2021

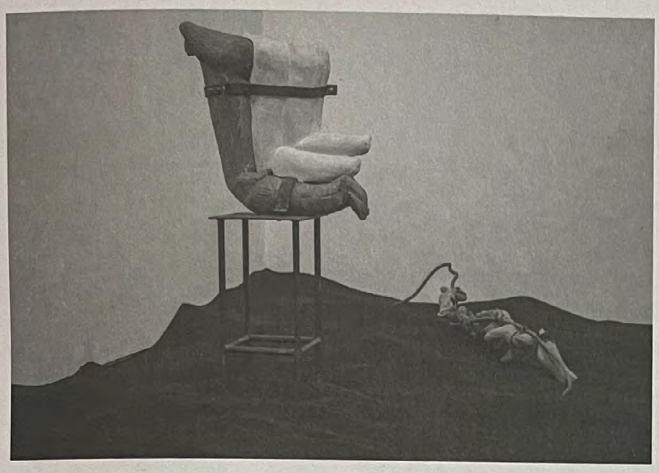
New Museum Triennial

Soft Water Hard Stone

PHAIDON

NEW MUSEUM

YU JI & HAN MENGYUN



Exhibition view: "Entropy," Faurschou Foundation, Beijing, 2018

HAN MENGYUN When seeing your work, whether in the form of sculpture or installation, I immediately think of archaeological excavation sites such as Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang [China], where broken bodies and building remains lie scattered around. However appalling, the impression of such incompleteness and fragmentation exudes a striking sense of beauty. I find the same beauty in your work, yet the fragmentation is the result of your conscious decision as an artist rather than the atrocity of time or war. How did you come to conceive these broken figurines in your work, such as the series *Flesh in Stone* and *Ta Jama* (2012–ongoing)? What are your influences?

YU JI The direct response to the visual experience at the historical sites of ruins is a very important premise for my work. My earliest inspiration came from my field research into historical sites in China, where you could only see a wreck, some traces of carving, sometimes not even a single statue. From there, I discovered the possibilities of connecting the past, the present, and myself.

My very first exploration of Europe was in 2009. I was enlightened by the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, especially the way they display and reveal the relationships between sculptures, architecture, and visitors in terms of proportions and spatial relationships. How fragments were displayed also deeply touched me. Based on two small parts of a giant stone relief, the original image can be deduced. Without putting these parts in their original context, one can't recognize what they are, due to a high level of erosion that has abstracted their meaning and function completely. It might be a part of a knee, or an ankle, or the thigh of a battle horse. This idea of displaying and the fragment's abstraction really piqued my curiosity.

HM These museum displays on the one hand reenact the historical narratives of the object and the spatial condition to which it belongs, but at the same time treat these fragments as pure objects of art in themselves, which opens up possibilities for interpretation and appreciation.

YJ Exactly. When I was looking at these indefinable fragments, I started to think of them as the original instead of parts of something else. In 2012, I started to make these figurative sculptures for the still ongoing series *Flesh in Stone*, in which bodies were dismembered, the missing limbs or heads also brought about the dissection of memories that the bodies contain.

During these years, I became interested in theater, particularly Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" and "body without organs." To Artaud, the organ is a kind of system, a fleshed entity independent from the corporeal body. His radical expression of the shattered body manifests the demise of humanity that plagued the world from the end of the nineteenth century till the early twentieth century. This directly reflects what I learned in the Pergamon Museum. The confluence of these two influences is integral to the making of my work.

HM The breakdown of form implies the destruction of the existing social order. The active remake of the body is a political act to claim one's image and expression, a chance to liberate and resurrect life that has long been tamed in reason and cultural structures.

YJ Yes, and this is how I question the idea of "completeness" of the body through my sculptures and performances.

HM You turned to ancient oriental sculpture in your postgraduate program. What made you choose this reference?

