

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Holmberg, Ryan, "The Snake and the Duck: On Huang Yong Ping," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Sept/Oct 2009, 38-46

Ryan Holmberg

The Snake and the Duck: On Huang Yong Ping



Play sculpture is a term now used to describe an idea Isamu Noguchi began experimenting with in the late 1930s: to use the modernist vocabulary of sculptural form within the context of leisure, recreation, and purposeless play. Most of what he designed was for children's playgrounds and included angular swing sets in primary colors, cubistic climbing blocks, and biomorphic landscaping. At the same time, a fair number of these projects, none of which were realized in full before the 1970s, have an atavistic subtext, from references to monuments of the ancient world to almost protozoan biological structures. As if to suggest that to play like a child is to reincarnate the most archaic forms of human civilization and the most primordial forms of life on earth.

The same conceit resonates strongly in *Tower Snake* (2009), the newest work by Huang Yong Ping. First exhibited at Gladstone Gallery in New York in the summer of 2009, *Tower Snake* can be seen as a kind of "play sculpture" that links interactive amusement to ultimately atavistic fantasies. As an object, it is as much a pavilion as a sculpture. It measures approximately six and a half meters high and twelve by eleven at its base, and is constructed of green and beige bamboo upon iron scaffolding. One ascends the tower upon a spiral walkway of bamboo slats that narrows toward the top before ending abruptly

Huang Yong Ping, *Tower Snake*, 2009, aluminum, bamboo, steel, 660 x 1189 x 1128 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Left: Isamu Noguchi, *Slide Mantra*, circa 1986, marble, 3.10 x 3.10 m. Photo: Shigeo Anzai. Courtesy of The Noguchi Museum, New York.

Right: Huang Yong Ping, *Tower Snake*, 2009, aluminum, bamboo, steel, 660 x 1189 x 1128 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.



at a chained-off precipice above the tower's centre. The entire walkway is roofed with an aluminum armature in the shape of a giant reptilian skeleton that is Jurassic in scale, the eponymous "snake" of the tower. Ascending the tower thus doubles as passage through the entrails of the beast. One enters through its rear, then traverses its guts, emerging at the tower's pinnacle below the snake's mouth before having to backtrack to exit. The walkway creaks for the entire climb and descent, and, for safety, a gallery attendant allows no more than three people on it at a time; missing and splintered flooring slats are there to confirm the hazard. *Tower Snake* is like an old amusement park ride; the effect is one of faux trepidation, like a rickety ruin threatening to collapse at any moment and swallow the traveler whole, or an ancient and neglected suspension bridge splintering and swaying (as *Tower Snake* does just a tiny bit) above a bottomless maw. One almost expects the roar of the beast to reverberate over-loudly through the gallery and strobe flashes of lightning to illuminate the chilling mountain climb. But Huang pulls back, keeping his sculpture of kitsch sublime at a rudimentary level of seemingly vulnerable materials and beastly iconography.

Tower Snake is essentially a "duck," architects Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi's famous epithet for a type of symbolic or iconic architecture, not necessarily zoomorphic, in which structure is subordinate to the signification of the building's intended function. "The duck," they wrote in their influential *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), "is the special building that is a symbol . . . where the architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form."¹ The name came from the Big Duck in Long Island, New York. Built in 1931, this giant, twenty-foot-high, white ferroconcrete duck was shaped as it was as an advertising gambit for the poultry store it housed, which specialized in duck and duck eggs. *Tower Snake* has a similar character. It is, first of all, an architectural folly: it can be entered but is not meant to be inhabited, and its restricted interior space and questionable structural integrity dictate limited if not mono-functionality. Its symbolic form is not, like the original Duck, for retail commerce, but still it functions as a kind of advertisement. A good advanced capitalist work, *Tower Snake* trades in images and experiences rather than material goods, and what it has on offer is a certain very conventional idea of China.

