

The Mak-ian Theory of Evolution: (A Personal Reconstruction)

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A Way In

To look through the more than 200 drawings, paintings and texts by Antonio Mak presented in this book, spanning a period of over 20 years, is to experience the full weight of Antonio's personal iconography—an iconography that is not only visual, but also philosophical and conceptual. Those who know Antonio's art are aware of the many layers of interplay and playfulness that shape his world, and that are so compellingly articulated in his sculptures. Many of the works presented in this book explore motifs that have been materialized by Antonio into three-dimensionality: Here are his animated male figures, his chairs and ladders, his tigers and horses, his trees and books, his doubles and split figures. But the advantage of this rich collection of Antonio's studies is that they allow us to wander through the trajectories of Antonio's thoughts, to trace his conceptual explorations, to encounter his scribbled self-questionings and commentaries, and to better understand his stylistic explorations, appropriations and transitions.

Such a rich body of work predicates many possible ways of engagement and interpretation; but I would like to focus on one particular thread that lies at its core. For Antonio, everything begins with the body. His body—the male body. The proud body, the vulnerable body, the body that is drawn upwards towards heaven and downwards towards hell, held together by the centrifugal force of the human heart. In these works Antonio presents the male body in a whole spectrum of manifestations: as beautiful, vulnerable and arrogant; as cartoonish, anxious, and clueless; as desperate and divided; as heroic in its seeking and tragic in its failures.

Here we can see how, stylistically, Antonio draws from many different sources to express his

visions: he appropriates, he responds, he reconstructs, he uses what makes sense to him, all in perfect freedom. (In this sense, as David Clarke has pointed out, he is a true conceptualist).¹ Here are drawings of the male body as elegant and detailed as a study by Michelangelo, and as flat and



featureless as a line drawing by Michael Craig-Martin, an important mentor for Antonio during the years he studied at Goldsmith's in London. We see surrealistic juxtapositions (a man in a suit transforming into a suited chair), existential conundrums (a man emerging out of his own body) and haunting mis-en-scenes (a nude man standing on the trunk of a fallen tree, its roots wildly exposed, and his posture a study in despair).

But through it all, it is possible to trace a kind of Mak-ian sense of human evolution.²

A Mak-ian Theory of Evolution

But be forewarned: this is not a chronological evolution, based on a timeline of Antonio's "artistic development". Rather, it is a visual and existential evolution distilled from this entire body of work, and it is both additive and reductive.

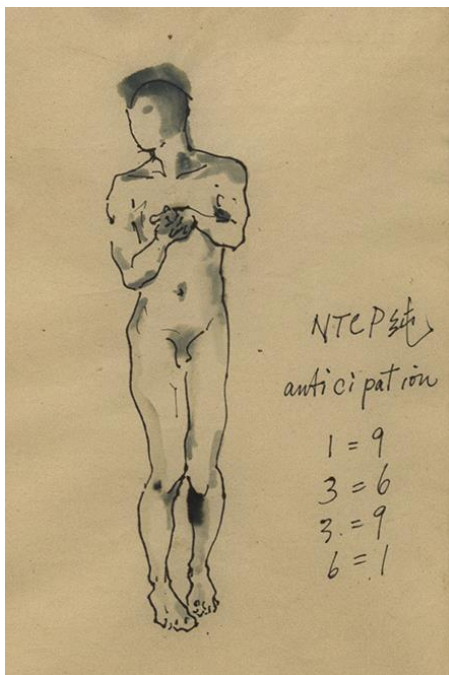
It begins at the most fundamental level, with a detailed pencil drawing of an oddly expressive human skeleton. The progression moves on to studies showing the addition of a powerful male musculature, drawn with a Michelangelo-esque precision. Then there is the covering of the musculature with the skin, and the male nude emerging in his beautiful completeness. He is an organic whole, possessed of his thinking nature (his head), his emotional nature (his heart) and his animal nature (his sex). We see his confident and even arrogant engagement with the man-made objects of his world, represented by the chairs, the combs and the mirrors that are part of Antonio's peculiar iconography of things. He uses them, manipulates them, admires his own image within them.

¹ See David Clarke, *Chinese Art and Its Encounter with the World* (Hong Kong: 2011), p. 153.

² Perhaps the identification of such an evolutionary intent on Mak's part could be open to criticism of this being a case of subjective construction; yet in my encounters with Mak's work I have always felt a strong sense of this evolutionary presence and its innate logic.



Gradually, however, a sense of anxiety creeps in, a realization that this man-made world is not so easily manipulated after all, that it is closing in on him. The Dadaists and the Surrealists showed us that we are as much possessed by things as they are possessed by us, and Antonio here pays homage to their mentorship. The objects that seemed there to serve him take on a life of their own. In his vulnerable nakedness, the man wrings his hands, he hides under a table. But he becomes trapped inside a chair, even poisoned by it, like a spider.



He needs something else, some kind of civilized armour to hide and protect the vulnerability of his naked body and to help him navigate this modern, manufactured world. Enter the suit, and his concomitant transformation from a classical figure to a line drawing, a flattened

creature, a cartoon, easily able to blend in. But there is a sacrifice implicit in this adaptation, in this flatness. He loses the energy, passion and vulnerability of the body. He is sucked dry. He is reduced to the observer, to the thinking mind alone, and becomes a figure with a man's head and a skeleton's body.



This is the turning point, the crux, the crisis. This is where things fall apart.

