

INDEPENDENT CURATORS INTERNATIONAL

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DISPATCH

Interview with artist Huang Ran
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"If Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* cycle fell in love with Wong Kar-Wai's *2046* on the way home from a screening of *THX 1138*, their mutant offspring might make a cameo in Huang Ran's new video," I wrote to a friend after wandering into Beijing's Space Station gallery last fall and walking out, thirty minutes later, feeling stunned. For a few weeks afterward, when people asked me which shows they should see, I could only answer "Huang Ran's." Curious about the wizard behind the curtain, I arranged a meeting with the artist, about whom I knew next to nothing. Our first breakfast, with its menu of coffee and cigarettes, went on for well over two hours, as we talked about his filmmaking process (which involves great technical precision and resourcefulness), his ideas about beauty and his recent return to China, among other things. Huang Ran wanted to know which galleries in town had the best reputations. His work required a production budget and he already had ideas for the next video. Though his affect was unhurried, it was clear Huang Ran wasn't wasting any time.



Turn Over, 2007. extract still from original format: HD video transferred to SD DVD, looped, unsynchronized sound

Perhaps a month later, we sat down and looked at the work (mostly video) that he'd been producing since graduating from Goldsmiths in 2007. I was struck immediately by the diversity of his projects and by how inventive Huang Ran has been in his quest to put our unexplored habits and buried impulses under the microscope. In *Turn Over* (2007), an unmoving, perfectly centered camera records a basketball game played by three sets of identical twins that are dressed in the same orange and

grey uniforms and divided into two teams. Though each player can only identify his own twin as his opponent, the game proceeds, with temporary alliances constantly forming and fracturing between them, based on hunches, glances and gestures. By stripping away any sense to the competition that dominates the scene, Huang Ran demonstrates its primacy. We play games in order to win, no matter how impossible or absurd they may seem. Huang Ran is no exception.



The Next Round is True Life, 2009. extract still from original format: HD video transferred to SD DVD, 28 mins

Social forms are again isolated, reproduced and observed under strangely neutral, lab-like conditions in *The Next Round is True Life* (2009), a video in which three middle-aged actors, plainly (but identically) dressed, stand before a black backdrop, taking turns chewing a single piece of gum that they pass amongst themselves. Each man has a face you want to watch, but you have no idea what he's thinking about as his jaws work purposefully. Although the gum becomes less and less flavorful, the actors continue to chew during the video's entire 28 minutes, going through the motions of habitual consumption while getting nothing in return, save the pleasure of the empty process.

After several meetings with Huang Ran, I recently visited him in his studio for the first time. Sitting with the artist at his workstation, I found myself surrounded by three walls papered with images (a fourth, directly opposite our chairs, was mostly windows). All around us were sketches for future shoots, carefully annotated diagrams of machines or sculptures that would or would not be built, images that seemed to come from fashion shoots, and pictures printed out from the Internet that included images of gay porn, disasters, obscure architectural structures, and far off lands. We sat in the center of this sea of images, which seemed to ripple and sway in the room's uncomfortable heat. Huang Ran lit up with a plastic Osama bin Laden cigarette lighter and our discussion began.

"This new life was in front of me, and I just did it."

The first time I saw your work was last year at your solo show in Beijing, Blithe Tragedy. The work was unlike anything I had seen before. My immediate thought was "Who is this artist, and where has he been hiding?" Tell me about your background.

I originally come from a very small town in Sichuan. I went to study in England when I was 18, but before that I spent most of my time back in my hometown, which is a small and very simple place. There's no art going on there, if you're talking about contemporary or modern art. At that time, I thought only that artists should be stuck in their studios doing oil paintings. When I was five, my sister would come home from art class and show me what she had done, and I was really into it. Then my mom bought me some colored pencils. So that was the first time I began to do something that related to color and drawing. I started to learn how to draw and paint when I was seven.

How did you end up studying in England?

It's very strange. As I said, before I went to England I knew almost nothing about contemporary art. Even now, when I recall it, I still feel that it's so surreal. I knew nothing about Birmingham, but I chose to go, even though it felt as if I had no backing. It was 2001, and I was thinking of going to the US as well, but then 9/11 happened, so the visa policy in the US changed a lot. I was still wondering about whether to go to New York or London, and 9/11 helped me to make my choice. I hadn't considered other places in Europe, because I sensed that if you wanted to be an artist, New York and London were the best places to go. It was very exciting – this new life was in front of me, and I just did it.

