

# sculpture

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Left: Takashi Murakami, *Oval Buddha*, 2007–10. Bronze and gold leaf, 568 x 312 x 319 cm. Below: Andrew Rogers, *Unfurling*, 2003. Bronze, 310 x 100 x 120 cm. From the Rome Biennale.

## ROME Rome Biennale: International Exhibition of Sculpture

Billed as the first sculpture biennial in Rome, the original and very ambitious plan was to place contemporary artworks in many of the piazzas of a city celebrated for piazzas—if not for contemporary art (although that might change now with MACRO, MAXXI, and Gagosian). Many of these spaces are already occupied by destination art—one obvious instance is Bernini's *Fountain of the Four Rivers* in Piazza Navona. It therefore seemed a great idea to site more recent works in the context of a public exhibition, alternating old and new, Italian and international, pegged to the Venice Biennale not so far away. However, due to bureaucratic snafus and other impediments, it was not to be, although the curators, Gloria Porcella and Lamberto Petrecca, are hopeful for the next edition, which they are already planning.

This first exhibition, sponsored in part by Roma Capitale and the European Commission, was greatly curtailed, however, confined to the gardens of the Casina Valadier, located on the Pincio not far from the Villa Borghese, and the park of the Villa Torlonia, the residence of Mussolini

from 1925–43—two storied (but in Rome, what isn't) and popular gathering places for Romans and tourists. Porcella and Petrecca expressed a desire that their project be populist, accessible, and (in some cases) interactive, and toward that end, they presented frequently Pop-derived and kitsch-based works, although they also included several Modernist-inspired works by contemporary artists, as well as canonical 20th-century artists such as Henry Moore, Sante Monachesi, Giacomo Manzù (a wonderful crouching, life-size faun), Giorgio de Chirico (a bronze statue of a standard from his repertory of figures, *The Archeologists*), and Dalí (*Nobility of Time*, a signature melting clock leaning against a budding tree stump in black and gold bronze that works better as a painting).

Its title notwithstanding, the exhibition was short on international artists; of the 31 participants, only six came from countries other than Italy. Contemporary Italians included Lorenzo Quinn with his enormous sculpture of a hand holding a Vespa, *La Dolce Vita*, (he also reconstructed a T55 Russian tank in Venice, part of *This is Not a Game*, his contribution to the Italian Pavilion, in dialogue perhaps with

the overturned Centurion tank of Allora & Calzadilla that guarded the entrance to the U.S. Pavilion). Camilla Ancilotto contributed the colorful *Peccato Originale* (*Original Sin*), which resembles a child's free-standing, three-dimensional puzzle, only much bigger, its sections capable of rotation. As the sections turn, images of the *Temptation* and *Expulsion* from the Sistine Chapel shift in a state of perpetual deconstruction and revision.

Michelangelo-inspired works abounded, including London-based Mauro Peruchetti's blinding white resin *Michelangelo 2020 A Tribute to Women* and his humorous rendition of Batman and Superman as Michelangelo figures. He also contributed some tubby translucent resin mannequins from his jelly baby family. Cracking Art Group's splashy orange, recycled plastic snails are many times life-size, part of a series of enlarged creatures that includes a colony of scarlet penguins shown in Venice some years ago and now in the collection of the 21c Museum Hotel in Louisville, Kentucky. Australian artist Andrew Rogers's (best known for his immense land art projects) two soaring bronzes were more weighted, resonating between the representational and

the abstract, the heaviness of the material transformed into something visually much lighter, more buoyant. *Unfurling*, a graceful abstraction, suggests a figure or a gigantic leaf *en pointe*, its ridged surface, catching the light, turning gold. The other, gilded and touched with color, is an enormous flower, plucked, perhaps, from some magical garden. The Villa Torlonia half of the show was dominated by American artist Seward Johnson's *Kiss*, a 26-foot, towering sculpture of a sailor kissing a girl, a camped-up, colorized copy of Alfred Eisenstaedt's iconic black and white photograph taken in Times Square,





shooting up, reborn from their ashes, have appeared for at least 4,000 years, beginning with early Shang Dynasty pottery motifs. Referred to as *fenghuang*, the phoenix is both *feng* (male) and *huang* (female) and is traditionally associated with the Chinese empress. Actually a composite of many birds, it sports the head of a golden pheasant, the body of a mandarin duck, the tail of a peacock, the legs of a crane, the mouth of a parrot, and the wings of a swallow. Each Chinese dynasty developed its own version, and Xu searched the different interpretations to find his exact approach. The Qing Dynasty, he felt, was too soft and celebratory, so he chose the Han Dynasty, with its harsher and more angular depictions.

