

ARTFORUM



Guan Xiao, *Messenger*, 2020, pigmented bronze, lacquered porcelain, bicycle parts, dried flowers, 72 7/8 × 43 1/4 × 16 1/8".

Guan Xiao

ANTENNA SPACE 天线空间

Guan Xiao works in both sculpture and video and often finds ways of linking the two mediums in unexpected ways. At the same time, her work is language- and narrative-heavy, though language always comes after the fact. For the videos, she amasses her footage first, then sculpts her narrative out of it, content directing form. For her latest exhibition of eight freestanding sculptures (complemented by seven wall sculptures of palettes), the artist cast 3D-printed anthropomorphic beings in bronze; attached to them a mixture of industrial, handcrafted, ready-made, or natural objects; then wrote micro-fictional narratives for each one, all printed on a single sheet and freely available at the entrance to the gallery. Positioned throughout the space, the sculptures served as both three-dimensional collages and anthropomorphic characters; you could interact with or form imaginary narratives around them—and not necessarily those the artist supplied, depending on your mood.

Messenger (all works 2020) has an orange, bumpy-surfaced, centipede-like body with four pairs of black spiky arm-legs running down its length. The spikes look like hand grenades, though in actuality they are bicycle footrests. The grayish ceramic plinth that supports the assemblage doubles as a pair of feet; in shape and color, it clashes somewhat with the rest of the sculpture. The piece coalesces into a magnificent coil at the top; its eyeball is a yellow floral dot, which sprouts randomly as a motif elsewhere on the body. *Storm Rider* repeats

— *Messenger's* textural pattern, only it's painted a pale turquoise, its parrot-colored artificial flowers infusing the whole with a tropical feeling. A metal bar, yet another part ripped from a motorbike, has been stuck perpendicular to the sculpture's torso, hanging precariously like a quaint, old-fashioned, and particularly gaudy bow.

The most narrative work in the show was *Lulubird walked out of delicatessen bumped into a swarm of buzzing. Lulubird*. A conglomeration of plate-size, UFO-like birds are scattered around, flying toward the main character. She wears an enormous pink bonnet recalling the headgear of a seventeenth-century pilgrim; her face is made of welded branches. Her body is the skinny twisted trunk of the tree—a product of the ancient Chinese sculptural tradition of root carving—painted a satiny red. The accompanying story mentions neither Lulubird nor the “swarm of buzzing” but is content to describe the weather, the dryness of the air rich with pollen, and the narrator's sense that it will likely never rain again.

Rosalind E. Krauss has written about the historical evolution of sculpture from the condition of monument to modernist autonomy. We could say that Guan gives us a playful fabulistic modernism, though I prefer to think of it as a neo-monumentality: These are commemorations of a nonreality whose fantastic beings and events seem superior to our own, a “thingdom of gory,” such as James Joyce conceived in *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Perhaps it's just the escapist in me talking, but I'm at least in part willing to believe that in an age bereft of heroes either human or divine, these totemic weirdos with their plastic alien appendages, each lost in its own detached jumble of narrative, will do just fine.

— Travis Jeppesen