

Mutant Mythos

An oneiric fascination with the terror and awe implicit to scientific discovery informs Yong Ho Ji's sculptural practice, for which the artist plays dual roles of skilled artisan and mad doctor. Meticulously layering cut strips of tire as the flesh for his "mutants," Yong Ho Ji models his creatures after endangered animals, mythological beings, and humanoids akin to his favorite superheroes. Underlying his unique brand of science fiction monster making is a startlingly specific, poetically lucid, ethical critique of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), based on his skepticism towards those "who seek to challenge nature by creating an entirely new form of life through modifying genes of animals, plants, and human beings." Scientifically speaking, Ji's mutants are emblematic of Darwin's evolutionary theory, which states that mutations may evolve species better adapted to their environments. Some of his mutants inherit handsome traits (long necks or muscular hind quarters), while others inherit the abhorrent traits (multiple heads) typical of Lovecraftian sci-fi imagery. The mouse with the human ear stitched onto his back; the man's heart replaced by a pig's—these are the debatable technological advances comprising Yong Ho Ji's resistance to mutation tainted by human interference, in which "the original identity of all natural living creatures may one day disappear."

Yong Ho Ji's mutants are not limited conceptually because they directly state a position on this controversial topic. Rather, their associations extend to commemorate centuries of grotesque portrayals of the monstrous, rooted in satire, wherein aberrance serves not only as a gateway into the imaginary but also as a mirror reflecting our own bizarre behaviors. He wittily expresses this horror by deploying an ironically similar controlled approach to the hubristic scientists he chides, in manipulating his own animals' lives. He invents his own hybridized creatures in which genomes and DNA sequences are replaced by another altered natural substance: vulcanized rubber.

The exquisite levels of anatomical detail Yong Ho Ji achieves by gluing and screwing all types of tires onto his resin-cast skeletons is in itself a feat of engineering. Sinewy musculature, fleshy soft spots, and even the beasts' facial expressions, ranging from innocent bewilderment to fierce predatorial gaze, are determined by his tire application, and vice versa. His chosen material, selected because of its links to industrialization and environmental degradation, is intricately linked to the lively character of his mutants;

like skins, the tires breathe as if they're organs. These tire-skins even exude a pungent smell that one could describe as the mutants' "native scent." A deer's tender cheekbones and muzzle are rendered with lightly treaded road-bike tires and smooth inner tubes, lining its eye sockets and nostrils to conjure a quizzical expression. The burly neck and forehead of a steadfast rhinoceros uncannily resembles a real rhino's bust because of the broadly treaded tractor tires peering out, like anger-strained tendons, from beneath a rough outer skin made of motorcycle tires. Animals' horns spiral out of their heads in the same manner horns biologically grow, coming to marvelously sharpened black points. Beyond the tire strips wrapped around each mutant, like cloth bandages over a patient recovering from operation, the mutants' obsidian eyes—large, opaque lucite marbles—glow with a melancholy realism that animates these still, sleeping giants. Entering an installation, one feels Yong Ho Ji's mutants watching: some are ready to pounce and some simply observe.

Yong Ho Ji was originally inspired to adopt tires as his signature material by a childhood memory of the spare tire on his family's Jeep Wrangler, a rugged machine in visual contrast to his home's rural landscape. Having grown up at the base of a large mountain in Korea, where his grandmother raised cattle and other livestock, the artist views his material choices and his deep sense of ecological responsibility as interconnected, noting that early comparisons drawn between domesticated and wild animals informed his desire to make art about the preservation of pristine nature. In a sense, his mutants can be viewed as an effort to reassemble the farm he grew up on, transforming it into a bestiary of remembered brethren. Ji's early mutants are recognizable wild animals and insects such as arachnids, wolves, and jaguars, meant to reiterate nature's majesty through a contemporary lens.

