

Between the Present and the Future

Text/ Yu Fei

The virtual world created by Tian Mu is like a mirror image of reality. Where history mutates and forks, it takes a complete turn into a path that seems familiar but is totally different, as if another mysterious big bang has broken down the physical world, let loose the rampaging genetic technology and blinded us to reason, so what's before our eyes is a world of fragments – machine parts, animal torsos, exposed human organs, all of which just fit perfectly in. The new species, created, in a sense, by combining the inorganic and the organic, machinery and flesh, has been given eye-catching colors and homogenous skin, sending out a dual signal that is both humorous and violent, ordinary and strange. In fact, all that is chaotic and whimsical on the surface is sugarcoating criticism. With different inorganic and organic properties integrated, this party of organs is rehearsing a silent protest tinted with anarchism. And this exhibition is an active intervention made by Tian Mu from backstage in the present and the future in a post-human context.

On the forms of future lives, such a consensus seems to have long been reached: humanity is logging into the future as a more complex, diversified and intellectual subject, and, thanks to the high updating frequency of biotechnology, such a future may have already been just around the corner. In reality, our life is dominated by such topics as the gradual marketization of the 3D organ printing technology, the rise of genome editing as a medical approach and the attempt to realize digital immortality by storing our consciousness as information. A big number of cyberpunk literary works, movies and video games, as the contributors of the mainstream world of science fiction, even act as prophecies over and over of the possible futures of human civilization. Putting aside the totalitarian politics of a hyper-capitalist society, we can see that most of these narratives have mankind as their protagonist, who has to suffer from both self-alienation and outside intrusion, so the stories are built on the worry about man's loss of subjectivity and the honoring of those who've shown a ray of humanity. Although the advent of a post-human world underlies our discussion of possible future lives, the word "human" still gets highlighted and capitalized all the time, so there's basically no escaping the narcissist humanistic complex and the worship of AI developed by technological Darwinism, and such misunderstanding and ambiguity of the concept of "post-humanism", in the end, would lead to the reverse of its true sense before we realize it. In the face of such illusion of an imaginary world and such technological ambition in reality, Tian Mu takes a minority stance by starting something new or different from the two. In a sense, he goes for an anti-future approach which features smashing "human" up resolutely and steering clear of the concept of "me". Everything, be it 2D digital printing, ready-made alteration or three-dimensional sculpture or be it a car engine, human intestines or the head of a bug, is treated equal in Tian Mu's works: machines serve not as any artificial parts to add to the strength of human bodies, animals are not personified nor intelligentized into some more advanced subjects, and mankind even comes into play with no dominant power but as a coexistence equal to the previous two in hierarchy. Also, in a synergetic life form, these motley organs counteract and constrain each other in some way. Assembled often in some impractical

manner, these new bodies have been deprived by the deliberate detachment of logic of the possibility of truly working and being put into practical use. The very purpose of piecing these seemingly abandoned and useless organs together is to disintegrate the concepts of function, profit and evolution.

At first sight, it seems impossible to find any rule of Tian Mu's viral approach to assembling the parts as it completely defies any biological or physical reasoning in contemporary times. Man's exploration of the inorganic world, as a matter of fact, has everything to do with the organisms in the natural world that are closely related to human activities, exemplified by the machines man, who's been playing the Creator ever since the industrial age, has designed and invented based on various prototypes such as the neural network, the cellular structure, insects, frogs, fish and birds. It's quite appropriate, therefore, to see machines as extension to and conversion from the biological structures of organisms in the natural world in terms of function and image. Thanks to the theorization and application of bionics, the barrier between organic and inorganic beings has been lifted, and what Tian Mu's doing right now is definitely no rigorous scientific work. On the contrary, he aims for functional and image malposition, so as to add badinage, comicality and ambiguity to the not-very-harmonious and even quite abrupt symbiosis of the organs. For all the sculptures, hard and cool marble is employed to be carved into the shapes of cellular tissues and human organs. Then repeated polishing and grinding give, miraculously and gradually, an organic-like texture to the surface of the marble. Taken off their original mechanical structure, the car parts are put here in a new body as a simulated component. Double-alienation happens to the organic and the inorganic during their functional and material interpenetration, and such defamiliarizing effect betrays the nuanced relationship between the two.

