

# Forging the Perfect Form: Muscular Male Bodies as AI-Powered Perpetual Motion Machines

Interview / Suchao Li

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Shang Liang's recent solo exhibition "Mortal at the Helm" at MadeIn Gallery brings together her distinctive visual explorations from the past two years. Across series such as "The Real Boy", "Good Hunter", "Sofa Man", and "Boxing Man", the recurring imagery of muscular, youthful male bodies and portraits has become emblematic of her practice. The juxtaposition of powerful, athletic physiques with tender, almost childlike faces, set against backgrounds stripped of detail, evokes a surreal, even mythological, experience of the Incarnation. In the "Boxing Man" series, where boxing gloves supplant the figures' heads, this sense of corporeality is pushed even further.

Meanwhile, the artist sculpts her painted images. The "Portrait of Boxing Man" series presents a group of metallic sculptures of varying sizes modeling on the "Boxing Man". Drawing on Western classical sculpture, these works respond to humanity's age-old pursuit of perfect physique and the ideal of endlessly spiritualizing such perfection. As the exhibition unveiled, I talked with Shang Liang on her recent themes and thinking.

**Q: How do you view, as a woman, your depiction of male bodies and portraits, especially those exuding such intense masculinity?**

A: In the earliest "The Real Boy" series, there were both male and female figures. At the time, I was exploring the transition from adolescence to adulthood, especially the ways in which one's own body becomes a site of both imagination and conflict during this formative period. Over time, I came to realize that male figures could more directly embody the physical energy and sense of confrontation I sought to express; the choice ultimately stemmed from what best served the work.

**Q: Do you think the male body better conveys this energy and sense of power? If you replaced them with female bodies, while retaining the muscular physique, would it create an even greater visual and**

## **psychological impact to the point of challenging inherent gender perceptions?**

A: I think this has to do with deeply ingrained patterns of thought within society. If female figures were grafted onto these bodies, it would introduce a different set of meanings, which is not what I'm seeking to express at this stage.

**Q: In the progression from “The Real Boy” to the “Boxing Man” series, you replaced the figures’ heads with boxing gloves, completely erasing facial features and emphasizing pure physicality and strength. What led you to make this change?**

A: Many of my paintings take the strong body as a motif. “Boxing Man” is like a collage of such bodies, stripped of what is unnecessary until only a head — now transformed into a fist — remains. It becomes a symbol of the alienation of strength, or a compact weapon for combat. I have been asked: “Can he think?” “Without a nose, can he breathe?” I’d say that remains uncertain — much like in *Frankenstein*, where the creator does not fully comprehend or control the life he has created. An autonomous being follows its own logic and accepts all manner of projections from the outside world. My works are relatively open-ended: the backgrounds are either pure white or infused with atmospheric color, but never tied to any concrete setting. I wish to open to the viewer an imagery distilled to a singular figure, unbound by any particular time, space, or relational context.

**Q: The “Sofa Man” series is fascinating as a hybrid of human and sofa, a grafting of organic and inorganic forms. How did you first come up with this idea?**

A: The “Sofa Man” series originated in 2018 when I was creating a sculpture for a project show. My initial idea was to stage a domestic scene where every object could engage in dialogue. I imagined that if two individuals sat on a sofa for a prolonged period, they would gradually seem to merge with it, becoming imprisoned within the role of the sofa itself. Even now, I have yet to settle on whether the figure should be regarded as human or furniture. The series began as a sculptural work and later expanded into paintings,

encompassing variations such as the two-seater sofa, the corner sofa, and the sofa bed.

Over time, I have continued to inscribe new layers of meaning into my works, increasingly recognizing the figure's openness to shifting interpretations. The sofa, for instance, is an object subjected to continual use, while the individuals seated upon it possess a fluidity that allows the constant reenactment of different social relations. The identity of the "Sofa Man" is endlessly replaceable and displaceable.

**Q: Many of your works engage with contemporary popular culture, for example through the imagery and symbolism of superheroes from the Marvel Universe. The exceptionally muscular bodies appear as tropes of the ordinary individual transformed into a superhero, carrying connotations of justice and redemption.**

A: Superheroes allow us to project ourselves into a two-dimensional world and engage with crises portrayed in those narratives. We fantasize about being capable of saving the world or bending space-time, and such fantasies are often so fully realized in the virtual realm that they require no actual fulfillment in reality. I also draw from sculptural paradigms of ancient Egypt and Greece, in which kings, deities, and athletes were idealized rather than rendered realistically. Such idealized human forms embodying the finest attributes forms the very foundation of Western aesthetics.

