

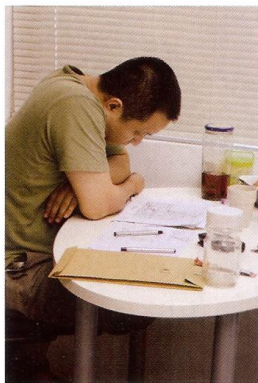
Fire His Breath, Jade His Bones

Text / Wu Hung Translation / Lee Ambroy

Leafing through notes, the critical juncture for this project began to germinate in the summer of 2007. It was just when Shi Jinsong had finished a three-person show at the Today Art Museum, Nine Trees, and he took me to Beijing's eastern suburbs for a look at the place where his works are being manufactured. I walked through tree roots and tree branches big and small as I listened to him talking about his current project: he was experimenting with smoldering the entire trunk of an enormous tree, turning it inside and out into a charcoal log. He would then burn it again as a work of art during an exhibition. From his suddenly quickening speech and the sparkle in his eyes, I could see the excitement that comes along with a technical challenge: even though few people venture to think, manufacturing charcoal is no easy task. Without mastery of the duration of and heat during the smoldering process, even a branch with the thickness of a finger will be destroyed, turned to coke on the outside but white on the inside. I learned this bit of knowledge as a child eating hot pot. At that time there were no such conveniences as natural gas or electric stoves, if you wanted to eat hot pot at home, you had to buy charcoal first. I remember that we often went to a charcoal chop near Houmenqiao. Mrs. Li, who took me, was an old Beijing Manchurian and it was said that her father was a guard for Empress Dowager Cixi's state treasury, but by the time of her generation the family was already in a complete state of decline. She had to spend at least half an hour picking through the charcoals, asking questions like what kind of wood was a type of charcoal made of, what color of smoke did it give off, and what kind of smell was it--while snapping a piece of charcoal now and then to see if the pitch black color was distributed throughout.

It was also in the summer of 2007—a time when I was anxious to settle a plan for Shi Jinsong's work in my exhibition Net—that I received a succinct e-mail he sent on August 8th. He apologized for a late response, casually excusing this by stating he had “recently been to a jade mine, in preparation for a jade work.” My heart jumped: I was curious about what attracted him to charcoal and jade at the same time. I knew from my study of art history that this kind of simultaneity is never fortuitous, even if even the artist himself isn't conscious of the relationship between the two.

Looking back, from then until now, I can generalize my planning for this exhibition as continuous reflections on this simultaneous occurrence. After the Platform directors Natalie Sun and Chen Haitao invited me to act as curator for Shi Jinsong's exhibition, I began to formally engage him on the contents of this show. A few early proposals were negated through discussions and e-mail exchanges, while some obscure links became more distinct and more appealing. Finally, the exhibition concept was prescribed as the potentiality of fire and jade as art mediums, as well as the relationship between these two seemingly different natural materials or phenomena within the artistic imagination. The title of the exhibition—the Chinese character 琰 comprised of the radical for “jade” with two components for “fire” beside it—provides a compendious description for the interrelationship of these two concepts. Here I must explain a little about using Chinese characters to summarize artistic ideas—a practice which reminds me of the theory of the late American art historian George Rowley. Rowley proposed that an important characteristic of traditional Chinese art is its “ideational” representation, meaning that the artist is not principally trying to capture the external appearance of the observed world. Rather, his images result from subjective thoughts on the essence of and the conceptualization of objective reality. I agree with this view, and would propose that the most concentrated proof in the infallibility of this thesis lies in the Chinese written characters, whose



史金淞

1969年 出生于中国湖北当阳
1994年 毕业于中国湖北美术学院
现生活工作于武汉及北京

个展

2008年
《琰：史金淞新作展》 站台中国，北京，中国
《哪吒2008—婴幼儿用品》 前波画廊，纽约，美国
《自定义》 玛蕊勒画廊，米兰，意大利
2007年
《蓝图-龙威英才国际学校·春游》 玛蕊勒画廊，北京，中国
2006年
《哈克龙-2007新产品发布会》 站台中国，北京，中国
《哪吒婴幼儿用品》 前波画廊，纽约，美国

