposing the arrogant entitlement of her subjects.

As with Cao’s two previous solo exhibitions, *I Have an Hourglass Waist* at Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing (2017) and *Femme Fatale* at Galerie Urs Meile, Lucerne (2019), she has approached *Passing Through the Human World* as a holistic installation, carefully considering how visitors will respond to each work. They are like unfolding chapters of a book, or sequential frames in a film. The aim, often, is to unsettle and provoke. In this exhibition Cao Yu has experimented with aerial holographic projection in *Where Have You Been* (2020). Audiences encounter the levitating figure of a saffron-robed monk, an anagārika who has relinquished all worldly possessions and preoccupations to devote his life to Buddhist practice. He appears to float, hovering in the air like a beatific mirage. But his benevolent, smiling face soon dissolves into bitter weeping. The title is like an accusation, but its target is ambiguous. Is it directed to the figure of a holy man who has abandoned his earthly flock to seek his own enlightenment, or to the human race who so easily choose avarice and selfish ambition?

Cao Yu has explored ambition and arrogance previously, in her video work *I Have* (2017), a litany of shameless, tongue-in-cheek boasting. Women are supposed to hide their desire to succeed within a cloak of feminine humility, not loudly brag about their beauty, wealth, and achievements. Ambition and material success, for Cao Yu, represent a double-edged sword. Those who do succeed are subjected to the jealousy

of others in a destructive spiral of negativity. A new work illustrates this issue with a coded message. A gaudy, flashing neon sign, nostalgically recalling those in old Shanghai or Hong Kong, spells out in Chinese and English, “I just don’t want you to live better than I do.” These words, says the artist, are like invisible needles.¹⁰ At the top of the sign a small mirror reflects the viewer, creating an uncomfortable moment of truth—visitors to the exhibition are invited to consider their own complicity in an uncomfortable reality: in the machinery of the market, humans are all motivated by envy. In the competitive, consumerist, get-rich-quick China of the twenty-first century the work is also a comment about what has been lost in the transformation from collectivism to a society driven by individual aspiration.

The continuing, almost autobiographical *Everything is Left Behind* series (2019–2021) brings a simmering anger and sorrow to the surface, with its explicit reference to how girls and women are valued in a society still underpinned by patriarchal social norms. Cao Yu has used her own long black hair to stitch white canvases with spiky, awkward Chinese characters that spell out quotes revealing a deep-seated misogyny. The use of the artist’s hair is a potent signifier: women’s hair, so often considered an ideal aspect of female beauty, is imbued with erotic symbolism. It also relates to an ancient Chinese embroidery tradition dating from the Tang Dynasty, in which women stitched images of the Buddha or Guanyin with their own hair.¹¹ But hair, especially cut or fallen hair, is also a sign of the abject, evoking disgust and even fear; today we find it hard to understand the nineteenth-century fashion for mourning jewellery in which locks of hair belonging to the dead were made into rings and bracelets. In Cao’s *Everything is Left Behind* works, her roughly stitched phrases resemble the suturing of a wound.

This wound remains unhealed. The very first work in the series began with a quote from the artist’s father: “Our family has no luck. We gave birth to a girl, and she’s ugly, with a flat nose.” Another reads, “If you’re not a good girl, I will abandon you.” Later works in the series reflect the pressures placed on children—most particularly children of the One Child Policy generation—to succeed, honouring and enriching the family: “Daddy’s happy. All that money spent on tuition wasn’t wasted after all,” and “What business does a girl have studying sculpture? What’s wrong with painting? You’ll regret it when your hands turn into grandpa hands.” And from her mother, an admonition familiar to women across time and space: “... there is one thing you must remember from me. Don’t lose your virginity. Girls are very precious on the first night. You have to give your virginity to your husband ... otherwise he will be very sad if you are not a virgin, and he will think that you are not pure.” Each stab of the needle that sutures Cao’s canvases is a painful memory relived.

