

A THEORY OF EVOLUTION

Shih Chieh Huang's kinetic sculptures keep growing

BY MARGARET CARRIGAN

TRYING TO DESCRIBE Shih Chieh Huang's motile sculptures feels almost like taking a high school biology exam. First you have to identify the specimen by how it looks and moves, then you have to dissect it by its different bodily systems: exocrine, circulatory, skeletal, and so forth. Huang's organisms are far from organic, however. Instead, they're made up of everyday plastic items, like water bottles, shopping bags, household appliances, computer parts, toys, and colorful LED lights. Assembled by the artist into large, intricate forms reminiscent of deep-sea monsters, these simple, inert materials become living, breathing creatures. Some have rib cages fashioned out of Tupperware and zip ties that keep their electric circuitry in place. Others have a vascular system of tubes that circulate a neon-infused Mr. Clean solution by peristaltic pump. The sculptures' membrane-like plastic appendages systematically respire up and down thanks to a network of small computer cooling fans, timed and controlled by the artist. Most works hang from the ceiling of Huang's studio, their tentacular limbs creating a wave-like whoosh against the floor as they exhale, making one feel as though they're underwater watching giant squids swim by.

According to Huang, the bustling night markets of Taiwan, where he grew up, have indelibly influenced his work. Indeed, his Brooklyn studio—full of blinking lights, shelves displaying cheap toys and trinkets he's picked up at dollar stores and on Amazon, and the ambient buzz of fans and disemboweled electronic devices—feels like a miniature version of Taipei's bustling Shilin market, where fresh fish, produce, electric knickknacks, and neon lights all congeal. The artist came to New York City in 1999 to get his MFA from the School of Visual Arts, where he says he snuck into a computer arts class and picked up some physical computing basics; from there he began

RT DVD Rain Forest
(power.org, 2006, Mixed
media, 38 x 30 x 19 in.)





Seductive
Evolution of
Animated
Illumination, 2013.
Collaboration with
glass masters from
Murano,
modification of
Renaissance style
glass chandelier
with mixed
household
electronics.





ART: Installation view of *Nocturne*, 2011. Mixed media, 120 x 120 x 120 in.

IMAGE: A detail of the inner circuitry of *Nocturne*.



FROM IMAGE: CASEY DOORBEK; SHIH CHIEH HUANG; AND RONALD REIDMAN/FINE ARTS



Huang in his Brooklyn studio with an in-progress sculpture.

crafting his own code to animate his sculptures. Huang's first animatronic works were more compact and floor-bound, like shin-height R2-D2 skeletons. "In undergrad, out in California, I had a lot of space so I did more installation work," he says. "But when I moved to New York my studio was much smaller. I had to downsize! So I started to build everything smaller, tighter." The artist gradually started constructing bigger works again once he found a larger workspace. "I've always been more interested in creating work that functions more as an environment," he says.

After graduating from SVA in 2001, Huang participated in a handful of group shows before snagging solo exhibitions in 2003, at the former Star 67 gallery in Williamsburg and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei. Since then he's been showing consistently at venues across the globe, like the 2007 Venice Biennale Taiwan Pavilion and San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in 2013; the following year he was named a TED Talk Fellow. As one of the first Smithsonian Artist Research Fellows, his fieldwork pushed him to fine-tune the mechanisms behind his tentacled sculptures' movements. "While I was

there, I was spending a lot of time looking at all these bio-organism specimens in their collection, like how they move and stuff," Huang says. "I realized they needed to be more fluid. Instead of these fans just switching on and off, what if I could slowly turn them on, and then stop them in the middle if I wanted to?" He kept trying to design increasingly complex computer codes to better approximate a living organism's movement, but, he says, "I couldn't write the program—I'm really a terrible programmer!" Thanks to iPhone apps like Luminaire, however, Huang can now control the respiratory rhythm of his creations to his liking. "I think the app is for people who are doing theater or concert lighting. But when I saw it, I was like, 'I think this can work.' Now I can make the works communicate with each other. Some of them take 20 seconds to turn on; then another part of it turns on or something." The result is a slower, more responsive range of motion.

The evolution of Huang's creatures continues in his latest solo exhibition, "Reusable Universes," opening June 24 at the Worcester Art Museum in Worcester, Massachusetts. Comprised of more than 100 site-specific sculptural elements that will primarily be mounted from the gallery's 18-foot ceilings, the show is his largest immersive installation to date. In addition to new works, Huang will create on site an iteration of his 2002 work *Organic Concept*, an infinitely scalable sculpture made from rolls of painter's plastic and box fans, as part of a public performance at the museum on July 20. "In planning this show, I thought, 'What if these things started to grow up?' Maybe they'll become more complex. Maybe they'll have more bags attached to their bodies or something," he says. "So they just keep growing." **—EW**



Battery Puppy with Helmet. © Its Heavy. 2005. Mixed media. 14 x 20 x 18 in.



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Markus Lüpertz with works in progress at his studio near Berlin.

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ON THE COVER:
Rachel Maclean, photographed by Patrick Raftery.



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JUNE/JULY 2017

MARKUS LÜPERTZ

A MEISTER
MEETS AMERICA

EILEEN QUINLAN

AN EXCLUSIVE
PORTFOLIO

+

Dineo Seshee Bopape,
Shih Chieh Huang,
Ali Banisadr

DEL
KATHRYN
BARTON
ORNATE
OBSESSIONS

← RACHEL
MACLEAN
GIRLY
GROTESQUE



21

short
The Kaviarfactory in
Norway



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LEFT
**Shih-Chieh
Huang**
010-303 (power
on), 2003
Mixed media,
29 x 21 x 24 in.

88

RIGHT
Laurel Sparks
Codex, 2016. Acrylic, ink, crayon,
marker, paper mâché, glitter,
collage, cutouts, dirt, beach glass,
dental floss, linen on canvas,
23 x 23 in.



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