

"Berlin Gallery Weekend 5/6: Guan Xiao," interview by Franklin Melendez, *Kaleidoscope*, April 28, 2017

# KALEIDOSCOPE

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## Berlin Gallery Weekend 5/6: Guan Xiao

INTERVIEW BY FRANKLIN MELENDEZ



Juxtaposing relics both ancient and modern, Beijingbased artist Guan Xiao creates mutant forms and dissonant temporalities in sculpture and video that shed light on our present moment. For her latest solo-her second at Kraupa-Tuskany Ziedler-she looks ahead and explores a future that will never come to pass.

*Interview by Franklin Melendez/ Photography by Franziska Sinn*

**Over the past few years, you have been examining ways of seeing in contemporary visual regimes. This latest show seems to mark a shift in perspective: from “ways of seeing” to “ways of physically inhabiting.” This is a subtle shift, but one that strikes me as significant-is it for you?**

I’m concerned with people’s mutated situations and shifting habits in the complex environment we currently live in. That includes technology, but also numerous other factors. Like you said, these perspectives ( or if you want nuances) are not necessarily competing against each other. And ultimately I believe I’m still working on “ways of seeing,” but under a wider purview. While I was preparing this exhibition, I was also invited by MuHKA in Antwerp to make a video especially for them under the theme: “A Temporary Futures Institute.” I was just thinking about similar issues right around that time-particularly, the huge success of sci-fl movies in recent years.

**Is that genre an important source of inspiration for you?**

Sci-fl movies have become super hot over the last few years and I love sci-fl movies, but at some point I also started to wonder why all the cool, eye-catching special effects in these movies barely touched me. And I figured it out: the economic system always wants to sell the future to us-it has to but the truth is the future doesn’t exist. Or better put, the future that we want will never come, it’s an illusion. And the more we over-imagine it, the faster our hopes and expectations about it will fall apart. In considering all this, I also started to realize where my sculptures came from. Sculpture is always about physicality; no matter what kind of fancy theories we apply to it, it’s always an object existing in a certain environment. And my sculptures share a spiritual belonging with my city, Beijing.

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**The underlying politics of speculative futures certainly resonate with the title of the show: “Living Sci-Fi.” It’s all about timelines projected from the present and their use-value. For me, it also couldn’t help but evoke the urbanization that is currently reshaping Asia and mainland China, where the “future city” seems to have materialized in places like Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou. I know this is a somewhat problematic confluence, but I wonder if these urban spaces are at all materially resonant?**

Not really. When I’m in these cities, I am experiencing them and in a way it has nothing to do with art. And when I’m working, it’s like I’m totally removed from the city-it’s another whole system with its own logic.

**Do you think we can imagine an endgame to this process?**

I don’t think we can imagine it-perhaps only experience it. And I believe this is the only thing we can do and the best. Any construct or illusion cannot last any longer. Actually, this process of “imagining” is exactly what’s killing the real imagination.



**Exactly, because “imagining” and “imaging” are things that have become increasingly confused, particularly in our visual economies, including urbanscapes, cinema and the Internet. Do you think these sectors feed one into the other?**

I think the redrawing of urban space and the Internet are two very different situations. I can see why you bring them together, as they both have deeply transformed our life and urban ecology, but I believe they are built on different foundations-where the mutation of our urban space is more based on economic interests, the Internet on human needs.

**The new three-channel piece in the show, *Degue, Degue, Degue*, engages this broad range of shifts by reflecting our own fragmented temporality. In doing so, it also indirectly illustrates why we have this need to imagine a cohesive narrative ahead of us. Is that the case?**

First, I want to say: Don’t think (or imagine) too much. That’s one of the major problems of the modern times and of human life in general. If an orientation could be predicted, then it wouldn’t be real-that’s only people’s desire or political agenda. A real orientation can only be found in true experience. I don’t think art should be directly responsible for searching or proposing any directions. But I do believe it can help us find our true experience as humans.

**If experience is the determining factor, will anything else be left behind after us, or maybe it does not matter?**

I believe there’s no future, or the future and the past are all the same. What happened in the past is exactly what’s going to happen again in the future. Past and future are just words to describe what we have had, and what we strive to have. So I don’t really care what will be left after us. I’m rather trying to notice every moment of my present life.