YJ It was unacceptable to me that the study of oriental sculptures such as those from the Buddhist tradition was completely absent during my five years of training in the Western lineage. But my postgraduate supervisor was a devout Buddhist. Therefore his practice in art and Buddhism revealed to me the huge chasm between what I'd learned previously and what he specializes in. Under his tutelage, I had the chance to visit the monk artist Li Shutong's former residence, peruse texts about him, gradually moving towards the oriental vein. Apart from the grottoes I've visited in China, I've also ventured into places abroad, such as Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the Elephant Island, and Ajanta Caves in India, to examine their sculptures on site.

During a one-month residency in Athens in 2017, I completely immersed myself in all the museums and historical sites there. I was utterly blown away by the sculptures made during 650–480 BC. Athens brought me back to an epoch of beginnings, which have made everything different for me.

HM I can definitely see the idealized body of Vishnu statues from Angkor Wat in your figurines, especially the sedentary one in the exhibition "Forager." But one can't identify your figurines as purely Eastern or Western since they're the product of the two, or maybe more. Could you talk about the disparities or common grounds between Eastern and Western sculptures after experiencing education in both directions and combining them in your practice?

YJ What I saw in Athens presented some connections to me. The ancient sculptures and the sites of ruins there naturally brought me to thoughts of the ancient oriental ones.

HM A connection between Greek and Buddhist sculptures does exist. The earliest Buddhist art was aniconic and the image of the Buddha only occurred after the conquest of Alexander the Great in Gandhara, where Greek influences merged with local craftsmanship. Buddhist statues developed later in other areas were the result of this influence. That's why there seems to be a prominent affinity between oriental sculptures and their Greek counterparts.

That figurine in "Forager," in a vajrasana pose, is redolent with the humbleness and serenity of a secular being in our everyday life. How did you achieve that?

YJ Actually it's not difficult for me because there's no mental obstacle to secularity in my case. When I make sculptures, I'm engaged in the postures of the figurines, and their "personalities" come from real life, which determines their fundamental separation from divinity in religious contexts.

HM Seeing the work, I'm compelled to think of children's bodies, maybe because of the smoothness and roundness of the figurines. Their fragmented form and the lack of details signal a process of growth of the body in a liminal state before maturity.

YJ When I first began to make these figurines, I wanted to weaken the idea of gender by shaping the body, torso, and muscles differently. The proportions and anatomy of the figurines weren't accurate or scientific. Why did I do this? I don't think I should ask myself why I did it, but how it's provided an alternative way of seeing or evaluating the body. It's not a matter of accuracy or correctness.

HM This inattentiveness to accuracy is probably closer to the tradition of ancient oriental sculptures. Although there have been numerous treatises on the making of Buddhist statues, such as The Canon of Iconometry, the reality is that artisans didn't fully stick to the designated rules for various reasons. Greek and Roman statues seem to pursue a more naturalist representation of the human body.

YJ In my mind, ancient Greek sculptures pursue some kind of eternal beauty, which is not the result of naturalism but an idea of the "ultimate beauty" based on a rational calculation of the idealized proportion. That very beauty transcends real bodies. Comparatively speaking, in the East the pursuit of eternity or the beauty of science and mathematics is not so prominent. What we embrace is a kind of openness, which allows vagueness, a lack of precision, an openness that's more forgiving and welcoming. This disparity is very palpable when one compares those two kinds of sculpture.

HM There's a long history of statue-making in both the East and the West for religious purposes, and you continue to make figurines in this contemporary era out of non-religious incentives. What do you think is the meaning and importance of creating images of the human figure? What's the relationship between the figurines you make and your understanding of your own body or the self?

YJ This is the first time I've been asked this question. It's a deeply fundamental one concerning the ways in which human beings construct civilizations. It's our human nature to learn about ourselves and leave something for future generations. Creating our own images in art is not only a form of self-reflection but also a form of narcissism. Both are in it.

HM So the figurines you make in a way reflect things about yourself?