What was your training like at the Birmingham Institute of Art & Design?

It was great. If someone asks me where they should do their BA course, I respond that I think that this school is one of the best choices outside of London. The school was established in 1883, so it's got a long history. They offer a fine arts course, but they don't divide things up into painting or sculpture departments; there's only one fine arts course. The facility is also really good. The tutors all came from RCA and Goldsmiths, and my main tutor for the whole BA course was from Goldsmiths. Later on, when I got into Goldsmiths for my MFA, I found that the way my tutor taught and the kinds of things he encouraged me to do were quite close to what was happening at Goldsmiths.

What kinds of things?

Goldsmiths holds blind seminars, which means that you present your work to a group and you're supposed to say nothing. And the tutors are quite personally challenging.

I'm looking around your studio walls, and they're covered with images and sketches and all kinds of materials. Your practice is clearly very research-based.

Yes. I have some friends who did their BA course in China, and they never do research. I had the same problem during my first semester at Birmingham. During our assessment, I saw that some of my classmates had boxes of research, but I just had a small stack of materials. I had no background in such things, so I started to read a lot. I remember I used to stay in the library for days. I would just grab anything at hand. I had no idea what kinds of books I should look at, so at the beginning I would – you know those little trolleys where people would put books to be shelved? – I would always sit by one of those trolleys and as people would return books, I would grab them and read them. Slowly I began to discover my own interests. Goldsmiths changed me a lot, as well. I think that was the biggest turning point in my practice.

How did it change you?

Goldsmiths forced me to think about the fact that you must have your own strategy if you want to stay in the art industry. You cannot look at other people's strategies and follow them. And it encouraged me to develop independent critical thinking, so I that could continue to manage my own practice after getting out of school.

The Double Helix of Horror and Beauty



Blithe Tragedy, 2010, extract still from original format: Red One digital transferred to 35 mm film, Betacam, Blu-Ray DVD, 14 mins 56 secs

*In that exhibition I mentioned earlier, which was your first in China, you showed two works. Let's start by talking about the video, *Blithe Tragedy*. It's very carefully composed, with images that evoke science fiction and disaster stories, sadomasochism and sexual ambiguity. With its slow tracking, striking actors, and incredible attention to costume and makeup, it is almost supernaturally beautiful. But I understand from our previous conversations that for you, beauty is a kind of trap. What's underneath that surface?*

It's like the story about the Nazi concentration camps. During WWII, German scientists built a room with a small pool. They put people in there, and at the beginning, the water temperature was quite comfortable, like a nice bath. But then scientists started to add ice into the water, so that it grew colder and colder. So they discovered very accurate figures quantifying the limits of what one's body can suffer. They learned precisely at which temperature you lose consciousness but can still recover and at which temperature there's no chance for survival. It was very cruel. But the thing is that before that, modern science had no accurate figures for frostbite, so all the accurate figures were established through those experiments. It was very brutal, but somehow it transcended science. That is a kind of contradiction that I'm always looking for.

In the story I just told you, there is a certain quality, which is very close to my idea of beauty. In the film, I communicate using beauty, but at the same time, the whole video is denying that sort of beauty as well.

Well, the video is very stylized, but something horrible seems to be going on.

It is unclear what is going on, but because it's very beautiful – very attractive in a superficial way – the language of the image starts to divide into two parts. One is the content of the image, and the other is the surface of the image. These two things deny each other, but they start to support each other as well. It's beautiful because of the content, and then [the content is] quite brutish, sort of nasty, but it's also [the beauty of the image]– the superficiality of the image – that makes it acceptable. I think we know more about what is beautiful by studying what is bad. That's the way we get it. It's sad, but you can actually know more about beauty this way.

Alongside this, you presented Something as Beautiful, as Desirable, as Transcendent, as Evil (2010), a work made of two synchronized slide projectors, one showing gorgeously hideous 19th century medical and botanical drawings (images, essentially, of violence and sex) and the other depicting sequential images of the Space Shuttle Challenger's 1986 takeoff and explosion. There was something familiar and hypnotic about the clicking of those projectors, the whirring fans, and the stuttering images. It made me so aware of the act of looking and the fact that time was passing.

It also reminded me of the Rodney King trial, which took place in LA during the 90s. Members of the LAPD were caught on video beating King without provocation; attorneys slowed that tape down and eventually turned it into a series of stills, and they used the stills to create a new narrative in which the police did nothing wrong. Remarkably, the jury bought it.

