

Yu Honglei

Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin 25 April – 23 June

A frequent sight on social media is a user making a public request, often facetiously, for an emoji that doesn't yet exist. The seven bumpy, bronze-coloured sculptures, raised up on cubic orange plinths, in the opening room of Yu Honglei's exhibition are an approximate reversal of that process: they look like speculative ideograms for feelings we don't have names for, substitutes for strings of text. One is a cartoonish heart with a zigzag mouth, a single portholelike eye, and one of its upper curves capped with a truncated twist of rope from which, on a wire, hangs a row of red peppers crafted from paper. (Also, if it helps, the rope is hollowed out and there's a pile of yellow seeds sitting in it.) Another sculpture looks like a confused, mouthless egg. Others vaguely recall jellyfish and warthogs and fish. But I write this just to have something to say: you look at these sculptures, which are pointedly untitled – previously Yu has used deliberately unconnected titles, here he's given up on language altogether – and words don't really adhere. The condition, the confusion, is purely visual.

That, seemingly, is what the Mongolian-born, Beijing-based, mid-thirties Yu wants. His art exaggeratedly reflects a digitally driven

culture based on circulating and recombined images, one in which looking rather than reading is paramount. These seven sculptures, in sequential rows, have the quality of embodied memes: a form progressively, vertiginously morphing; their bronzy appearance harks back to traditional sculpture, but these works have one foot firmly in the disembodied. In the midst of them – literally inhabiting their space – is a grey-and-black totem pole of sorts, made up of a vertical stack of silvery alien heads, again mouthless and separated by black hairbands, a step along the evolutionary chain perhaps. A figure, in this economy, might as well be all brain and eyes.

There's a similar totem in the next room, but this time a stern, jug-eared male head on a stack of orange funnel-shaped forms. That same head, gifted with various expressions, repeats on a sequence of eight silvery slabs on the floor: again the body is gone, and the heads appear in variegated trances. Maybe they've been watching the colour-reversed video that the totem stands in front of, in which a brief shot of someone throwing what looks like a round of dough onto the floor

– where it lands with an audible splat that becomes a rhythm cast across the whole show – is intercut occasionally by a shot of a wild boar. This is evidently meant to summarise online browsing: falling into a suspended, hypnotised state while encountering, and accepting, regular disjunction.

So yes, Yu is as Postinternet as they come, if anyone's still using that phrase. He's also sly: the logic of mutation and mantralike repetition in his sculptural output happens to fit neatly with the collector-driven market dictates for variations on a theme. But his work does what he desires. I walked through this show and for much of it I didn't have a thought. Rather, there was a flattened sense of something alienated and alienating morphing slowly, and occasionally rapidly, in front of me, my brain half deactivated and thickened-feeling, eyes very open, demeanour faintly reptilian. Later I tried to put into words – those archaic things – what that feeling made me think of. I thought for a moment of myself, sitting anywhere, smartphone in hand, scrolling dazedly through Twitter. Rather more, though, I thought of myself in a few years' time. *Martin Herbert*



#7, 2018, brass, stainless steel, iron wire, paper, millet rice, 103 × 52 × 52 cm.

Photo: def_image. Courtesy the artist, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, and Antenna Space, Shanghai