部分群展

2008年
《世界新秩序》 各罗宁根美术馆 各罗宁根 荷兰
《互涉视界》 多伦美术馆 上海，中国
《Re-Imagining Asia》 House of World Cultures 柏林，德国
2007年
《“能量：精神·身体·物质”首届今日文献展》 今日美术馆，北京，中国
《网》 前波画廊，北京，中国
《OPEN10》 威尼斯国际雕塑·装置展，利多岛，威尼斯，意大利
《浮游—中国艺术新一代》 韩国国立现代美术馆，首尔，韩国
《树树树树树树树树树》 今日美术馆，北京，中国
《中国当代雕塑十人展》 亚洲艺术中心，北京，中国
2006年
《超设计》：第六界上海双年展，上海美术馆，上海，中国
《冷能》 表画廊，北京，中国

formation often simultaneously combine pictographic and ideographic elements. Regarding the character yan, Han dynasty philologist Xu Shen already stated in his *Shuowen Jiezi* that the character's structure integrates "the graphs of jade and fire, which provide the character's significance and pronunciation." Therefore, this character can mean either fine, multicolored jade (as defined in *Guangyun*) or "blazing radiance" (as described in *Yunhui*). The composite of these two meanings leads to another significance concerning the relationship between jade and fire. Here we return once again to Shi Jinsong's exhibition.

I must clarify that the purpose of this text is not to introduce or analyze the exhibition *Fire His Breath, Jade His Bones* itself. This is because the exhibition will not open until a month later, and, like all kinds of installation, performance or site-specific projects, before such a project is made public we have no right to discuss its nature or significance. But from another angle, despite this we are not powerless to discuss a work's creation—especially the artist's imagination and experimentation. This is because no serious artwork will suddenly appear unexpectedly—it is necessarily the result of an artist's unceasing contemplation and elevation. As a matter of fact, as people with a set purpose often discover, the process of realization for an artwork often contains more humanity and wisdom than what is apparent in the final outcome. This is because its creation process reflects the active involvement of the artist's intellect and emotion, sometimes even of his painful struggle. The artist's personal relationship with the artwork vanishes from the finished product, however, and the task of determining the work's "value" changes hands from the artist to the critic, media, to the market. In regards to the curators who participate in an artistic project like the current one—rather than organizing large-scale exhibitions such as biennales—what frequently attracts them is the close-range tapping of potentials and the interactivity with the artist. Within this process he or she is not passing judgments, but is participating, and therefore must consciously reject the professional language and status of the critic.

Because Shi Jinsong and I are still entrenched in such a process of production and interaction, this essay can only discuss the roads we have traveled so far and the states we have achieved. The remaining road—including making adjustments in the exhibition, deciding on the works' spatial installation, forming temporal viewing sequences and interacting with the audience—will need to be related in another forthcoming essay. At such a time, my status will have changed, and the artist will have a new relationship with his work. This was the reason behind our decision to compile two separate exhibition catalogues, the first documenting the project and concepts, the second the implementation and completion. The two cannot be mutually substituted, because even though our initial ideas might not all come into reality, the creative concept will by no means lose its value.

Based on the present plan, this exhibition will include three works: two are related to fire, one uses the material of jade. Thus together they form the Chinese character for yan. The two fire-related works are titled *1500_C* and *2 min 56 sec*. The former is the implementation of the charcoal project mentioned earlier, the latter consists of two exposed automobile engines that have been precisely calculated, transformed and reassembled, accompanied by two meticulously forged exhaust systems made of stainless steel. Owing to art history's impoverished lexicon, we will temporarily call them "installations," however neither work employ "readymade" materials in a conventional sense. Instead their materials have resulted from transformations painstakingly designed by the artist—an entire tree trunk has been treated to create the first work, the second work has been meticulously forged from mirrored stainless steel. The extremely high level of technology employed in the manufacture of these two works—evident in a glance at their precise design blueprints—completely rejects the original significance of installation art. However, their state of motion as shown in the exhibition and their rejection a pure visual signification makes us unable to classify them with other established art forms.

SHI JINSONG

1969 Born in Dangyang County, Hubei Province, China
1994 Graduated from the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts, China
Currently living and working in Wuhan and Beijing, China.

