The Singularity of Art: *Sofa Man*, *The Real Boy* and Transhumanist Portrait

Text / Wang Kaimei

In his 1931 science fiction *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley depicts a future highly developed in technology and yet deficient in emotion. In this World State that transcends national borders, human beings forgo natural reproduction and instead cultivate embryos in test tubes. From a single egg, multiple identical offspring are generated through repeated division, bottled on the assembly line of a hatchery, and destined to grow into obedient citizens of this seemingly worry-free brave new world. Here, babies are conditioned through ‘hypnopaedia’, a form of sleep-learning, and adults rely on ‘soma’ to cure unhappiness. Such is Huxley’s pessimism towards the inhuman prospect of artificially cloned humans. Indeed, it is chilling to imagine siblings who look identical and yet remain emotionally indifferent, living side by side in unquestioning servitude. Today, advances in genetics and biotechnology have proved Huxley’s imaginings more than a mere fantasy. From test-tube infants, in vitro surrogacy to brain-computer interfaces and even artificial life, the issues surrounding human procreation and reproduction can no longer be taken for granted as a natural evolution. It is no stretch to imagine that within our lifetime, we may witness the birth of a cloned human being or the prevalence of what transhumanist thinkers call “biomorphic redesign”. As a popular figure among the group puts it, “Biotechnology will liberate us from the constraints of being normal humans. We will be able to become anything we wish — elongated beings with blue skin and orange fur, sixteen-fingered mythical creatures, or ribbon-like forms soaring through the sunset, dancing gracefully in sensual bliss.”[1]

When I first saw Shang Liang's series of works "Sofa Man", transhumanists’ visions came alive to me. Two "sofa men”, with their upper bodies as human and lower parts as sofa, are painted against a bright yellow background (fig. 1). If they are a playful appropriation of the part-man and part-horse Centaur from Greek mythology, the pair of youngsters must represent a new species with bodies tied to the sofa by the excess of entertainment consumption in

[1] R. U. Sirius & Jay Cornell, *Transcendence: The Disinformation Encyclopedia of Transhumanism and the Singularity* (San Francisco: Disinformation Books, 2015).

modern society. Their well-shaped pectoral muscles seem to be swelling with masculinity while their arms are bent into the armrests. When I pointed at the vague but similarly composed faces of the two young men and asked Shang Liang if there might be any implications of homosexuality, her answer was straightforward: It is a man and his replica! That was when I began to understand that those adolescents who frequent the artist's canvas with blurry features and ambiguous genders, along with their frail bodies and disproportionately strong muscles, are actually human specimens venturing out of her imaginary world. As for the origin of such specimens that seem painstakingly self-abasing in terms of painting techniques, two distinct threads of thought have emerged after I delved into Shang Liang's art world. One has to do with her departure and re-departure from the traditions of the No.3 Studio of the Department of Oil Painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), and the other is rooted in the quest for knowledge-based expression by her cognitive self by means of painting. As Renaissance painters realized after Giotto, painting is a window to the world. In Shang Liang's case, the window opens up to her love of science fiction, reflection on the future of humankind, appreciation of hard-boiled authors, as well as fascination with the body in boxing and other sports.

Born in 1981, Shang Liang shared an educational journey with almost all Chinese art students of her generation. She spent her childhood in a typical Beijing housing compound and had memories of her grandfather, an architect, teaching her to paint. Beginning her formal training at the Affiliated High School of CAFA, she arrived at its Oil Painting Department after working on countless sketches of plaster casts. Although it may be difficult to tell her solid sketching skills in her current works, a sketch of Michelangelo's *Moses* that she completed during college was collected by her alma mater after she graduated and recently exhibited at the Centennial Teaching & Research Exhibition of the No.3 Studio of the Department of Oil Painting.

