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"BONSAI" SERIES

2007

Plant, iron tools, 90 x 60 x 130 cm.

Courtesy Eli Klein Fine Art,
New York/Beijing.

PERSONAL HISTORY

In the Grip of Power

BY MICHAEL YOUNG

1

SHEN SHAOMIN at his studio in outer Beijing, 2011. Photo by Michael Young for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

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SUMMIT (detail)

2009

Mixed-media installation with five life-size human sculptures, dimensions variable.

Courtesy the artist and Eli Klein Fine Art,
New York/Beijing.



From painfully constrained bonsai trees to ghoulish figures of deceased communist leaders laid out on mortuary trolleys, the bleak, morbid work of Shen Shaomin critiques humankind's attempts to control nature and society.

Shen Shaomin's cavernous concrete studio is bone-chillingly cold in winter. The surrounding landscape is sparse and the 19 adjacent studios that make up the Qiaozhi Art Commune, north of Beijing, do little to fracture the sense of isolation that the scenery imposes.

By contrast, inside the brutalist building there is a creative frisson in the air. The space is a forum for powerful ideas; it is also a repository of Shen's earlier pieces, which are on display as though in a gallery. Among them are two fragments from a crashed Chinese rocket—its one-centimeter-thick steel plates buckled and twisted. Alongside each half-ton fragment are numerous sketches showing how the twisted steel will be incorporated into an installation later this year. How, one wonders, does an artist acquire fragments of a crashed rocket?

"In China, if you have money you can get anything," Shen tells me, gesturing to the fragments. He could easily have been referring to the human bones that he found impossible to acquire when living in Australia during the 1990s and yet were readily available in China, where he combined them with real and fabricated animal bones in his "Unknown Creature" series (2002–04).

In spite of his brusque exterior and the morbid quality of his work, Shen is a gregarious and generous man with a warm spirit. Born in 1956, he is one of China's most recognized experimental installation artists, and his international reputation has grown significantly over the past decade. One of the two installations that he showed at last year's Biennale of Sydney—"Bonsai" (2007), with its miniature trees bent into grotesque shapes by an array of medieval looking implements—attracted a great deal of critical attention. Works such as these,



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drawing on themes of genetic engineering and environmental despoliation, reflect the artist's genuine concern for the horrors inflicted on the world in the name of social, economic and political progress. His practice is dedicated to the creation of an illusory reality in which a disjunction between the real and the imagined manifests itself in a way that is logical to the viewer but which at the same time is the irrational stuff of nightmares.

Shen began to expose the potential for science's meddling with nature to create evolutionary dead ends and monstrous outcomes with his sculptural series "Experimental Field" (2002), in which osseous materials mix with animal skeletons to suggest an unclassified fauna. The subsequent "Unknown Creature" series developed these ideas to even more grotesque ends, as Shen created an extensive imagined bestiary made from real and fabricated bones. Like Jurassic exhibits in a natural history museum, the gigantic skeletal curios point to an alternative yet obsolete existence.

If it is hard to see beyond the fantasy of Shaomin's imagination in his earlier works, "Bonsai" is an alternative proposition, taking the all-too-familiar Chinese and Japanese art form and twisting it into something different altogether. While the beauty of conventional bonsai trees lies in their autonomous, miniaturized perfection, in Shen's bonsais, the bolts, chains and shackles that have distorted the trees over time must remain intertwined with each plant—they are both implements of torture and the props on which the organism depends in order to survive.

The idea for this piece came from a book on Chinese foot binding that contained X-rays of women's distorted feet. "The trees took ten years or more to grow," Shen explains, adding that

they were the result of many visits to Anhui province. "Everyone grows bonsai in Anhui and I visited many people's homes asking them to help me."

As much as they refer to humankind's relentless attempts to control nature, Shen's bonsais are also a wry commentary on how citizens in a totalitarian state are manipulated to conform to state ideals. When asked if he sees himself as a political artist, Shen responds, "When I have an idea for a project I just do it. I never think about whether it has a political angle or not." Nevertheless, navigating the line between artistic freedom of speech and the risks of political critiques is one all artists in China must internalize as they develop their work.

Also shown at the Biennale of Sydney, *Summit* (2009), presented a hypothetical meeting between five Communist leaders. Life-sized silicone replicas of Lenin, Mao, Kim Il-sung and Ho Chi Minh lay in state in glass sarcophagi, with Castro lying on his death bed, clinging to life. The message that old-style Communism is dead is plain for all to see. Shen hopes that following negotiations, *Summit* will travel to Singapore and Japan this year.

The artist explains that as a boy, he was forever taking things apart and reassembling them into models. *Fighter X* (2007) is model fighter plane that seems half-constructed, its fuselage not yet affixed to its inner frame. But at five meters long this sculpture is anything but a toy. Rather, it is a meticulously crafted exposition of what a modern fighter jet would look like if stripped of its skin. For all the precision of its design and construction, the work points to the flaws in humankind's attempts to maintain control over nature and society. *Fighter X* owes its creation to Shen's chance find of "top secret" stealth aircraft blue prints in a Shenyang flea market.