

## A Conversation with Mu Boyan

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Philip Tinari = PT

Mu Boyan = MBY

PT: Your series of sculptures of fat people might be considered your first mature work.

MBY: I'm not sure how mature it is, but the "fatties" have been a continuing theme for me. Part of making art is about chance and fate. My recent works however are a departure from the "fatties."

PT: Dogs and cats.

MBY: Yes, and still-lives and scenes too.

PT: What led you to do these new works?

MBY: It's also about fate. Last year I had a traffic accident. It was raining heavily, and a person suddenly rode out in front of me on a bike. I couldn't stop in time, and nearly killed her. I ended up with a mouth full of glass shards.

PT: Where was that?

MBY: Near Han Ji-yeun's gallery, at an intersection on the Airport Expressway Side Road.

PT: It's especially scary as that site marks the periphery of the city.

MBY: Yes, it's a neighborhood full of migrant laborers. The woman I ran into was one of these, about forty years old, nanny to a foreign manager.

PT: When exactly was this?

MBY: August 2008, almost a year ago already.

PT: And just during the Olympics.

MBY: In a heartbeat I almost became a murderer. My mind went blank, my identity destabilized. It didn't matter that I was an artist, or a professor; I just felt totally guilty. I can never forget the glass that was broken by human flesh, the sound of her hitting my windshield, the objects that flew far from the collision site. It's hard to describe my feelings at that moment, but at least the situation was resolved. She lived, and she was not seriously injured. She's fine now.

PT: Did you have any interaction with the victim or her family after the fact?

MBY: Last year I went to see her a few times, but we have no contact now. They are a nice family, and she herself regretted not having been more careful on her bicycle. The family never tried to blackmail me. I would go see her periodically at the hospital, and I paid for her medical expenses, missed work, nutrition, and a new bicycle. Later she recovered, and my relationship to the family ended peacefully. I

wouldn't have wanted it to continue either. I brought so much pain to this family, it pained me too, and I needed to recover psychologically.

PT: She lives there, too?

MBY: She lives in Bei Gao, not far from my place. That place is a mixed area of artists and laborers.

PT: This seems like a powerful starting point for this series, because it touches on the relationship between the art community and the local population in this area on the outskirts of Beijing. There is this metaphorical collision between these two ways of living and thinking.

MBY: Yes, a collision between two kinds of labor!

PT: Have you thought to turn the collision directly into a sculpture?

MBY: No, when something like this happens, it changes your life but it also changes your psychological state. It makes you look deeper. So in my work I may only choose to include traces or shadows of people, but not actual people. It's a way of using forms to move people to think, and I find this to be a way of expanding the scope of my work.

PT: So the starting point for this new series is quite different from the "fatties" project.

MBY: Yes. This incident completely changed my work and my life. It made me uncomfortable, but it also forced me to encounter some of the basic questions of life, to think about life and death. I'm much quieter now than I ever was before, because I think about the woman I hit and her brush with death,

and it seems like I also came up against this bad luck, but somehow escaped. I have continued to live normally, so I am lucky. This brush with death has made me more and more conscious of the meaning of life.

PT: So you came to this proposal after a period of self-reflection?

MBY: It was a way of reflecting on a lot of different things in my life, and then stringing them together into a single work. There are so many details and fragments in life that arouse memories of different precious moments. So the work is like a mirror, in which is reflected the brilliance of humanity. I have a maid who lives in a rented room not far from my studio, and I often go to her place to eat. She is a pro at steaming buns (mantou), and I love eating her buns. One winter afternoon, she came by with a pot full of buns, took the lid off, and released a cloud of steam. Inside there were all of these white, fat little buns. They smelled so nice. They looked so good. At that minute I felt all warm and fuzzy, and out of this came the idea for a work. Mantou is one of China's most basic staples. If I pick it up when I am hungry, I feel right. It's a tiny, and yet unlimited, pleasure.

PT: How did you decide to organize these different fragments into a single scene?

MBY: I chose a few rather iconic images which do not resemble each other formally, but then I treated them in a sculpturally similar manner, endowing each with the capacity for very tiny movement. This sort of movement is a way of capturing the distinct texture of a specific object, and of using these textures to drive the viewer to new ways of thinking.

