

看不見的手

他記得那些已經流逝的歲月。

猶如從積滿灰塵的窗框舉望時，

逝去的時光仍依稀可見，祇是觸不可及。

所見的均已模糊、遙遠。

王家衛，《花樣年華》，2000年

He remembers those vanished years.
As though looking through a dusty window pane,
The past is something he could see, but not touch.
And everything he sees is blurred and indistinct.

Wong Kar-wai, *In the Mood for Love*, 2000



Angkor, 2014, detail view

頓感對未來日子的懷緬

在王家衛2000年的電影《花樣年華》中，尾聲情淒意切，鏡頭中，寫作人周慕雲（梁朝偉飾）愁腸百結，在吳哥窟廟正面處，正對著一個樹洞喃喃絮語。我們聽不到他說甚麼，其言甚秘，從聖潔的柬埔寨寺廟傳來的颯颯聲掩蓋了他的細語。但是我們都知道慕雲的故事，1960年代他在香港與一位鄰居太太的艷遇現已烟消雲散。影片最後，我們看到樹洞抽枝發芽，猶如一個鳥巢。「一個時代過去了，我們被告知，那時候發生的一人一事已不復存在。」。

故事真的結束了嗎？對於藝術家ZOTI來說，這種形式的緬憶和挽救祇是他的一種現代手法，用於尋求和孕育人們對共有故事和歷史的理解。《最後一位立士》、《白南準的頌歌》、《曲代》等。這些藝術作品雖像用廢墟裏的雜物砌成的，但作品並不是要回望過去。猶如慕雲的細語，藝術家ZOTI的美術作品充滿了活生生的記憶——這些記憶很快會被時間浸沒、竊取或轉型。就像被不可名狀的災難打磨和考驗過，瓷瓶玉竹的碎片成了圖謎的一片拼塊。在重新被賦予角色和重新尋回它們的蹤跡之後，這些碎片有時候可以提升成爲雕塑的架構，暗示著不可預測的未來正在被組建，或成爲某一靜物的一個形狀，與某一故事或歌曲共鳴。這些廢棄的窟洞，又會長出甚麼東西，或會變成誰的巢穴呢？

與王家衛的情愁滿腸的男主角一樣，藝術家ZOTI被過往歲月的遺物所吸引。藝術史學家Christopher Woodward在其2001年《廢墟》一書中寫到，這樣的吸引不一定就是懷舊，但一定是藝術性質的：「我們在思量著廢墟的時候，其實也是在思量著自己的未來。」。

因爲住在悉尼這個對歷史熟視無睹的城市，藝術家ZOTI對廢墟的尋求是從非常微小的物品開始的——建築工地上救回來的盆栽、被丟棄的電視熒屏的碎片，碎片蘊含著舊電視節目的魅影，也反映著將來。對於這位藝術家而言，過去並非一個異域（如L.P.Hatley曾經說過的名言），那時的人們也不是說著不一樣的語言。那個時代其實就是當下。

在1992年，澳洲總理Paul Keating曾言，澳洲將成爲「歐亞」。當時，極少人相信在20年后的今天會證明被他言中了。抵達悉尼機場的國際旅客第一眼看見的廣告牌都是售賣公寓的中文廣告。據最新的人口普查數據，在澳洲，普通話是居英文之後的最多人說的語言。歡迎來到我們的亞洲世紀。藝術家ZOU把自己看作是藝術中間人，遊走於這個新的跨文化的景象之間。他本人是在蘇格蘭長大的，但精神上很被亞洲吸引，那裏是他的創作根基，他是Keating所說的「歐亞」的自然之子。

也就是因爲這個原因，鳴鳥金鷄的秘密故事能引起如此巨大的共鳴。這種黃胸鳥，又稱「朱雀」，每年都候遷於歐、亞之間，是我們的跨國時代的象徵。這種候鳥能超越疆域或國界——可惜這也是它們的瀕危之因。因其壯陽屬性，金鷄在中國被殘酷捕捉，已瀕臨絕種。猶如一代帝王的末日，這物種已處於廢墟狀態。何時我們將再也聽不到它們的麗曲？

在這種境況下，藝術家ZOU對黃腹金鷄的頌讚就與虛空派的傳統非常和諧了——“*momento mori*”傳統，亦即「緬懷往逝」。然而，藝術家的共鳴是如此地強烈，此傳統已遠遠不足以淋漓表達。通過突出鳴鳥的故事，藝術家與情愁滿腸地向牆壁細語的周慕雲沒有兩樣。一個故事一旦被講了出來，哪怕是喃喃而敘的，就已經不再是秘密了。它已被公諸於天下。而通過敘述故事，我們同時也就對下一步要發生的做好了準備，可以坦然自若地迎接它的到來。



Fade to grey still life, 2018, 13 porcelain pieces on found vintage wooden base; Shepparton Art Museum

Feeling a nostalgia for an age yet to come

In the elegiac finale of Wong Kar-wai's 2000 film *In the Mood for Love*, melancholic writer Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung) is seen whispering into a tiny nook in the ruined facade of Angkor Wat. We can't hear what he is saying; his words are secret, hushed by the sacred Khmer temple that looms over him. But we intimately know Mo-wan's story, and his elaborately concealed affair with a neighbour's wife in 1960s Hong Kong, now over. At the end of the film the nook is seen sprouting vegetation like a nest. 'That era has passed,' we are told. 'Nothing that belonged to it exists any more.'

