

DISGUST OR FASCINATION? INSECTS IN WORKS OF CONTEMPORARY EAST ASIAN ARTISTS

The most prolific creatures on Earth. Over the ages, insects have aroused both disgust and fascination in human. Their ambiguous reception is a reason why they were and still are a subject or an inspiration for artworks. Painters, sculptures, weavers and others have depicted them: useful silkworms, beautiful butterflies, mysterious fireflies, ants, as well as intrusive flies, danger spiders,¹⁾ and the predatory praying mantis. The aim of this article is to present different approaches to the insect theme taken by contemporary Chinese, Korean, and Japanese artists. How do they see bugs? As little friends or intruders? Are they the main subject of their work or just a tool to achieve a relevant artistic expression? Have their representations been inspired by the traditional arts?

DISGUST, FEAR AND FASCINATION

In 2013 a book was published entitled ‘The Infested Mind: Why Humans Fear, Loathe, and Love Insects’²⁾ written by Jeffrey Lockwood – an entomologist

¹⁾ However, spiders are not insects but arachnids, I allow myself to include them in my article because of cultural context. They cause the same human reaction like insects. They are called “bugs” as well.

²⁾ Lockwood (2013).

as well as a graduate of philosophy and a M.F.A. programme. He described – based on his own experiences and, for example, artwork by Salvador Dali – how insects can influence human life. How do they ‘push our disgust button’? Why are we scared of them? The book presents many cases, but still it asks more questions than it answers. The main issues included in this publication were accurately reviewed by Nina Bai:

“Lockwood dissects the many ways these creepy-crawlies make us shudder and gag. Fear is a reaction to present danger. We are afraid of erratic motion (scurrying cockroaches) and alien features (exoskeletons, too many limbs). Disgust is a protective response against contamination, both physical and psychological. We are disgusted by morbid associations (maggots), excess fecundity (swarming locusts) and the invasion of our body (parasitic worms).

Is our aversion to insects evolutionarily ingrained or socially constructed? It seems silly to be instinctively fearful of creatures that are more likely than not harmless and sometimes even nutritious. The evolutionary psychologist, however, might contend that it is better to be safe from a harmless grasshopper than to be sorry from a deadly black widow. As with most questions of nature versus nurture, the answer lies somewhere in between.”³⁾

Lockwood focused on the human, mostly negative, reaction to insects and spiders, but more often nowadays books such as *Extraordinary Insects: Weird. Wonderful. Indispensable. The ones who run our world*⁴⁾ tend to be written, whose authors depict the lives of insects with passion and fascination. One example is Anne Sverdrup-Thygeson, who describes insect habits and behaviour in an accessible manner. Understanding reduces fear, but disgust is more difficult to eliminate. We dislike flies because in our mind there are associated with dirt and filth. We loathe maggots because they remind us of rotten food or decomposing flesh. According to Julia Kristeva, an author of “Pouvoirs de l’horreur. Essai sur l’abjection” [Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection],⁵⁾ everything that has contact with filth, excretions of the human

³⁾ Bai (2013).

⁴⁾ Sverdrup-Thygeson (2019).

⁵⁾ Kristeva (1980).

body or death – not only in the physical but also in the cultural meaning – becomes impure as well. Insects equal uncleanness. They are *abject*. However, Kristeva pointed out that what disgusts also attracts at the same time. That is one of the reasons why contemporary artists incorporate insects and spiders in their artwork.

FLIES

One of the most disliked insects, because they are attracted to excrement and other filth, flies create a feeling of disgust if they have a contact with human skin. That is why the video work of Yoko Ono (b. 1933), titled *Fly*, is controversial and transgressive, as well as attractive. The artist presented it as a 6-channel video installation in 2008 at the Centre of Contemporary Art in Warsaw (fig. 1). Each screen displayed different recording sequences, all ending with the same frame. All of them depicted a fly wandering on a naked woman's body. Close-ups are used to create an intimate atmosphere. The insect walks through a corporeal landscape to the accompaniment of a soundtrack performed by Yoko Ono, who composed it based on traditional Eastern singing techniques. It even adopts anthropological features⁶⁾, but loses them when the camera pans out to view the entire body with several insects crawling on it. Their inroad is repugnant. Because of physical contact with flies, the body is no longer an erotic object, but becomes *abject*. Lisa Gabrielle Mark claimed that “The film arouses a primal fear of invasion, an awareness of mortality”, while Hendricks commented on it more in a feminist context:

“(…) an unusual film by Ono about flies wandering in the vast landscape of a still, naked woman body, becomes a metaphor for female suffering, and enduring burdensome and constantly repeated acts of sexual violence”.⁷⁾

The flies embody intruders, dirt, and the transgression of marked boundaries. Chinese artist Zhang Huan (b. 1966) also used them in this meaning in

⁶⁾ Mark (2007: 276).

⁷⁾ Hendricks (1992: 10).

his performance staged on 14 June, 1994 in East Village in Beijing. *12 Squares Meters* was described in detail by Thomas J. Berghuis:

“In the weeks before the performance, Zhang Huan spent several days testing the attractiveness of difference food products to the numerous flies that inhibited the public toilet used by the village chiefs where they lived. In the final performance of this work, Zhang Huan settled himself on a tool naked inside the public toilet. His entire body, covered in honey and fish oil, baked in the heat the confined space that in summertime reaches up to 40 degrees Celsius. Soon thousands of flies were feasting on his body”.⁸⁾

The performance ended after 40 minutes, then the artist walked into a polluted pond near the toilet to clean himself. His action was incorporated within a series of “self-inflicted performances”, which took place in East Village during the 1990’s.⁹⁾ According to Monika Szmyt, the artist drew attention to the issue of “human” garbage by including himself by placing himself in an environment full of rubbish and ruins, and consenting to the vegetation of his body. In those days East Village was both a place of asylum for artists questioning the world of art and a garbage dump.¹⁰⁾ Undoubtedly the performance was extreme and its aim was to break the limits the body’s endurance. It was one of the methods used to abandon body and “dissolve the distinction between all things in life” – called *Zhuangzi*.¹¹⁾ The nuisance of the flies intensified the feelings and helped to achieve the goal.

SPIDER

At first sight, a work by Kan Xuan (b. 1972) entitled *Looking, looking, looking for...* (2002), is quite similar to the Yoko Ono video described above. Across a naked body wanders a bug. However, these two works have several important differences. The Chinese artist’s work is a single channel video; the bug is a spider, and there are two bodies – male and female. Its background music

⁸⁾ Berghuis (2006: 108).

⁹⁾ Other performance artists of East Village was Ma Liuming (b. 1969) and Zhu Ming (b. 1972).

¹⁰⁾ Szmyt (2007:178).

¹¹⁾ Berghuis (2006: 111).

is a song from Japanese cartoon about a girl looking for her father, called *3000 Leagues in Search of Mother*. As Lu Leiping noticed, “For anyone born after the 70s in China, the theme song is an indelible childhood memory”.¹²⁾ This music contrasts the scenes with the adult naked bodies, and additionally, it contrasts the ambivalent situation created by the presence of the spider. “*Looking, looking, looking for...* conveys the complex emotional state – a mix of provocation, stimulation and passion – inherent in playing a game”¹³⁾ – commented Lu. It is difficult not to agree with this opinion. On the one hand, in traditional Chinese beliefs spiders bring luck,¹⁴⁾ but on the other they are terrifying. Lots of people are scared of them, and are especially afraid to touch arachnids directly. In Kan’s video piece “the skin on the bodies, reacting to the spider’s movements, trembles nervously”.¹⁵⁾ The animal disturbs the intimate atmosphere and also usual perceptions.

ANTS AND BEETLES

Since 1988 Yanagi Yukinori (b. 1959) has collaborated with ants to create his works, in which his insects are a symbol of human wanderings as well as the possibility of transcending cultural and political boundaries. In 1994, for example, the Japanese artist prepared *Wandering Position* at Santa Fe Depot in San Diego.¹⁶⁾ This was a work in progress. Yanagi used a crayon to trace the path that an ant followed on the ground. The space accessible for the creature was marked by steel angles (750 x 750 cm).¹⁷⁾ In another work, *Pacific - The Ant Farm Project* (1996), however, the ants moved between 49 Perspex boxes and plastic tubes. The boxes were fill with artificial sand which was coloured so as to look like the flags of nations bordering a titled ocean. While the ants were wandering, they transfered grains of sand and consequently damaged the flags. The artist commented: “I question the concept of a nation” and,

¹²⁾ Lu (2016: 15).

