

Galerie für Gegenwartskunst, E-WERK Freiburg i.Br.

Steph Huang | the water that bears the boat

Ausstellung | Fr 2.2.2024 – So 17.03.2024

Steph Huang's exhibition *the water that bears the boat* centres on the complexity of the Rhine as a dynamic system that is constantly changing influenced by human actions and beliefs.

Today's appearance of the Rhine has fundamentally been shaped by two ideas at the beginning of the 19th century. Based on Enlightenment thinking, the neighbouring states of the Rhine imagined it as a straight waterway for the fast and reliable transport of goods, people and ideas. In less than a century, they jointly realised this ambitious project by advanced engineering. The straightened Rhine brought "liberal progress along the metaphorical river of history" (Yao 2022:3) as one of the most important trade waterway for the global movement of goods (Yao 2022: 58).

At the same time as the river was being fundamentally altered by human intervention, the Romantics celebrated it as wild nature of sublime beauty (Yao 2022: 53). In their poetry, they transformed it into an idealised "natural" state" (JY 2022: 56). As a universal romantic symbol, the Rhine attracted more and more people and developed its own economic logic as a popular tourist destination.

Using a variety of materials and manual techniques such as glass blowing, glass, plaster or bronze casting, assemblage as well as film and sound-based media, Steph Huang transforms historical, material and phenomenological dimensions of the Rhine into minimalist sculptures and poetically charged installations. The exhibition explores the multi-layered entanglement of the river as a rational transport route, as a source of food, as a tourist pleasure destination and as a romantic place of longing with its fragile ecology.

With her artistic work Steph Huang exposes the complex histories, entanglements, human desires and behaviours embedded in living matter. The Rhine thus becomes tangible as an assemblage of human labour, human imagination, hydrological and ecological conditions and forces.

Galerie I

1 *Saltness*

A wind harp made of hand-blown amber-coloured glass at the entrance to the exhibition poetically evokes the natural power of the wind. The fish-shaped casted metal toggle brings to mind the Rhine as a food reservoir and fishery.

2 *Pause; 5 Transporting*

Two glass pretzels ***Pause (2)*** and an empty crate of beer ***Transporting (5)*** evoke sensual delights. They stir reflection on everyday enjoyment and pleasure in the age of mass consumption.

4 *Sunrises and Sunsets*

The river as a romantic place of longing for those weary of civilisation is addressed in this five-part wall piece. Its title alludes to romantic images of sunrises and sunsets. Huang, however, breaks with their kitschy colour palette by printing fragmented black and white photos on smoked glass. They show a river at low tide, when you can see rubbish washed up on the riverbed. Alluvial flotsam and waste is also photographed for one of the light boxes ***The Driftwood (22)***.

6 *Carpeting*

The three-part work refers to the requirements of the river for tourism and trade. The blue carpet could be from a tourist ship. The yellow advertising pages embedded in the carpet-like canvases promote transport services. In order to increase travel according to capitalist logic, the tourism industry advertises the natural beauty conjured up by the Romantics. Huang's work exposes the paradox of the commercialisation of the Rhine as a natural space, which leads to more traffic and thus further pollution and destruction of the river ecology.

7 *Pillar*

This multi-part sculpture calls to mind posts for boats at river piers and thus shipping traffic on the Rhine. The notches look like marks of water levels. These can fluctuate greatly due to global warming and sometimes make the Rhine unnavigable. The pieces of paper and metal moulded into the plaster casts suggest also a drill core that makes the deposits of civilisation waste visible.

9 *Promenade Along the Time*

The starting point for this work is the shape of a cable reel, which Huang abstracts and defamiliarizes. In one of the three curved glass tubes, ladybirds seem to move towards an unknown destination. The work reflects time, of which we do not know what it will bring and how the state of the world and the river will change.

8 *Cherry Picker*; 3 *Liaison*; 11 *Bitterness*; 17 *Breeze*

Painted plywood panels with leaf motifs are recurring leitmotifs in the exhibition.

Quotes of hands from European paintings of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance printed on small copper plates address touch and the transience of worldly desires. The reduced minimalist forms of these works also brings to mind modernism's ideas of pure utility rejecting ornamentation as well as its concern with consumption and waste. The octagonal frames of *Liaison*, *Bitterness* and *Breeze* are reminiscent of window shapes of country houses in Taiwan.