Cao Yu often speaks of being in a ‘dialogue with art history.’ Many of her works contain unmistakable and intentional references to art historical antecedents—to the Surrealist Meret Oppenheim and to the readymades of Marcel Duchamp, for example, to the ‘poor’ materials of Arte Povera, to the ‘cut paintings’ of Lucio Fontana and to the sublime minimalism of Agnes Martin. The bitter, crudely embroidered grievances of *Everything is Left Behind* recall the similarly autobiographical, textual appliqué quilts made by Tracey Emin, another artist who attempted to break free of stylistic conventions and gendered assumptions about ‘women artists.’ Cao’s works allude to art historical referents, creating an ongoing dialogue between a young artist and her artistic ancestor figures, yet they are simultaneously completely grounded in her own experiences, and to the rigorous training in the Sculpture Department of the art powerhouse of Beijing’s Central Academy of Fine Arts that provided her with the assured technical confidence and knowledge of material possibilities to realise her vision.

A more direct reference to history is found in *Pear of Anguish Flowering* (2020). A replica of a sixteenth-century instrument of torture is attached to the head of a sceptre, which is inserted into a marble sculpture. The device looks like a metal pear when closed, but its separate leaves open at the turn of a handle, causing unimaginable suffering when inserted into a bodily orifice. Like a scold’s bridle or the sexualised punishments meted out to women suspected of being witches, the pear of anguish was intended to silence ‘difficult’ women. The sceptre itself, symbol of royal power and state control, is adorned with a grinning, diamante-encrusted skull, recalling a notorious 2007 work by British artist Damien Hirst. Hirst claimed that he sold *For the Love of God*, an antique skull cast in platinum and covered with 8,601 diamonds, for £50 million to an anonymous consortium. Cao Yu’s use of the skull represents death, of course, but also greed and overweening ambition. And in her continuing dialogue with art history, we could read *Pear of Anguish Flowering* as a warning against masculine, authoritarian hubris.

Yet all is not grim in Cao Yu’s three cosmological realms of *tian di ren beyi*. A sculptural installation, *Yeab, I am Everywhere III* (2019) consists of two pieces of rough-hewn green marble from which, impossibly, ten gold-plated fingers emerge. They resemble curling spring shoots seeking the sun. The work suggests a

fairy-tale—the undoing of a sorcerer’s enchantment, perhaps—or an unsettling dream of bizarre, inexplicable transformation. The ten golden fingers are cast from the artist’s own; growing out of the hardness of stone they represent her tenacity, courage, and resilience. The title is a mantra, an affirmation: “*Yeab, I am Everywhere.*”

1. Cao Yu, in a WeChat message to the author, 1 May 2021.

2. Cao Yu, in an email to the author, 27 April 2021.

3. Wu Hung’s theory of the significance of materiality in the work of Chinese contemporary artists underpinned his curation of “The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China” shown at the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, in 2019. The exhibition later travelled to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Seattle Art Museum, and Peabody Essex Museum. For more, see his catalogue essay: ‘Material Art from China: An Introduction’, 2019, in Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione, eds., *The Allure of Matter*, Chicago: Smart Museum of Art.

4. Ibid.

5. The author interviewed Cao Yu via WeChat and email in May, June and October 2020 for articles that were subsequently published in *Randian Online*, *Art Monthly Australasia* and the *4A Papers*. Further conversations took place in April and May of 2021 for this essay. Cao Yu responded in both English and Chinese. All quotes from the artist are excerpted from these interviews. They have been lightly edited.

6. For more on this tradition see, for example, Mary H. Fong, “Images of Women in Traditional Chinese Painting,” *Woman’s Art Journal*, Spring - Summer, 1996, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 22-27 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1358525> [accessed 1.5.21]. Fong cites the 11th century painting historian Guo Ruoxu, who wrote that “the female image should be ‘richly endowed with blossoming loveliness and feminine charm’ but specified adamantly that the female forms and faces must have the ‘look of severe correctness’ to reveal ‘an antique purity of soul’ so that their ‘stately and dignified beauty’ would inspire the onlooker to look up to them in reverence.” (p.23)

7. For more on the symbology of tigers, see Patricia Bjaaland Welch, “Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery,” Tuttle, 2008. p.145

8. Cao Yu, in an email to the author, April 2021

9. Information provided by the artist and by Urs Meile Gallery, April 2021.

10. Ibid.

11. For more see Lydia Gershon, “Hair Embroidery as Women’s Buddhist Practice,” *JSTOR Daily*, 25 February 2021, available at <https://daily.jstor.org/hair-embroidery-as-womens-buddhist-practice/> [accessed 14.5.21]