Solo Exhibition

2008

Fire His Breath, Jade His Bones: New Work by Shi Jinsong Platform China, Beijing, China

Ne Zha 2008: A Child's Boutique Chambers Fine Art, New York, USA

Customize Marella Gallery, Milan, Italy

2007

"BLUE PRINT-Long Wei international elite school Spring Picnic" Marella Gallery Beijing, Beijing, China

2006

HALONG-KELONG New products Launch part Platform China, Beijing, China

Na Zha-Baby Boutique Chambers Fine Art, New York, USA

Selected Group Exhibitions

2008

New World Order Groningen museum, Groningen Holand

Inter Electrode Horizon Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China

Re-Imagining Asia House of World Cultures, Berlin, Germany

2007

Energy: Spirit.Body.Material The First Today's Document Beijing Today Art Museum, Beijing, China

Net :Reimagining Space,Time,and Culture (proposal) Chambers Fine Art ,Beijing, China

OPEN 10.International Exhibition of Sculptures and Installations Venice Lido Italy

*TREE *9* Beijing Today Art Museum, Beijing, China

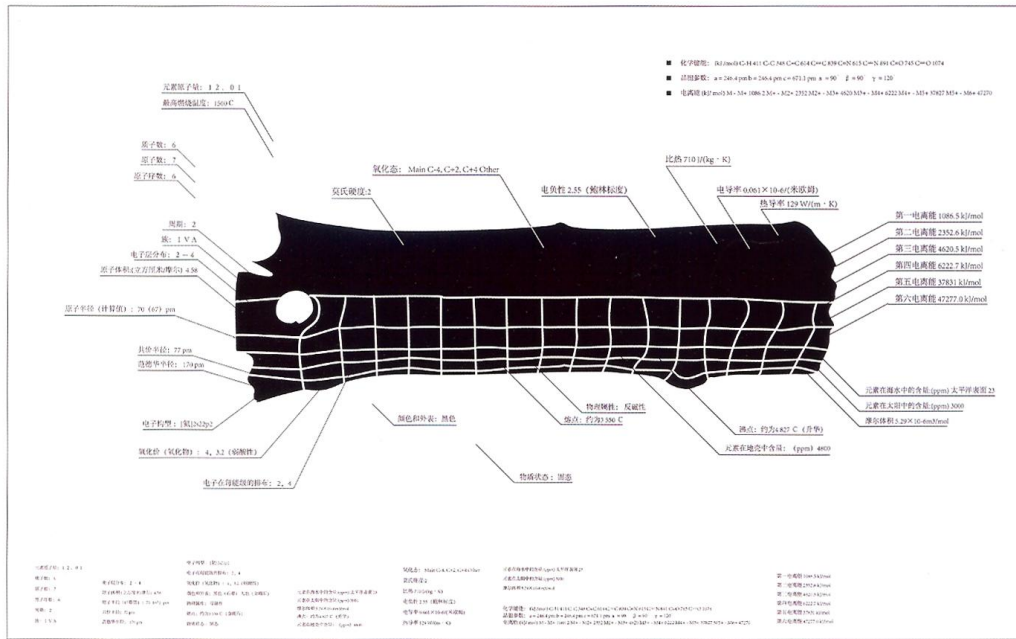
TOP10 China Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition- The Contemporary Road of Media and Tradition Asia Art Center, Beijing, China

Floating-New Generation of Art in China National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea, Seoul

2006

Hyper Design, 6TH Shanghai Biennale Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China

Cold energy Pyo Gallery, Beijing, China.



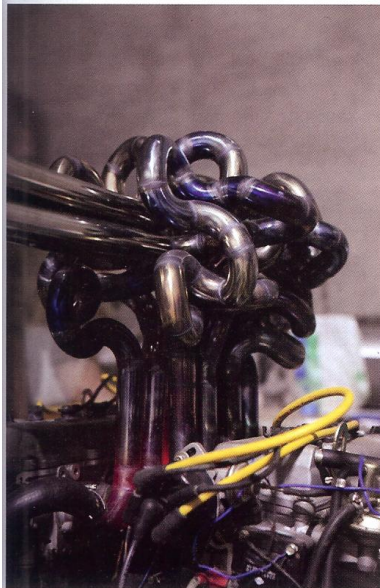
1500 ° C 设计图 Design Diagram of 1500 ° C

Both works imply force and danger, but force and danger of different sorts and divergent cultural connotations. Perhaps at first glance 1500_C does not appear very visually striking, but just like lava that has suddenly come into contact with cold air, a discombobulated dark red inside this black carcass radiates an enormous quantity of heat, daunting and far surpassing the bright flames of firewood and even of coal. In contrast to this implicitly violent form is the dramatic nature and explosive force of 2 min 56 sec. The title of this work suggests the ignition intervals of the engine: accompanied by deafening sounds, the tangled mess of stainless steel exhaust pipes are turned red in a quick moment, a burst of heat on one's face and a radiant pierce of light amidst the surrounding darkness. There is a possibility that these two works will be impossible to display because of their excessive danger, or special protective measures need to be adopted for the exhibition period. Currently, what attracts me is the combination of an extreme artistic vision and the use of precise techniques—characteristics of Shi Jinsong's work which are given purified and elevated forms here. If a Western art museum were to exhibit them, the fire would necessarily be "extinguished" to make the two works silent and safe objects for appreciation. Displayed in Platform China in Beijing, however, these two works would embody intense social psychology: their overbearing high temperature and sober technical process together reflect the present "China conditions": the scorching-hot blasting method brings viewers into a modern state of anxiety, a pioneering, pulse-quickenng critical landscape that causes cautious onlookers to hesitate a step before advancing.