Gallery II

12 *Mapping*

Research material and memorabilia from Huang's Rhine excursions are exhibited on the minimalist display. They bring the perspective of an artist who experiences and observes the Rhine as an outsider.

14 *For Goods*

On her train journey, Huang filmed the concrete pave banks of the straightened Rhine with its gigantic cargo ships. Other transport infrastructure such as railway bridges and container ports along the route also come into view. The linear tracking shot underlines the function of the river as an efficient superhighway for goods. The black-and-white film reveals the structure of the river as a system of staggered and overlapping horizon lines that serves as the most direct connection between the North Sea and Basel.

13 *For Humans*

This footage shows the hilly landscape between Bingen and Koblenz filmed from a tourist boat. The Romantics praised this section of the river for its wild nature and sublime beauty.

In Huang's film, it is captured panorama-like, from a circling or meandering perspective in slow motion. The numerous cargo ships, tourist boats and the railway line in the shots disturb the impression of untouched nature. Filmed in black and white, the river scenery appears morbid as if revealing its creeping destruction.

16 *Served Chilled*

The exhibition room is bathed into cool blue light by the neon lettering. The slogan is a recommendation for the consumption of white wine and an allusion to the grapes that thrive so splendidly on the fertile banks of the Rhine. As a motto, it stands for the relaxed attitude to life of a society that can fulfil all its needs with sophistication.

21 *Deep Shallow*

The large-format video installation creates a nostalgic atmosphere. In close-up shots, we see a fisherman in a rocking boat rhythmically moving a fishing line trying to attract prey. A player improvises virtuoso violin music to the rhythm of the line. The creaking of the boat and the wistful music are reminiscent of the bygone days of Rhine fishing, when people still had time, of stories and songs of fishermen and sea. The work also captures the beauty of the minimalist line formation on the bottom of the ship.

19 *Each Person a Bubble*

The sounds of water, the clatter of chains and cables while mechanically deploying nets on a commercial fishing boat are captured in the sound installation ***Each Person a Bubble***.

Their harsh noise alternating with the violin music of ***Deep Shallow*** makes present the industrial use of the waters.

The glass loudspeakers bring to mind soap bubbles, drops of water or Christmas tree baubles. They refer to the glass industry in the city of Hsinchu, Taiwan, which produced glass Christmas tree decorations for export in the 1960s and 1970s.

20 *Landscaping*; 18 *Liquidity*

A hand-forged steel basin ***Landscaping* (20)** is placed under one of the spheres, as if catching a drop of water. The double bowl object ***Liquidity* (18)** contains samples of polluted water from the Dreisam.

22 *The Driftwood*; 23 *The Angler*; 24 *The View*

Three light boxes are placed in the long, narrow room as views of the Rhine. Many people like to look out over the water and see ships gliding past. The work ***The View* (24)** doubles the view with two back figures looking out over the water. As a topos of Romanticism, the back figures accentuate the view as a longing expectation. Through the light boxes advertising devices, this work highlights to the commercialisation of this longing.

Steph Huang

(b. Taiwan) lives and works in London. She received her MA in sculpture from the Royal College of Art, 2021.

Solo exhibitions (selection): Public Gallery, London (2023); Taipei Fine Arts Museum (2022); Volt, Eastbourne (2022); Goldsmiths CCA, London (2022); mother's tankstation, London (2022).

Group exhibitions (selection): Galerie du Monde, Hong Kong (2023); Bloomberg New Contemporaries, Humber Street Gallery, Hull and South London Gallery, London (2022); Staffordshire St, London (2022); AplusA Gallery, Venice (2022); Belmacz, London (2021); San Mei Gallery, London (2021, 2020); Bloc Projects, Sheffield (2021); South London Gallery (2021); and Cromwell Place, London (2021).

Huang was awarded the *Mark Tanner Sculpture Award* in 2023, supporting a new body of work to be presented in May 2024 at Standpoint, London. She also received the *Grand Prize in the Taipei Art Awards 2022* for her presentation at Taipei Fine Arts Museum, where she will hold a solo exhibition in 2025.