

Opening: 12th February 2010, 6 – 8 pm

Exhibition: 12th February 2010 – 17th April 2010

Opening Hours: 10 am – 6 pm, from Tuesday to Friday, Saturday by appointment



“Night Light” 2009
rib, fine gold
ø21-23 cm

Performance:

“One Rib” (08.08.2008 Kunming, Yunnan Province, China). He Yunchang had a surgeon to remove one rib from his body. He used the rib to make a necklace.

“The Wings of Live Art - He Yunchang”
by Nataline Colonnello, 2009

“The Wings of Live Art – He Yunchang” is the first soloshow in Europe of leading Chinese contemporary performance artist He Yunchang (*1967, Liang He County, Kunming). The exhibition presents “One Rib” (2008-2009), a challenging and multi-faceted project that consists of a variegated body of interlinked art pieces including performance, sculpture, photography, video and painting.

All the works comprising the “One Rib” project are the result of a recent performance, held outside of public view on 08.08.2008, in which the artist underwent a medically unnecessary operation in order to have a rib excised from his body. For the first time in his artistic practice, He Yunchang experienced his own performance from behind closed doors, under a pharmaceutically induced state of unconsciousness for most of the surgery. By deliberately rendering himself incapable of actively controlling the situation while it was carried out, He Yunchang subverted one of the key elements of his previous works, in which the artist’s psychological and physical stamina both play a crucial role in the success of the performance.

Saturated with even more intimate, existential and cathartic connotations than the artist's earlier works, the "One Rib" project is undoubtedly a powerful, crazy and at the same time highly poetic masterwork in which the extraction of the rib represents not only the end of the performance itself, but also the starting point for the other works originating from it. Unlike He Yunchang's previous performances, this one is accompanied by an object--the rib--constituting what He describes as "the most important document of the project". Imbued with a strong symbolism, the rib has been turned into a necklace that takes on pivotal conceptual implications in a subsequent series of 5 photographic works, and also appears in the video that records different stages of the whole project.

The necklace, entitled "Night Light" (2009), is a piece of jewelry made out of the artist's rib and more than 400 grams of gold. The artist's choice to combine a rough, firm and livid-hued material (the artist's own unprocessed rib) with a precious, malleable and warm-colored one (gold) questions the common values we generally tend to confer onto things. Serving as the support for the rib, the satinated golden structure of the necklace is modeled in the shape of a double-headed mythological animal, with the two heads positioned at the opposite extremities of its elongated, serpent-like body. The dragon of He Yunchang's necklace is just one of the many references to myths, legends and philosophical theories detectable in many of the artist's works.

Besides the references to Chinese culture, in the "One Rib" project He Yunchang also draws from elements of the Christian tradition, taking inspiration from the Holy Bible, in particular from chapters 2.21-2.23 of Genesis, in which Eve is created from Adam's rib. What interests He Yunchang about this myth of creation is not its present-day enactment by means of an artistic transposition, but the symbolic value of the rib that here becomes the emblem of the eternal union between man and woman.

This bond is further sealed through "One Rib", a series of photographs in which He Yunchang poses individually with five women, each of whom he once had or still has a very close relationship; among them his mother, his current wife and his ex-wife. In a sort of consecrating ritual, each woman is portrayed wearing a provisional version of the necklace, initially used to keep the rib in shape by means of an unadorned metal support, and not the final golden one.

The five photographs (159.8 x 126 cm each), although shot at different places and times, share similar frontal compositions in which subjects are sitting next to one another and at a similar distance from the camera, along with analogous backgrounds and identical oval outlines reminiscent in shape--but not in their vivid colors and contemporary clothing--of old family pictures. Not lacking in the partially veiled self-irony with which He Yunchang approaches his works to varying degrees, the photographs are characterized by the contrast between their gaudy backdrops, made from a board fully covered with withered flowers sprayed with an artificially hued finish that is different in each of the pictures, and the complexity of the expressions, stances and details through which the subjects' emotional domains and bonds become perceivable--even when those bonds are a thing of the past.

Like many earlier paintings by the artist, the realistic oil canvasses He Yunchang realized on the occasion of the "One Rib" project are based on source documentary photographs strictly related to the performance. If they can be considered as another, perhaps more accessible channel for the public to understand his performances, they are as well an important means of knowledge for the artist himself, who can observe and revive the performance from another perspective through these works.

Text: Nataline Colonnello