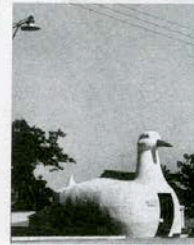
GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Much of Huang's art deals with Daoism—not Daoism as a moral philosophy, but Daoism as an adaptation of earlier epistemological and ritual systems of divination and alchemy and populated with fantastic cosmological beasts.² Most writers take Huang at his word and hold that his Daoist appropriations serve the dual purpose of cultural decentering vis-à-vis the West and finding Chinese vernacular analogues for historical and neo-avant-garde aesthetic strategies of chance and non-intentionality. But as Huang's embattled Xiamen Dada years recede into distant history, and as he now basks in the wealth of international patronage, this position of oppositionality is really no longer tenable. Critic and curator Robin Laurence put it well in a review of Huang's *Oracle of Bones* retrospective: "It is difficult to reconcile the monumentality, materiality, and spectacularity that have increasingly characterized his art with his stated determination to confound or refute the ego-driven Western myth of the artist."³ Add to this the fact that his figuration of China has become more and more fossilized in cliché. It serves little as inquiry into Chinese thought or culture as a viable alternative to Western intellectual or aesthetic paradigms, and fully in the maintenance of an exotic national identity for the ends of ethnic self-marketing in a global art market. It is important to remember the occasion of Huang's break into the Western art world: the *Magiciens de la terre* exhibition in Paris in 1989. This show, widely recognized as a watershed in global art exhibitions, has also been roundly criticized for its reinforcement of discredited stereotypes regarding the non-Western artist. "The discourse of *Magiciens*," explained Okwui Enwezor in a roundtable for *Artforum International* in 2003, "was still very much dependent on an opposition within the historical tendencies of modernism in Europe—namely, its antipathy to the 'primitive' and his functional objects of ritual, and, along with this process of dissociation of the 'primitive' from the modern, its attempt to construct exotic non-Western aesthetic systems on the margins of modernism."⁴ I think Huang's success can in large part be attributed to how well his work has fit into the shoes readied for the non-Western artist by European modernism. Not only does his work not problematize this primitivist discourse, but, since *Magiciens*, has reveled in it evermore.

Tower Snake is a strong case in point. Given the Daoist derivation of similar creatures in other works, one assumes the snake here should be understood in that context. Note how the structure resembles the legendary Dark Warrior (*xuanwu*), the Guardian of the North in traditional Daoist cosmology and a figure that appears elsewhere in Huang's work. Though later rendered as human, the *xuanwu* was originally zoomorphic, a compound animal with a tortoise body and the head and tail of a snake, or, in other cases, a snake coiled upon the back of a tortoise. A green structure domed with a serpent, *Tower Snake* is not the first Huang work to make an architectural analogy out of the *xuanwu*. Take, for example, *Theater of the World—The Bridge* (1995), with its overlapping turtle and snake-shaped terrariums. In ancient Daoist thought, the configuration also represents the creation of the universe, suggesting an atavistic dimension to Huang's "play sculpture," though articulated in strongly nationalistic terms alien to Noguchi's worldview.

The image of China offered here is patently essentialist. Huang is often upheld for his critique of the West and especially its colonial history, his



Big Duck, Long Island, New York.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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open engagement with cultural hybridity, and his promotion of religious ecumenicalism. But, with one or two exceptions, he turns no such political eye toward China, which is figured instead through Daoism as a place rooted in an archaic and magical past, with no imperial history, no historical discontinuities, and no cultural or ideological heterogeneities of its own. I think the structure of *Tower Snake* is designed to replicate these notions at the level of form, at least in a general way: it spirals up and then tapers off as if into infinity or the heavens—a typical symbolical conceit in sacred geometries or (more apposite) in old science fiction programs, where the psychedelic swirl of a worm hole transports the unsuspecting to a land before time. *Tower Snake* is thus a “duck” of an ideological kind. It is no doubt “a building that is a symbol.” The atavistic and essentialist notion of China that it symbolizes is not just supposed to be seen in its external iconography and spiral plan but also to be experienced bodily by traversing its interior. In this, it has much in common with a playground pavilion or a theme park ride.

The turn to “play sculpture” marks a departure for Huang, but its advent is fully continuous with his earlier work. It stems from his wide-ranging and longstanding investment in the amusement theme park and its historical antecedents. I think the case can be made that two different phases of Huang’s career—his early localization of the strategies of the avant-garde and his later adoption of a postcolonialist critical mode—were informed if not led by an interest in the history of amusement spectacles. The earliest such references are fast and loose. They involve popular amusement forms, particularly the roulette wheel, used in various works from the Xiamen Dada period (1986–89) and later and “inspired,” according to Hou Hanru, “by the Chinese fortune-telling tradition and gambling.”⁵ More specific references are tied to Huang’s engagement with nineteenth-century colonial and imperial history. This is clearest in *11 June 2002—The Nightmare of George V* (2002), a modified recreation of a taxidermy configuration the artist saw at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. It consists of a tiger attacking an elephant-borne carriage emblazoned with the British Royal Coat of Arms. A simple statement of resentment against British colonialism in South Asia, the work is also intended as a comment on the role of exhibitionary techniques in the service of colonial power and self-representation. This work is a kind of post-colonialist “edutainment,” aimed most of all at pleasuring the liberal political persuasions of the art world and its expectations of “criticality” while taking care not to make too great a demand on viewer attention or intelligence. In other words, Huang makes postcolonialism—its trope of hybridization, its project of cultural decentering, and its anti-colonial and anti-imperial sentiments—fun, and to this end he has harnessed popular amusement and exhibitionary forms.