¹³⁾ Lu (2016: 15).

¹⁴⁾ Eberhard (2007: 187).

¹⁵⁾ Lu (2016: 16).

¹⁶⁾ A short movie documenting the work is available : <https://insiteart.org/people/yukinori-yanagi>

¹⁷⁾ More similar works can be found on the artist’s website: http://www.yanagistudio.net/works/wanderingposition_eng.html

“A nation, its border and national flag, has become an imaginary fiction”.¹⁸⁾ Other artwork by him such as *The Atlantic* (1996) or *Eurasia* (2000–2001) may be interpreted in the same way.¹⁹⁾ He also claimed that “Nations, ethnicities, religions are all ghettos. They are surrounded by imaginary boundaries born out of social or institutional constructs”.²⁰⁾ The ants’ wanderings superbly illustrate globalisation processes and the construction of multicultural identities.

These hard-working animals also became an inspiration for a Chinese artist. Chen Zhiguan (b. 1963) is the creator of abnormal size sculptures imitating the shape of ants. The works are made of ultra smooth, shiny stainless steel, which reflects the surrounding like a mirror and helps integrate with it. The artworks from 2008 reach sizes such as 100 x 250 x 200 cm, and another from 2014 even measured 800 × 600 × 1000 cm. According to the artist “the specialization of cooperative labor among ants makes them different than other creatures. Their team work is vividly displayed in food cultivation, nest construction, an even in reproduction”.²¹⁾ Sometimes they are personalised but mostly their collectivity is underlined. Their behaviour is used by the artist to comment on the current social and economical situation of the Chinese people, as pointed out by Feng Boyi as follows:

“The coldness of these man-made materials blend with the natural characteristics of ants, forcing us to reflect on the colony-like structure of China, especially the acts of living and moving at a time of social transformation.”²²⁾

Kim Young-sung (b. 1973) also uses enlargement as an artistic strategy. The Korean artist paints hyperrealistic images of small animals (fig. 2). The *Nothing. Life. Object* series depicts snails, little frogs, fishes, and beetles, “that appear as the metaphors of Life (生)”.²³⁾ The artist explains his inspiration:

¹⁸⁾ Hodge (2015).

¹⁹⁾ More examples of ant farms: http://www.yanagistudio.net/works/antfarmproject01_view_eng.html

²⁰⁾ Trujillo (2003: 243).

²¹⁾ Liu (2009 :34).

²²⁾ Feng (2015).

²³⁾ Kim (2021).

“I transferred animals that should be in nature, in cages, or in fish tanks onto silk fabric, into glass bottles, or onto metal dishes to create images where they are foreign and forced to coexist with others. The fabric, glass, and metal, the metaphors of Object (物), show their physical properties through shine, projection, reflection, or refraction in front of the camera or in the canvas. What is the meaning or value of living organisms in the modern civilization? What is the meaning of living organisms to humans? They exist with us in the same environment, but they are always faced as food or decorative elements in a lower hierarchy. (...)The insects displayed on silk fabric, fish in a covered glass bottle, and frog on a metal spoon. They look beautiful, colorful, and stable in the captured moment, but the animals must have experienced highly stressful and anxious state as models.”²⁴⁾

The painter is fascinated by these creatures. His careful observation allows him to show them as magnificent creatures, especially beetles, which have been often depicted in cultural artefacts since ancient Egypt.²⁵⁾ Their shiny exoskeletons and magnificent “horns” captivates the attention of the viewer for a long time. Beside visual aspects, the paintings also invite us to ponder on questions such as human coexistence with different life forms, ecological matters like global warming and animal-friendly human habitats – issues that are relevant to political and social debates nowadays.