The use of the projectors is about timing. The actual footage of the space shuttle explosion has been edited down to forty slides. Every two seconds, the slides change, and they loop, so [the work] plays with the relationship between the still and the video. Because of the timing, you start to pay quite a lot of attention to the image itself, rather than what's going on in terms of the narrative. Of course, you get the narrative at the very end, when you see it's an explosion of something—maybe it's a rocket. If you have the knowledge – if you've seen the original footage before – you will get the idea that there are sixteen human beings inside. The timing of the slides connects to technology itself. At some point [in the work] you're dealing with death. That is very profound for me, because it was a peak point in human science.



Something as Beautiful, as Desirable, as Transcendent, as Evil, 2010, 2 sets of looped slides projection (40 slides each set)

You mean the U.S. space program at that time?

Yes. By that time NASA and the U.S. were very confident in what they were able to create. It was as if they were saying, "We are a superpower." And it was a peak point for mass media, because that was the first time they did a simulcast. Only one of the astronauts was a professional, the others were volunteers. So it was like the whole society was encouraged to be involved.

As if we can all be astronauts...

Right.

If I remember correctly, they were showing it live in classrooms throughout the U.S. The explosion was quite traumatic.

The media itself has the power to create collective experiences, but that was also what captured the point at which it turned into disaster, which changed our moral standards. The whole thing is like the story I told you – it has quite similar qualities. And then images came out of it, and the images became very, very beautiful somehow, especially now – they suit our contemporary taste very much. [This image is] something from which you always get satisfaction, but it's a forced satisfaction from something that is quite brutal and nasty.

Alongside that, I displayed botanical and anatomical plates from the 18th and 19th centuries, made before the camera [was invented], using techniques designed to copy reality for research purposes. At that time, they were not dealing with the aesthetic or artistic qualities of the image; it was only to record. Before photography, one had to actually know the technique [of realistic reproduction], and had to do it in a very precise way. Now these sorts of images have lost their function; they no longer serve any medical or scientific purpose. They just become images, and we give them a quality that is very close to aesthetic perfection, because they represent a lost skill. They look very "vintage" and suit our tastes very much. So these images become very beautiful things to look at, even if they are all dealing with death and disease. The plants and flowers look so beautiful, but they're actually dead – everything is dead. So the work is about history, it's about science, it's about transcendence, but it's also about beauty. The content of the image is denying the possibility of beauty, but our taste allows the beauty to deny the content as well.

I was doubtful about whether our moral values are really so secure. Our language makes it seem like everything is quite fixed in its own terms, but there's an impossibility or limit that is quite difficult for language to deal with. You experience something and you lose your feeling of security, but you are also attracted to the intoxication of such experiences.

Now you're talking about the limits of representation and language, and the intensity of extreme experiences. The first two times we met, I noticed you were carrying around Bataille's Erotism: Death and Sensuality.

I got really into Bataille's writing, but I don't consider it to be critical guidance for my own thinking. Bataille himself is communicating an impossibility, so his language is not trying to offer you complete comprehension of his ideas. I think he's trying to create an experience. If, at the end of a long day, you think you understand Bataille and have clarity about what he's writing, maybe you're actually moving further away from him.

That's the trouble with Bataille. He wants to undo systems of meaning, so the minute you try to systematize his thinking, it becomes very difficult.

He's not like other philosophers, who are trying to create or establish a new system, which can battle with other systems, so that new things can be produced from these conflicts. But I think Bataille is always [operating] inside the system. He never really belonged to any party, and he used Surrealism to subvert the whole system, to do damage. That is very close to the culture and politics of today. You might feel that there are conflicts or battles going on, but actually these transgressions are happening inside the system, which is fully protected by the laws of the system. We are still talking about revolution, but actually it's not possible.



Blithe Tragedy, 2010, extract still from original format: Red One digital transferred to 35 mm film, Betacam, Blu-Ray DVD, 14 mins 56 secs

You've talked to me a lot about the difference between making people think and making them believe, and how in your work you strive for the latter. Can you explain this difference, and describe the effect you're trying to have on your audience?

In the latest film, *Blithe Tragedy*, I am trying to examine that point. There are so many insecure things going on, and of course you are also dealing with representation and the meanings of things and symbols. I think that's the way we look at art now: we try to find the meaning of a piece. This raises quite a big question about the function of art: whether art is supposed to be critical or is now just a very weak reflection of our tastes and what's going on around us. I also think that there's a power of art that at some point makes people start to believe rather than comprehend, rather than understand, and I think that's very powerful.

