CHEN XIAODAN:
MOURNING, BEAUTY AND THE ACT OF MAKING

Tony Godfrey

Chen Xiaodan's work *Bloom*, made in 2009 and remade in 2012, is one of the most strange, complex and haunting works made in recent years. It is not difficult to describe: a large skin of silica gel originally moulded on a container is draped over a ladder or a chair. (In the original a ladder, in the remade version of 2012 (*Blooming Skin Series*) it is draped across a chair.) It is pierced by many hundreds of silver safety pins which are not closed but left with their sharp points exposed. But the flood of associations it suggests or triggers are manifold and diverse. What is it? What does it seem to be?

It is like the pelt of some large animal, a bear or horse that has been killed and skinned, or the skin a vast snake has sloughed off. Alternatively, one could see it as a counterpane or bed cover that having been pulled of a bed and has been thrown thoughtlessly here. Something thrown away or discarded, but it is also, if we dredge childhood memories, like the tent or house we might have made with a sheet or carpet to form our own habitat, a refuge to hide from the ordinary world in. Again, if we consider the actual material it is made from, industrial not natural or domestic, we may consider it as some experiment or prototype, though created for what function remains unclear. We look at the endless rows of safety pins and we consider how much time it must have required to stick all of them in the skin and perhaps we can see it as a punishment, like the lines a bad pupil is required to write out a hundred or more times. We could even read it as a human skin: in old European art the skin of St Bartholomew who was martyred by being flayed alive is often portrayed. Michelangelo famously portrayed himself as the flayed skin of Saint Bartholomew in the Last Judgement he painted in the Sistine Chapel.

Or we can read it as a coat - for what is our skin but the most intimate of coats? When some loved person has died or left us, their presence seems to linger in the

clothes they have left behind. Perhaps we can even detect a last few lingering scents of perfume. (Such a use of clothes as a way of mourning people can be found in the work of Doris Salcedo who made works with the shirts of people "disappeared" by militia in Colombia. She also used furniture in a similar way.) Can we not, finally, imagine some beautiful, elegant woman coming home and throwing it casually like a fur coat upon the chair?

There are other associations floating there but we have listed more than enough to make the point: it is an object which holds its space in a very confident and affirmative way but its meanings or associations are slippery and uncertain.

In English these are known as safety pins: you can mend torn clothes with them and close them so as not to be pricked. We use safety pins to mend and repair, but here in such profusion they a became almost decorative and, moreover, in their profusion, their exuberant excess, they suggest obsession or compulsion - an inability to stop. When we think of the skin and imagine the more than thousand times it has been pierced we wonder if this was exquisite pain or punishment. (In the punk movement safety pins were often used as earrings or nose piercings - a small sado-masochistic outrage to offend "normal" people.) Here are they a type of body jewellery in place of tattoos or needles in place of the stitches they should have slipped in? Blooming skin, how complex and how beautiful it is, but the beauty that exists here akin to pain. And a pain that the over-curious or clumsy viewer may share: to leave them unclosed is as Chen says to present something deliberately "dangerous".

It is a curious work, at once beautiful and disgusting. It seduces us to look closer with its beauty and strangeness, but then repels us with these suggestions of hurt, pain and teh abject. It makes us question our own responses: why do we feel this way? Without saying a word it has asked us questions.

It seems so personal, both the work and our response, and here the nub is, I suspect, that in our deep, semi-conscious visceral response we see this as our own skin, or as a projection or manifestation of our own skin.

And in so seeing we awake our fears and fascinations of the wound and the fold. These are two highly problematised terms of recent cultural discussion - and tellingly ones where Eros and Death meet.

