



Ah Xian

CHALLENGING THE SPATIAL LIMITATIONS OF SCULPTURAL ART

» MABEL LEE

Ah Xian was born Liu Jixian on 7 May 1960 in Beijing, six years before the beginning of the social engineering project in China known as the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). This grand-scale project was the culmination of successive political campaigns to remould the population into perfect socialist beings by eradicating human individuality. As an adolescent at the time that the Cultural Revolution ended, Ah Xian began to exert his intellectual potential to define a career path for himself as an artist, despite the lack of opportunities for formal art training. Through critical study of art publications as they gradually became accessible, he resolutely developed his own aesthetics and art practice. His first solo painting exhibition was held at the Old Observatory in Beijing in 1986, and he participated in a number of group exhibitions at the National Art Gallery of China during 1986 and 1987. Around the same time he also began to establish international credentials through being selected for group exhibitions: during 1987 at Salon d'Automne in Paris and at Harkness House in New York; during 1987–1989 at the Beijing–New York Art Exchange in New York and Boston; and during 1988 at the Salon du Grand Palais in Paris, an exhibition that afterwards toured France.

In early 1989 Ah Xian travelled to Australia to take up a two-month residency in the School of Art at the University of Tasmania in Hobart. Returning to Australia in September 1990 he

found lodgings in Sydney, and a month later was joined by his wife Mali. To provide for their daily needs, Mali worked in a factory cutting mounds of old sheeting into rags with a circular saw, and Ah Xian worked as a housepainter, kitchen hand, and at various other jobs. Though engaged in manual labour, his mind was focused on art. He made the time to create a new series of paintings, and then began to explore ways of resolving the complex practical issues associated with his idea to produce figurative sculptures based on plaster moulds of real people.

In 1998 he showed his first figurative sculptures to Richard Dunn, director of the Sydney College of the Arts (SCA) at the University of Sydney. Soon afterwards he was offered a two-semester residency at SCA during which he completed ten ceramic busts. In the following year he was awarded a grant from the Australia Council that enabled him to move to Jingdezhen in China where he completed forty figurative works. Suddenly his unique sculptures saw him launched as a significant presence in the Australian and the international art worlds. Since then his work has been showcased in solo exhibitions at public galleries and museums: once in China, five times in Australia, five times in Germany, once in the United States, and once in the Netherlands. At present his solo exhibition *Metaphysica* is on a 2013–2015 tour of fourteen Queensland regional galleries. His sculptures have been selected for group exhibitions at

(above)

Scales: 4 (reclining on the side)
Human, Human
2006–2007

See page 33 for source image and information.



(above)

Fig. 1. (SJ: IMAGE 89)

Bust 67

China, China 2002

Porcelain cast with applied decoration of kingfisher-blue feather design

41 x 40 x 22.5 cm
(h x w x d)

Made in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, China.

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public galleries and museums in Australia, Germany, Korea, Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, United States, United Kingdom, and Switzerland.

In Australia, Ah Xian's sculptures have won two major national art prizes: in 2001 the National Sculpture Prize at the National Gallery of Australia and, in 2009, the Clemenger Contemporary Art Award at the National Gallery of Victoria. His sculptures have been collected by several Australian public institutions: the National Gallery of Australia and National Portrait Gallery (Canberra); the National Gallery of Victoria and RMIT Gallery (Melbourne); Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) (Brisbane); the Powerhouse Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art and Art Gallery of New South Wales (Sydney); the Art Gallery of South Australia (Adelaide); and the University of Tasmania (Hobart). Overseas they

are part of collections at the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa), the Asia Society Museum (New York), and the Kirishima Open-air Art Museum (Kagoshima, Japan).

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For an artist talk at QAGOMA in Brisbane on 29 March 2014, Ah Xian prepared a PowerPoint file titled 'A Solitary Journey of Self-exile: Ah Xian's Art Practice from Early Times to the Present' that chronologically documents 200 images of representative pieces of his major works. 'Solitary journey' alludes to his solitary personality and also to the fact that he likes to be in a dream state, to drift away from crowds, to be silent and alone. The phrase also indicates his conscious avoidance of participation in political or social groups, or even any art group. In his art it is only his solitary self that arbitrates, and he sees himself as a reverent pilgrim prostrating himself in prayer as he travels along a road that will lead him to art.¹ The 200 images of 'A Solitary Journey' (SJ)² are the primary source material for the present study, with each image closely examined as artefacts of the aesthetics informing Ah Xian's art.

