

A Gift from Medusa

Text/Yang Yuying

Last year, Tian Mu bought an engine as heavy as a few hundred kilograms, so you can imagine how unsuitably massive it was when lying undisturbed, like a hill, for over a month in the hallway of our tiny studio in London where property is terribly expensive. Jokingly, I suggested that he take a car apart and make use of the disassembled parts as material for his art. Tian Mu, however, thought about it with a frown and then replied, “I’m not interested in cars, nor am I into driving one, but I just love the parts that constitute them, the parts that are normally hidden from us.”

All of a sudden, he made it clear that he’s not interested in mechanical products that serve the human society and that, as an artist, his focus is on exploring the material language of mechanical installations made independent so as to present how the “broken” organs take back the sovereignty over themselves. For starters, Tian Mu’s practice is a confrontation against simplification, the sort of simplification that sees the social functions as the only facet of operation of machines, which is attainable by means of linguistic dissemination and public acceptance. For those who don’t want life to be too complicated nor to have a deeper link with the physical world, few conventionalized expressions are worth questioning, and, in the case of “cars”, they can only imagine four-wheeled vehicles for land transport which can carry us to our destinations very fast, vehicles that are driven by engines. Simplification entails oblivion, and even weakens our ability to question the inner order of something. Tian Mu’s work, however, tries to stand opposed to simplification by taking the conventional definitions and names in the human society off the objects and sabotaging their regular activities of serving a dominant body.

Once defunctionalized, machines will be isolated from previous order. Instead of trying to find them a position in language by over-theorization, the artist has created a game, which refers not to any specific product but to the concept of “play” in Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of The Play-Element in Culture*. He defines play as an element of and an approach to every culture, and he also has it that, in the earliest language, it was such a state of play as personification that gave birth to myths and fables.¹ Tian Mu is also playing a personifying game on machines, but, rather than directly claims the existence of a soul in everything from an egocentric or anthropocentric point of view, he does it a fairer way by deconstructing the human body, converting it to an assemblage of movable parts and blending the parts into a structure with machinery. So this is not finding any existing order for machines that have stopped working but putting a stop also to the human body in a new order.

In his earlier London solo, “Killing All On Board”, Tian Mu married personification with fictional elements which also reflect reality by relating to news events. The theme, “Killing All On Board”, for one, was taken from the news headline of an air crash. For this project, the artist only presented a marble-carved engine and constructed a context for it with the rest of the environment. Boldly, he combined classical mythology with modern incidents: if the stare of Medusa could turn a complicated engine into stone, we’d at least have a truth for all the inexplicable air crashes, a comforting truth that all our tragedies in question were caused by force majeure that can override the scientific and physical world of humanity. Similar to myths, news is also very distant from our daily life, which just demonstrates the power of the press. By juxtaposing two distant types of narrative, it’s certainly much easier for us to see the most reality-based everyday elements that underlie each of them. The reality

here is not just the concept in a broad sense but also personal. This exhibition has also made a peculiar difference to the identity of Tian Mu as an artist. The play he created for machines has started to serve as an impetus to his art practice, which, as a change in his identity, didn't bring him any anxiety but mostly excitement. Starting with such air disaster as caused by a Greek myth, his art has evolved to cover more dimensions; he imagined himself to be also on board and created a series of distorted and wild images of himself. And he told me that this is the radiation-induced facial mutation during his abduction by aliens, and a video has also been made that describes the various human-machine combinations being trapped in an enclosed space which is filled with the images of Tian Mu's mutated face. This is a story in a different universe, but the artist is not denying the existence of such reality. As the fictionist, after all, he has to be the first and most loyal believer in the fantasy. "It's up to them to decide whether to stay in my work or not, not me to choose them." So this piece gets to keep its original name as the creator – *Killing All On Board*, and the eroded self-portrait of the artist, the clue left of this fiction, also symbolizes a scenario of "killing all on board" in the war between humankind and machinery. Some, perhaps, would see Tian Mu's work as his prediction and imagination of the near future, but such opinion has missed an important point about the artist in his art: he's not obsessed with technology at all, but even having second thoughts about it, just like, as mentioned in the beginning, he's neither interested in cars nor driving one. Fiction and mythology have proved his obsession with story-making, which, as a classical pursuit, doesn't rely on any future that we don't know yet. After all, flirting with the future is nothing but flattering and toadying to power. The future has the power to judge us, but does he have the capacity too? To fight simplification is to get away from the future and to look for the part of life that one has forgotten. It's like, you thrust your fingers into a sand hill to feel the reality of transitioning from simple to complicate by going past layers of sand grains, but, when your hands are out, that reality just doesn't exist. About such a process, the artist has no second thoughts, since isn't there also the possibility that the future and the present are just two ends of an end-to-end mechanical crawler belt that loops endlessly?