The man in the suit now seeks to escape this constructed world, to return to nature, to seek his core. We see him clinging to the trunk of a tree, as though desperately trying to merge with it, or claw his way inside it. From this point on this



man has become aware of his own disjuncture, of the disconnects emerging within himself between the rational and the emotional, the spiritual and the animal. And we realize that this tree, this trunk (*gan* in Chinese), is a metaphor for the trunk of his own body, the place where his heart resides. (Antonio's close friend, the artist Yank Wong Yan-Kwai, once wrote about the way Antonio always kept his shirt partly unbuttoned, to expose the skin nearest his heart.)



The leaves of the tree (*shuye*), which appear often in Antonio's work, are rebuses for the leaves of a book (also *shuye*—one is a homonym for the other) through which the narrative of his own evolution will be told.

The suit that is supposed to protect him becomes a mere absurd covering, a surface attempt to domesticate him; it is as ridiculous as putting a suit on a horse. And so the suit is discarded, and the man becomes naked once more.



But he has lost the wholeness he was born into. He is all mixed up. He loses his head, he is cut in two, his legs go in different directions, his mind ends up in his crotch, he cannot identify his roots. He dallies with tigers without awareness of their dangerous nature, and he dreams about history while lying on the back of a horse, oblivious to the fact that it is standing still.



He tries different attempts to regain his balance. He recreates the classical form of the centaur, where the rational strength of the man is wedded to the unbridled power of the horse, but succeeds only in attaching the bottom half of a man to the bottom half of a horse, a grotesquerie that only doubles the figure's bestial nature.

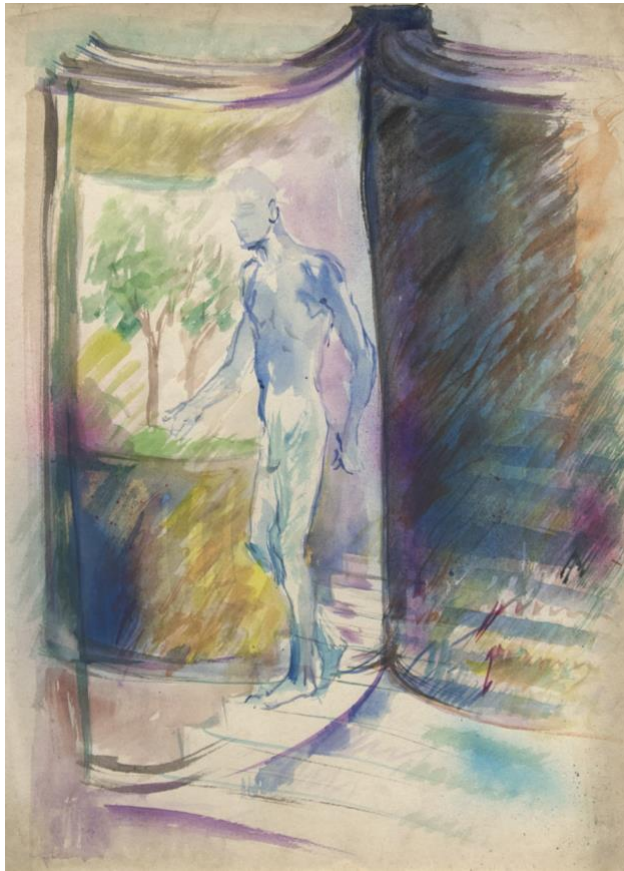
He seeks a path back into himself and a hole opens up in his body to reveal an ascending staircase, leading both in and out. He searches for transcendence and his body unravels to create a pair of wings.



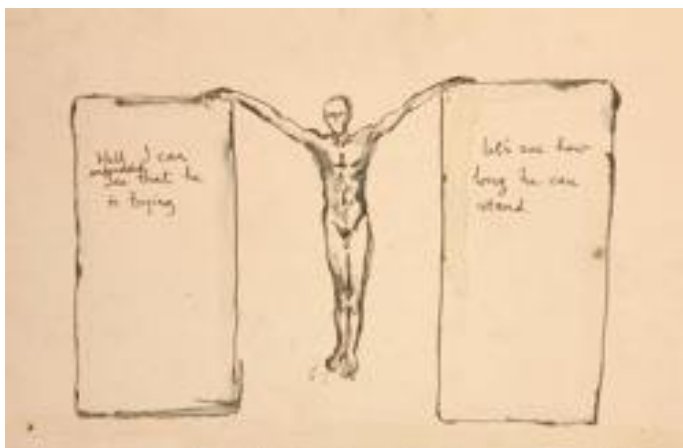
He attempts to take flight, but the wings turn into a cape and the cape turns into a veil that covers his face, that hinders and smothers him: superman loses his head and runs off in a nightmare panic.



Yet he doesn't give up. His trunk sprouts new leaves, his book opens to another page.



And thus for all the disjunctures and failed attempts to regain balance and wholeness, the evolutionary narrative revealed in Antonio's work is a heroic one, because it is a story of a man who never gives up, who will try every which way to bring the body and the spirit back together, to open a path into the heart of the matter.



A Way Out

In Antonio's later sculptures, the body takes on a further evolutionary step that is not explicitly present in the drawings, because it is integrally linked to the materiality of his sculptural language. This final stage of the body's evolution is found in the textured nudes and human trunks which are so clearly modeled with the imprint of the movement of Antonio's hands, and whose surfaces are marked with jagged openings and ragged holes, allowing the viewer to glimpse the hollow interior.



Yellow Wind, 1989, bronze, h. 25.2 cm

Yet these seeming windows into nothingness are really the visible markers of where the artist has finally broken through the outer shell of the body, to find what lies at its core—they are entries not into emptiness, but to the living energy within, the centre of balance.

While Antonio's drawings and paintings do not explicitly depict this evolutionary step, its core energy is nascent within them. Through the gift of this book, we can not only seek its presence, but absorb it.