Plaster cast sketching and life drawing — the "great traditions" of Western oil painting — have undergone the transformation from classicism to postmodernism and nowadays are almost seen as a relic in Western art education. For example, even the traditionally conservative Royal Academy of Arts in the U.K. reclassified life drawing as an optional course for first-year students as early as 2002. Meanwhile, the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague — the oldest art school in Europe, founded in 1682 — offers life

drawing only once a week during the first month of foundation courses for freshmen. Yet, much like the recurring proclamation that “painting is dead” — a theory that has been repeatedly raised and challenged over more than a century of art history, realist painting, particularly figurative painting centered on the human figure, continues to hold a significant place in contemporary art (not to mention its strong presence in the art market). As the prominent British contemporary art historian Tony Godfrey once asked: might the figurative painters active on today’s global stage one day be seen as the new “Old Masters”, wielding an influence akin to that which Picasso or Philip Guston held on their contemporaries?[2] In every generation, there are always artists who carry the torch of figurative painting and pass it on to the next. Portrait and figure painting will persist, though the conditions that nurture this tradition evolves with the times.

Put simply, Shang Liang is one such young painter who has taken over the banner of figurative painting and continues to work with the human figure as her central subject. What keeps us interested — and curious to engage with her work and to understand her art — is precisely how she brings her own distinctive brushwork and style to this age-old tradition, adding her own terms and definitions to the language of figurative painting. Often standing alone at the center of the canvas, her figures, whether facing forward with bent knees or shown in profile with a raised fist like a bodybuilder entering the stage, echo the compositional style of classical portraiture. One might almost imagine her confronting a series of life models posing in her studio, or perhaps directly sketching plaster casts of classical sculptures. Undeniably, this speaks to her inheritance of the classical tradition through formal academic training. For instance, in *The Real Boy No.22* [2016] (fig. 2), with fists raised and arms in motion against a black backdrop, the male figure’s bent legs form a steady triangular stance, evoking *Discobolus*, the iconic sculpture by the ancient Greek sculptor Myron. The figure seems like a continuation of the world-famous athlete immortalized in marble, but in the moment just after the release of the discus. Yet the classical ideals of muscular beauty, youthful vigor, and bodily harmony are not what Shang Liang primarily aims to convey. On the contrary, our attention is quickly drawn to the figure’s disproportionately large back muscles and biceps that apparently exceed the limits of human anatomy. This imbalance between the

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[2] Tony Godfrey, *Painting Today* (London: Phaidon Press, 2009), p.170. Translated by Wang Kaimei into Chinese.

upper and lower body disrupts the classical sense of harmony and becomes the most striking and unsettling “punctum” of the composition. As Roland Barthes remarked on Duane Michals’s photograph of Andy Warhol, the punctum is not Warhol’s gesture of covering his face with his hands, but rather “the slightly repellent substance of those spatulate nails, at once soft and hard-edged”[3]. In Shang Liang’s painting, it is likewise the overly muscular upper body, embedded within what appears to be a classically idealized Greek form, that draws our attention and becomes the punctum.

So, who exactly is this recurring "real boy" in Shang Liang’s work? In *The Real Boy No.1* [2012] (fig. 3), he appears as a youth whose body is still in the developmental stage with his skin clean and smooth, exuding a quiet, virginal purity. And yet, his right arm is clenched in a fist, its veins bulging with tension, while his left arm resembles that of the Hulk — an oversized, hyper-muscular limb that seems almost to consume his delicate frame; it is a masculine prosthesis forcibly implanted into his body. In *The Real Boy No.19* [2016] (fig. 4), the once-innocent boy develops a cybernetic golden hand, which he holds up to the viewer in the shape of a gun. By *The Real Boy No.20* [2016] (fig. 5), he not only sports Michelin Man–like bulging muscles, but his ambiguously expressive face appears androgynous, making it difficult to tell his gender at first glance. “I wanted to create an irrational kind of superhuman,” the artist says, “a protagonist suspended in the ambiguous space between adolescence and full-grown adulthood. His body contains conflicting energy, desire and age, and he has yet to learn how to wield his own form.” These “real boys”, still unaccustomed to their new bodies, start out as an embodiment of the dialogue between humanity and divinity in the artist's initial studies, and evolve into personal expressions of outer and inner worlds of the human psyche. From the old masters like Rembrandt and Vermeer to modern giants such as Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon, artists have raised enduring banners for generations to follow. Through their legacy, the myth and reality of painting continue to be carried forward, reinvented in each new era. Willem de Kooning has been quoted as saying, “Flesh was the reason oil painting was invented.” Freud used paint to sculpt the human form and document the aging process, imbuing the figure with the same gravitas found in Egyptian or Greek sculpture. Bacon painted violence and trauma, letting his pigments collide and scream across the canvas. The Belgian artist

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[3] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p.43.

