

MAGICIAN SPACE

魔金石空间



他们还是我们？ Them or Us？

潘泓钢 胡有辰 Pan Honggang and Hu Youchen

策展人：凯伦·史密斯 curator : Karen Smith

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Them or Us?

A Project by Pan Honggang and Hu Youzhen

By / Karen Smith

In 2009, when Pan Honggang and Hu Youzhen were under-graduate students of the sculpture department at Sichuan Academy of Fine Art, they participated in an award scheme for young artists—the Earl of Cromer Scholarship Award for Contemporary Chinese Artists . The award, held annually at the academy, is open to students from across the country. In 2009, through its alignment with a similar award scheme operated by the Luo Zhongli Foundation, it received an impressive number of entries. Pan Honggang and Hu Yuzhen won the top award.

Their work stood out not just because it was sculptural, and took the form of a well-thought through installation, but because the works seemed uniquely to express an emotional state close to the artists. It was, thus, deemed expressive of their generation, and that used a highly individual approach to articulately that expression. The judges, of whom I was one, were unanimous in presenting these two promising young artists with the award.

Pan Honggang and Hu Youzhen's works comprised a group of eight semi-figurative sculptural forms that were part-human and part-animal, but that were all products of the artists' imagination. Each of the eight figures was placed on a carefully selected chunk of tree trunk that had been preserved with care: dried to relieve it of moisture, such that the tree bark remained intact along with the natural beauty. This group of nature's plinths was placed together just close enough, but just far enough apart to suggest a copse of trees. But in keeping with the unnatural nature of the creatures Pan and Hu had created, the ground beneath them was made of sand, not earth.

On encountering these creatures, one is immediately struck by their pale delicate "skin". Whether seen in full figure or as a bust (as three of the individual pieces are) this skin has a uniformly bluish and translucent quality, as if the fine veins and blood vessels that we can see barely beneath the surface, and which have been created, painted, with painstaking care, are vibrating with life. Here, the artists' careful choice of materials becomes apparent. Having been first completed using clay, they reproduced from moulds using a light weight polymer resin. This material is highly flexible in the surface finishes it can support. This first group of figures also showed the artists in the process of experimenting with various finishes—some shiny, some matt. This exploration is, to some degree, still in progress.

All of the figures in this first group wear some kind of head piece, which lends us the impression that even if we speak to them they would be unable to hear us. That motif represents one element of the isolation that surrounds the figures individually and as a group. The second element arises from the sense of physical containment that is suggested by the stunted growths that have been placed where the figures' arms should be: only one of these sculptures is equipped with arms in the human sense. The rest have some form of stunted growth closer to the wing stubs of a flightless bird or a marsupial flipper. At times standing tall, at times perched on their wooden stilts, these creatures are thus inalienably separated from each other. In "clipping their wings", the artists literally deny their creations the physical possibility of leaving their perch, thus once again reinforcing the aura of isolation, even as these figures appear to form a group. That sense of physical restriction is experienced by the audience as a sense of claustrophobia.

The final element that seals these creatures' isolation from us lies in their gaze. Hard as we try, we are unable to make eye contact with any of them. Of course, that's because these artworks are not real, even though at times they almost seem so. That aside, their gaze is consciously deflected away from any potential contact, at once introspective and obtuse.