SILKWORMS

Similarly to Yanagi Yukinori, who uses ants to create his work, Liang Shaoji (b. 1945) cooperates with silkworms. Since 1988 the Chinese artist:

“has managed to integrate silk spinning with contemporary art forms like installation, performance, video and sound art. (...) [He] has even developed a unique technique that allows him to ‘direct’ silkworms to spin silk on and around a variety of surfaces and objects, rather than producing their usual cocoons. Through the manipulation of sound, music, light,

²⁴⁾ Kim (2021).

²⁵⁾ Some examples can be found in medieval manuscripts as well as baroque still-life.

temperature, manmade materials and smell, he manages to guide, alter and even transform the paths by which silkworms spin, and create the sculptural forms he envisages by twining and piling up their threat.”²⁶⁾

The silkworms are a significant part of Chinese culture and traditions. Silk as a material was one of the most valued goods in the world for centuries. There are several stories of the its invention as well as its production.²⁷⁾ Among others there is the legend of the Leizu Empress, called Xi Lingshui – the Silkworms Lady,²⁸⁾ and the tale of Matou niang – a girl with a horse’s head.²⁹⁾ Caring for silkworms, making threads, and producing materials were mainly a female activity. The process of preparing woven silk was even depicted in hand scrolls. The most well-known is an ink and colour painting made by Emperor Huizong in 12th century, which was a copy of the Zhang Xuan ones, originally from the 8th century.

Liang Shaoji’s installations and other works are constructed to clearly depict differences between the materials used. For example in *Natural Series No.7* (2003) the artist contrasts hard, cold iron with soft, warm silk threads. Huge chains entwined with organic material hung down from the ceiling. The effect of silkworms was seen but the insects were absent, although they were present in earlier works – *Natural Series No. 4* (1992) and *Natural Series No. 25* (1999).³⁰⁾ They were used in the form of larvae and moths in video and photography pieces as well as installations. Creeping larvae can be disgusting, although according the artist they are not. Silkworms symbolise rebirth and reincarnation. Zoe Zhang Bing, describing Liang’s works, pointed out that his art is deeply engaged in Chinese traditional philosophies:

“Silk is the vestige of a silkworm’s life, the accumulation of power before silkworm metamorphoses into moth, and the index between the existent and existence. Objects wrapped by the silk are the sculpture of time, life and nature. In other words, they are examples of destiny. The influence of Chinese traditional philosophies and the doctrine of the Buddhist Tiantai

²⁶⁾ Zhang (2015).

²⁷⁾ History of the silk see: (Hang, Guo 2008).

²⁸⁾ Franck, Brownstone (1978: 45–46)

²⁹⁾ Eberhard (2007: 98)

³⁰⁾ Chen (2010: 8–9).

school, especially its core doctrine *zhiguan* (cessation and insight), can be clearly perceived in Liang's work. In Sanskrit, 'cessation and insight' can be translated as 'void and stillness.'³¹⁾

BUTTERFLIES

The most often depicted insects in arts are butterflies. Their colourful wings were, and are, an inspiration for many artists, and their metamorphose from larvae is a great illustration of transformation – a significant theme in various cultures. These reasons why butterflies are the heroes of stories and have wide symbolic meaning. According Eberhard, in Chinese tradition the insect symbolises a seventy-year-old man, because of a play on words, but a more popular interpretation identifies it as a man in love who drinks from a flower (a woman).³²⁾ Handscrolls, hanging scrolls and woodcuts are replete with their images. Some examples are works by Chinese, Korean and Japanese artists such as: Xie Chufang (f. 1300s), Sin Saimdang (1504–1551), Fun Qi (1616 – after 1694), Chen Shu (1660–1736), Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806), Ma Quan (active in the first half of the 18th century), and Nam Gye-u (1811–1888), to name but a few. This motif was common in fabric decoration,³³⁾ ceramics³⁴⁾ and other crafts as well. In traditional artworks, besides a simple interpretation, wider meanings of this insect can also be found – for example, a butterfly and a plum depict long life and untouched beauty, but a butterfly and a cat indicate a wish to live 70 years or longer.³⁵⁾

In Eastern Asia it has believed that the butterfly embodies the human soul.³⁶⁾ Recently this concept is reflected paintings by Otake Hiroko (b.1980).³⁷⁾ She

³¹⁾ Zhang (2015).

