

The Sculptor's Mirrored Self: Antonio Mak's Drawings and Collages

“For me drawing is a form of thinking. But it is also about medium: using the intrinsic qualities of substances and liquids, a kind of oracular process that requires tuning into the behavior of substances as much as to the behavior of the unconscious, like reading images in tea leaves, trying to make a map of a path of feeling, a trajectory of thought.” —Antony Gormley

Twenty-four years after the passing of Hong Kong sculptor Antonio Mak (1951–1994) his artistic life in two dimensions exists as a kaleidoscope of approximately four hundred and fifty drawings (wet and dry media) and collages (mixed media). A sculptor's drawings are often seen as being an unmediated link between the hand, eye and mind, as a mode of visual discovery with divergent artistic practices and materials. Drawings are intimate, subjective, self-sufficient, revelatory, and their core significance is bound to the artist's intent. One might assume a ‘logical’ and tightly bound relationship between the elements of two-dimensional visual experiments running in parallel with three-dimensional works, or that there is a strict delineation between the 2D ‘original’ and subsequent 3D manifestation. Without the opportunity to clarify these related points with the artist, I will refrain from limiting myself to this “first life (initial drawings) versus second life (later developed sculptures)” binary chain, and instead will posit his two-dimensional portfolio as being an independent body of work that bears equal status to his celebrated sculptures. The collages and drawings presented here are Antonio Mak's mirrored self, and the reflected portraiture is not necessarily identical to his other face.

Antonio Mak's collages suggest a direct lineage with the Cubist and Dadaist movements. Collage making as a spontaneous process can provide a tactile density and non-linear form of narrative. This spontaneity provides a doorway into Mak's insurgent form of unconscious art that allowed him to re-posit a fantasy world filled with segmented tigers, decapitated heads, twisted female torsos and skinned male anatomies (écorchés). These cut-up and jumbled elements are often juxtaposed into illusive or paradoxical spaces. In 1973, Mak broadened this pictorial witticism by scattering collaged fragments, along with his drawings and appropriated news photographs, onto

gallery walls. The extension of the physical space beyond the paper supports, and the hybridization of various forms of media into installation art, was a revolutionary approach in contemporary drawing practice. Forty-five years ago Mak was undeniably at the forefront of such cross-media investigations.

Mak's drawings focus upon several recurring subjects: animals (horses, tigers and snakes), human torsos (male and female), trees and man-made objects (book, chair, bicycle, ladder and staircase). These various elements are often morphed together into new environments or contexts. His meticulous figurative drawings are subjective and humorous, the sensuous surface of the drawing medium acting as a stage for the artist to execute pictorial gestures. The British sculptor Antony Gormley has said that he sees drawing paper like a skin reacting to the media or substances it encounters; together these materials provide a visual pathway for viewers to ponder and reveal an artful form of wisdom. For both Mak and Gormley, drawing is equally analytical and experimental. Beyond bearing witness to the representation of any one thing, drawing allows the artists to take these elements apart and then to reassemble them into new connections. In this way the primacy of drawing invites an investigation of three-dimensional space from the viewpoint of two dimensions; it also can inspire a reproductive drama for further creative acts.

The geometrically proportioned male nude in motion is one of Antonio Mak's most distinctive images; it also can be interpreted as the artist's own transformed identity. This classic torso is an extension of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (1490), and correlates with the modernist concept of the "human motor" that developed during the first industrial revolution in continental Europe. Synchronous to this bodily motion is the role of faith within the physiological sciences and the associated drive for economic productivity. Materialism and technological progress are a means by which to shape an energized figure's disciplined social identity. Mak's sketched figures can be viewed as a Promethean ideal of productive force; a unity of matter (in this case, flesh) with sufficient energy to grow towards being an *energumen*. The legacy of such a possessed spirit within the paradigm of modernity measures time in relation to the regulated laws of bodily

motion—lightening quick images that have been captured, fixed and analyzed ever since the scientific advances of the 1870s.

Equipped with a shutter speed set to one thousandth of a second, and with highly sensitive gelatin dry-plate negatives for faster exposure, the chronophotography of gesticulated humans and horses created by the American photographer Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904), and French physiologist Étienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904), succeeded in providing an objective real-time record of moving entities, imperceptible to the human eye. This pioneering chronological time-motion photographic technique has been credited with having an immense impact on later scientific and artistic developments, eventually leading to the birth of cinematography and the Futurist art movement. One can see the influence of Muybridge and Marey's decomposed sense of time and the spatial relations in Antonio Mak's energized human movements. Mak's work transfers this modernist energy and speed into fixated torsos. His related drawings of frozen action sequences are akin to the camera's multiple exposures and dynamism. Mak furthers this theatrical rhetoric by transforming the humans into animals, trees and objects. Mak's zoomorphic carnival becomes a revelation of humanity's transitory existence situated within his individual artistic fantasia.

Apart from fulfilling commissioned sculptural projects for the Hong Kong film industry, cinematic linkages to Antonio Mak's work can be traced to his poetic and theatrical treatments of drawn elements. Mak was an avid fan of the extraordinary visions of the Russian and Japanese directors Andrei Tarkovsky and Akira Kurosawa. The enduring dichotomies and metamorphoses illustrated within Mak's visual dramas encompass similar irrational aesthetic ideas that instigate private memories, as well as surrealist or mystical imaginaries, thus echoing the forms of magical realism, poetic sensation and cinematic tension experienced in Tarkovsky and Kurosawa's oeuvres.

Decades ago I was stunned by Antonio Mak's brief filmic performance in the role of the bizarre Tang poet Li He (李賀), in Yau Kong-Kin's (邱剛健) *Tong Chee Yi Li Nan* (1985).¹ This cult Taiwanese movie, an adaptation of Federico Fellini's fantasy drama

Fellini Satyricon (1969), portrays the mystical romance and sexual adventures of several teenagers in the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). Mak appears on screen for a memorable thirty-five-second sequence in the latter half of the movie (Fig 1-10). In the role of Li He, Mak is first depicted reclining on the back of a white horse with a child servant standing in front. He then sits up straight, seemingly enlightened by some deep thought, which abruptly shifts to a state of delirium, and a final outburst of fresh blood falling from his mouth. Li He's blood spills onto some of his calligraphy as the horse gallops away with the suffering poet. The poem reads, "Withered orchids by Xianyang Road see the traveler on his way. If Heaven had a heart that could feel, it too would grow old."ⁱⁱ In the film the poetic text portrays a literati's concern for the declining dynasty, and serves as an abrupt response to the decadent lives rendered in the film.

The blueprint for this particular equine sequence can be seen in Mak's undated drawing "Man thinking about history on horseback." Mak's archive includes a number of similar drawings of reclining figures on horseback, but any link between the intended meaning of Li He's calligraphy and Mak's original drawing remains unclear. As with much of Mak's work, there are multiple possible directions and interpretations. Regardless of authorial intent, Li He's fortune undeniably becomes a foreshadowing of Mak's early passing, though like a timeless classic of poetry, Mak's aesthetics, flair and spirit have continued to influence generations of Hong Kong artists, and his collages and drawings will continue to serve as fragments for a discourse on mapping out the artist's mirrored self, which remains as allusive as Gormley's notion of mapping out a path for feeling.

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ⁱ 《唐朝綺麗男》 in Chinese or 'Enchanting Man of Tang Dynasty' (my translation).

ⁱⁱ 「衰蘭送客咸陽道，天若有情天亦老。」