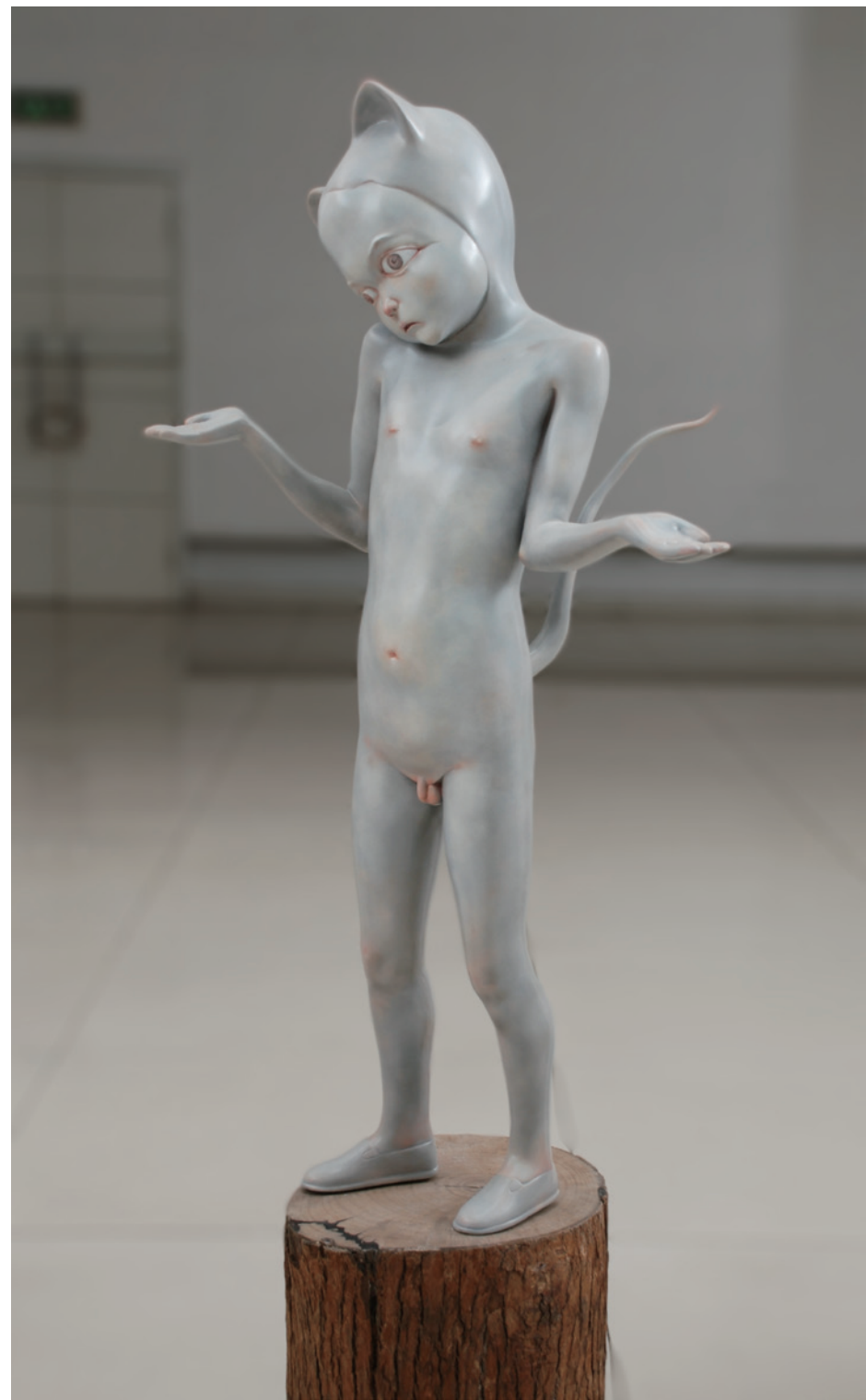
In the artists' words: "In our works, the form is our baseline, which we employ to convey our emotional state."

Perhaps, in these curious forms, some viewers might find creatures they recognize from comic books, from video games, from films. Yet, whatever the influences that lie behind these works, the final forms produce an aura, an ambience, that speaks directly to human experiences common amongst today's generation of one-child children in China. But in one sense, they have a resonance that extends beyond China alone, for across Europe, too, today many children are also single children and are equally products of a computer age, dominated by electronic social networks that place invisible but ever present immaterial barriers between these individual adolescents and society. In many ways, this young generation has morphed into exactly that alienated collective of frustrated, conflicted, and potentially paranoid or damaged individuals suggested in the character of Pink in The Wall, British rock band Pink Floyd's prophetic 1979 vision of a society that loses grip on the place of the individual and what were once defined as normal social relationships.

