

LI SHAN

B.1942

Important participants in the 85 New Wave Art Movement

International Bio-Art pioneer

The first Chinese in Bio-Art

One of the first Chinese artists at the Venice Biennale 1993



In more than forty years of his artistic career, Li Shan lived through the experimental art of the 1970s, the "rational" art of the 1980s (a unique period of "abstraction" in China), the Rouge series of the 1990s, as well as the past twenty years of engagement with bio-art. Li Shan undoubtedly ranks among the few most important and influential artists in the history of contemporary art in China because he has constantly investigated the possibility of new forms of art. Li Shan is a refined and understated artist, but his art is brimming with a fierce tension, whether in the early-period paintings, installations or performance art, or the later bio-art. All of his works are challenging and critical. Li Shan's art has always forged links with the unique developmental stages in the ecology of contemporary art; and in his works, he has been able to assert his own voice, untrammelled by the aesthetic concepts and social limitations of the time.

1970s - 1980s

In this period, Li Shan was mainly probing the mysteriousness of life and thus the mystical factors in painting life. The biological elements were already present in Li Shan's early series of paintings Propagation and Order.



1988s - 1994s

Metaphorical biology hidden behind the political pop "Rouge" series.



1995s - today

He gradually moved to a new "biological experimentation" phase and began to acquire relative knowledge and do some sketches, where the "Reading" series started.



2007s

Since 2007, he worked with scientists to create bio-artworks based on biogenetic engineering.

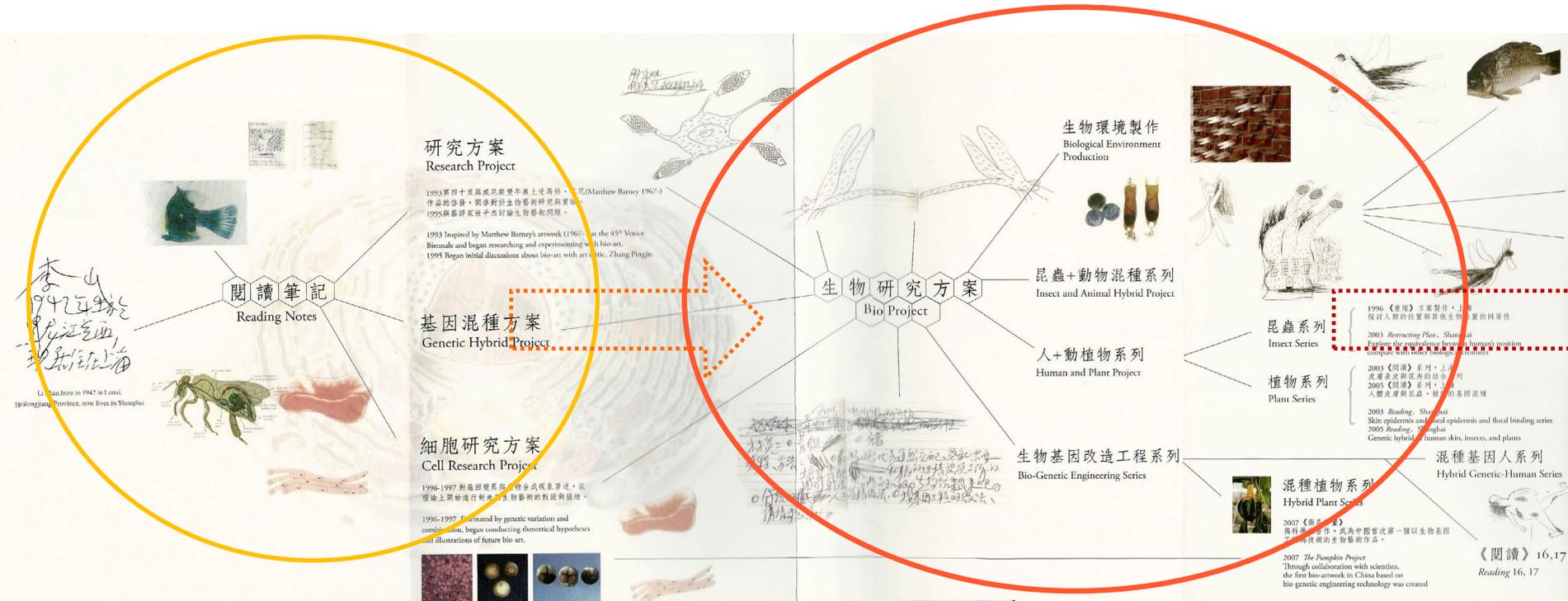


2017s

In 2017, Li Shan made more progress in the artistic demonstration of gene editing research. "Decoding" alludes to the unfolding of double helix structure in the genome, in which biological information could be humanly interfered by reading, writing, and editing.



