

Shang Liang: The Post-Darwinian Hosts of Life

Text by Yang Yang

“Each painting is a part of me condensed. I see them as my children making an appearance together this time.” Shang Liang joked while surveying her newly opened exhibition “New Order”. Indeed, the artist is making an appearance.

The gallery is overwhelmed with monumental vertical contours — namely, human figures, whether in full length, bust, profile, or in motion, all towering in midair. Take “Boxing Man No. 7” for example, in place of the head and hands are the strained muscles and boxing gloves thriving like fruits at the extremity of the upper body. Such a performative expression of masculinity — the largest paintings exceed 2.5 meters in height — was also the subject of Jana Euler's recent series of soaring shark paintings at Gallery Weekend Berlin. While both artists ridicule an unexamined, inflated privilege through highly sexualized representations, Shang retains a more ambivalent possibility for imagination when compared to Euler's explicit judgment within a historical context. Just as Frankenstein is composed of body parts pieced together from various sources, Shang's muscular man is the product of mingling human figures collected here and there, or of a utopian sci-fi experiment. Far from merely conveying and witnessing a certain compensatory imagination of the contemporary identity, the boxing men raise a further question by making an appearance together: in an age when technology has transcended geographical boundaries and commanded the entirety of the body, what is left to be said of the definition and ownership of life?

The transformation of the body, the coming of age from ignorance and confusion to self-awareness are the recurring themes in Shang's creations. Psychologist Erik Erikson divides people's social psychological development into eight stages, each of which corresponds to a set of dialectical and opposing propositions. The fifth stage (12-18 years old) deals with “Identity vs. Role Confusion” and explores the friction between individual

consciousness and social expectations. This is precisely what the “Real Boy” — a series dating back to 2012 and seen as the prototype of “Boxing Man” — has to resolve. A typical "Real Boy" has a tender, handsome, and gender-neutral face, either stubbornly raised or provocatively lowered, oozing a stereotypical youthful rebellion. Meanwhile, his/her body is undergoing an acute metamorphosis, with strong, almost boorish, arms growing out of a puny physique. More recently, Shang introduced the imagery of Pinocchio and his dual anxiety about human/sexual consciousness into her pictures' narrative. The "Real Boy" came to have a long and pointed nose as if it could bulge the muscles once injected onto the body like a syringe. The muscles, as a symbol of awakening self-awareness, keep swelling until reasoning completely gives way to bodily functions and the head is rendered as boxing gloves. The "Real Boy" hereby completes its evolution into the “Boxing Man” in the current exhibition.

As Lois Rostow Kuznets points out in *When Toys Come Alive*, since the early nineteenth century, the narrative of scientists and artists imbuing objects with life through creative endeavors has been plagued by an implicit anxiety over the threat to traditional "divine Creationism". Judging from the sweeping bans on abortion recently enacted in Alabama, Arkansas and other US states as well as the ensuing debates, our society has yet to reach a verdict on the core question framed in the “New Order” show — that is, who is the real master of our body and life? Perhaps this is why any parallel time-space imagined by futurists (whether with the prefix African, oriental technology, or queer) is, without exception, fundamentally “counterfactual”. This also explains why the futurists often would not scruple to overturn and reset the society’s governing rules at any cost.

Shang Liang is recently intrigued by the bold hypothesis of biophysicist Carl Woese that a pre-Darwinian era existed when creatures could evolve through "horizontal gene transfer" (HGT) and individual species as can classified were yet to take shape. Woese further proposes that with today’s cutting-edge biotechnology, human beings could easily reinitiate HGT, thus blurring interspecific boundaries and even obliterating the concept of species. Seen from this perspective, Shang’s point of interest coincides with that of artist Li

Shan, who is concerned with “releasing the potentials of life”. Through his “Reading” series — collages that simulate genetic integration of humans and insects, as well as his Pumpkin Project that cultivates genetically modified pumpkins, Li stands blatantly in defiance of "divine Creationism" to deconstruct the inherent historicity of bioethics and its taboos.

Shang has never made clear whom the “Boxing Man” is guarding against with all its battle gear. Every trace seems soaked in a crimson-purple stench, recalling the hues of mercurochrome and gentian violet solution from her memory. For the artist, they epitomize the trauma people share as they stride across boundaries of identity and culture, thereby belying the only sentimentality of the exhibition. As it underpins our reimagining of history and the future, such heartfelt, concrete sorrow is capable of illuminating human beings’ innermost potential for empathy.