

Art Review

**“Contemporary Chinese Artist Xu Bing: Rising Phoenix”
at
MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA**

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Contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing's sculptural and mixed media installation works were on exhibit for 10 months (December 2012-October 2013) at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in North Adams, Massachusetts, in the United States. The exhibition was co-curated by Susan Cross and Joe Thompson, Director of Mass MoCA.

Xu Bing (徐冰), one of China's most successful contemporary artists, was born in Chongqing, China in 1955. He was raised in Beijing and sent to a commune for two years during the 1966-1976 *Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (文化大革命), where he worked on propaganda art. Bing returned to Beijing in 1977 and completed a BA and an MFA from the Central Academy of Fine Arts majoring in drawing and printmaking. After the 1989 student protests in Tiananmen Square, Bing was harshly criticized by the authorities. In 1990 Bing moved to America, where he remained until 2007. He began as an artist in residence at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, moved to South Dakota, and eventually relocated to New York City to maintain an art studio for 16 years. His reputation grew, and in 1994 he participated in the 45th Venice Biennale. In 1999 he received the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship award. In 2007, Bing returned to China to assume the position of Vice President of Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing. Currently he lives and works in New York City and Beijing and remains active in the international art scene.

Art of Xu Bing

Background Story 7 (2012)



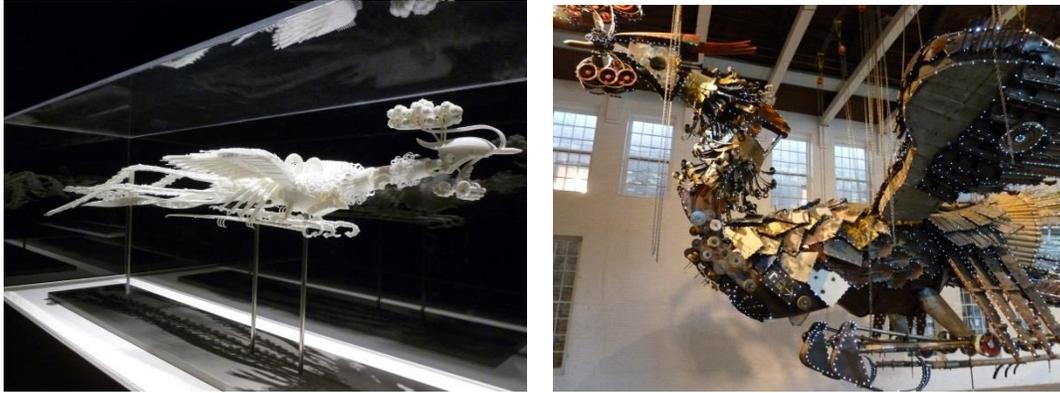
At the entrance of Building 5, MASS MoCA's signature space, Xu Bing's black ink brush landscape painting *Background Story 7 (2012)*, placed in a large (25 x 12 x 7 ft.) translucent light box installation, welcomes the visitors. At first the work looks like a traditional 18th century Chinese ink brush painting but is constructed with natural dried shrubs and leaves attached with tape to an acrylic panel in a background light box. This visual puzzle raises questions about how

and why debris and refuse are used to create the image of a traditional Chinese landscape painting. The illusion of a classic Chinese painting created from non-traditional materials reveals the meaning of the *Background Project*. A few feet away a facsimile of the inspirational Qing dynasty hanging scroll ink painting by Shitao, entitled *Landscape Painted on the Double Ninth* (1705), is displayed. Shitao's original landscape painting is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. In China, studying old master ink brush paintings and copying works is considered an important part of learning and acquiring technical art skills. Following this tradition, Xu Bing connected his 21st century technology-based artworks to a historical and traditional Chinese landscape painting. From his perspective, in order to create new works of art he reached back 300 years. Bing respected his Chinese roots and retained his cultural identity and traditions while creating new artistic statements. This was an excellent marriage between tradition and innovation.

Phoenix Project (2007-2010)



The two awesome Phoenixes are suspended on trusses from the ceiling crossbeams. These giant mythical birds are the centerpieces of Bing's exhibition entitled *Phoenix Project 2007-2010*. The huge mythical birds are displayed in flight, and the effect is stunning and captivating. Each bird weighs approximately 12 tons and is 100 feet long. The male Phoenix (Feng) is at the front, and female phoenix (Huang) follows just as a traditional Chinese wife follows her husband. The image of a Phoenix bird is the second most common motif after the dragon in East Asian iconography. The Phoenix symbolizes imperial power, prosperity, wealth, and rebirth. According to Bing's *Artist's Book*, the two bird images were inspired by works of art from the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD).