From that first group of eight pieces, a second group has evolved: seven new creatures are as a second generation to the first. In some ways, for obvious reasons of their physical form, these new figures are even more constrained than the first. Their arms, where these exist, almost glued to their sides, or joined to the body like the webbed digits of a water bird. The aura here is more silent, more haunting. The natural development of these creatures stunted in ways that did not afflict the first.

Having said that, in line with the aura of this type of artistic production in the early twenty-first century, Pan and Hu's magical creatures have their cute side, much as we might expect from artists belonging to a young generation fully aware of Hello Kitty, Japanese manga, and the work of artists like Murakami and Nara. Yet beyond this "cuteness", it is the haunting air of isolation and vulnerability that strikes the viewer most profoundly. In the exhibition space, the individual characters are placed in close proximity to each other. To the viewer encountering them, they appear to have clustered together as a measure of security or self-protection. One can almost hear them muttering words of reassurance to each other as if they wait with baited breath until the viewer has passed on and they are safely beyond the range of a human's gaze. Quiet to the point of silent, still to the point of stasis, seems to be their natural condition; penumbra their preferred habitat. As viewers, and with these creatures inside, we are made to feel as if the exhibition space has been transformed into some kind of zoo: but the question then becomes which of the occupants, these curious creatures, or us is the animal on display?

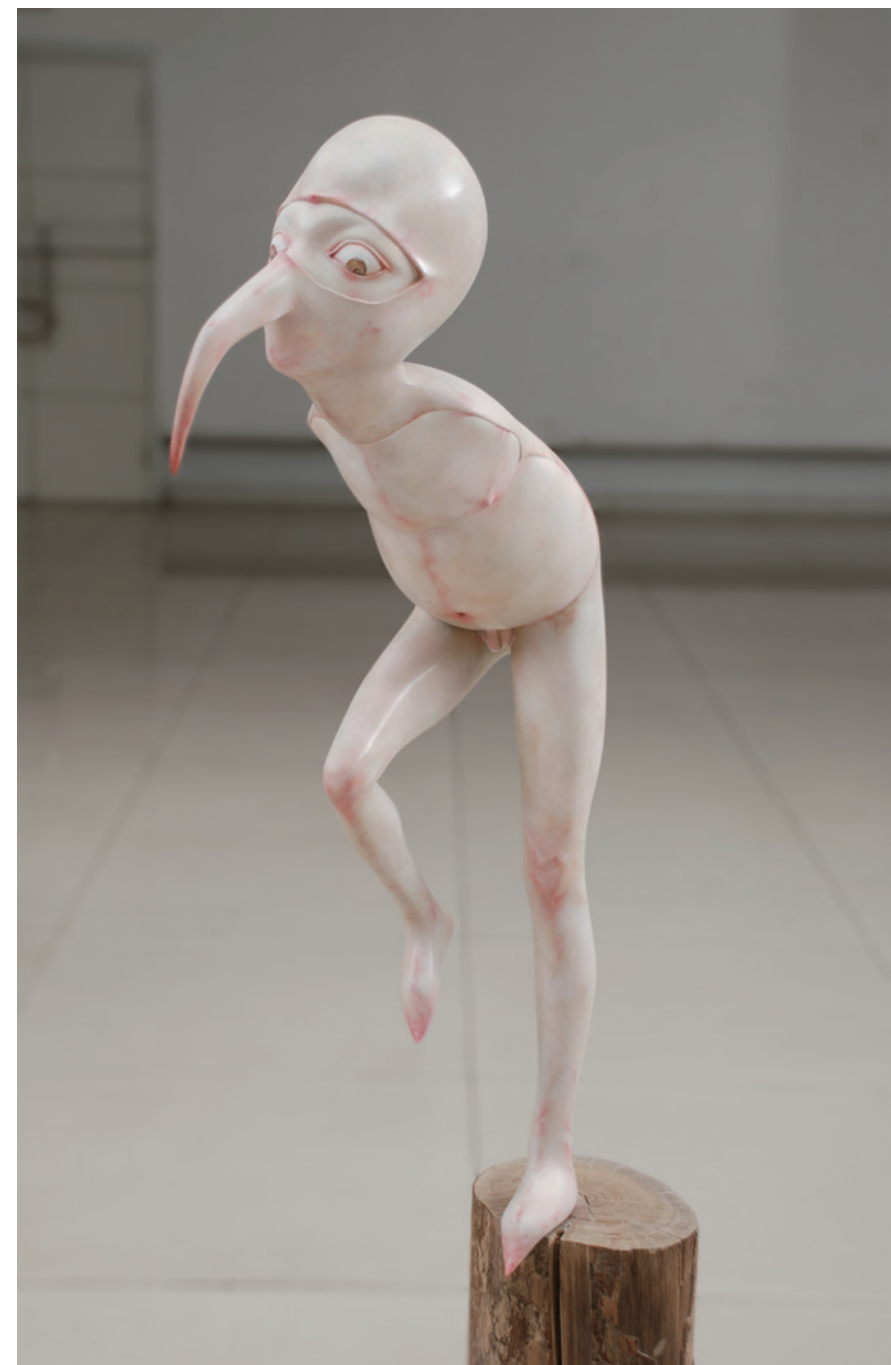
If There Is If NO.1
2009
Sculpture
Resin, Wood, Sand
95 x 58 x 39cm