End of story? For the artist NOT, such gestures of remembrance and reparation are just the beginnings of his contemporary practice that seeks to nurture new understandings of our shared stories and histories. *Last man standing*. *Ode to Nam June Paik*. *Song dynasty*. These artworks assemble like remnants from a ruin, but they don't look back. As with Mo-wan's whispered words, NOT's aesthetic offerings are alive with the memory of things – soon to be lost or stolen or transfigured by time. Worn and weathered as if by a catastrophe unknown, ceramic fragments of bottle and bamboo become pieces in a picture puzzle. Recast and retraced, these elements sometimes rise into sculptural scaffolds, suggesting the building of an uncertain future, or find shape in a still life resonant with story or song. What will grow or nest in these ruined nooks?

Like Wong Kar-wai's lovelorn protagonist, NOT is drawn to the debris of the past. In his 2001 book *In Ruins*, art historian Christopher Woodward writes how such an attraction is not necessarily nostalgic but essentially artistic: 'When we contemplate ruins, we contemplate our own future.' Living in Sydney, a city which shrugs off its history with startling insouciance, NOT seeks ruins in the smallest of things – a bounty of bonsai pots rescued from a development site, shards of discarded TV screens clouded by the ghosts of programs past – and reflects on the future. For the artist, the past is not a foreign country (as L. P. Hartley so famously wrote), where they do things differently there. That moment is now.

When, in 1992, Prime Minister Paul Keating declared that Australia's future would be 'Eurasian', very few would have believed that, 28 years later, he would be right. For international visitors to Sydney Airport, the first billboards they will see are in Chinese, advertising apartments for sale, and according to the latest Census figures, Mandarin is Australia's most popular language outside of English. Welcome to our Asian Century. NOT sees himself as an artistic 'go-between' in this new transcultural landscape. Raised in Scotland but aesthetically and spiritually drawn to Asia, where he creatively roosts, he is a natural child of Keating's 'Eurasia'.

Which is why the secret story of the songbird *Emberiza aureola* resonates so powerfully for him. Migrating annually between Europe and Asia, the yellow-breasted bunting or 'rice bird' is very much a symbol of our transnational age. It is a creature that knows no bounds or borders – sadly at its peril. Cruelly hunted in China for its aphrodisiacal qualities, it is now nearing extinction. Like the end of an empire, it is a species in ruins. When will we cease to hear its song?

Viewed in this light, NOT's ode to the yellow-breasted bunting sits very much within the vanitas tradition – a *memento mori* or remembrance of death. But its resonance is too strong for that. By illuminating the songbird's story, the artist is not unlike the nostalgic Chow Mo-wan whispering into his wall. A story, once released, even in a whisper, is no longer secret. It is told. And in its telling we become ready, poised for what comes next.



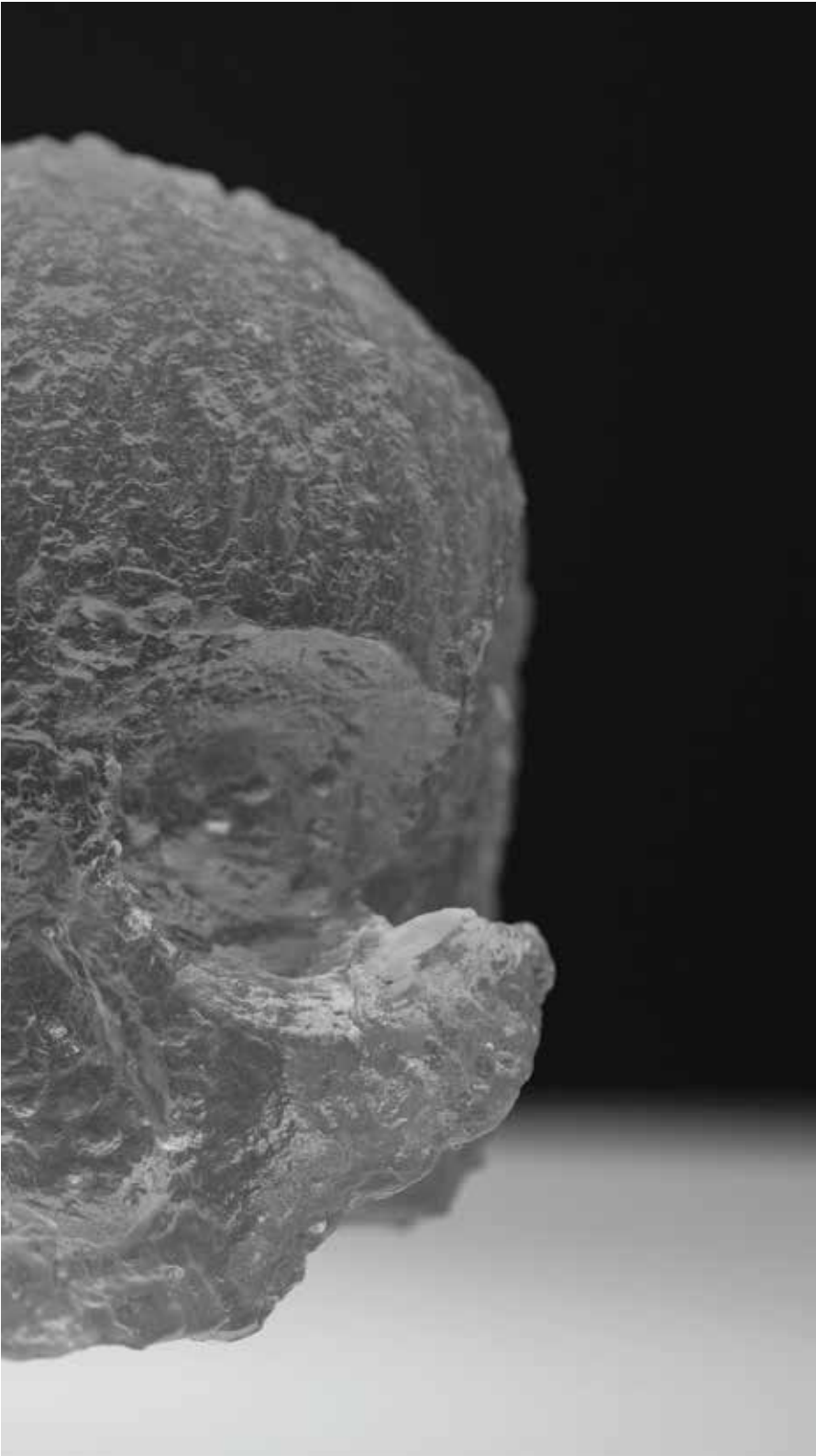
Song dynasty, 2018, studio view, Sydney; 17 solid kiln-formed, cold-worked lead-crystal glass sculptures (clear and black)