Ah Xian states in a matter-of-fact manner that he is a self-taught artist, who did not undertake formal study in an art college or university.³ While he does not declare himself to be free from obligation to any master artist or school of art, it is clearly the case. In other words, Ah Xian has been free to develop a unique brand of aesthetics and art practice. He states that he is a conceptual artist: he begins with a concept, and works out the exact details of every stage of the actualisation of that concept prior to engaging in the production of the artwork.⁴ The main concern of Ah Xian's art, however, is the human body, which is the opposite of what is generally considered as conceptual art with its geometric icons, machines, angles and lines, and scant reference to the human figure. Questioned about this, he asserts with conviction that he is a conceptual artist because the concept is decisive in each of his artworks. But he rejects outright the notion that he belongs to any trend or school of conceptual art. He regards his own art as 'characteristically personal and unique', and states categorically that 'the core

of art is about creation and soul', and that 'art' does not necessarily result if someone paints a painting. For him both the language and style of an artwork must be 'new, personal, special, unique, and creative'. Of equal importance is whether a work can 'touch and move people's hearts'.⁵ So, while a certain school of art may have appropriated the term 'conceptual art', Ah Xian has staked his own claim to the term, and authoritatively given it meaning.

Such an understanding of art has its roots deep in Ah Xian's love of art from early childhood. Even at kindergarten he was aware of his affinity for art. As a junior high school student he seized opportunities to attend the occasional art classes offered after school at the local cultural centre, where he took basic lessons in drawing, seal carving, calligraphy and ink brush painting. But his school years coincided with the Cultural Revolution, when all books that failed to promote socialism were considered reactionary or counter-revolutionary, and summarily seized and destroyed, or locked away in library basements. His parents obtained an art book that had been a textbook at the Central Academy of Fine Arts during the 1950s. It was about the drawing techniques of Russian portraitist Pavel Petrovich Chistiakov (1832–1919), and Ah Xian treasured it as a sacred text throughout his junior high school years. On reaching adolescence, Ah Xian's impulse for artistic expression intensified; frustrated by the lack of opportunities for art training, he lost interest in his senior high school studies, and his marks plummeted.⁶

Ah Xian graduated from high school in 1979 with mediocre grades, and afterwards trained for two years as a mechanical fitter at a state-run factory technical college. From childhood he was good at doing things with his hands: painting and calligraphy, making model planes and ships, constructing a beautifully designed steelyard for a physics project, and making wardrobes, cupboards and sofas. In his home there were several bicycles that he had pulled apart about ten times and put together again.⁷ Ah Xian had no inkling that such practical skills would later prove invaluable for his art creation.

At the time he simply rationalised that as a mechanical fitter he would be able to make a living to support his art. After classes he spent

virtually all his time reading about global art movements of the past century as art books and magazines became increasingly available; he also taught himself basic painting skills. His close friends were young artists, poets, playwrights, novelists, editors, critics and musicians who were united in their protests against government censorship. In making their demands for freedom of expression, they produced works that audaciously flaunted the official guidelines for cultural production. He found he could sell his paintings to scrape together a modest living, and so adopted 'Ah Xian' as his art name, and committed himself to a career in art.

Ah Xian's father, Liu Fengyi, was a cadre at Renmin University in Beijing and his mother, Wu Yuling, an associate professor of English at the Beijing Institute of Technology, which meant that the family lived in a university residential

(below)

Fig. 2. (SJ: IMAGE 143)

17: *Nelumbo nucifera* (Lotus)

Concrete Forest
2008–2009

Concrete, wax

52 x 47.5 x 25 cm

Made in Beijing,
China.

