



WHAT LIES BENEATH

Huang Yong Ping's installations are brain-teasers that never resolve. They fuse esoterica from East and West, past and present, in an attempt to comment on the world and our place in it.

BY MAX CROSBIE-JONES / PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHAKKAPAN IM-AREE

L'ombre Blanche (2009).

Do artists enjoy playing highbrow cat-and-mouse? Judging by a meeting with Huang Yong Ping – the Paris-based Chinese installation artist whose achievements include representing France at the Venice Biennale – there’s one who relishes it. Are you religious? “No,” followed by an awkward silence. Are you an optimist or a pessimist? “What do you think?” There are points during our interview when I can almost see the faces of other obstinately uncooperative artists from down the ages whispering conspiratorially into his ear: ‘Don’t give your secrets away, Huang. Pull the cloak in tighter. The less said, the better.’

It should be said, though, that this slight, bespectacled and otherwise self-effacing artist has the goods to back up his slipperiness. At the current BACC exhibition *Imply/Reply* – in which some of his past works and one new one are in conversation with those of Thailand’s Sakarin Krue-on – there are answers out there. But to find them, you must first submit to *his* game – let his highly conceptual form of crypto-philosophical and often cataclysmic installation art ask some tough questions of you.

Most pressing of them all is: why has he placed two lion’s cages, each with bones and faeces festering away inside them, at the entrance and exit of the BACC show? When pressed about this, Huang is not quite so cagey. *Passage* (1993), he explains, was originally a site-specific work created for a show at Glasgow’s contemporary art centre. For that, signs for “EC Nationals” and “Others” appeared above each one, the piece serving as a droll (and pungent) response to the passport control he had encountered at Glasgow Airport. But



Huang Yong Ping and new work, *Towers* (2014).



The Nightmare of George V (2002).



La Pêche (2006).

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here, the signs – easily missed if you don’t know to look for them – read “Nationals” and “Others.” Dividing audiences between them and us, and drawing a link between the gatekeepers of state borders and zookeepers, there is a cynical (as well as nasal) stench about this work. And in this show, that stench hardly lets up.

Animals feature prominently, as they do in much of his work. Vultures pick at the trailing viscera of a laughing Buddha statue at the back of the gallery. A giant reptilian wolf being ensnared by a fishing rod strung with religious icons occupies a corner. And there are two elephants in the room. One has stepped out of its skin to reveal a white torso; the other carries a howdah and an attacking Nepalese tiger on its back. The latter, *The Nightmare of King George* (2012), is one of his best-known works, functioning as a sort of post-colonial wish fulfillment/vengeance fantasy that reimagines the gruesome outcome of one of King George V’s safari expeditions.

There is nothing remotely cutesy or doleful about his use of them. And “they are not symbols,” he insists. He is no impassioned ecologist. He uses taxidermied animals regularly. One of his most controversial pieces, *Theatre of the World* (1993), even pitted live tarantulas, scorpions, millipedes and small snakes against one another in a cage. This and other Huang works imply a state of aloof indifference to, and even compliance with, the Darwinian game of survival and the casual blood-letting that results from it. It’s an indifference that could be read as being mimetic of the world’s own indifference. He is not trying to change the world; he is

merely reminding us of its callous and unharmonious nature and our place as the most disruptive agent in it.

While his works draw heavily from Western tropes and often riff on international incidents, Huang’s upbringing was a very Chinese one. He was born in the Southwestern coastal city of Xiamen in 1954. In 1977 he enrolled at the Zhejiang art school, the first arts academy established after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Initially, he practiced the prevalent art of the time – state-sanctioned social realism – but when restrictions relaxed he began comparing and cross-pollinating the traditional Chinese philosophies of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism with the more alien concepts contained within translated Western texts. The ideas of Duchamp, Foucault, Wittgenstein and Beuys, among other iconoclastic artists, philosophers and social theorists, permeated his consciousness and fermented in him a desire to question – in his own unique way – conventions, beliefs and hierarchies. “It is the collision between ancient beliefs and new knowledge that drives Huang’s art,” as *Frieze* magazine has put it.

He’s no stranger to bold artistic statements. He has placed Chinese and Western art history books into washing machines, then tossed the soaked pulp out across gallery floors. He has used roulette wheels to determine the shape and colour and outcome of paintings. Art-historically, his most important and celebrated provocation of all came in Xiamen in 1986, when the avant-garde art collective he co-founded, Xiamen Dada, disposed of a collection of Art Povera-style ready-mades by burning them in the yard of the city’s New Art Museum on Hubin Nan Road. *We came empty handed and will return empty handed. This is a show that is workless*: read the statement for the show. “This act inspired a cognitive revolution in the creation of art in China,” he explains. “It was a form of fierce resistance to conventional forms – a rebellion against the ideas of socialism and realism, and the distortion of traditional Chinese arts by adding something else into them.” Looking back, he views this as

the source from which the rest of his work has naturally flowed. “It was the beginning point at which we broke out,” he says, “rearranged our position and destroyed the balance in order to create new things.”

Compared to many of his Chinese-born contemporaries, Huang is something of a recluse. Inured from and unimpressed by the art world and its obsessions with star artists, excessive hype and big money, he spends nearly all his time working of his studio in the suburbs of Paris (he went there for a show at the Centre Pompidou in 1989 and, after the Tiananmen Square crackdown, decided to stay), emerging usually only when he has a show to prepare. “Huang doesn’t give a damn,” his Paris dealer, Kamel Mennour, has said. “Sometimes I’ll point out important clients to him, but it makes no difference. He never goes to openings or parties, never reads magazines. He wears the same pants and shoes every day. He’s just obsessively focused on his work.” Still, being detached from the art world hasn’t expunged him from the art world. Though his installations aren’t of the easily collectable sort, they are still collected by a small coterie, namely museum institutions and super-collectors such as Francois Pinault and Budi Tek, both of whom own private museums large enough to display his creations. He is not damning of his champions, but prefers to keep his distance nonetheless. And the same goes for his fellow artists, whom he both admires and distrusts.

Given his lack of commercial instinct, it’s no surprise that Huang courts obfuscation and bristles when asked to play the game – the journalistic one. Are you an optimist or a pessimist? When he fires that question straight back at me with a mischievous smirk and a “What do you think?,” I reply that his work seems to me to lean towards a dark, almost nihilistic pessimism. “Come back tomorrow,” he says, laughing heartily, “you might think differently.” ✖

“Imply/Reply” runs until April 26th at the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre, 939 Rama 1 Road. www.bacc.or.th



Passage (1993/2005).