

Huang Yong Ping

Huang Yong Ping is one of the leading Chinese artists of his generation. He moved to Paris in 1989 soon after the suppression of the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. Today he divides his time between studios in Paris and Fujian province in southern China.

Huang Yong Ping’s sculptures act as allegories – they combine references that are topical and traditional, political and mythological. His work examines how cultures transform as a result of massive political and economic forces – imperialism, for example, or rapid economic globalization.

World religions are also a theme in his work. In this exhibition there are references to Islam, Buddhism and the Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as current events. They include a minaret from a mosque, and a terrifying Leviathan – or sea monster – from the Book of Job in the Old Testament, as well as objects used in Buddhist worship. These are contrasted with modern technology.

“In my eyes, interactions and mutual influences between different cultures are very important. ‘West’, ‘East’, ‘I’, ‘Other’ are not fixed concepts; they can shift. I was very interested in the West when I was in China. I considered it as something outside me, and it provided a source for my imagination. On the contrary, I talk more about China now that I am in the West.”

Huang Yong Ping

“(Huang Yong Ping) is at once an artist, magician, fortune-teller, alchemist, healer, teacher, philosopher and writer.”

Curator Hou Hanru on Huang Yong Ping

Amerigo Vespucci, 2003

“An Italian-bred bulldog, the Neopolitan mastiff (mastino napoletano) is used here as a metaphor for Amerigo Vespucci, the Italian who documented the discovery of the American continent, and after whom America was supposedly named. The bulldog’s urine forms the geographical outline of America in an instantaneous and accidental way. Here the line between the wall and the ground represents the world’s longest straight border (the United States-Canada border). Its fluidity implies extensiveness and overflowingness. It is an example of all ‘limits’ and ‘borders’.”

Huang Yong Ping

Gallery 1



Amerigo Vespucci, 2003
Photo Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
Courtesy the artist and Jerome L. and Ellen Stern

Construction Site, 2007 Photo Huang Yong Ping. Courtesy the artist



Hagia Sophia, Istanbul



Bat Project IV, 2004

Bat Project is a series of related works created between 2001–2004. They refer to an incident in 2001 when a US spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter jet in Chinese airspace. The US plane – an EP-3 packed with sensitive surveillance equipment – was forced to land and its 24 crew were arrested. The Chinese fighter jet crashed and its pilot is presumed to have died. A diplomatic wrangle followed, but eventually the US was allowed to dismantle its plane and ship the pieces home, as the two countries attempted to paper over the cracks of a newly emerging economic relationship. Bats now roost in the cockpit – an allusion to the bat logo on the tail of the spy plane, but also a direct reference to the cultural differences between East and West. In Chinese mythology bats symbolise happiness and good luck. They are also credited with healing sight defects. In the West they represent the furtive threat of the night.

It was intended that Bat Project would be shown in 2001, at the Fourth Shenzhen Contemporary Sculpture exhibition in China. However, once the content of the work was revealed it led to another diplomatic incident – this time involving the Chinese, French and US authorities. It was removed from the exhibition – to the fury of the artistic community who wrote a letter of protest. After also being banned by the Chinese authorities from the Guangzhou Triennial in 2002, the work was finally shown in Huang Yong Ping’s retrospective at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. The artwork incorporates an actual Lockheed EP-3, the same type of plane involved in the 2001 incident. It is shown here for the first time in Europe.

Gallery 1

Huang Yong Ping, Bat Project IV (inside view, cockpit) 2004, photo Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Courtesy Huang Yong Ping and Yu De Yao



A Lockheed EP-3 Orion of fleet air reconnaissance squadron one (VQ-1) World Watchers.



Gallery 1

Marché de Punya (The Market of Merits and Virtues), 2007

The market stall is typical of a small street shop in China. This one sells Buddhist statues, incense, candles and fake banknotes used as offerings to the dead. In keeping with a rapidly expanding economy it has diversified – selling brooms and household goods too. It is a market of “merits and virtues”, or punya – the image of China’s economic prosperity.

The elephant is often the guardian of Buddhist temples and a symbol of mental strength. Here it lies dead, overpowered perhaps by market values.