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(right)

Fig. 3. (SJ: IMAGE 175)
13: Taihu Stone-1
Evolutionaura
2011-2013

Bronze, gold,
Taihu stone

72.2 x 53 x 26 cm

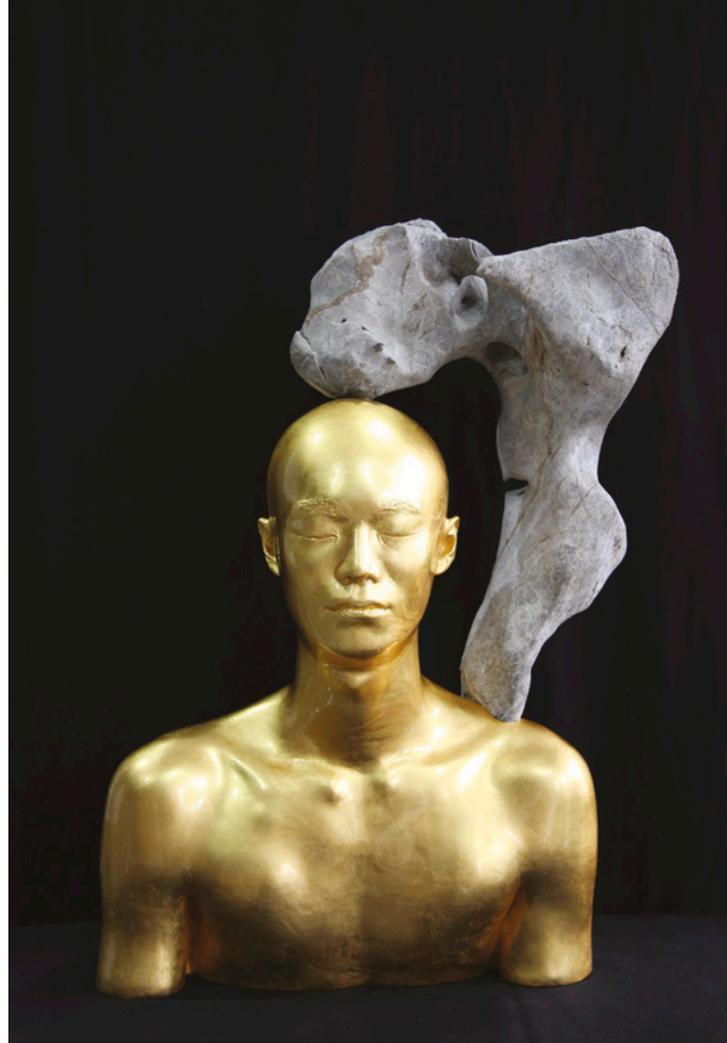
Made in Beijing,
China.

COLLECTION OF THE ART
GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH
WALES, SYDNEY, 2014

complex. Although there were no art books, they did have a splendid silk-bound hardcover first edition of *Arts and Crafts of China* at home, and Ah Xian notes that its high quality photographs of the finest examples of China's traditional artisan art left a deep and lasting impression on him.⁸ The impact of that book is clearly evident in his sculptural art although, while growing up, he could not have imagined how those images contributed to shaping his artistic sensibilities, or how he would later creatively appropriate those ancient crafts in his artworks.

The first image in 'A Solitary Journey' is a pencil sketch of the head of an ancient Greek statue, which was completed while Ah Xian was at high school; the second is an oil on canvas portrait of Mali, then his girlfriend, painted in 1980. The paintings that follow, however, suggest the directions to which his art would gravitate. In 1983 he painted a large three-panel work in oil on cotton titled *Daily. Beijing* that captures the colour and vibrancy of Beijing youth after the standard monotone grey and indigo garb of the Cultural Revolution had been abandoned. Lime-green flared trousers and floral shirts are in evidence. He shared the anger of his generation about the insidious forms of repression inflicted on the individual by the state, especially state interference in sexual relationships between men and women. Above all, his goal in art was the portrayal of the naked human body; his reasons for this are explained in the following paragraph. The fact that he was not enrolled in an art college, however, meant that he was unable to practise painting or making sculptures using nude models, and could only rely on images in magazines or in his imagination.⁹ His fascination with painting nudes led to his spending a night in police custody in early 1983 at the beginning of the Anti-Spiritual-Pollution Campaign that year.¹⁰