PT: You have re-created these most common, most fundamental objects, but you have not done this by piecing together ready-mades. The sort of mimesis you are after is of a different variety.

MBY: I want my viewer to know that I am fooling him, and even to know how I am fooling him. It's like how some counterfeit products are more beautiful than the "real" versions, because their makers were so afraid of revealing some flaw, when actually "real" goods often have flaws. So this is interesting.

PT: So it's a process of managing the difference between the real and the fake.

MBY: The objects are fake, but the feelings they elicit are real.

PT: Are these different objects supposed to all be seen in the context of the balcony you have also created, or is that a separate work?

MBY: The balcony is separate. There is a space in Aye Gallery, which actually almost cries out for a balcony, so I made one as if seen from outside the building. This allows the viewer two possibilities: first, that they might be standing on their own balcony looking at someone else's, attracted by something they have seen, able to guess at the owner's identity although one might not actually meet him; second, it evokes memories of older homes, which might lead to a sort of distant beauty.

PT: So it's a project about space and memory.

MBY: Yes, but it's not only about space and taste, there are many other emotions. I am always trying to bring back some details from life that might otherwise be forgotten.

PT: Did you see Shi Qing's recent solo exhibition at ShanghART Beijing?

MBY: No, not yet.

PT: It's interesting, because he also included a balcony, but it was entirely different from yours. Still, it posited the balcony as a space for imagination. His was entirely made from plywood, and conceptualized the porch in an entirely different way. He left only the structure, made from very ordinary materials, and then filled it with plants. A few weeks ago I participated in a discussion about the work, and the artists there all had something to say about the notion of the balcony. In the Western architectural and visual imaginary, a balcony is something else altogether. One classmate at Harvard wrote her dissertation on the balcony and its place in literary history. But in the Western context, the porch or balcony is much more a platform on which its owner stands to look out upon other things. In China, the balcony is an extension of the domestic interior. Even though it faces outward, it is still an interior space. It's a very strange thing, this ability to expand one's living space just a little bit.

MBY: This raises a lot of questions. I wouldn't want anyone to think I'm just making a balcony to join in the fun. Actually it's a bigger tendency—I like to see objects as extensions of human beings.

PT: How do you see the sort of realism you practice in relation to the more academic realism of the academy where you teach?

MBY: Academic realism is based on three-dimensional mimesis of actually existing forms. It is a very traditional system, a sort of training, an artistic stratagem. You can use it however you choose, so the key question becomes what you do with it. Some realists works are actually quite abstract, and don't get caught up in this question of what is or is not realistic. I work to capture my subjects in a certain state, which is not merely three-dimensional—it also involves a fourth dimension of time. My results are often modest. These tiny moments inside the work, but these are the key to my project. I see this as a way of pushing realism to a new place.

PT: For example here, you use these realist techniques to piece together a fictional scenario, almost a dreamscape.

MBY: Well, people always think their dreams are real when they are having them.

PT: I think your exhibition could use a fish tank.

MBY: Yes, it feels like there is a little something missing. Perhaps I'll try. These objects are all controlled by machines, but I want their motions to seem irregular. In the end it's all a computer code, how to make the frequency of the motions vary, so that they don't look like rote mechanical movements.

PT: So you have done specific research into these animals?

MBY: I like animals, because in them we can see the shadow of humans, except that animals solve problems in a simpler way, often risking their lives.

PT: This seems like a new departure for you.

MBY: I want to make a new departure, to do something I am really happy with. I love these works, particularly the way they move, it gives me the feeling of having created life. That is why I say that these small movements have such great power. If I made animals to look like taxidermic specimens, that would be a failure.

PT: I have only seen your earlier series of fat people displayed as single objects, be it in the gallery or at art fairs. Will you also make scenes of fatties?

MBY: I plan to.

PT: Perhaps a Rent Collectors' Courtyard of fat people?

MBY: [Laughs] I'm not so sure about that—so many people have done takes on the Rent Collectors' Courtyard already.

PT: It's a sort of endemic problem facing sculpture in China today, this inclination toward the tacky. If you go to 798, you see one after another these sculptures of red guards and red babies, each sillier than the next. It's like Wu Shanzhuan's "red humor" run amok.

