

## Reshaping the Meaning of Sculpture

BY ELIZABETH YUAN

Rafael Risemberg entered Klein Sun Gallery in Chelsea wondering whether to include its new exhibition—nearly three dozen works by Li Hongbo that resemble ancient Greco-Roman sculptures—in his selective tours of New York art galleries.

“There is 0% chance,” he recalled thinking at first glance.

Then a gallery employee pulled on the head of one bust, and Mr. Risemberg changed his

mind. “I had a one-second conversion from 0% to 100% chance,” he said.

Two days later, when his tour group saw the demonstration, they too gasped.

With a single tug of his head, the sculpture’s face stretched and distorted, his features disappearing, revealing an accordion of paper layers before reassuming its shape when returned to its resting state.

With thousands of sheets of paper, Mr. Li, who lives and

works in Beijing, has expanded on the techniques used in paper-based folk art and the traditional Chinese paper toys he grew up with. “Tools of Study,” his first solo U.S. exhibition which runs through March 2, references the generic models used by art students.

Each bust comprises roughly 7,000 to 8,000 sheets of paper and weighs about 30 pounds.

“When people look at a box, they think it’s a box. But actually, it can change into another

thing,” Mr. Li, 39 years old, said via an interpreter. “I want to change the image and how people see things, so they think in another way, and more deeply.”

For the sculptural works in “Tools of Study,” he chose a type of white paper that most resembled marble. For works he contributed to a 2012 group exhibition, “Material -> Object,” also at Eli Klein’s New York gallery, he used brownish paper that imitated the qualities of wood.

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## When Paper Trumps Rock

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Mr. Li sketches his ideas before cutting the selected paper and stacking sheets to create a sculpture. Two assistants help him assemble and move the bulky paper mass, which can unfurl like a Slinky. To form the face, he uses a band saw; for the finer features, an angle grinder.

Along with master’s degrees in folk and experimental art from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, he has worked as a book editor, publisher and an ancient books expert, so paper is a fitting medium for his output.

“He’s really the perfect storm of paper,” said Mr. Klein, whose gallery represents him in North and South America.

Soren Edgren, who had

headed the Chinese Rare Books Project from Princeton University, met Mr. Li years ago through bibliophile friends. “What we talk about mostly are ancient Chinese books and manuscripts,” Mr. Edgren said.

Besides his intellectual approach, Mr. Li, with his sensitivity to paper, “also looks at books as physical objects, cultural artifacts,” Mr. Edgren added. “That’s where he is a step ahead. He sees things that many of us don’t see as easily.”

Last year Mr. Li’s “Cultured Man” arrived in what resembled a sarcophagus for “Hot Pot: A Taste of Contemporary Chinese Art,” an exhibition featuring 20 artists at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center, curator Mara Williams recalled.

The 150-pound “man” had been wrapped like a mummy, and Ms. Williams had visualized him seated in a Vermont rocking chair. Each part—the head, body, limbs—had been carefully wrapped, but when undone, the moving operation became, she said, “a two-hour, six-person, holding-on-to-dear-life job.”

“Get the pillows now,” Ms. Williams said she remembered hollering to staff. “I have never had an artwork get out of control in my 25-year career.”

The rocking-chair idea scrapped, “Cultured Man” ultimately found his place, lounging on pillows, “reading” a book on contemporary Chinese art, his hand resting on a page that featured a work in the show.

Mr. Li played down the role humor plays in his work. Ms. Williams disagreed, pointing to “Tools of Study” as an example. “Looking to the big bad West for inspiration, it’s hysterical,” she said. “These aren’t sculptures from the great Chinese past. They represent the height, the cradle of Western democracy.”