Two series of numbered paintings represent Ah Xian's first deep meditations on art. *Palace Lady Series* (1985-1987) and *The Wall Series* (1987-1989) are both anti-realist depictions of the human body, and register his reaction to state prohibitions on male-female sexual relationships. The *Palace Lady Series* are works in oil on canvas that portray nude women with big breasts and hips engaged in various chores



within the corridors and courtyards of ancient palace buildings. Secluded within the palace walls, women are off limits to men. In all cases their faces are turned away, obscured, or cut off at the edge of the canvas. Their nudity and the anonymity generated by their lack of facial features endow the women with the quality of abstractions: they are universal woman. Without any distinguishing facial features and clothing, the women are reduced to a state of equality in their predicament of being enclosed within forbidding palace walls, denied expression of the innate sexual instincts embodied in the fullness of their breasts and hips.

This anonymity of the person is retained in *The Wall Series*, works of ink on rice paper containing the shadowy figures of nude women. The setting for these works is distinctly urban. Deconstructed bright yellow traffic signs, iron grilles on window spaces, occasionally red grilles and red strips, stand in stark contrast to pale grey brick walls. White shadowy shapes of nude women are visible through the window grilles, or their shapes appear to have been etched into the walls.

As stated above, Ah Xian sees himself as a conceptual artist, something already

demonstrated in these early works. Even his 1980 portrait of his girlfriend Mali is anti-realist, and he has not deviated from this position. He maintains that realism has never been the objective of his art, that he has never depicted landscapes or real life scenes. He began making

the back of the T-shirt is unmistakably a shadowy image of a PLA soldier with a rifle. By September 1990 Ah Xian had settled in Sydney. The events of 4 June still reverberated in his psyche, and resulted in a series of oils on canvas called *Heavy Wounds* (1991). These adopt

AH XIAN RETURNED TO BEIJING IN MAY 1989 AND WEEKS LATER ... WITNESSED THE MILITARY CRACKDOWN ON STUDENTS IN THE EARLY HOURS OF 4 JUNE.

friends with foreigners and attending parties held by the Western community. The locals in Beijing certainly had neither the money nor the inclination to buy art, but members of the foreign community were buying and collecting the work of local artists. Australian writer and academic Nicholas Jose¹¹ made many friends amongst Chinese artists and writers, including Ah Xian. When Jose was appointed cultural counsellor in the Australian Embassy in Beijing (1987–1990), Ah Xian and he had already been friends for a number of years. Geoff Parr, director of the School of Art at the University of Tasmania, happened to be in Beijing and was invited to Jose's residence for a party to celebrate an exhibition of paintings by a few of his Beijing artist friends. Parr saw paintings from *The Wall Series*, and this resulted in Ah Xian's residency at the University of Tasmania in early 1989.

Ah Xian returned to Beijing in May 1989 and weeks later, from his vantage point in the Muxidi area, he witnessed the military crackdown on students in the early hours of 4 June. He was immobilised with disbelief and sorrow for weeks, but then began to express his emotional state in a series of works in different media titled *Post June. 1989*. The first of these is a replica of his 1983 work *Daily. Beijing*. The colour and vibrancy of the original, however, is leached out in this stark black-and-white plywood woodcut. The other black-and-white woodcuts of the series graphically depict naked women in palace settings or against brick walls, or else the faces of national leaders emanating evil, and those of ordinary people etched with horror and anger. He also produced T-shirts printed on the front with an image of the legendary People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldier Lei Feng, who always unquestioningly obeyed his commanders:

the painting style of first-aid posters issued during the Cultural Revolution, and are clearly ironic statements about distorted reality. While purporting to demonstrate the procedure for wrapping bandages, Ah Xian describes the paintings as 'critical and cynical' indictments of the authorities: what they preached and what



(left)
Fig. 4.
Ah Xian
Profile by
David Goodman
COURTESY
DAVID GOODMAN

they did to people were completely the opposite. The faces of the people depicted are devoid of expression, and the eyes that look ahead are unseeing. The bandaged heads (SJ: images 53–56) could be interpreted as subliminal metaphors for lobotomy or imposed amnesia, despite Ah Xian's not having had this specific intention in mind. Following the paintings of *Heavy Wounds*, the PowerPoint presentation moves on to two photographs of an installation titled *Pervasive Spirit #2* (1992) (SJ: images 62 and 63) that, in



(above)

Fig. 5. (SJ: IMAGE 108)

Lotus Cloisonné-1
Human, Human
2000–2001

Hand-beaten copper,
finely enameled
cloisonné, lotus
design

158 x 55.5 x 32 cm

Made in Dachang
County, Hebei
Province, China.

