



A colourful installation by Li Hongbo



WHAT YOU SEE
WHEN YOU SEE

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PASSION WITH PAPER

The ongoing Art Bengaluru had an interesting artist from China- Li Hongbo. The artist became a magician with paper sculptures. With the audience curious about his work, it was no wonder that he became one of the most talked about artists.

Li Hongbo is known for using handmade paper as his medium, to create malleable sculptures that challenge the viewer's perception of metamorphosis in sculpture. His fascination with the material and its history, which is an important part of his Chinese culture --the oldest known paper fragments in the world date back to the Han dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD), and made their way to the west by way of the silk road -- began when he attended the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing where paper was a cheap and a readily available resource. Since then, the artist has engaged in in-depth with the material, exploring its endless possibilities.

Li Hongbo was a former book editor and designer, trained in a variety of artistic fields from Fine to Folk and Experimental art. Li Hongbo plays with the appearances and connotations of paper. His fascination with paper, book binding and the craft of making paper toys began during his childhood, later becoming a lifelong obsession.

"I was born in a Chinese province called Ji lin, and I was educated just like any other child. However, I picked up a hobby -- painting. I always liked to add little paintings that I wouldn't have in my textbooks. The hobby stayed with me for many years. Ultimately, I was lucky enough to enter into art school to study art, and I was able find a job, thus pursuing my hobby after I graduated. My creations are the result of my thought process. However, if you were to ask me about the way I think, I would say that I pay attention to everybody in my life, and every little thing that surrounds me. It's because of that that my work is closely connected to daily life."

Material to him, is an endless source of inspiration and interpre-

tation. Li Hongbo observed that honeycomb paper is a folk art present in many aspects of life in China, from children's toys to festive decorations. Dismantling one such object, he discovered how simply it is made and the amazing flexibility, resilience and strength of the paper material once built into layers of hexagonal cubes. The artist reproduces the mechanical process manually, making it a painstaking craft, which requires a whole new level of perfection to achieve the machine made rendering. The thousands of layers of brown paper are cut, folded and glued together to look just like what they originated from: wood. The artist then carves the block of paper as if he was sculpting wood. Common brown paper, usually associated with wrapping and meant to be discarded, is then interpreted in shapes of much more valued objects, such as a pair of porcelain vases or even human figures, to give it a whole new significance.

The presentation chosen by the artist invites participation from the audience. Li Hongbo plays with elasticity of the material and installs it in the most unexpected



The guns that blossom into flowers

contortions, sometimes wall mounting the three-dimensional sculpture, stretching the accordion like parts of his creation into variable forms every time. A life-size human silhouette or a skeleton, looking as if made of solid wood or marble can thus expand into a large scale paper installation. Whether Western or Indian, the viewer feels the attraction for this toy, like a work of art, reminiscent of a 'slinky' to Westerners or of the



A display of the bust of Marseilles

"paper gourd" to the Chinese.

Li Hongo's Ocean of Flowers examines the conflicts of war and weapons, in which he transforms the crude tools of destruction, rendered in vibrant, honeycombed, laminated paper, by reshaping them into delicate abstract forms resembling floral patterns. The artist eliminates any signs of slaughter and chaos that guns evoke, by transposing the sinister intent of guns into a pleasant landscape which instead expresses feelings of optimism.

Participation and interaction are key components of the work and keep expanding the possibility of Li Hongbo's creation; his artworks are challenging cultural references and inviting the spectator to not only reflect but partake in the work, blurring the boundaries of art and ordinary object, 'do not touch' and play, precious and impermanent. "This visual impact had me realise that an alternative possibility existed in the language of paper texture and form: from concrete to abstract; from physical to the intangible; from standardization to liberation; or vice versa. The continuity of paper has thus become a key element in the lan-

guage expression here; its gathering and dispersing, ups and downs, twists and turns have presented to us a set of unpredictable images."

"My artistic creations have many themes, but they are all closely linked to my thoughts, my experiences, and my current life. The themes are produced by my formless inner thoughts. I layer sheets of paper one by one attaching each with glue at specific points to create a honeycomb pattern. Each sheet is glued individually by hand until I've created a small block. I use a woodworking saw to create the initial cuts, discarding excess paper and reducing the area of the block into the form I'm striving for. As the saw becomes impractical for cutting, I switch to an angle grinder. This allows me to achieve greater detail and I put the finishing touches on the sculpture with sandpaper," he explains.

In Bengaluru, at the UB City, Li Hongbo displayed a human skeleton made out layers of paper. The body became a diary, a fragile palimpsest of papers stacked and glued together. Amidst the uber-cool luxury, the work reflected human fragility and the transience of life. And the reference to the Buddhist philosophy was obvious.

As an interactive display, he also had a bust of Michelangelo. When shown to the audience, it looked like carved marble. As the assistant lifted the head with his white gloves, it fanned out into an abstract form... the paper flowed and opened up like an accordion and later collapsed into its original form. The awe of the audience was palpable in their applause. It was surely a "Chinese Chamtakara"



Li Hongbo's creation of a paper head

(Suresh Jayaram is a visual artist, curator and art historian; his column features perspectives on the Arts)