

SKIN,

**FLESH
AND**

BONE

**with
Cao Hui
Feng Feng
He Yunchang
and
Ma Qiusha**

by Feng Boyi, curator

**Wang Dong,
assistant curator
Bjørn Inge Folleevaag and
Malin Barth, Co-curators**

**Produced
by Stiftelsen 3,14**

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Feng Boyi**



FOREWORD

Malin Barth, Director of the international contemporary art foundation, 3,14

On behalf of 3,14 I am pleased to present the exhibition *My gu rou pi* - Skin, Flesh and Bone, which can be viewed in relation to recent shows at 3,14, but which presents yet a new and challenging position and survey of artists' reactions to modern-day China.

The international contemporary art foundation 3,14 has a global vision and a will to globalize. The institution works almost exclusively with international exhibitions and partnerships. The emphasis is on contemporary art beyond the very western, centralized discourse. The institution is committed to knowledge-production, presentation and interpretation of innovative artistic work in all media promoting creativity and artistic exploration. Through our program we aim to reflect upon the complex nature of international contemporary art and different contemporary issues. 3,14 emphasizes international projects that enable local understanding of global issues.

3,14's vision today is to ensure that world-art avoids becoming a backdrop to our own geographical periphery. We need to be open-minded in our approach, investigative in our method and critical to our own provincialism in the global context. Substantially, these are the perspectives and issues that we communicate to the public. In a broader sense, they can perhaps widen and strengthen our perception of ourselves. Our longstanding exertions with Chinese artists and curators have always been based on a wish for dialogue with our Chinese colleagues. 3,14's efforts on the field were first sparked by adventure and curiosity and have later been richly rewarded with knowledge of the Chinese art scene. They have also resulted in annual exhibitions by Chinese artists.

It has been a pleasure to interpret, realize and effect Feng Boyi's curatorial concept *My gu rou pi*, which translates to "Skin, Flesh and Bone". The four artists who are included in the exhibition, Cao Hui, Feng Feng, He Yunchang, and Ma Qiusha, show works that relate to Chinese contemporary culture and its current context both directly and indirectly, and they all examine different aspects and issues of the body in their artistic production. Feng Boyi states that: "In China those who lost religious beliefs and interest in the grand political discourse, seem to have found a firm, reliable base of self-identification in the modern world's image of the physical body. A central characteristic of modernism is how the body has become a focus of individuality." The particular works derive from the new experience of modernity in China, while they at the same time illustrate universal themes. The exploration that takes place is not purely private nor purely Chinese, but closely linked to comparable conditions and situations, as well as to the general experience of what it means to be human. Cao Hui, Feng Feng, He Yunchang, and Ma Qiusha's works also encourage us to a large extent to reflect on what we feel. What they allow us to see and experience is helplessness, anger, shame, love, pain, despair and hope transformed into video, installation, sculpture, performance and photography. The viewers see and experience art shaped by memories of feelings and events, and the works can be defined as open, expressive and symbolic. Cao Hui, Feng Feng, He Yunchang, and Ma Qiusha all employ an artistic language which is stripped

down to the bare essentials, but which includes a metaphoric density. This minimizes the difference in our cultural vantage points, making their works communicate and resonate easily across cultural boundaries. An initial look at the art works might be with a fleeting glance, and upon returning, the artists' complex communication points may be seen; or a second look might hide from sight a reality that does not want to be in plain view. The variables of openness in our approach to the subject matters and the art works create the nuances in the intensity of this exhibition's dialogue.

My warmest thanks to Bjørn Inge Follevaag for our successful collaboration on this exhibition, and for his continued efforts and expertise in the field of Chinese contemporary art. I will especially thank Feng Boyi for greatly illuminating this artistic discourse through his curatorial approach. I feel very fortunate to having had the opportunity to work with Feng Boyi on this project. This show also owes a lot to the assistant curator Wang Dong's dedication and hard work. Special thanks, of course, to the artists, Cao Hui, Feng Feng, He Yunchang, and Ma Qiusha, for participating in the exhibition, for your ever so strong and powerful work, and for your hospitality when I visited your studios and discussed your art works in Beijing last fall. Great appreciation to, Director at Art Museums of Bergen, Erlend G. Høyersten and Chief Curator Eli Okkenhaug at Art Museums of Bergen for our joint venture in showing the exhibition *Real Life Stories*. Thanks to the staff at both institutions for all the work you have done in realizing this exhibition and its catalogue.

