

QAG



AH XIAN
METAPHYSICA

GOMA



AH XIAN METAPHYSICA

Ah Xian is one of Australia's most prominent contemporary artists, exhibiting across the country and around the world.

In 2001, Ah Xian's beguiling life-sized cloisonné sculpture *Human human – lotus, cloisonné figure 1* 2000–01, held in the Queensland Art Gallery's Collection, won the National Gallery of Australia's inaugural National Sculpture prize. Two years later, the Queensland Art Gallery staged a major solo exhibition of his works. More recently, he won the 2009 Clemenger Contemporary Art Award at the National Gallery of Victoria for a series of concrete busts, evidence that his experimentation with materials is not restricted to tradition and that his artistic journey continues to evolve.

'Metaphysica', an important series of sculptures by Ah Xian, balances ancient techniques, cultural symbolism and portraiture

in a mode of figurative art that has become his signature style. This celebrated suite of sculptures, made in 2007, represents a fascinating artistic journey, one that expresses cross-cultural possibilities in the iconography, aesthetics and production of contemporary art. Thanks to a generous gift from the artist and the support of benefactor Tim Fairfax, AM, the Queensland Art Gallery holds ten busts from this magnificent series and is delighted to tour these to 14 regional Queensland venues.

A self-taught painter, Ah Xian began working as a professional artist in China during the 1980s, participating in a number of group exhibitions. In early 1989 he visited Australia for the first time for an artistic residency at the University of Tasmania's School of Art, returning to China only weeks before the confrontations at Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989.¹ The following year, Ah Xian and his artist-brother, Liu Xiao Xian, sought political asylum in Australia. The violence of the political regime and its effects were profoundly expressed in his paintings from subsequent years, such as the 'Heavy wounds' series of

LEFT
Installation view of the
'Metaphysica' series at the
Queensland Art Gallery, 2009 /
QAGOMA Photography

RIGHT
**Ah Xian / *Metaphysica: Crane
on tortoise* 2007 / Bronze and
brass / Gift of the artist through
the Queensland Art Gallery
Foundation 2010. Donated through
the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program / Collection:
Queensland Art Gallery**

1991.² Ah Xian soon began creating sculptural works, initially using plaster and bandages to depict the trauma in China. Gradually, however, his desire to investigate the history and artistic traditions of his heritage grew strong; it gave impetus to what would become an extraordinary body of work in a unique and unbounded sculptural journey.

In May 1996, Ah Xian visited the historic Chinese city of Jingdezhen and began to incorporate traditional materials in his works. An imperial porcelain centre since the early fifteenth century, Jingdezhen is still seen as the home of porcelain production.³ This was the start of a long relationship between the artist and local craftspeople, during which he has employed their skills while challenging their established processes with new purpose. From porcelain, a material celebrated as an important part of Chinese identity for centuries and exhaustively imitated from outside, Ah Xian began looking to other esteemed materials. These include lacquerware, a highly skilled craft that has been traded since the Han dynasty (206BCE – 220CE); green jade, used since Neolithic times; the laborious technique of cloisonné, revered by the court and by scholars after its introduction during the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368); and bronze, the material that helped form civilisation, which defined an age and continues to be heralded as one of the most sophisticated materials, produced in China on an unrivalled scale over history.⁴

From around the fifteenth or sixteenth century BCE, the Chinese considered bronze the most noble and admired material. It was used to convey power and wealth, and thought to possess a supernatural or religious quality. Buddhism's popularity spread in the fourth century and bronze was the material chosen to create precious religious sculptures.⁵ Ah Xian's experience with the medium began in 2004. He travelled to the city of Nanchang in south-eastern China to work with craftsmen there and began creating busts and life-sized figures, decorating their surfaces with cultural motifs, such as ancient *taotie* masks, and covering others in gold leaf.⁶

In all his experimentation, the human form has remained a central subject in Ah Xian's work. Through it he explores identity, history and human interaction. He began painting nudes in the 1980s, considered radical and rebellious in China at the time, and has continued to depict the human form in a variety of guises. 'Metaphysica' corresponds with a stage in his career when sculptural busts had become a trademark. Hairless, and



with eyes gently closed at rest or in meditation, these faces have an enchanting and serene quality. At a glance, they appear anonymous or generic, but on closer inspection each conveys its own life and personality. Life-cast from female models, their subtlety and individuality is revealed if we look closely, be it by posture, age or the hint of a smile. Ah Xian has always had an interest in depicting the nude human form, a mode of representation primarily associated with Western artistic traditions. However, by choosing to sculpt Chinese figures, he connects the language of Western art to people of his own cultural heritage. Often working with inexperienced models, including friends and family, Ah Xian constantly navigates the values of the two cultures he inhabits; he has acknowledged that it is difficult to ask sitters in China to pose as models for casting. The human form has its own long history in Chinese art, most famously the terracotta army found in Xi'an, in the tomb of Emperor Qin Shi Huang (259–210BCE) — a massive group of around 8000 life-sized clay figures, yet similarly each depicting an individual person.

