The conspiracy of art

Gérard Rancinan didn’t become one of France’s most recognisable photographers by accident. “A picture is not a language. A picture is a shock,” he tells us at Opera Gallery during a brief Hong Kong visit. “You have to shock people. You have to take the people in front of the picture with you and [let them] feel the emotion.”

Since he started as a photojournalist at the tender age of 18, Rancinan had covered wars, riots and natural disasters, before subsequently finding his true calling in portrait photography. His diversified subjects range from Monica Bellucci and Paul McCarthy to Fidel Castro and the Pope, and his works have been regularly featured in magazines from *Time* and *Life* to *Sports Illustrated* and *Vanity Fair*.

But that’s hardly the end to Rancinan’s ambition: the veteran photojournalist has also started a parallel career in fine art photography since the early 1990s. After previous stops in Geneva, Paris and London, Rancinan is set to make his Hong Kong debut this fortnight, as his touring exhibition arrives with a selection of works from his trilogy series – *Metamorphoses*, *Hypotheses* and *Wonderful World* – and, of course, some of the celebrity portraiture that he’s still widely known for.

For his large-scale photo series *Metamorphoses*, Rancinan has transformed imageries of iconic artworks from past eras – such as Théodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*, Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* and Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* – into hyper-realistic mockery of our contemporary society’s intrinsically absurd conditions. And then there’s the new *Wonderful World* series – from which a set of Mickey Mouse-themed satires will appear here for the first time internationally.

Gérard, it looks like there’re a few fine art photographers working today – including you – who have a special interest in referencing iconic paintings in their works. Why do you think that’s the case?

Because, you know, too many artists want to [get closer to] the original. We learn a lot when we look [at] the past. It was the same thing for Géricault and Velázquez and the classical painters from the 15th century: they look at the past too. I mean – it’s my opinion – I am, as an artist, just a link [to the past]. Nobody invented the [original]. Since the first guy drew something on the rock millions and millions of years before [us], all was set. We have to be modest, and just learn and be witnesses of our time. The real artists are not [working] for decoration.

Do you consider it your responsibility as an artist to deal with social issues and world affairs?

Oh yeah, of course. It’s my principal work. It’s the most important thing in my life to talk about that. I talked about humanity in [my work for] the magazines, and now I talk about that in the museums and galleries. It’s my responsibility; an artist has to be engaged.

You’ve gone from commercial photography to fine art photography midway through your career. So what was the jump – or transition – like?

There was no jump, because when I started my job as a photographer at about 20 years old, for me it was exactly the same thing. I never build frontiers between different fields. Really, there’s no difference between a wedding photographer and a war photographer; there’s no difference between a painter and a photographer. A lot of my friends say I’m crazy to think like that; I don’t know, I don’t think so. Because all these guys are witnesses of our contemporary time. In the next century, people can look at these photos now.
Behind his camera. It’s the most modest, and to disappear is no difference. A photographer [Chinese artist] Zhang Huan? There is no difference between working with athletes to politicians and around the world, from artists shots of many prominent figures. Well, you’ve since taken portrait Yeah. The best one. Only one. Small ambition.

Let’s go back even further: you started out as a photojournalist at a French newspaper. What made you decide to be one then? My father worked in that newspaper, too, in the south of France. It’s a good newspaper. And my school [life] was so short… I don’t like school at all. And my father said: “You need to have something very creative.” I was young, about 15 years old, so I started an apprenticeship in the lab of the newspaper’s photo department. After that, the newspaper was all my life: I started at 15, and I love that. A very short time after I started, I wanted to be the best photographer in the world.