植物

Botanical

植

物



The China syndrome, 2018, detail

The absorption method, 2019

While rice cultivation dates back at least 8000 years to China's Pearl River Delta, its history in Australia is much more recent, when Japanese immigrant Jo Takasuka introduced it to then-flood-prone Murray River land in 1906. More than a century later, rice is the thirstiest crop in the Murray Darling Basin (according to recent reports by both the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy), requiring 12.6 million litres per hectare or roughly 21,000 litres of water for a kilogram of rice.

Working with hand-blown cold-worked glass from vintage wooden rice moulds at Canberra Glassworks, NOT makes transparent this seemingly most unsustainable of economies, with the cost of water alone equating to \$21 for a \$2.50 kilo bag of rice. While not questioning the centrality of rice in Chinese culture for millennia, such as its original inclusion in the Chinese character *qi* (meaning essence or spirit), NOT speculates on the ongoing role of rice production in this most environmentally volatile of regions.

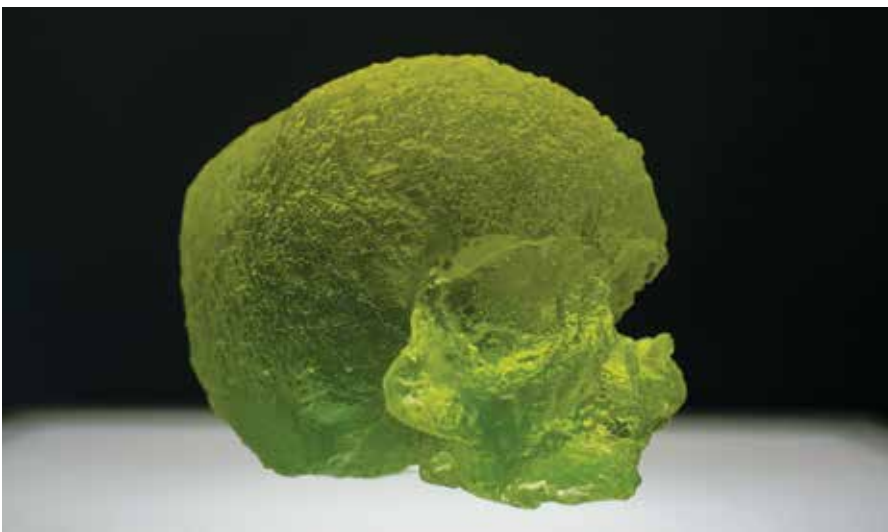


The absorption method, 2019, installation view, 'River on the Brink', S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney, 2019; wooden vintage rice moulds scorched from hand-blown furnace glass, loose kiln-formed glass droplets; image courtesy S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney

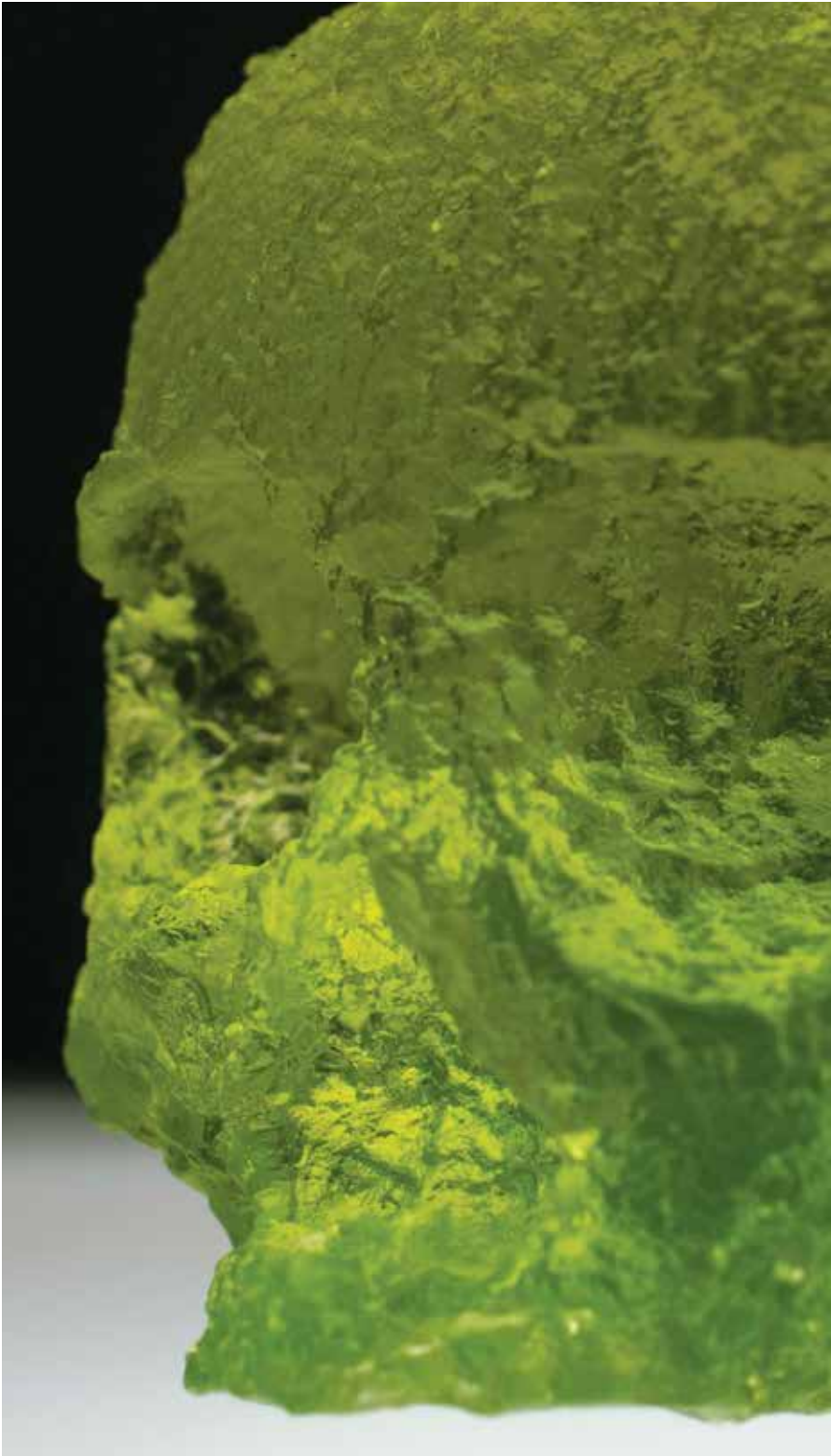
The China syndrome, 2018

The China syndrome takes its name from the 1979 film by James Bridges that, with eerie prescience, was released 12 days before the world learnt of the nuclear power plant accident at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania. Like the film, NOT's *The China syndrome* is about the phenomenology of playing with fire – in the case of this sculpture, four kilos of hot-formed uranium glass shaped into a human skull and then cold-worked at Canberra Glassworks. Here the medium of uranium glass communes directly with the work's message, referring to the threat first raised by Bridges's film that: 'If the [nuclear plant's] core is exposed for whatever reason ... nothing can stop it, and it melts right down through the bottom of the plant, theoretically to China.'

Nearly 40 years since the film raised environmental concerns about unchecked nuclear power, and with China (the world's fastest growing consumer of uranium) now building a fleet of 20 floating nuclear-power stations in the South China Sea, the threat lives on perhaps more silently, with the world currently distracted by a new set of nuclear trigger points in North Korea and Iran. But such recent cautionary tales can only be forgotten at our peril, and with *The China syndrome* NOT transforms the classic symbol of memento mori ('remember death') into an existential thought bubble for possible future action: 'To be, or not to be?' Made vulnerable and child-sized, the uranium-irradiated skull is weighty but graspable, lit up like a loaded question which is otherwise too hot to handle.



The China syndrome, 2018, solid kiln-formed, cold-worked uranium glass; private collection



The China syndrome, 2018, detail

竹

Bamboo





Nestled, 2018, detail; 16 porcelain pieces and found bird's nest on wooden shelf;
Shepparton Art Museum



top left
Hemudu 2, 2018, 2 vitrified black porcelain pieces; private collection

top right
Hemudu, 2018, 3 vitrified black porcelain pieces on charred wooden stand; private collection

bottom
The red wedding, 2016, 9 Ohata-glazed stoneware pieces in found vintage box

Last man standing, 2016

The dizzying sensation of standing on bamboo scaffolding high up in an apartment development in Hong Kong was the stepping-off point for *Last man standing* (2016), an installation comprising earthenware, porcelain and stoneware elements with clear and celadon glazes. For NOT, the feeling of vertigo has become a sense memory; it helps imbue this ceramic meditation on the whirling speed of development currently transforming the artist's home city of Sydney with a poetic melancholy – as if Yang Fudong's *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (2003–07) has been reduced to a single, solitary figure. NOT also ponders the metaphysical materiality of bamboo – sometimes considered a weed – but full of remarkable resilience, flex and strength.



Last man standing, 2016, 18 glazed and unglazed ceramics (earthenware, porcelain and stoneware) in vitrine; private collection



In delirium, walking through the neon lights, 2020, hand-blown glass and neon

鳥

Birds

鳥



Study for *Song dynasty*, 2018, detail

Song dynasty, 2018

We live in an age where nothing can be taken for granted or presumed to outlive our hungry appetite for the now. Nothing, it seems, is forever.

Consider the humble passenger pigeon, once endemic and now extinct (the last, called 'Martha', died at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914), prey to industrial-scale human hunting as a source for cheap food. Now consider the yellow-breasted bunting (*Emberiza aureola*), gorgeously gilded as its name would suggest; a migratory Eurasian songbird, considered by many to be sacred, whose plumed carriage fits neatly into the palm of a human hand.