The traditional motifs of flora and fauna delicately decorate the surface of Ah Xian's earlier sculptures, but with the 'Metaphysica' busts, he has arranged the balance between body and object in a new way. Objects float above their heads — where an *usnisa*⁷ or angel's halo would emerge — appealing to the realm of thoughts and dreams, the domain of the spiritual and the metaphysical, a place where we may look for meaning beyond physical parameters. As the artist has said: 'The top of our head (brain) is always where our wishes / imaginations / spiritual souls linger



around. [The] skull is like a skylight to link up our emotions and soul with something up there.⁸

A variety of auspicious symbols, animals and Buddhist motifs crown these busts. Fashioned from brass and bronze, they are coloured to contrast with the figure's bronze patina. The crane, a symbol of longevity believed to live for 600 years and to carry immortals to heaven, stands on a tortoise, another symbol of longevity and one of the four revered ancient animals.⁹ The fish is a symbol of abundance: here, with a pearl in its mouth, considered a treasure or charm as well as representing feminine beauty and purity.¹⁰ The Buddha hand holding a lotus is common in Buddhist art. The lotus represents purity; a beautiful flower that rises from the mud, its bloom representing enlightenment.¹¹ Another distinctly Buddhist image appears in *Metaphysica: Maitreya* — an image of the 'Future Buddha' depicted in characteristic form as the round and happy figure synonymous with Chinese Buddhism today. The immortal featured in *Metaphysica: Immortal on deer* is likely to be Shou Lao, the Daoist god of long life and luck, and is commonly depicted with a deer. Both are powerful symbols of longevity.

Anthropomorphic forms have an ancient history in Chinese art, most notably in bronze sculpture, and the stylised figure of a bird with a human head has been particularly associated with Sanxingdui culture of the late Shang dynasty (c.1766–1122BCE). The happy and lucky symbol of a baby has been popular in papercuts, historic painting, folk art and seen in abundance in *nianhua* (New Year posters), which influenced Communist Party

'Art is what I love! Being creative is very exciting, challenging and mysterious – it always amazes me. I just follow my heart and passion to go further and further.'

Ah Xian

propaganda imagery. Cicadas were one of the few insects to have appeared in Chinese art as early as the Shang dynasty and continue to be replicated and worn as charms as symbols of regeneration, youth and new life.¹² Pigeons or doves have been associated with long life in folk art and were carved into the end of jade sceptres that were presented to elders in the Han dynasty (206BCE –220CE).¹³ Rabbits and hares have been very popular in Chinese art; the rabbit an important Daoist motif, symbolising the moon and representing immortality.¹⁴

These objects, many of which have been culturally significant symbols for centuries, are also commonly found in China today. They were collected by the artist at markets and roadside stalls in Beijing, commercial areas where old and new are often confused. Such places of ancient trade still lie in the fast developing capital — a city where ideas of tradition and technology, labour and manufacture, import and export, east and west — are constantly challenged. While the objects Ah Xian incorporates are relatively common and not necessarily precious, they carry cultural meaning. The pairing of object and bust adds playfulness to the European-style classical sculpture, making distinct references to the iconography of East and West. Ah Xian alters the meaning of both figure and object to create works that are idiosyncratic and invite new interpretations. He explores the idea that context can provide different meanings, and that what we worship, value or reject depends on our heritage, beliefs and personality.

Inspired by his experiences in both Australia and China, Ah Xian manages production in one country but conception and presentation is connected to another. His work is the culmination of moving between and belonging to two cultures, carrying something familiar and foreign in both places. Ah Xian's continuing investigations into historic materials have enabled him to take a variety of approaches, with each surface and texture inviting different treatments, and in each case allowing his sculpture to evolve with the reinvention of a traditional art. Through 'Metaphysica', he contributes to an important cross-cultural dialogue within contemporary art, a process that continues to redefine both figurative art and explorations into tradition.

