

TimeOut Shanghai, Liu Chuang: Works #16-21, text/Sam Gaskin, P47, Oct. 2012



Feng Mengbo: My Private Museum



Shanghai Gallery of Art until Sunday 28

New media artist Feng Mengbo, who has previously created works using the online avatar platform Second Life and the first-person shooter *Doom*, this time turns his attention to a dusty old corner of the analogue world: the beat-up and neglected Shanghai Natural History Museum.

The museum, on Yanan Dong Lu, was opened in 1956, and the exhibits look like they've barely been revisited since. Feng's pictures feature faded dioramas with peeling paint and slumped-over taxidermy animals. A

bird's wire skeleton is exposed where the skin of its leg has split, for instance, and in the 'Depot for Spare Exhibition Parts' Feng finds a pile of whale bones.

In addition to the evident wear and tear, the outdated curation gives away the museum's age. Cramped exhibits explode attempts at realism, with a killer whale, lion, fox and wolf all captured in one frame, the unnatural juxtapositions recalling the scene in *The Simpsons* when a shark leaps out of a river and pulls an ape from a vine.

It's Feng's celebration of these sad, outdated and unwittingly beautiful scenes, combined with thoughtful framing, lighting and novel printing treatments – many of the works are

3D lenticular prints – that makes the museum Feng's own. (The title is also a riff on previous works 'My Private Diary' and 'My Private Album'). Zooming out from the dioramas to show their odd surrounding contexts gives them the feeling of found art installations. An aquamarine curtain behind 'Rhincodon typus', for instance, casts the whale shark as a burlesque performer.

Feng's subject matter is so engaging that *My Private Museum* might engender an 'I could've done that' feeling in viewers, to which the rejoinder, 'Yeah, but you didn't' is largely sufficient. Using a Polaroid camera with flash, photographer Yang Hongxun did a better job showing the ludicrous expressions of taxidermy animals, which never quite make it across the uncanny valley, in his photos from natural history museums in Beijing and Inner Mongolia. But where Yang shot animal portraits Feng shoots whole scenes, paying half-homage to the artist-tradesmen who painted the backdrops and sculpted the foregrounds, the same way Cai Guoqi celebrated amateur inventors in his *Peasant da Vincis* show at Rockbund Art Museum in 2010.

Underpinning the beauty and humour of this wonderful work lies a subtle but serious social critique of China's blistering development: what does it say when an institution charged with preservation is itself in such a state of disrepair? **Sam Gaskin**



Liu Chuang: Works #16-21



Leo Xu Projects until Sunday 21

Opening the same weekend as SH Contemporary, where scores of showy works competed for retina time, Liu Chuang's *Works #16-21* are understated and deliberately difficult. During the exhibition's installation we asked the Beijing-based artist how he'd feel if people were angered and frustrated by the works, or thought they were unfinished. He smiled broadly and said, 'That'd be great.'

The show is built around *Works #16-18*, three projectors mounted on plaster and fibre-reinforced plastic plinths inspired by baroque sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini's 'Torso of Neptune', Dadaist Hans Arp's curvy 'S accroupissant' ('Squatting'), and 'Construction in a Sphere' (pictured) by Georges Vantongerloo.

The sculptures have been scalped, creating level surfaces for the projectors, which throw near Yves Klein-blue rectangles across the room. In each case, the rectangles seem to miss their targets, having been angled to illuminate multiple walls and, in one case, stray off the sides of a suspended canvas.

The familiar blue rectangle Liu employs usually tells us that a screen is on but lacks data input. As the rectangles slowly grow and shrink we sense Liu's hand in the work, but that only strengthens the conviction that he has deliberately created art whose message is that, even standing on the shoulders of art giants, it is devoid of content.

Other pieces, including scrawled through pulp fiction novels rented by migrant workers in Shenzhen and Michael Lin's *Shanghai Daily* show upstairs, soften the conceptual blow, but it's nevertheless brave work to show during the most carnally, carnivorous commercial moment on the Shanghai arts calendar. **SG**

* Introducing The SURGE art fair

The Affordable Art Fair Beijing was conceived during a period of aggressive art speculation, when Beijing-based painters were fetching astronomical sums, and even young photographers, just out of college, were selling pieces for \$10,000 US. 'Working at the 798 art district I realised I couldn't afford any of this beautiful art I was around,' says fair director Tom Pattinson. 'At the same time, I knew artists and small gallery owners with reasonably priced art available. I wanted to connect them.'

That was back in 2006, and over the past eight years the Beijing fair has doubled in size. This year, 600 pieces were up for grabs, culled from a whopping 10,000 submissions.

Many artists have also matured along with the fair. 'Last year a young artist called Yang Rei took part in our event, the first time she'd ever shown publicly,' Pattinson says. 'She sold well and was picked up by Platform China, one of the most respected galleries in Beijing. Now she sells for ten times what she did last year.'

Arriving in Shanghai, the affordable art fair (renamed SURGE to outflank imitators) aims to show 400-500 works. Anyone can submit pieces for consideration – quality and originality are the two key criteria – but Pattinson says 90 per cent of the works come from full time artists and 75 per cent



are from graduates of fine arts schools.

Most pieces are by artists acting independently, but local galleries including Art Labor, island6, M97 and Studio Rouge are also participating.

Unlike traditional art fairs, there's no charge to show works, with the fair instead taking a 25 per cent commission on sales. Prices range from a couple of hundred *kuai* to a maximum of 30,000RMB.

Sourcing work from around the region, Pattinson says he hopes to make SURGE Shanghai a local fair for local artists. He's also looking for more local buyers. 'We're very keen to reach the domestic audience, and we're doing education programs to introduce art as a lifestyle. And why is that? We've traditionally had a lot

of Western buyers, but in terms of spend, Chinese buyers spend more,' Pattinson explains.

Pattinson believes that the rise of buyers from China's burgeoning young middle class is sustaining the investment potential of Chinese art. 'My theory is that every ten paintings you buy, one of those will go on to pay for the other nine, and a lot more probably,' Pattinson says.

Of course, investment may be a false economy for collectors, including the fair director, who like their works too much to sell them. 'I've never sold anything that I've bought myself,' he says. **SG**

SURGE Shanghai 2012 is at River South Art Centre from **Saturday 20-Sunday 21**. See Listings for details.

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