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CHEN XIAOYUN, *The Lightning in the Eyes of Three Travelers*, 2016, aluminum plate and hard electroplating coloring, 62 × 200 × 3 cm. All photos by Andrew Stooke for ArtAsiaPacific.

106 FLASHES OF LIGHTNING THAT I COLLECT CHEN XIAOYUN

ANDREW STOOKE
SHANGHART GALLERY

CHINA

A cartoon-style graphic of a power surge has been precision-cut into three slabs of five-millimeter-thick aluminum and bolted securely to the wall of Chen Xiaoyun's exhibition at ShanghArt Gallery. The work's title, *The Lightning in the Eyes of Three Travelers* (all works 2016), evokes travelers who may be exhausted by the artistic transcription of lightning. In Chen's work, the iconographic image of lightning, once belonging in the dynamic subculture of comic book art, is now fixed in a corporate plaque in vandal-proof metal. This installation sets the tone for the 13 other works reflecting the symbol of lightning within culture. Noting on this motif, Chen has commented that we are "competing [for] the possession of images with billions of people." Searching for lightning's image on the internet, we still find in these millions of instances a bolt of light that is frozen in the sky.



CHEN XIAOYUN, *That Lightning*, 2016, still from single-channel video: 10 min 20 sec.

How the world has changed in 39 years: from the creation of American artist Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977)—an installation of 400 steel poles arranged in a grid in New Mexico, devised to promote the natural occurrence of lightning—to the rise of cultural anthropology in which lightning is cast in an artificial light. De Maria demanded a devotional audience; only individuals or small groups are permitted to make the pilgrimage to have an intimate elemental experience with *The Lightning Field*. Chen, on the other hand, doesn't bemoan the decline of live encounters with art. Instead, he celebrates the fact that what was once marvelous and untouchable can now be summoned digitally over a hundred times at will.

Chen's works are mannerisms that originate from cinematic, graphic and artistic models. In *Infinite Mercy 1–4*, for example, four spiky twists of gilded bronze are arranged high on the wall in a circle, like a crown of thorns. They yield a connotation of torture or ecstasy, and include a variety of other visual tropes often found in period dramas and horror films, such as antlers displayed as trophies. Far from being the source of unequivocal power, lightning is collected, mounted and dramatically lit in this installation, confusing images suggestive of religious and animal suffering with the frisson of affect.

The idea of lightning as a bodily contact is sublimated in a sculpture in the opposite side of the room. On low plinths are *Lightning in Winter 1–3*, which are recumbent carvings in azure. They recall fulgurite, the extraordinary geological occurrence of silica fused by lightning into vitrified rods. However, as sculptural forms they also recall three particularly unpleasant dildos. Here, the idea of a wondrous object formed by a potent touch is perversely manipulated.



CHEN XIAOYUN, *Infinite Mercy 1–4*, 2016, bronze and gold leaf. Counterclockwise from bottom: 105 × 156 × 40 cm; 35 × 135 × 40 cm; 70 × 190 × 50 cm; 45 × 145 × 40 cm.

Sexual innuendo connected to the intense flash of lightning is continued nearby. Viewed through a long narrow slot in the wall, a video titled *That Lightning* shows headshots of women, some of whom are perspiring, making comments such as, “Big or small, intense or mild,” “Lose reason,” and “Stronger and stronger.” They may be thoughts about lightning, but also suggest orgasm. Other works also connect the image of a lightning bolt to sex. *Homothermal Animal 1 and 2* embroiders a schematic picture in synthetic lace, which, incidentally, is the

fabric of a boudoir. The filaments that make up the lace suggest energy gathering to form a lightning explosion, but the tawdriness of the material undermines this vitality, instead suggesting a lethargic burlesque.



Installation view of **CHEN XIAOYUN**'s "106 Flashes of Lightning That I Collect" at ShanghArt Gallery, Shanghai, 2016.

Elsewhere, Chen references German artist Joseph Beuys' *Lightning with Stag in its Glare* (1958–85), in which an amorphous monumental lump of bronze, supported by an iron girder, represents lightning. Beuys' vision for his work was primordial. He proposed the emancipation of society through the natural energies of the earth. Chen contrasts this to contemporary detachment from the natural environment. Chen's *You Keep Some Secrets and Remain Silence* (2016) deploys conductive wire coils and a saw-like lightning bolt, insulated from the floor by a wooden chair. It listlessly adumbrates reserved energy: the wire is loosely coiled, and the arrangement casual, bored even, as if its style has been overexposed and dissipated across the internet. In *Nihilistic Billionaire* (2016), Chen also juxtaposes bronze and iron. A sinuous thorn-like object in bronze looks like it is performing an athletic triple flip as it dangles from an iron support. It alludes to a transmission between earth and sky, but in an affected way.

Only one work attempts an original, visual equivalent of direct experience unmediated by secondary representations, and un-jaded by associations with cultural traces. *Lightning on the Hillside* is made of long, multicolored zip fasteners, joined together to form a curtain. The fasteners are an effective, albeit funny, metaphor for lightning. The unlikely material evokes something that is released—something wild. The work sharpens the sense of the contemporary disjuncture between images and sensations. These colored stripes don't look like photographs of lightning, but the act of unzipping them portrays the way that lightning happens: a gash torn open and mended straightaway.

Chen, as was Beuys, is still hopeful about the power of lightning. Even as pictures capturing lightning have evolved and lightning's discharge has been smoothed into other shapes through the propagation of shared representations, Chen suggests that the experience of lightning through the body, rather than in the eye, is still pure. When lightning is felt rather than seen, its jagged magic is unspoiled and continues to electrify.



CHEN XIAOYUN, *You Keep Some Secrets and Remain Silence*, 2016, hard electroplating aluminum, brass wire and wood, 50 × 225 × 76 cm.

“Chen Xiaoyun: 106 Flashes of Lightning That I Collect” is on view at ShanghArt Gallery, Shanghai, until July 1.

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