Tarun Nagesh is Assistant Curator, Asian Art, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

'My art is about fantasy,
imagination and being human.'

Ah Xian

GLOSSARY

Metaphysics

The branch of philosophy that deals with first principles, including the sciences of being (ontology) and of the origin and structure of the universe (cosmology). It is always intimately connected to a theory of knowledge (epistemology). (*Macquarie Dictionary*, revised 3rd edition)

Patina

A film on the surface of bronze caused by oxidation, formed through age or artificially through a chemical process.

Cloisonné

An enamelling technique in which strips of gold, brass, silver, copper or other metals are welded to a metal backing and the resulting spaces are filled with vitreous enamel paste. The creation is then fired, ground smooth and polished.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Suhanya Raffel and Lynne Seear, 'Human human' in *Ah Xian* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2003, p.9.
- 2 Fourteen paintings from this series were donated by the artist to the Queensland Art Gallery in 2012, in addition to one painting previously acquired by the Gallery.
- 3 Email from Ah Xian, dated 15 October 2003, referenced in endnote 8 in Raffel and Seear, p.15.
- 4 These materials were used in traditional processes; layers of sap applied to carved timber to produce lacquerware; enamel separated by strips of gold wire to create 'cloisons' for his cloisonné works.
- 5 Christian Deydier, *Chinese Bronzes*, Rizzoli, New York, 1980, p.15.
- 6 Email from the artist to the author, 18 January 2013.
- 7 The protuberance on the top of Buddhist sculpture, represented as a chignon or flame that sometimes carries a deity.
- 8 Artist statement, 2009.
- 9 ST Yeo and Jean Martin, *Chinese Blue and White Ceramics*, Arts Orientalis, Singapore, 1978, p.303.
- 10 Yeo and Martin, p.307-10.
- 11 Meher McArthur, *Reading Buddhist Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2002, p.125.
- 12 Patricia Bjaaland Welch, *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*, Tuttle Publishing, Singapore, 2008, p.93.
- 13 Welch, p.71.
- 14 Welch, p.142.

ABOVE

Ah Xian / *Metaphysica: Maitreya* 2007 / Bronze and brass / Gift of the artist through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation 2010. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

OPPOSITE LEFT

Ah Xian / *Metaphysica: Buddha hand with lotus* 2007 / Bronze and brass / Purchased 2009 with funds from Tim Fairfax, AM, through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

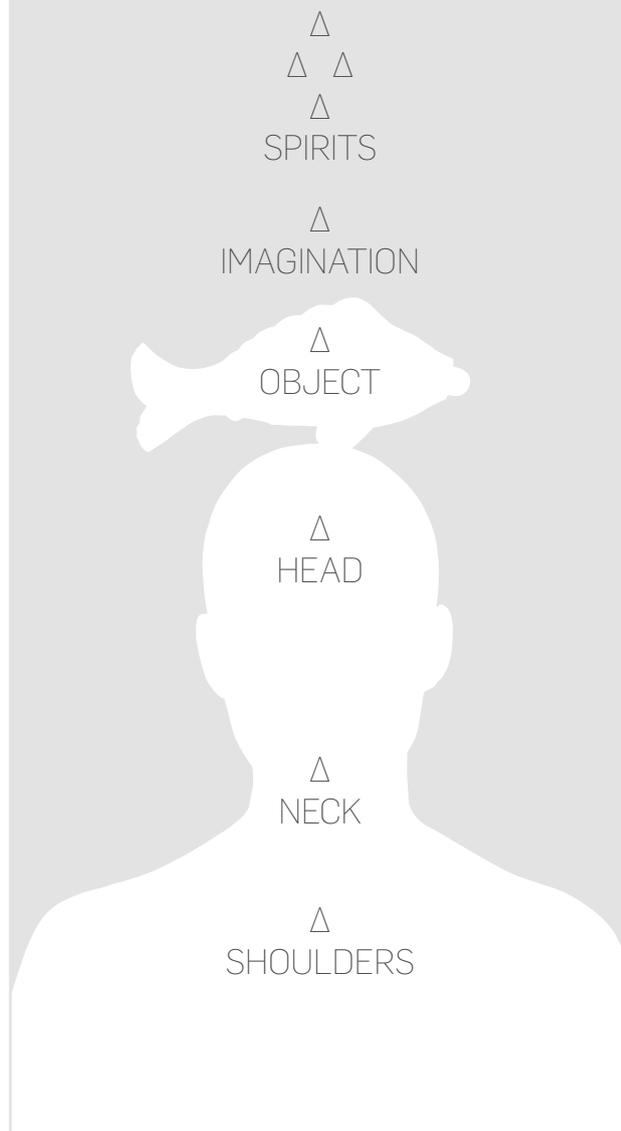
ARTIST'S DEFINITION

met • a • phys • i • c • a /,metə'fɪzɪkəl/ n[C]

A group of figurative sculpture works with a randomly selected object on top of each head, the part of the study of PHYLOSOPHART by Ah Xian that is concerned with trying to understand and express the nature and meaning of art and life.