The Development of Li Shan's Biological Art



1970s - 1980s

However, at the end of the 1970s, Li Shan had already started incorporating biological elements into his figural works. He frequently emphasized structuralism and organic feeling, so his life-painting was not a kind of meditative self-reflection on the spirit of life, but was rather concerned with structure and description. Even though this structure was generalizing and objective, it did not posit a living body as an object of accurate scientific knowledge. For example, in *Genesis and Propagation*, Li Shan's early painting series from the eighties, there are frequent iterations of the "circular," single circles or several circular forms. But these circular forms are not the geometrical forms of logic, or clear-edged circular forms, the kind found in Western abstract painting, but are shaggy, soft, irregular circles. They remind us of living bodies. Within the contours of the outline Li Shan extremely conscientiously spreads color, not with flat strokes but applies it gently, layer upon layer, leaving extremely subtle calligraphic strokes, fleshing out the form like the tissues of a living body, giving an almost tactile sense of embodied flesh.

In 1986, Li Shan, explaining his *Order* series of paintings, said that his use of black was an attempt to discover a universal and biological mysticism. The rough black lines and freely painted circles are all black and white, and together they form a limitless mysticism.

—— Gao Minglu

Li Shan said, "Why do I adopt this kind of 'lattice' symbol and use these kinds of colors? I think this kind of symbol is essentially both simple and ambiguous, both definite and indistinct, and there is an essential mystical tone in it. For some people, the things that they experience in the color black are things that are repressed, frightening things, severe things, etc. But what I experience in it is only mystical."

