

SEARING PAIN 热辣辣的痛楚

A snake falls from above and explodes into pieces. Only its tail remains. *The Fall* (2022) is a new sculptural work by the artist Tao Hui newly commissioned for his solo exhibition *Searing Pain* at the Aranya Art Center. Although known primarily for his experimental films and videos, Tao has in fact made sculptures since 2010. In the work *Autocastration* (2010), a snake's tail, powered by a built-in motor that rotates at a steady speed, emits an ear-piercing yip, evoking a painful moan of self-mutilation. Contemplate the tail's polished and sleek skin. What do we have here? Is it a vessel for narcissism or a well of sentimentality? And so the youthful artist projects a curious gaze toward his own body.

It is a tricky exercise for the human eye to discern a snake's tail from its body, and the "tail" that Tao tenderly caresses is, however, unnecessary for humans. It is the artist's metaphor for his incessant investigation into the *sequelae* of today's highly mediated society. He plumbs our emotional excesses and sentimental remnants at both the individual and collective levels. Whether it is the Iranian actress dressed in bridal attire in *The Dusk of Tehran* (2014), the middle-aged woman wearing a kitsch floral dress in *Pulsating Atom* (2019), or the lonely figure speaking into the void over his phone in *Hello, Finale!* (2017), these emotionally charged characters weave together a shared fate of pot-holed roads and unrequited love, as well as the agony of being "left behind".

From the quiet mountain village of Yunyang, Chongqing to Beijing, Tao experienced his own highs and woes. Personal experiences become the source material for his art. "My role in it will flicker like a speck of dust between the light and the dark, between laughter and tears," as Roberto Bolaño appropriately describes in *The Savage Detectives*. Subjected to the grand narratives of our times, the artist feels trapped in an inclination to plummet, sink, and fall. Nevertheless, in most of his works, the processes of falling, struggling, and hysteria have been cleverly omitted. What the artist aims to achieve visually evokes the vast surface of the Yangtze River at night, filled with star-lit ripples. Darkness swallows the silhouettes of cargo ships, and a low roar from the depths of the river reaches the ocean's whales.

Tao reveals such private sentiments, bleaching them under the sunlight, an approach quite similar to stories from *Night Talks in a City of Fog*, a television drama filmed entirely in Chongqing's local dialect, which has fascinated the artist and his family for decades. One day, he remarked that his mother's emotional dumping echoed what is seen on television, sometimes in an even more exaggerated manner. The boundary between fiction and reality started to blur for Tao. Are images the representation of reality, or is reality the imitation of images? Which world is the "real" one: our reality or the image? Is there even a difference between the two?

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The French postmodern cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard used the term *simulacrum* to describe that which no longer has an "original," or perhaps never did, and so reality now lies within images, a procession of simulations that distorts our ability to determine if there is any "real" at all. We now have inherent doubts over the authenticity of pictures, and the attempt to objectively reproduce reality through images has been declared a failure. The widespread popularity of live and amateur videos initially seemed to offer a chance to fight against fake images, yet we soon realized that they too were nothing more than curated plots shot in a studio. Ironically, just like the artist's mother, most people today live in a reality that has become more and more akin to the staged performances in their screens. We now live the reality that imitates images. The latter has in turn become the prototype of the former. Imagery has become the real, a point compellingly illustrated in Tao's 2016 work *Joint Images*. Hamming, clumsy acting, deliberate artificiality, and a "plastic" visual quality are prevalent throughout Tao's works. They are intended to foreground the paradox of harboring falsity within the "real" image. Nowadays, it appears that the only way to approach truth is through fiction. Take, for instance, this quote from *Dream of the Red Chamber*, one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, which is borrowed by the artist for his 2022 work *257 (Digital Painting)*: "Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true; real becomes not-real where the unreal's real."

Looking back, from where did the snake fall? High above the sculpture hangs a diminutive smartphone that plays *Similar Disguise* (2020), a short video series Tao customized for TikTok. This might offer some insight into why livestreams and TikToks would fail to challenge fake images: the screen, with its boundaries and limits, harbors an obscure and vast void for fabrication. On the other hand, post-production and kaleidoscopic filters and effects, offered and encouraged by the platforms, nourish fiction production. To reveal the screen's manipulative nature in addition to its functions is precisely Tao's intention in producing works like *White Building* (2019) and *Screen as Display Body* (2019). Consequently, where to see – and what to see with – are as important as what to see. For Baudrillard, there is a fundamental reason why images can morph into the blueprint of reality and become the reality itself: images are no longer the mere representation or reenactment of the actuality, but the simulation and manifestation of the real world's systems of production and operation. Therefore, Tao's investigation into imagery, its display media, and mechanisms is in essence an attempt to outline the boundaries and scales of what is real. A group of Tao's works, including *Double Talk* (2016), which considers South Korea's idol industry, *Untitled (Holographic Building 06 & 07)* (2022), based on the leftover of Aranya's architectural maquettes, and *The Night of Peacemaking* (2022), which draws its inspiration from tabloid talk shows,

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exemplifies his continuous experiments in intervening and investigating the problematics around image production. Whether it is the snake's self-castration ten years ago, or the collapsed tail in front of our eyes today, the act of piercing through the relationship between image and reality involves the symptoms of pain.

[1] Realgar wine is a wine that is mixed with an arsenic compound to ward off evil, also a snake repellent. It can be store bought or homemade.

As a child, Tao was struck by a scene from the 1992 version of *New Legend of Madame White Snake*, where the female protagonist reveals her true form after drinking realgar wine^[1]: the manifestation of one's true self and its consequences can, in fact, be horrific and full of pain. Tao strives to awaken and mobilize our critical awareness of ourselves and the surrounding world through the contradiction of truth and falsehood distilled from his own experiences. So Tao nobly reminds us that it is "the artist's destiny to translate his own sufferings into aesthetics."

BY DAMIEN ZHANG

Tao Hui was born in 1987 in the mountain village of Yunyang near Chongqing, China, and now lives and works in Beijing. Drawing inspiration from personal memories, television, and popular culture, Tao distills and weaves them into experimental visual narratives and film styles. Running throughout his practice is a sense of misplacement, explored through such subjects as social identity, gender, ethnicity, and cultural crisis. He sets up absurd, paradoxical, and melodramatic scenes with characters brimming with metaphor. Tao reveals our shared contemporary experiences and prompts us to face our own cultural histories, living conditions, and subjectivities.

In parallel to his artistic endeavors, Tao is a productive writer, penning most of the scripts of his own video works. The exhibition's title comes from his unpublished novel *Toad Bell*, which is about an encounter between a young male laborer and a middle-aged female factory worker, both seeking companionship. In conjunction with the exhibition, Aranya Art Center will also release the artist's latest publication in collaboration with Aranya Library and present the artist's newest sound work on the podcast *LandingOnAir*.