

He Xiangyu

COLA PROJECT

Developed since 2008, He Xiangyu's ambitious *Cola Project* (2010) investigates the American-style consumer culture that is rapidly rising in China today. Enacting a process of transformation, the artist employed factory workers to boil thousands of liters of the popular beverage down to a sticky, lava-like black mass. When reduced even further and dried out, the mass was then transformed into glittering crystals and coal-like lumps.

This foul-smelling residue formed the centerpiece of "Cola Project," He's exhibition at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney. Introducing the show was a mass of the aforementioned crystals, piled like a slag heap on the gallery's ground floor, whose bitter odor wafted out onto the street. The gallery's second level displayed two vitrines containing equipment used by factory workers during the cooking process—blackened buckets, spades and protective clothing—all stiff with cola residue. A photographic series accompanied the installation, outlining the transformation from cola to coal. In some images, masked workers are seen bent over steaming piles of thick sludge, scooping and turning it like laborers in a giant tar pit. Other images show close-up views of the bubbling liquid, which is strangely geothermal in appearance.

According to He, his project reveals "a great lie under the beautiful appearance of tasty drinking." Ironically, the artist also says he drinks cola every day—a habit one might question after seeing the beverage's toxic transformation illustrated stage-by-stage within the exhibition. The *Cola Project* reveals an underlying ambivalence toward the product, as well as to the massive infiltration of popular culture from one part of the world to another. The glut of black coal is like an avalanche of cola. Here, the drink is presented in an extreme form, as if to expose its true nature as a corrosive, nutritionally void substance that we enjoy despite ourselves, lured by its status as a popular import that is colorfully packaged and marketed, and artificially sweetened for swift consumption.

Intriguingly, He also presented a suite of landscape paintings inspired by the traditional style of the Song dynasty (960–1279), as well as a jade skeleton based on his own bodily proportions. On closer inspection, we learn that the landscape paintings have been executed with a combination of traditional Chinese black ink and ground cola crystals, which produces a dark brown pigment when mixed with water. It is unclear how long the resulting cola ink might last, or whether it will discolor with time. Longevity is not important for most mass-produced, daily products, yet this notion is contrary to the spirit of landscape painting, which focuses on reflecting and propagating centuries of traditional themes and styles.



The contrast of the traditional and the contemporary is illuminated most effectively in He's landscape paintings, which—though lacking the immediate visual impact of the heaped cola crystals—convey the concept with added subtlety and a strange sense of beauty. The hand-carved skeleton is similarly alluring, with its milky white-green hues and surface glow. On closer inspection, one sees that the skeleton is tainted by the cola residue, which has been applied to the pelvic region, discoloring the surface and eating away at its smooth stone veneer.

Is the blemished skeleton a commentary on the insidious nature of global consumer culture, eating away at us, ingraining itself so deeply into our mentality that we no longer recognize it as a "foreign" substance? Or is the message perhaps more ambivalent, suggesting that local cultures are constantly devouring new and popular concepts from overseas, incorporating them for the benefit of their own posterity? Either way, He Xiangyu strips culture back to its origins in the "Cola Project" exhibition, returning the iconic cola drink to its constituent elements, and artistic tradition to a process of cultural accumulation.

RACHEL KENT