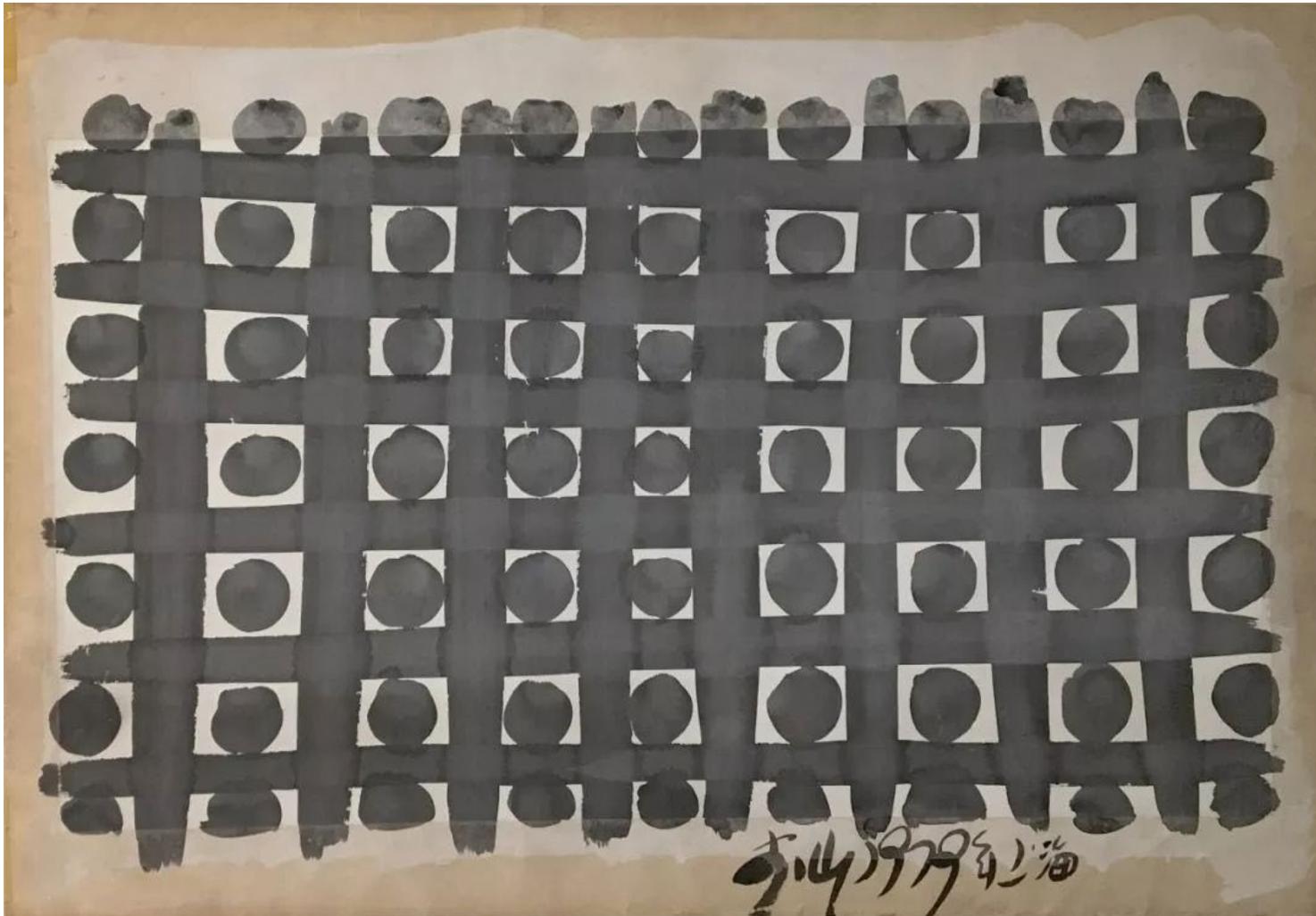
—— Li Shan



Propagation 1

1984

Oil on canvas, 75x59cm



Propagation 2

1979

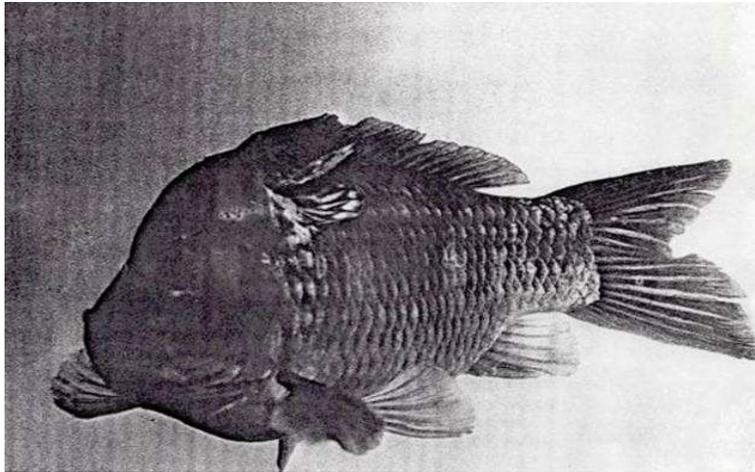
Ink on paper, 57x73cm

1995s - Today

Through the late 80s and early 90s, Li Shan quickly abandoned Rouge series this kind of emblematic or metaphorical style, and began to proceed in a biologically "realist" direction. When he came back to Shanghai from Venice in 1993, he was not impressed. Instead, he was disappointed, and the only thing that stayed with him was the work of Matthew Barney. It was then that he began to conceive of the Reading series, the possibility of a bio-art. He remembered the discussions he had in his university years with a student named Yuan about how to manufacture a human being. On the threshold of Li Shan's consciousness, a new form of art was about to appear.

At the start of 1995, Li Shan had embarked on a program of study, reading books and journals in the biological sciences, and making notes. He covered the different schools of thought regarding the origin of life to the discovery of cellular chromosomes and genes, to how the biology of the cell had progressed to the stage of molecular biology; DNA and the coding of biological transmission; theories of genetic mutation and genetic engineering; recombinant DNA engineering (DNA's mutations, splitting and recombination).

At the beginning of 1998, Li Shan completed his first bio-art project, entitled **Reading**.



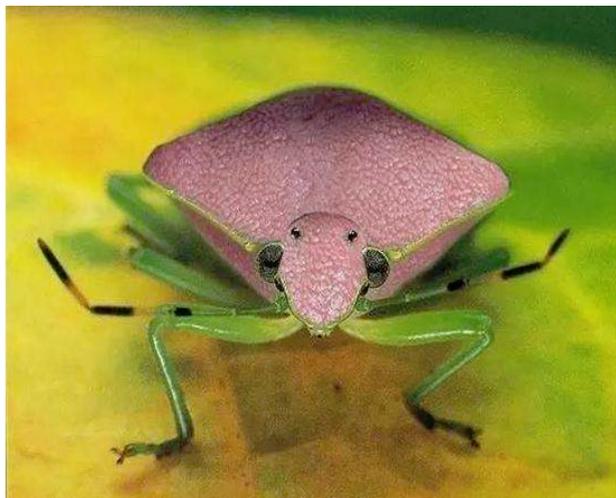
Reading No.98-1, Li shan studio in New York 1998

Production Method :

The approach involved placing a small hindrance in the ribosome while it was reading the mRNA message, and the desired amino acid was then injected into the corresponding mRNA codon to force the message to become invalid. In 1998, I treated fish and butterfly sex cells according to the aforementioned method, and then placed them back. Six days later, I opened the nuclei of the fish egg and the butterfly sperm and took out segments of DNA from them. If their genetic codes had expired, it would then be possible to link the fish codon at the even number and the butterfly codon at the odd number. The ribosome would move along the mRNA as usual, and thus a protein with human cultural intent was thereby synthesized. The protein was placed in a Petri dish filled with culture medium, and eighteen days later, an organism, not as grotesque as I had expected, was born. It looked more like a fish than a butterfly, because the butterfly wing impression only composed a small part of the entire creature.

After Li Shan's Reading project in 2000, the American artist Eduardo Kac used transgenic technology to produce Alba, a green fluorescent rabbit. What he had originally imagined was a green wolf. This was the first work of bio-art ever produced in a laboratory. If Li Shan had had his own laboratory, his "butterfly fish" would have most certainly been born before Kac's creature.