MBY: It's true. Humor can be a very high-end strategy, not just a signboard, if deployed properly. And "red" in China today is no longer just the color of freshly drawn blood; it comes in many different and rich tones.

PT: Who is your mentor?

MBY: Professor Sun Jiabo. He helped me to realize my hope of becoming a sculptor. He has one line that rings especially true: "It's not a question of is it contemporary or not; it's a question of is it art or not." So many people get stuck on questions of contemporaneity, and this often drives them far from art itself.

PT: As soon as people start talking in those terms, things start to seem fake.

MBY: As an artist, I have tried my hardest to avoid coming up with a single solution. As soon as you have a solution, then work becomes pure design, and good works are not designed, they simply flow out. A solution is not about first impressions; it is arrived at only after a long process of self-reflection. That's how I understand it at least, which is why I have always been so circumspect about my creative efforts.



PT: Do you have a circle or a group around you? I'm not talking about a creative collective, but a group of people you can talk and debate with.

MBY: Not at present. I like to keep my conversations and dialogues scattered and separated.

PT: This seems like an interesting basis for an exhibition, somewhere on the boundary between sculpture and installation, an assemblage of five works. If you showed one work on its own, the effect would be different from that of seeing the whole group.

MBY: An exhibition is actually a work in its own right. Fragments that may seem unrelated are actually expressions of the same concepts, and the question of how one uses the space becomes paramount. If you show only one fragment, you need to change the way you display it.

PT: Are these sculptures of people in a bathhouse your earliest works?

MBY: They became works, but they began as a commercial commission.

PT: It's interesting to think about playing with this boundary between pure art and the commercial jobs that sculptors in china often take on.

MBY: Yes. The boundary is actually very thin. "Jobs" are about doing art that other people like; "art" is about doing jobs that you yourself like.

PT: To hear it, your oxygen seems to come from personal and social experience, but does anything come from reading you do or from your artistic predecessors? I'm talking here of the sorts of influences that allow you to more clearly know your own direction.

MBY: I see myself as a frog at the bottom of a well, willing to let the birds go measure the actual size of the sky. Even if I climb out of the well, I'd still see the piece of blue above me as sufficient, as my own. I remember once in class with Sun Jiabo, there was one student imitating the works of one or another master. Professor Sun asked the student why he was doing so, and he replied that he had been researching this or that modernist trend. Professor Sun replied: Don't research trends, just focus on the model in front of you. I think this sentence moved me deeply. The model is truly the artist's best teacher, and life is my model. One is always one's own model. I have no intention of studying art history as I make my works, it's just always there.

PT: A few days ago I watched a documentary about the composer Philip Glass, which started with his role in the avant-garde circle of downtown New York in the late 1960s. He was close to a lot of artists, and they made experimental work together. There was an interesting moment where he spoke of how after graduating from Juilliard he went to Paris, and how it was his teacher in Paris that turned him from a Juilliard graduate into a composer. In a way all artists have this experience of sculptor or painter or whatever into an Artist.

MBY: That's true. There's an element of the relationship between actor and director here. A sculptor is like an actor, but a true actor is like a director. The people I respect most are like [actor and director] Jiang Wen, who began as an actor, then became a director, but can still act.

PT: Have you employed live models in making your "fatties" series?

MBY: I have not, which is why these sculptures look like things that should not actually exist. Perhaps if they were based on live models they would look different.

PT: You could find plenty of people fat enough to model for you in the U.S.

MBY: [Laughs] When I went to Germany, I suddenly started thinking that my fatties were too thin.

PT: I suppose this brings us to the question of sculptural training in China, which is still mostly Soviet-influenced. Do the academies teach other sculptural traditions, like the Buddhist sculptures of the Sui and Wei dynasties?

MBY: I feel like Soviet-style education has already disappeared, even if it is still present in form and structure. When I was an undergraduate [at the Central Academy of Fine Arts], we were not taught on this model. The education Sun Jiabo gave me was much more about using native methods, finding a connection to ancient Chinese sculpture, eliminating cliché while retaining consciousness.

PT: Do you get anything out of your contact with your own students today [as a professor at the Central Academy]?