³²⁾ Eberhard (2007: 161).

³³⁾ *Cammelia* by Zhu Kerou form XII century can be sample of such a motif in fabric decoration. See: Wetzel (2008: 257); for other examples see: Zapolska (2014: 246–247).

³⁴⁾ For some examples, see the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/42200> or the British Museum (Harrison-Hall 2017: 255).

³⁵⁾ Eberhard (2007: 161).

³⁶⁾ Baird (2001:101).

³⁷⁾ <https://www.hiroko-otake.com>

uses traditional Japanese techniques (called *nihonga*) and themes to express questions on identity and existential issues.

The butterfly (...) is synonymous with “psyche” (from the Greek word “ψυχή” (psūkē)), meaning “life” in the sense of “breath”, “spirit”, “soul”, and “ego”. (...) Hiroko Otake feels sincerity and candor observing nature and she is especially drawn to the butterflies and flowers. Like her life, the lives of butterflies and flowers are constantly exposed to instants veiled by uncertainty. She resonates with their ability to modify and renew their shapes in accordance with the environment that is continuously changing.³⁸⁾

In her works such as *Landscape where is not here* (2017), *Metamorphosis* (2018), and *Birthscape* (2019) the butterflies move expressively. The vibrations of the air made by their wings can almost be felt. They create clouds, vortexes or spirals that sometimes look like mandalas, followed by the viewer’s gaze. Their decorative shapes construct ornamental patterns. The butterflies by this Japanese female artist are the quintessence of elegance, ephemerality, and spirituality all at the same time.

Like Otake, Cai Jinwei (1980) was also inspired by old art and uses a traditional technique (ink and colour on rice paper). She paints in the *gongbi* technique, which is characterised by meticulous brush strokes to create very detailed images. Since 2007 this Chinese artist has made a series of works, all with a flower and butterfly theme.³⁹⁾ Each of their titles expresses different emotions or states, such as *Joy* (2012), *Carefree* (2013), *Linger* (2013), *Fullness* (2014), or *Elegance* (2014). In format they are similar to hand scrolls and hanging scrolls, and sometimes fan-shaped. The insects on them are depicted according to tradition, as well. Flying around plants, alone or in pairs, colourful, ephemeral and fragile.

The classical interpretation of a butterfly can be found in a painting called *Gisaeng* by Hong Kyoung Tack (b. 1968). The title of the work is a Korean term for women trained in arts as a child to entertain men, exactly like Japanese geishas. A skeleton and a woman in a *hanbok* stand on a square canvas. They are surrounded by butterflies and two branches of blossom cherry, with a spider’s web in the background. All the figures are hyperrealistic, although the composition of the painting is in the form of a collage – characteristic for the style of this Korean artist. There is also a tendency towards *horror vacui* and mixing symbols of different cultures. He often uses baroque motifs. Elements

³⁸⁾ Waterfall Gallery (2021).

³⁹⁾ Cai (2014).

of Western and Eastern cultures have equal representations in his works. In *Gisaeng* the insects are used for two purposes: as a symbol of love, beauty, male desire, fleeting life, and as a decoration.

The typical imagery and symbolic meanings of a butterfly were also used by Hu Xiaoyuan (b. 1977) in her installation work *A Keepsake I Cannot Give Away* (2005–2006). She embroidered motifs from Chinese art on white silk, which compare relations and love between a man and a woman to a pair of mandarin ducks. To these images she also added female genitalia. As thread she used her own hair. According to Karen Smith:

“China has a long tradition of embroidery, evidenced by a rich legacy of imperial gowns. It is also an important folk tradition. Specific combinations of stitch and pattern represent the defining characteristics of minority people; as much decoration as emblem of ethnic identity. Even today, young minority girls embroider to demonstrate a nimbleness of fingers desired of a prospective wife. Adapting the stance of a modern young woman – modern by Chinese standards, despite the entrenched attitudes towards women that remain – Hu Xiaoyuan invokes this tradition only to adulterate the modesty and virtue it was designed to embody by introducing images certain to make a chaste maiden blush.”⁴⁰⁾

Hu refers to elements of tradition to express her identity as a young modern Chinese woman and artist. She used them to redefine tradition at the same time.

