

ZHUO QI

*History never really says goodbye*

EN

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Opening on 10th September

**Text by Baiyu Ju : Seeking Defeat with Triumph**

“Hasten, slowly” (festina lente). This motto of the ancient Roman emperor Augustus – found on a gold coin from his reign – is embodied by a crab and a butterfly on the obverse and reverse (slow and fast, heavy and light). Such a paradox is similar to the wisdom of the East, which renders precisely prudence and radicalism. When two extreme polars go hand in hand, we call it tension. Once the artist is willing to take the risk of mastering this delicate balance, the fascination of the work becomes apparent, and I can perceive this kind of weightlessness in Zhuo Qi’s works.

The artist “restores” Buddhist statues from China’s Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (A.D. 907-960) in glass bubbles. From which we perceive the temporal notion of “slowness”, an eternal splice while maintaining a geographical fluidity. Such style of damaged Buddhist heads, evident in Buddhism’s many rounds of rising and falling, represents the violent movements of religious icons in the East. Eventually, they established a distinct image out of the chaos and confusion. Over the years, such images became detached from its own aesthetic origins and followed Qi like ghosts. They enter the global language and became a metaphor of his “irreverent” as evidence of time and space. In his false “restoration”, Qi supplements its integrity with temporally and geographically irrelevant materials.



*Bubble-Game*, 2022, stone sculpture and blown glass, 47 x 23 x 23 cm

These works continue the dialectic of the *Bubble-Game* series exhibited in 2020: when he takes a religious icon from an ancient civilization as the material for his work, he dissolves the notion of “icon” in convention; Moreover, the creators of a religious icon was usually commonplace craftsmen who serve the public designated by the religion and who do not need to have their own free will or strivings of innovation. Whether in the case of Buddhist or Catholic

icons, the creators do not have names, yet the idol was glorious and authoritative. Nowadays, as the times and space have changed, the humanistic image is free from the worship of beliefs and has generated its own culture. Hence, the artist becomes the primary creator of visual culture. Creativity is no longer reliant on divine power; thus, when the glass bubble casts over the remnants of the icon, not only does a sense of humor shine through, but the artist, as an individual, accomplishes his historical responsibility, which is to deliver freedom. In other words, art assumes this function when the sacred icon no longer evokes the world.

This “reinvented statue”, which consists of several colored glass bubbles, is no longer presented in a sacred place, but now rests gracefully on a stainless steel butcher’s table. From a butcher’s point of view, the exhibition space could be considered a “Buddha butcher shop”. Hanging from the ceiling of this butcher shop, a glass ham becoming the arm of the statue symbolizes the gesture of Bodhisattva. This hand which for thousands of years pointed upwards, now points downward to the earth. This mischievous destruction, undermining the norms and conventions of its own culture: let’s call it liberation.



*Bubble-Game*, 2020, stone sculpture and blown glass, variable dimensions

Born in the Liaoning province of China, Zhuo Qi’s hometown is rich in onyx stone and Rinpoches<sup>1</sup>. However, precious stones were only commonplace materials to him, and the untouchable religion meant nothing more to him than that a family member was a lama<sup>2</sup> or a shaman. Having grown up in such an atmosphere, religion belief and icon worship are both close and far from him. We can accurately describe his “irreverence” due to this environment just as Cézanne one said that a farmer in Provence would never look at Mont Sainte-Victoire.

People have shaped the invisible religious consciousness into a physical and palpable statue. In Zhuo Qi’s case, he uses abstract

and blown glass to restore and reconstruct. When he faces the countless defective porcelain vases in Jingdezhen, he sees the magic of failure or rejection. They are abandoned because they do not meet the standards of beauty. As for the artist, he considers that “Beauty itself emanates from what is rejected”, just as Régis Debray put it: “The museum is the dustbin of cultural degradation linked to faith”. History and society constantly interpret religion and its physical manifestations in perpetual evolution; the artist is the only one who can transform past creations and resurrect them into an aesthetic of the present. It is the artist who connects the past to the present, who destroys and rebuilds in order to reveal a new perspective of history through what could be called a “positive legacy”.



*Sorry since one thousand years ago*, 2015-2022, Porcelain from the Dynasty Song (960-1297) until today, variable dimensions

When put together one next to another, those failed porcelain abandoned from the kiln are like a grammatically incorrect sentence. It is a sentence about history that is awkward-sounding, poorly constructed or it does not convey the real meaning. Wrong words yet can constructed a real sentence, a real long process of history. It's not difficult to find out from all the works that the artist does not approve a purified, perfect history, just as a flawless white jade Buddha head always fails to amaze the audience when it's only to be observed in a window of an antique shop. Things must not only shows their flaws and frustrations, but also need some magic to achieve the beauty. This is the artist's worship of failure: seeking defeat, is also the triumph of will.



*Piercing-game #4*, 2022, sandstone, blown glass, copper, iron, variable dimensions

Beautiful and desolate dead branches, often found in Chinese painting of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), late Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) or in Japanese painting from the Edo period (1603-1867), which usually represent the repository feeling of travelers or the disillusionment of literati. In the series *Piercing*

*game*, Qi renders the dead branches by shaping ceramics in a wood-fired kiln. This transformation between both substances seems to make us go lost in our understandings between ceramics and wood. Who give birth to whom? Which one is the subject of the work? But his mischief intensifies even further: the broken branches are joined together by staples<sup>3</sup>, and the failed pieces from the glass workshop are casted on the end of the branches, as if the flowers of impossibility are blooming on the branches, as an impossible outcome of the history.



*Dance of chairs*, 2018-2022, Porcelain, 50 x 52 x 45 cm

This contradiction can also be seen in the Bamboo Chairs series, in which Chinese porcelain bamboo takes the form of a chair. The viewer can neither anticipate nor judge whether it is solid or flexible. Like *Piercing Game*, Bamboo Chairs returns to echo the dialectic of the Ancient East. Seemingly poetic, yet the pieces are full of contradictions, uncertainties, doubts and a comic restlessness that the artist delivers with apprehension. These ceramic bamboos are presented to us like cultural relics from a museum, similar to ancient Chinese musical instruments or tools from a workshop. They look familiar to us but no one is able to determine their origin and function. These post-modern “false creations” are part of history, the one that we persist in wanting to restore. This time that we connect to myths and legends with staples, wishing to progress but without knowing where to go, ended up repairing the past with our noses kept to the grindstone.

Nowadays, the Buddha's head is not in a temple, nor in a museum but playing with glass bubbles freely laying on a butcher's block. The approach that breaks the principle of secularism is Qi's signature language of banter, which juxtaposes “irreverence” with “reverence”. The tension engendered from this language game of disorder is the same as we couldn't identify someone on a street in Europe hundreds years ago as a dandy or a philosopher. After looking at all the works by Zhuo Qi, I am reminded by Chögyam Trungpa<sup>4</sup> Rinpoche. He once got drunk and took off the Buddha amulet from his neck and soaked in a glass of wine. He said: I would also like the Buddha to enjoy what I enjoy.

<sup>1</sup> Rinpoche is a religious teacher held in high regard among Tibetan Buddhists.

<sup>2</sup> Lama is a title for a teacher of the Dharma in Tibetan Buddhism. High lama may claim to have a vision to know who is the next lama and his birth date and place. Every lama could be born from a normal family.

<sup>3</sup> Restoration of ceramics with staples is a traditional technique where metal is knocked in to flat-shapped nails to repair broken ceramics

<sup>4</sup> Chögyam Trungpa (1939 –1987) was a Tibetan Buddhist meditation master and holder of both the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages of Tibetan Buddhism.