Michaël Borremans halts his figures in the picture; his paint settles like dust on memory — nostalgic, mysterious, and tinged with sorrow. Leonardo da Vinci believed that the highest aim of painting is to express the dignity of human intellect. Shang Liang too follows similar ideals and seeks a painterly language that bears her own personal imprint.

Shang Liang and I visited the “500 Years of Western Painting” at the Powerlong Museum in Shanghai. She lingered before the works she loved, carefully explaining to me every brushstroke by the Impressionist masters. As we were leaving, I asked her, “If you could take one of these home, which one would it be?” She thought for a long moment before answering, “Probably that nude by Renoir.” Her answer caught me off guard: why would this painter of hulking muscles be drawn to such a voluptuous, sugary-sweet female nude? Not long after, she sent me a photo of one of her new works: a figure with a boxing glove for a head, set against a dark crimson background, filling the entire canvas. And there it was, within the perfect curve of that boxing glove, I seemed to glimpse the sensual, full hips of Renoir’s nude. A biomorphic homage by transhumanism to the Impressionist master, the two sharing a common ecstasy on divergent journeys of art.

Originally published in *Artcoco*

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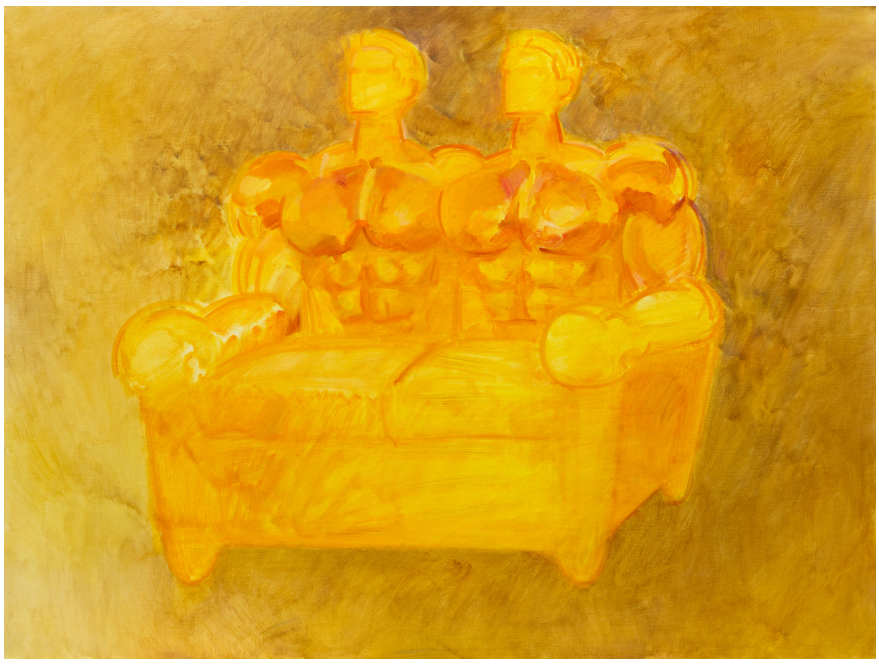
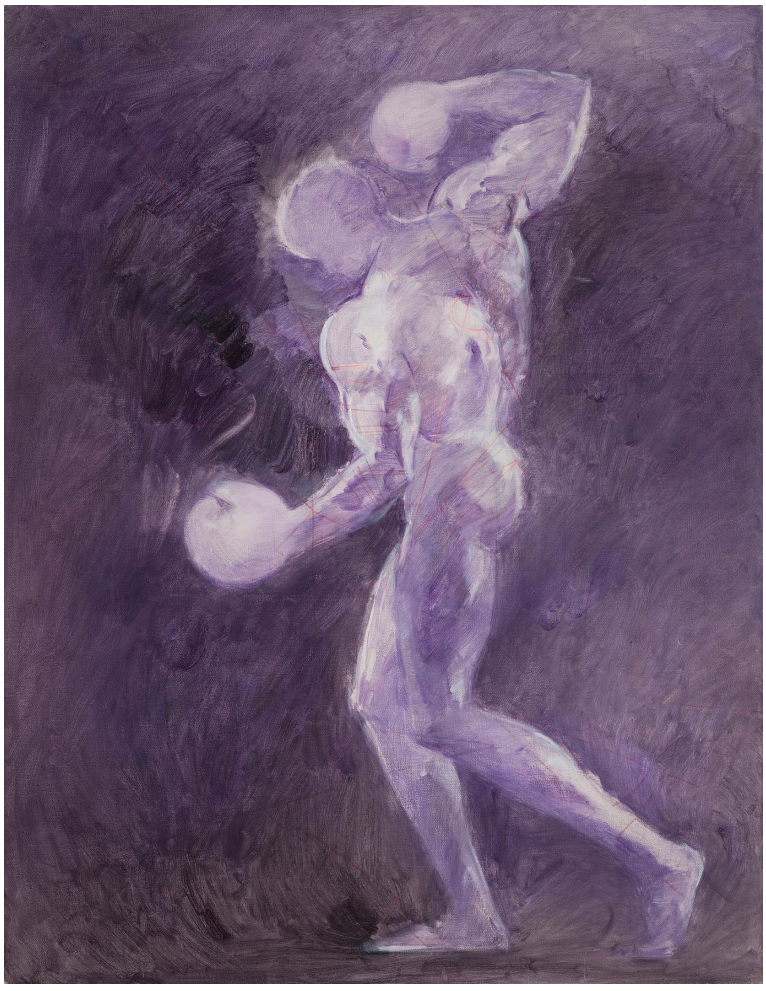
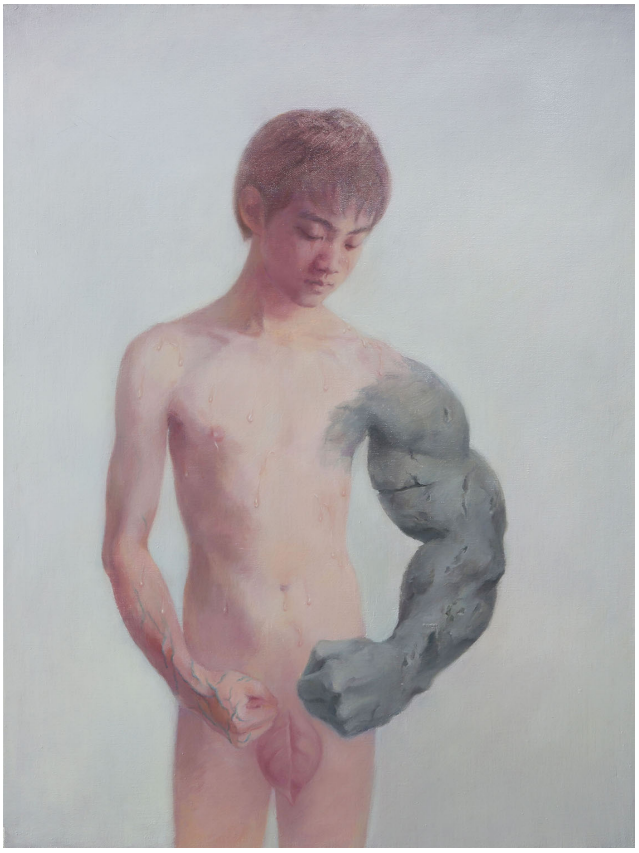