The wound has a long history in western art, where it is figured most especially on the body of Christ. But since Wagner and Beuys the term has been taken out of a specifically Christian reading to deal more generally with fear, trauma, the abject and therapy. For Beuys it was only by acknowledging one's wound that one could attain self-knowledge and therapy And when I say: “Show it! Show the wound that we have inflicted upon ourselves during the course of our development”, it is because the only way to progress and become aware of it is to show it,’[i] Though Beuys may have located the wound in his own personal mythology and in German history it could be seen as applying to a wider human condition of trauma and incompleteness. The wound is never just a physical things, it always exist as a fear, a horror and a fascination. This is where the coherence and unity of our body (and mind) is disrupted.[ii]

When critic Michael Newman declares that, ‘If the wound is the site of eruption of the flesh through the surface of the body, through the skin, we discover here both the constitution of an opposition of interiority and exteriority, and its impossibility,’[iii] we can see how the concept of the wound in places overlaps with that of the fold, a concept derived by Deleuze from Leibniz and his fascination in the baroque. For Dezeuze the fold is where interior and exterior convolute, where the objective and subjective co-exit, where skin and flesh are both present and visible.[iv]

In her book *Questioning Caravaggio*[v] Mieke Bal understandably anchors her discussion of the fold on an analysis of Caravaggio's *Doubting Thomas* where Thomas, who doubted that Christ had risen from the grave inserts his fingers into the gaping wound in Christ's side. The image of this wound is echoed by the myriad folds and rips in the costumes of Christ, Thomas and the other disciples. Sadly, the book and its argument are weakened because when she extends her discussion into the contemporary Bal relies on several somewhat schematic artworks that do little more than quote

Caravaggio. Chen is far from schematic! She embodies the issues without needing to quote.

The unfinished process of the work is one of its most unusual, and woundful aspects. If we look at others works by her it seems paradoxical: on the one hand so complex and heavily worked, on the other perhaps unfinished, abandoned and thrown casually away. Was the whole surface nor meant to be covered in pins? Why have they not been closed up?

In her paintings and drawing the presence of the fold, often figured as a knot is more explicit.

There is here, as elsewhere in her work, a two-fold action, centrifical, to pull things in closer as if one is tightening a knot, and centrifugal, to let things spread out, sprawl across the floor. A knot or a piece of string or gut stretched out.

The knot is at once an image at once of construction and germination. We knot things to strengthen them, but in so doing we confuse and intermingles surfaces. Knotted surfaces and forms fold back on themselves as if compacted, and intense. There is a recurrent association made between the knot and the joint where bones meet. In her bone works the joint is where most activity happens: it is at the joints that lines focus and gather - much like iron filings do to a magnet

She was first known as a painter, though her early career had been in ceramics. It was later she turned more explicitly to sculpture. But the key question we have to ask is not "Why have the sculptures replaced the paintings?" for she still regularly make paintings, but "How do the paintings relate to the sculptures?"

Her paintings have been described, not always politely as "beautiful". It is a word that has been used in the same pejorative sense that "decorative" has often been used. But beneath their subtle and sometimes gentle colour harmonies there lurks something more forceful - this image of a pulse or knot. Many of her recent paintings seem to have a complex knot of veins or muscles or roots or tendrils at their centre; this seems to

expand out into the canvas as a whole. However this knot is often loosening or even exploding.

In Xiaodan's paintings this sense of an inner life or glow is balanced against a sense of destruction or fragmentation. Germination set against the wound, or folded together. This is something I am increasingly made aware of by looking at the painting by Xiaodan I own myself, *Blooming 2012 No. 20*: a flower in bloom can look, especially if the veins of the petals are accentuated as there, like an explosion. In a flower life seems to explode, the bloom happening with surprising rapidity - but only to fade, wither and dissipate.

In Xiaodan's paintings, despite their colouring which unifies the whole canvas and despite this sense of an inner glow or light, things are often coming apart, are often becoming fragmented. But in the ceramics and sculptures we can see clearly that these objects, that seem fragments themselves of flowers or bodies, yet have an inner life and coherence. Just as in a rhizomatic plant structure in, so in art fragments can start again, grow and develop their own "personality".