It is a sequence worth further consideration. First, in the late 1980s, commercial themed spaces began proliferating across China, beginning as the entertainment wing of neoliberalization in the Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen, and then into Beijing, other major urban centres, and numerous tourist sites, becoming a subject of global fascination in the middle part of the present decade. Second, from the mid 90s to the present, Chinese artists have been working in sculptural and installation modes that

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Left: Huang Yong Ping, *Large Turntable with Wheels*, 1987, painted wood. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Huang Yong Ping, *11 June 2002—The Nightmare of George V*, 2002. Courtesy of the artist.

increasingly resemble the structures one finds in themed spaces generally across the world or locally in China. With his historical theme rides, flying taxidermy, and pyrotechnic spectacles, Cai Guo-Qiang is the indisputable champion of this mode. Of course, it is an international trend, applicable not just to Chinese artists, and it cannot be divorced from the museum and art fair preference for bombastic, easy-to-understand, space-filling work. Nonetheless, the strong predilection for amusement theme forms, particularly amongst leading Chinese artists, begs for explanation.

In the case of Huang, the main lesson learned from the modern theme park seems to be the theatrical power of miniaturization and monumentalization. As anyone who has been to a theme park knows, dwarfism and gigantism are basic operations, often working in tandem to imaginatively render the patron larger or smaller than the normal scale of human life. Monumental landforms can be shrunk to the size of an amusement ride, intercontinental geography can be condensed within a multi-hectare enclosure, and animals can be doubled or more in size to create pretend terror. For Huang, this scaling dynamic applies to a wide range of subject matter, including medicine flasks and historical buildings, as well as his favorite subject matter, the mythical Daoist bestiary. *The Theater of the World—The Bridge* (1995) is a clear example. In two terrariums—again, one shaped like an oversize serpent, the other like an oversize tortoise—live animals deemed propitious in Daoist mythology were pitted against one another in a death match that evokes not so much the intended existential and cosmic allegories as a Ray Harryhausen feature or a Japanese *kaiju* battle. Also relevant is *Python* (2000), a forty-metre-long wooden snake skeleton, its openwork structure and notch assembly resembling a giant version of those do-it-yourself dinosaur skeleton kits made of balsa wood and sold at museum gift shops and Chinatown novelty stores. Though later exhibited in gallery spaces, *Python* was first produced as a site-specific work for the German town of Hann Münden. Always ready to play the ethnic theming card, Huang noted how the town, surrounded by low mountains and fed by multiple waterways, had great *feng shui*, and in recognition of its auspiciousness offered a sculptural version of a Chinese aphorism: "Where there are high mountains and big lakes, dragons and snakes emerge."⁶ But what the work resembles most of all—with its fang-

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Left: Huang Yong Ping, installation view of *Python*, 2000, and *Theatre of the World—The Bridge*, 1993-95, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Courtesy of Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Right: Huang Yong Ping, *Theatre of the World—The Bridge*, 1993-95, metal, wood, insects, reptiles. Collection of Peter Huber, on long-term loan to Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon.



filled jaws open, tongue flicking, crawling across the land, over a bridge, and finally sliding into the town's waters—is the animatronic terrors of the amusement park jungle cruise and darkride. Like the bamboo *Tower Snake*, *Python* uses woodcraft and Chinese culture to mask its essential relation to the entertainment industry. It could just as well be a Chinese Godzilla readying to gobble up a small European town.

Chinese theme parks are numerous in kind. Best known, however, and offering the most for the plastic artist is the miniature park. It is an amusement form most intimately associated with post-Mao neoliberalization in Chinese consumer leisure culture.⁷ First was Splendid China, which opened in Shenzhen in 1989. It features miniature replicas of the Central Kingdom's grandest monuments: the Great Wall, the Temple of Heaven, Potala Palace, and so on. In 1993, Beijing World Park opened. Like Splendid China, it is a miniature park, but this time of the world's natural and architectural wonders, amongst them the pyramids of Giza, the Roman Colosseum, the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, Niagara Falls, and the Manhattan skyline. In 1995, a similar park named Window of the World opened in Shenzhen, and others followed elsewhere in China. Though not in all cases resembling those at such commercial parks, miniaturized monuments appear with considerable frequency in Huang's work. There is *Two Typhoons* (2002), two four-metre-high towers shaped like the spiraling minaret at Samarra and made out of paper. The towers resemble two enlarged unfurling woodblock-printed scrolls, one with a Buddhist text in Sanskrit and the other a Qu'ranic text in Arabic. Similar in theme is *(543-622)* (2000), consisting of a wood model, a meter and a half in height, of the French Baroque Chapelle de la Salpêtrière set upon an Islamic prayer rug and installed with a small Tibetan prayer wheel. I cannot help but think again of Venturi and Scott Brown. As a perfect example of the "duck" within pre-modern religious architecture, the architects cite the Byzantine-era Little Mitropoli in Athens, which like Huang's Salpêtrière Chapel miniature is an undersized church (7.62 metres in length by 12.1 metres wide) on a Greek cross plan, "evolved structurally from large buildings in greater cities, but developed symbolically here to mean cathedral."⁸ Miniaturization, in other words, reduces a building to a sign of itself in its most general ideological aspect—a useful feature for an allegorical artist like Huang in need of clear and compact cultural symbols.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Holmberg, Ryan, "The Snake and the Duck: On Huang Yong Ping," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Sept/Oct 2009, 38-46



Huang Yong Ping, *Two Typhoons*, 2002, paper, ink. Courtesy of the artist.



