

PLAYBOUR

Text | Nobuo Takamori

“Everything that is dead quivers. Not only the things of poetry, stars, moon, wood, flowers, but even a white trouser button glittering out of a puddle in the street... Everything has a secret soul, which is silent more often than it speaks.”

— Wassily Kandinsky (1913)

The recent group exhibition “PLABOUR” in Solid Art involves a complex structure of curatorial aesthetics, featuring artworks by LIN Yi-Chun, CHANG Chih-Chung, LO Yi-Chun, three artists whose works, coincidentally, give expression to the object encompassing physical thing, human body, and economic activity. The three objects were interconnected in the exhibition, formulating three underlying tiers of manifestation: first of all, creating associations between objects and human bodies through anthropomorphism; secondly, reviewing the materials integral to human economic activities through the context of the colonial history; lastly, portraying how the activity-induced physical work done by “Homo Economicus” shifts from manual labour to fitness exercise under the influence of changes in economic activities. Overall, the curating of “PLABOUR” is considered classical and meticulously structured, so that it has provided a platform for discussion on relevant issues.

The anthropomorphism, or the attribution of human form to other physical entities, is not merely a mysterious concept based on the animism but a tool for redefining and elaborating the meaning of the body. As stated by LIN Yi-Chun, the existence of the body consists of two parts: the content and the physical body; also, it is by interweaving the void and the solid elements that her art breaks the limit of the fixed timescale in the physical world and leads to the scenario depicting “textual generation” according to the artist’s statement. Lin’s work, Burning Stone: Hot Archives, is a single-channel video screened in a distinctive space that is reminiscent of human body cavities. Upon entering the screening room, the viewers were embraced by the orange lighting that illuminated the whole space; in addition, despite being utterly ridiculous, two electric heaters were placed alongside the video to warm up the room on hot summer days. As the viewers started to sweat a lot, they were

soon greeted by close-ups of profusely-sweating human body parts, together with the narration about body heat dissipation and odour.

In fact, the term “burning stone” refers to the literal meaning of the word “sulfur”, and Lin adeptly uses it as a metaphor for human body in the said work. Under this context, we are able to understand how Lin’s other work, Burning Stone series, deals with the same theme in a more playful way that is close to everyday life. She has created a unique ambience in the exhibition venue where the spa decor of a massage studio was incorporated into the display; also, Lin had cross-referenced the texts among the Small Sea Travel Diaries (Diary of Sulfur Mining), Dan-Xin Archives, Diary of Castle Zeelandia, and other contemporary essay collections so as to deduce/piece together the “map” of the senses of the human body, different shades of perception and various viewpoints. This narrative perspective in which physical objects were explored through human economic activities can also be applied to the works by another participating artist, CHANG Chih-Chung.

Chang’s work, The Coral Island, raises questions about the territorial disputes concerning Dongsha Islands nowadays. Yet, given the coral island itself has a strong symbolic value, Chang draws inspiration from human economic activities, repositioning the idea of the island as an object that can be expressed through his art. Hence, the fishing net hanging from high ceiling in the exhibition venue not only symbolizes the manual labour performed in fisheries and done by the artist in the course of practice, but also signifies the image of a manmade island through its visual language. In The Coral Island, the installation consists of marine debris of all kinds including hauling lines in order to suspend the coral stone — the result of coral reefs which have undergone petrification — from above; it is designed to direct the audience’s attention to the ancient cartographic documents of the Dongsha Islands in different periods of time. Consequently, with its spatial representation, this work is meant to reflect how objects were being examined by cultural activities.

Accordingly, we can tell that, being made up of thousands of tiny animals, the coral atoll itself is a neutral existence in the field of natural history; however, its significance in human societies was redefined owing to economic activities, thereby resulting in the modern-day international political crisis. Yet, Chang addresses the above-mentioned issues further, beyond the expression of grand

narrative. As a matter of fact, in “PLAYBOUR”, each of the participating artists finds their own way to refine the human-object relationship embedded in the structural framework of grand narrative through some kind of “alchemy” processes and transform it into the daily record of personal experiences. Take Chang’s work as an example, The Coral Stone series employs the combination of coral stones and the rigging to create an installation resembling the fitness equipment designed for weight training. He sarcastically emphasizes the labour activity and conflicts between the nature and human through the seemingly preposterous “exercise” performed in this series; yet, in a way the “exercise behavior” itself has resonance for Chang with regard to his body memories.

According to Chang, the amount of energy expended during physical exercise and the bodily fatigue caused by manual labour would lead to two completely different physical experiences; likewise, LO Yi-Chun’s works echoed with this perspective. Lo has long since worked with materials symbolizing the cash crops in Taiwan, such as tobacco leaves and sugarcane bagasse, in her practices, aiming to explore the contemporary interpretation of these colonial cash crops. In this exhibition, even though she utilises the same materials in her work, Lo attempts to further extend the heavy labour required for growing cash crops in the past to correspond with the present-day leisure activity and physical exercise. Therefore, with the intention of using the differences between the two activity-induced physical strength as a metaphor for the changes in economic activities, Lo creates Molasses, Ethanol, Fitness Workshops, Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Life So Different, So Appealing? (Fitness Program-3), which was displayed in an ambiguous form resembling an agricultural tool as well as a fitness equipment so as to highlight the transition in the physical work done by humans after the said changes occurred. In Climbing in the Geological Site, by mold making and casting the natural rocks found in Beitou district, Lo employs these artificial sulfur rocks, sandstones, andesite to build an indoor rock climbing wall.

All in all, the English title “PLABOUR” echoes with the three artists’ aesthetic intentions: the labour associated with the economic development and colonial governance in the past has been transformed into the concept of “playbour” — physical work that involves playful experiences, or comes within the scope of leisure activities — under contemporary consumption scenarios. In response to the three tiers of manifestation mentioned above, “PLAYBOUR” has delineated the

transition from labour to “playbour” done by humans in contemporary society and the human-object interaction involved in that dynamic process; hence, the exhibition reveals how the existence of objects have been transformed along with the changes in human economic activities. In short, with a sophisticated arrangement which can rarely be found in typical group exhibitions, the artworks by LIN Yi-Chun, CHANG Chih-Chung and LO Yi-Chun were showcased masterfully in “PLAYBOUR”, thus rendering representation distinguishing; moreover, the harmonious interrelation among their art series has built a profound narrative structure and brought personal experiences hidden behind the vast universe of time into focus.