

sculpture

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Momentary Place I, 2015–17. Repurposed reinforced concrete, and raw silk and silk thread that have been aged in the outdoors, 620 x 450 x 280 cm.
Photo: Courtesy the artist

Concrete Things and Momentary Places: A Conversation with Hu Xiaoyuan

July 18, 2023 by Jonathan Goodman

Beijing-based sculptor Hu Xiaoyuan takes a thoughtful, philosophical approach to contemporary art. Both an installation artist and a creator of individual objects, she is as concerned with the idea of form as its physical existence, investigating the three-dimensional as site as well as object. Her poetic, abstract works, particularly the installations, explore the ephemeral, the belief that art speaks to our brief passage through time. If this notion is inherently melancholic, it is also true, expressing inevitable change and mortality. Hu seeks a treatment of form, and its relations from one object to the next, governed by an awareness of how life varies, even from moment to moment. She looks ahead to a time and place activated by relations between things, between spaces shaped by form, and between work and viewer, fashioning connections both traditional and new.



Grass Thorn II, 2017. Cedar, pinewood, jujube wood, ink, raw silk, used grate, silk thread, and metallic nails, 73 x 70 x 166 cm. Photo: Courtesy the artist

Jonathan Goodman: You studied design at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing and graduated in 2002. Why did you major in design, and how has it affected your sculptural process?

Hu Xiaoyuan: I started to study painting in a very academic and systematic way when I was 12. My tutor at the time, from the sculpture department at Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, urged me to complete each drawing, sketch, and color assignment in an extremely

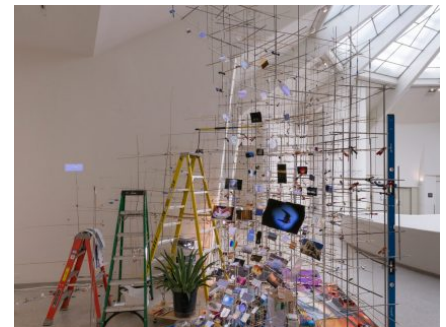


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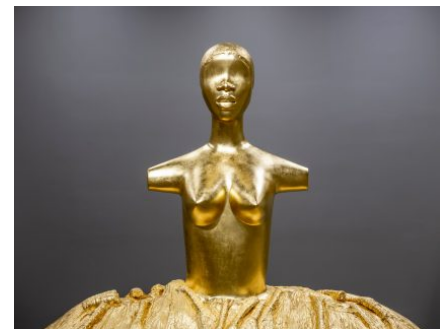
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Kiki Smith
Eclipse V, 2014
Bronze
14-5/8" x 11-7/8" x 3-7/8"
Prints by Kiki Smith also available

EDITOR'S CHOICE



Sarah Sze: *Timelapse*



Simone Leigh



Henry Taylor: *Nothing Change, Nothing Strange*

professional way. This was in 1989, when there were almost no modern or contemporary art museums in China, and no foreign catalogues for art students to buy. When I was 12, I didn't understand what my studying meant. Adults advised me to apply to CAFA or another prestigious art college.

In 1994, I enrolled in the high school affiliated with CAFA. With good scores, I could go directly to CAFA after graduation. This also meant that I could pursue art after college. I wanted to express my ideas freely, so, far more than painting, I was attracted to other media, techniques, and languages. In my last year of high school, professors from CAFA gave an introduction to the various departments, and I became interested in the design major; it had been in place for just three years, and the department was considered open-minded.

During my four years there, I was exposed to exercises related to self-awareness and expression, to divergent thinking, to visual communication logic. These multi-channel exercises were not limited by medium. I learned a lot about contemporary art. Looking back, my studies gave me the courage to practice my initiative and taught me how to use reason to control sensibility. They also strengthened my thinking and made me realize that freedom has boundaries. The influence of these years is reflected in my individual works, including video, sculpture, installation, and painting.



No Fruit at the Root, 2012. Pine wood, Chinese ink, silk, white paint, and iron nail, dimensions variable. Photo: Courtesy the artist

JG: What is it like for artists in Beijing, China's center for contemporary art?

HX: Beijing, like London, Tokyo, and New York, encourages a fighting spirit. Depression and tension, as well as excitement, can result. Art life can become uncomfortable here, but it is like other cities, presenting artists with high speed, convenience, and abundance. Its historical connotations and rhythms make it impossible to stop thinking.