On the one hand, I attempt to sculpt figures with seemingly eternal vitality: they are perpetually youthful and endowed with robust physiques, resembling an AI-powered perpetual motion machines. Yet, on the other hand, underlying this idealization is a sense of nihilism that arises when humanity is faced with ultimate questions. Such an existential absurdity is latently embedded in my works.

**Q: When selecting source materials, do you primarily reference figures from classical art, or are you more influenced by imagery from popular culture?**

A: Both sources inform my work. For instance, *Good Hunter No.14* [2020] (fig. 1) is based on a pose from Marvel's Winter Soldier. The gestures of my figures are often inspired by ancient Greek Olympians, postures in iconic action films, or various compelling images I encounter in books and online platforms. They are not confined to human figures, nor even organic forms. Some references are steeped in classical gravitas; others are marked by extreme narcissism or sensuality. After gathering these materials, I assemble them into what I perceive as a perfected figure.

**Q: Does your frequent use of metal surfaces stem from metal's symbolic associations with masculinity, hardness, and strength?**

A: I prefer surfaces finished with matte metallic automotive paint or other metal-based media, which give the impression of a newly manufactured life form out of a modern industrial production line. In terms of materiality, *Portrait of Boxing Man No.6* [2021] (fig. 2) resembles the unpainted prototype model of a collectible figurine prior to mass production, or perhaps the raw texture of a plaster sculpture. Meanwhile, the black and golden sculptures remind one of chess pieces or trophies (fig. 3). I am drawn to rounded, compact forms that stand somewhere between classical sculpture and contemporary anime figurines, effectively synthesizing the visual languages of both traditions.

**Q: The biological fragility of the human body might be ultimately resolved in a post-human era. It seems that your work engages with this theme — could you elaborate?**

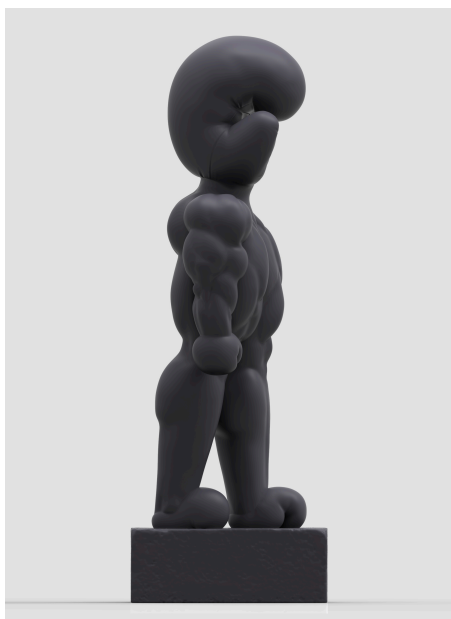
A: Indeed, this is a subject that occupies my thoughts. Following the Darwinian theory, one might ask: why have species ceased to evolve significantly over such a long span of time? Perhaps the moment for a new stage of evolution is approaching. Contemporary evolution has mostly occurred within virtual spaces. Even developments such as prosthetics, whether physical or digital, have not yet substantially transformed the biological substrate of the human body itself. That goes for gender differences as well: the systemic disadvantage associated with women arises mostly from disparities in physical strength. True equilibrium — and perhaps even transcendence — could only be achieved when advancements in biotechnology eliminate these physiological gaps as a limiting factor. Humanity has an enduring fascination with the imagery of the science-

fictional superhuman. It is due to a deep-seated fear of the unknown that we construct potent images, which are designed to confront or counteract the anxieties surrounding what lies beyond the limits of human potential.

*Suchao Li currently lives and works in Shanghai, where she is engaged in art writing, research and curation. She is also a researcher at the Macalline Center of Art and a member of the Longlati Foundation Writers Collection Committee.*



(fig. 1) *Good Hunter No. 14* [2020]



(fig. 2) *Portrait of Boxing Man No. 6* [2021]



(fig. 3) *Portrait of Boxing Man No. 5* [2021]