His idea for constructing these 12-ton birds began during China's

**Left:** Mauro Perucchetti, *Michelangelo 2020 A Tribute to Women*, 2010. Hand-carved marble, 174 x 62 x 42 cm. From the Rome Biennale. **Below:** Xu Bing, *Phoenix Project*, 2007–10. Construction debris and light-emitting diodes, 2 elements, 27 and 28 meters long.

pre-Olympic economic boom. A real estate developer constructing a building designed by César Pelli commissioned Xu to create a motif over the entrance. At first it was going to be two cranes, but that bird's associations in Chinese culture are not pleasant—cranes assist in the flight toward death. Xu decided instead on phoenixes, which signify transformation. He planned to finish making them in just two months, but it took two years. Part of the delay stemmed from the fact that all of Beijing's factories were closed during the Olympics.

Xu notes that, according to Mao Zedong, art is for the people and should be returned to the people to inspire them. To create a direct connection between the extreme wealth financing the real estate project and the workers who built it, he collected raw construction materials and debris from the site of the new Beijing World Financial Center. The birds were cobbled together using rubber tubes, wires, bamboo, rusted metal, steel rods and plates, tools, hoses, filter grates and meshes, safety helmets, and orange warning cones. The unused

parts were returned and recycled. The tails mimic shadow puppet animals from Chinese theater called *zhi zha* (paper models). Xu's phoenixes, however, change their shape depending on the viewing angle. Even though it required six construction cranes to lift them into the air, their weight seems to disappear when they are lit up at night. From far away, they float; from up close, they are stark and raw.

When the economic crisis hit, Xu's sponsor refused to accept the project. Barry Lam, founder and director of Quanta Computer in Taiwan, a Fortune 500 company, and a great patron of Chinese arts, stepped in to take over the funding. After opening at the Today Art Museum in Beijing's Central Business District, the phoenixes were installed in the China Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo 2010, a national place of honor.

—Ellen Pearlman

which personified the jubilation of V-J Day and the end of the war.

Porcella and Petrecca wanted a festive exhibition and succeeded in creating a crowd-pleaser as streaming groups of people of all ages stopped to look and interact with the art—it was, it seems, a people's exhibition, if not a biennial.

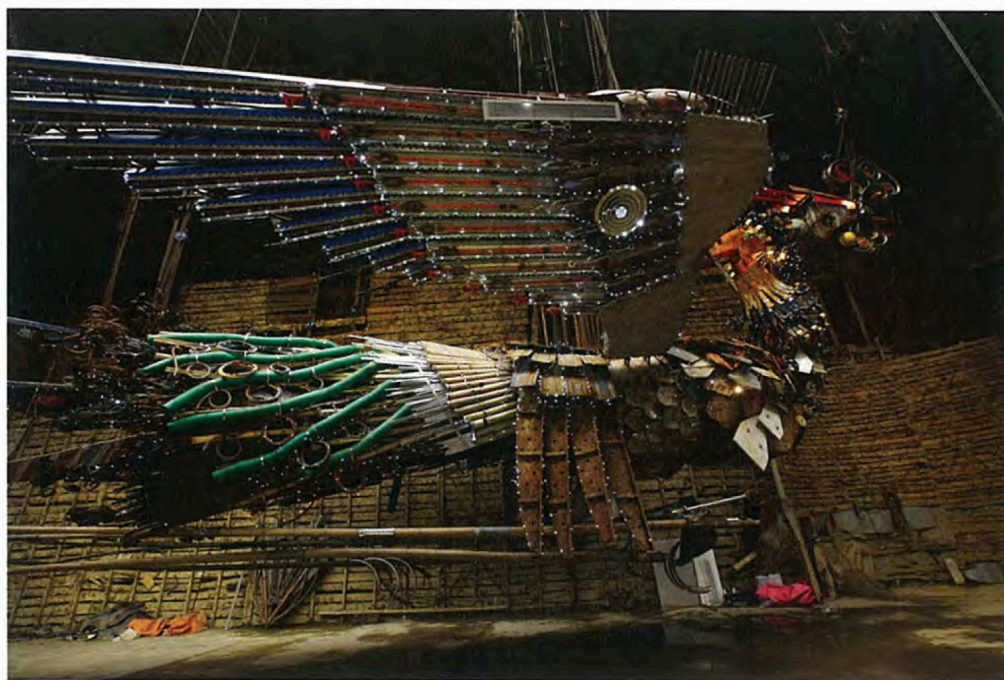
—Lilly Wei

## BEIJING AND SHANGHAI

### Xu Bing

Today Art Museum and Shanghai Expo 2010

Xu Bing's two enormous, 28-meter-long *Phoenix* sculptures are a pastiche of dangling three-dimensional tales chronicling China's past, present, and future. Images of these mythical birds dying in flames, then



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