The core of Li Shan's artistic work from the 1990s to the present had therefore become human-engineered recombination of genes and genomes. He approached this from three aspects. First, in **painted works, including works featuring hybridized images of humans and animals**. In 1996 Li Shan began to use digital composition technology to produce pictures depicting human bodies hybridized with animals and insects, as well as many human or animal bodies hybridized with fish, but with heads that resembled butterflies. With a computer he composed spiders, butterflies, and houseflies, having human body parts located where they would be on a human, such as mouths, ears, fingers or genitals. **Transcription Error** is Li Shan's painterly "illustrations" that imagine a complete biological hybrid based on the possibility of genetic recombination and artificial genes. The strange images are all based on an imagined result of recombinant DNA and synthetic genes. They are not the product of a laboratory, but are actually the product of the "laboratory" in Li Shan's own mind.



Restructing Plan

1996 - 2003

Colour inkjet print, 60 x 80cm



Installation view

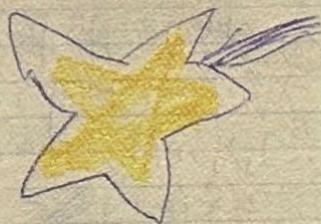
Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, 2012



Installation view
Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2019

To use life itself as material to build living entities. The emphasis of current biological studies lies in the intervention into heredity from biological genes and artificial generation of the biological genome . Artists using the mechanisms of genes and genic generation to formulate his or her art plans and produce artworks embedded with biological features in line with the operating patterns of genetic engineering is called BioArt.