So sacred is this songbird – *tru-tru, tri-tri* comes its clarion call – that its presence in the house is seen as a sign of eternal happiness. In China, where it comes annually to roost in the European winter months, the 'rice bird' (as it is known) is also unfortunately considered a delicacy, and consumed in ever-increasing quantities for the illusory promise of social status and sexual allure.

According to reports, bunting numbers have dropped 90 per cent since 1980, with its geographical range shrinking by 5000 kilometres, its presence all but erased in eastern Europe, Siberia and Japan. Despite its hunting being outlawed in China since 1997, poaching for the black market by way of the illegal and cruel practice of netting thrives. Within a decade, the bird's status has escalated from 'least concern' to 'endangered' along the seven steps of extinction, with some forecasting its inevitable demise within 20 years.

Consider the cost of the songbird's survival. For the price of HK\$80, a bunting can end up on the table of an aspiring denizen of Guangdong as songbird soup; in their eyes sex on a plate. In 2001, it was estimated that a million birds had been consumed in this way; a hunger not easily satiated. In June 2017, as *Song dynasty* was being fired and crafted at Canberra Glassworks, NOT successfully bid AU\$2.50 for a Chinese hunting net on eBay, promoted with images of the yellow-breasted bunting. 'YOU WON,' the artist was messaged. 'Wholesale hunting bird net to catch bird nets bird nets nylon nets 8M*3M.'

With *Song dynasty*, NOT places these unsung souls on a low-slung plinth, presented as if in bird's-eye view: eight pairs, the colour of drifting clouds, plus one black bird, each fixed in hand-etched lead crystal, but floating free on plexiglass. Consider the number: 16 birds + 1 = 8, the luckiest number in Chinese numerology. Then consider the lone black songbird. Could this be the so-called 'canary in the coal mine' – a caged bird transported by miners deep underground to detect toxic gases and to ward off catastrophe?

Now consider our relationship to the birds so carefully arrayed as a *memento mori* at our feet. In their presence, as with the task of a scholar, we are asked to look down and impart our wisdom on the earth. We are invited to contemplate not only the yellow-breasted bunting's fate, but that of all creatures seeking sanctuary, often far from their birthplace, in a world without borders. We are asked to grasp the gravity of their plight and to hear the resonance of their song.



top
Study for *Song dynasty*, 2018

bottom
Study for *Song dynasty*, 2018, detail



Song dynasty, 2018; details, Canberra; courtesy the artist

佛陀
Buddha



陀



Fade to grey 2, 2018, detail

Digital glitch, 2020

In the closing moments of Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000), an artist restores the face of a Buddha statue, saving the eyes until last. Because of their divine powers, the eyes can only be painted through the aid of a mirror, so that the artist is forever reaching back over his shoulder. Such reverence for the sanctity of the Buddha's image is lost in our current age of facial recognition technology and mass-scale video surveillance. China's citizens, for instance, are assailed by an estimated 600 million cameras watching their every move, while more than 700 million Chinese use their faces to pay for their daily shopping via the Alipay app. If China is the future, we are to be controlled and consumed by our faces.

With *Digital glitch* (2020), NOT renders the Buddha's image as if captured by live-stream surveillance video. But rather than presenting a vision that is seamless, what is reflected back to us appears buffered, with the Buddha reduced to the distortions of digital data. What we see is not the truth but the distrustful eye of the beholder. Only with a more respectful distance, it seems, can the sanctity of the Buddha's image be restored.



Digital glitch, 2020, vitrified porcelain and basalt

mid-Korea, 2018

Nestled in a modern office block opposite the ANZAC War Memorial in Sydney, the Korean Cultural Centre is one of the city's most successful – and unsung – demonstrations of soft-power diplomacy. Here visitors are welcome to take off their shoes and repose within a Korean traditional house (*hanok*) or, at one of their exhibition openings during the year, savour Korean delicacies and (to western palates at least) unusual canapés combining sweet and salty flavours.

Late 2017, having recently completed *TV screen Buddha: Ode to Nam June Paik*, the artist NOT was thinking about Korea and his desire to bring divergent elements together into a creative whole. Kim Jong-un had been firing rockets at random into the Sea of Japan and the white noise of President Trump's counter-tweets filled the airwaves as NOT began to assemble his triptych of solid lead-crystal sculptures, created at Canberra Glassworks and luminous with the colours of the Buddhist flag. In his Sydney studio, he placed these surprisingly weighty forms on a constructed industrial stand, the 'POHANG MADE IN KOREA' label discernible along one of its blue-painted steel legs.

At once, NOT's trio of three-sided Buddhas – their 'lucky' miens drawn from mass-consumer culture – took on a glassy gravitas as they floated on their plinth of plexiglass, hovering on the reflected lines of the metal below. Their colours seemed to pulse more radiantly, certainly more hopefully: blue (Compassion), white (Purity) and orange (Wisdom). The planes taking off from Sydney Airport in the studio window behind only reinforced the work's connection to world events and its desire to transcend them.

Following the end of war in 1953, the Korean Peninsula was split in two by the Military Demarcation Line, signified by 1292 metal signs, now rusting. Both sides have flexed their muscle in the meantime – militarily and culturally. In 1972, for instance, South Korea began manufacturing crude steel at Pohang; today POSCO is the fourth-largest producer in the world. It is no coincidence that *mid-Korea's* base is forged from this very same metal, a deliberate show of strength in the face of threatened annihilation from the north.