If There Is If NO.2
2009
Sculpture
Resin, Wood, Sand
60 x 30 x 22cm



If There Is If NO.3
2009
Sculpture
Resin, Wood, Sand
92 x 52 x 20cm





If There Is If NO.4
2009
Sculpture
Resin, Wood, Sand
100 x 20 x 21cm



If There Is If NO.5
2009
Sculpture
Resin, Wood, Sand
38 x 58 x 25cm



If There Is If NO.6
2009
Sculpture
Resin, Wood, Sand
50 x 40 x 17cm



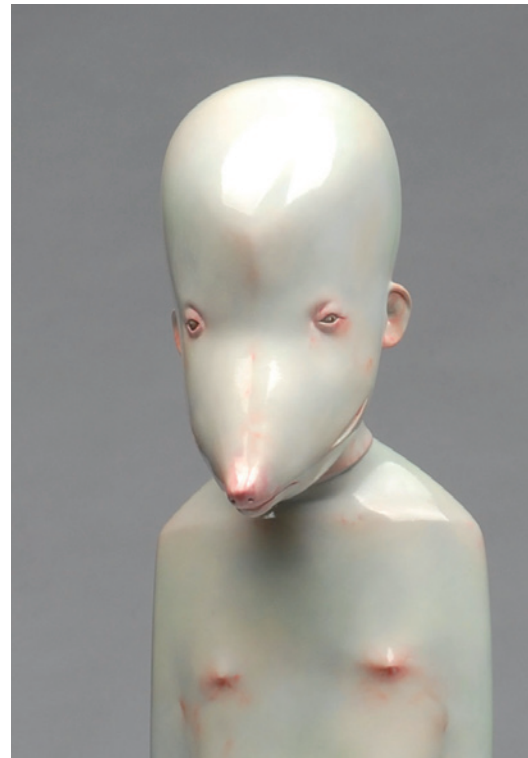
If There Is If NO.7
2009
Sculpture
Resin, Wood, Sand
69 x 30 x 23cm