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Thank you!

Dialogue

Feng Boyi and Wang Dong on “Skin, Flesh and Bone”

Date: August 25, 2012
Location: Feng Boyi’s studio, Beijing

Wang Dong: For this exhibition, entitled *Skin, Flesh and Bone*, you chose the Chinese name “Wo de Gu Rou Pi,” which roughly translates to “Skin, Flesh and Bone.” What does that mean, specifically?

Wang Dong: In Chinese contemporary art, it could be said that artworks which use the body as their subject matter or medium have attracted a lot of attention. Against what kind of social and cultural background did such works develop in China?

Feng Boyi: The Chinese term “Gu Rou Pi” sounds like the English word “groupie,” which is mainly a term referring to people who pursue relations with film and music celebrities. “Gu Rou Pi” is a foreign term that has already entered into the Chinese language. My selection of this title for the exhibition actually has nothing to do with this. “Skin, Flesh and Bone,” refers to “my body,” and is basically directed at these artists’ use of the body, the “Skin, Flesh and Bone,” as a creative medium. Anything beyond that is merely an interesting coincidence.

Feng Boyi: Artists have been using the body as subject matter for a long time; it is a direct and concentrated expression of the self. The changing of the times and shifting identifications, aspirations and even ideologies regarding the body will always manifest in surprising ways. There is a basic thread of the development of attitudes and methods towards the body as a medium in Chinese avant-garde art since the 1980s and 90s, all the way up to today.

China is currently in this state of reality marked by the swelling of crazed desire and human perversion. The artists’ creations are all actually rooted in inner human desires, and these form a pair of contradictory yet inextricably linked psychological sentiments. In this way, their artworks can perhaps provide us, so steeped in material hedonism and entertainment, with a warning. They transform the abuse from social reality into self-abuse carried out by the victim, and thus serve as a release of the suffering within this environment of existence. This is not only a continuation and breakthrough from the scar art that emerged in China after the Cultural Revolution, it also points directly at the new scars that are an aspect of our restless desires. It creates a strengthened interpretation and representation of

the fate of “man” in contemporary society, and also serves as a kind of hopeless appeal towards the circumstances that we have grown accustomed to. This exaggeration has caused harm and stained life with a nihilist essence, to the point that all human efforts to construct meaning, from memory to history composition, are for nothing. The perception of joy cannot necessarily be passed on to others, but the perception of suffering certainly can. This difference between joy and suffering has determined the direction of artists’ focuses and cultural duties in the purest sense. One of the artist’s main duties in society is not to help people increase their happiness, but to warn them away from suffering.

Wang Dong: Specifically speaking, what changes have taken place in artworks that use the “body” as their subject matter? For instance, a series of changes took place in China’s political and cultural environment during the 1980s and 90s, and Chinese contemporary art is deemed to have shifted from a collective voicing of struggles to escape from the fetters of the social environment and ideology to the individual presentation of the experience of existence. People’s aspirations for the body certainly took different directions as well.

Feng Boyi: To a great extent, the body narrative in the Chinese avant-garde art of the mid-80s was influenced by the grand narrative of enlightenment thought, with which it distinguished itself from the asceticism of the Mao era. The great controversy aroused by the Human Figure Oil Painting Exhibition at the National Art Museum of China from late 1988 to early 1989 in Beijing was a typical, concentrated embodiment of this. It belonged to the movement of cultural reflection and idea liberation that began with China’s reform and opening in 1970. The mainstream ideology of this period took a stance of limited lifting of restrictions regarding the body while continuing to control the body (specifically people’s sensual desires), so the “body” was drawn into a different ideological discourse – that of enlightenment thinking and national promotion. In a certain sense, enlightenment thinking and developmental ideology had no choice but to give limited recognition to the rationality of the body as the core of everyday life.