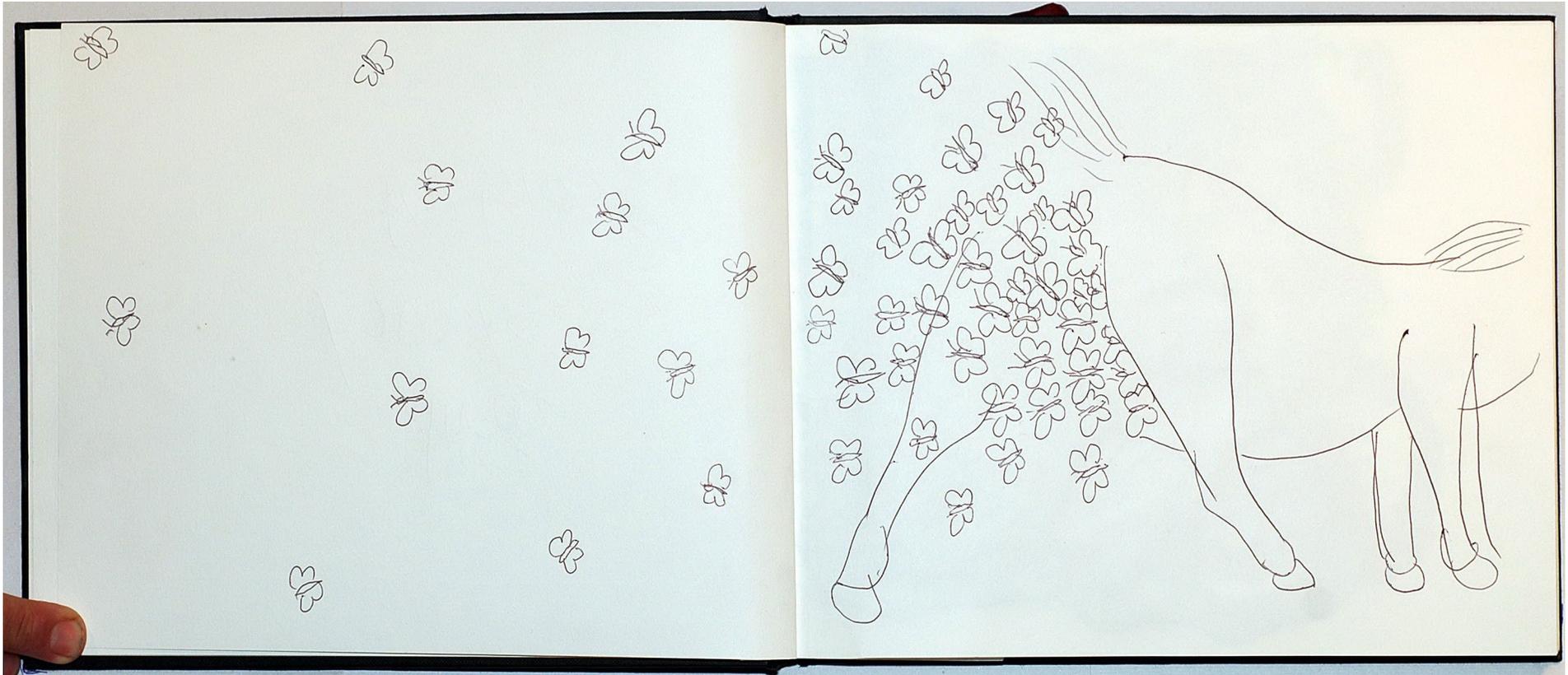
—— Li Shan



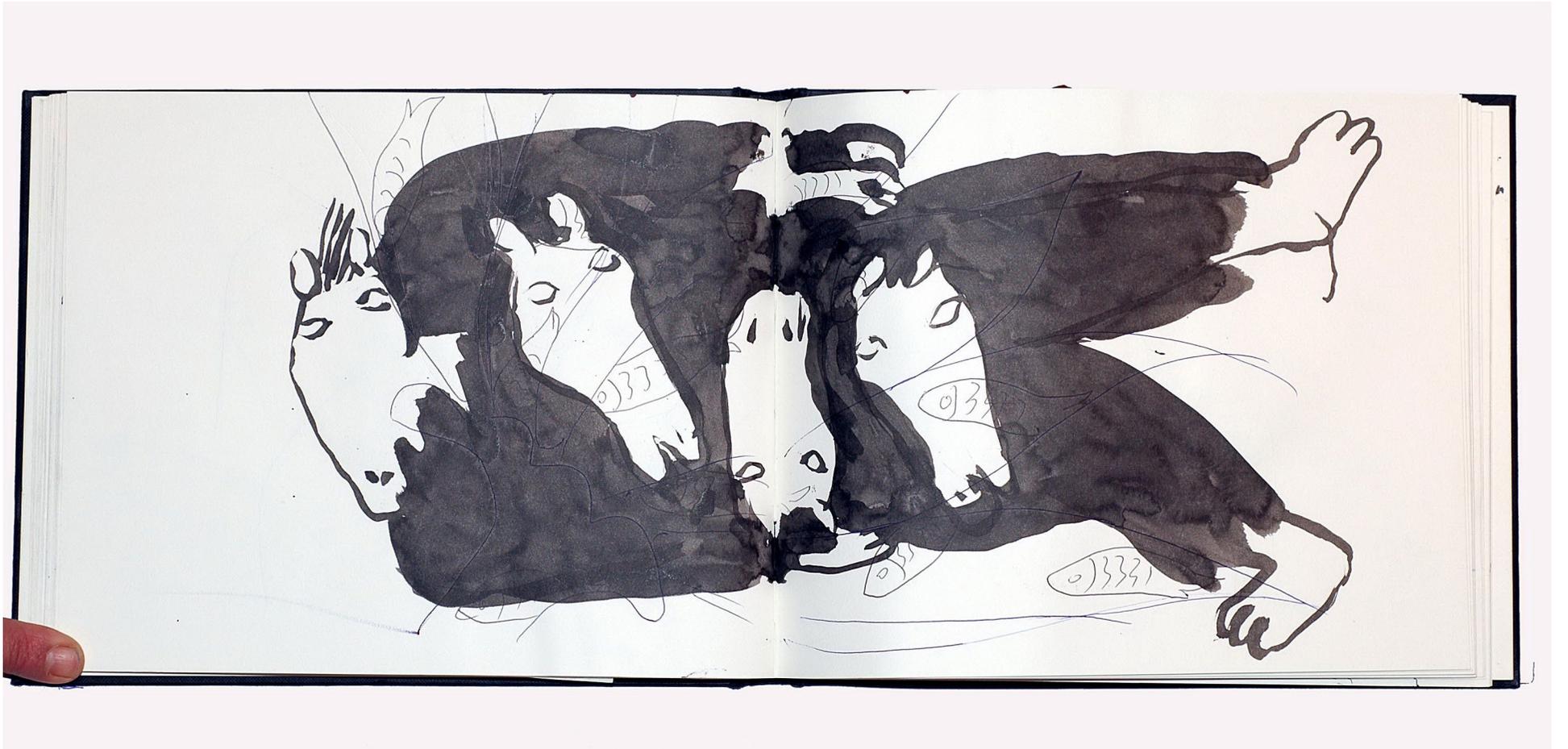
种氨基酸语言的重任是由三种RNA共同承担的，一种是信使RNA (m-RNA)，另一种是转运RNA (t-RNA)，再一种是核糖体RNA (r-RNA)。

生产过程：

细胞制造蛋白质时，细胞核内双螺旋的DNA便分解成为两个单链，信使RNA把DNA上合成蛋白质的密码“抄录”下来，然后被派往细胞质，在细胞质中与蛋白质的制造车间核糖体结合起来。这时，转运RNA (t-RNA) 便忙活起来，它能够识别信使RNA上的遗传密码，因此充当了“译员”的角色。转运RNA (t-RNA) 表现得相当活跃，它来回工作，把相应的游离的氨基酸“领到”核糖体那里报到。



Research notes by Li Shan



Research notes by Li Shan



Installation view

Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, 2012



Reading

2006

Oil on canvas, 175 x 361 cm



Reading 008

2008

Acrylic on canvas, 176 x 363 cm

2007s - 2017s

Li Shan would create extremely vigorous works of bio-art. We can already see a glimpse of this vigor in Li Shan's Pumpkin series of bio-artworks. In collaboration with a scientist, he combined the genes of a pumpkin and other vegetables to create strange new fruits. In Pumpkin, Li Shan is just trying his hand, a project to tide him over; he can only do this kind of project as it is not subject to ethical restrictions. But its terrifying image is enough to render people speechless with fright and anxiety.