If the world is science-oriented in the future, then the ancient history of our civilization is dominated by mythology, which seems to suggest an eternal, striking symmetry between the future and history. In the Greek mythology, the gods look no different from human beings, but the privilege of immortality helps tell them apart. As the current science and technology is closing in on the singularity, the uncertainty of the boundary between man's life and death has become a topic about a possible near future. The pursuit of eternal life, in a way, should be taken more as a return to a primitive desire rooted in our culture than an arrival at the future. Indispensable though science is for social advances, the conclusive and orderly part about it can have art easily trapped, while mythology, fantastic and uncanny in nature, can provide the tolerance, openness and freedom necessary to artistic creation. In Tian Mu's works, we can see his reference to both the images and narratives of the Greek mythology. Most of the monsters in it take on the form of hybrids and Tian Mu's art happens to be built visually on the diversity of sources of all the monster images. By a step further beyond the diversity of biological species, Tian Mu transplants the heterogeneous organs in a more deviant fashion. His *Flying Man*, for one, is inspired by the eagle that feeds on Prometheus's liver, but the image delivered is a half-human and half-machine flight vehicle that doesn't work as there's the torso only, without wings. The driver's seat on the back of the vehicle seems to also suggest that it cannot fly as a free subject. In the corresponding myth, the eagle preys by order every day on the ever-regenerating liver of Prometheus. It's surely a punishment of Prometheus

as lengthy as thousands of years, but, for the eagle, isn't it also a kind of penal servitude? *Medusa*, on the other hand, refers directly to the female monster with hair made of snakes and the power of turning men into stone in the Greek mythology. Tian Mu's piece shows no attempt at a replica of Medusa's image but only a focus on an object who has been "turned into a stone" – a marble-carved car engine. So we're looking at a justifiable narrative formed by combining the reference to real-life incidents and mythology: frequent air crashes have prompted discussions and speculations among the public, and the truth here of each such mysterious tragedy is that the aircraft engine stops working when being turned into stone high in the air by the stare of Medusa. The absence of any reasonable scientific explanations makes it possible for a coincidental link between mythology and the absurdity in reality, so this work happens to act as an engine that fills us with fantasies.

Besides mythology, fairy tales are also one of the legacies of our ancient civilization. The former, as the product distilled by cultural elite, has generated typical motifs in art history and the images in it have been given various visual forms by artists generation after generation, while the latter, a collection of folk wisdom to begin with, gradually developed into reading materials for the edutainment of children, and have also given life to distinctive and symbolic characters of the contemporary cartoon industry. Cartoon magnates represented by Walt Disney Animation Studios not only make adaptations of classic fairy tales but also keep creating original figures and stories, which have made an indispensable part of contemporary popular culture. Tian Mu loves to appropriate some very popular cartoon characters and give them a brand-new context he created for new meanings. His *Barbed Claw* series, for example, has rounded up the representative villains in the Disney animations and reveals and covers their evil images with the structure of a barbed net suggestive of danger. As for his *Monster*, we can faintly see behind the claw marks a genuine monster with furious staring eyes, a large, fierce-looking mouth and exposed fangs; this image, somewhat strange though, is actually an evil version of the popular Mickey Mouse. So this is Tian Mu ridiculing such a reality: just as many cartoons disseminated by the mainstream culture are quite different from the original fairy tales, isn't the mainstream culture also a product of domestication that has been selected, filtered and trimmed by humanity? Apart from the appropriation of existing text and images, Tian Mu certainly also has his original characters and story systems in his self-supporting world of organs. In similar forms and postures, the figures show up at different settings, in an attempt to develop a totem of the current visual culture out of their endless self-repetition so that a link can be built between the contemporary concept on image consumption and the totem worship back in the primitive times. In his recent works, Tian Mu has started including a photo portrait of himself in his system of organs as a new image element. In this self-consistent pool of virtual images, such an abrupt real human figure seems to be an intruder from outside. Such symbiosis of organs is made more paradoxical and complicated by the role reversal of the subject and the object and the ambiguity in the identity boundary between the manipulator and the manipulated.

Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* has it that the change in necro-politics has brought about a new type of disadvantaged groups. Take a break back to reality from this imaginary world of organs, and we'll find

that the starting point of Tian Mu's art happens to be his personal experience of the post-industrial turn that has been bringing uncomfortable twitches to the individuals stripped sadly off the collective. Every civilization relay or every social transition cannot escape the rise of a group of spiritual and physical refugees. In one of the foreseeable futures, the quantity of individual capital will be determining his or her physical form of existence – a low-end human with a bare body, or a high-end superhuman with an upgraded mind and body, or even a body-free form of informatized cloud consciousness. Through these pieces of art, Tian Mu provides us with another possibility – a script about the harmony or the love and hatred between the organs that will eventually be dismissed by the times, and there will be doomsday revels going on endlessly in an autonomous parallel universe, since what can be certain is that Hybrid is much more interesting and worth looking forward to than Matrix.