In the early 1990s, the performance art that arose from the cultural margins began to attract attention, with artists such as Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Zhu Fadong, Zhu Ming and Cang Xin enacting performance artworks in Beijing’s “East Village,” each of them setting out from the existential state of the body, applying themselves through their actions towards enlightenment about human existence, especially in attempts to seek redemption and salvation from the misery of life. Their actions were marked by the heightening of cultural directedness and formal extremeness in reality: politics, power, misery, sex, violence, etc. Their thoughts about the body were tightly connected to ideas regarding the fate of the nation and the future of the people, and as a result they were markedly dualist, emphasizing the sacrifice of the self while liberating the body. In the late 1990s, performance artworks by such artists as Zhang Shengquan, Zhu Yu, Yang Zhichao, Sun Yuan, Peng Yu, Qin Ga, Xiao Yu, He Yunchang and Wang Chuyi took the form of sanguinary lab reports. Not only did they use flesh, blood and other aspects of the body to bear witness to violence, they wanted the viewer to witness the violent tendencies in the behavioral processes. This concept and method of “harm” and “self-abuse” was the limit of what performance artists could attain. The wounds in these artworks, and the bodies that were victims or self-perpetrators of this abuse, became the most direct point of observation for massive “ritualized” blood-letting and waste.

Wang Dong: It was around the year 2000 that “harmful” and “self-abusive” embodiments of the body’s limitations in performance art elicited widespread discussion among the public and the art world. Of course, much of it was condemnations rooted in judgments based solely on sensory experience, without any real scientific sifting. We can see, however, that after 2000, the manifestation of the body’s limitations was no longer the focus of attention as a creative category, or, in other words, there were new changes in the direction of artworks that took the body as their subject matter.

Wang Dong: The body-themed creations that we have discussed above can be generally summarized as being about the social and cultural constructs of the body, and the use of the body to reflect social and cultural issues. In recent years, some artists have become quite interested in the functions of the body itself, engaging in almost scientific dissection of the body, though of course their direction is quite different from that of scientific experiments, and they have not completely discarded with the social properties of the body. All I am saying is that their implications are founded more on physiological experimentation.

Wang Dong: So how do we view these creations that engage in scientific or psychological experimental methods on the body? How do we evaluate their value?

Feng Boyi: As China entered the 21st century, the culture of the consumer society that arose as the result of economic and cultural globalization was a culture of the body. The economy of the consumer culture is the economy of the body, and the aesthetic of consumer society is the aesthetic of the body. This might be a slight exaggeration, but it is certainly not a fabrication. In contemporary consumer society, the body is increasingly becoming the core of modern man’s self-identification. In the academic field, we have also seen the emergence of the “sociology of the body,” the “aesthetics of the body” and the “body in cultural studies.” Mass media’s interest in the body is also incomparably strong, with all kinds of fashion publications full of body imagery in various forms. Of course, interest in the body is nothing new, but in the context of contemporary mass culture and consumer culture, the shape and consumer value of the body have become the center of attention. It is of particular concern in avant-garde artistic creations. The constant appearance, permeation, even flood of body imagery in mass culture and consumer culture, has turned the body into a shell of desire. This is one of the results of the body’s (particularly its ability to reproduce) split from the social economy and political structure. This shows that whether among artists or the masses, this groundswell of interest in the body is a product of the consumerist characteristics that have arisen through a series of shifts in society, the economy and culture.

Feng Boyi: If we observe the artists in this exhibition in this light, we will discover a discrepancy with the thread that I outlined above, or at least certain traits that are connected to it but somewhat different. As I see it, with the further development of Chinese modernity, the demystification of society and culture has also grown more drastic, but while the modernization process has destroyed religious faith, it has not constructed any stable faith in its place, and we have fallen into a state of religious anarchy where “anything goes after god is dead” and the “manifold gods contend.” The culture of consumer society does not have any ultimate spiritual values that can guide us in life. In this way, for those who have lost their religious faith and lost any interest in the grand political discourse, the body provides the only solid foundation for self-identification that can be depended on in the modern world. When a creation erects the meaning of life atop a young, sensual body, then the outward appearance of the body becomes a symbol for the self. Meanwhile, they see the body as just the body; it does not have any excess nobility or baseness. It is important as a part of life, but it does not possess any miraculous powers. For this reason, their attitude towards the body approaches a “scientific experimentation” method, the treating of the body as a medium and material for experimentation, even a very mundane thing. That is to say, the cultural import attached to the body is gradually fading, while the body’s natural functions and properties are being increasingly emphasized.