Bio-art and the life sciences are divided in the fact that biology finds its ultimate end in the value of biological cloning. In other words, genetic modification and recombinant DNA lead effectively to cloning, and because the unalterable end of the life sciences is the service of human life, it has to reproduce the most optimal genes. Human life ultimately moves toward reproduction, something shown in the very fact of reproduction.

Goal of Li shan's bio-art is not in the reproduction of pedigrees, and it is not in preserving the uniqueness of an individual. Li Shan's bio-aesthetics goes beyond using reproduction, and transcends humanity's narcissistic uniqueness.



The Pumpkin Project (Selection)

2007

Colour inkjet print, 85 x 65cm



Installation view

Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, 2012

On the Explanation of “BioArt”

Li Shan

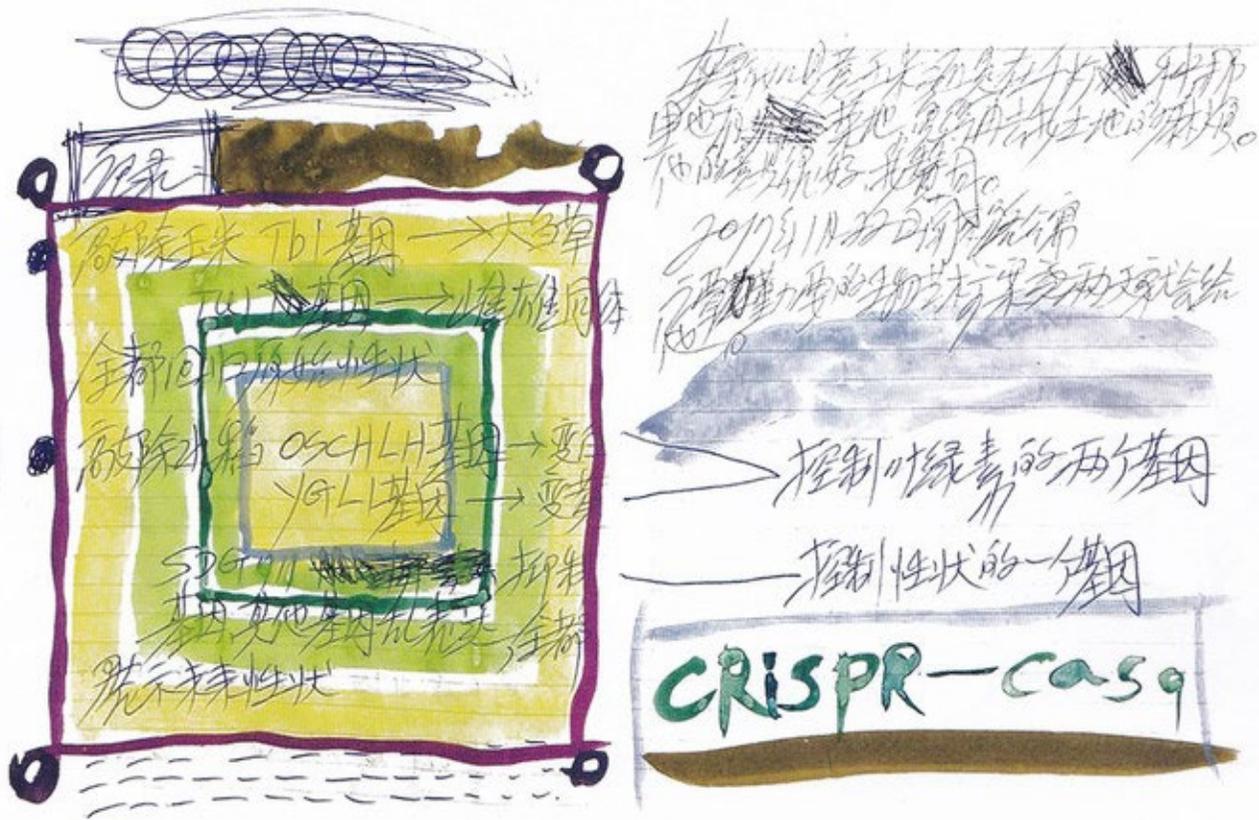
BioArt is not about utilizing biotechnology to make art . It cannot be criticized or defined from the perspective of “aesthetics,” and it cannot be described using the language of “poetry” or be sensed through “experience. ” It is a way of becoming aware; it is a way of constructing a new cultural configuration.