JG: Your work is abstract, yet when you talk about it, you often describe it in very personal terms—for example, the work making use of items belonging to your mother and grandmother. How much do you want viewers to know about your life? Is it hard to communicate personal events and feelings in such abstract work?

HX: The integration of geography, life experiences, and humanities forms the basis for all of my works, and it also provides support for my seemingly individualized life. But actually, my "individual" impulses are the background of my "group" because they have always been two sides of an organic whole. To put it another way: artists often believe that they have created an island of thinking, but the existence of the island does not need to be repeatedly and compulsively emphasized. In contrast, the existence of the ocean can be



Athena LaTocha, *The Remains of Winter*



Mary Ann Unger: *To Shape a Moon from Bone*

ISSUES

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revealed by the diverse descriptions of self-positioning, attitude, and appearance. Since an island originates from the encircling state of the ocean, which wraps around it, the island can be revealed by infinite paths.

I have always believed that even abstraction conducts an infinite and detached exploration from a landed position of thinking in reality. Being figurative or abstract can never be distinguished by the number of details or the specificity of description, but depends on the depth of thinking and the dimension of argumentative logic achieved by the artist. And this “artist,” this so-called “me,” which originally existed in reality, does not really exist at all.



Grass Thorn III, 2017. Rosewood, ink, raw silk, used grate, silk thread, metallic nails, and marble, 45 x 32 x 173 cm. Photo: Courtesy the artist

JG: You use a wide variety of materials—cement, wood, nails, silk, ink, even soap and desiccated eggs. Some are industrial and others personal. How does this broad array help you to create, and why is it necessary?

HX: The world is stacked, shaped, and synthesized by continuous constructive concepts. The confinement of everything into a standardized concept works to maintain the stable operation of the world. It makes everything bear a defined or conceptualized destiny. For me, it is interesting to perceive those things beyond standardized concepts. I divide this kind of enjoyment into two steps. The first is to cut the skin of the outer layer of pre-established concepts. I then search for variations or explore differences from the characteristics of confined materials. Materials show various specific characteristics of time, space, and process, revealing appearances, taste, and position. What has been industrialized and personalized forms a small part of the special features of materials. They cannot be divided or limited.

JG: Your work consists of both individual objects and room-size installations, the latter usually composed of multiple works. Do you see installation as an extension of sculpture? Is it important that the separate works in the installations function as individual pieces as well as parts of a whole?**HX:** Installation and sculpture are two different working methodologies. My sculptures can be exhibited alone, although when they are placed with other works in an exhibition space, they should be closely related to everything around them. No matter where a piece is placed, its independent existence can clearly, distinctively, and completely convey my thoughts. As complex structures, they may adjust to a new order within the spatial domain of the exhibition. But I will not change them to reflect established constraints. Otherwise, I will feel that my thinking and expression cannot be thorough and clear.



Spheres of Doubt – Farewell, Forever III, 2021. Ink, silk, thread, cultured marble block, iron pipe, sea worn concrete, wood piece, marble, copper bar, sea-worn brick, granite brick, crumpled paper, dried passion fruit, discarded space aluminum, discarded rebar, and cement, 246 x 73 x 50 cm. Photo: Courtesy the artist

JG: Is there anything that can be defined as specifically Chinese about your work, or do you feel that it participates in what has become an international point of view?

HX: I was born in northern China, and I live in Beijing, an ancient capital and the fastest-changing city in the country. Throughout history, the world gathers, expands, mutates, and disintegrates, and then it does so again. These repeated cycles have created pain and sadness, as well as reunion and rebirth. The torrent of progress always regards things as sacred and useless at once. People have begun to understand that correct solutions have to be achieved, with less grief to reach rebirth and fusion.

All of the humanities—art, literature, history, and philosophy—shoulder a sense of mission. Synesthesia and shared human attributes have built an effective bridge for common purpose. If my work is understood by people all over the world, it is probably because I have always believed that the world is where geography, species, and humanities are linked. So-called internationalization does not eliminate differences and individuality; it attempts to show shared goals.



A Day in Heaven, 2021. Mixed media on wood brick, mixed media on aluminum, ink, raw silk, thread, dried fruit, and rebar, 160 x 20.5 x 13 cm. Photo: Courtesy the artist

JG: What is your work environment like in Beijing?

