

May 2022

Artforum

"Yu Ji"

Link: <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202205/yu-ji-88447>



View of "Yu Ji," 2022. Photo: Eva Herzog.

Yu Ji

SADIE COLES HQ | DAVIES STREET

Over the past few years, Yu Ji invited men to her studio to pose for her, asking them to test the limits of their bodies—to strain, to exhaust themselves, to go perhaps beyond their physical capacities—as she observed. Boredom, fatigue, entropy, meditation, transformation, transcendence: How might these states manifest in sculpture? Later, from memory, she molded their taut limbs and striving torsos in clay, using the studies to make resin molds, which she filled with concrete.

Alongside other mixed-media works, nine of these concrete bodies—none of them whole—were scattered throughout Ji's recent exhibition "Against Shadows." Clustered on the floor at the front of the gallery were four stony corporeal fragments: truncated torsos sitting and arched, twisted and bent over, legs lopped off at the knees, shins, ankles. One of these, *Flesh in Stone – Rema Rema 2112*, 2021, a pair of pale thighs, buttocks exposed, leans on a chunk of concrete that has been roughly broken on one side, its corner filled in—mended? ameliorated?—with inky black soap. Nestled in the jagged material, the substance shines and appears precious, like the interior of a cracked-open geode. *Jadeite Joint No.1*, 2021, engages in playful material trickery: A narrow torso is gently inclined, balanced on one footless leg, the knee and partial thigh of which has been replaced with dark-green soap, carefully smoothed so that it resembles the mineral of the title. The other leg has been hewn away, exposing a curved rebar that ends in a concrete stump.

Poised between rubble and relic, the sculptures evoke both urban detritus and ancient statuary. Ji likes to explore urban sites of destruction or abandonment in her native Shanghai and elsewhere, observing how things fall apart, degrade, and sometimes sway, like bodies. She has also traveled widely to see archaeological artifacts in Cambodia, China, and India. In Ji's "Jadeite Joint" and "Flesh in Stone" series, 2012–, these references fuse in the fragmented, flexing bodies that can also be read as anatomical models, records of labor, hybrid beings, and incomplete and provisional things.

Choreographed throughout the room, as though unfolding in time, were sculptures of limbs bound together, for instance *Flesh in Stone – Ghost NO.2*, 2018, featuring multiple versions of an extending leg (one in concrete, three in plaster) fixed to the wall with two iron bands; and *Flesh in Stone – Spontaneous Decision NO.2*, 2021, a contorted form screwed into a wooden stool. Ji has said she is interested in materials "categorised as having no value," and that every substance "has its own charge or energy." The modest austere materials of *Column – Untitled NO.2*, 2021, three slender helical wood columns that hung from the ceiling by strands of blue neoprene, have an Arte Povera inflection, as do the nearby *Ta Jama – Olive #1* and *#2*, both 2021, made up of craggy, boulder-size lumps of molded and polished soap that perhaps mimic onyx, jade, or other rarities.

In the video piece *Against Shadows*, 2021, which montages two performances, from 2021 and 2017, we saw Ji working on one of her "Flesh in Stone" sculptures. An assistant holds it steady as she swings her arms high and bears down on it with a heavy mallet, chipping away at its limbs, baring its interior armature. "I always find myself pursuing forms that are not clear-cut, that are even obscure, to the point of being ineffable," Ji says. The mute weight of the unmonumental body asserts itself, awkward and incidental, cherished and broken—in a language of its own that tests the limits of recognition.

— Emily LaBarge