


Transforming Sculptures

By Jonathan Thomson



Over the past century, sculpture has changed its physical presence in all societies. While some works are still made to praise people and events uncritically, it now, more than ever, embraces all aspects of our turbulent and troubled world. While a great many sculptures draws the most serious consideration from audiences there are many others whose presence offers us comic relief from the harsh realities of life.

Hong Kong's *Art Week* is the time when the art fairs *Art Basel Hong Kong* and *Art Central* attract large numbers of visitors, auction houses hold major sales and local art galleries arrange late openings and special events so that art, for this week at least, is on the popular agenda. At the Swire Lounge at *Art Basel Hong Kong*, Tim Marlow, artistic director of the Royal Academy in London, engaged Christopher Le Brun, president of the Royal Academy in a conversation about the role of the artist in the 21st century. In passing they noted that while the rules of the Royal Academy state that Academicians can only be elected in one of four categories of artist—print-maker, painter, architect and sculptor—of these, sculptors are best represented, not least because the definition of sculpture has become much more fluid and inclusive.

Sculpture, in many different manifestations, was much in evidence at both *Art Basel Hong Kong* and *Art Central*. Both employed large, in-your-face sculptural works at the main public entrance and throughout the venue in order to help set the tone for the whole event. At *Art Central* visitors were greeted by new-media sculptural work at the spaces operated by the fair's key supporters. In the Lead Partner space, UOB presented an interactive artwork by local artist Victor Wong, which employed a very large stainless steel brush equipped with a sensor that, when moved over a large floor panel of LED screens, allowed visitors to make their own digital "ink" painting. In the Official Partner space, Swarovski presented an immersive installation devised by Steve Leung that combined an array of crystal lanterns with projections of *shanshui* landscapes.

Art Central also presented the most overtly political work of either fair in its "Projects" section. Ko Siu Lan is a mainland-born, Hong Kong-raised artist



Above: Anila Quayyum Agha, *Shimmering Mirage*, 2016, lacquered steel and halogen bulb, 91 x 91 x 91 cm. Sundaram Tagore Gallery at Art Central. **Previous page:** Lee Bul, *Willing To Be Vulnerable – Metalized Balloon*, 2019 nylon taffeta cloth, polyester with aluminium foil, fan, electronic wiring, 230 x 230 x 1,000 cm. Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Lehmann Maupin, PKM Gallery at Art Basel Hong Kong. Both photographs by Jonathan Thomson.

who now lives between Hong Kong and Canada. Her installation *New Territories Old Territories* consists of a series of "prayer wheels" mounted on poles that allowed visitors to make different combinations out of three pairs of alternatives—Hong Kong/China, Is/Isn't, China/Hong Kong. It brings to mind a child's flip book that allows the user to cut costumed figures into three parts—head, torso, and legs and joining them together again in different combinations that are funny because the combinations of costume are so incongruous. At *Art Central* Ko's work was taken by most visitors rather more seriously.

The galleries also presented strong work. Marc Straus from New York showed

a series of very striking-shaped canvases by Charles Hinman. These hard-edge three-dimensional works brought him to prominence in the early 1960s, but then he was eclipsed by other issues and concerns. Now in his late eighties Hinman is again gaining critical recognition. Sundaram Tagore Gallery from New York, Hong Kong, and Singapore showed a very beautiful work by the Pakistani-American artist Anila Quayyum Agha that comprised a halogen lamp inside a laser-cut steel cube that casts intricate patterns onto the walls of its enclosure. Looking through the cube from one side to the other with the shadows behind the work plays with our perceptions in much the same way as a mirage.



Above left: Charles Hinman, *Delphi II*, 1985, acrylic on shaped canvas, 182 x 121 x 15 cm and **Charles Hinman, Lagoon**, 1981, acrylic on shaped canvas, 81 x 142 x 15 cm. Marc Straus at Art Central. **Above right:** Choe U-Ram, *Ala Aureus Intimus*, 2017, metallic material, resin, machinery, stainless steel with 23K gold plated, electronic device, 135 x 98 x 60 cm. Metaphysical Art Gallery at Art Central. Both photographs by Jonathan Thomson.

