

“*Xie Kong*,” I said

Yin Jinan

(Trans by Lee Ambrozy)

Lately I’ve been thinking on Sui Jianguo’s recent works. On New Year’s Eve 2021, we were together at a dinner in Beijing where I said to him, “*Xie kong*—you are ‘describing emptiness.’” * He gave me a high five—I had expressed it in two words. And with that, we had our exhibition title. Artists are often lost inside their practice; they cannot find the words to express their ideas even after their artworks are complete. But this exhibition has particular significance.

Why use hands to mold clay? Am I saying that modeling a clay solid, the manipulating movements of one’s hands are equivalent to the work of other sculptors? Or am I thinking instead that the two entities of hand and clay coming together in the soft clay describe the empty space inside of the clasped hands, represent the void within, and use a solid to *xie kong*—to describe the emptiness? This work is based on Sui Jianguo’s continued reflections and efforts over many years, through which he has used freehand description and realistic expression in concrete materials to strive for the many potentialities for abstraction. He has investigated both spatial issues within time and temporal issues within space.

“*Xie kong*”—materializing invisible spatial states using clay, and then using 3D printing technologies to create a final form using materials that

replace the clay, achieves the ultimate simulation of a state of artistic emptiness. This is a kind of “anti-sculptural” sculpture, an “anti-form” form. His real intentions are neither artistic realism or freehand expression, nor figurative or abstract representation (all of which are positive expressions of form). In actuality, concepts of “negative form” in contemporary art ultimately describe tangible formal aspects, rather than “voids.” Their foothold is in form, not in emptiness. Sui Jianguo’s artistic intention is to “describe emptiness,” to use solids in defining a void (which is defined in freehand painting as “using form to describe the intangible” [*yi shi wei xu*], and based on a theory of inter-generative presence and absence), to create from nothing, and to realize the mutual causality of materiality and emptiness, wherein presence and absence become one. “Nothing” cannot be represented by “nothing,” and “emptiness” cannot illustrate “emptiness.” There are contradictory critiques within the ancient Chinese painting theory of *chuanshen lun* “conveying spirit,” of “using form to convey spirit while emptiness is its tangible inverse” (via Gu Kaizhi in the 4th century). I’m borrowing the notion of “emptiness and its tangible inverse” to articulate another motivating force behind “describing emptiness”—“visualizing emptiness from within the tangible.”

“Emptiness” is Sui Jianguo’s subject and his matter. “Solids” are Sui Jianguo’s tangible forms and materials for modeling. Using hands-on

techniques, he achieves empty-handedness; he achieves the void and eliminates his body, taking the description of spaces in his mind as parameters. In that case, I understand this to be art's emptiness and use actual discourse to formulate a "theory of emptiness."

September 26, 2021

In Guangzhou

Translated by An Jing

* Translator's note:

"*Xie kong*," here rendered as "describing emptiness," is a neologism that serves as a contrast and foil to two dichotomous concepts in modern art theory: *Xie yi* and *Xie shi*. These terms can be literally translated as "describing one's meaning" (*xie yi*) and "describing solid form" (*xie shi*), but they are more commonly translated as "freehand brushwork" (expressionism), and "realism." No English word can adequately describe the artistic operations described in "*xie kong*," thus the author would like to retain its Pinyin equivalent. This highlights the neologism's invoking of the intrinsic tensions between freehand, expressive traditions and figurative, realist interpretations which would otherwise be lost in translation.

"Describing Emptiness"—An interview with Prof. Yin Jinan

Q: The "empty space inside of clasped hands," "tangible inverse," and "realism and freehand brushwork in figuration" you discussed in your exhibition preface are all very new concepts. Can "*xie kong*" (writing/describing emptiness) be understood as an artist's inquiry into the possibilities of freehand brushwork

using the “tangible inverse” in materials or techniques? Additionally, can we understand tangible form and emptiness as coexisting?

A:

You cannot know space in the absence of solid form. For example, how can you know space if I do this? You cannot. “Emptiness” is attested to by the existence of physical objects, which inform you what absence or “emptiness” actually is. What does “emptiness” look like? Forms regulate such a condition.

