Bravo

text/ Sandywan
translation/ dorothy cheng
photo/ courtesy of Liu Jianhua and Hong Kong Arts Centre



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Liu Jianhua : A Body Built by Broken Pieces

Discard– piled porcelain fragments scattered on the ground, the nobleness and elegance of the vases and dishes retains, exuding the country of porcelain, China's dedication towards skills and perfection. Placed on the other side are a large number of white porcelain daily supplies: boots, hats, toys, bottles and jars, and hammers, etc, some remained in whole piece, while some crumbled. When gazing at the piece, we begin to wonder, how this famous Jingdezhen sculptor and installation artist, over the years, constructs his own artistic language of social criticism through the one and only element – porcelain.

Alienating daily life through abandonment

Discard is first exhibited at Pujiang, Shanghai in Vanished Boundaries: A Dialogue Between Edwin Zwakman and Liu Jianhua in 2011. It comprises two outdoor pits. Smashed remnants of everyday articles made of white porcelain filled one pit, which is formerly the central lawn of Pujiang Overseas Chinese Town, while replicas of coloured ancient Jingdezhen porcelain chips and fragments filled the other, formerly the central fountain. Water was added to the fountain, so half of the porcelain submerged.

In the pit of white porcelain, Liu's ten-year project *Regular/Fragile*, is transplanted here. Making use of the characteristic of porcelain, looking strong yet practically brittle, the artist stated very often, one's ideal is only a presumed expectation. There is a distance between one's dream and what one wants to achieve in daily circumstances, which is short-lived. The special meaning provoked by changing the material of everyday articles used by Liu's family and friends, together with the monotonous shades, allowed viewers to lift their observation beyond the surface. The other part is replicas of vintage porcelain chips. Through investigation, Liu discovered ancient people in Jingdezhen would smash porcelain that was not up to standard, leaving only a little amount of excellent ones. The process is full of religious and ritual sense and displays an attitude and spirit to culture. "The white porcelain part is my own inner awareness, found from daily lives. The ancient replica is the respect and rigor our ancestors had towards art and culture. Combining the two together allows people to reflect, and it is a progress of knowing the objects again. Discard may be an idea in terms of time, instead of really abandoning the objects," said Liu.



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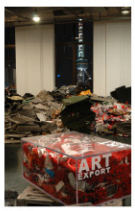
001-002_ *Discard* (detail), Installation, porcelain, Dimensions variable, 2012
003_Liu Jianhua, taken in Hong Kong Arts Centre in 2012 004_ *Disharmony series*, Mixed media, 1994-1997
005_ *Play (series)*, porcelain, 56 x 56 x 9 cm, 1999-2000 006_ *Regular / Fragile*, Porcelain installation, dimensions variable, 2002-2003
007_ *Export-Cargo Transit*, exhibited in Shanghai Gallery of Art at Three on the Bund, 2007 008_ *End of 2012*, Porcelain, 247 cm x 514 cm x 3 cm, 2011

Selected works of Liu from 1994 to 2012 :


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Life in Jingdezhen

Like other work of the artist, *Discard* relates strongly to his own background. Born in 1962 in Ji'An, Jiangxi province, Liu Jianhua learned drawing from his uncle Liu Yuanchang, a renowned Chinese artist in arts and crafts, at Jingdezhen at the age of 12. At 14, he received an eight-year training at a porcelain factory, and got the biggest award in porcelain art, the Bai Hua Prize, at 20. In his years working at the factory, the death of Mao Zedong declared the end of the Cultural Revolution. Liu was exposed to contemporary western art, and in 1978 he read Rodin L'art. Sculptures of Rodin, especially in terms of spaces and dimensions, struck his usual concept of art. Later, he got into the Institute of Jingdezhen Ceramics, majoring in sculpture. He was then assigned to work in Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province, and taught in the Yunnan Arts Institute when he graduated in 1989.

From 1994 to 2000, Liu materialized human bodies to express his criticism on how modern society retained old values. Appearing in his work were headless and armless women of the 30's who wore fashionable cheongsam with slits high to the waist or hip, exposing their thighs. These porcelain art pieces were put on traditional Chinese dishes: the bodies of women were ready to be savoured. Liu wanted people to think about the status of women in modern society. Although achievements were made during the Communist era, women were still engaged in conventional roles, when they were regarded as objects, as consumer goods, and they must be beautiful and appealing to men. Their thoughts were not valued, and they were incapable of escaping from these restraints.

This series of work marks the early stages of Liu's creation, and we can trace his tendencies in his subsequent works – to explore the relationship between human and objects in a non-direct way. Liu once said, "If you want to express temptation, it is not through exerting high effort to guide and tempt others. Sometimes the ambiguity and obscurity it transmits may offer the biggest room of imagination or impulses. It does not have to be specific, and without convoluted, imaginative spaces."

Responding to environment through material

Later, Liu moved from Kunming to Shanghai, where the varied city pace made him more sensitive to the society's situation. He once referred his feelings as falling into a huge concrete mixer, "The pace is so rapid that it pushes you to move and you cannot help but think about a lot of things and have a lot of concerns. This of course is related to the environment, and I acknowledge it as a brand new space for my existence, and in this space I created a lot of my work."

In 2001, Liu began to make *Regular / Fragile* and exhibited the pieces in different cities. A thousand white porcelain everyday articles were on show at the Chinese Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2003. The scale grew then, and formed an installation work of environment reform, which is site-specific. In 2007, he exhibited *Export – Cargo Transit* at the Shanghai Gallery of Art at Three on the Bund. An export and transit system was established to show how western industrial waste, after being imported to China, were transported, sorted, and re-transported once again. Scattered waste on the ground piled high up to the side near the windows, while sights of the Huangpu River and Lujiazui acted as the background, blending together with the exhibits. This is a manifestation of the unfair dialogue between developed and developing countries. Using historical evidence and documents, he triggered debate around the globe. Using the shock of the five senses, he proclaimed his quest on the emerging materialistic culture and social issues.

In recent years, the artist begins to consider the necessity of visual impacts, and hopes to make his work simple and straightforward, quietly creating distance between human and everyday life, allowing viewers to re-consider the real living space through a detached perspective. "In the past, I focused much about social issues and reality, but starting from 2008, I begin to take off the superficial meaning of my work. Every artist has his own journey to building his own artistic language, and has his own context and clues, which displays how he views the society and himself. But when how you comprehend and attend to the society gets complicated, you do not build the whole scenario, but to derive it from the language of art."