At Art Basel Hong Kong visitors were greeted at the main entrance and treated at various locations throughout the fair to very large sculptural works in the “Encounters” section, curated by Australian curator Alexie Glass-Kantor. At the main entrance visitors encountered a massive 10 metre long silver metalized balloon that resembles the infamous Hindenburg zeppelin which crashed and burned in 1937 when attempting to land, shattering the reputation of airships as a symbol of modernity and marking the abrupt end of commercial passenger airship traffic. For Korean artist Lee Bul the delicate skin of her balloon suggests the intrinsic risk in any new technological undertaking, but its lofty position, suspended high above the heads of visitors, also evokes the dreamy whimsy of Andy Warhol’s floating, helium-filled silver pillow balloons.

Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota is renowned for her immersive poetic installations employing string. Her conceptually driven work is both beautiful and universal. At *Art Basel* she asked the question: “Where



Paola Pivi, *Remix*, 2017, mixed media. Massimo De Carlo.

Are We Going?” She used the outlines of hulls of boats, drawn in black metal, to evoke the journey that we all make into the unknown. Her boats were presented amid a jumbled sea of white thread suggesting clouds or a void, and were given depth and materiality by black thread suspended from each hull. The artist describes this work as a metaphor: “We cling to the idea of destiny to accept uncertainty; we ride the sea of time in search of destination. Boats are the bearers of dreams and hope.”

Things falling from the sky, or, perhaps, the sky itself falling formed the motif of Latifa Echakhch’s *Encounters* installation *La dépossession*, which comprises a very large ten-meter-square-theater-canvas depicting fluffy white clouds in a blue sky that appears to have fallen broken from its rigging. More than half of the canvas lay jumbled on the floor and the rest only partly suspended from a broken pole. It is a melancholy work, suggesting the aftermath of a theatrical performance that has gone wrong, or simply finished and forgotten, despite the cheery optimism of its blue shies and fluffy clouds. It is a work that evokes the juxtapositions of

the Belgian surrealist Rene Magritte who delighted in making everyday things strange and for whom clouds were a key leitmotif.

A strong theme among many of the artists is the relationship between appearance and reality. At The Modern Institute Gallery British artist Jim Lambe used the appearance of inflation to make a rather poetic installation out of everyday potato sacks. Each sack was filled with expanding foam, giving it a fuller structure and some rigidity: it was then painted in reflective,



Above: Chiharu Shiota, *Where Are We Going?*, 2017–2018, white wool, wire, string, dimensions variable. Templon. © Art Basel.



Dan Colen, *Rabbit and the Moon*, 2017–2018, sculpture: stainless steel, epoxy primer, acrylic paint, auto paint; rabbit: rabbit fur, urethane foam, polyester resin, stainless steel, glass, 177 x 76 x 55 cm. Lévy Gorvy Gallery. Photographs by Jonathan Thomson.

metalized chrome paint. His work *Air (Blue Skies)* more closely resembled a cluster of clouds, which may look weightless, despite carrying hundreds of thousands tons of water.

Italian artist Paola Pivi lives and works at Anchorage, Alaska. It is perhaps not surprising then that polar bears feature in her work as representatives of the fragile relationship between humankind and the rest of the planet. At Massimo De Carlo she showed a cute, almost life-size polar bear, sitting upright with its legs extended forward, looking engagingly at the audience. The power and ferocity of these animals in the wild was belied by the fact that instead of fur it was decked out with fluorescent yellow feathers. The association between the bear and a newly hatched chick was immediately incongruous and appropriate. We empathize with teddy bears as some of our closest companions in childhood but in the wild the polar bear is sorely in need of friends to help protect them and their shrinking habitat.

Angela Bulloch's *Night Sky* works are two dimensional, but appearances can be deceptive as these works present the viewer the boundless depth and majesty of the universe. Bulloch uses a computer-simulation algorithm to generate views of a night sky seen from some position other than earth. At Simon Lee Gallery her *Night Sky: Aquarius Pegasus* is a midnight-blue sheet of matt felt studded with LEDs programmed to glare and wane. The result is a compellingly imagined representation of real space, as we could never see it. At just over 2.6-meters high, her work is medium sized, but it is at once enveloping and awe-inspiring.