Feng Boyi: In fact, we have a physical, flesh-and-blood body which allows us to taste, smell and touch. The body is the condition for our linguistic practices, self-awareness and spiritual reflection. The body allows us to perform actions, and to enter into and change everyday life. No theory can gain traction without explaining the

body. For this reason, we can say to a certain extent that the person in action is the body in action. Once the expression of the body has been removed from the various grand narratives such as the nation, the state, class, ideology, rationality or enlightenment, it shifts to scientific analysis to focus on and express the body's experience, a probing of every entryway to the unconscious "body." Awareness of the body still belongs to the realm of modern self-awareness and modern individualism, even though it has essential differences from the individualism of the enlightenment era.

Wang Dong: What is your goal or target in curating this exhibition?

Feng Boyi: Only when the attitudes and methods of the "body's" narrative are placed within the developmental thread of Chinese contemporary art, within the thread of Chinese social culture, especially in terms of shifting social functions and concepts of the body, can we gain a more precise grasp of it. In fact, art and the body have always been inextricably linked. We cannot imagine aesthetic or artistic activities without the body, without creations regarding the body, or any human activities without the body for that matter. Aesthetic activities are more connected to the body than other activities. We should discuss how the cultural arts of different eras have rendered or presented the body. By observing the different artistic methods for imagining, rendering and presenting the body in different periods, we can uncover rich cultural and historical meaning. I think that this is what makes research of body art alluring, and it is our main goal in curating this exhibition.

Cao Hui

Cao Hui

Artist Cao Hui was born in Kunming in 1968. He graduated from the Yunnan Art Academy in 1991 and from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 2000. He currently teaches at the CAFA Sculpture Department and resides in Beijing. His artworks include such series as *Urinal*, *Pure Wool Mark*, *Disclose You* and *Visible Temperature*.



Artist Cao Hui's *Disclose You* series presents chimpanzees, pigs, goats and other domestic animals through realistic modeling and lifelike sculpture language. There are two things that make his latest series special. The first is the anthropomorphizing exaggeration and magnification of these animal forms, as if they are typical classical sculptures of the human form, with the coloring and rendering of the "realistic" portions presenting the smooth and transparent sheen of human skin. The peaceful, even naive facial expressions possess hints of tranquility. The second thing that makes them special is the portion where the flesh and tendons have been opened up and exposed. The flesh and blood, appearing as if the result of a real autopsy, reflect his firm grasp and conscious application of realist art. Even the portions that feel relatively real can be moving and shocking in the realism of even the most trifling of details. The polar opposition between the two elements creates a sudden, bizarre visual tension, evoking a quivering sense of anxiety in the mind.

What prop up the perspectives and techniques in his creative concepts are his convictions and judgments about the predicament of reality. These highly pessimistic judgments have been firmly implanted in these animal forms and their flayed skin, and have ripped deeply into these animals' fates. In essence, these animals also reflect the internal contradictions and rifts in modernity. He is picking the fragments of humanity back up from these animal forms and their eviscerated flesh. In other words, he is using the symbolic metaphors of these animals' gestures and skin textures to allude to his attitudes regarding the relationship between reality and nature, because this relationship bears a certain resemblance to China's predicament. Cao Hui's shaping of this powerful contrast between the reserved and the sanguine can serve as a reflection on our plundering of nature during the process of so called "modernization." The influence of modernization touches on every realm of human activity, and is particularly manifested in the epistemological worship of the infinite powers of the subject and the unbridled economic exploitation of natural resources, these being the soil that nourishes modernization. The contradictions, paradoxes and even loss of control that are concealed behind the process of modernization produce "bizarre" results that are the very crux of the matter, and are what Cao's creations take aim at and intend to derail.

