

Shang Liang, *Mortal at the Helm*: A Response to Hegel's "Spirit is a Bone"

Text / Nelson Cheung Kawing

Hegel pursues the idea that only when mind integrates the two most seemingly antithetical terms — restless spirit and hard bones — can spirit activate its infinite creativity. The works in Shang Liang's solo exhibition *Mortal at the Helm* make this idea essential as though they are responding to what Slavoj Žižek characterizes as the Hegelian account of infinite judgment — "Spirit is a Bone." In her works, physically powerful hunks with popping veins collide with objects that are made of disparate organic functions, appearances, or materials. But there is one loophole in Hegel's meditation: Is spirit really relentless? And are bones always hard? The exhibition *Mortal at the Helm* defies the notion that energy comes only from spirit. It also signals a refusal to the idea that bones, as part of our bodies, are a predicate subsidiary to spirit. As the word "mortal" in its title suggests, those who steer the ship and lead people into the boundless ocean are the ones who possess mortal, corporeal, and limited strengths.

Rather than an arbitrary combination of antitheses, perhaps what we see in her works can be better termed as a breakaway from inherent organic functions. Works in the "Boxing Man" series keep challenging our common recognition about the functions of individual body organs. On her canvas, human brain, as a symbol of spirit, is substituted with a fist (fig. 1). By doing so, the artist proposes a new version of the Hegelian account of infinite judgment — "Spirit is a fist." Nonetheless, the paintings do not intend to place spirit in the visual center. Rather, they put the gloved "fists" in the position that is supposed to belong to one's head. Such arrangement induces an *epoché* of the organ encased by a boxing glove, and a question is hence called to mind: is it indeed a fist in the boxing glove? Can it be another organ? Here, Shang Liang deviates from Hegel's infinite judgment in that the "boxing man" shows alternative paths leading to infinity — the substitution of organic functions in the human body as well as the possibility to make any organ the core of one's body. In short, her works not only prompt critical and dialectical thinking, but also invoke a kind of race logic internalized by athletes, who excel in international sports competitions because they are equipped with the skills to replace their body organs and to outperform ordinary people with

their exceptional physical strengths. The entire body of a soccer player during a game grants its decisive power to their feet, or even to the football rolling on the ground. In a similar vein, the body of a “boxing man” revolves around the gloved “fist”. A boxing glove can replace the brain, and feet can morph into the upper torso. Any kind of primary or centralized organic functions is dismissed in the “Boxing Man” series, which demonstrates a line of reasoning that draws away from “Spirit is a Bone.” The artist never aims to give any body organ the central role, so what is covered in the boxing gloves exactly? In a nebula of a million possible options, the question awaits its answer.

In hypothesis, if the position and function of every organ can be substituted, then can such substitution advance into a more radical field? The work series “Sofa Man” offers a perfect answer to this question when it finds a way to graft an external “object” onto any organic structure (fig. 2). This time, the artist not only overrides the definition of *spirit* in Hegelian infinite account, but she also makes bones assimilated into objects. The integration of a sofa and organic matters negates the mutually exclusive dichotomous relationship between everyday objects and human bodies; rather, they coexist with and complement one another. There is no contradiction between them. In a society where latex suits are more effective than exposed skins in arousing desire, the surface of a sofa likewise resembles the synthesis of human skin and other textural materials, evoking a pleasant sensation. Obviously, this pleasant sensation comes from the unknown object that is encased (by either boxing gloves or a latex suit) so that these “invisible objects” leave room for desire. Just as Gilles Deleuze states, the reason why Francis Bacon was able to create the “screaming Pope” was that the heavy curtain in the painting represents “the invisible”, with which horror and sensations are intensified. On the other hand, however, the screams of a *Sofa Man* do not require any concealment. For a *Sofa Man*, concealment takes place in the synthesis of human and object so that “the invisible” turns out to be the figure itself, exuding a power that confounds the interior and the exterior.