Realism in sculpture is becoming more prevalent perhaps in part due to the use of 3-D printing technology and the more widespread accessibility of large-scale computer numerical control milling machines. There is no doubt the results can be highly engaging, as in Hans Op de Beeke's *Tatiana (Soap Bubble)* at Galerie Krinzinger, realized in part, through 3-D painting techniques. The grey monochrome finish is emblematic of his work and ties this sculpture conceptually to his large-scale *Vanitus* scenes, in which entire rooms are realized with great precision and painted in a uniform shade of grey, suggesting emptiness and loss.

Dan Colen has reinvent-



Latifa Echakhch, La depossession, 2014, theatre canvas, painting, steel tube and straps, 1000 x 1000 cm. kamel mennour. © Art Basel.

ed himself numerous times in his career as an artist. He began making *trompe l'oeil* paintings of domestic interiors and then realist paintings of candles before turning to chaotic assemblages made using less conventional materials such as chewing gum and bird shit. Along the way his drunken antics gave rise to a reputation as a bad boy of the New York art scene. More

recently, he has made painted versions of the landscapes depicted in Warner Brothers *Looney Tunes* cartoons or Walt Disney's *Bambi*. At Lévy Gorvy Gallery he paired a number of autumnal scenes from *Bambi* with a hyper-real sculpture of a beautiful young nude blonde woman lying on her back with her arms raised and dangling a stuffed rabbit above her, pinching the fur of the animal at the back of its neck. Titled *Rabbit and the Moon* it is based on a life cast of his former girlfriend. The girl's figure is flawlessly executed in stainless steel and automotive paint and suggests innocence and the loss of innocence that are the key themes in Disney's masterpiece.

Allen Jones gained notoriety in 1970 when he showed a set of three fiberglass sculptures called *Hatstand Table and Chair* depicting nearly nude women, wearing black, patent-leather boots and bondage gear, transformed into furniture. These highly sexualized images were roundly criticized at the time for their objectification and commodification of women but they quickly became icons of Pop art. With their exaggerated sexuality and poses that contorted them into positions of complete subservience these works could not fail to be provocative. Jones was invited to design similar work for the Stanley Kubrick film *A Clockwork Orange*, but when he refused because Kubrick expected him to work for free, the director simply copied his style. His work



Angela Bulloch, Night Sky: Aquarius Pegasus. 12, 2012, LED-installation, felt, aluminum profiles, cables, 267 x 200 cm. Simon Lee Gallery.

Enchanteresse (2006) is a sexualized figure of a woman with the same unrealistic figure as a Barbie doll presented standing stiffly on a cylindrical pedestal. Green patination and real tan-colored leather bands at the neck and cuffs suggest that she is wearing an impossibly tight form-fitting jumpsuit. A pair of tan-leather boots completes her ensemble. Her cartoon-like face suggests the artist's influences may have included Japanese *manga*.

Duane Hanson was one of the pioneers of hyperrealism in sculpture. His work *Flea Market Lady* at Gagosian Gallery bears all of his hallmarks—uncompromising verisimilitude, a sense of world-weary resignation, use of real everyday accessories and the ordinary trappings of working-class life. While a viewer may be easily fooled into thinking his figures are real, this is not his intention: the important thing is the honest and uncompromising representation of human attitudes. A lot of art today is pitched as product for the privileged and powerful but these artworks celebrate ordinary people and remind us that we all have value beyond price.



Duane Hanson, *Flea Market Lady*, bronze, polychromed in oil, mixed media, with accessories, overall dimensions variable. Gagosian Gallery. Photograph by Jonathan Thomson.