The symbolism of butterflies plays a significant role for another Chinese artist, Cheng Caroline (b. 1960). Her installation from the “Prosperity” series (since 2011, fig. 3a, 3b) is a free reference to traditional Chinese garments – *hanfu*, i.e. the clothes of the Han people.⁴¹⁾ The title is deliberately ambiguous, because the English term *prosperity*, which we can translate as welfare or abundance, in Chinese sounds the same as the word for clothing: *fu*. This multiplicity is symbolised by miniature, hand-carved porcelain butterflies which cover the garments. There are so many of them that it is impossible

⁴⁰⁾ Smith (2007: 139).

⁴¹⁾ Han is the most numerous ethnic group in the People’s Republic of China. Cut most of them is the closest form of male garments daily, mostly worn during the Ming Dynasty, called *zhiduo* or *zhishen*. This loose garment was distinguished by generous, long sleeves. Other works in this series refer to short women’s sweatshirts *ru*.

to identify them from a distance. This is a deliberate approach and the artist explains her intentions as follows:

“China is filled with people with all the differences and diversity packed densely together. From a distance, China appears to be just one big country. But living in China, one experiences the wide array of changes, stimuli, and distraction.”⁴²⁾

Thus, the artist’s installations are a reflection of her perception of contemporary China as well as a commentary on her consciously chosen cultural identity. Cheng, despite the fact that she was born and raised in Great Britain, returned to the country of her ancestors, where she now lives and works, drawing on its rich cultural heritage. In an interview with Sotheby’s Hong Kong gallery,⁴³⁾ she said that her grandparents, although they lived outside China, were *literati*, that is, people with great knowledge and skills in the field of literature and art. She owes her first contact with Chinese culture to them.

FOLLOW OR REDEFINE TRADITION

The works by contemporary Chinese, Korean, and Japanese artists described above are only a few of many featuring insects and spiders. They were selected to depict different approaches to their application in fine art. Based on the presented materials, at least three ways are observable, such as:

- Following traditions
- Using symbolic meanings
- Using living creatures to cooperate.

In the first approach, the artists (Cai Jinwei, Otake Hiroko, Kim Young-sung) follow traditional techniques and are inspired by the compositions and formal solutions of old art. They are the heirs of masters such as painter Huang Quan (903–965), the author of the *Study of wonderful birds and other living creatures* scroll (fig. 4), as well as woodcut artists including Kitagawa

⁴²⁾ Leigh 2007.

⁴³⁾ For an interview with the artist, see: <http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/videos/2013/10/the-eternal-spring.html> [31.08.2015].

Utamaro (1753–1806) and Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) who made albums with realistic images of insects. Artists such as Hu Xiaoyuan, Hong Kyoung Tack, Cheng Caroline and Liang Shaoji tend to use insects for their symbolic meaning and importance. The first and second approaches could be linked to the third, in which new media artists use living creatures to cooperate in making pieces of art (Yoko Ono, Zhang Xuan, Yanagi Yukinori, and Liang Shaoji, especially the latter two). In these works, the insects often disgust or disturb the viewer and have subversive power. When they are used in traditional and symbolic ways, they fascinate with their beauty and uniqueness. Although this article has not mentioned all the insects and arachnids which can be found in old and contemporary East Asian art, it may hopefully inspire wider research on this subject because these little creatures they are and will be important companions with whom we share the world. The ambivalent feelings they evoke in people could be interesting material for art.

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1. Yoko Ono, *Fly*, Ujazdowski Castel Contemporary Art Centre, Warsaw, 2008. Photo Magdalena Furmanik-Kowalska.



2. Kim Young-sung, *Nothing. Life. Object* series. Courtesy by the artist.



3a. Cheng Caroline, *Prosperity* series, Art Basel Hong Kong, 2015. Photo Magdalena Furmanik-Kowalska. Courtesy by Grotto Gallery.



3b. Detail of *Prosperity* series, Photo Magdalena Furmanik-Kowalska. Courtesy by Grotto Gallery.



4. Huang Quan, *Study of wonderful birds and other living creatures (Xie Sheng Zhen Qiu Tu)*, the Palace Museum in Beijing.