Ah Xian formulated a diagram to explain the concept of these works:



ON REFLECTION

- What is your heritage?
- What does this mean to you?
- What are some traditional art forms specific to your culture and heritage?
- How could these be reinterpreted in contemporary culture?

CREATE A PORTRAIT OF YOURSELF OR OF A PERSON YOU ADMIRE AND REFLECT ON ASPECTS OF THEM THAT CAPTURE YOUR IMAGINATION.

- How could you represent this person?
- What symbols or metaphors do you associate them with?
- What symbolic objects does this person love, appreciate or enjoy?
- Are there any cultural motifs you can include that are related to the person's heritage?
- Is there a particular artistic technique that corresponds with the person's heritage, interests or background?
- Think about colour and texture, and how these might affect meaning.
- Choose a medium (plaster, resin, pen and ink, watercolour, or found objects) to represent the person.

ABOVE
Ah Xian with unfinished busts from the 'Metaphysica' series

OPPOSITE FROM TOP
Completed busts from the 'Metaphysica' series, 2007

'Metaphysica' series production process, 2007 / Photographs courtesy: The artist



THE WORKING PROCESS

Ah Xian's 'Metaphysica' series employs the ancient craft of bronze casting. It is a technique historically used in the manufacture of images of the Buddha and Bodhisattva, an enlightened being who is often portrayed with a mandorla of flame on the topknot. Ah Xian gives a contemporary twist to tradition by replacing the usual spiritual symbol of the flame with more everyday objects, including a fish, a rabbit, a statue of an immortal or a Buddha.



Ah Xian casts each bust in a lengthy process, using female models in China. First he creates an initial set of (negative) moulds from which a (positive) resin-fibre cast of each bust is taken. Then he polishes and refines the cast, which forms the base for the bronze version. The resin-fibre cast is covered in wax before being encased in a mould, from which the final cast is taken at a bronze factory.



Each bust is subtly different in patina and expression, and is further distinguished by the object on top of its head. Ah Xian finds the objects in markets and roadside stalls in Beijing.

Once cast, the bronze busts are sandblasted to create an even and smooth surface. To achieve the desired colour, the busts surface is heated with a gas flame blower and then a chemical spray is applied. Heat is required to gain the desired colour quickly.

A final layer of wax is applied to the bronze surface to seal and polish it before Ah Xian paints or applies any gold leaf to it. Ah Xian uses these techniques to reanimate old traditions with his own vibrant sense of pleasure and enjoyment.



TOUR VENUES

Gladstone Regional Art Gallery & Museum

13 April – 9 June 2013

Cairns Regional Gallery

28 June – 11 August 2013

Caboolture Regional Art Gallery

17 August – 5 October 2013

Stanthorpe Regional Art Gallery

31 October – 8 December 2013

Artspace Mackay

14 December 2013 – 25 January 2014

Rockhampton Art Gallery

7 February – 23 March 2014

Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery

29 March – 11 May 2014

Mundubbera Regional Art Gallery

17 May – 3 July 2014

Logan Art Gallery

8 August – 13 September 2014

Noosa Regional Gallery

10 October – 23 November 2014

Gympie Regional Gallery

29 November 2014 – 1 February 2015

TYTO Regional Art Gallery, Ingham

7 February – 29 March 2015

John Mullins Memorial Art Gallery, Miles

17 April – 31 May 2015

Redland Art Gallery

5 July – 16 August 2015

Touring exhibition coordinators: Helen Bovey and Caitlin Pijpers

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COVER

Ah Xian / *Metaphysica: Red Fish* (detail) 2007 / Bronze, brass and oil paint / Purchased 2009 with funds from Tim Fairfax, AM, through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

ABOVE

Installation view of the 'Metaphysica' series in the exhibition 'The China Project', at the Gallery of Modern Art, 2009 / QAGOMA Photography

QAGOMA



TOURING

The Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art provides a program of touring exhibitions and related services to regional Queensland.