



The power of a smile

The power of the smile is a recurrent theme throughout art and popular culture. From the slightly curved lips of Leonardo's famous Mona Lisa, the edges upturned in an ironic curl, to the Joker's sinister lipstick-smudged sneer, laughter has the capacity to provoke us, making us question the status quo. Contemporary Chinese artist Yue Minjun's iconic laughing self-portraits entered the modern consciousness when his canvas "Execution" became the most expensive modern Chinese artwork sold when it fetched EUR2.93 million at auction in 2007. Now his toothy caricatures are being displayed for the first time in Macau at a new exhibition at the Macao Museum of Art (MAM). **P13**



- MOVIES: PHILOMENA
- BOOKS: KING AND MAXWELL BY DAVID BALDACCI
- MUSIC: SUNSHINE DAYDREAM BY GRATEFUL DEAD
- WINE: IN DEFENCE OF BEAUJOLAIS
- FOOD: THE VIRTUE OF SIMPLICITY

FEATURE

Art Museum showcases Yue Minjun's Neo-Idolatry

Vanessa Moore, Macau

In the age of the ubiquitous “selfie”, avant-garde Chinese artist Yue Minjun aptly features in his own laughing self-portraits as the signature icon and the recurring leitmotif of his work. He repeatedly portrays cartoonish figures with dentist-white grins set in brightly colored backgrounds to provoke audiences into self-reflection. In an exhibition entitled “Neo-Idolatry”, MAM plays host to Yue’s doppelgangers, with the artist’s studio also “transplanted” into the venue, together with his materials and tools, alongside his works including oils, installations and sculptures.

Within MAM’s modernist structure, the artist’s works are grouped into nine sections, including ‘Reworking the Portrait’, ‘Laughing Man’, ‘Journey to the West’, ‘Epidermis’, ‘Not a Soul’, ‘Maze’, ‘Triviality’, ‘Overlapping’ and ‘Re-Idolatry’. Speaking about the layout and subject matter, Yue reflected, “This exhibition is quite crazy. There’s no logic behind it and when the audience got here they just got completely lost. Probably they cannot tell that it’s crazy but it is”.

“This exhibition lives up to my expectations”, he continued, when describing the layout of the space. “When I first got here I saw the structure of the building was quite strange because there are a lot of walls that separate the space. Usually my exhibitions are in quite a simple setup, but this time, I managed to display a lot of different types of art such as oil paintings, sculptures, even this studio here”, he mused. “There’s not exactly a logic behind the connections of all my artworks and this space, but it just fits perfectly because there’s no logic in how to separate it. It makes a perfect exhibition overall. Things are connected in the space”.

“Most art is constructed around logic and based on academic theory, but this exhibition is against these theories”, Yue specified. “It is non-logical, non-academic theory based, so this is why you can see different styles in one exhibition as if different people had created all this work. Usually, for artists, they are expected to have something in a coherent style, but I didn’t care”, he said matter-of-factly.

Speaking about his figures’ signature laughing expression, on one level “it’s a laugh, it’s a



smile, it’s happiness”, the artist states; however he subverts the emotion through irony, using exaggerated pop art aesthetics. “This is my way of being ironic, to reflect the real pain of life and the world”, Yue explains. “I want to express the bitterness in life through the smiling face”. Reflecting on the prevalent emotions of irony and sarcasm in his work, he considers this to be no accident – his figures were “created based on humanity, that’s why I think these emotions were generated”.

The exhibition’s curator, Feng Boyi, has interpreted Yue’s laughter as “a kind of shameless

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laugh”, containing “the pleasure and humor of breaking taboos”. “Yue’s artistic creation is an exaggerated narrative, indulged imagination and continuous experiment. It highlights the essentials of existence via absurdity”, he writes. The painter himself previously described his own distinct perspective on laughter as “represent(ing) the denial of thinking, a feeling of impossibility about thinking about certain things, or difficult to think about, and a desire to get rid of it”.

On the title of “Neo-Idolatry”, Yue considers we are living in a

world filled with idols who use their own images repeatedly to advertise themselves and shake people’s beliefs. By reproducing the laughing man over and over, he endeavors to satirize icons and mock society. “We are fully living in a world packaged around idols”, he continues, “It’s not natural”. By using his own image to make a new anti-hero, he expresses his disdain, mocking this culture of idolatry. “Laughter is my best weapon”, he says.

The commercialized vacuity of pop art’s forms and color pallet reinforce the message of spiritual vacuum the artist aims to convey. One of the most notably pop art inspired canvases, Roles, is an oil painting in which his laughing avatar is placed in the middle of the composition with several famous ‘roles’ alongside, such as Marilyn Monroe, the Monkey King, and superhero Batman. But their lips are tightly shut on their emotionless faces, while a skull with a big grin due to its lack of muscles sits behind the laughing man, making the whole piece more paradoxical and absurd. In this way, Yue questions the modern-day concepts of stardom, celebrity and the notion of the hero.

However for the painter, the adaptation of pop art aesthetics was purely accidental. “The language of pop art is so prevalent, used all over the world. I don’t mean to copy or absorb ideas from other people, it’s just it happens to be that way”, he affirms. “It’s just that these kind of

symbols, they are already registered by these American artists, but this is not the right way to be because this is art”, he continues; “I got inspired, this is just my creation”. Moreover, Yue sees his output as a reflection on his circumstances. “The work was made when I was in a certain situation in the past. I had only ever been in China and didn’t have much exposure to other cultures, I just reacted to the situation that I was in”, he states.

Discussing copyright and people selling copies of his work on the street, Beijing-based Yue still views this as a cultural issue. “In Chinese culture, we have this concept of copying, just repeating again and again”, he describes. “If you want to learn Chinese calligraphy, for example the character for revolution “革”, if you want to

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learn this character, you have to repeat it one, two, maybe a hundred times”, he explains. “When people want to learn something, they just pick it up and start copying it. And so there are some artists copying my artworks and they’re just doing it. They don’t

realize this is a problem. Even people who are selling copies of my art, they don’t think there’s a problem, they’re just responding to Chinese culture and customs. Only those people who’ve gone abroad to study have this sense of or concept of copyright, but in China it doesn’t exist”.

Moving to the subject of politics and art, he comments that what happened to Beijing’s other famous artist Ai Weiwei was political. “Everybody knows the reason is because of the political situation. Everybody knows what’s happening”, he says. “We are subject to this environment, to this reality. That is exactly the reason why I use this laugh as the symbol of my artwork, to express myself”.

So should art be political? To answer this question, Yue points to the series of small portraits titled “Overlapping” in which the faces are blurred. The artist explained how he made two oil paintings and while they were still wet, he put them together and moved them. “Actually, I want to give painting another meaning”, he says. “The painting is not the receiver (vehicle) of the painter, but instead two paintings painting each other. This kind of concept didn’t happen in the West or Africa, it happened in China because the environment gave me this thought, so I think everything, including the political issues, are the stimulus for me to create work”.

“Yue Minjun: Neo-Idolatry” runs at MAM until 16th February 2014.