



Utopia is Here—The Art of Hanison Lau Hok Shing

2011-5-9 09:18 | 发布者: kejing | 查看: 261 | 评论: 0 | 原作者: Stephanie Cheung

摘要: 有关香港艺术家刘学成的评论文章。

Utopia is Here—The Art of Hanison Lau Hok Shing

Stephanie Cheung

Hanison Lau Hok Shing searches for utopia in his art. Before becoming an artist, Lau was trained in graphic design at Melbourne's Swinburne University of Technology. That, however, did not lead him to where he aspired to be. In 2001, he made his way back to Hong Kong, where he enrolled in an art programme and began a new journey.

A milestone in Lau's reroute is *Utopia Search Engine* (2004; fig. 1), done as the graduation project for his first diploma in fine arts. Thematically, the search for utopia is presented as reaching for the sky. The work is composed of photographs, ready-made objects and sculpture. A concrete tablet is turned into a springboard with thousands of rubber bands wrapped near one end. In the direction of the spring, there is a tower made up of a deck of photographs. A needle poking through the photographs points to a suspended sculpture, again composed of rubber bands. They form yarn balls of various sizes, and are tied together to look like a cloud. In the middle of the set, a ladder leading to a collage of dots—punched out from the deck of photographs, which capture the sky at different times—concludes the narrative.

This early work shows an artistic strategy which Lau fine tuned in his later works. A range of materials, from traditional sculptural means to commonplace objects, is transformed into signs. Meanings are suggested by the materials' form and other sensual qualities (for example, the elasticity of the rubber bands creates buoyancy for the cloud). A sense of humour animates the work. For instance, the cloud piece is titled *Thunder-proof Flying*. This explains the dangling earth wire, which otherwise looks so out of place. When everything comes together, the work is a narrative of personal vision. The objects are freed from their everyday contexts. Something as banal as a rubber band turns aesthetic.

Last year, Lau obtained his MFA degree from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. In the course of his study, the flight to the sky contextualises in a project on Chinese literary pursuits. Lau, who is 29, grew up in colonial Hong Kong. While most young people of his generation have limited if any knowledge of Chinese classics, he has been exposed to the gems of the culture ever since he was a child. He was trained in Chinese opera, whose graceful lyrics inspired a deep interest in Chinese literature. The world of classics like *The Romance of the Red Chamber* is a spiritual enclave for the young artist, who despite having no big problems living in this world, knows clearly that he fancies somewhere more imaginative. The evocative aesthetics of Chinese literature becomes a point of departure for his art.

Poem.Imagine (2006; figs. 2 & 3) is based on a selection of poems from the Tang and Song Dynasties, the golden age of Chinese poetry. As in *Utopia Search Engine*, various materials are combined to visualise the artist's vision. However, instead of suggesting a straight-forward idea like reaching for the sky, the challenge this time is to convey the poems' richness in visual terms. Tackling this challenge led Lau to the series *Twenty-Eight Works of Qi Quan Zhai* (2008; fig. 4), a furtherance of *Poem.Imagine*, in which he demonstrates an eventual mastery of his artistic language. A most illustrative piece is *Withered Lotus* (fig. 5), crafted after a verse written by himself:

留一扇，殘荷敗葉
待秋雨，滴滴敲打到天明
恰似喚鈴聲

Lotus fading, leaves evanescent
Pelted by the autumn rain
Dripping and dropping
Jingling and tinkling
Till dawn comes

The rich aesthetic experience evoked by the original text can hardly be conveyed in translation. However, Lau has done a very nice job in visual expression. A wooden form merging a withered leaf with a lotus pod portrays the moment when the once verdant pond is left with nothing but dried leaves and pods. In the place of the lotus seeds, there is an inlay of circular metal pieces. Together with the hooded shape, this brings to mind a comical association to a faucet. Imaginary rain drizzles down and tickles the rippling base. One side of this base is cropped and painted azure, adding to the imagery cooling water and a brightening sky. For the tinkling of the rain, hidden bells jingle when the object is given a shake. The work is an autumn pond to be held in hands.

