The **DAY** after **TOMORROW**

Shen Shaomin

As a species with the power to imagine, we have a complicated relationship with the idea of disaster – of the apocalypse, of Armageddon. Of course we do not wish our own destruction, but we find it impossible not to envisage the event, to construct narratives around the end of the world: the skies turning black and the waters rising. Despite ourselves, we are drawn to images that visualise our inner fears and, more recently, our sense of guilt at the damage we know that we do to the planet.

Chinese-Australian installation artist, Shen Shaomin, works precisely within this psychological repertoire, his visions of a warped natural world tapping into anxieties about civilisation’s ghastly effects. His *Unknown Creatures* (2003) and *Experimental Studio* (2004) series consisted of sculptures...
made out of bone – bizarre and unsettling collections of fantastic animals created through errant biological mutation; while later his Bonsai Series (2007), exhibited at the Sydney Biennale in 2012, comprised a range of miniature trees, tortured into shape with bolts and wire.

The Day After Tomorrow, Shen Shaomin’s first solo show in Australia in ten years, continued with this eerie aesthetic, expanding further on the themes of human brutality and its impact on a fragile environment. Showing at Gallery 4A between 15 November – 10 December 2011, the exhibition transformed the greater part of the gallery into a white crystalline world twinkling in darkness, evoking a vision of an unnatural reality hovering somewhere between the near future and present.

Upstairs, the floor was covered in salt (crunchy under the protective slippers provided) and the room’s dimensions unclear in the gloom. At one end was the installation I Sleep On Top Of Myself, an arrangement of pinkened animals lying on beds of their own feathers and fur. In a technique that Shen has used in a number of his recent sculptural works, the creatures appeared to be breathing, their little chests lifting and falling making them quiver with the fragile suggestion of life. All were animals that are in some way deployed by humanity – pigs, sheep, a rabbit, a dog. They looked part familiar, part mutant, resembling some bizarre, post-nuclear nativity scene.

At the opposite end of the gallery sat a life-sized elderly woman in a deckchair, also a silica gel simulation but you had to look twice to be sure. Like the barnyard animals, her body also heaved with the motion of breathing, giving her the tentative impression of life. Sunken into a deckchair, the woman’s legs fell open, her genitals exposed and skin sagging. She sat as a reminder of what will happen to youth, confronting us with the suggestion that we might actually be viewing ourselves. Throughout the upstairs of the exhibition there was this feeling of system collapse – the collapse of the woman’s skin, of the fur from the animals – and the consequences of borrowing against time. I Want to Know What Infinity Is was the title of this installation, but beneath this lurks our fear of what this might cost.

Downstairs at street level, a collection of musical instruments was arranged in a circle on plinths. Each one made out of a different material – plastic, steel, aluminum, glass, wood – the instruments were varied iterations of the muyu, a traditional Buddhist drum used to focus one’s attention while meditating. Conventionally made out of wood, the muyu usually gives out a hollow, distant sound, suggesting the vastness of both the physical and spiritual world. The timbre of the muyu arranged here however ranged from the tinny to the muted, complicating this sonic and spatial unity and shortening any sense of expanse. Again, the title of the work was striking: I Heard the Sound of Distance, questioning what this sound might now be. What have we done with distance? The work seemed to ask. What have we done to the future?
"The space for our lives is shrinking," Shen told me in a recent interview. "The world is more and more dangerous because of the way that we live our lives." A self-confessed pessimist, Shen Shaomin has little faith in humanity to right its destructive behaviour. "The feeling behind all the works in this show is one of despair," he said, and indeed the majority of Shen Shaomin's practice – from his sculptures to his installations or documentaries – seems to point in this direction.

The strange thing then is that Shen's work should be so appealing. It has a powerful ability to make us want to look twice, to check if that sculpture is really breathing, to gasp at a malformation. There is more than a touch of Frankenstein in Shen's tortured bonsais, of Dorian Gray in The Day After Tomorrow's sagging woman, and we have a strange attraction to this ghoulish sense of discomfort, to images that realise our own dread. Perhaps a world of biological experimentation or nuclear fall-out is our own contemporary gothic, our visualisation of the horrors of humanity and science.

As with the gothic, there is also almost always something beautiful in Shen Shaomin's work, almost virginal, to offset the grotesque. The naked animals in this exhibition play that role, bedded down in their fur like children, or the blinding white of the salt-covered space. Only with this spotlight on innocence can the monstrous be fully understood. Only then can we feel the pathos in the damage of our actions. And this pathos is apparently something we want to feel, perhaps in some kind of catharsis, magnetised as we are by these visions of environmental cataclysm and a death that is of our own making.

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