

YANG XINGUANG: GLASS SHOWS BROKEN HEART

As a newcomer to contemporary art project, the museum was worried how to communicate and collaborate with contemporary artists to present the important “Annealing” projects to the public and to the industry. When I heard that the ancestral home of the other artist for the 2016 “Annealing” project, Yang Xinguang, is in Ningxiang of Hunan province, I was excited. Knowing that he and I are from the same region, I naturally felt good about him and our communication. As Hunan people are generally considered aggressive or somewhat domineering, which was expected of Yang Xinguang before the meeting. When I first met him in person in June 2016 at the museum, he struck me only as a “calm” person, who gave the most sincere handshake. In nearly half a year of cooperation, what I senses more was the delicacy and subtlety in his personality and works.

“Glass is new to me.”

When Yang Xinguang participated in the “Annealing” project, he brought a relatively complete exhibition plan and ideas, “The process of annealing is more complex than expected, and it may not turn out as we want it like clay sculpture.” In his previous works, Yang Xinguang mainly applied natural materials such as wood, clay and stones for his sculptures. These natural media can be controlled and shaped easily by the artist. But this time he must use glass, an artificial material, to carry out new attempts and challenges. When the glass enters the furnace, its fate cannot be controlled by man to a certain extent. During the annealing process, due to changes in temperature and internal pressure, unexpected results may arise. “The starting point of my work is to fully leverage the breakability of the glass and make some human intestine out of it.” Mature furnace casting techniques may perfectly realize the artist’s idea, “but due to the actual length of the production, the glass may stand a chance of fractures, which is perfect to display the meaning of “断肠” (literally: broken intestine) or “heartbroken” in traditional Chinese poems.” Such properties, which are seemingly restricted but at the same time “beautiful, fragile and sharp”, are natural in the hands of Yang Xinguang to express his



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GLASS INTESTINE (PART) / 2016

by Yang Xinguang



emotions. The randomness of “objects” and the occasional combination of the “heart” have formed an interesting relationship.

The works are a reflection of Liao’s aspirations and pursuit.

In Liao Fei’s work of the “Plain”, he adopted a lot of cold processing methods, such as cutting, hole-drilling and grinding, which echoed the rational calculations and calm thinking of Liao Fei. In contrast, the “glass intestine” was created with more hot processing techniques such as blowing and casting, which was consistent with Yang Xinguang’s idea of heated passion. Yang Xinguang once jokingly called the “glass intestine” an answer sheet as a liberal arts student, which constituted an interesting contrast to Liao Fei, whose “Plain” could be considered a reply from a science student.

It was in August, and the temperature reached the highest in Shanghai with the maximum daily temperature of nearly 35°C. As SHMOG was undergoing a transformation, the artist’s studio was not that pleasant: there was no air-conditioning facilities, or even the basic lighting. In the sweltering space, a large fan that was designed for outdoor barbecues and an emergency light became the only electrical appliances. At that time, Yang Xinguang was supposed to create models of the glass rocks within a week, which was surprisingly completed in only three days when he dealt with more than 80 pieces of rocks and nearly 1 ton of sculpture clay.

During his stay in Shanghai, Yang stayed in apartment assigned by the museum, and whenever I arrived at the museum for work, I could always see him busy in his studio: he found a few rocks that could be made into models from the lawn of the park and constantly slapped the clay onto it, giving no notice about the rolling sweat. At about 10 o'clock, the temperature began to rise to an unbearable state, so he simply took the wet shirt off and kept working. The power of such a scene could only be felt by those who actually saw it. The noisy sound of cicadas echoed the powerful “slaps” of the clay; enjoying the roar and blow of the big fans, I thought that was the attitude for artistic creation.

