

SAATCHI ONLINE TV & MAGAZINE

CHRIS MOORE ON LI HUI AT BUND 18 CREATIVE CENTRE, SHANGHAI

Shanghai has saved its most stunning show of 2008 until last. Li Hui's 'Samsara' is extraordinary and if you have the chance to see it, you must. It transforms the Buddhist concept of reincarnation into a parable of technology's transfiguration over humanity - how it does it and how we want it. This is no nightmare, however, rather a play on the uncertain nature of metaphor, how the delusional or strengthening character of hope, its sincerity and sentimentality, are refracted by technological development, which is as much human as technical or scientific. Indeed even the distinction here between humanity and technology is itself artificial, linguistic and relative rather than material.

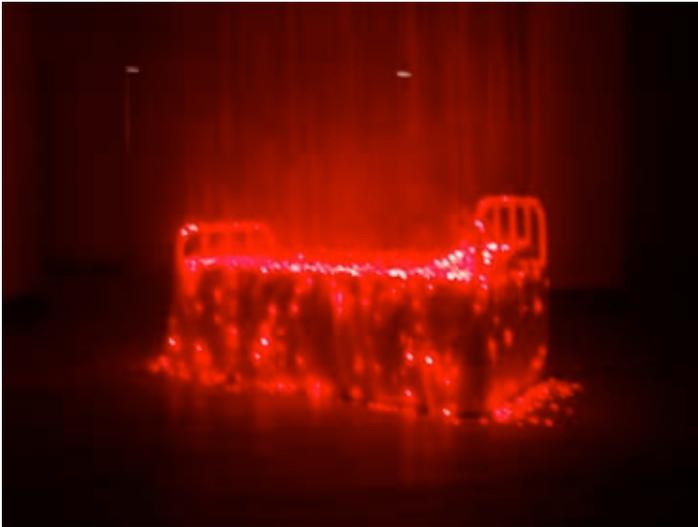
In the Roman pantheon, Janus was the god of gates and doorways, of beginnings and endings, and the liminal space of doorways was itself considered ambiguous and uncertain. Li Hui's 'The Door' is a fascinating variation on this theme. It stands at the end of a corridor leading to the main exhibition space. You are led to it by another corridor, an ethereal one, composed of beams of light which frame the doorway, and blind you if you transgress its walls by straying from the path of enlightenment. But now here's a strange thing, as you walk towards the door you are confronted by your own advancing reflection - the doorway is impenetrable, blocked by your own emanation. The doorframe is clothed in oblique mirrors that reflect the wall-mounted laser beams at 45-degree angles, thus creating the initial corridor but also a barrier to the main exhibition space. With the corridor, the threads of light trail off into the ether, splashing red into eternity. With the barrier however, the beams take on the quality of some sort of mythical cloth. In order to get to the other side of the door, you have to go around it, through the gossamer paravent. This indirect approach is a very Chinese notion and, intentionally or otherwise, questions the Western one of artificial ethical separation known as 'Chinese walls', referring simultaneously to the Great Wall and to the elaborately pointless performance of confidentiality once practised by the Imperial Court. Stepping through the wall an unsettling puff of smoke shoots into the air, swirling among the laser beams like ink dropped in water, a random abstraction generating real action painting. If you picked up the silver card advertising the exhibition on the way in, you can play with reflections, directing the beams hither and yond. Away from the wall you can watch the bodies and shadows of others dance in and out of the laser curtains, bewitched by their new status as ghosts. In other words, Li Hui's wall is a cipher for a multitude of things, among them the impossibility of intellectual objectivity and the face of political transparency, as well as a meditation on the nature of art and its experience.

Samsara refers to Buddhist reincarnation. The Chinese title however is not 轮回 lúnhuí, that is, 'to return' but 灭渡 miè du, a more complex word. The various connotations of mie include to extinguish, perish and even kill, whereas those of du include to cross and to survive. Hence the word itself describes the process of reincarnation rather than the result. There is also a slight play on words here - Li Hui's given name, Hui, sounds similar to the word for return, 回 huí, even if it looks entirely different and is pronounced with a different tone. Tones are important in Chinese and the distinction between almost identical words as written in the Latinized form but with tonal differences can be decisive. On the other hand, an understanding of the diverse associations that the characters bare is a crucial part of the particular subtlety of the language. So one should neither over interpret Latinized similarities nor ignore the various actual and potential associations of Chinese characters. With Li Hui's 'Samsara', what we have to concentrate on is the process of reincarnation. In the respective works, humans exist only as traces of their existence - empty doorways, cars and beds. There is no proof of reincarnation here, just a magical promise. What remains is a feeling only of its impossibility, albeit camouflaged by the capacity of metaphor and art to make that promise rather than keep it.

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY



730 FIFTH AVENUE
NEW YORK NY 10019
TEL 646 336 7183
FAX 646 336 7185



'Reincarnation' (2007)

Beyond the curtain of 'The Door' lies 'Reincarnation' (2007), a lonely but glowing bed in the middle of a large dark room. Its more material aspects include a simple iron bed, such as one might find in an old fashioned hospital. Its tubing is wrapped in bandaging and the bedding clothed in a white gauze fabric with an old grey blanket draped on top, as if the body it had warmed had, Boojum like, softly and suddenly vanished away. Reincarnation is also composed of red laser beams and smoke (amusingly described as 'smog'). The smoke drifts up through the bed and curls among the thin wires of light from the lasers, which rain down on the bed. The optical effect however is one of substance rising, indeed, up to the heavens. In contrast to their elegant strands, when the lasers hit the bed, they spatter red over the sheets and blanket like blood, reminding us of the cycle of life - birth, sex, child-birth, disease and ending in death. It is a very plain bed, one made by the millions for a population of many millions. The drama of the piece is so seductive, begging us to dream of sweet spirituality. Yet at the same time the very heavy and earthly iron bed speaks not of renewal but mass fabrication, of constant effort pursued by the wolf-like threat of redundancy, the state of non-being which evolution makes ultimately inevitable. Reincarnation here lies close to being superceded, to exhaustion. And it applies not only to people or objects, but also to philosophy and dreams.

Further ruminations on these concepts can be found elsewhere in the exhibition. Before you reach the laser show, there is a small side room that glows an icy blue in contrast to the heat of the laser spectacle further on. Here lies 'F1' (2007), transparent fragments of a generic racing car. Each piece is a slab of layered clear acrylic Perspex, bolted together and internally lit with LED lights. This is the latest variation on the Amber series of racing cars, almost life-size cars containing the transparent skeletons of dinosaurs - most apt, given the current state of the automotive industry. This time though the skeletons are human, crammed into their respective spaces - part of the bonnet or one half of the engine - as if they had attempted to avoid whatever huge knife sliced through the car and leaving them each one isolated. This is the dissection, the autopsy of hope. On the first floor one is met by its monster successor, 'Renewing Jeep - Smooth Current and Counter Current' (2003), a Siamese twin version of a Jeep, with two fronts facing in opposite directions and no backs. In the luxurious space of the entrance to 18 on the Bund, this perverse object of mutated strength disturbs the entire architecture, bringing us back to the ambiguity of Janus' doorways.

What is so exciting about this exhibition, besides its beauty and theatricality, is how Li Hui presents the promise of perfection with the reality of imperfection, the inevitability of evolution with the horrific redundancy that must shadow it. Go and see it and be transformed.

Chris Moore

Li Hui's "Samsara"
 Until 2 February
 1F and 4F, 18 The Bund (Wai Tan)
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