

A-Mazing Laughter

Yue Minjun (Daqing, Hei Long Jiang, China)



WHO MADE THIS SCULPTURE? *A-Mazing Laughter* is made by Yue Minjun (born in 1962), a contemporary Chinese artist based in Beijing, China. Before studying art at Hebei Normal University, Yue worked as an electrician for an oil company. In 1989, he was inspired by a painting by Geng Jianyi in the “China/Avant Garde” show in Beijing, which depicted Geng’s own laughing face. The following year, he moved to an artist’s colony outside Beijing.

Yue Minjun became a leading figure in what was known in the 1990’s as Cynical Realism, an artistic movement that emerged in China after the 1989 student demonstrations in Tiananmen and the suppression of artistic expression. Humour, cynicism, repetition and an emphasis on the individual are common characteristics of this artistic movement. Yue Minjun was one of the first artists to translate this new ironic view of contemporary life, one that is expressed in nihilistic hilarity, at a time when little was funny. His signature style developed out of portraits of his bohemian friends from the artist village. Yue Minjun is best known for oil paintings depicting himself in various settings, frozen in laughter. He has also reproduced this signature image in sculpture, watercolor and prints.

WHAT IDEAS ARE BEING EXPLORED IN THIS SCULPTURE? Yue Minjun’s view on his work is ‘My work is both fantasy and fiction, It is a description of the “real” world through my eyes, Reinventing oneself through “non-reality”’. (Translated from Chinese). Yue has always found laughter irresistible ‘...well, at least I don’t dislike it. I paint people laughing, whether it is a big laugh, a restrained laugh, a crazy-laugh, a near-death laugh or simply laughter about our society: laughter can be about anything.



Laughter is a moment when our mind refuses to reason. When we are puzzled by certain things, our mind simply doesn't want to struggle, or perhaps we don't know how to think, therefore we just want to forget it. The 90's was a time when everyone should laugh. Artists are the kind of people who always like to reveal to the simple, innocent and humble souls the never-ending illusion of our lives.'

In A-maze-ing Laughter Yue Minjun depicts his own iconic laughing image, with gaping grins and closed eyes in a state of hysterical laughter. These laughing figures are the signature trademark of the artist. They are not a conventional self-portrait, as they tell us little about the person portrayed or of the reason they are laughing so hysterically. The longer you look at these cast bronze figures, the more the contradiction of the silent, frozen form of sculpture begins to intrude. We see, but do not hear the laughter. The contorted poses of the figure suggest animation and a cartoon form of an anonymous person. The laughter appears to be convulsive, intense, and manic, but also insincere and forced. The scale is "un-naturally" large, exaggerated and excessive like the laughter.



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HOW WAS THIS SCULPTURE MADE? The material of this sculpture is patinated bronze. Artificial patinas are applied to bronze using chemical solutions which react with the surface to form a thin layer of coloured corrosion products. Patinas can be transparent or opaque and are sometimes applied in a number of layers to produce widely varied effects. Patination has been used as a decorative technique on metals for thousands of years.

The development of patination as we now know it on bronze sculpture probably began around the time of the Renaissance when it was primarily used as a means of conferring the appearance of antiquity on a sculpture.

The techniques for colouring bronze expanded in the late nineteenth century. During the twentieth century the trend has been to move away from the more traditional colourations and to develop a new language of colour on the surface of bronze for a modern generation of sculptors. It is now possible to colour bronze chemically in a wide range of shades. To give this sculpture the brown color, sulfur compounds are applied to the bronze.

Read about Patina formulas for bronze at <http://www.sciencecompany.com/patinas/patinaformulas.htm>

HOW DOES THIS WORK CONNECT WITH THIS

ARTIST'S OTHER WORKS? LI Xianting, one of the greatest of contemporary Chinese art theorists, says of Yue Minjun that 'he constructs his artistic language as a self-ironic response to the spiritual vacuum and folly of modern-day China.' It is as if the mass of contradictions faced everyday were so absurdly dense that they led to a sort of pathological dissociation from self, expressed through these grotesque portraits. Monica Dematte wrote: 'The full-toothed laughter of the cloned in Yue Minjun's work (you can actually count all thirty-two teeth) rings false - especially as in real life the artist laughs very rarely, and this version of himself (each clone is a self-portrait) seems to exist on canvas alone.' The technique used is similar to that in advertising and propaganda posters: sharp outlines and



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rather even fields of color which give a 'Pop art' effect. The simplified human figures are generally all dressed alike and painted in a limited range of colours: the skin is a very kitsch pink, the lips are red and the disproportionately large inside of the mouth is done in perfect black. The gaping mouth occupies most of the face and is contrasted with the eyes, slits that are so tightly shut that vision is impossible. The visual impact of the works is enhanced not only by their mere size—some are enormous—but also by the complexity of their composition. These figures—as unseeing as they are insincerely jovial—are often in poses taken from Christian iconography or from popular Chinese-art.

These self-portraits are also depicted in body poses shown in forced, impractical attitudes. The skin tone sometimes is more yellowish but the colour is that of someone caught in a glaring headlight. Hence the light is as artificial as the expression on the face and the posture of the body. The effect of depth is achieved through the use of shadow, whilst the actual painting technique tends to render the surface of the work very flat.

WHO PUT THIS SCULPTURE ON DISPLAY IN VANCOUVER? This sculpture is part of Vancouver Biennale 2009-2011 Exhibition. The Vancouver Biennale is a non-profit charitable organization that celebrates art in public space. Each exhibition transforms the urban landscape into an Open Air Museum, creating globally inspired cultural experiences where people live, work, play and transit. The Biennale features internationally renowned and emerging Contemporary artists that represent a diversity of cultural perspectives and artistic disciplines including sculpture, new media, performance works

The Vancouver Biennale also creates supporting public programs, events and publications including the award-winning BIG IDEAS Education program, the International Artist Residency Program inspired by Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream", the CineFest LIVE documentary film festival and the Tour de Biennale and BIKennale arts & culture cycling events.

TO LEARN MORE you can search the terms **BIENNALE**, **PUBLIC ART** or **OUTDOOR SCULPTURE PARKS** on-line. Also Visit the Vancouver Biennale website at www.vancouverbiennale.com

IMAGE CREDITS:

- 1 Artist portrait; artist
- 2 *A-maze-ing Laughter*; Dan Fairchild
- 3 *A-maze-ing Laughter* (detail); Dan Fairchild
- 4 *A-maze-ing Laughter* (detail); Dan Fairchild
- 5 *A-maze-ing Laughter* (installation); Dan Fairchild
- 6 *Bayoneting, 2003*; artist website
- 7 Artist portrait; ArtZine

Written by: Katherine Tong
 Edited by: Debbie Berto
 Design: Julie Rudd