Ambiguity exists not only in the crisscrossing of human and object, but also manifests from the obscurity of sexuality. The “Bishōnen x Macho” motif in the “Good Hunter” series speaks of a combination between the feminized young hunk character and a physically robust body (fig. 3). “Xiao Xian Rou”, which literally means “little fresh meat” and stands for young male hunks in Chinese, has recently become a buzzword online. Handsome, young, and muscular

men are objectified into a target of consumption, with the marketing force fueled by capital investment. One such example is the rumored "tittytainment project" designed by Zbigniew Brzezinski to portray feminized East Asian male celebrities. Shang Liang's paintings, by contrast, show that those feminine and delicate faces, once multiplied by capital investment, can obtain tremendous strength of the muscular proliferation in the paintings. Such strength takes control of everyone's desire for consumption and blurs our gender identities at the same time. Masculinity is rendered impotent, yet only the obscured sexuality can unleash power. Again, two antitheses are synthesized together, bringing about massive power that is almost lethal because it is monopolizing our aesthetic culture. This explains why the hands in some of the "Good Hunter" paintings are substituted with guns (fig. 4), through which ideological bullets are fired and strike our fixed gender identities into shambles. It seems like the "spirit" as an ideology is also unable to withstand a single blow under the attacks from this gun, so much so that the subject in Hegel's famous statement "Spirit is a Bone" should be canceled and replaced by anything that can be grafted, such as boxing gloves, a sofa and a gun. Works in *Mortal at the Helm* do not limit themselves within Hegel's or Žižek's hackneyed infinite judgment. Or, we shall say that they rather make a parody of the infinite judgment which assumes "spirit" as its subject. This is why *Portrait of Boxing Man* grow mouths out of the boxing gloves (fig. 5), with an intent to smile at those masterminds in the history of philosophy.

We might realize that the big bulky fellas in *Mortal at the Helm* have transcended the Hegelian meaning of "Spirit is a Bone." Alternatively, works in this exhibition are more like the monk in the movie *Running on Karma* directed by Johnnie To and Wai Ka-fai, whose physique is as prominent as his name "Big" suggests. In the film, Big once expressed his own take on the cause-and-effect relationship: when the female protagonist asked him whether she must die an unnatural and unfortunate death to compensate for what she did in her last life as a Japanese soldier who killed civilians, Big gave her a straightforward answer, "No, the Japanese soldier had nothing to do with you. You must die just because he killed somebody." Such an answer obliterates all types of cause-and-effect relationship which centers on one's spirit or personality. Thus, all kinds of causality has nothing to do with the karma presumed by the existence of "you" or "me". Under the same vein, *Mortal at the Helm* reveals to us that the pairing of cause and effect has no inherent rationality, and that perhaps all the cause-and-effect relationships

are merely coincidental. A boxing glove can become a head, but what is inside the glove remains random. Coincidence permeates our daily life as well as blurs the boundaries between things and events. Shang Liang's works remind us that the key to solving these questions are not our perceptions of these issues, but how we shall engage with them through physical experience. Her proposal takes note from Buddhist understanding that every ordinary person can become a Buddha after achieving enlightenment. When asked how one can reach infinity, unlike Hegel's conceptual reasoning of infinite judgment, *Mortal at the Helm* attempts an corporeal, mundane, and sensuous approach.