This sense of the fragment being something that can become whole within itself is especially true of her ceramics. This seems especially true of her *Shanghai Women* series of 2005 which at first glance seem like broken bits or shards of highly decorated porcelain plate but on closer examination are conceived and made as entities.

She comes at ceramics, even though she was best known as a painter, from sculpture, that is to say for her the material is not precious: clay is just stuff. It is something you can do things with. It is a material that responds to the actions of the human body. Each piece of porcelain or biscuit in the large multi part works comes from a twist or squeeze of the fingers, twisted or squeezed as you might twist, or squeeze a piece of dough for a croissant or a wantun dumpling. This is ceramics at its most primal, kneaded like bread. However she has come out of the most sophisticated ceramics tradition in the world.

For example, the fragility of ceramics that begin soft and supple but become after firing hard and brittle. The bones become branches: dead things make a living form. Her sculptures, like her paintings, depend on a poetic dialectic between the whole, the organic and the fractured. She is an intuitive artist not a programmatic one - so we should look for such image clusters as bones/birds/butterflies or bricks/walls/coffins and ways of working such as kneading, squeezing, placing, not for clear conceptual or pre-planned schema.

In recent years she has used silk or wire mesh as a support for such drawing with bones. Here it seems her implicit reference is very much to traditional Chinese ink drawing. It is as if the silk or mesh were paper and the bones the brittle essence of ink. These are profoundly lyric works. Things do not knot here, but stretch out. The bones traverse the silk as a pathway does the landscape.

When we look, as we walk alongside it, her long sprawling *Great Wall* sculpture the body enjoys its length, its energey in spreading across the room, but the eye constantly hones in on particular individual bricks and their tight enclosed worlds or knots. (The *Great Wall* is paradoxical in that it spread out but each brick is an introverted, a packed tomb, a repository, a congestion.)

The bone on silk or mesh pieces also evoke forms: a tree or bamboo climbing towards the sun; the bones of an animal. Most likely the skeleton of some excavated pterodactyl or some other extinct animal, re-assembled as a palaeontologist would reassemble it - with care, love, but uncertainly, not copying but re-making - with the same sense of surprise and wonder as if this were some newly created animal waiting for life and the freedom to walk, run, swim or fly.

But bones, above all else, mean to the human viewer death and the remnants of those who have died. Bones are inescapably connected with thoughts of death. Death is, of course, a general truth as is fear of death and the need to mourn.[vi]

Her work as a whole makes the transition from the wound and the fold to the movement of mourning - that is to say of making whole that which has been broken or separated out.

What she is providing us with is a disquisition on the act of mourning. There is no specific focus on this: no name or person is cited, either friend, relation or heroine, and it is important that we do not know whether there is, or is not, a personal experience of mourning that initiates this body of work. It is not so much a generalised experience of mourning that she is providing, rather she is providing some objects for reflection - and perhaps allowing some space or contemplative form for consolation or reparation.

Of course, in reality separation and mourning are always about a specific person. Where is some consolation to be found? For myself when my much loved brother died as a consequence of his alcoholism I was desperately in need of some symbolic/aesthetic help: throwing a red rose into the grave was a necessary gesture. Listening to music gave some consolation, but contemporary art gave disappointingly little consolation; walking in nature gave consolation too but every exhibition I went to see at that time gave very little help. Why was that? One reason was that there is so little beauty in contemporary art - and here we may remark that one reason Chen turned away from painting was the way people saw her work as too beautiful, too easy. But we need the experience of beauty to effect the action of mourning. Without it we cannot escape gloom and depression. Beauty is the promise of a better tomorrow - to misquote English philosopher Edmund Burke "Beauty is the promise of Happiness" and French Writer Stendhal who wrote "Beauty is nothing other than the promise of happiness".