“Religion today is not disappearing it is stepping back. Another way of looking at this withdrawal is that it now has a substitute... globalisation itself.”

Huang Yong Ping

Gallery 2



Marché de Punya, 2007.
Photo Huang Yong Ping
Courtesy Huang Yong Ping and Galerie Kamel Mennour

Construction Site, 2007

Construction Site was first exhibited at the 10th Istanbul Biennial in 2007. It refers to the former Hagia Sophia mosque in Istanbul, Turkey. From 360 to 1453 the building was a Christian cathedral – its four minarets were added when Istanbul fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, and it became a mosque. Ataturk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, finally turned it into a museum in 1935.

The canvas screens are modelled on those used during the renovation of Hagia Sophia and suggest a sacred enclosure. The cast aluminium minaret behind them is in the Ottoman style. Its slanted position recalls a rocket – perhaps a comment on post 9/11 Islamophobia – while its title reminds us that religions, while making claims to universality and eternity, also have a history of their own. They adapt and are interpreted differently in different epochs – in that sense they are always under construction.

“The history of Hagia Sofia has shown an example of how a site, or architecture of one kind of spirituality, can be transformed to host another one. Certainly, there is not a single spirituality which remains unchanged in any given site.”

Huang Yong Ping

Gallery 3



La Pêche, 2006

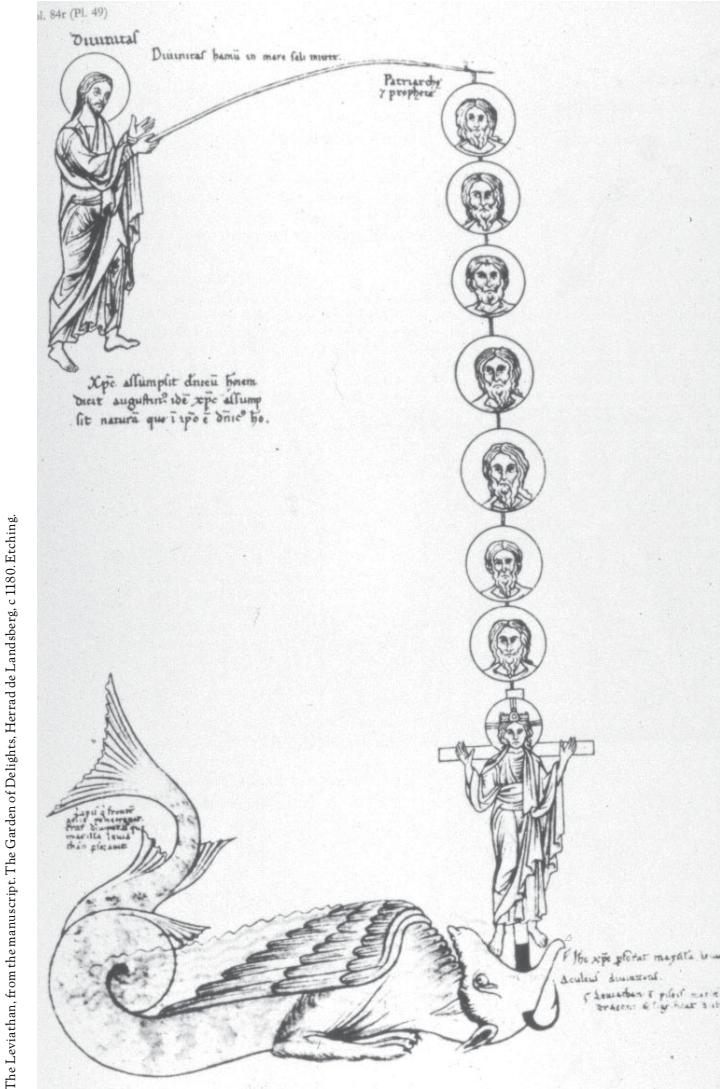
An angel is offering a small carved wooden statue of Christ on the cross and seven Buddhas as the bait to catch the Leviathan – an enormous and terrifying sea monster. The Leviathan guarded the gates of Hell in the Old Testament Book of Job. The work refers to an illustration in the 12th century book Hortus Deliciarum (The Garden of Delights), by the nun Herrad of Landsberg. Huang has substituted the seven prophets with the laughing Buddhas, representing prosperity.