The well-thought use of materials makes the work a compact sign, signifying a multitude of meanings at an instance. More attention is given to craftsmanship and sensual experiences. A clever reference to history adds to the increased complexity: works in series are conceived as curios—exquisite objects collected by Chinese scholars. These objects, some functional, some ornamental, were much cherished and kept in studies to create a tranquil environment. In this particular case, to give the hand-held pond a resounding shake is reminiscent of a practical act. Too immersed in their literary world to even say a word, ancient scholars rang bell to summon attendants. Thus when the viewers do what is cued, besides conjuring the autumn scene, they re-enact a gesture of the literati tradition.

The artist himself also retraced the scholars' steps when he created the series. The three titular words "Qi Quan Zhai", "water-begging study", refer to his studio. Because there is no water supply, he has to "beg" for water from his neighbours. The name is a humorous remark on the situation. At the same time, it carries a serious meaning. In a poem titled "Zhong Yan", Song-Dynasty poet Chao Gongsu writes: "Beg for water to cleanse one's heart." To ancient scholar-painters, art-making was a passage from earthly hustle to a purer, spiritual realm. Similarly, sculpting these objects was a soul-cleansing exercise for the artist, whose days then were hectically occupied by long hours of work.

Works done in this period were grounded in a research on Ming-dynasty scholars, whose interests in curios and the likes marked an epitome in the material embodiment of literariness. This research brought Lau to the magic of Chinese gardens. These gardens are microcosms of nature. When one looks at a fantastically shaped rock in a garden, one is supposed to see a magnificent mountain. This imaginary vista appeals greatly to Lau, who finished his MFA with *Tabletop Garden* (fig. 6).

The work is primarily a set of miniature landscapes, sculpted from wood, accented with water and plants. The pieces are similar to the curios fashioned in the aforementioned projects, but while those works are essentially about the artist's solitary imagination, these are more outward looking. Lau wanted to share the joy of his literati pursuits with his beloved. Twelve miniature landscapes were made and "adopted" by Lau's friends and family upon invitation. The adopters were to place the landscapes in their living or working environments and "travel" through this imaginative space by handling the pieces in whatever ways they liked. For example, Lau's mother, who is an avid gardener, turned her adoptee into a mini forest. A carefree friend kept his/her cellphone in a hollow.

Vestiges of the adopters' daily routines were left on the pieces and recorded by photography. When the work was exhibited, they topped a set of tables. Together with the adopters' paraphernalia, the set is indexical of Lau's collaborators' interaction with his crafted space. The inclusion of interaction seems to be a modern practice. However, this is also the spirit of traditional Chinese landscape. In whatever form, painted or planted, Chinese landscape is not just about trees and rocks but also the harmonious coexistence of Man and nature.

That the adopters could do anything they liked to the miniatures is comparable to the blank space in landscape paintings, which allows viewers to dwell in the mountains and streams. The placing of a cellphone is out of sync with such romanticism. Yet the fact that these landscapes were used in individual ways manifests another philosophy embedded in traditional garden design. *Yibu yijing*, literally "moving steps, changing views," is a principle governed by a worldview that reality changes as one stands in different positions. A beeping cellphone in a dried up pond is actually symbolic.

To mediate viewers to the utopia he sees in Chinese culture is also the task of *Lan Su Yuan Recreated* (fig. 7), a recent work done in Portland, Oregon, where Lau spent a month as an artist-in-residence. Initially, the artist wanted to experiment with something new, but a discovery drew him back to his usual practice. A few days after arrival, he learnt that there was a Chinese garden, called Lan Su Yuan, in the American neighbourhood. The background is that in 1988, Portland and Suzhou became sister cities. To commemorate their sisterhood, the two cities gave each other a traditional garden. "Lan Su" is the Chinese abbreviations of Portland and Suzhou. A perfect Chinese style prevails in the garden. Along a sinuous path, there are a number of scenic spots with poetic names. To Portlanders not accustomed with ambiguity, the garden is puzzling: there is a "Moon-Locking Pavilion", but the moon can be seen nowhere; "Celestial House of Permeating Fragrance" sounds like New Age mysticism; "Tower of Cosmic Reflection," which is basically a tea house, seems to be a hyperbole. Having learnt about this through research and conversation, Lau thought perhaps he could bridge the cultural gap.