YJ Not necessarily myself, but they're definitely about the world I inhabit. I don't really think of my own body when making the work. Rather, I think about my relationship with it.

HM The video work that records your visit to Qixingtan is titled *Pataauw Stone* (2015), the Chinese translation of which is "Stone of the Witch." I'm very intrigued by the illegible word Pataauw. What language is this and how did you come about using this word?

YJ The arrival of the title was accidental as well as inevitable. In the Aboriginal language, Pataauw is the pronunciation of Beitou, a village north of Taipei, and it

meant "witch." Beitou village was associated with the idea of the "witch" because there were volcanoes and sulfur mines in that area. The smoke, pungent smell, and occasional tectonic quakes were interpreted by the villagers as sorcery. It wasn't any particular language, but a spelling that passed down from ancient times. I named my video work *Pataauw Stone* because of my obsession with stone as an object, its form, even objects similar to the shape of a stone, and the idea of some kind of disintegration from the mountains. I wanted to make a stone that speaks to stones born out of the local natural environment as if what I made is also a stone even if it's not. The name *Pataauw Stone* seems to recall or allude to the Beitou from even earlier times, when people believed in natural powers.

HM Stone is a material that represents antiquity and eternity, and the naming of a stone is itself a human behavior. What is a stone essentially? It could be anything: something you dig from the ground, or something you make out of cement. Both can be considered stones. Stone is your language.

YJ A stone polished by rhetoric!

HM If we put the background story of Pataauw aside, it also intrigues me as an apt term to describe the female sensibility in your work. It isn't a simple definition of femininity, however, because it presents a complicated and mysterious relationship between women and creativity.

In your *Ta Jama* series, you attempted to grow moss on concrete stones with your own hair dyed seaweed green; in *Tongues of Lykavittos* (2016), you grafted agave leaves onto cement blocks and olive soap; and in *Forager* (2020) you poured green liquids into an old bathtub. All these attempts to instill fluid, wet, organic materials into inorganic and "dead" objects are to me like some kind of sorcery too.

Your making of human figurines also reminds me of Nüwa, the mother goddess of Chinese mythology, who created humanity with yellow clay by molding each figure with her own hands. Characters such as the witch and Nüwa are associated with myths of origin of the world and their creative energies can be equated to the act of giving birth and making art—from nothingness to being, from death to life. Creativity is at the same time violent, since the creator also maintains the power to destroy. The fragmentation of your work harbors that same potential to dismantle and disrupt the already established forms, which is highly empowering and radical because with destruction you've re-created the image of woman as the "creator," rather than being content with the image of the "created" female body.

YJ As women, we both long for the spirit of revolt.

HM In your essay under the same name "Tongues of Lykavittos," you discussed the distortion and misconception of the female body in history, the understanding and experience of life unique to women, the pain and decline of their physical bodies, the nurturing of new lives. You also mentioned your son watching you work. How has motherhood influenced your practice?

YJ I'm willing to embrace the changes that my childbirth and motherhood experience have brought me, whether large or small. It affected my work in the past two years. I came to realize that being a mother is the most vivid and powerful reality that women have to confront and endure. This new identity miraculously enables us to empathize with each other because our common experience of giving birth offers the opportunity to understand the bodies of other women.

My exhibition "Forager" last year reflects an overlap between my experience as a mother and the world's unprecedented experience in quarantine during the pandemic. Without the global pandemic, my life would have been the same having become a mother, moved to the countryside, separated from the city, all humanity and amenities. I had to do groceries on my own and cook, and finally got into farming. None of these had anything to do with the pandemic and it felt very strange when all of a sudden the whole world fell into in the same situation. The world during the pandemic is an experience of quarantine for most people, but for me it was an experience of motherhood. There's something both subtle and theatrical about such an overlap. The sense of distance from the reality of the world and an unexpected overlap with it are what I intend to present in the exhibition.