MBY: Students today have it pretty good in terms of academic environment. Some students are quite bold, and don't feel inferior at all to their teachers; they see themselves merely as needing more experience, but as artistically equal to their teachers. Sometimes I ask students for their thoughts on my own work, because sometimes they are even farther out ahead than me.

PT: How did you become an artist? Did you know already as a teenager that you wanted to become a sculptor?

MBY: As a child, I was already on my way, making clay figurines for fun, and winning a few prizes. But I have a hard time pinpointing my exact motive for making art, which suggests to me that it's a natural occupation for me.

PT: Are you from coastal Shandong province?

MBY: No, inland. I'm from Ji'nan, a city which floats atop springs.

PT: And you came to Beijing in 1992?

MBY: No, in 1993. PT: And after all these years, here you find yourself in Heiqiao, on the outskirts of town. How do you relate to this area? MBY: I don't care for it as a place to live. There's a giant trash heap next door, but otherwise it's a clean and calm place. It can be interesting to live among people at the bottom of the social ladder. You start to understand different things about life in Beijing.

PT: For example?

MBY: There are many. There's a man next door who takes care of the garbage station for the village, and he scavenges for food from the garbage. Lots of stray dogs follow him, picking through the trash alongside him for scraps. At first I thought this "garbage station chief," who always wears a gigantic hat, was a mental patient, because the things he eats are indeed quite scary. Later I learned that each month he makes nearly 2000 RMB from selling on this waste, but he spends nothing at all, giving his entire income to cover his brother's medical expenses. This level of income is already enough by working-class Beijing standards. He could eat well if he chose to, but instead he prefers the garbage heap. On the outside he is dirty and smelly, but inside he is quite clean. He treats the dogs with the utmost care, playing with them, pulling lice from their hides. He is a competent leader. Once, one of the dogs was run over by a car, and since he doesn't have the same hang-ups as most of us, he ate the dog, making his stomach into the dog's grave. To me this all seems unfathomable, but to him it is normal. He lives at the bottom of the bottom echelon, but if you really think about it, he's more

“normal” than most “normal” people, particularly those beasts in human clothing. He has his own way of regulating himself and his life.

PT: A few months ago I did a residency in Norway, and met some artists who work in studios so tiny that they would have no idea what to do with a studio the size of yours. It seems that despite all our hang-ups, China is still a good environment for young artists.

MBY: There are some things we’ve grown accustomed to, like these ever larger studios. Perhaps it’s a national trait.

PT: When it seems like anything is possible, it’s easy to lose one’s grip on the basic things.

MBY: China’s social development has given people a lot of hope. It’s like running a red light—if you have the opportunity to sneak through before the light changes, why give it up? It’s not necessarily a safe state of affairs, but China has a lot of people, and so it has a lot of hope, even though there’s no way to distribute things evenly, so people get upset. It’s like the saying about the guy eating from the bowl who can only think about what’s in the pot. If he were able to just focus on his bowl of rice, he wouldn’t need to think about the pot. And these basic things are like that bowl of rice.

PT: In some ways your studio seems to resemble a laboratory.

MBY: That’s true. I’m always happy to experiment with new materials. I don’t like to repeat myself, which means that when I do work I have no feeling for anymore—like those fat sculptures—it becomes quite onerous. The other piece of it is that experiments determine your creative path, so if you don’t have experimentation it all becomes empty.

PT: This seems to be a common phenomenon among young artists—you make a work that gets some attention, and then people come to know you by that one work. The market requires the artist to produce more and more of it, and suddenly the artist is trapped at a place he should have long ago transcended. But perhaps that's just how it is

MBY: Eventually you start asking whether you are making art or making money. If you are responsible to your art, you ultimately know what you need to give up.

PT: It seems like you are in an important phase of your career, having just finished one stage and now beginning to enter another.

MBY: It's true. I feel good about where I am, happy, in Deng Xiaoping's words, to "cross the river by touching the stones." It feels wrong to work against one's own will. So now I have made a series of works that looks nothing like what I have done before, like changing to a new style of clothing. Perhaps people will not recognize me at first, but for me the most important thing is that the suit fits. This is not transition for transition's sake. People always need to progress. The current series may seem like a departure, but in fact, it's a continuation in another guise.