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"Now you see it"

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Portrait of NABUQI. Photo by Zhu Mo. Courtesy the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong/Shanghai.

# Now You See It NABUQI



NABUQI, *Game and the Importance of Joints*, 2020, copper, wood, stainless steel, paint, 118 x 88 x 112 cm. Courtesy the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong/Shanghai.

BY OPHELIA LAI

In a tenebrous gallery, a curtained cube frame encloses an illumined space filled with artificial palms and potted plants. Their shadows overlap and distort on the thin white fabric, which flutters in the breeze of wall-mounted electric fans. Intermittently the fans and lights switch off like a cut in the scene. This theatricality is intentional in Nabuqi’s *At dusk after the rain... setting sunlight... where light spots in all sizes..... fade, .....washing out... and winding towards..... the end, as a sharp honking is heard... disappear* (2017), commissioned for the group exhibition “Cold Nights” (2017) at Beijing’s UCCA Center for Contemporary Art. Despite the artwork title’s evocation of dramatic exteriors, *At dusk* conjures a stage set of a living room. The curtains and plants serve as familiar signs of domestic comfort, yet the room’s veiled interior remains inaccessible, visible only as shifting shadows to the audience. Nabuqi further distorts the setting with small mirrors that reflect isolated sections of the work and cast ripples of light onto the ceiling.

*At dusk* represents a confluence of the Ulanqab-born artist’s fascination with the ambiguities surrounding notions of authenticity, awareness, and presence. The viewer must negotiate the ways in which the work’s elements appear or disappear, their familiarity and their strangeness, as well as the viewer’s own perplexing position both within and beyond the installation’s obscure thresholds. Perhaps it is unsurprising that Nabuqi is drawn to sites of indeterminacy; in 1999, as a high schooler, she moved to Beijing, where landmarks are constantly subsumed in cycles of demolition and regeneration.

Nabuqi continued her education in the capital, graduating from the Central Academy of Fine Arts with a master’s degree in sculpture in 2013. A few years into her artistic career, she became drawn to the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, who posited that one is not separate (say, by virtue of one’s consciousness) from a world of independent objects, but rather immersed in a world of interrelated entities that are intelligible in the totality of their contexts. “It is by our perceptions of these interrelations that we know that objects are real,” the artist explained. Installations from this period, including *At dusk*, are notable for destabilizing the viewer’s perceptions of space and of the connections between the found objects, often resulting in dissonant clashes of

“real” and “unreal,” the graspable and the elusive.

The artist continued in this vein with the installation *Do real things happen in moments of rationality?* (2018), presented in the main exhibition of the 58th Venice Biennale (2019). While *At dusk* relies on transience and hiddenness in its perceptual play, *Do real things happen* instead bombards the viewer with blatant visual incongruity. Hung on temporary white walls were cloth curtains printed with imagery of bright blue skies and cottony clouds. Artificial plants, foam stones, PVC models of Corinthian columns, and lampposts sit on a floor decal depicting grass, while a mechanized cow sculpture trundles in languid circles on a track. The enveloping work, conceived of as a “sculpture” that the audience can enter,” enacts an absurd diorama of competing clichés (pastoral romanticism, classical grandeur) that fall flat as a result of their material inauthenticity. “All of the objects are essentially decorative, designed to simulate real sceneries that conjure a sense of beauty and goodness,” said the artist. Yet, “assemblages of objects and other spatial forms can evoke real feelings, or déjà vu, or memories we have previously pushed aside and that only resurface when we’re in a certain scenario.” Nabuqi asks, if these simulacra not only manifest as tangible objects but also call forth genuine feelings of pleasure and comfort, are they any less real? Or are the feelings prompted by simulations and by reality “intertwined, inherently difficult to differentiate?”

The artist delved deeper into these ideas with *Fountain: Night Garden* (2020), shown at the Guangdong Times Museum in Guangzhou. The work’s components are “fragmented” in order to examine their objecthood, “so it’s no longer the case that the whole exhibition space is used to manipulate perceptions of the environment.” The centerpiece is a large fountain that is wrapped in multicolored tarp, as if out of use, but that paradoxically continues to spray water. Standing off to the side is a replica of a classical sculpture, shrouded in fabric that has been printed with three images: a 3D model of a fountain along with photos of an urban fountain and a natural geyser in Yellowstone National Park. “In photos, objects exist only as information to be received. The difference lies in cognition. If you see an image of a pyramid, for example, you might say, ‘I know what that is.’ But do you really know what it is as an object? When we talk about the disappearing materiality [of the digital age], we’re actually

talking about our anxieties toward the physical getting replaced by the intangible.” *Fountain: Night Garden* is a realm of reproductions that allude to the multiplying of form and function over time, as exemplified by the iterations of the fountain from natural spring to practical human infrastructure to urban monument to virtual image. Yet the artist rejects the idea that a copy is a replacement, characterizing it instead as “another independent form of materiality. These ‘fakes’ have actually broken away from what they imitate, turning into new objects with new meanings and materialities.” Nabuqi eschews a hierarchical approach that privileges the real or original, for “how do we understand objects—and accept different, even opposing, materialities—when despite the proliferation of new forms we still cling to the old ones? That’s a kind of nostalgia or idealized thinking. Perhaps we take objects of the past for an extant utopia.”

In parallel to staging installations of found objects, Nabuqi creates sculptures that likewise investigate form, space, and imitation. The series *A View Beyond Space* (2015–17) and *The Doubtful Site* (2018) consist of paradoxical exercises in scale—miniature towers and flights of steps that can extend several meters tall or wide. Hand-shaped with clay before being cast in metal and coated in candy-colored varnish or resin, these architectural forms resemble Lilliputian obstacle courses, only traversable in the viewer’s imagination.

Works in Nabuqi’s 2021 solo show at Hong Kong’s Edouard Malingue Gallery lean further into abstraction and metatextuality. Silkscreen prints created during the pandemic flatten her already abstracted sculptural forms, including tiny red ladders and a green cage-like grid. One print depicts scarlet peanut shapes similar to the biomorphic paper-clay pieces of an in-progress sculpture, which in turn imitates a basin she saw in a photo of Henry Moore’s studio. The influence of the British sculptor appears again in *Game and the importance of joints* (2020), a winding steel frame painted fire-truck red with a string of ultramarine blocks at the top, like a bead maze. Among the wooden blocks are two metal cubes attached to a curved Moore-esque form. “A miniature view of a playground is hidden within what appears to be a child’s toy,” Nabuqi hinted. It’s hard to pinpoint what she means even after a long look at the work, but therein lies the allure of her enigmatic structures—the slow unravelling of what may or may not be there.