

Tui (Transfiguration)

-- The Image World of Rong Rong and inri

Curated by Wu Hung

In classical Chinese, *tui* (蜕) refers to the biological process in which certain arthropods and reptiles shed their skins while growing and transforming. From this root meaning the character has gained two general significances. First, it denotes a profound change in one's life that amounts to rebirth. In particular, *chan tui* (蝉蜕)– the sloughing of the cicada – has become synonymous with the achievement of immortality through discarding the impermanent human body. Second, *tui* also signifies the physical remains left after such transformation. A host of compound words related to this usage, including *tui qiao* (蜕壳, a sloughed-off shell), *tui yi* (蜕衣, sloughed-off clothes), and *tui zhi* (蜕质, sloughed-off material), all pertain to death but also convey the hope for a transcendent, albeit elusive, afterlife.

“Exuviation” – the technical English term for this biological phenomenon – does not have these metaphorical connotations. Another word that does possess such connotations, however, is *transfiguration*, defined in dictionaries as “a marked change in form or appearance that glorifies or exalts.” It also has a religious significance and refers to, in the Bible, the sudden emanation of radiance from Jesus's body after his resurrection.

I have titled this exhibition *Tui* because the term's poetic, metaphoric meaning seems to resonate deeply with the photographs by Rong Rong and inri, thereby providing a possible concept for understanding these images. Moreover, because these images include all important works that these two artists have created so far (and this exhibition can actually be considered a joint retrospective), this concept may also help reveal some essential human elements underlying their artistic creativity: emotion, hope, struggle, inspiration.

Both artists are fascinated by the mysterious transformation of the world they live in. inri's grotesque *1999. Tokyo*, in her own words, represents "illusions born from the radiation of darkness – a symphony of the changing light and shadow." In Rong Rong's "ruin" pictures, the residents of the half-demolished houses have long gone, but the wall decoration and photo negatives they left there, though abandoned and damaged, still breathe with life. These traces of past lives are connected with lives in the present and future; so in the next series, *Wedding Gown*, ruins and an abandoned "ghost village" provide the setting for romantic lovemaking.

It must require a violent struggle to shed one's skin. This struggle to emerge from one's own body must also induce unspeakable pain and pleasure. "Struggle" is a shared theme of works that Rong Rong and inri had created before they met each other. Rong Rong's *East Village* records memorable performances by the village's struggling artists – performances that move us with the performers' pain and desire. inri's explanation of her *Gray Zone* concludes with this sentence: "To struggle free from hopelessness, to stay alive in a desert-like world: this is the meaning of the *Gray Zone*." Both artists have made many self-portraits. What animate these images is again a sense of persistent struggle, which both distorts and purifies the photographers.

Beauty and youth becomes the dominant theme of the last section of the exhibition, which features two groups of collaborative works that Rong Rong and inri created after they had found each other and fallen in love. As if reborn from ruins, nature, still unspoiled, comes back to life. The two photographers embrace this amazing world. Harmony has triumphed; struggle has subsided. Sensual pleasure has returned to supply a main purpose for artistic creation; even the frozen, frightening winter landscape of Mt. Fuji can only inspire joy. Looking around at today's world filled with hatred and misunderstanding, I am relieved to see the persistence of the old ideal of *chan tui*-immortality in these beautiful images.

From a different perspective, *tui*, as a metaphoric expression of action and transformation, is intimately related to an important issue in contemporary art and art theory – the symbiosis of photography and performance. Rong Rong and inri's images represent this symbiosis in various ways, and can be interpreted on different levels in terms of the photography/performance relationship.

Generally speaking, their images signify three principal modes of this relationship: (1) photographing performances, the photographer produces images that result from his interaction with the performance artists. (2) Assuming the dual roles of recorder and performer, the photographer produces images that result from the interaction between these two roles. (3) Two or more photographers collaborate and each takes on the double role of performer and recorder, producing images that result from the interaction between the collaborators as well as between each collaborator's dual roles.

On a deeper level, today's art photography has increasingly departed from its traditional role to record the observed world, and has increasingly focused on inventing new artistic languages and exploring the artist's inner vision. The growing closeness between photography and performance is a natural outcome of this general trend. In fact, it is fair to say that today's art photography has become increasingly "performative," and many photographers have become self-conscious "performers" both before and behind the camera.

In my view, Rong and inri's interest in the relationship between photography and performance, and the duration and depth of their experimentation along this line, give them a special position in contemporary art. Conversely, their impressive body of works, created over a decade, also provides rich materials for art critics and theoreticians to reflect upon this relationship.

I therefore feel that an exhibition of their major works will facilitate the development of contemporary art and art criticism. With regard to the current state of contemporary Chinese art specifically, its rapid development in recent years is well-known, but it also faces a challenge to increase its depth and historical consciousness. While group exhibitions are useful in introducing general trends, careful examinations of individual Chinese artists are

necessary to explore the specific problems involved in their artistic experimentation. This is also one of my purposes in curating this exhibition.

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Exhibition Items :

RongRong :

Ruins, "1996-1998, Beijing" series
"East Village, Beijing" series, 1993-1998
Wedding Gown, "1997-2000, Beijing" series
"Self-portraits" series, 1994-1998
Fragments, "1998, Beijing" series

inri :

"Maximax" series, 1998
"1999 Tokyo" series, 1996-1999
"Gray Zone" series, 1998-2000
"Self-portraits" series, 1996-2000

Rong Rong&inri :

Returning to Nature "In the Jiayuguan, China, 2000" series
"In the Yumenguan, 2000" series
"In the Great Wall, China, 2000" series
"In Helsinli, Finland, 2001" series
"In Fujisan, Japan, 2001" series
"In Bad Goisern, Austria, 2001" series
"In Luguhu, China, 2001" series
"In Yulongxueshan, China, 2001" series

"Liulitun, Beijing" series, 2000-2003
"We are here" series, 2002