



XU QU

35

BY CHRISTOPHER SCHRECK

In presenting his 2011 work *Movable Structure*, Xu Qu concludes: “How can the connections between things be defined as an ‘entirety’? Most people prefer a stable structure, but they ignore the changes [occurring] within the interior.” His remark, figurative but hardly rhetorical, could easily serve as a thesis for the artist’s broader practice. Drawing on media ranging from painting and video to multipart installation, the Beijing-based artist is all about zooming in on the details, finding aesthetic possibilities in the shifting, often imbalanced exchanges that define his surroundings.

Following educations in Nanjing and Braunschweig, Xu’s early works varied widely in both technique and content, his energies directed largely towards participatory performances and architectural interventions. His return to Beijing in 2010, however, brought with it a newfound focus on painting and video, and a narrowing of the artist’s conceptual aims, with his work taking on a ruminant but incisive political edge.

Xu’s best-known work, the ongoing “Currency Wars” series, finds the artist translating the watermarks of international bank notes into intricate abstract paintings, the freestanding canvases all geometric patterns and bold, clashing palettes. The work comes as a direct response to China’s growing presence in the art market—specifically, the popularity of ornate abstraction among foreign collectors. Aggressive even in their vibrancy, the resulting works function as both commodity and critique: a knowing comment on art’s monetary realities wherein all invested (figuratively and financially) are implicated.

Of course, a significant factor in that recent, rapid ascension has been China’s growing reputation

as an incubator for exciting contemporary work, and Xu—a provocative, thoroughly globalized artist whose output reflects an international influence while tackling issues particular to his age and locale—has certainly benefited from so thoroughly fitting the bill. But this heightened visibility has not prevented him from continuing to address notions of social power and control through stirring, increasingly symbolic gestures. “Intercourse,” Xu’s 2015 exhibition at Antenna Space (Shanghai), included two videos: one depicting an overturned turtle, toyed with by an indifferent human foot; another showing a slaughtered black horse, its skin stripped by a butcher into a makeshift zebra’s hide. Other recent works find the artist in various performative modes: throwing coral back into the sea to thwart bureaucratic efforts towards territorial demarcation (*Coral Reef*, 2011), or tracing the Liangma River via an inflatable dingy, the stream’s flow through Beijing routinely interrupted by municipal architecture in disrepair (*Upstream*, 2011). With each offering, Xu speaks further to the complexities of social connections, stressing the thin lines between coexistence and control, interaction and imposition.

And so we return to Xu’s initial query: in matters physical, social or philosophical, what can truly be said of “entireties”? Little, it would seem, beyond acknowledging what transpires beyond appearances—the hidden networks, the tenuous bonds between elements, each interrelated but rarely equal. Dealer and artist, collector and market, human and animal, construction and seaway: as confirmed in Xu’s work, insight into these relationships ultimately depends on one’s curiosity, the returns lying less in didacticism than active, unflinching dissection. ☉

Xu Qu (Chinese, b. 1978) is an artist who lives and works in Beijing. He is represented by Almine Rech Gallery, Brussels, London, Paris, and Antenna Space, Shanghai.

Xu Qu’s work is currently exhibited in “Bentu: Chinese Artists at a Time of Turbulence and Transformation” at Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, through 2 May, and “Digging a Hole [Beijing]” at OCAT, Shenzhen, through 29 June. Upcoming projects include a solo presentation at Art Basel with Almine Rech from 16–19 June and a solo exhibition at Antenna Space, Shanghai, in the fall.

Christopher Schreck is the Online Editor of *Kaleidoscope*. Based in New York, he is also an independent writer and publisher.

Image: *Maze (relative)*, yellow and purple details, 2015. Courtesy of the artist, Almine Rech Gallery, Brussels, London, Paris, and Antenna Space, Shanghai.

“AGGRESSIVE IN THEIR VIBRANCY, HIS WORKS FUNCTION AS BOTH COMMODITY AND CRITIQUE”