If There Is If NO.8
2009
Sculpture
Resin, Wood, Sand
55 x 18 x 33cm

Milk Teeth
2010
Sculpture
Painted resin
80 x 18 x 21cm

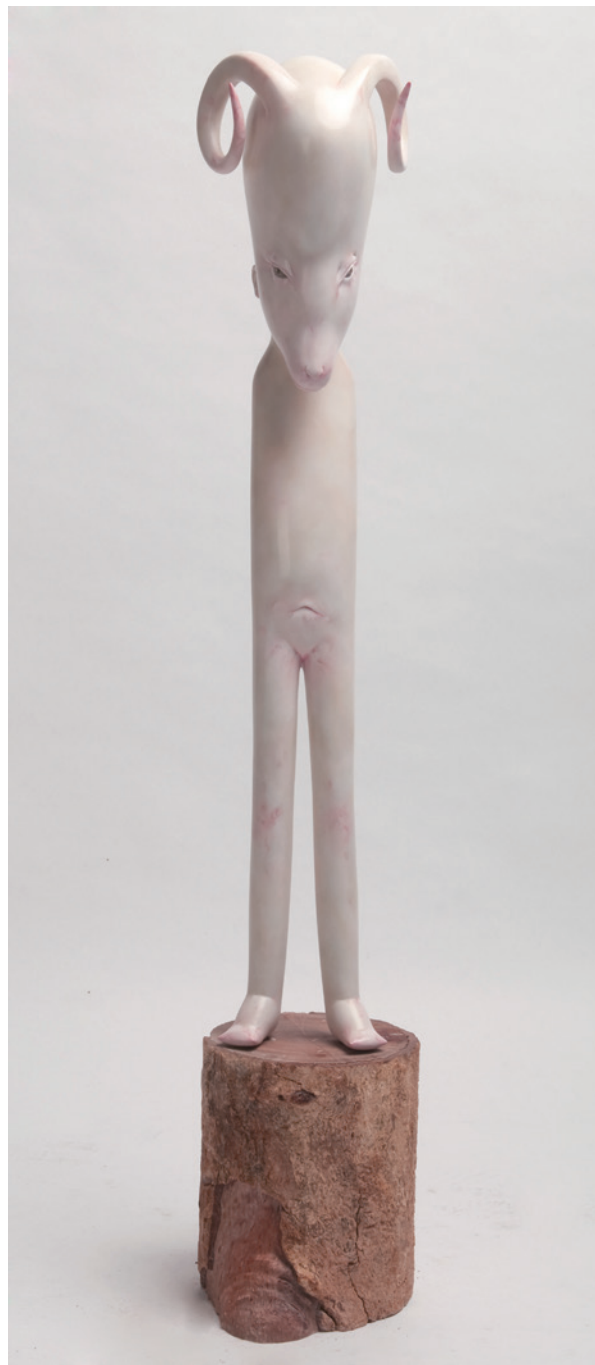




Mouse Paws
2010
Sculpture
Painted resin
90 x 18 x 19 cm

He
2010
Sculpture
Painted Resin
82 x 17 x 16 cm

She
2010
Sculpture
Painted resin
87 x 14 x 12 cm





Delusional Disorder
2010
Sculpture
Painted resin
87x 17 x 16 cm



Baby Elephant's Tusk
2010
Sculpture
Painted resin
83 x 28 x 18 cm



Bear
2010
Sculpture
Painted resin
82 x 17 x 14 cm



Tailless Dog
2010
Sculpture
Painted resin
65 x 36 x 12 cm







Media Reported

By Iona Whittaker/ Frieze

Previous Shows 2

Pan Honggang and Hu Youchen

MAGICIAN SPACE, 798 ART DISTRICT, BEIJING, CHINA

In an art district replete with giant galleries and accustomed to large-scale works capriciously arranged, *Them or Us?* feels unusually intimate. Magician Space is an up-and-coming gallery quietly but astutely staging strong exhibitions by emerging artists at its modest yet iconic. This scale is refreshing – it cultivates a feeling of closeness to the work that has become diluted in many of the area's larger venues. In *Them or Us?*, a collection of works by Pan Honggang and Hu Youchen, a young couple from Sichuan, this atmosphere is particularly potent.

Together they have created a group of anthropomorphic sculptures, their bodily forms and features in some ways human, in others animal; they are objects with which the first encounter is intriguing and uneasy.

In the first room, a group of figures is arranged in a rough arc,

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In the first room, a group of figures are arranged in a rough an, with sand dumped on the floor around their supports. At the apex is a seated child like male figure entitled *If There is No a* (c.1900). His painted resin face is grayer than that of the others but similarly translucent. His head is half covered in a red-stained hood as if from a tortoise, yet its color is the same as his skin. His eyes are big, their downward gaze seemingly removed from the gesture shaped by his hands and arms – something like a shrug, bent from the elbow, palms facing up. It is this figure alone that exerts a human like expressive gesture; the rest are unanimated or cold reproach, mounted (there are two busts) or standing on dried, rough-skinned tree trunks of varying heights – natural pedestals from which they cannot move.