COLLECTION OF
THE QUEENSLAND
ART GALLERY/GALLERY
OF MODERN ART,
BRISBANE, 2002

fact, belong to the separate series *Scattered Souls*, although this is not specified in 'A Solitary Journey'. The installation depicts an open black box full of plaster sculptures of severed hands with nametags attached to them. Ah Xian created six such works in the series, using genuine ammunition containers, plaster, lead, steel nails, wax and cotton bandages.¹²

Soon afterwards Ah Xian began to experiment with making plaster casts of the human body for the large-scale sculptural projects he had in mind. He initially practised on himself, and later on his brother and wife. One of his early experiments almost ended in disaster when he

decided to make a plaster cast of his torso while at home alone. He used liquid dishwashing detergent as a separator or buffer between his skin and the plaster, but as the plaster set it released heat, the detergent began to burn his chest, and he could barely move. When his wife Mali returned she had to use knives and scissors to free him. His burns required hospital treatment.¹³ Over the following years he developed a safe technique of making plaster casts and was able to produce figurative sculptures in the backyard of his home, and fire them in the kilns at the Sydney College of the Arts through the kind auspices of Richard Dunn. During his 1998 residency at the college he produced the first porcelain busts for his series *China, China*. Afterwards he progressively added to the series during 1999, 2002 and 2004 at the Jingdezhen kilns in China. The city of Jingdezhen had for many centuries produced the finest porcelains in the world, and Ah Xian enlisted the help of skilled craftsmen and artisans to assist in producing artworks according to his detailed specifications. He also enlisted local people to model for the plaster casts of human figures that he wanted to populate his installations.

To date the *China, China* series numbers eighty porcelain busts of male and female persons, including ten made at the Sydney College of the Arts in 1998, forty-three made at Jingdezhen in 1999, and another thirty pieces made during 2002 and 2004.¹⁴ Each of the busts is of an anonymous person, except for the bust of eminent Sydney paediatrician John Yu (SJ: image 96). As the busts are based on plaster casts of real people, the eyes and mouth are necessarily closed, hence stripping the face of expression and endowing it with an air of serenity or even transcendence. While the busts have different facial features, they are further differentiated by traditional Chinese decorative motifs that are painted, etched, attached to or wrapped around the busts, or else the bust itself is produced as cloisonné, sculptured lacquer, overlay, or cut-out porcelain items. In other words, each bust is unique as an art object. This being so, *China, China* can either constitute a single large installation of eighty items, or an endless number of installations using various selections of smaller numbers of busts. Alternatively, individual busts can be mounted on plinths, or



multiple busts can be displayed alongside one another on a bench (S): images 97–101).

Ah Xian's *China, China* series was an instant success. Exhibitions were held at the Art Gallery of the Beijing Teacher's University (2000), the RMIT Gallery (2000), Powerhouse Museum (2001), Brisbane City Gallery (2001), Museum für Angewandte Kunst Frankfurt, Germany (2002), the Asia Society Museum (2002), and the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane (2003). It was clear that his art career was finally on track, with his skills for working with various sculptural media taken to a higher level while working at the kilns of Jingdezhen. Also, his unique technique of working from plaster casts of the human body had been established as his signature.

lacquer busts, but it is the striking sculptures of the full female body that predominate.

The women are featured standing, walking, sitting with legs crossed, sitting on a chair, kneeling, or reclining in various positions. These creations of extraordinary beauty represent the starting point of his sculptural realisation of the nude figure.