Sometimes the real appears entirely abstract. Matthew Barney's *Water Cast 10* at Gladstone Gallery is highly intricate

sculpture that appears at first glance to be some riotous spray of foliage. In fact it is an abstract shape that is at the same time a precise mapping of what happens in an explosion—in this instance the explosion that occurs when molten bronze at more than 950°C is pored into a mixture of clay and water. Barney's process is similar to that achieved by nature and depicted in the film *Sweet Home Alabama*, in which Josh Lucas as Jake Perry plants lightning rods on a beach to collect the fused glass sculptures made when lightning hits sand. The film depicts the glass sculptures as intricate organic forms (much like Barney's) but in real form these "fulgurites" are lumpy and misshapen.

Einstein said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge." Imagination is something that comes naturally to children, before education and adult expectations stifle its development. Children make wonderfully rich playgrounds for their imagination out of practically anything. Some of us may remember this, or we are fortunate enough to have our memories refreshed by watching our own children. Ryan Gander is one of the lucky ones. His *I is....* at GB Agency Gallery is a large marble sculpture of an abstract shape draped in a cloth, a little bit like a work by Christo, but without the binding. A wall text reveals that the sculpture was inspired by the artist's daughter who made a secret fort for herself by piling up bits of furniture and other household goods and covering it all with a cloth. On crawling inside, she would have found herself in a fantastic space, part of, but at a significant remove from the everyday world.

Ever since Marcel Duchamp inverted



Hans Op de Beeck, *Tatiana (Soap Bubble)* (Small version), 2018, epoxy, MDF, glass, metal, coating, 146 x 36 x 36 cm. Ed 5 + 2AP. Galerie Krinzinger Vienna. Photograph by Jonathan Thomson.



Allen Jones, *Enchanteresse*, 2006, painted and patinated bronze with leather on a steel base, 197 x 45 x 45 cm. Ed 8 + 4AP. Photograph by Jonathan Thomson.

and signed a urinal, artists have been making art out of ready-mades. Others have taken their inspiration from existing objects but have transformed them through changes of scale or material. A tetrapod is the generic name given to the very large cast concrete blocks generally with four arms (hence the name) but sometime five or more, that are used in coastal revetments, either to protect a coastline from erosion or to reshape it with groins or breakwaters. At Galerie Chantal Crousel, Jean-Luc Moulène's used onyx to make a five-armed tetrapod, which gives the object the same hard stone carving qualities that are found in its normal use such as in cameos or signet rings. The shape, whilst utilitarian, is also aesthetically pleasing, made more so by the surface quality, color, and finish of the stone.

Mehmet Ali Uysay's sculptures transform the viewers' perception of space and how they interact with it. His *Mirror Plane* at Pi Artworks Gallery is based on the form of a simple paper plane, but its scale, at 2.3 meters



Erwin Wurm, Untitled (Austrian Mountain Cap), 2019. Photograph by Danielle Taeger.

long, and its finish in mirrored stainless steel, disrupts our sightlines and makes us feel Lilliputian. His work also speaks

to the relationship between movement and stillness, airiness and the pull of gravity, and that which is seen and that which is known.

Erwin Wurm's sculptures invite the viewer to become a user and to participate in the completion of the work, to the delighted amusement of other onlookers. His famous *Five Minute* sculptures, consist of a wall drawing that serves to provide instructions to the viewer / user and a few rudimentary props. At Lehmann Maupin Gallery his "prop" is rather more substantial as it consists of a ridiculously oversized knitted woolen "beanie" hat. Amusing enough on its own, his work becomes a living sculpture when a viewer ducks underneath the brim, knowing that their own vision will be completely blocked, and suspecting that they will look silly, but knowing that onlookers will get an additional laugh. Wurm's work is refreshing because for all of us comic relief is a crucial respite to the realities of life. Δ

Jonathan Thomson is a regional contributing editor for World Sculpture News and Asian Art News.



Background: Ryan Gander, *There's a work in that, (Wall encounter), 2018,* vinyl letters on painted wall, variable dimensions. **Foreground:** Ryan Gander, *I is... (XIII), 2015,* marble resin sculpture, 100 x 180 x 130 cm. gb agency.



Qiu Shijie, Mr. M, 2016, brick, ceramic, bronze, and neon tube, 172 x 125 x 33 cm. Hunsand Space. Courtesy of the Artist and the Gallery.