

The Inextricability of the Image: an Interview with Ran Huang

Beijing, May/June 2014: Ran Huang recently became the first artist and filmmaker from China to be selected for the Short Film Palme d'Or competition at the Cannes Film Festival. Huang possesses a multidisciplinary practice, but he is known for creating video works of sinuous beauty that examine the sinister articulations of power on and through the body. His works vibrate from the collision of an intense formalism with supple, fleshy tenderness in which control often emerges through sexual charges physically and psychologically exchanged between protagonists. In other works, power exerts itself in the far more mundane task of the routinization of contestation and protest. His work at Cannes, *The Administration of Glory*, synthesizes Huang's tendencies towards fantastical costuming and elaborate, lush scenery with a narrative about the historical formation of the law. I sat down with Huang to discuss his recent works and practice in advance of the Jewish Museum's summer *Sights and Sounds* program, which features Huang's *Blithe Tragedy* (2010) and begins on June 27, and a September solo show at Simon Lee Gallery.



Ran HUANG, *Blithe Tragedy*, 2010, Still from video, 14' 48; Courtesy of the artist and Long March Space

Ran Huang: I will cut to one of your questions straight away. You were wondering about a shift in my practice from video art to film language around 2008. It was not because I wanted to make a film, but rather because I came up with lots of ideas that video wasn't able to fulfil. All of my practice is concept-driven. The idea behind the work decides what kind of medium I am going to use. Some of the mediums I only use once. There are certain types of ideas for which I like to work with the language of cinema. Film was the best medium that fit my concept so I started to think about how I can make films. Now, it's almost been three years since I made my first film. There is some sort of quality that relates film to belief.

Sometimes I compare film with religion. No matter whether the film is good, bad, commercial, or a soap opera, it's all aimed to make you believe in the story. It's like the Bible. The Bible is never supposed to make you understand what is inside the book, but it is supposed to make you believe. That is one of the very interesting things in film. This sort of belief allows me to hide

my own attitudes and do things without really saying I'm doing it. I really like [that] sort of thing, and it distinguishes my film practice from my work with other media. Outside film, I have a very straightforward attitude towards subject matter, but film offers me an inextricability in denial, which is that I am trying to communicate something but at the same time I am also denying that communication through narrative, through film language.

Katherine Grube: That sort of belief in the fiction of film, but also taking it at face value.

RH: I think that sort of belief is engaged in an invisible critique of how we trust an image. You mentioned that many of my images are very stylized, and I am dealing with two layers in the image as well. One is the fact of the image. The other is the meaning of image, which is what I meant by inextricability. On the surface, you see the fact of the image, but also you are trying to believe, or understand, the meaning of the image. That sort of relation is where communication comes from. To put it simply, maybe I am trying to communicate with the meaning of the image, but sometimes I use the effect of the image to deny communication.



Ran HUANG, screen shots from *The Administration of Glory*; Courtesy of The Artist, Long March Space, Simon Lee Gallery and Domus Collection

KG: Denial or a process of denying often has a formal inflection in your work. Your frames and the images are very sparing, almost a stab at meaning that allows for interpretation to happen autonomously. There is a minimalism to your work.

RH: There is a sort of minimalism that relates to the idea behind the work because it itself is very minimal. If we're talking about the idea of politics, it's a very minimal idea, and I really like the minimal stuff in art history as well. I like the quality that eschews overt explanation by using form.

KG: You have mentioned several times that the creation of the work is a process. How does that begin for you? Is it the idea that arises from an image? Or from a desired narrative?

RH: There is no standard procedure. I like fragments. I don't like ordered things. Sometimes I work on a narrative and a script, and the next day, if I find an image on the internet, I redo everything because of that single image. It's not a very systematic way of working (laughs). For the creation of my films, I sometimes have the title first without any idea of what I am going to do. Sometimes an image from the internet triggers a narrative or dialogue. I use Tumblr a lot. Sometimes I go through a person's personal page and find an image I like, but a couple of weeks later I find that image to be very boring, which makes me wonder if it was that image amongst hundreds of other images that attracted me. You know, the order of the images that

actually attracted me. That's what I am talking about with the fact of the image and is what I'm trying to achieve in my film.

KG: Can you tell us about your most recent short, *The Administration of Glory*, which was selected for the Short Film Palme d'Or competition at this year's Cannes Film Festival?

RH: My latest film is about the movement of the law from one generation to another generation. It is about how we first discovered order within a collective or a group and, subsequently, how that order became law. In the film, many stories are interlocked with one another, so there are no completely individual stories. One story gets into another, which expresses how people see freedom, how people fight for freedom. To return to my own situation, I think it's a kind of question of how I project myself onto the art system and how I consider my freedom of creativity. Don't get me wrong. This isn't about censorship or something as stupid or superficial as that, but about how people really work inside the art world and within a regime of expression.



Ran HUANG, screen shots from *The Administration of Glory*; Courtesy of The Artist, Long March Space, Simon Lee Gallery and Domus Collection

KG: What type of restrictions to do you see shaping or influencing your creativity? Or limiting your creative freedoms?

RH: I think it's a kind of mind control, and you maybe have that experience as well. Sometimes you're changed by a situation or context, and, without noticing, you give into that change. I think it's also a cultural thing and it happens to everybody. Sometimes the things we really believe in [are] maybe the processes of mind control. We live in it, so we believe it. Some of the dialogue in *The Administration of Glory* is, "We believe this is history because we believe this history." It's a loop that I believe engages in some of our historical attitudes towards our value systems. It is, again, a kind of inextricability, a sort of communication that is constantly going on but also constantly being denied.

KG: Yes of course. That actually registers quite profoundly with how history is treated everywhere, but then also in the contemporary context of China where history seems to be a very slippery, or at least an unmoored, ever-moving reality.

RH: Yeah. In that sense, I always avoid talking about real things, real stuff, real history, real politics because I think it is just superficiality. What really matters is the idea of history and the idea of our politics—for instance, what I mentioned earlier about freedom. It's not about someone taking away your freedom by forcing you to do something. It's about the belief in our freedoms as real.