These two works will respectively occupy the two symmetric ground floor halls of Platform China, the stairway between the two rooms will lead the audience to the main hall upstairs. Before entering the second-floor gallery, repetitive striking sounds will be audible, as if there is someone unconsciously and exhaustedly thumping on something. One's first impression of this hall is a deserted and cheerless space, which forms a sharp contrast with the obliged boiling temperature downstairs. Searching for the source of the striking sounds, visitors discover that they are coming from a small jade sculpture of a human head that is installed on a motorized stainless steel base. Powered by the base's mechanism, it endlessly strikes the wall in front of it at the frequency of every 16 seconds (the title of this work is 144.58N.m, meaning the torque force of the jade head as it strikes the wall). Following its movement, a sunken dent will gradually appear on the wall; a hole will expand and scatter red brick dust over the course of time. However, the jade head and its crude outer appearance will bear not the least sign of damage, and will indifferently continue to attack and destroy that seemingly much more substantial wall.

Why does this exhibition include these three works? What is the relationship between them? These are natural questions, but are quite impossible to answer because no one knows for what reason they were conceived of simultaneously in Shi Jinsong's mind, nor can we figure out what imaginative nerve cells connected them in his brain. Therefore, if the juxtaposition of fire and jade in this

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2分56秒局部2:56(Detail)

As mentioned above, the final curatorial concept that I have established for this exhibition is the materiality of art mediums—more specifically it is the potentiality of jade and fire as art mediums. Currently, materiality is a hot topic in art history research circles: in a recent academic report, a professor puts forward a proposal for reinterpreting oil paintings from the early Italian Renaissance, and provides convincing evidence to explain the experimental nature of new materials employed by some artists. These materials, including gold leaf from Africa and Lapis Lazuli from Central Asia—a

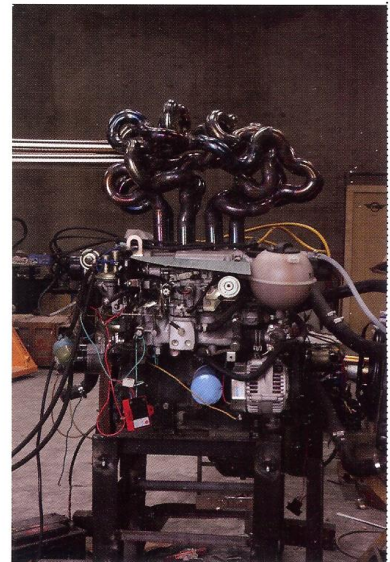
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As I have previously discussed, jade is in fact the most ancient and most important art medium in Chinese culture. Even though prehistoric peoples also used cinnabar [mercury sulfide] and other pigments with shamanistic significance to paint, the interest in jade among the ancient Chinese was truly without comparison. A Liangzhu Culture tribal chief created for himself, or his ancestors, hundreds or even thousands of jade objects; the expenditure of manual labor and material resources was comparable to the assiduous undertaking of the Egyptian pharaohs and their pyramids. Especially worthy of mention is that

none of these jade objects were functional utensils nor were they practical tools—these were high quality art objects that the ancient Chinese called *liqi* or “ritual objects” (discussed in detail in my book *Monumentality In Early Chinese Art and Architecture*). Recollections of that ancient era were still present in the Han dynasty: Yuan Kang illustrates for us through the legend of Feng Huzi in his book *Yuejue Shu*, that between Stone Age and Bronze Age there was a Jade Age. He thus proposes the first history of materiality in China.

Fire had a pervasive significance for humans living in childish ignorance, and ancient Chinese



2分56秒局部2:56(Detail)

peoples were no exception. Thus we have the legend of Suireshi, [the legendary ruler who discovered fire]; archaeologists have also discovered traces of intentional burning in prehistoric graves. Shang dynasty oracle bones record an important ceremony, Liao—the burning of sacrificial offerings that allowed their fragrance ascending to the heavens. Modern people regard these activities as pre-scientific ignorance, but if we are able to more leniently widen our observational field of vision, ancient ritual performances perhaps appear to have only a different goal from contemporary art performances.