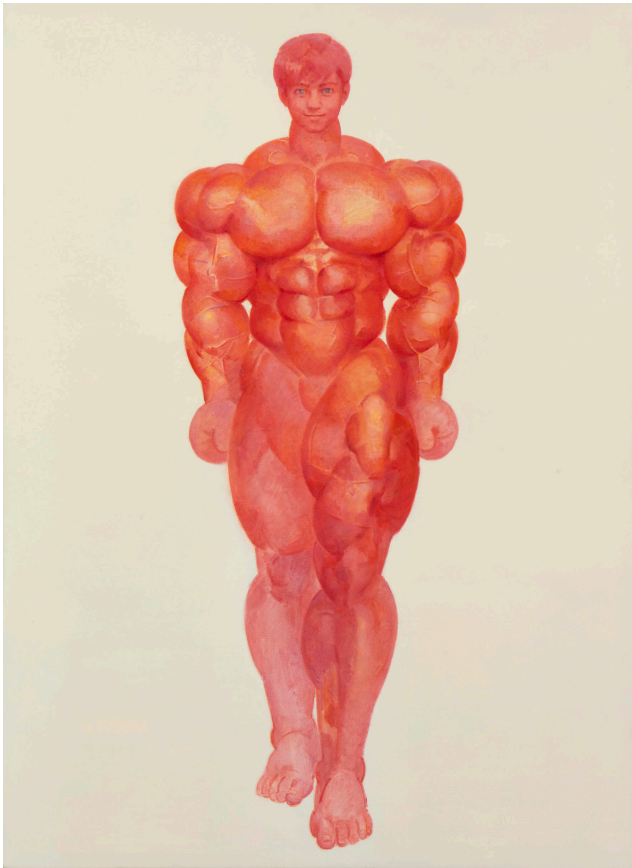
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(fig. 1) *Boxing Man No.11*
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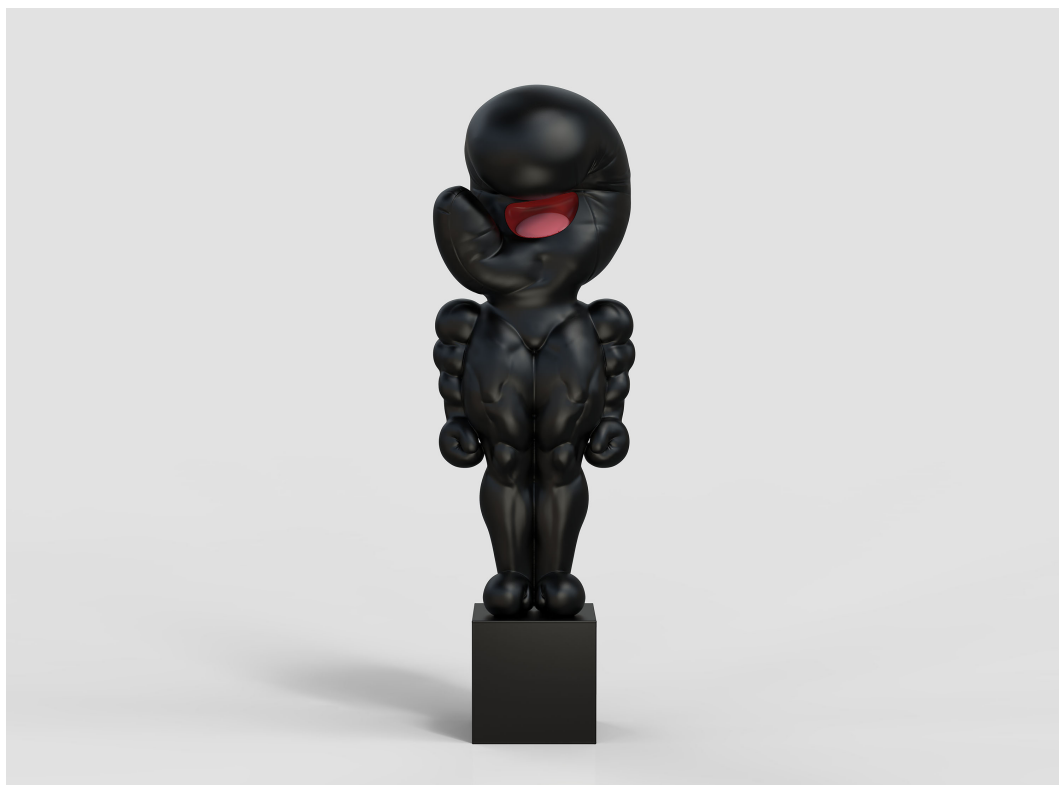
(fig. 2) *Sofa Man No.6* [2020]



(fig. 3) *Good Hunter No.12* [2020]



(fig. 4) *Good Hunter No.14* [2020]



(fig. 5) *Portrait of Boxing Man No.2* [2020]