

Embodied

David Ho Yeung Chan

To 'embody' is to take spiritual possession of something that one holds dear in the hope of making it one's own. An artwork's attributes come from the visual representation of an idea, and the most direct way to engage us is by depicting the human body. As early as the classical period, Hellenistic sculptures incorporated the human body as a vehicle for expressing an ideal beauty and a longing for an eternal existence. In *The History of Ancient Art Among the Greeks*, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, an 18th century art historian and archeologist, writes:

From unity proceeds another attribute of lofty beauty, the absence of individuality [...] and consequently produce[s] a figure which is neither peculiar to any particular individual, nor yet expresses any one state of mind or affection of the passions [...] The idea of beauty appears to be the simplest and easiest, requiring no philosophical knowledge on man, no investigation and no expression of the passion of his soul. (Winckelmann, 1764: 44)

Classical Greek sculptures are idealized in order to convey a purity that duly transcends the beholder to a higher spiritual ground not bound by earthly constraints. Approaching the human figure and its representation in a different manner, the central canon of Baroque paintings acknowledges the innate characteristics of man as the basis for our relationship with God. A good example is the use of chiaroscuro in Caravaggio's paintings. Depicted with a strong contrast of light and dark, the painted figures are meant to engage our active participation in an emotionally charged scene and, in doing so, they encourage us to come to terms with our own limitations as mortals.

Our body is more than just a physical vessel. As the late French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out, our body is already a rich universe with its own dimensions. How we experience the world is not only conditioned by our corporeal activities, but also by how we remain open to reality through our perception. Merleau-Ponty claims:

Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'. [...] Sight and movement are specific ways of entering into relationship with objects [...] [I]t is the momentum of existence, which does not cancel out the radical diversity of contents, because it links them to each other, not by placing them under the control of 'I think', but by guiding them towards the intersensory unity of a 'world'. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 137-8).

Realising the potential of "I can", our perpetual being in the world, is a far greater asset than being confined by our thoughts. How we connect our different senses is what gives us meaning for our existence in the end.

Embodied presents different approaches towards translating artists' own experiences into a bodily form, and explores the language of figuration—specifically how artists give shape to an entity through the use of different media. Their visions may appear to be utopian or self-indulgent in nature at first, but upon closer examination, our bodily interactions with the

artworks provoke us to think and feel otherwise. In dialogue with Western art history, the artworks touch on the themes of performance, spirituality, identity, and portraiture. Collectively, they are meant to contemplate how we mediate our humanistic ideals with reality.

Li Ming

XX (2009) documents two almost identical young men sitting in a picturesque setting in Hangzhou. To escape boredom, they decide to exchange their own vests in close proximity with one other. The two men inevitably wrap their heads and bodies together with the mingled vests. After a brief yet intense physical struggle, they resume their original sitting position as if nothing has happened. If friendship is dependent on trust and a genuine willingness to share what is personal, this will is guarded by an equal need for protecting one's self-interest and physical boundaries.

Mist (2012) is a two-channel video shot in the manner of a low-budget feature film that depicts the Mayan prophecy of an apocalypse in 2012. Starting with an expansive scene of the ocean, *Mist* captures the absurd behavior of a security guard who has been affected by climate change. This scene is then followed by the sporadic movement of a group of casual workers on the outskirts of a city. The film closes with a scene of the artist suspending himself from a crane in midair, suggesting death. This artwork speaks of desolation and the destruction of our subjectivities as a result of environmental degradation. Li is particularly critical of mainstream cinema and how it propagates a belief all for the sake of mass consumption that has no real bearing with reality. Attention is often drawn towards the event and its effect without acknowledging the cause. For Li, whatever we accept with our minds becomes reality.

Du Zhenjun

Du's photographs depict the Tower of Babel in the background and raise the spectre of humanity in the midst of chaos and man-made catastrophe. The Tower of Babel is described in the Book of Genesis as a monumental structure that can reach unto heaven; it symbolises the unity of mankind with one language. Despite our faith in a unified humanity, this aspiration is undermined by the abolishment of a single moral principle in the information age. Be it the unpredictable climate change that leads to large-scale devastation or an environmental breakdown as a result of consumerism, it seems the only escape from this distressful predicament is to find time to nap as shown in one of Du's photographs. The artist gathers a large array of images to collage a series of hypothetical situations that bear stylistic reference to the 15th century Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch. Du's dark yet parodic vision is a timely reminder of the precarious state of current affairs where uncertainty and chaos are the orders of the day.

Ben Quilty

By appropriating the Rorschach technique as a form of psychoanalysis, Quilty uses the double images for his portrait painting and to create an identity crisis for the audience. Having been brought up in Australia with an Irish background, Quilty has always been very conscious of the impact of colonisation on the nation, and also on his own subjectivities. Quilty states: "Through the use of the Rorschach I attempt to force the viewer to 'see' or recognise themselves in history in order to reassess our colonial past, a past that has a dark heart." In 2011, Quilty

spent time in Afghanistan as a war artist for the Australian War Commission that led him to do a series of paintings on the post-traumatic stress disorder of the stationed soldiers. Quilty's interest in masculinity and the perversity of humanity shed light on the fragility of his subjects. The painting becomes a contested ground for mediating the tensions between the artist as an active observer, and his sitters as the subjects of a psychological probe.

Gatot Pujiarto

Pujiarto's oeuvre expresses a spiritual indoctrination. Painting becomes a means to communicate the weakness of man as a result of temptation and sensual indulgences. Inspired by uncommon events or occurrences from everyday life, Pujiarto includes writings, sexually explicit images, and layering of different fabric materials on the paintings' surface. The act of disfiguration is nihilistic in nature with the figure gazing squarely back at the beholders in a crisis of identity.

Ho Tzu Nyen

EARTH is a film that projects a dystopic vision of humanity, an imaginary journey into the heart of darkness of a post-modern world. Ho stages fifty actors gradually regaining their consciousness across an elaborate mountain of debris and natural waste. Their poses reference French and Italian paintings from the 17th–19th centuries, from *The Raft of Medusa* by Gericault to Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* and *David with the Head of Goliath*. Using three long takes, Ho pans the camera slowly from one body to another, and occasionally pulls the lens backwards to reveal a glimpse of a particular section of the set, and also of the entire situation. Ho's intention is to handicap the traditional narrative structure of film, rendering it completely illegible. This state of void is resuscitated by articulating the movement of the camera that resembles the action of drawing on a canvas. What you are looking at is not a film, but a painting that depicts a microcosm of humanity in real time with its protagonists in the midst of unravelling with their destiny. The combined use of religious music in the background with chiaroscuro lighting expresses a pessimistic view of our existence on Earth. We soon realize that humanity is on the verge of total collapse, and that we are forever deprived of the opportunity for a real spiritual awakening.