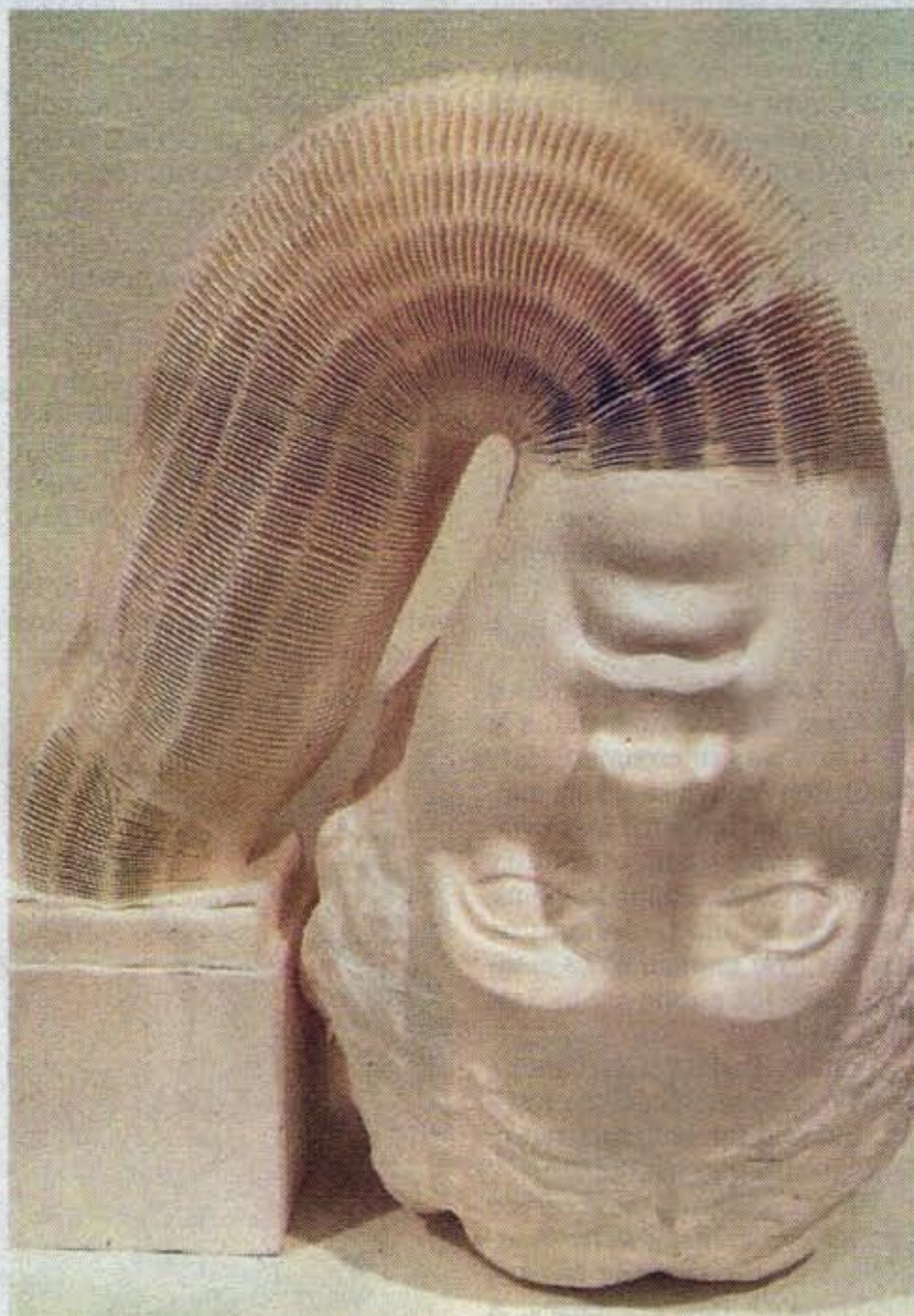
As someone working in a Communist country, she said, there is “something very sly about what he’s commenting on.”

Of the 35 pieces in the show, 31 have already sold, with prices ranging from \$10,000 to \$48,000, Mr. Klein said. Among them is the bust of Michelangelo, which Los Angeles designer and collector Blaine Halvorson bought last month while at Art Miami.

“I was walking by the booth and saw a girl unfolding one and putting him back together. I stopped. Ten minutes later, I owned a piece,” he said.

It is his first Chinese contemporary art piece, and Michelangelo will join a taxidermied giraffe and other curiosities in his invite-only gallery and studio.

“What you see is not necessarily what you get,” Mr. Halvorson said, “and it’ll be sitting in my space.”



Li Hongbo’s paper sculpture ‘The Goddess of the Parthenon.’

Elizabeth Yuan

Online»

Watch a video of artist Li Hongbo’s use of paper for his ‘marble’ sculptures at [WSJ.com/NY](http://WSJ.com/NY).