

EACH MODERN

亞紀畫廊

'Time Enough for Countin' when the Dealin's Done

By Robin Peckham, 2014

“A Hit,” Xu Qu’s showcase of flat, large-scale paintings and sculptures of motifs from Greco-Roman aesthetics, could not possibly be a more dead or uninteresting exhibition; it is tacky, banal, and flaccid to the point that one suspects—or at least hopes—that the artist, like the proverbial topless lady, has something up his sleeve. This is fortunately the case. To get at the paintings in “A Hit,” we must first read through another series of paintings, one that comes with a tight conceptual rationale: “Currency Wars.”

In these canvases, Xu Qu magnifies to a uniform scale details from the design of paper currency from across the world; on the simplest level, he is interested in the fact that these objects function as a form of capital that is at once cultural and financial, and is willing to see them absorbed into funds, foundations, and private collections. On another level, he has split the project into two sub-series, one of which looks like pristine dollar bills or hard-edge abstraction, and the other of which appears dirtied and a bit like abject or expressive abstraction. He is interested in a temporal contrast: the paintings that look like old bills actually look like new paintings, the kind in vogue in the international art scene right now (Sterling Ruby, Oscar Murillo, Israel Lund). The paintings that look like new bills actually look like old paintings, the kind that had its moment in the 1950s-1960s (Robert Indiana, Kenneth Noland, Josef Albers). And yet, in a twist of history, it is the later style that appears “new” to Chinese critics and curators at the current moment, whereas the former sub-series are largely collected and exhibited by Western actors. This is a clever gaming of the art world and does something to reveal certain biases of taste and coincidence even as it toys with the broader financial ramifications of the heated market for young Chinese art since 2010. But, on a formal level, it is not much more. Executed robotically by a team of assistants, the paintings could only be called cynical (although it is interesting to note that Xu Qu adds the “dirty” or “contemporary” effects himself; trained in Europe, perhaps he has a better hand for this kind of thing). Fortunately for both the artist and his conceptual framework, the work is well-received not despite but rather

EACH MODERN

亞紀畫廊

because of its cynicism; collectors love to play along. Rather than the circulation of capital, the main series in “A Hit,” entitled “Research about Time,” focuses on the circulation of imagery through the conceit of Greco-Roman classical sculpture.

Xu Qu thinks through the profusion of images—digital and analogue, printed and projected, in space and on the page—in a nuanced way, composing paintings of shadow effects and building sculptures out of the resulting images like so many automated copy-and-paste tools. We are reminded of artists like Oliver Laric, whose ongoing “Versions” project combines plasticine reproductions of Greco-Roman sculpture with discursive videos about the cultural realities and consequences of copying and versioning, or Parker Ito, whose practice focuses squarely on the redistribution of imagery online and through the marketplace. Xu Qu takes the historical and analytic conversation away and simply lets the work circulate; this makes the work far less attractive on a conceptual level, but also allows its critical ambition to succeed in the wild. “A Hit” is a fundamentally cynical project, but it is hardly as vacuous as it first appears. This is Xu Qu’s Trojan horse, and it will ultimately be judged not on equine mimesis but rather on the utility of the armaments it manages to conceal.