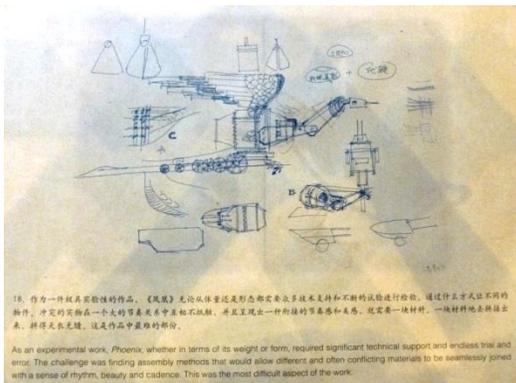


After living in America for 18 years, Xu Bing returned to China in 2007 and began to conceptualize large scale commissioned works that complemented the dynamic economic development in China. Bing's conceptual approach to creating his projects and his choice of materials reflected the major economic boom exemplified by the costs of hosting the 2008 International Olympic Games in Beijing, which totaled \$42 billion dollars. The Olympic construction destroyed many traditional neighborhoods and displaced hundreds of thousands of local residents. In 2007 Bing received a commission to install an artwork in Beijing's World Financial Tower. He visited the construction site and, after viewing the architectural drawings, said that the atrium in the building reminded him of a large bird cage. He wanted to install flying cranes in the glass atrium, which represent longevity and wisdom in Chinese iconography but the owner did not consider cranes auspicious enough for the project. Bing decided that mythical phoenixes would be a better motif, perhaps because in the fable their magnificent feathers were donated or recycled from other birds. His construction materials for the project were the debris from the construction site. His plan was to use recycled materials such as bamboo scaffolding, plastic pipes, workers' safety helmets, shovels, wheels, steel bars, fans, fire hoses, empty fire extinguishers, wire cables, and parts of construction machinery. Bing collected used materials from the construction site and other buildings during the building boom in Beijing. When Bing began to infuse the work, which took two years to complete, with social messages about the enormous economic disparity between the luxurious building and the harsh life of the rural migrant construction workers, the building's owner, a real estate developer and art collector, withdrew his support. Another art collector Barry Lam, who loaned the work to MASS MoCA, supported the completion of the two giant Phoenixes which were first displayed outside the Today Art Museum in Beijing and later in the Baosteel Stage at Expo 2010 in Shanghai. The two-year project creating these monumental works involved hundreds of workers, assistants, and associates. Bing's experience as a young man sent to a rural commune during the Cultural Revolution may have given him the philosophical and practical knowledge about the life of peasants and workers and the collaborative application of their creative skills in a communal effort. How the mythical birds were constructed, who made them, who supported the efforts, who commissioned and owns the works, and where they are displayed are all intertwined with China's economic, political, social, and cultural

development. This collection of disassociated voices became the living educational confluence of an artist who was born and educated in China but lived for 16 years in New York City, the epicenter of the world's art community. Bing described China's recent impressive economic growth as a merging of Western values and Western technology, not part of China's 5,000-year cultural continuum, thus creating a gap between tradition and rapid change.

Bing applied multiple media approaches to this collective monumental project by infusing documentary video films, bound book art, photography, sculpture, field trips, classical paintings, mechanical engineering, and other skills contributed by his associates, assistants, and workers. The history and process of creating and constructing the two giant Phoenixes is explained in Bing's artist's book, *Phoenix Art Project*. The sequential pictographic book is displayed in an L-shape along two walls of the Building 5 Gallery. The book was printed in a pseudo-faded brownish tint, suggesting that his current concept was based on the images of a Phoenix in the Han Dynasty. The artist's book contains personal sketches, drafts, notes, photos, and documents and is a visual diary for artists.

After viewing the two Phoenixes, visitors can enter a dark enclosed viewing area to watch a documentary video produced by Bing and his associates, which details the two-year process of creating, transporting, and installing the giant Phoenixes. In this area Bing provided four chairs for the viewers made from the same construction debris used to create each Phoenix. In a corner of the viewing room, two white plastic three-dimensional models of the Phoenixes were on display in a lighted glass case like an architectural model.





Phoenix Project (2007-2010) carries a substantial message by the artist about the social, political, economic, and cultural consequences of China's rapid growth into the world's second largest economy. These changes produced a huge gap between China's emerging super-rich and the multitude of poor and oppressed workers and peasants. Migrant workers from the countryside living under harsh conditions build endless blocks of glamorous office buildings, shopping complexes, and luxury condominiums. This gap is reflected in the innards of the awesome Phoenixes which appear as fabled objects of beauty yet upon closer inspection are made from soiled construction debris. The delicate bird feathers and body are actually twisted, rusted, metal and plastic remnants of shovels, pipes, the wheels of heavy equipment, fans, cabinet cases and other discarded materials. Each bird's stunning beauty from a distance, upon closer inspection, reveals rough industrial textures, surfaces and colors, yet Bing was able to extrude well balanced unity from the debris. These mythical birds, decorated with LED lights, are linked to the starry cosmos. The birds were inspired by Han Dynasty images and transformed into a 21st century multi-media experience with a social and political commentary.

