

ArtReview Asia



Guan Xiao

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Yan Xing *Thief*

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Over the past few years, Yan Xing has become known for disrupting and obscuring narratives drawn from classical Western art-history as a means of deterritorialising his artistic practice; his latest exhibition elaborates this cornerstone of his production.

The exhibition is divided into four rooms, each with its own title and theme. In *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (all works 2015), the centre stage is occupied by a wooden writing desk, arrayed with various personal items: a pair of reading glasses, two books, a bottle of sleeping pills. A couple of chicken bones along with a pencil is carefully placed around a set of photographs of Ancient Greek sculptures. In a few carefully choreographed photographs, two persons are leaning over the same table, as if they are in the process of deciding the final placement of the objects. On another wall, a large sheet of transparent plastic is stretched out like canvas on a wooden frame, masking the photographs hanging on two of the walls. The third corner of the room looks like a paint job in progress, left behind with all the necessary tools needed to finish. As a whole, this *mise-en-scène* brings to mind the atmosphere of a European film-noir crime-scene riddle.

Throughout the exhibition, the Chinese character 'shòu' is to be found on various artefacts. It is a character that is often used

at Chinese funerals to honour the life of the deceased. For the reader of Chinese, this character adds a sense of tension; when encountered, it conveys a subtle notion of mortality – a feeling that permeates the entire exhibition.

In the space titled *Tendon*, 'shòu' is engraved on a bronze plate that is placed together with a chrome block. The sculpture rests against the wall, evoking associations with a gravestone. On the wall Yan elaborates on his past photographic series *American Art* (2013) by displaying a selection of nude photographs of posing black men. It is a series that clearly talks to Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial 1986 exhibition, *Black Males*. A floor sculpture occupying a third of the ground space references American minimalist Carl Andre. The character 'shòu' appears again, woven in black into the corners of white silk handkerchiefs. An old picture of Yan's mother hangs at the entrance to the exhibition room. Juxtaposed with the aforementioned references to the collective history of Western contemporary art, it opens up a whole array of inquiries into the notion of personal and cultural identity.

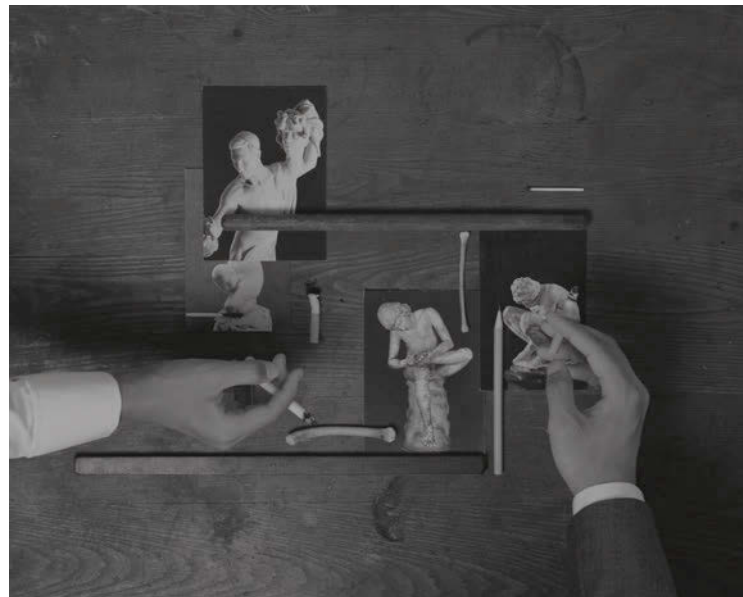
In the third room, titled *The Story of Shame*, two photographs half hidden behind their own fake walls immediately catch the eye. As in the first room, objects used in the sculptural constellations on the floor leap into the hands

and feet of unknown individuals portrayed in photographs on the walls. We are pushed into an aesthetic dilemma since the photographs are purposely hidden, thus obscuring the grounds for judgement of the single works. It is clear that what is at stake here is everything that is not there.

In the last room is the work *Thief*, a silent video consisting of three scenes: two young men at the scene of a theft, closeups of the flexing muscles of a real horse and slow-motion footage portraying a young gymnast practising on a pommel horse. The short closeups of flexing muscles, the sweating and spitting when the gymnast gasps for air or the erect penis of a horse conveys a strong homo-erotic sensibility.

Yan Xing aims at taking his practice beyond notions of cultural categorisation, not by neglecting culture specificities, but rather by juxtaposing references across both cultural and historical barriers, often via the personal. It is this aim at deterritorialising contemporary art that makes his artistic practice, along with a few others from his generation, a political statement; an attempt to liberate artistic practice from the regional segregation and regional identification that still prevails in writings about contemporary art and its histories.

Kristian Mondrup Nielsen



The Aesthetics of Resistance (detail), 2015, inkjet print, dimensions variable.
Courtesy Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing & Lucerne