“Emptiness” cannot be seen with human eyes. “Emptiness” and “solids” in fact have a time difference. Imagine that I never kneaded this shape—“emptiness” existed first, and “substance” appears only after I shape the clay.

So it is a temporal process, and the entity appears later to describe the state of “emptiness” that preceded it. This is a relationship predicated on a temporal shift, a time difference.

Q: Is “writing” (*xie*) a particular characteristic of artistic creation? Is it something unique to Chinese art and culture?

A:

As for why I use the concept of “writing emptiness,” it is because on the whole—whether in Chinese art discourse or Western criticism, or at least in the Western field of Sinology—art historians familiar with Chinese painting know that China historically had a period of so-called “realism” (*xie shi*) There was also a period called “freehand brushwork,” (*xie yi*). In Chinese both of these words include the character *xie* (“to write”). What does it mean to “write” (*xie*)? “To write” is “to inscribe”—which does not imply that something with form is constructed or manufactured.

Yet much of contemporary art is manufactured. For example, prints are made, not drawn, and they are ultimately completed through a physical process of rubbing. The same is true for sculpture; a form is made in plaster,

and then translated into fiberglass-reinforced plastic, finally cast in metal or another material. This is also a process of production, a quasi-industrial process, it is not a process of “writing.”

I have discussed with the question of spontaneity with Sui Jianguo. It is important to note that the “natural” (*ziran*) in “spontaneity” (*ziran erran*) does not have the same meaning as “nature” (*ziran*) as it is translated into English. What I mean by “*ziran*” here is “personal freedom.” Natural as a state of freedom to act as one pleases, which is called “acting naturally,” right? Natural is a condition, a thing. Therefore, Sui Jianguo’s process of modeling also has elements of “writing” in it.

Q: What is the relationship between “inscribing” (*shu xie*) in classical art and “describing emptiness” (*xie kong*) in contemporary art?

A:

Generally speaking, how we define a technique as modern or classical is simple. All classical art has written components, and will involve muscle memory. Both Chinese painting and calligraphy both involve such a thing, but it is different.

Printmaking appeared early on—in the second half of the Tang Dynasty, but why did it persist until relatively late? The art of printing, typography, is quasi-industrial. It does not involve movement or muscle memory. In the past, painting a portrait was called “*xie zhen*” (writing reality), and painting birds, flowers or landscapes was called “*xie yi*” (freehand brushwork)—both were forms of “writing” (*xie*) that used a brush.

In fact, in Sui's work this spontaneity and natural condition echoes the “writing” aspects echoed in our classical past. But he accomplishes something that classical art never could, because there has never been such a thing as “describing emptiness”—everything before was either realistic or freehand, and it was all figurative.

Q: Is there a figurative element in freehand brushwork (*xie yi*)? What does it mean? And how might it intersect with “describing emptiness”?

A:

In fact, they are all figurative, but Sui is just more obscure and dramatic, it's not whether a painting recreates a state of reality. Realism as a school is more about reproduction, and at its core is portraiture. Historically, in the West and in China, portrait painters enjoyed the highest status. The status of landscape painters was the lowest, and it was even lower for painters of still life. This was true in Western cultures as well as in ancient China. When did this change? After the rise of small and medium-sized landlords, and this was because freehand brushwork reflected their aesthetics values. These changes occurred in the late Northern Song Dynasty. For example, literati tastes influenced calligraphy, and freehand painting styles became more important in painting.

True freehand painting did not appear before the Tang Dynasty, everything was still called “writing the true” (*xie zhen*). Contemporary Japanese still retains the old sayings of the Tang Dynasty, and in Japanese “photography” still uses the same characters as “*xie zhen*”. The original intention of a photo was to authentically replicate an image. The person in the painting is exactly like the person you see before you, so it is called “writing reality” (*xie zhen*).

But there was no such thing as “writing emptiness” back then. Because there was no theory to support “writing emptiness” in any true sense.

Q: How does “writing emptiness” unfold in the hands of Sui Jianguo?