Huang Yong Ping may also be invoking Thomas Hobbes. His book Leviathan of the Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth (1651) promoted the idea of a powerful sovereign, restrained by a social contract. The complex relationship between religion and politics still drives global events today. Huang describes it as “..a twofold project with the capacity to invent a vision of the world, while at the same time justifying unhappiness.”

Gallery 2



La Pêche, 2006. Photo Galerie Anne de Villepoix, Paris.
Courtesy Huang Yong Ping and Anne de Villepoix.



The Leviathan, from the manuscript, The Garden of Delights, Herrad de Landsberg, c. 1180. Erching.

Wael Shawky

Wael Shawky questions Western assumptions about Islam and the Arab world. His work is concerned with history, politics and religion – all brought into sharp focus by the recent upheavals in his native Egypt and the wider region.

He aims, he says, to create a hybrid image of society where meanings are ambiguous. His animations and reenactments also explore histories that appear to repeat themselves in different eras, and that still resonate in contemporary politics and culture.

Born in 1971, Wael Shawky lives and works in Alexandria. Aside from running MASS Alexandria, a study programme for young artists, Shawky has received international acclaim for his work as an artist and filmmaker.



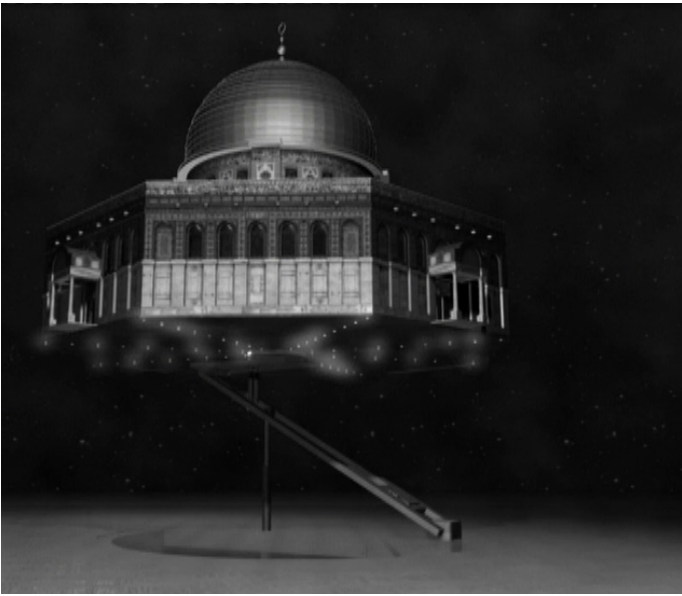
Wael Shawky, still from Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show File, 2010, video, 30mins, courtesy the artist

Al Aqsa Park, 2006

Al-Aqsa Park is a digital animation of the Dome of the Rock, the most recognisable monument in Jerusalem and a masterpiece of Islamic architecture. The Old City in Jerusalem is where Judaism, Christianity and Islam converge. The three “Abrahamic” religions share some figures, places and histories detailed in the Old Testament’s Book of Genesis, although with different roles, perspectives and meanings.

Built between 689 and 691 AD on the site of a Jewish temple destroyed by the Romans, the Dome of the Rock has been contested throughout history, right up to the present day. The rock platform on which it stands is believed by Jewish scholars to be the probable location of the Holy of Holies, the most propitious place for prayer. It is also on the place where Sunni Muslims believe Mohammed ascended to heaven. The Crusaders turned it into a Church, Israel hoisted its flag over it during the Six Day War in 1967, and the second Intifada – or Palestinian uprising – was sparked when Ariel Sharon, then leader of the Israeli Likud Party, paid it a provocative visit in 2000. The Dome of the Rock is now a familiar graffiti image of Palestinian resistance to Israeli domination.

In Shawky’s video the Dome rises and rotates like a fairground carousel – an ironic nod towards the endless merry-go-round of Israeli-Palestinian talks and conflicts, perhaps. Shawky’s sci-fi-like Dome of the Rock looks like it has arrived from the future rather than ancient times.



