

Guan Xiao

By Yung Ma

Guan Xiao (b. 1983 in Chongqing, China) is a Beijing-based video artist and sculptor. Using digital images and footage found online, she weaves them together with icons and motifs from diverse cultures and eras to create multi-channel video installations and serialised three-dimensional objects. Her practice is based and operated upon the conviction that our perception of things, and how we make sense of the world around us today, are almost entirely defined and dictated by our virtual experiences. Guan received no formal education or training in fine art while at school. Instead, she relied on the arguably boundless reach of the web as her primary channel to learn about matters related to arts and culture. Needless to say, this way of engaging and absorbing information as well as materials from the internet naturally informed the practice that came of it. This interest and approach are particularly pronounced in the methodologies of her video outputs.

David (2013) is an interconnected three-channel video piece. As the title implies, the work employs the world-renowned sculpture, David, by the Renaissance master Michelangelo as a point of reference and departure. It showcases a juxtaposition of images of, as well as related to, the famed sculpture. Some of the images are clearly captured by earnest tourists encountering the statue, others are commercialised representations found from mugs, aprons and other paraphernalia, which exploit the celebrity status of the sculpture. While the sequence of images may appear random, it is accompanied by a song written and performed by the artist. The lyrics of the song lend a strong narrative that responds to the visuals, revealing an underlying message and meaning. As Guan sings ‘We don’t know how to see him... Only recording, but not remembering...’, it becomes acutely clear that *David* is an allegorical and critical tale, which confronts our ways of seeing in a hyper-materialised and amnesiac culture.

Guan and her practice are often linked to the term ‘Post-Internet’. Since she sources virtual materials as her artistic ingredients, her chosen language and aesthetic fit into the mould and understanding towards an emerging genre of art. Yet, her interest does not merely lie in the production or construction of the image in the digital age. Nor is she keen to seek or explore the intent behind each image. Moreover, she is interested in how information, namely digital still and moving images, are distributed, circulated and consumed through new technologies. And more importantly, how we as consumers have been feeding into a frenzy of uncontrolled desires to disseminate information. This phenomenon has turned the act of image-making into a spectacle itself. In this sense, Guan is inviting us to develop a critical viewpoint, asking her audiences to consider that when an image’s content or its underpinning meaning are no longer of value to us, how can we still perceive and understand a reality in which they predominate?

What sets Guan apart is also her ability to transcend cultural, geographical and temporal specificities. It is commonly expected that artists from the so-called margins, which is to say outside of the traditional Western centres of art, should mainly demonstrate and be highly reflective of subjects, histories or issues related to his/her instead: their (?) own cultural background. This otherness has been a trend that fuels one's sense of discovery, and perhaps it provides a certain exotic leaning. However, by using materials from the web that belong to vocabularies of different cultures, Guan manages to avoid the cliché. It has freed her from the burden of deploying overtly Chinese symbols and motifs. This is why David, a historical symbol and an icon of Western mythology and one of its greatest artistic achievements, is rather poignant as a protagonist in her creation. Deep within and via the cyber space, Guan is a receiver of information from around the globe and beyond, and she fuses all its aspects to generate a distinct yet universal, and let's not forget, critical voice that engages and speaks to all.