HX: Since 2002, I have been renting a two-room apartment in an old building not far from the CAFA campus. In the second half of 2005, my income increased, so I rented a studio of about 220 square meters in the suburbs. Unfortunately, less than six months later, the area where my studio was situated was destroyed. I then rented a room in a studio area about 10 minutes away by car. It was very quiet and stable, and I have been using it for the last 16 years.

JG: When you write about your work, you often mix the philosophical and the personal. Is it important for viewers to know your motivation and thinking? Or must the work stand by itself?

HX: Art is the same as literature or philosophy. It is never one-way. I love creating, and I am obsessed with expressing my thoughts and feelings. I want to ask questions through creating; I want to discuss through creating. In short, art is my path to freedom. My creative intentions, ideological descriptions, and background indexes are based on analysis; they are musings about art written for myself.

When my writing is released to the public along with my works, I hope that my sensibility will be generally understood. But I also understand that the most attractive thing about art is that differences between people will help everyone discover and choose the “materials,” physical and conceptual, that are effective for them. The material may be knowledge, the works in the exhibition, a hamburger, or a pill. Creation has given me freedom of expression; the right to receive belongs to others. Today, with the ubiquity of

technology, the world has become a carnival. In peaceful times, in places where basic needs are met, everyone should be able to choose the circumstances they need in an easy and subjective way. This is fair and beautiful.



Spheres of Doubt – Farewell, Forever IV, 2021. Ink, raw silk, thread, black pottery pot, brass pot, copper stick, tinplate offering tray, Venus's flower basket, fossilized tooth, flint arrowheads, stone spearhead, discarded aluminum alloy for aerospace, discarded rebar, concrete, and discarded steel plate, 110 x 280 x 325 cm. Photo: Courtesy the artist

JG: Do you consider yourself a feminist artist? Can abstract sculpture take on feminist meaning?

HX: I'm not sure that I am. The problems are like the roots of giant trees exposed on the surface, which are intricate and differ in form below. There is no meaning that a work cannot bear. The premise is what the artist wants the work to represent—it is why the artist wants to rearrange a part of her life to create. Both thought and artistic creation should be free and should have a sense of responsibility, but we should never be limited to a certain kind of thought, or a particular social position.

JG: Your work has been shown in many places around the world. Are there any international artists whose work means a lot to you?

HX: Louise Bourgeois's work is very powerful; it embodies a simple metaphor of life—the mother, an ancient fable. I envy her tenacity and wild energy. Brancusi's sculptures contain his detached comprehension of existence, meaning, and beauty. He exercises almost perfectly balanced control between rationality and sensibility, between restraint and arbitrary will. Finally, I am very interested in the works and concepts of the Japanese Mono-ha movement.



Ant Bone No. 3, 2015. Pine, ink, silk, paint, steel, iron nail, and silk thread, 163.5 x 20.5 x 146 cm.
Photo: Courtesy the artist

JG: Monuments and memorials have played a large role in art history, in various cultures. How do you see the purpose of sculpture now? Have we become too narrow in our intentions and references in contemporary art?

HX: There is no constant eternity, so sculpture will not have a constant meaning or purpose. Among the nonstop changes, the function of anything is meant to adjust the boundary between self and the world, with repeated frictions and struggles. The purpose of sculpture has become so complex that it has long been unrealistic to advocate a single value or function. This may be related to capital intervention, the influence of the market, globalization, the popularization of technology. The system in which sculpture can be discussed today is far more than a system of contemporary art. Those sculptures with a clear social leaning and a strong sense of service have a more direct purpose. In the field of contemporary art, the purpose of sculpture is difficult to define.

JG: Can you talk about your approach to abstraction?

HX: From my perspective, abstraction is derived from the knowledge of the most concrete things or from perception and consciousness. It is inevitably based on the individual intelligence, judgment, and expression of the artist. Abstraction is actually a kind of macro expression determined by the concrete; restraint is established for the sensitive. This sounds too philosophical, but it is not difficult to understand. The logic of linguistic creation in ancient Chinese phrases, such as “Spring flowers result in autumn fruits” and “Blue comes from the indigo plant,” is the same. These old sayings apply to any era, any place, any thing.