Mixed Materials of Resin, Fibre, etc
180 x 110 x 70cm
2006

I'm sorry



Pure Wool No.2

91 x 57 x 116cm
Mixed Materials of Resin, Fibre, etc
2009



Disclosing You-Cattle No.2

Mixed Materials of Resin, Fibre, etc
195 x 185 x 120cm
2007



Mixed Materials of Resin, Fibre, etc
170 x 55 x 35cm
2007

You-Pig No.2

You-Sheep No.1

Mixed Materials of Resin, Fibre, etc
170 x 55 x 35cm
2007



Mixed Materials of Resin, Fibre, etc
70 x 45 x 42cm
2007

You-Sheep No.4

Feng Feng



Feng Feng, professor of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art, director of the Contemporary Art Department and MA student supervisor

Graduated from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art in 1991, while engaged in art education, Feng Feng is making art works related to various fields, including contemporary art, experimental design and fiction. His works has been exhibited in United States, Britain, France, South Korea, Japan and other countries. He has held solo exhibitions in Paris, Beijing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Hong Kong. Feng Feng is the designer of the remarkable buildings: "Time Palace" in Xi'an Daming Palace National Heritage Park, which includes the Xuan Zheng Pavilion and Zi Huan Pavilion (collaborated with IAPA from Australia).

In 2012, he published "The Residue of Time: 1991-2011" which documented his art creation in the past 20 years. He also published "Feast: FENG FENG'S WORKS: 1993-2008" (Capital Normal University Press) in 2008.

Feng Feng

Feng Feng is an artist marked by thought and experimentation. He is special in that his interest in art has reasons that are rather different from those of most avant-garde artists of his time: it is not rooted in discontent with reality or submission to the times but in suspicion of accustomed language and knowledge. He often uses the dissection of the human body and internal organs to engage in his art. Though Feng Feng says that the term "body" conceals the truth of the thing, the body is merely the subject of observation, with the real question being how to recognize today's world.

When these real human skeletons are covered in gold leaf, they become living "architecture," a medical "specimen" that serves as a warning. He draws from the powerful contrast of the materiality of the body and the symbolic nature of gold leaf, as well as the systematic dismantlement of the skeleton to reflect the fragmented world of today's China. The decadence and terror of the skeleton, and the value and splendor of gold are all so direct and nakedly presented, and this directness reflects and mocks the state of existence in China – the constant pursuit of desire.

He uses this to attain awareness and reflection of the abuses of the modernization process, through which he expresses the aspiration for a beautiful and fair sanctuary for mankind behind revelations and criticisms, declaring that material development in no way guarantees the fall of the spirit and the collapse of morality. The silence of these specimens contains tragic tones, alluding to the subconscious distortions of humanity and the psyche wrought by China's period of social transformation. The tension of the visual stimulus produced by these readymade objects emerges precisely because of Feng Feng's sharp perception of this fluctuating social reality. This is his appeal against the destruction of modern urbanization in China and a reflection of the humanist sentiments deep inside his heart – the responsibility of the intellectual artist.

Golden Age



Human Bone, Gold Foil, Cement, Metal
800cm x 122cm x 210cm
2007





He Yunchang

He Yunchang

He Yunchang was born in 1967 in Yunnan Province. He received his bachelor's degree from the Yunnan Art Academy in 1991, and quit his job in 1993 to become a professional artist. He currently lives and works in Beijing. He has won numerous awards during his career, including the first Yan Wenliang Young Artist Award; the Chinese Young Critic's Nomination Award, the Macau Museum of Modern Art International Artistic Exchange Award, the Reshaping History – Contemporary Art Academic Award, the Chinese Contemporary Art Award (CCAA), and the 9th National Oil Painting Exhibition Bronze Medal.



Performance art first began trickling into China in the late 1980s, becoming a flood after the year 2000, and He Yunchang has become the most important representative of this art form in China. His series of works testing the limits of the body has solidified his place in Chinese art history.

In He Yunchang's performance works, the individual will is staunchly defended. Using his own body as a medium he presents a series of challenges to the body's limits to place the existence of individual life on display. According to the artist, "only when an artwork is bestowed with a certain amount of power can it be distinguished from everyday action" and thereby express his perceptions of existence.

