

## like a luminous animal

Written by Hung-Fei Wu

This exhibition draws inspiration from my experience of transitioning from youth to middle age, which triggers my innermost feelings of nostalgia, anxiety and emptiness as well as the dilemma of whether to break or follow social norms and expectations. As I see it, the only way to deal with the ingrained conflicts and the sense of loss resulting from individual and collective identities is to explore the issues that are inherent to our bodies; in particular, as a female living being, I'm just like any woman, whose body is generally seen as a vessel being doomed/prone to carry, take on whatever burden the outside world can place on it.

According to Jung (1875-1961), when two opposite traits of the psyche meet at a certain point in time, the new dynamics would be created, which is described as "the energy coming from opposites". Judging from that context, allow me to jump to conclusions — existing between our inner and outer worlds as well as self and others, the physical shell that experiences brokenness and conflicts at all times has served as the dynamic vessel exclusively for us to continuously search for the essence of existence.

Upon entering the exhibition space, we are overwhelmed by a mouth with bloody red luminescence that covers an entire wall. The art of **Anna Maria Maiolino** always reminds people of their basic bodily functions, tempting yet vaguely disreputable — we human beings need to eat as well as to defecate, just like animals.

*In-Out (Antropofagia)* is a 8-minute video montage that centers on the primary entrance to the human digestive tract — both male and female mouths are either taped shut or stuffed with strings or eggs, all of which are objects delivering strong symbolic messages, along with many other oral-motor movements that triggers the primal memories of lust, suffocation and chewing. Also, this work makes reference to the art of Lygia Clark, an icon of the Neo-Concrete Movement in Brazil, in which she proposed the idea of "organic" that suggests "the fusion of opposites"<sup>1</sup>, echoing with Jung's concept as mentioned above. As a matter of fact, the vast disconnect between the reality and one's yearning can somehow open up the infinite inner spaces integral to one's inner world, and such spaces appear when Maiolino (as an Italian-Brazilian immigrant in South America) struggles to learn a foreign language; when she (as an artist living under a dictatorship) struggles to fight for freedom of making art; when she (as the wife of a renowned artist and the mother of two children) struggles to achieve self-realization. Eventually, the fragmented, bizarre and mournful sounds of emotion from the video have composed a poetic expression that is beyond description but appealing to the senses.

Maiolino made this video work at the age of 31, which is the same as the present age of Hao Ni, whose work is shown on the other side of the exhibition wall. Nearly half a century has passed since then, Brazil is still in a state of political and economic turmoil, and the far-right political party gradually goes mainstream. However, as far as the young artist Hao Ni is concerned, online images have already been used as a tool to help him understand the world. Being keen to research on topics related to violence and institutionalization, Ni once found pictures of refugees trying to break through the long razor wire border wall. In addition to the physical sensation of danger and pain associated with the imagery of razor wires, fabrics and strands of hair, I tend to consider this series an reflection of artist's intention of deconstructing collective systems in human society as well as breaking out the mental cages in which we lock ourselves up.

The long border walls in Europe reach all the way to the United States–Mexico border. Yet, on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, **Joshua Liebowitz** sat in front of his computer and immersed himself in the archival research

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Inside is the Outside*, which was first showcased in 1963, Lygia Clark suggested that the concept of "organic" is concerned with the fusion of opposites.

of protests taking place in various states in the U.S., trying to comprehend the political perspectives that are far different from his. According to the research, Liebowitz finds most of the protest participants to be white males who bear facial resemblance to him, and they tend to construct their masculinity as well as rock-solid determination through costumes. Liebowitz, as a member of cultural elite, attempts to walk out of his comfort zone, put himself in these people's shoes and understand them; eventually, he aims to bridge the gap between two opposite groups in human society by means of putting on different forms of armor in his practice. However, only when I stand in front of the triptych portraits that centers on the performative and even ritual-like expression do I realize that it's all in vain, for it is the physical body that works as a huge barrier, making it impossible for people to truly "empathize with the feelings of others".