A:

Sui's earlier series “Blind Portraits,” even though creating while he was blindfolded, are still considered sculpting, not “writing.” Even though he punched, kicked, and even threw mud down from a second story, he was still

modeling, not anti-modeling. To form means to create something according to your will, according to your ideal, and with your own eyes. Therefore, the “Blind Portraits” were a transitional stage in his sculpture.

But one of the biggest changes occurred since he started kneading clay; this is because he is not sculpting it. In the process of the artist “kneading clay,” he cannot see what he is creating. However, he continued to maintain tactility, using an invisible process of “kneading,” which was also equivalent to the actions of a blind person.

However, the artist can feel the interactions between flesh and the clay. These interactions are alive, they can be felt, even though the artist is unaware of the final shape. But, why would he say “there are 100 moments,” or “there are 40 moments,” and each one is different? He doesn't even know himself. That is to say, each moment of emptiness is only visible after being kneaded in clay, this is the only way to visualize the different forms of “emptiness” that accompany each moment. This is what I'm talking about: using a concrete entity to realize the non-entity that is “emptiness.” Without such forms, you would never see what “empty” looks like. “Emptiness” also has form.

Q: The form of “emptiness” is not easily understood. How does it come into being?

A:

When Sui Jianguo gave a lecture at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, I participated in the discussion and I used this relevant analogy: I used to study archaeology. Many people mistakenly believe that human bones will turn into stone after tens of thousands of years. This is false assumption. Bone will never become stone. It is common sense to know that organic matter can only rot and disappear. It will never transform into an inorganic substance. Only inorganic substances can exist as inorganic substances; stones will always exist in the form of stones. For example, the fossilized skull of the cave man at

Zhoukoudian in Beijing is definitely not the skull itself. The skull disappeared and was replaced by an inorganic substance and has thus been completely transformed.

What kind of thing could transform a human bone into a stone? It is a process of petrification, wherein the original organic matter is continuously decaying, and it forms an empty shell. It is generally possible to form empty shells in karst topographies. However, it is not so possible in Japan, where the acidic soil ensures a thoroughness of decay is beyond other soils. So how does one know there was once a state of “emptiness” in this shell-forming process? This state of “emptiness” is related to Sui's work. It is a kind of lava, dripping endlessly into it the shell, replacing the void little by little in a process that takes tens of thousands of years to complete. Lava that drips for a long time will form a shape like a stalactite. This is the process of constant trickling into the “emptiness,” filling the “void” before revealing the fossil that remains. So it would be more accurate to say that the fossil is “a state after the disappearance of the bone.”

Why would I arrive at the concept of “describing emptiness”? It is related to the discussion above. It is natural in academic experience to find the source that is closest to us. Here it is the long, boneless, empty time we just spoke about. The form that will not appear until the void is supplanted by stone.

Q: The title “Describing Emptiness” is quite unique. How did you come to associate this concept with Sui Jianguo's sculpture?

A:

If we peeled away everything else, Sui's works resemble the petrification process. He accelerates this process of petrification, instantly filling a momentary “emptiness,” and instantly expressing its form. After a process of

enlarging by 3D printing, this massive and originally fragile “void” is realized through high-tech methods.

You may notice that many critics and scholars, when faced with new works, are particularly prone to return to older or existing theories and familiar means of elaborating its meaning. This is not my habit, I'm always looking for new ideas or theories to describe novel material states.

My practice of characterizing his work as “describing emptiness” actually occurred at Sui's place. I truly have never seen this practice from any other artist. At a New Year's Day dinner, I was suddenly inspired to use the title “describing emptiness.” It embodies the traditional practice of muscle memory, spontaneous expression, and also the concept of “the void.” Although Sui's practice never merely relies on notions of muscle memory, touch, or writing.

That is to say, by using a form of “writing” (*xie*), it is still possible to create something modern, even ultra-modern. And this is because most contemporary artists are “manufacturing”—creating contemporary artworks through processes of fabrication, and not writing or inscribing.

October 10, 2021

Translation by Lee Ambrozy