Here we find ourselves and/or a cultish community of beings – mummy in tone, greyish or white as if having germinated in a lightless place. Their eyes, which are not large and anatomic, are discerning for their bluntness to those of tired children; the skin around them is puffy and pink-tinged like their other extremities – pointing, fingerless, smooth and loose. These are not robust creatures but restricted and fragile creatures. A common feature is typical protrusions like tiny horns, or flaps, antennae or mutated nicks that create an aura of fearfulness and restriction. One notices scars in their skin that detract from the norms of organic growth – join at the neck and wrists, or a line between the chest and back on a particularly weird figure, *If There Is I/No, 2* (500pp), its lips focused together beneath its drooping, pointed 'back'.

The artist's use form as a baseline from which to convey their emotional state. It is likely that these sculptures are born of the isolation felt by the one-child generation in China; although they depict physically different creatures, they share enough in common – negative features that are products more of fear than nature – to suggest a shared cohesion among them. They seem to convey a fragile space between optimism and darkness, vulnerability and horror, their pink lips suggestive of tears, or their shrines by heart or enlarged by paranoia.

If humans are selfish beings inclined to conform, then this exhibition becomes more about the emotional state of the viewer. To enter the exhibition at Magpiean Space alone is unwise, as it thrusts you into a group of beings you recognize in part but cannot penetrate. Their partial likeness to people clashes with our innate compulsion to categorize and understand, sparking the kind of self judgments we involuntarily make upon meeting someone for the first time. Quickly, however, their alien features interrupt our path to 'knowing' them. Coupled with a sense of emotional awkwardness from which humans naturally dissociate themselves, these sculptures perhaps operate, in physical form, the same we keep inside. Extrating through pallid skin, there is a power that strikes remarkably close to the bone.

Irena Whittaker

The artists use form as a baseline from which to convey their emotional state. It is likely that these sculptures are borne of the isolation felt by the one-child generation in China; although they depict physically different creatures, they share enough in common – negative features that are products more of nurture than nature – to suggest a silent cohesion among them. They seem to occupy a fragile space between cuteness and darkness, vulnerability and horror, their pink tips suggestive of hurt, their eyes shrunken by tears or enlarged by paranoia.

If humans are selfish beings inclined to conform, then this exhibition becomes more about the emotional state of the viewer. To enter the exhibition at Magician Space alone is unnerving, as it thrusts you into a group of beings you recognize in part but cannot penetrate. Their partial likeness to people clashes with our innate compulsion to categorize and understand, sparking the kind of silent judgments we intuitively make upon meeting someone for the first time. Quickly, however, their alien features intercept our path to ‘knowing’ them. Coupled with a sense of emotional awkwardness from which humans naturally disassociate themselves, these sculptures perhaps capture, in physical form, the unease we keep inside. Emanating through pallid skin, theirs is a power that strikes remarkably close to the bone.

Pan Honggang and Hu Youchen

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Reviews

Pan Honggang and Hu Youchen

★★★★★

Magician Space Until Saturday 30

In the last three decades, China has produced a handful of sculptors whose works have become recognisable icons in the international art world — Sui Jianguo's Mao suits; the elegant *qipao*s of Liu Jianhua; and Zhan Wang's stainless-steel scholar rocks. There's no doubt that China has produced accomplished sculptors. The question is where are the rising young ones whose talent is capable of expressing the interests of this current generation?

Yang Xingwei — born in 1980 — is remarkable for his work in wood, a simplicity that echoes Italian *arte povera*. But Yang represents a potential revolution in pure aesthetics. Pan Honggang and Hu Youchen, two young sculptors who work together, are different. This show proves that they have their technical and material charms, but — as importantly — it also suggests that two new artists have arrived on the scene whose aesthetic interests have finally captured the psychological and existential state of contemporary Chinese youth.

The artists have presented a sculptural group comprised of malformed humanoids and mythical half-person-half-beast, mixed-species bastards. They are the illegitimate wishes of the artists' own minds — imaginary orphans who, in the words of curator Karen Smith, manage to be both 'cute' and 'eerie'. The sculptures' gestures and expressions parallel the communicative adolescence of China's 'Me Generation', a generation reared on shopping malls and often accused of valuing material delights over the historical purpose and political passion of their predecessors.