This kind of awareness is based on the following two points:

First, we know that there are only a handful of genes that can be mapped on the long chain of macromolecules comprising DNA, representing just two percent of what exists in the whole genome. Between the genes, there exists parcels of debris, and scientists consider this debris to be the remnants of ancient genes and viruses. Recently, scientists have discovered that this debris is not completely useless. So what does this phenomenon tell us?

If this debris or miscellaneous groups of DNA sequence can be arranged to form readable patterns, then a living organism has the possibility of unlimited genetic expression. This also indicates that the existing pattern of life is not the ultimate pattern.

Second, does humanity want to find themselves through the study of their genes? Do people want to consider themselves as a pile of cell groups that are constantly in flux, and from this be liberated from the concept of humankind so as to examine the self from a much broader perspective? In doing so, we could see the interlocking relationship between mankind, dragonflies, maize, and yeast from a renewed perspective. We cannot look at a gene simply as the foundational material of life, but instead should see it as the character that plays a much greater role in the greater harmony amongst all living things.



For the exhibition at the Power Station of Art in Shanghai in 2017, I am preparing to make a work using genetically modified maize. The core idea of this work is, through the process of CRISPR-cas9 genome editing, to lift the inhibiting mechanism of gene expression of the maize in order to reactivate the dormant ancient genes. By doing so, the maize is forced to return to exhibiting its original traits. This is done by guiding the cas9 by means of gRNA and executed to the point where the specific ancient gene resides inside the maize genome, thus knocking off the two inhibitory genes Tb1 and Tu1 and relieving the enzyme-bind and its fixed location. The maize will then exhibit the teosinte and hermaphroditic trait.



Smear (Selection)

2017

Colour inkjet print, 80 x 60cm



Installation view

ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai, 2019

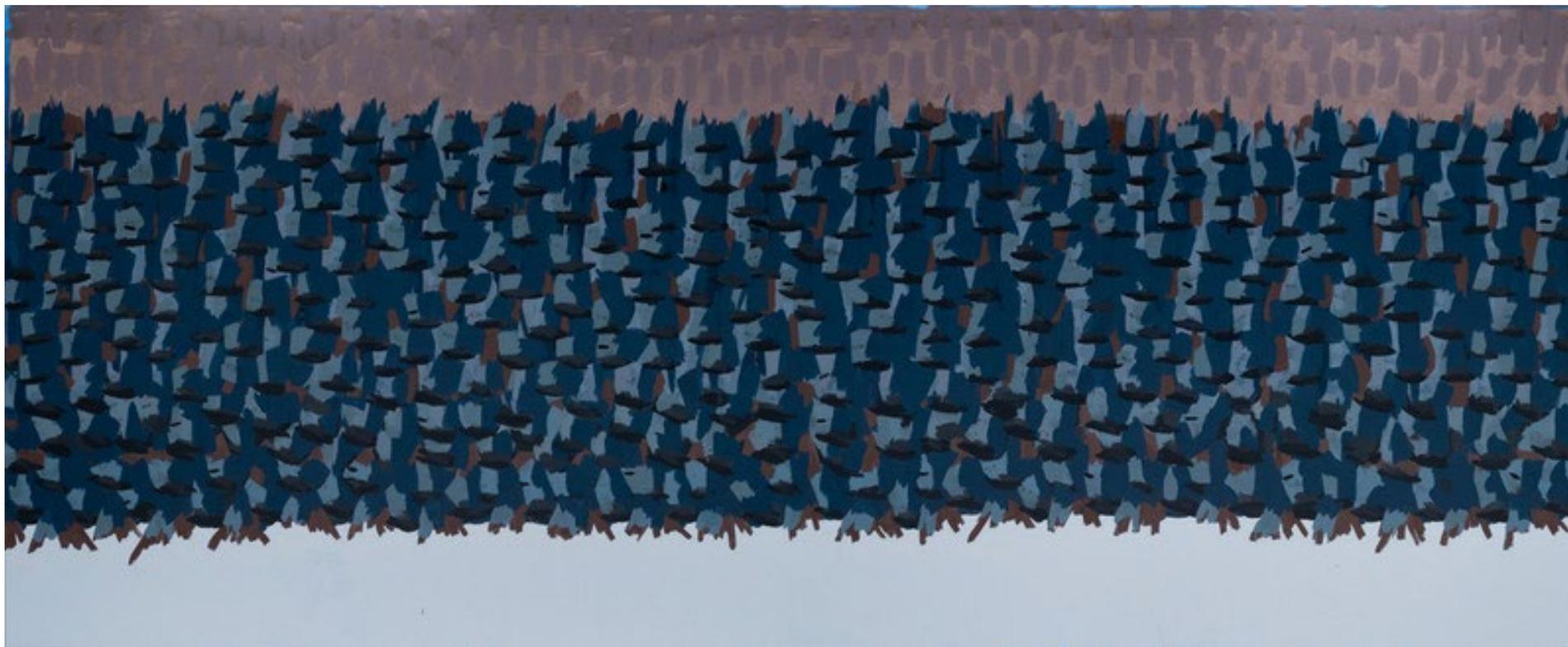


Installation view

Power Station of Art, Shanghai, 2017

2017

“Decoding” alludes to the unfolding of double helix structure in genome, which biological information could be humanly interfered by reading, writing and editing. This is a next step of Li Shan’s research into **genetic editing** since his solo exhibition at Power Station of Art Shanghai, 2017.