Re-entry Shock and the Branding of Contemporary Chinese Art

Let's talk a little bit about coming back to China. How has your experience been? How are you finding your way in the art system here?

People here think that they are playing on the international level, but they are focusing a lot on how they can play locally. I don't feel they understand that there are a whole lot of things going on outside this locale. It's weird. I think some basic things just make the situation different here.

Like what?

People's knowledge and education are different – and also what sort of information they are able to access. That's also one way that this country operates on cultural information. [With respect to information, there is the question of] how much [the government] wants you to receive, and on another level, how much information you want to receive. I think it's difficult sometimes, especially for someone who doesn't speak English.

I fear it's getting more nationalistic here. So many people don't even care about what's happening abroad.

Those things happen everywhere. When I was in England, it was the same. Some Sunday evenings I would turn on the TV and all the news would be about what's going on in England. People don't give a fuck about what's going on outside, unless it hurts them or touches them in same way. So I don't think that's one of the main things that affects China. The art scene is somewhat bizarre, but it's flourishing. Young artists don't have much pressure. Maybe it's good; maybe it's bad. Compared to young artists in Europe, many artists here in China have quite a comfortable life. They have very large studios, and they have access to many resources, like production resources, where in Europe these things would cost a lot. [In Europe] you can rarely have those things when you're young. Maybe it's good, maybe it's bad – I'm not sure. I just think there's a big problem.

There's a big problem?

Yeah. There's a big problem. And it's inextricable.

What it is?

It's the branding of Chinese contemporary artists. It's already in place. It's going to take years for someone Chinese to be able to play at the very top international level.

So how do you deal with that label of "Chinese contemporary artist?" Do you reject it entirely? Can you use it strategically? How does it work for you?

I don't know. One of the weird things I have found is that for the Chinese artists who participate in a lot of international exhibitions, they are all part of that brand. It's kind of sad. But I think for many people this is not a really big issue. They think they can make a new "Chinese contemporary art."

Rebrand it?

Yeah. But I don't know how you really get engaged with that. As I said, I used to spend days in the library, and I would go through all the books, no matter whether they were about modern art, Asian art or contemporary art. I wish one day that I'm able to compete with those dead [artists'] names. I just hope I have that ability.

I was talking to another young artist a few days ago and she was saying she feels there is a lot of pressure to demonstrate the "Chinese" aspect of the work, to be a part of the brand...

I'm not saying people are expecting us to be a part of that brand, but I do think it's a pressure that we put on ourselves. Actually, I don't know if it's them or us.

If you look at the system, whose works sell for the most at auction? Who is getting picked up for representation by top galleries? Since we have so little museum or

nonprofit support for contemporary art here in China, the market is the thermometer that indicates what is hot, what is important. And I agree that some of those Chinese artists who have reached the highest levels of commercial success are those who still deploy symbols of "Chineseness." But I think it's getting much more interesting now.

Yeah, it is. But I still don't know. It's good, but on the other hand, I don't know if Chinese artists are able to play on that [top] level. I don't know whether things will turn out differently, or will remain the same. It's not about individual practice. If the whole system has a problem, you cannot expect one thing to change the whole.

Who do you want to compete with?

There are loads of dead [artists'] names. I wish one day that I can [compete with them].



Huang Ran

About Huang Ran

Huang Ran (b. 1982, Xichang, Sichuan Province, China; lives and works in London and Beijing) graduated from the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (BA Hons, 2004) and Goldsmiths College, University of London (MFA, 2007). The artist's work has been presented in numerous group exhibitions, including *ACT > TION*, Long March Space, Beijing (2011); *Basel Film*, Art Basel 42 (2011); *Video Review*, BWA Contemporary Art Gallery, Katowice, Poland (2011); *You Art Not a Gadget*, Pékin Fine Arts, Beijing (2011); *Beijing Voice: Isolated or Together*, Pace Beijing (2010); *Projectables*, 7th Mercosur Biennial, Brazil (2009); *Move*, Werkleitz, Germany (2009); and *Où va la vidéo 00.00.02*, Fondazione March, Parvoda, Italy (2009). In 2009, Huang was one of 16 artists selected to participate in the European Media Artists in Residence Exchange (EMARE) program, with support from the European Culture Programme and Arts Council England. The artist's solo exhibitions include *Blithe Tragedy*, Space Station, Beijing (2010) and *Fake Action Truth*, George Polke, London, UK (2010).