His standing woman (S): image 108), which was created over several months during 2000–2001, won the 2001 National Sculpture Prize and Exhibition held at the National Gallery of Australia. The figure is a work in pale ivory cloisonné on hand-beaten copper, intricately patterned from the head to the feet with trailing lotus plants that include the roots, the leaves in various stages of growth, seed



(above)

Fig. 6. (S): IMAGE 111)

Scales: 4 (reclining on the side)

Human, Human
2006–2007

Ox-bone inlay on resin fibreglass body cast with dragon-scale design

33 x 150 x 50 cm

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THE LOTUS CAME TO BE REVERED AS A SYMBOL OF MORAL PURITY BY SCHOLARS, AND BECAME A POPULAR MOTIF IN TRADITIONAL ARTISAN ARTWORKS.

By 2000 Ah Xian had found the specialist artisans he needed, and immediately began on his new series of works *Human, Human* (S): images 102–117). The cloisonné work, as well as the jade, ox-bone and ox-horn inlay work was produced in Xianghe County in Hebei province; the carved-lacquer work at the Beijing Carved Lacquer Factory; and the bronzes in Xinjian County in Jiangxi province.¹⁵ At present the series contains some cloisonné and carved

pod, trailing stalks, buds and flowers. The Song dynasty philosopher Zhang Zai (1020–1077), renowned for his path-breaking metaphysical interpretation of the universe in terms of Qi-energy, had immortalised the lotus with his 'Ode to the Lotus': the lotus flower is unsullied by having grown out of mud. The lotus came to be revered as a symbol of moral purity by scholars, and became a popular motif in traditional artisan artworks. Importantly in a work of

(below)

Fig. 7. (S): IMAGE 110—
CONTAINING TWO WORKS)

Scales: 5 (sitting)
Human, Human
2006–2007

Ox-bone inlay on
resin fibreglass body
cast with dragon-
scale design

137 x 57 x 76 cm

Made in Xianghe
County, Hebei
Province, China.

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Immortal on Deer
Metaphysica 2007

Bronze, brass

64 x 43.5 x 23.5 cm

Made in Beijing,
China.

COLLECTION OF THE
QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY/
GALLERY OF MODERN ART,
BRISBANE, 2009



contemporary art that extols the human body and the excellence of human endeavour and creation in the ancient art of cloisonné, Ah Xian's cloisonné work met the demanding standards of master craftsmen.¹⁶

The full body sculptures of *Human, Human* introduce significant innovations that expand the spatial limitations of the sculptured form. The three-dimensional sculpture of a woman kneeling acquires an additional dimension when executed as a work of carved-lacquer (S): image 104). Additional dimensions are also achieved when resin-fibreglass sculptures are covered with jade, ox-bone or ox-horn inlays (S): images 109–114). Furthermore, movement has clearly been captured in the sculpture of the woman walking (S): image 109).

Between 20 October 2007 and 7 September 2008 selections of Ah Xian's sculptures and busts toured Städtische Museen Heilbronn and Kunsthalle Recklinghausen in Germany, and then Gemeentemuseum Den Haag in the Netherlands.¹⁷ By this time Ah Xian had started

on his new series: *Metaphysica* (2007) (S): images 118–126). Produced in Beijing, these bronze busts of expressionless women are cast in lustrous ebony or have been artificially tarnished in green. Disrupting the serenity of these busts, however, is an icon of traditional folk culture perched on the head of each of the women. The icons include a bright red fish, a brass pagoda or a Buddha statue, a grey elephant, a rabbit, a crab, a rooster: replicas of mundane objects that can be purchased in the stalls of local markets and serve as powerful counterpoints to the uncluttered beauty of the sculptured human form. The location of these mundane objects on the head symbolises how such objects continue to exert an influence on people's minds, as indicated by the persistence of traditional folk customs and practices.

From 2008 Ah Xian began working on a new series titled *Concrete Forest*. Thirty-six concrete busts set on plinths (S): 127–165) from the series were exhibited as an installation at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, where it received the 2009 Clemenger Contemporary Art Award. The busts are of both men and women, and each bears indentations made with different leaves, or occasionally the leaves are executed as bas-relief. Significantly, the leaves add multiple dimensions to the three-dimensional sculpted form, endowing the concrete with interesting and varied textures without disrupting the simplicity of the monotone concrete. While some have conjectured that the work represents the intrusion of concrete urban life on the forests, it is more likely that Ah Xian is merely pursuing his aim of using a wide range of media to explore further the potential of sculptural art to satisfy his aesthetic goals.