Poised above the steel base is something more numinous and intangible. It is a dream of wholeness – receptive to the waves of wisdom and compassion from Confucian teachings that have united both sides of the Korean Peninsula for centuries. At its centre is the white figure of Purity. Uniquely inverted (a nod to *Ode to Nam June Paik* and this Korean father of video art), it is contemplating its own reflection while complementing the other two upright sculptures in a gesture of intellectual balance. It is a vision that hovers both above the line and in between, immune to rockets and rhetoric, a kingdom of pure spirit.



mid-Korea, 2018, 3 solid hot-formed, cold-worked lead-crystal glass sculptures on fabricated Korean steel base with plexiglass top; photo: Dominic Lorrimer

TV screen Buddha: Ode to Nam June Paik, 2017

In 2013, the artist NOT began his current project of returning a mass-produced image of the Buddha for popular consumption to the realm of the particular and the handmade, beginning in the ceramic medium at a time when ‘wonky pots’ were considered ‘the new video’. With *TV screen Buddha: Ode to Nam June Paik* (2017), the artist continues the handmade process through the medium of solid hot-formed, cold-worked glass from recycled TV screens in a unique artwork created at Canberra Glassworks. Referencing Nam June Paik’s ‘TV Buddha’ series and, in particular, the father of video art’s *Standing Buddha with Outstretched Hand* (2005), NOT deliberately inverts his three-sided Buddha, perched on its polished shard of TV screen, and asks us to pause and internalise the perpetual self-reflexivity of the moving image, reducing an endlessly perpetuating subject to the singularity of the object. Here the medium becomes the message, transmitting eternity through the swirls of tiny light-refracting bubbles of glass.



TV screen Buddha: Ode to Nam June Paik, 2017, solid hot-formed, cold-worked glass sculpture from recycled TV screens on shard base; photo: Dominic Lorrimer



top
Framed still life, 2016, 4 white-and-blue porcelain vessels in brass framework

bottom
Justified and ancient, 2014, install view, 'Glazed & Confused', Hazelhurst Regional Gallery, Sydney, 2014; 4 glazed porcelain and stoneware vessels in found vintage dragon cabinet; photo: Silversalt

青銅

Bronze

青

銅



Lasting impression (Fukushima Prefecture), 2020, detail

Lasting impression 1 *(Fukushima Prefecture), 2020*

On a research visit to Japan's glass capital of Toyama in 2018, NOT found a collection of antique kanji printing blocks close in nature to the original Chinese characters that formed the basis of Japan's writing system many centuries ago. Around the same time as NOT's visit, similar kanji signboards – largely indecipherable to modern eyes – were being erected in a town of Fukushima Prefecture to encourage tourism following the devastating 2011 earthquake and tsunami that saw widespread radioactive contamination. In this cultural context, NOT began to see his kanji blocks as talismans of a pre-apocalyptic age and signs of hope for a regenerated future.

By casting these blocks in bronze lead crystal glass (bronze being a favoured material for sacred vessels in Shinto shrines) and imprinting them through hand-blown clear glass, the work both interiorises and makes manifest these unknowable words, with fresh meaning found in their very act of artistic and material translation.



Lasting impression (Fukushima Prefecture), 2020, kiln-formed, bronze-coloured lead-crystal glass and clear hand-blown furnace glass



top
Borrowed nostalgia for the unremembered, 2020, bronze metal, bronze glass, bamboo works
in a unique cedar (shou-sugi-ban) wood-burnt frame

bottom
If you meet the Buddha on a road, kill him !, 2020, solid bronze metal Chinese stoneware and
television screen glass in a unique cedar (shou-sugi-ban) wood-burnt frame

盆栽

Bonsai





Reliqui, 2019–20, studio detail

Reliqui, 2019-20

During a ceramic residency at GyMEA TAFE in 2014, NOT began working from an archive of bonsai pots cleared from a nearby development, casting new forms and building them into large-scale installations such as *Angkor*, first exhibited at Hazelhurst Regional Gallery as part of 'Glazed & Confused' in 2014–15. Since then, NOT has continued to draw from the archive, recasting these bonsai forms into shifting assemblages that evoke the ruins of a disappearing world.

Commissioned for 'Manifest', curated by Damon Moon for the 2019 Australian Ceramics Triennale, and inspired by the Latin word meaning abandoned or relinquished, *Reliqui* (2019) memorialises 'artistic' time. Arrayed across twenty wooden storage containers with fourteen niches, hundreds of these vessels (along with other objects from the artist's archive) have been transformed and transfigured through extreme processes of post-production, care and risk. In an era of ceramics being considered the new video, and subject to the whims of fashion, *Reliqui* asks: what lasts? The work inhabits a kind of creative entropy and is presented here as evidence of impermanence and material decay, but also as a mountain of memories – like Monte Testaccio in Rome – for the future to build on.



Reliqui, 2019–20, studio detail



Reliqui, 2019–20, earthenware, basalt, porcelain, stoneware and terracotta with kiln-formed lead-crystal glass installed with cardboard boxes

Hemudu, 2018

Ironically, it was a 2014 workshop in Venice that brought NOT closer to one of the cradles of Chinese civilisation. Introduced to the ancient Etruscan technique of *bucchero* by a group of Venetian ceramicists, NOT became interested in reducing forms to essential, charred remnants – things of fire and ash that have survived the vicissitudes of time. Researching further afield, he came across the Hemudu culture that inhabited coastal Zhejiang province just south of Hangzhou Bay some 7000 years ago. From long stilted houses, they cultivated rice, bred animals and fired distinctively robust vessels blackened by charcoal. With *Hemudu* (2018), however, the still-life tradition is rendered not only Neolithic but post-apocalyptic – as burnt offerings for the future.