On October 10 2010, He Yunchang enacted a performance entitled *One Meter of Democracy* in his studio in Beijing's Caochangdi neighborhood. For this performance, he had a 0.5 to 1 centimeter deep incision cut into the right side of his body, stretching one meter from his collarbone to his knee. A doctor assisted in this procedure, though no anesthesia was used during the entire process. Before the surgery, he held a satirical "Chinese democracy-style" vote, using the farcical methods of Chinese elections, to ask the roughly twenty people present, whether or not he should carry out the procedure. The final tally was 12 votes for, 10 against and 3 abstaining, passing by two votes. The process was shocking to watch. He used a self-abusive, self-mutilating method to push himself to the edge, near the brink of death, and attained a self-redemption of both spirit and flesh. Perhaps this is the price of democracy, and perhaps He Yunchang is using his own suffering to awaken and probe the languishing soul.

Photograph
126cm x 180cm
2010

One Meter Democracy





Ma Qiusha



Ma Qiusha

Based on individual experiences, Ma Qiusha's artworks miscellaneously include photography, videos, paintings, and installations, where she keeps constant aloofness from commonality and surpasses direct emotional narrations for the purpose of more essential expressions. In her work *From No.4 Pingyuanli to No.4 Tianqiaobeili* (2007), Ma, with a piece of sharp razor blade in her mouth when talking, described the complicated influences of parental love during her childhood and juvenile period. The shocking scene of mouthful blood reveals a prevalent situation happening in one-child families after 1980, as well as embodying political and economical changes. Similar complexity and paradox exist in her other video or photography works, such as *All My Sharpness Comes from Your Hardness*, *We, Intimacy*, *Warm Snow Series*. Ma's individualized delineation, including her confusion about intimacy, a delicate counterforce of facing and resisting emotions, and her query in the memory of growing up, reflects the situation of the young generation, who enjoy a rather rich, steady, yet much more materialized modern life.

Ma Qiusha (b. 1982, Beijing) graduated from Electronic Integrated Art, Alfred University (MFA), New York, United States. She currently lives and works in Beijing. In 2011, she was invited to attend the group show "Soft Machines" at the Pace Gallery in NYC.

The brutality of adolescence is a theme that permeates the video works of young artist Ma Qiusha. In the process of growing up, adolescence in and of itself implies brutality. Adolescence is a special time in one's life, one marked by a particular form of restlessness that is a product of dreams and evasion. Everyone must face such a stage in their lives; it is just that it manifests in different experiences and expressions within different living environments. This theme perhaps asks how this brutality of youth is manifested in the cultural contexts of different periods, and how the scars it leaves behind are transformed and expressed in the language of visual art.

In Ma's *From #4 Pingyuanli to #4 Tianqiao Beili*, the artist holds a blade in her mouth as she faces the camera and tells about her experiences and important memories. *Us*, on the other hand, uses the coming together and separation between a man and a woman to express the issues among people and between people and the world. Ma Qiusha says: "Perhaps there is only this one question and it constantly emerges in various forms throughout the different stages of our lives. In the end, we will discover that no matter how we strive, every effort we make to figure ourselves out and to find the thread that ties us to the external world, we are actually using certain methods to cut those bonds. I am always in a state of contradiction."

If the 1990s in China were marked by the profound influences of social upheaval and transformation on the fate of the individual, expressed as the pain of being helpless against the "environment," then the scar art of the children of the 80s, represented by Ma Qiusha, instead faces the test of having to make one's own choices in facing their situations, as well as the expression of tender feelings regarding the process of growing up. That is to say, they now had an opportunity to engage in their own choices within a universal individual destiny. This of course demonstrates that after thirty years of development during the reform and opening, China had already cast off its tragic destiny of the past. But this also led to a shift from the earlier monolithic subject of the scars they expressed, a natural and true product of the environment in which they grew up. In other words, they had a relatively larger space in which to make their own choices, and thus had to face the predicament of how to make those choices. This seems to have led to a situation where the subject of their challenges shifted to their selves and their sentiments, and they constantly sought out their shortcomings and anxieties within existence. For this reason, these artworks are not so much Ma Qiusha presenting her own experiences, emotions and memories in an allegorical fashion as they are wholesale imaginings of "growing up" that are inextricably linked to individual life. The value of these imaginings lies in the fact that they set out from the ones own desires to provide the self with a sincere range of emotions – the true properties of a pure state of existence.



We



3-channel video
2'00"
2009

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