Al Aqsa Park, 2006. Video animation with sound, 10 mins. Courtesy of the artist.



Dome of the Rock and the Walling Wall by Peter Mulligan.

Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show File, 2010

“Behold the Franj (Crusaders)! Behold with what obstinacy they fight for their religion, while we, the Muslims, show no enthusiasm for waging holy war”. Saladin, quoted in The Crusades through Arab Eyes, by Amin Maalouf, 1983.

Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show Files tells the story of The First Crusade of 1096 – 1099 from the perspectives of Arab historians and eyewitness accounts, drawn together in the book The Crusades Through Arab Eyes. Made using an Italian collection of 200 year old puppets in the place of actors, it is a saga of bloody battles, betrayal and gruesome civilian massacre – a genuine horror show, despite the beauty and artifice of the puppets and sets.

The puppets have authentic costumes – some of them carrying the emblems of the crusaders. These are repeated in the series of asphalt “flags” that accompany the film. Far from the romantic western ideas of The Crusades, the video tells the story of the recapturing of lands, with motives that were socio-economic as much as religious, following the devastating plague in the Byzantine Empire of 541 AD – where Shawky’s story begins.

Nottingham has a strong connection with the Crusades. They may have gathered at Nottingham Castle, and toasted their departure at the historic Trip To Jerusalem pub nearby. Robin Hood’s antagonist, King John ruled the country while Richard I was overseas fighting the Crusades.



Wael Shawky, Telematch Sadat, video, 2007, courtesy the artist

Telematch Sadat, 2007

Telematch Sadat is more specifically Egyptian. The video is a re-staging of the assassination of President Sadat in 1981. His death ushered in 29 years of dictatorship under Hosni Mubarak, who recently relinquished power after mass popular protests. Soldiers and assassins are played by children, armoured vehicles replaced by donkeys and carts, and the desert substituted for the streets of Cairo.

“The performance of Bedouin children allows the event to be depicted with a softened sense of drama, as these children re-create the event without having a personal attachment to or reference to Sadat’s assassination,” Wael Shawky states.

Sadat was awarded the 1978 Nobel Peace Prize with Israel’s Prime Minister Menachem Begin after signing the Camp David Peace accord. This was followed by the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979. As a result of being the first Arab nation to recognize Israel, Egypt was temporarily suspended from the Arab League. Sadat’s assassination at a military parade on 6 October 1981 by members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad was captured on film and beamed round the world in news programmes. Shawky watched it as a child. Despite a huge turnout at his funeral, only three Arab countries sent their representatives.

Telematch refers to a German televised game show popular in Egypt in the 70s and 80s – an example of Shawky’s ironic borrowings from popular culture.

The Cave, 2005

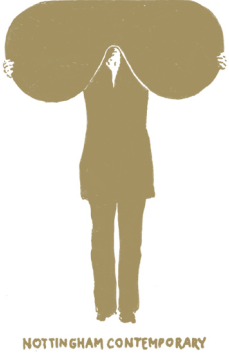
In The Cave, Shawky himself appears walking the aisles of a Hamburg supermarket reciting a chapter of the Qur’an – Al-Kahf (The Cave) – oblivious to the consumer goods that surround him. Shawky is almost ignored, and appears isolated from the shoppers around him.

“According to most of the Islamic scholars, the purpose of revelation in The Cave is to celebrate the migration from Mecca to Medina in order to gain more power and knowledge. My choice to memorise and recite this chapter in a supermarket – the space being an evident metaphor for new capitalism – is a commentary on hybrid cultures. It creates a meeting point of two systems.”

Wael Shawky



The Cave (Amsterdam), 2005. Video with sound, 12 mins 45 secs. Courtesy of the artist.



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Front cover image: La Pêche, 2006. Photo Galerie Anne de Villepoix, Paris. Courtesy Huang Yong Ping and Anne de Villepoix.

Gallery 4

Nottingham Contemporary

Exhibition Notes
15 April – 26 June 2011

Huang Yong Ping & Wael Shawky



The Study