Hemudu still life, 2018, 9 vitrified black porcelain pieces on black glass shelf; private collection

Angkor, 2014

During a ceramic residency at GyMEA TAFE in 2014, NOT was inspired by the donation of a variety of bonsai pots that had been cleared from an original property being swamped by city development. As an artist naturally drawn to slipcasting, the moulds represented the slipping away of worlds, from the miniature to the mega-metropolis, from the old to the new. In the process of casting these moulds, NOT began slowly turning the process around. In Sanskrit, the word 'stupa' means to heap or pile, and for NOT the accumulation of pots forms something greater than its individual parts, evoking the ruins of the past leading up to the central stupa housing a Buddha, the last bastion of a disappearing world. These non-functional bonsai pots have been cast in Limoges porcelain, stoneware and terracotta, each representing three of the colours of the Buddhist flag: blue (Compassion), white (Purity) and orange (Wisdom). As so as the forms slowly slip from view, their essence reappears; what is lost returns.



Angkor, 2014, studio view



Angkor, 2014, detail view, 'Glazed & Confused', Hazelhurst Regional Gallery, Sydney, 2014;
installation comprising: central stupa housing blue double-sided Buddha and 36 bonsai pots;
2 triple-sided wood-fired Buddhas; 2 double-sided wood-fired Buddhas; 180 loose bonsai pots;
photo: Silversalt



top

Angkor, 2014, detail view, 'Glazed & Confused', Hazelhurst Regional Gallery, Sydney, 2014; installation comprising: central stupa housing blue double-sided Buddha and 36 bonsai pots; 2 triple-sided wood-fired Buddhas; 2 double-sided wood-fired Buddhas; 180 loose bonsai pots; photo: Silversalt

bottom

Blue still (life), 2016, 7 reduction-fired, blue celadon-glazed stoneware pieces and found wooden stands; private collection

不
Bù

不



TV screen Buddha: Ode to Nam June Paik, 2017, solid hot-formed, cold-worked glass sculpture from recycled TV screens on shard base; photo: Dominic Lorrimer



#invisible hand, 2020, kiln-formed television screen glass

Invisible hand

While on a visit to Hong Kong in 2017, I was walking back from Art Central along Lung Wo Road when I noticed a cluster of cameras on the corner of a high brick wall. There was something sculptural about them, but also almost comic in their paranoia, the way they anxiously pointed out at the world, watching but also screaming to be noticed. As I stopped and looked up, one of the cameras spun around and zoomed down on me. I took a photo and posted it on Instagram.

A few days later I received a direct message from an unknown account, asking who I was and why I was posting such interesting views of Hong Kong. As it turned out, the high brick wall belonged to the People's Liberation Army garrison, and I immediately took the image down. From this somewhat naïve encounter with China's so-called 'invisible hand' in Hong Kong, my interest in the idea of surveillance grew. It seemed to me to be the very antithesis of art, a means aimed solely to disempower and control, stamping out any individual agency, with authority achieved in the smallest acts of denial or self-censorship, like taking down an Instagram post.

The Chinese authorities are, of course, not alone in marshalling such technological tools for sociopolitical ends. As Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) tells us, American multinationals like Facebook (owners of Instagram) and Google have been watching us intently for years, harvesting our personal data for profit in a radical new form of consumer predicting and engineering. But China, with Xi Jinping's plan for world domination through artificial intelligence and big data, has shown its mastery of one of its primary vessels, the surveillance camera. According to Kai Strittmatter, author of *We Have Been Harmonised: Life in China's Surveillance State* (2019), there will be some 600 million cameras actively stationed throughout China this year. Many will employ facial recognition technology, and together they will form a vast 'Skynet' to help with the policing of everything from a classroom to a freeway and, most disturbingly, the Uyghur Muslim population of north-west China. The partly state-owned Hikvision, meanwhile, is the world's largest manufacturer of video surveillance cameras, with their all-seeing systems now installed in over 150 countries, spreading a global surveillance state.

It is but one way China is pursuing its New Silk Road or Belt and Road Initiative, providing infrastructure to developing countries in return for previously unknown levels of 'soft power'. Another is through the voice recognition technology of Chinese companies such as iFlytek (let the machines listen and speak, let them



NOT, on my watch, 2019, bronze-coloured lead-crystal glass, furnace glass and resin;
Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery

understand and analyse'), parlayed through the country's estimated 1.4 billion mobile phone users whose every action and transaction is monitored and rated according to the country's Social Credit System. Meanwhile China's Great Firewall and web censors keep its 830 million internet users in close check. Such seamless 'harmony' and civil obedience rendered by artificial intelligence and big data can, of course, disguise darker forces at play.

Back in March 2017, the cluster of cameras that I photographed on Lung Wo Road made visible that which the state preferred to keep hidden – the hands which sought to wrestle Hong Kong and the New Territories back into the Party's central control. Or was that the whole point – for the cameras to be seen? In conceiving a perfect system of social domination, English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) envisaged a ring of prison cells circling a central watchtower so high and backlit that the prisoners would never know when they were being watched. He called it the panopticon – 'a mill for grinding rogues honest'. In the right hands it could be benevolent, enlightened even. But what if there was no social contract, no sense of enlightenment?

Three years on I wonder if the cluster of cameras on Lung Wo Road are still there. Perhaps, with recent worrying events in Hong Kong, they have become redundant, their job already done, with Michel Foucault writing that 'the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary'. I hope not. Let's not ignore these silent watchtowers around which we circle, but look them straight in the eye.