Huang Yong Ping, *Bank of Sand, Sand of Bank*, 2002/2005. Collection of Guang Yi, Beijing. Courtesy of Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Different in theme from these religious examples is *Bank of Sand, Sand of Bank* (2000/05), a miniature version of the famous HSBC Building in the Shanghai Bund, an icon of British colonial power in China. Huang's version was three and a half metres high, made of sand (with a dash of cement), and was allowed to crumble over the course of its exhibition. *1/4 Hoover Tower*

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Holmberg, Ryan, "The Snake and the Duck: On Huang Yong Ping," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Sept/Oct 2009, 38-46

Huang Yong Ping, *1/4 Hoover Tower*, 2005, wood, plastic sheeting, 7 x 2.8 x 2.8 cm. Installed at Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University. Courtesy of the artist.



(2005) is a schematic representation of the tower at the Hoover Institute on War, Revolution, and Peace at Stanford University. It is built out of two-by-fours and red-, white-, and blue-striped tarp. Stenciled onto the walls of its interior are phrases implicating American international aid as a facet of imperialism. Huang's use of miniature buildings for anti-imperial allegories culminates in *Colosseum* and *Pentagon*, both from 2007 and included in his previous exhibition at Gladstone. These half- to two-and-a-half-metre-high buildings are constructed of terracotta blocks that have been fired to look badly weathered and assembled with gaps to read as structural fissures. The blocks double as planters for saplings and other green leafy flora, as if the civilizations that erected and maintained these structures have long since passed, their monuments ceded to entropy and a slow return to nature. This allegorical register points to a basic difference between Huang and his miniature theme park models: while the commercial park aims at timelessness, the representation of a monument in frozen ideality, Huang often figures its physical or moral demise.

If they were assembled, Huang's miniaturized monuments would form a theme park of the ruin of empires, but a very selective one. In striking contrast to Huang's numerous anti-monuments to Roman, British, and American Empire is the absence of a comparable intervention into the long and ongoing history of Chinese imperialism, territorial disputes, and

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Holmberg, Ryan, "The Snake and the Duck: On Huang Yong Ping," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Sept/Oct 2009, 38-46



ethnic conflict. For no good reason, China is exempt from Huang's critique. China is granted the status of exception, with Daoism functioning as an alibi. Since the mid 1990s, Daoism has functioned in Huang's work most of all as a method to figure China outside of political and social history. It produces a work like *Tower Snake*, the perfect culmination of the two theme park tropes explored mostly separately in preceding work: the monumental building miniaturized and the mythical bestiary monumentalized. Seen in the context of his other work, it is also an aggressive cultural statement. In Huang's miniature theme park, *Tower Snake* would have a central position. As a symbol of ancient and eternal China, it would provide, like the 1/3-sized Eiffel Tower at Beijing World Park, a commanding prospect across a landscape of dwarf monuments representing not the world eternal but the world according to a standard hyperbolic fantasy regarding rising China. Behold the Chinese dragon, a tourguide might say, towering and roaring above a Western civilization eclipsed.

Huang Yong Ping, *Colosseum*, 2007, ceramic, soil, plants, 226.1 x 551.2 x 758.2 cm. © Huang Yong Ping. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

Notes

- ¹ Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour, and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1977), 87.
- ² For an overview of Daoist elements in Huang's work, see Doryun Chong, "Huang Yong Ping: A Lexicon," in *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005), text volume, 97-107.
- ³ Robin Laurence, "Huang Yong Ping," *Border Crossings* 26, no. 3 (August 2007), 132-36.
- ⁴ "Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-scale Exhibition," *Artforum International* (November 2003), 154.
- ⁵ Hou Hanru, "Change is the Rule," *House of Oracles*, text volume, 13.
- ⁶ *House of Oracles*, image volume, 54.
- ⁷ See, for example, Thomas J. Campanella, *The Concrete Dragon: China's Urban Revolution and What It Means for the World* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), 241-79; and Hai Ren, "The Landscape of Power: Imagineering Consumer Behavior at China's Theme Parks," in Scott A. Lukas, ed., *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation, and Self* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2007), 97-112.
- ⁸ *Learning from Las Vegas*, 105.