In a way, an interesting comparison has been drawn between the razor wires from Ni's work, the armor in Liebowitz's work, and *Armor of Mine* by **Eiko Ishizawa** in terms of the use of metal materials; however, in Ishizawa's work, such material symbolizes the imprint formed from the driving force inherent in oneself rather than a type of defense against external threats. Among all artists participating in the exhibition, Ishizawa is the most likely person to break "free"; the reason is that the knowledge of Zen and Aikido have shaped her perspectives on the world, thus inspiring her to live in harmony with universal energy and to flow with the moments of life. As far as Eiko Ishizawa is concerned, she follows her gut instinct and plays with a variety of materials and colors in a random fashion, so, in her art, sculptures possess features that are associated with painting; likewise, the creature bears the traits of both human and animals. In short, these coverings and bodily forms that manifest both the internal and external reality have somehow broken down the boundaries between the self and the real world, mind and body in a gentle yet powerful manner.

Moreover, the large-scale painting by **Philipp Kremer** depicts a group of people having sex with their bodies tangled together; also, the use of ochre — a color that is considered neutral, neither divine nor depraved — creates richly textured layers based on monochromatic coloring. Growing up in a commune, Kremer didn't undergo the standard process of socialization, so he has long been concerned about the interrelationship between the individual and the collective. Although being inspired by his *Basic Community* series with diverse, expressive use of bold colors that reveals the tension generated from power relations, the *Gathering* series tears down the barrier which might be caused by such diversity but showing the genuine, pleasant interpersonal relationships triggered by the animal nature of human — each of us is a whole person and we are also able to bond with others in our own way.

In comparison with the photographic works by Anna Maria Maiolino that employ pieces of string and eggs to refer to maternal experience, the *Annonciation* series by **Elina Brotherus** delivers a strong message in the absence of maternity — How should we view the bodies of women who have never given birth? What would happen if the archangel Gabriel had never been sent from God to the Virgin Mary? Would this change rewrite human history? After undergoing long-term assisted reproductive technology (ART) treatment that eventually led to the unsuccessful outcome, Brotherus decided to put an end to the suffering owing to this painful life event through art — by photographing the provocative self-portraits of "the mother and dog" that serves as the replacement imagery of "The Virgin and Child", she redefines the divine glory of which based on several years of experience in recording herself going through transition from youth to old age. As a result, the viewers are able to relate to the sense of loss, longing, frustration and toughness they have experienced, thus radiating the sheer, genuine glory of humanity. It's never divine, but so human.

Going up the stairs, we would find five eye-catching monitors being irregularly displayed in the exhibition space and screening the ultimate confession about the last goodbye made by an artist who is deeply inspired by her life-changing experiences. After the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991, **Breda Beban** took refuge in other countries together with her life partner, who died in an accident six years later. Accordingly, her previous piece, *I Lay on the Bed Waiting for his Heart to Stop Beating* (2000), indicates the remembrance of things past including the

images of an empty bed at their temporary residence and the view from a desperate gaze out of the window. Ten years later, in *My Funeral Song* (2010), Beban filmed the moments of her close friends listening to the funeral songs chosen by each of them, inviting the viewers to immerse themselves in those scenarios and to relate to these strangers' rehearsals for bidding farewell to the world — some listens to enjoyable rock 'n' roll music, some weeps with the sad songs, some sings out loud and proud, and some wears an awkward, grimacing smile with mixed feelings. Different from Brotherus' practice of making herself as the subject matter in most of her photographic works, Beban took another path to face her fate, which was implied by her dim reflection appearing in the video as well as the trusting eyes of her friends.

All in all, each of these seven artists represents their bodily experiences and imaginations through artistic practices that take the form of autobiographical expression, metonymy or materials transformation; thereby, the exhibiting works were seemingly made flesh by artists, each of which not only embodies distinct individuality but also awakens our collective consciousness in that we would call them "luminous animals".<sup>2</sup> These animals howl, perform solos and venture into the dark so as to encourage us to be more aware of the significance of our existence, to build connection with the world in a more positive way, and to live our lives well together in the face of uncertainty and chaos.

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<sup>2</sup> The English title of this exhibition "like a luminous animal" derives from the poem, "*Luminous Animal*", by an American poet Tony Moffeit.