To indicate this state of being, the sculptures rarely have well-formed ears, eyes or limbs with which to interact with the world. Or perhaps, what they want to express is limited by the constraints of the rather authoritative forest in which they reside. The smooth surfaces of the sculptures — executed in wood and polymer resin — form a sensuous contrast to their maligned forms. The juxtaposition of feelings that the work evokes in various viewers — of desire and repulsion, of perversion and sympathy, of familiarity and distance — camouflages any definitive statement made by the artists, and encourages repeated viewings. These wild things, whoever they are, grow on you. *SD*



19 Shows About Painting

★★★★★

Platform China

Until May 31

The positive aspect of this show is that there are loads of paintings. Most of it is technically competent, supported by a prevailing mixture of wry playfulness and visual gravitas. Chen Haitao and Sun Ning, the two curators who also established Platform China, treat this relaxed gallery-cum-courtyard space as a creamy, imaginative spot where 19 dedicated artists put their best strokes forward.

The flipside is that much of the work manages to be both intelligent and derivative. Liu Wenjian's 'Border Problem' — it depicts a German shepherd barking at the shut entrance of a gated compound — is compositionally solid, even as it echoes the conceptual concerns of Wang Xingwei. The quality of light in Wu Guangning's richly dark painting of a stone lion recalls recent works by veteran painter Zeng Fanzhi.

Xiao Bo's 'Nurse #2' — the nurse in her hospital blues set against an ash grey wall — hits you with a dirty immediacy, but it's hard to adore the piece for its originality when you recall tonally similar antecedents by Michael Borremans. The thing is, Xiao's painting still looks good enough that you wonder what else he's doing. Besides, you can't always crucify the



Eye spy? The 19 painters have clearly been inspired by their predecessors

young for aping their gods — it's the only way they turn divine.

Elsewhere, Liao Guohe remains the best painter in China who doesn't know how to paint. Love him or hate him, Liao's bad paintings — from still life to figures to landscapes — are compelling as aesthetic objects precisely

because they are so casual, as if you'd found yourself naked and alone with nothing but the painting before you and a freshly squeezed smoothie. The variety here at 19 Shows is still impressive enough that you walk away feeling as if you've taken the pulse of new Chinese painting scene. *Stacey D.*

Collections from the Uffizi



Mighty fine The show cements this gallery's reputation

★★★★★

Central Academy of Fine Arts Museum Until June 5

The CAFA Museum's primary aim is to bring world-class art to students and faculty at the Academy, but the recent calibre of the shows makes it an indispensable stop for art lovers outside of the institution as well. After an exhibition of works from

the Louvre collections last year, and now the current travelling show from Florence's Uffizi Gallery, the CAFA Museum has proven its bona fide quality: you're as likely to see a memorable work of art here as you are at established venues such as the National Art Museum of China.

So long as you approach the show less like a tourist hunting only for masterpieces and more like a student

of art history thrilled to see obscure and famous works in equal measure, the exhibit both satisfies and stimulates; 82 works are displayed covering the three main genres of painting: landscape, still life and portraiture. Each genre — as Anton Natali, Uffizi director and curator, notes in his catalogue preface — is buffeted by at least one well-known masterpiece considered representative of its respective genre.

We see a stunning portrait, for instance, of Cosimo II de' Medici by Filippo Napoletano. Caravaggio's basket of fruit — whether the fruit serves as *memento mori* or as an example of religious symbolism — can be taken as emblematic of the still-life genre. A landscape, such as Vincenzo Torreggiani's 'View of the Arno with the Santa Trinita Bridge' has so much going for it — its delicate use of *chiaroscuro*, its balanced composition echoing the city's architecture, and finally the way the canvas shines as the painter captures that inimitable Florentine sky.

Whether or not each work is by a painter whose name immediately rings a bell is immaterial. Even the lesser-known pieces here impress enough to demand a second viewing. *SD*

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