

Forensic anthropology

‘Well before the appearance of COVID-19, a process of global mutation was already underway – we were undergoing social and political changes as profound as those that transpired in early modernity.’¹

PAUL B PRECIADO

In late 2018, the artist NOT found his practice migrating north. In Toyama, Japan’s glass capital, where his work was included in the Hindmarsh Prize travelling exhibition, NOT came across a collection of antique printing blocks. These were inscribed with old kanji characters, largely illegible to modern eyes, and similar in style to those adorning the antiquated signboards then being erected in Fukushima across on the eastern coast to encourage tourism following the devastating 2011 earthquake and tsunami which saw widespread radioactive contamination. Despite NOT being unable to read Japanese, let alone its more archaic form, these kanji printing blocks spoke powerfully to him. He had grown up an hour’s drive away from Hunterston, one of Scotland’s nuclear power plants in Ayrshire, and had felt the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident personally, with spumes falling over the Scottish countryside. In fact, it was the fallout from Chernobyl and the overlapping 1986 oil price crash that saw NOT seek refuge a hemisphere away in Australia as a young man. Thirty-one years later, as a Sydney- and Canberra-based artist still forming his artistic identity, NOT began to see these kanji blocks as talismans of a pre-apocalyptic age and signs of hope for a regenerated future.

Kiln-cast in cold-worked lead-crystal bronze glass, thereby translated into another artistic vernacular, they symbolically bookend the artist’s installation *Mechanical botanical* (2022). They also offer signposts through this otherwise fractured firestorm of found objects and meticulously made small sculptures in glass, metal and terracotta. The narrative is as entangled as the objects which slowly pull focus, much more than a fraction of the whole: lotus pods; shoots of bamboo; the lathes, pipes and insulators of fallen industry; the prickly fruit of a bunya pine. Rendered in the patinated form or colour of Asian reverence and longevity, we can trace the gilded geopolitical story of trade and globalisation by way of Dutch still life and the Golden Age, the Opium Wars segueing to the Opioid Epidemic, a rhizoid-like interconnectivity revealing itself not unlike the spreading root system of bamboo. But it is a story interrupted. The eye keeps catching on the sharp scales of bunya cone, on the rusted relics of local industry. Globalisation has mutated into something we can barely recognise; a tiny, seated monk turns his back on the pointy end of a metal lathe, the landscape suddenly weaponised.

¹ Paul B Preciado, ‘Learning from the virus’, *Artforum*, May/June 2020.

Before being disrupted by lockdown, NOT saw himself as a natural child of former prime minister Paul Keating's 'Eurasian' Australia. Raised in Scotland, but aesthetically and spiritually drawn to Asia, NOT regarded himself as an artistic go-between in this new transcultural landscape ushered in by the floating dollar of neoliberalism. Which is why he was drawn so strongly to the story of the songbird *Emberiza aureola*, the migratory yellow-breasted bunting or 'rice bird' now nearing extinction through illegal poaching in China, and powerfully immortalised in his 2018 installation *Song dynasty*. NOT also saw in its plight what he hoped to be the death knell of what had transpired to be a cruel global system that allowed bird-hunting nets to be sold over the internet, and those seeking sanctuary in a world without so-called borders to be sacrificed as collateral damage.

When the first of a series of hard border closures separated NOT from his studio practice at Canberra Glassworks in 2020, his response was both expedient and improvisatory. The relentless regularity of council clean-up days disgorged a plethora of discarded tools and machine parts onto his suburban Sydney nature strip, as *Mechanical botanical* swelled in scale, at the same as the artist began working with a local foundry specialising in bronze casting. In the overgrown gardens of Callan Park he discovered a copse of bunya pines – trees whose fruits have given sustenance to Aboriginal people as a food source for millennia. But it wasn't just materially that NOT's work began to transform. Around him, with the onset of the global pandemic, social fault lines were beginning to emerge and deepen locally. He read about increased reports of racism directed against Chinese-Australian communities, and his seated monk figure took on a more loaded lustre; the messages in his kanji blocks grew darker. Arrayed around them, slightly fractious and much more than a fraction of the whole, came NOT's strange mutations in a form of forensic anthropology, to find a place profoundly changed.

MICHAEL FITZGERALD



LEFT:

NOT

(detail) *Mechanical botanical*

2022

kilnformed cold-worked lead-crystal
bronze glass, bronze, found objects, terracotta
36 x 184 x 64 cm

Courtesy of the artist and
KRONENBERG MAIS WRIGHT, Sydney

Photograph by Greg Piper

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ABOVE:

NOT

Mechanical botanical

2022

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found objects, terracotta

36 x 184 x 64 cm

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