Since 2010 Ah Xian has been working on a series of bronze sculptures called *Evolutionaura* (S): 167–180). Eight works from the series were chosen for a group exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia as part of the 2014 Adelaide Biennial. To date twenty-seven busts have been completed, and more are nearing completion. He is also considering full-figure sculptures, but this will depend on whether he finds the appropriate natural rock materials for what he has in mind.¹⁸ The male and female busts mostly have a matt finish in shades of gold or ebony, sometimes a highly polished gold finish or a green rust finish.





The beauty of the human form, however, is disrupted by various protrusions or appendages. One gold bust of a woman is sparsely covered with walnut-size or slightly larger chunks of lapis lazuli (SJ: image 167), while another is densely

meditation on the place of the human in this ancient world we inhabit. As the title of the series suggests, the artworks of *Evolutionaura* are manifestations of Ah Xian's reflections on existential issues.

Since 1998 Ah Xian has created five series of sculptural works: *China, China*; *Human, Human*; *Metaphysica*; *Concrete Forest*; and, *Evolutionaura*. Each series is open-ended, and constitutes a continuing work in progress.²⁰ At the same time each artwork is uniquely different, and stands on its own as an object of beauty. Yet, when the works of a series are placed together in multiple variations they form independent and breathtaking installations. Created in the medium of concrete and exhibited first as an installation for the Clemenger Prize, his *Concrete Forest* brings to mind the Terracotta Warriors unearthed during the 1970s at the mausoleum of the First Emperor Qin Shi Huang (260–210 BC). For Ah Xian the Terracotta Warriors constituted an art installation, and informed by this concept he began developing concepts and strategies to create his own unique sculptures that, while emphasising the beauty of the human form, also significantly extend the spatial limitations of sculptural art.

Unlike many artists of his generation of Chinese origin, who slavishly imitate so-called modern or contemporary Western art theories and practices, and even take their works to obscene extremities of crass vulgarity

(left)

Fig. 8. (SJ: IMAGE 119)

Cicada on Leaf
Metaphysica 2007

Bronze, brass

57 x 43 x 21 cm

Made in Beijing,
China.

COLLECTION OF THE
QUEENSLAND ART
GALLERY/GALLERY OF
MODERN ART, BRISBANE,
2009

FOR AH XIAN THE TERRACOTTA WARRIORS CONSTITUTED AN ART INSTALLATION, AND INFORMED BY THIS CONCEPT HE BEGAN DEVELOPING CONCEPTS AND STRATEGIES TO CREATE HIS OWN UNIQUE SCULPTURES...

covered with dark red stones of various sizes (SJ: image 170). Even more striking are the busts that make use of carefully chosen Scholar's Rocks (SJ: images 172–180).¹⁹ In traditional Chinese culture these ancient rock formations were admired because they provoked aesthetic and religious contemplation. Ah Xian's innovative use of such rocks as integral parts of his human sculptures inserts multiple meanings for artist and viewers to ponder. At a visual level the juxtaposition of the human and the ancient rocks produces a definite sense of beauty, yet at the same time also provokes intellectual and even religious

for the sake of self-promotion, Ah Xian's art, as delineated in 'A Solitary Journey', is clearly premised on the portrayal of beauty and the human. He affirms the high level of aesthetic excellence achieved in China's artisan craft, for such visual images had sustained him during his formative years when individual artistic expression was prohibited. Informed by his critical reading from the late 1970s and early 1980s of developments in Western modern art, he began to see himself as a conceptual artist, but not in the mould of Western conceptual art movements. The archaeological unearthing of

the Terracotta Warriors around the same time was a reminder of ancient China's aesthetic achievements, even by craftsmen: each anonymous warrior is different, and together they form a striking monolithic installation. Ah Xian's sculptures are clearly informed by this concept of a multitude of anonymous human figures. His busts or full-body figures, however, also emphasise the beauty of the human form. His paintings are also informed by traditional Chinese aesthetics. Traditional Chinese literati art has always been consciously aware of, and to some extent respected, the two-dimensionality of the painting surface. There was no attempt to replicate reality until artists encountered Western art in modern times. Literati aesthetics was reflected in various forms of artisan work, including in sculptural art as evident in religious sculptures or even in the Terracotta Warriors. As a self-taught artist who grew up during the Cultural Revolution, Ah Xian staunchly defends his sensibilities and perceptions as an artist who responds to art as a calling: he is the sole arbiter of his aesthetics and art practice. 🍷