Working within the short time frame of the residency and without familiar materials, Lau made use of his serendipity. He gathered materials through dump-diving in the neighbourhood, and tried to reword the poetry of the garden in a language more accessible to his American audience. For example, *Moon-Locking* (fig. 8) is an assemblage of two abandoned drawers, sheets of punch-holed paper and a yellow sticker torn from the road. Put together, they make conspicuous the reflection of the moon in the star-dotted evening water, framed by the pavilion's pillars. Lau recalls that this metaphor was well received, but some others were lost in translation.

Permeating Fragrance (fig. 9) is a lighthearted expression of fragrance in visual, sculptural and olfactory terms. Two protrusions, formed by copper filters, sprout from a twig. The set is fixed on the wall at a level matching the artist's nostrils. When he stands next to the work, he can take a sniff of the fragrance stored under the filters. On the wall, a pencil drawing outlines the invisible scent. This evocation of a subtle sensation was, however, mistaken by some viewers as smoke from a burning stick.

In a different context, the cultural specificity of certain ideas is pronounced. An "enigmatic" work in the series is *Cosmic Reflection* (fig. 10), which is at the onset a mistranslation of *han xu* (containing emptiness). To represent the Taoist concept of nothingness, Lau makes use of reflections and negative space. Beneath a paper-mache landscape, a frame contains the garden's silhouette. This cut-out is divided into halves, and overlapped to void the defined forms. The work is an attempt to put the nihilistic philosophy in tangible form, but to an audience unacquainted with such a way of thinking, this state of mind is beyond comprehension. The artist, however, does not mind misinterpretation. Although the works are rooted in Chinese references, they do not dictate meanings. The reading of poetry is not about definition but imagination. The series prompts the latter.

From flying to literary musings, Lau creates his utopia—a realm of self-invented signs, appropriated references and ultimately, cognitive freedom. One or two years ago, the artist was in a TV party. The group was watching the finale of a cheesy but very popular serial drama. At the climatic moment, the bad guy was chased by a car. "Run in a zigzag!", Lau burped out. It is hard to believe that this jester is the contemplative author of *Cosmic Reflection*, but it is the same person. He looks at reality with a romantic vision. Seeing extraordinariness in even the most mundane, he assures that, with imagination, utopia is right here.

- Fig. 1. *Utopia Search Engine*, exhibition view
2004
Pao's Galleries, Hong Kong Arts Centre
- Fig. 2 *Lotus Girls*, from *Poem.Imagine*
1996
Wood, velvet, metal
9 cm (H) x 9 cm (W) x 7.5 cm (L); 5 cm (H) x 5 cm (W) x 6.5 cm (L)
- Fig. 3 *Three Wishes*, from *Poem.Imagine*
1996
Wood, porcelain cup, velvet, wine, plastic, fluorescence
28 cm (H) x 9 cm (W) x 20 cm (L)
- Fig. 4 *Twenty-Eight Works of Qi Quan Zhai*, exhibition view
2008
Exhibition Gallery, Tseun Wan Town Hall, Hong Kong
- Fig. 5 *Withered Lotus*, from *Twenty-Eight Works of Qi Quan Zhai*
2008
Wood, stick, metal, bronze bells, Chinese watercolour, modeling powder
46 cm (H) x 20 cm (W) x 19 cm (L)
- Fig. 6 *Tabletop Garden*, exhibition view
2008
Pao's Galleries, Hong Kong Arts Centre
- Fig. 7 *Lan Su Yuan Recreated*, exhibition view
2008
Worksound, Portland, Oregon, USA
- Fig. 8 *Moon-Locking*, from *Lan Su Yuan Recreated*
2008
Drawers, pencil marks on paper, plastic
12 cm (H) x 42 cm (W) x 52 cm (L); 12 cm (H) x 42 cm (W) x 31 cm (L)
- Fig. 9 *Permeating Fragrance*, from *Lan Su Yuan Recreated*
2008
Wood, copper filter, fragrance, pencil drawing
13 cm (H) x 3 cm (W) x 31 cm (L)
- Fig. 10 *Cosmic Reflection*, from *Lan Su Yuan Recreated*
2008
Paper, wood, ink on paper, frame
25.5 cm (H) x 9 cm (W) x 61 cm (L)
Images courtesy of the artist.



[郑重声明]本网站发表的所有内容，只代表原作者个人的观点，不代表“艺术前线网”的立场和价值判断。

分享到: 新浪微博 QQ空间 开心网 人人网 网易微博 搜狐微博 飞信

分享 收藏

最新评论

评论