The earliest system to explain the relationship

between fire and jade was that of the Five Elements, a theoretical formulation which emerged from the Eastern Zhou dynasty. Arguably the most wide-ranging and profound symbolic materialistic theory in the ancient world, its deep meaning lies not only in using five essential materials to construct a standard model of the universe, but also in the fact that this theory proposes two synchronically existing “mutually engendering” and “mutually destructive” functions of the universe. The “mutually engendering” function indicates that wood feeds fire, fire creates earth, earth bears metal, metal carries water, and water nourishes wood. The “mutually destructive” function then indicates that water quenches fire, fire melts metal, metal chops wood, wood parts earth, and earth absorbs water. In the engendering process, fire obeys burning wood, extinguished fire becomes ash, ash becomes earth, accumulated earth becomes stone, and refined stone becomes jade. In the destructive process, water extinguishes fire, fire blends metals, metal tools cut wood, wood yields to earth, accumulated soil abates flood. The fire and earth (including jade) in these two processes not only indicate actual natural phenomena; they are metaphors for the growth and decline of the world, and links to an evolving universe.

The fire and jade in this system seem to represent two extremes: fire is super yang; jade represents super yin. It is impossible to determine the shape of prancing flames, yet the solid, compact nature of jade is superior to steel and iron. Fire is immaterial, yet is capable of transforming any object; jade, for ancient peoples, was the most stable and reliable existence, to the extent that it was used metaphorically to represent the perseverance of a gentleman’s morals. Fire always exists within light, it is impossible to conceal; jade lies hidden among boulders as uncut jade, it must be discovered, cut, and polished before its beauty may be revealed. But just as the fundamental theory of the yin-yang and Five Elements preaches, the contrast of extremes is coincidentally the prerequisite for reciprocal transformation. The statement “fire creates earth” already includes the artistic vision of the interaction between fire and jade, what personifies and narrates this picture is the legend of Nüwa mending the sky. As recounted in Huainanzi: before the creation of man, the god of water Gong Gong and the god of fire Zhu Rong had a battle that shook both heaven and earth. Gong Gong lost, and in his anger he knocked down Buzhou Mountain that held up the Western edge of the blue sky, thus “the four corners of the earth were laid to waste, the nine divisions of China were fractured, the heavens were turned upside-down, earth was turned over, fires raged and flood waters were incessant. Wild beasts feasted on people, and birds preyed on the old and the weak. Thus Nüwa smelted the five-colored stone and used it to patch the sky.”

This is perhaps the most imaginative legend from China’s past, therefore in referencing it, is hard to avoid restricted to a particular state of platitudes. My reason for bringing up this story is because it has a connection to issues of artistic materiality explored in this exhibition—at least, that is how I see it. Why didn’t Nüwa use solid rocks—perhaps even translucent pieces of quartz or sky-colored lapis-lazuli—to mend the hole in the sky? And why was she given to take the trouble to choose five-colored jade, which she melted into a thick liquid by flames? The author of Huainanzi did not offer any explanation, and to my knowledge, in the two thousand years since this its appearance no one has put forth this question. My guess—as an art historian—is that the creator of this myth either consciously or unconsciously used

used a familiar metaphor found in art materials, and likewise, consciously or not, visualized Nüwa, creator of the universe, as an artist. It must be understood that this isn’t such an odd thing—before the emergence of texts on the history of art such as Shudian and Lidai minghuaji, recounts of artistic creation were frequently expressed in the form of legends or myths. Nüwa mending the sky also was not the first illustration of her role as the prototypical artist—I have previously commented that her famous achievement of “molding humans out of clay” is in fact a mythological recounting of an important art historical event: the emergence of this legend was at approximately the same time in Chinese history that clay figurines were coming into vogue, moreover, at that time when clay figurines were believed to be living substitutes for real people. Returning to the exhibition at hand, we can trace the two mediums of fire and jade back to the legend of Nüwa. We may also imagine that yan—five-colored fine jade—is perhaps left over from her mending of the sky: even today there are still people who believe the Buzhou Mountain that Gong Gong toppled lies amidst the Kunlun Mountains in Xinjiang, and that the five-colored stone Nüwa used to patch the sky is in fact what we now know as Hetian Jade.

July 2008
Honolulu

Fire His Breath, Jade His Bones