1st Class (2011)

On the second floor mezzanine gallery, a large (40 x 15 ft.) white and tan faux tiger skin rug, entitled *1st Class* (2011), is displayed on the floor. The installation is composed of 500,000 filtered cigarettes held together by adhesive glue. The tiger skin rug was laid diagonally on the floor in contrast to the floating and flying Phoenixes, yet the two works are related in their monumental messages. Next to the rug of cigarettes, Bing included the source of his work materials. Disorganized piles of empty cigarette cartons, packages, boxes, wrappers, and cigarette butts are strewn about in contrast to the carefully articulated cigarettes used to create the thick fur tiger rug. Why were cigarettes used as the installation material? Why were they arranged in the shape of a two-tone tiger rug? What is the message about transforming half a million cigarettes into the image of a tiger? The tiger, which is regarded as the most ferocious of beasts, is the Yin versus the dragon who is the Yang in Chinese cosmology. The tiger skin is a luxury item owned by the rich and a symbol of royalty.

The brand name of the cigarettes is 1st Class, which connotes high status. Cigarettes are beautifully wrapped tobacco neatly organized in a pack, but they are deadly to human health just as the tiger, the most beautiful large cat in nature but a deadly carnivore. This project is close to Bing's personal life, as his father, a heavy smoker, died from lung cancer. Currently China is the world's largest cigarette producer and consumer with more than 1/3 of the adult population being smokers. Taxes on cigarettes and tobacco products constitute the single largest source of revenue for the Chinese government. In 1918 the American-Chinese Tobacco Company was formed to buy American tobacco and sell it in China, so there is a historical link between the Chinese tiger cigarette rug and America.



On the wall next to the 1st Class display, an 18-minute documentary film explains how Bing conceptualized and constructed his tiger cigarette rug. This digital film was made for the *Xu Bing: Tobacco Project* at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) in 2011. Bing was an artist in residence at Duke University in North Carolina in 1999. He met a tobacco holder collector and member of the Duke family connected to the largest tobacco company in North Carolina. The video documents Bing's visit to a tobacco farm and the first installation of his tobacco tiger rug in the VMFA in Richmond. During his visit to a tobacco farm Bing viewed every aspect of production from planting, nurturing, harvesting, and curing the leaves. Most of the difficult work is done by hand by poorly paid

farmers and migrant workers in America. Bing was moved by the contrast between the wealthy tobacco farm and factory owners and the poverty-stricken workers. He was concerned that the glamorous appearance of cigarette advertising and marketing belies the deadly health hazards smoking poses to the people of China and other nations.

Summary

Xu Bing's art works are monumental in concept, physical scope, and ideological reflection. Every part, piece, and posture represents a carefully constructed and articulated concept firmly rooted in classical Chinese culture and the current exploding economic and social tsunami. China is awash in new ideas, technology, and a \$8.5-trillion-dollar GDP as the world's largest exporter of raw and finished products. Trillions of dollars of exports translate into instant wealth for the elite at the price of rampant corruption and conspicuous consumption. One unintended consequence of economic development has turned Beijing into one of the most polluted capitals in the world. Bing's works, which have been exhibited in China, Japan, Australia, Europe, and the USA, voice the clash of traditional Chinese culture with Western ideology as the rich get richer while paying scant attention to the plight of the working class. The two monumental Phoenixes from a distance appear like graceful birds in flight, but their beautiful feathers and innards are composed of recycled construction debris. The faux tiger rug invites the owner to lay down on a soft, thick fur surface which is composed of cancer-inducing poisonous cigarettes. *The Background Story 7* light box includes debris from nature. In his art, Xu Bing's thoughts, artistic vision, and the voices of others continue to resonate, rising from the ashes like the mythical phoenixes.

List of Artworks

1. Feng the male Phoenix (Photo John Caruso Jr.)
2. Front view *Background Story 2012*, 25 x 12 x 7 ft. (Photo MASS MoCA)
3. Rear view *Background Story 2012*, 25 x 12 x 7 ft. (Photo Hwa Young Caruso)
4. Hunag the female Phoenix (Photo Hwa Young Caruso)
5. Bing's *Artist Book* (Photo Hwa Young Caruso)
6. *Phoenix Project* Model 3D, 58 x 61 x 14 in. (Photo Hwa Young Caruso)
7. Hunag the female Phoenix (Photo Hwa Young Caruso)
8. L.E.D. lights on Feng the male Phoenix (Photo Hwa Young Caruso)
9. *Phoenix Project* construction materials 1 (Photo John Caruso Jr.)
10. *Phoenix Project* construction materials 2 (Photo John Caruso Jr.)
11. *Phoenix Project* construction materials 3 (Photo John Caruso Jr.)
12. *Phoenix Project* construction materials 4 (Photo John Caruso Jr.)
13. *1st Class 2011*, 40 x 15 ft. (Photo Hwa Young Caruso)
14. *1st Class 2011*, 40 x 15 ft. (Photo John Caruso Jr.)
15. *1st Class 2011*, 40 x 15 ft. (Photo John Caruso Jr.)

Resources

Chinese Phoenix Myths

http://www.stiltman.com/html/phoenix_myths.html

Installation of the Phoenix at MASS MoCA

<http://vimeo.com/64902383>

Anthropology in China's health promotion and tobacco

<http://www.stanford.edu/dept/anthropology/cgi-bin/web/?q=system/files/XiaoKohrman%282%29.pdf>

The Tobacco Industry in China

<http://factsanddetails.com/china.php?itemid=140&catid=3>

Tobacco Project 3

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfygs7A-Nb0>

Acknowledgement

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