MABEL LEE FAHA is an honorary adjunct professor in the School of Languages and Cultures at the University of Sydney and honorary professor in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at the Open University of Hong Kong. She is an authority on the novels,

plays and art of 2000 Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian, and the translator of his works, **Soul Mountain**, **One Man's Bible**, **Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather**, **The Case for Literature, Aesthetics and Creation**, and **Song of the Night**. She has also written studies of the Australian artists Ah Xian, Zhou Xiaoping, Wang Lan, Vince Vozzo, Lin Chunyan and Hu Ming. AUTHOR PHOTO BY FU HONG.

1. Mabel Lee, interview with Ah Xian, 15 April 2014.
2. Images from 'A Solitary Journey' are referenced below with 'SJ' followed by the image number. I conducted numerous email interviews with Ah Xian between April 2013 and late September 2014.
3. Mabel Lee, interview with Ah Xian, 15–16 July 2013.
4. Mabel Lee, interviews with Ah Xian, 2013–2014.
5. Mabel Lee, interview with Ah Xian, 28 August 2014.

6. Mabel Lee, interviews with Ah Xian, 15–16 July 2013.
7. Lin Chen, interview with Ah Xian, 2 November 2013. Material from Chen's interview was subsequently used in the writing of 'The Transition of Cultural Identity: The Diasporic Presentation in Works of the Chinese Australian Contemporary Artists Guan Wei and Ah Xian' (unpublished masters thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, 2013).
8. Mabel Lee, interviews with Ah Xian, 15–16 July 2013.
9. Mabel Lee, interview with Ah Xian, 15 April 2014.
10. Rosemary Neill, 'The Face: Ah Xian', *Weekend Australian*, 21–22 March 2009, p. 3.
11. Jose first visited Beijing in 1983 while a teaching academic in the English Department of the Australian National University. During the visit he met Ah Xian as well as many other artists. In 1986 he was lecturer and writer-in-residence at the Beijing Foreign Studies University and, in 1987, at the East China Normal University in Shanghai. His account of the vibrant Beijing art scene and his connections with people involved in it is documented in 'My China Project', in *The China Project* (Brisbane: QAGOMA, 2009), pp. 57–63.
12. *Heavy Wounds* was donated to QAGOMA and is part of the permanent collection. *Scattered Souls* remains in the collection of the artist. Mabel Lee, interviews with Ah Xian, 15 April 2014 and 1 September 2014. See also the discussion of *Heavy Wounds* and other works in Russell Storer, 'Ah Xian: Healing the Wounds', *Broadsheet: Contemporary Visual Art and Culture*, 43, 1 (2014), pp. 39–41.
13. Neill, p. 3.
14. Mabel Lee, interview with Ah Xian, 1 September 2014.
15. Mabel Lee, interview with Ah Xian, 2 September 2014.
16. Cloisonné requires the filling of each cloisonné with mineral pigments, and involves multiple firings until each cloisonné has been filled. Afterwards there is hand-polishing, and a gilt finish to the entire work.
17. A joint museum edition was published as Ah Xian, *Skulpturen/Sculpture* (Bonn: Edition Braus, 2007).
18. Mabel Lee, interview with Ah Xian, 4 September 2014.
19. These are ancient natural rock formations that, for many centuries, have been admired by scholars for their beauty of form in China, and later Korea and Japan. Even today huge pieces continue to adorn traditional gardens and courtyards, while smaller pieces are used as interior decorations in palaces and mansions.
20. Mabel Lee, interview with Ah Xian, 4 September 2014.