Well, you’ve since taken portrait shots of many prominent figures around the world, from artists and athletes to politicians and ecclesiastics. What’s the biggest difference between working with each of these subjects? Like, between Fidel Castro and [Chinese artist] Zhang Huan? There is no difference. A photographer has to be modest, and to disappear behind his camera. It’s the most difficult thing. Because a lot of photographers – [including] myself at first, but I tried to learn – [want] to be in the front of the camera. They are [thinking]: are we looking nice? This is stupid. The most important thing is to [capture] the soul of the people [you’re photographing]. This is why, when I’m working with Fidel Castro or Yan Peiming or different people, I try to find the soul or the spirit of the people – not the face. I don’t care about the face. I don’t care about [the] surface. I want to shoot inside, [to capture] what the person is [about]. This is why my portraits are a little bit different from the others – maybe. From your countless shoots down the years, are there any particularly memorable ones? Yeah. [Pauses] With each person, it’s different of course. I ask [for] a lot, you know? For example, when I shot the portrait of [Hosni] Mubarak [the former president of Egypt], I asked to go in front of the pyramid – like a lion. All the people were saying: “Okay! It’s a good picture.” And one guy, the minister of culture next to me, said: “No, no, it’s impossible. It’s too complicated.” And the president Mubarak said: “Yes, yes, we’ll go.” Two days after, I arrived at the front of the pyramid, and I saw 5,000 soldiers cleaning up the rocks because the president arrived. Can you imagine that? Just for a picture. And the minister of culture said: “You see, this is your idea: 5,000 people cleaning up the desert for you!” Voida! It’s rare, but very often, it’s an incredible experience. With Dalai Lama in the [Himalayas], with Paul McCarthy [having] ketchup on his face… For everything it’s like that, when you push the limit – and I push the limit every time – every time is a good experience.

Gerard Rancinan in Hong Kong is at Opera Gallery from Nov 11-Dec 1.

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Elsewhere

Osage Soho Until Nov 21

Unreservedly baring all for the Old Bailey pedestrians to see, the massive French window panels of Osage Soho are as welcoming as they are detrimental to the sense of integrity in the gallery space. Only a simple sweeping glance is needed before backing out from the front door; there is neither room for surprises nor a sense of arrival, which is essential to an exhibition for surprises nor a sense of arrival, which is essential to an exhibition experience. It surely feels like a pleasant accident that the raised window sill does actually play to an advantage at Elsewhere, a joint exhibition by Hong Kong artists Au Hoi-lam and Sara Tse – drawing the viewers’ eyes to an array of odd objects placed across it and immediately evoking our curiosity. A small size suitcase, in particular, hints to a whimsical journey that is yet to be embarked upon. The exhibition itself embodies the idea of an unconventional voyage across time, space and personal histories; the artworks are mementos from the artists’ sojourns. The overall mood of the show is sentimentally charged – the works are strongly suggestive of private memories, even if neither artist has shed light on the specific details of their experiences. Through obsessive counting of days (Day), months (Full Moon), and years (1978–2011), Au’s incorporation of numbers within her work reveals a strong urge to create order from chaos. Her works function as receivers and emitters of emotions, while betraying few secrets of the artist.

Tse’s works, by contrast, deal with the past in a considerably different manner, choosing instead to try and capture time in delicate porcelain encrusted memorials. The act of incinerating objects may seem rather violent, but the porcelain shells that remain, while offering a sense of poetic destruction, represent physical impressions of what the objects once were. Her work Dress is easily the most visually impressive work in the exhibition: not only are the porcelain tiles laid across a large glass pane that looms from the ceiling, but the clever use of lighting also casts a gentle shadow across the blank neighbouring wall. If Dress is interpreted as a physical manifestation of Tse’s memories, then one wonders if these memories, casting their own shadows, are but an illusion of reality – as if we’re in Plato’s cave.

The work From Here may be considered the most representative work of the show – not just because it inscribes the exhibition title but, more interestingly, its cross structure seems to symbolise direction, navigation and the cross-point where Tse and Au have met, and for the duration of this exhibition, have become travel companions. It is a small regret that Elsewhere seems to have put most of its focus on highlighting the similarities between the two artists – rather than their differences. One could only hope there was a more dynamic dialogue between the two.

Cerine Liu

Osage Soho Until Nov 21

Abstract emotions Full view of Au Hoi-lam’s Number Series (2011)