Decoding 2

2017

Acrylic on canvas, 205x506cm

Decoding 1

2017

Acrylic on canvas, 359x297cm



Decoding 8

2017

Acrylic on canvas, 124x93cm





Installation view

ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai, 2019

ShanghART

香格纳画廊

ShanghART Shanghai 香格纳上海

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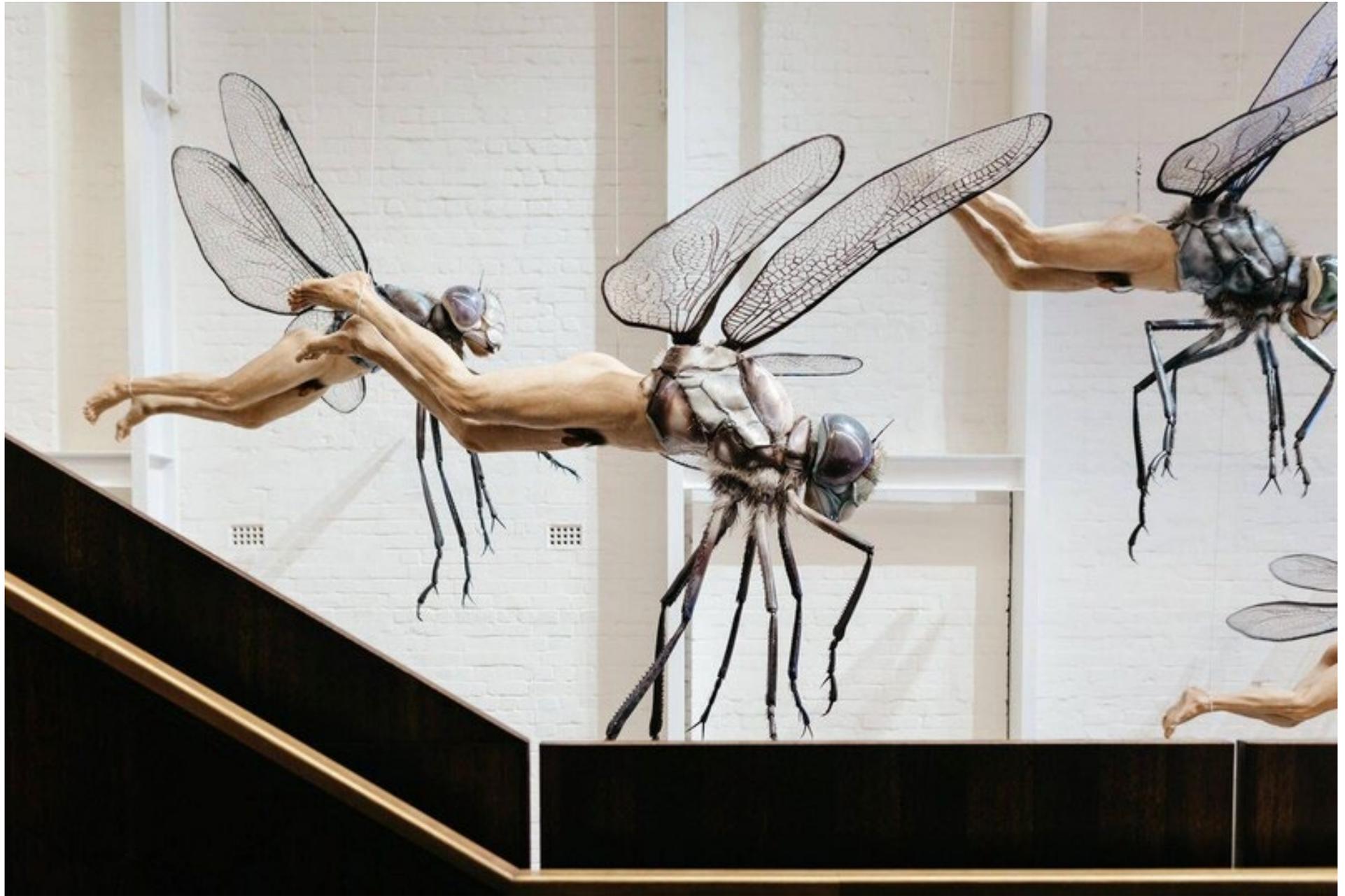
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Related Exhibition



Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, 2012



White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 2018



M+ , Hong Kong, 2021



The Armory Show, 2022



Start Museum, Shanghai, 2022