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Krakow, 29 July 2021

The Faculty of Arts

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Evaluation of the doctoral work of Mr Mingda Du, entitled *Remote Context. A Fine art study based on the coexistence experience with alien culture*¹ in the field of art, in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation, initiated by the Artistic Discipline Council of the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław.

I. Personal data.

Mr Mingda Du was born in 1986. He completed his BA study programme in China at the Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts in 2010, was a student in the Erasmus program at Bauhaus University Weimar in Germany for one year (2011-12), received his Master's degree at the University for the Creative Arts in Canterbury, UK in 2018, and has been a PhD student at the Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław since 2018. The doctoral student also has teaching experience - since 2014 he has been a teacher in the sculpture department at Shangqiu Normal University in China.

II. Evaluation of artistic achievements

Mr Mingda Du's artistic achievements comprise four solo exhibitions held in China and Poland and nineteen group exhibitions held mainly in China, but also in Germany (*Sino-German Contemporary Art Group Exhibition*, Halle), Estonia (*Satellite Imagery*, TYPA Gallery, Estonia), Poland (e.g. *Zeniths* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Wrocław) and the UK. I have taken this information from the list attached by the PhD student². The PhD student has also shown significant activity in symposia (12th International Ceramic Symposium 'LabOro' at the Centre of Polish Sculpture in

¹ I quote the title of the doctoral dissertation basing on the provided documentation in Polish and English.

² I regret that no photographic documentation from the above mentioned exhibitions was included in the list by the PhD student.

Orońsko, Philosophy and Cartography, ASP in Wrocław), conferences, and especially in art workshops, among others led by visiting professors such as Jane Jermyn, Jason Hess, Torbjorn Kvasbo, Ted Neal, Banni Brusadin organised at the Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław. He has also won three awards (MFA Graduation Exhibition, Distinction Award, 2012, Canterbury, UK, Future Star of Henan Art and Design Competition, Silver medal, 2016, Zhengzhou, China, the 7th Art and Design exhibition of Henan, Excellence Award, 2016, Zhengzhou, China). Mr Mingda Du has also been involved in organising and popularising activities. He was, among others, the curator of the *Muchuan Wang's Glass Art* exhibition in 2020 in Northeast Normal University Online Exhibition Platform, China.

III. Evaluation of the written dissertation

The doctoral dissertation (presented in Polish and English) of Mr Mingda Du consists of an introduction, two chapters: Chapter 1 *Unfamiliar experience*, with sub-chapters entitled: *Me and Foreign-land, Unfamiliar experience - my artistic work* and Chapter 2 *Headlines* with subchapters entitled: *Absence of those present, Headlines - my artistic work*, a summary, documentation of artistic works selected for the PhD cycle, a list of illustrations and a bibliography.

In the first chapter, the doctoral student presents his experience in contact with the West and then moves on to describe real-life situations, which prove how different the perception of the world can be for people coming from a different culture. He even mentions a cultural and empirical conflict, using Sofia Copolla's film *Lost in Translation* as an example. He continues his argument by referring to his own artistic practice related to his doctoral dissertation. The second part begins with a reference to a work entitled *The Comedian* (i.e. a banana taped to the wall) by Maurizio Cattelan, as well as the work *Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas, 1946-1966* by Marcel Duchamp and - less familiar to me - the works of Zeng Zaocai. This part of the written dissertation, I must admit, is less clear to me in the context of the second part of the chapter - that is, the description of Mingda Du's series of drawings - entitled *Headlines*. I understand that what the doctoral student means is that the work is in fact completed by the viewer through his or her own interpretation, and a certain sequence of events connected with it cannot be fully controlled. Describing, in turn, the works in the *Headlines* series, the doctoral student presents his personal experience of the pandemic situation in the world. In the chapter we learn where he was staying at that time and how the isolation influenced his artistic decisions.

I would like to add that the written dissertation contains adequate content for the theoretical issues presented and the concept adopted by the doctoral student. The bibliography consists of eight works in English. The doctoral student demonstrates the ability to formulate theses and draw conclusions, as well as navigate through the

latest contemporary art maintaining a critical point of view.

IV. Evaluation of the doctoral work.

Mr Mingda Du's artistic doctoral cycle consists of two monumental series: *Unfamiliar experience* - a series of 89 ceramics and *Headlines* - a series of 1097 drawings that were created in 316 days, thus in less than a year. This is an impressive number of works, testifying to the intense creative process of the doctoral student.