Like every English person I remember the curious mass phenomenon of mourning Princess Diana when she died in a car crash. There was a sea of flowers outside the palace where she lived separated from her frosty husband. Perhaps hundreds of thousands of people came and laid such a gift. The death of someone young and beautiful is always painful. It seems especially unfair.

What no-one seems to remark on is that no-one took their flowers out of the cellophane so it was in fact a sea of translucent cellophane filled with rotting flowers. Together they formed a curiously mixed metaphor: rotting flowers and non-rotting cellophane glinting in the summer sun. We need metaphors. We need beauty. We need to mourn - and in a country such as Britain where only a minority of people have clearly defined religious beliefs that is now profoundly difficult.

"Mourning," a fried writes, "in the Chinese way isn't much different from other nations, I think, in the way it is all about consoling the loss and emphasising that life-goes-on. There are of course ritual difference, like the mourning process, the funeral ceremony and all those things that happen after a death. One way the Chinese look at a funeral can be related to Buddhism, believing that the end of life is also a festival as worthy of celebrating as the new-born, the birthday and the wedding. The funeral is called a white happiness. At a traditional Chinese funeral there is always an orchestra playing music, or a local opera group play theatre and other entertaining lasting all night long. It's a way to celebrate and to say a proper farewell to the dead. To show respect to the dead one his children should make it as noisy as possible so all the neighbour can hear and know that the old man has some filial children. I witnessed such a funeral many years ago in Sichuan. The orchestra played the entire night!"[vii]

This is much like the traditional Irish wake - a celebratory party. Art cannot offer such communal celebrations, where a personal loss is transcended by a continuance of communal life, but in a globalised, urbanised world where communal life has broken down and few of us even know our neighbour's name, it can or should offer solace to the lonely person struggling to come to terms with such a personal loss and a sense of incompleteness. Xiaodan's works do this and it must be registered that the beauty of elements such as the porcelain butterflies and the bone drawings are crucial.

In an age when Visual Art has become a key forum for discussing ideas and traumas Xiaodan's work seems exemplary in the way they discuss death, mourning and beauty.

Discussing, that is to say, indirectly by making and showing - or to use a word with religious connotations: embodying.

---

[i] cited by Alain Borer, 'A Lament for Joseph Beuys'*, The Essential Joseph Beuys*, London(1996): pp 25.
[ii] This discussion could, of course, be extended by considering trauma (see Hal Foster) and the abject (see Kristeva).
[iii] 'Flesh, wounds and the divided body,' by Michael Newman in Exhibition Catalogue *Wounds*, Moderna Museet, 1998 p.35
[iv] Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, Minnesota, 1993. (English translation of *Le pli - Leibniz et la baroque.*
[v] Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, Chicago, 1999.
[vi] Obviously the death of a child is the most excruciating of things to mourn - especially so in the PRC because of the one child policy. Presumably the fear of having to mourn is palpable.
[vii] email from Wang Kai Mei, December 2012.

Tony Godfrey has been writing about contemporary art since 1978. His book include New Image in Painting (1986), Drawing Today (1991) Conceptual Art (1998) and Painting Today (2009). From 1977-1989 he worked in various art schools in Great Britain. From 1989-2008 he worked for Sotheby's Institute London. For much of this time he was programme director of the MA in Contemporary Art there. During this time he wrote for Burlington Magazine and Art in America plus many exhibition catalogues. In 2008 he became a Professor of Fine Art at University of Plymouth. Since 2009 he has lived and worked in Singapore and writes for LEAP, Broadsheet and C Arts Magazine. He is currently head of research, Sotheby's Institute Asia. His most recent publications are on Ian Davenport (London), Jane Lee (Singapore) and Agus Suwage (Jogjakarta, Indonesia), Zheng Chongbin (American China) and Dingyi (Shanghai, China). He has been invited by Mensheng Art Museum in Shanghai and presented public lecture on abstract painting today for Chinese audience and also held lectures for students in National Art Institute of China, Shanghai Visual Art institute and Xi'an Art Institute.