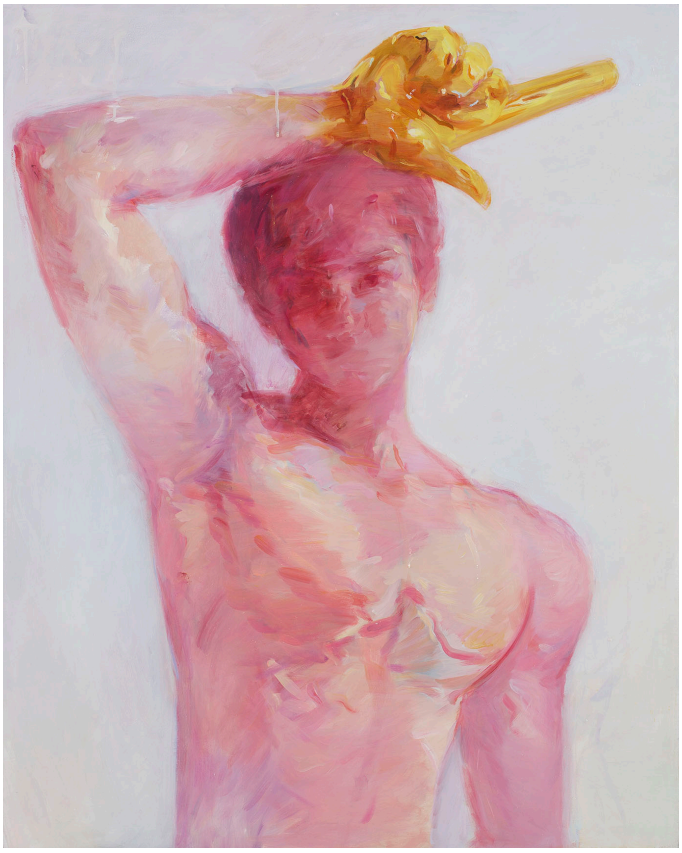
(fig. 1) *Sofa Man No.1* [2018]



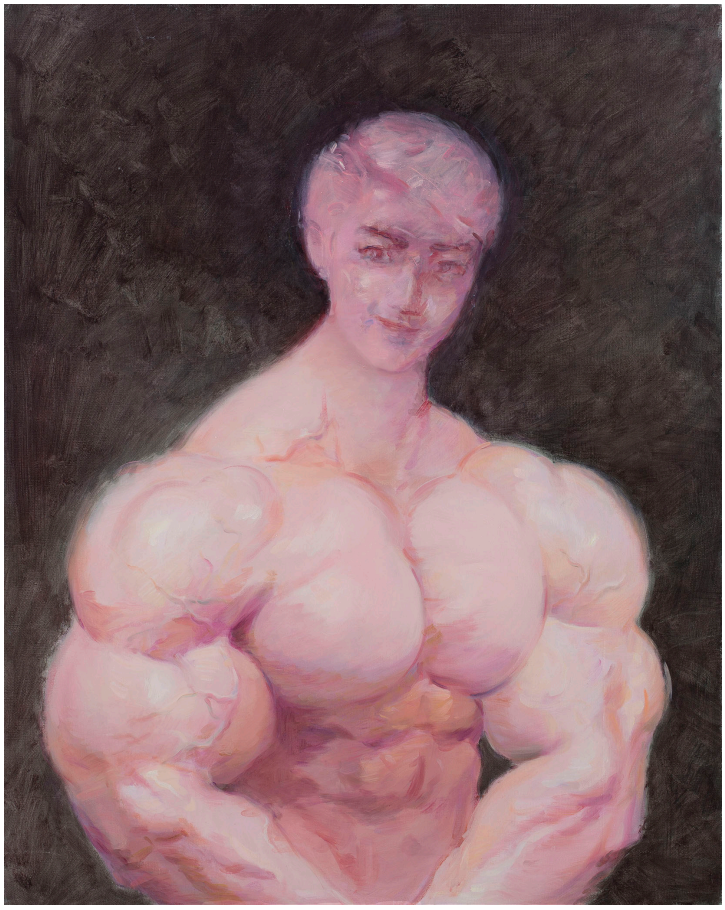
(fig. 2) *The Real Boy No.22* [2016]



(fig. 3) *The Real Boy No.1* [2012]



(fig. 4) *The Real Boy No.19* [2016]



(fig. 5) *The Real Boy No.20* [2016]