The ceramic works do not have titles or ordinal numbers assigned to them, which I could refer to when describing them. Very generally speaking, they are ceramics, usually with biomorphic, compact forms, in black, white, brown, pink, as well as red and turquoise. Only in some cases, we can refer to specific shapes and read their form. In principle, these spatial works can be classified as sculptures, objects or the aforementioned ceramics, devoid of utilitarian features. On the one hand, I think of these works as objects, on the other hand - which seems to me a more favourable identification - I am more inclined to classify them as ceramics. Recently I have been following with great attention the development of modern ceramics, especially the one used by contemporary artists in their works - also critical ones. I will stick to this classification while analysing the presented artistic works further.

The *Unfamiliar Experience* series is beautiful, individual ceramics have a lightness to them, their form is interesting and original. What appeals to me most of all are the forms in colours resembling the human body, especially the pink and flesh-coloured pieces. They give the impression of soft, sensual objects, like bodies sewn from fabrics, as in the art of Louise Bourgeois. The ceramic material used, after technological processing, is probably fragile - just like a human body or any living creature. Also noteworthy is the whole range of colours used by the artist, perfectly juxtaposed, probably influencing the contemplation and perception of the work itself. The second series included in this monumental cycle is a series of works whose individual parts suggest juxtaposed vessels or a vessel - formed, transformed, deformed. Somewhere in these works an opening or openings are left to suggest the space within the body or to suggest, for example, the mouth. And finally, the last set of ceramics, catalogued by me as works depicting a human head or figure.

Assigning shapes and deciphering them, however, is not helpful in the case of the presented works. As the artist himself states: "Any single object cannot serve as a sample for analysis"³. By not giving titles to the works, Mr Mingda Du thus creates room for the viewer to interpret, to freely follow associations. This is a brave but

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Mingda Du: PhD dissertation, p.17.

justified artistic decision. In essence - the artist assumed in his practice going beyond his cultural context. Doctoral dissertations in the aforementioned research and artistic area are not common, thus, they constitute an interesting contribution to the development of the discipline. Mr Mingda Du admits in his dissertation: "This way of working disturbs me on the one hand, but at the same time, it could help me avoid the familiarity brought by skills and stereotyped thinking"⁴.

I must confess that as an artist, I have also had the opportunity to experience a similar detachment from my culture of origin. I have been to Japan several times pursuing an art project. However, the most important experience in Japan was for me to verify my perception of the human body, as well as its emotions and behaviour. It was such a strong experience that I decided to create a concept of the *universal body*, which was included in my PhD dissertation. What seemed a named, certain phenomenon to me, in Japan was not so at all. So I can perfectly understand the mechanisms, reflection and experience of Mr Mingda Du in correlation with his artistic practice in Poland. It is sometimes difficult to put into words this specific experience, but the change in the perception of the world that has taken place is certain. Thus, looking at *Unfamiliar experience* as a multi-element cycle, I see it precisely as a whole of undefined (unnamed) experience as the artist himself declares.

I would like to emphasise the great value of the artistic practice in ceramics chosen by the doctoral student, as well as the combination of skills acquired in China and their transfer, in the context of a different culture, to the European area. This is the attitude of combining practices of an artist-nomad, and above all, as emphasised by the doctoral student, going beyond the sphere of comfort. It is also a way of searching for knowledge (conducting research) outside the designated paths. The artistic and popularizing activities of the artist-ceramicist and writer Edmund de Waal come to mind here. In his book "The White Road. Journey into an Obsession"⁵ he describes the process of becoming familiar with ceramics, "the white gold", he follows the trail of history, collections or special marks on a porcelain cup. He is an example of a contemporary artist who proves that historical techniques hide many secrets, which can be discovered through one's own individual practice, by someone coming from a different culture. De Waal goes to eastern China - to Jingdezhen, Germany and England. He sees the process of making ceramics as a whole, explores different shades of white, and for me he is a model of Far Eastern perfection in his artistic practice.

Moving on to discuss the second monumental series of works entitled *Headlines*, part

⁴ Mingda Du: PhD dissertation, p. 14.