Some time past 11 o'clock, Yang Xinguang got up and picked up his clothes, “It’s too hot! I’ll go back to my apartment for a shower and a meal, and pick up in the afternoon.” There were water droplets on the ground, which one couldn’t tell was his sweat or just water he left when drinking from a barrel. A few months later, his studio became the exhibition hall for Liao Fei’s “Plain”. The heated working scene of the “Glass Intestine” and the calm atmosphere of “Plain” constituted an interesting and meaningful dialogue through time.

In addition to the glass rock models, Yang Xinguang completed the clay sculpture of the glass intestine, the welding of the fitness equipment, and even the grass and trees on the bottom of his work. He was able to do things quietly, highly attentive for a whole day when he didn’t disturb or need help. Perhaps all the power in his working was injected into the exhibit and all his emotions were condensed into the glass, so that the final outcome of the glass intestines carried such strong spiritual implications. Looking back on the exhibitions and works of Yang Xinguang, we can always sense the influence of Chinese classical culture, which was put out of the stereotypes and was interpreted otherwise. Similarly, the “Glass Intestine” continued this habit as a standard artwork from a liberal arts student: on the first floor of the exhibition hall, there was a piece of work called “Leaning Post”, which borrowed the concept from the famous poem Shuilong Yin—Arriving at Shangxin Pavilion of Jiankang—Looking at the Wu knife, I hit all leaning posts and no one understood me. The poem was written by Xin Qiji in the Southern Song Dynasty, who often aspired to recover the old capital, but was suspected and even excluded under the conservative political environment, so he felt lost and unfulfilled as a patriot. Hitting on leaning posts does not only mean the physical pain of doing



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so, but reflects the resentment and bitterness for surrounding people who would not understand what he pursued. At this moment, the human and the body seem to be the imposer of the action, and the giver of the strength, but they are actually fragile and weak, just like glass, which could be extremely hot after being melted and could easily burn us; when put on leaning posts, it can only leave burning marks and a small piece of debris after cooling.

Similarly, the “Glass Intestine” on the second floor and the “Human Large Intestine” on the first floor were a reflection of the concept of “断肠”, or heartbroken, to express the spiritual or mental pain that extends to the body; when the pain reaches some point on the body, the original pain on the mind may not be as important. People often have a lot in common with glass: they are seemingly bright and gentle, but are extremely fragile that a little external force may result in destruction. When this excruciating pain becomes visualized, can we still feel such spiritual crisis?

In all Yang Xinguang’s works we can see his knowledge and control of the material; with a number of modeling concepts, he has managed to control the expression of things and people just right. Whether it is wood, steel, oil paint, stone and even gravel, Yang is able to put them in the best state in his works, and in the meantime dig out the most essential meaning of the material. Different materials have different properties, including color, hardness, density, melting point, etc., and they have different impact and interactions among each other. Such contradictions may depict the artist’s inner emotions, but not to the fullest. The cold and sharp glass in the “Glass Intestine” was a perfect component for that part, which, combined with wood, metal, plastic and other materials, expresses his deepest and strongest tearing pain.

In the long history of glass, we have intentionally or unintentionally labeled it with something that is so not consistent with contemporary art. When we try to drag glass closer to contemporary art, we, from a certain point of view, actually believe that these are two different things subconsciously. Because there are differences and divergences, we need cross-border cooperation, or integration. As put in Buddhist classics, “Since all is void, where can the dust alight”, which means everything are like a dream, so people should be too obsessed about something. In this sense, have we all been preoccupied or obsessed by the difference between “glass” and “contemporary art”? As Yang Xinguang said, “industrial and craftsmanship characteristics do not hinder the expression of the concept.” Glass is only a material that is neutral, and it can be the medium for artists to express feelings and emotions like the sludge, canvas and metals. “I may use glass in my future works, because glass has a unique character to fulfill certain creation needs.” Fortunately, in the latest exhibition of Yang Xinguang, “The Unknown Depth of the Woods”, we have once again seen the “glass intestine”.

Things are just what they naturally become.

Yang Xinguang has found a way to balance the “things” and the “heart”.

TEXT: CATHYE YANG, CESARE YE