With *Invisible hand*, that which surveils us is perceived, cognitised and made visible. Clusters of cameras flex and freeze, their all-seeing lenses turned to stone. The panopticon's enlightened dome is darkened and made inscrutable. Yet through the very sleight of hand of the materials and their transformative qualities that manifest in glass, porcelain, bronze and neon, an alternative hand of invisibility is revealed – that of the artist, to illuminate the eye and invite a different way of seeing.

NOT, July 2020

Song cycle, 2020

At a time of the harshest crackdown on organised religion in China since the Cultural Revolution, including the widespread destruction of temples, churches, mosques and shrines, and the ongoing silencing and ‘Sinicisation’ of faith, the standing bell or singing bowl is an eloquent metaphor for the desire of all religions to be seen and heard. Originating in China from the Shang dynasty, temple bells are associated with Buddhist or Taoist devotional practice, and more recently with so-called ‘Tibetan’ singing bowls imported to the West since the 1970s for use in New Age healing therapies.

With *Song cycle* (2020), the artist NOT has created a set of singing bowls in amber-coloured lead crystal glass – with the number five marking the 5000 mosques destroyed in China’s Xinjiang region in 2016, and amber being ‘nature’s time capsule’ and a restorative agent. In this way, the nuanced notes elicited by the glass strikers are a collective call for religious freedom in our age of intolerance, while the vessels’ amber glow casts a prayer for the preservation of all acts of faith – for them to be seen *and* heard.



Song cycle V, 2020, detail; kiln-formed, amber-coloured lead-crystal glass on bamboo, linen and silk

Silence is golden, 2020

While spitting, once dubbed 'the national anthem of China', is a cultural trait now being consigned to the past (thanks to President Xi Jinping's current crackdown on 'uncivilised' behaviours as part of his Social Credit System), it continues as a characteristic of racial stereotyping, othering and fear, especially in this age of anxiety around COVID-19 contagion. Saliva has become closely associated with the spread (and testing) of the novel coronavirus; we view it with the utmost of suspicion and revulsion, even though it is (bodily) part of us all. As the carrier of DNA (and disease), nothing could be more loaded – culturally or biologically.

With *Silence is golden* (2020), NOT has recast an old Hong Kong 'no spitting' sign on mirror and overpainted it with the Chinese character *bù* or 'not'. In one sense, this painted calligraphy is a comment on the so-called participatory authoritarianism that is currently sweeping China (and now, by default, Hong Kong), where a Social Credit System is upheld through a new list of outlawed activities, including political dissent. But in another sense, it asks us all to see ourselves in this picture, questioning our own complicity in this cultural marking and collective authoritarianism.



Silence is golden, 2020, oil paint on glass and resin with wooden frame

The New Silk Road, 2020

To talk about the New Silk Road – which refers to the historic trading route which first connected China to Europe from the second century BCE – one must expand this map to a teeming network that now sees China supplying nation-building infrastructure to more than 80 countries around the world. But beyond the relatively simple provision of railways, ports and stadiums, Xi Jinping’s so-called Belt and Road Initiative is also furnishing developing nations with more complex and contentious telecommunications and surveillance systems on a scale unseen before. And with China using these same tools to quash their own religious and ethnic minorities, it remains to be seen if the New Silk Road will bring greater social freedom or suppression.

With *The New Silk Road (2020)*, NOT presents a moving line or peloton of miniature stupas – hemispherical Buddhist burial structures also used as sites for inward reflection – to form a slipstream that harbours a darker, more insidious intent. While the Buddha’s path leads to liberation and nirvana, the relentless drive of the Belt and Road Initiative cedes spiritual enlightenment for the more muscular manifestations of state control and world domination.



The New Silk Road, 2020, stoneware, porcelain and basalt on black glass topped shelf

不 NOT is a self-taught artist working primarily in glass and ceramic. As a member of claypool and with training at Gynea TAFE, the artist's ceramic installations were first publicly shown at Hazelhurst Regional Gallery in the group exhibition *Glazed & Confused* (2014–15), and, most recently, with Kronenberg Mais Wright in Sydney. In late 2016, NOT began working with Canberra Glassworks to produce a new series of installations made from hand-etched lead crystal and recycled TV screens, including *Song dynasty* and *TV screen Buddha*, which, in 2017, was shortlisted for the Woollahra Small Sculpture Prize. Mid-2018 saw the artist's solo presentation of *Song dynasty* at Kronenberg Mais Wright, and the group show *Confluence* at Canberra Glassworks. In September 2018, NOT's *The China syndrome* was a finalist in the Hindmarsh Prize, with the work exhibited at the prestigious Toyama Glass Art Museum in Japan. In May 2019, the artist's mixed-media installation *Reliqui* was included in the Australian Ceramics Triennale exhibition *Manifest* curated by Damon Moon in Hobart. In late 2019, NOT's work was curated into *River on the Brink: inside the Murray-Darling Basin* at Sydney's S.H. Ervin Gallery, and was shortlisted for the biennial *Still: National Still Life Award* at Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery.



INVISIBLE HAND by NOT

© 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the written permission of the publisher or the copyright owner.

Design: Michelle Turcsányi

Texts and editing: Michael Fitzgerald

Translation: SBS In Language

Photography: Bob Newman (unless otherwise stated)

The artist wishes to acknowledge the inspiration of Stella Downer, the encouragement of Simeon Kronenberg and Hilarie Mais at Kronenberg Mais Wright in Sydney, and the skill and support of Somchai Charoen, Jacqui Butterworth, Shaun Hayes, Jacqueline Knight, Peter Nilsson, Cherie Peyton, Luna Ryan and Claire Tennant

Image: Courtesy the artist

頓感對未來日子的懷緬



終結

不