



Wearing the body inside out

Yu Linhan, solo exhibition Migrant Bird Space

Koppenplatz 5, 10115 Berlin
22, Oct-10, Dec 2021
Opening: 19:00 22, Oct

Yu Linhan's obsession is not with mechanical craftsmanship as such, but how the latter's products interact with the body. Every single type of machinery he portrays has a close relationship to the human body - carrying, underpinning, upholding or splaying human flesh, sometimes invasively (medical devices inserted into the body), sometimes expressing dominance (bondage or torture gear). Flesh emanates from nature, machinery is a creation of the mind. It follows that it is the former which is an externality, not the latter. The mind can control the flesh, but even 'control' is a relative term implying an opposition of forces. Yu Linhan prefers, when speaking of the body, to use the term 'homeostasis', a dynamic term and a very revealing one - dynamic control is at the same time dynamic uncontrolledness. The body needs to be continually disciplined; Yu Linhan's machinery bears witness to this struggle.

Yu's passion for human manufacturing derives precisely from his fascination with the body. He takes the opposite approach to Francis Bacon, inasmuch as the latter reduces humans to flesh. Bacon's most agonising tendency is not that he distorts, but how he exposes humans as nothing more than organisms, a flesh-built "pure body" of the Real. His over-objectification of this physical side renders the body into little more than the offerings of a meat-packing plant. These bodies are unbearable; Bacon's brush gives us just biological tissue, with no place left for humanness to show its face.

This is the "flesh" that Yu Linhan does his utmost to avoid. His trenchant rejection of it causes even the body as such to vanish. He foregrounds only clean-cut, disciplined human creations. These derive from human artifice, from our most honest-to-God internality, products of pure rationality. In other words, machinery external to the body actually belongs to the internal realm. To our rational minds, this apparatus is transparent, it is a product of our design, assembly, dismantling and reassembly. When the machine operates, we understand the motion of its every part. Depicting the machine thus calls for even, controlled, replicable lines, perfect straight lines and circles, recursive and symmetrical form; in short, it requires geometry. There is no perfect geometry in the physical world; the "vivid" brushstrokes used to paint nature end up as a hindrance. To draw a machine, you must use a machine. Printing, for Yu Linhan, is a matter of necessity, not choice.

The act of avoidance is also the best affirmation. The psychological austerity of his approach is what makes us realise that the body refuses to disappear, and indeed will undergo a constant recursion, just by different means. For Yu Linhan here, repetition has two levels of meaning. The subjects continually reproduced by block printing technology, those machines - they are not actual subjects of suppression. Far from being scars, they are a healing balm for scars ("Gentian Violet"). They cannot even be said to have been repeated; what they have undergone is more akin

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to a series of failed repetitions, Deleuze's "repetition of habit". They are what the artist strives after but cannot obtain, they have not returned so much as been stimulated, lacerated by another more active regression, namely that of the body; true scars are not that which we see, but that which we cannot. They show up as the accidents on the canvas, the blemishes and mismatches, the things that disrupt the normally clean and tidy screen printing. Printing as a choice means an aspiration towards form and symbolic order; spots and freehand mean that this aspiration is fated to fail. Yu Linhan's images have actually never featured perfectly-realised order; what we see is always a shaken and disrupted order, more of a confounded order, an unsteady form. The body is inherent to this dimension, not explicitly drawn by the artist but as an irrepressible form that disturbs the order, not the subject of repetition but as repetition itself. To this extent, the unexpressed human body is an even more potent presence than Bacon's bodies. Even the artist himself refuses to express it, transmuting it instead into that uncontrollable dimension. As a result we witness the highest form of artistic sincerity, one not attained by a confession from the artist, but by a concealment.

The "person" is an impossible thing in painting. It is not mere expansion or contraction of the field of view that will lead us from the body to the person; when it is lesser than the person, we see the body, and when greater than the person, we see the spirit. The former is Francis Bacon's field, the latter is that of Alberto Giacometti. Giacometti's radical casting-off of the body, whereby he sculpts the human form "without regard to the body", attempts to abstract the body into a metaphysical person. His creations are not so much spindly bodies as people without bodies, abstract subjects distilled from the physical body. Yu Linhan's is a third way: neither objectifying the body nor spiritualising it, but simply suppressing the body; this is the key to how his art achieves a magical metonymy. Sometimes we see him start with a basic sketch of an innocent human in motion, but then he immediately adds another motif: a cross-section in thick paint of human muscle. These two opposing dimensions (figure / body) are linked by a cinema editor's cross-cut, as if asking the audience, "which of these is reality?" These intriguing overlays are actually omnipresent, and the coexistence of the two dimensions is where we see Yu Linhan's response to the first two approaches mentioned above. When we combine figure and body, internality and externality, and "greater than the person" and "lesser than the person", we will find the impossibility of a correct answer. Darting back and forth from the internal to the external, banishing the flesh to the exterior and exposing its inherent estrangement - this is the only way to raise this contradiction in form to a higher plane. What Yu Linhan seems to offer is transcendence, one that can bring a final resolution to the dyad.

A hackneyed expression-centric liberalism is being subverted, as we discover hidden power in this inversion of the body. And it is perhaps appropriate that it be a Chinese artist who carries this out, since in that other linguistic context, the concept of "covering up" is neutral in value terms, just as leaving space is as legitimate a technique as the use of perspective. An artist such as Yu Linhan with a foot on both continents may just find it easier to return everything to conceptual neutrality. After all, as Sabina in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* declares, for the artist "my enemy is kitsch!", rather than anything that renders one free or unfree.