⁵ Edmund de Waal: The White Road. Journey into an obsession [Biały szlak. Podróż przez świat porcelany], Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec 2017.

of Mr Mingda Du's doctoral work, I would like to begin my analysis with the artist's concept. As I understand it, the idea for the series of works emerged with the onset of the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus. The starting point was the dilemmas and doubts of the doctoral student, who asked himself: in the age of digital media, does the public have the right to express an opinion?⁶ Ultimately, Mr Mingda Du did not take up critical threads in the aforementioned area, and chose to remain silent for 316 days - that is how long it took him to draw the series of 1097 drawings. In his dissertation, the doctoral student quotes Mills' "The Power Elite": "The powers of ordinary men are circumscribed by the everyday worlds in which they live, yet even in these rounds of job, family, and neighborhood they often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern. 'Great changes' are beyond their control, but affect their conduct and outlook none the less. ..." ⁷ This is basically the answer to the question posed by the doctoral student. Trying to understand the situation, to put it into words, became impossible for him. Everyone and no one was right at the same time, all of humanity found itself in an unnamed space, just like the student in his artistic practice in Poland. Today, of course, we know more and are able to group the knowledge of the virus, to name some of the processes that followed one after the other.

Mr Mingda Du, while in quarantine in 2020 in Wrocław, had only ink, brushes and rice paper which he brought from China. He accurately provides the date -1 April 2020 - when he started working on the drawing cycle. As he recalls, he accidentally opened a German news website, which he simply drew / copied, completely unaware of what the information displayed on the screen conveyed. In this way, the roles of the text and the accompanying image were reversed. The image fulfilled the function of the text, and the text fulfilled the function of the abstract image. The artist drew on numerous information services from countries whose language and cultural contexts he did not know. Thus, in numerous works, there appeared drawn headlines from Japan, Israel, India, Italy or Thailand, to name a few. The creative process was similar to the ceramic series *Unfamiliar experience*. The doctoral student did not impose on himself the format of the works, the number of drawings or the time allocated to the work. In his practice, he came to the conclusion that no one can possess comprehensive knowledge in the context of, for example, world events, and that "Even with a comprehensive linguistic knowledge, it is still difficult to establish connections with multiple political/cultural positions at the same time"⁸.

Thus, analysing the series of 1097 black ink drawings, I look at them as visual notes, sketches. Just like Mingda Du, I cannot read the words, while the figures appearing

⁶ Mingda Du: PhD dissertation, p. 22.

⁷ Mingda Du: PhD dissertation, p. 23.

⁸Mingda Du: PhD dissertation, p. 32.

in most of the works - their portraits - are recognisable to me only if they are related to the culture I represent. The monumental drawing series was created between 1 April 2020 and 11 February 2021, the eve of the Chinese Lunar New Year. This project also has a personal touch for the student. On 12 November 2020, his mentor Professor Maciej Kasperski, with whom Mingda Du had worked, passed away. On that day, work on the series was suspended and replaced by the memory of him. Silence.

v. Summary

The artistic works that make up the doctoral work *Remote Context* by Mingda Du are an impressive, monumental series (1186 works in total), demonstrating the significant involvement of the doctoral student in the process of their creation. In particular, the series of 89 ceramics has an original, diverse but coherent form. The shapes of the works resemble bodies-vessels, and their colour, as I have mentioned earlier, plays a significant role in the perception of the whole work. The series of drawings, on the other hand, is a notation of pandemic everyday life, or in fact a reference to the stream of media information, which often - if we do not know the language or the cultural context - we cannot really understand. It is a reaction to the contemporary problem of a society which, seemingly, thanks to the development of technology, should absorb and read a multitude of information, but in fact is only approaching its meaning. In both series of works, Mr Mingda Du distances himself as an artist - he weakens his position as an artist, his domination, trying to move to the position of a viewer, and certainly to shift the burden to a dialogue with him, rather than to a categorical manifestation of the interpretation of his works. A very important aspect in Mingda Du's doctoral dissertation is his movement between two cultures, and thus the expansion of the field of vision and practice not only in terms of technique - ceramics or drawing - but also marking the contribution to the understanding of phenomena or events that we experience every day. These are interesting observations and conclusions.

vi. Conclusion.

Having analysed the artistic, didactic and organisational achievements as well as the documentation concerning the doctoral dissertation, I conclude that the artistic works comprising the original dissertation are of a high level and I apply for the conferment of the doctoral degree on Mingda Du by the Artistic Discipline Council of the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław in the field of art, in the discipline of visual arts and art conservation.

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