

A brief interview between artist Bui Cong Khanh and curator, Zoe Butt

Zoe Butt: In the last year, you have produced a major body of work surrounding the idea of 'juice'. This idea of 'juice' has been visualized as a personalized soda can in paintings (oil on canvas and gouache on paper), and initially was also planned as a series of ceramic cans as an installation. For me, this idea of the readily thrown away 'can' appears central to the series, focusing on the habit of consuming objects and ideas without thinking of the value of the materials consumed (which are also most often wasted). Was there a particular reason that you chose to focus on the idea of the soda-can? Is there a particular link between the can and the context of Vietnam?

Bui Cong Khanh: Your thoughts are true in relation to my ideas concerning "object", "material values" and "consumption." The starting point of the idea for "Juice" is a little like a prank, where the humor with each subject is very important, particularly for contentious subjects such as religion, politics, the idea of cloning, the issue of power and control in society; but also in relation to everyday life in Vietnam, the work of the prostitute, young poets, old men, their sadness or happiness. They are all canned and contained in 'Juice', to consume in a cheap and easy way. We don't have to think of them as social problems when it is so easy to swallow.

ZB: In this new series of 'Juice' paintings, we have 'Labor power', 'Television' and 'Sentiment' amongst other kinds of 'juice'. Can you tell me a little bit more about why you chose these particular four titles and corresponding images?

BCK: The painting, 'Labor Power' refers to a concept of Karl Marx who always used this phrase in his discussion of 'Workforce'. The body of the character in the can is the body of an artist. The intelligentsia are weak and thin, the heavy weight of the work they carry on their shoulders is transferred to the people who carry out the job they will not necessarily reap the rewards. In 'Television', I refer to how everyday life has become more and more developed and efficient where television has become more and more useful. But the harmful effects of television is slowly killing our cultural values. We all depend on television, for the quick and simple entertainment, but the result is everything has become so insipid. In 'Sentiment', there is an image of a man clutching his belly with his arms. It is as if his arms are embracing the can, a reference I also want to link to the Vietnamese popular entertainment of the 'Bia Om' (escort or strip club). When some people are sad or happy or senseless, they all go to drink beer, where you can choose to drink with girls who will embrace you. Why do they feel the need to be embraced? Why do they need to drink in this state of mind? A little bit of love can be bought with money?

ZB: 'Life is Consumption' also includes an installation titled 'Sitting on Nothing'. What is the significance of the red chair? Who does this figure represent?

BCK: In Vietnam, the red plastic chair is something you find at street cafes, outside people's homes as they sit and relax, at some political meeting halls and public events. It is a common object in Vietnam. Light, cheap and easy to move. For me, the chair collectively represents a body of people, a way of thinking, an attitude. The chair is something sat on, it is a space for contemplation, productivity and decision making. But what is the subject we are thinking? The figure that interrupts each 'scene' is me. I want to try and make people think that perhaps there is a different way of doing, perhaps there is a need to question why we are doing what we are doing. We all start with zero and try to make something from our ideas.

ZB: All of these subjects seem to refer to the habits and value of human consciousness. Indeed much of your artistic practice has referred to the relationship between mind, body and society. As a trained painter, a graduate from the College of Fine Arts in Ho Chi Minh City, can you tell me more about how you see your art making particular comment on society? (Do you see this as one way your art making operates? What do you think the role of an artist is in Vietnam today?)

BCK: I graduated from the Ho Chi Minh Fine Arts University in 1998. My studies had a long affect on me as a young artist who had a lot of difficulty moving out of the trained shadow of technique and custom. The way that I make art relates to the time in which my life belongs. I know I have inherited a particular culture and its traditions but I do not cling to it to make my art. I am living in the present and find myself inspired by various elements that I think are humorous in their alleviation of unpleasant problems of the society in which I live. As an artist I see it as my responsibility to make art that makes use of this inspiration, to say something with it.