As Yong Ho Ji's mutants evolve, their representational strength grows with their expanded range of references. In the most recent works, his mutants are brilliantly complicated by mythological symbolism. They resemble the mutants' actual ancestors as well as archetypal monsters, miscreants birthed by human imagination to grasp and to impose order upon their surroundings. *2 Headed. Deer* (2008), hanging trophy-style on the wall, consists of two single-horned stag heads. Though they recall ki'lin (Chinese unicorns), they also conjure Cerberus, the Greek three-headed canine of the underworld, five-headed Hindu deities, and an entire symbolic history of stags as fertility totems. *Jackal.Man* (2008), with dog head married to

male human torso, initially recalls Anubis, the Egyptian god responsible for escorting souls of the dead to the afterlife¹, and also encapsulates Ji's childhood understanding of the differences between wild dogs and their pure-bred counterparts. Yong Ho Ji elaborates his own mythology, one as steeped in his cultural heritage as it is tapped into a larger, universal logic.

Yong Ho Ji's mutants' are pre-determinedly cursed, from the moment of their conception, because they tie wilderness to a manufactured, environmentally burdensome product. They are modernized golems; it is telling that the artist frequently likens his tire molding to the modeling of clay. Yet their imagistic power lies in the exploitation of these opposing forces, creating an unsolvable conundrum, thus proposing questions rather than didactic answers. This paradoxical nature is what makes them true monsters; they reconfigure the relationship between science, science fiction, and myth. The basic definition of "science fiction as the mythology of the modern world"² must be reevaluated upon viewing Yong Ho Ji's mutants.

Science fiction author and critic, Ursula Le Guin, attributes the creation of great mythic art to a delicate balance between the personal and the archetypal.

*If the only tool that [the artist] uses is the intellect, he will produce only lifeless copies or parodies of the archetypes that live in his own deeper mind...If he abandons intellect, he's likely to submerge his own personality and talent in a stew of mindless submyths. The only way to the truly collective, to the image that is alive and meaningful in all of us, seems to be through the truly personal. To reach the others, the artist goes into himself. Using reason, he deliberately enters the irrational. The farther he goes into himself, the closer he comes to the other.*³

Here, LeGuin describes how deeply personal imagery can trigger larger, collective excitements, wonders, and fears. Viewed in this light, Yong Ho Ji's mutants take on characteristics that express both his personal fascinations and those more ancient. *Lion.Woman* (2008), a life-sized, reclining lion body fused with an eerily anthropomorphic female head, transcends its kinship to the Egyptian sphinx or the Persian manticore. It accesses an archetypal reluctance to interbreeding, of zoology gone awry, and of cosmic order undermined, while voicing the artist's personal concern that our ability to produce something against nature is alarmingly near. In his on-going *Shark* series, Yong Ho Ji builds his sharks with the "muscular forms

¹ Budge, E.A. Wallis, *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt*, Dover, 1988, p.77

² Le Guin, Ursula, *The Language of the Night*, "Myth and Archetype in Science Fiction," Putnam, 1979, p. 73

³ Le Guin, Ursula, *The Language of the Night*, "Myth and Archetype in Science Fiction," Putnam, 1979, p. 78

of land animals" in mind, enlarging fins, stomachs, and backs to make his mutants appear more aggressive. As a result, he manifests archetypal animals that thrill the viewer by capitalizing on a deep-seated, death-based fear of gargantuan, predatorial ocean creatures. Personal visions amalgamate with fundamental visions of nature's mystery, forging scientifically apt metaphors that remind us not only that animals are related to each other, through DNA, but also that humans are included in these relationships.

Yong Ho Ji constructs his mutants with surgeon's precision, employing classic sculptural techniques to achieve the levels of "intense, abnormally muscular form" he strives for. Originally, he welded together iron "bones" around which he wrapped wood planks and potting soil before applying tires. Then he cast dead animals, though this conflicted with his aim towards vivification. (Conversely, he does not see his finished mutants as taxidermy.) Now, Yong Ho Ji sculpts his initial forms out of wire and clay, builds plaster molds, and makes resin forms around which he wraps tire sliced with mat knives. This laborious process can take two to three months to complete per mutant, but it enables the artist to more closely emulate Rodin's perfection of "powerful and exaggerated posture" to convey his subjects' emotional states. Yong Ho Ji sites figurative sculpture masters like Rodin and Michelangelo as his greatest influences, more than anime aesthetics or contemporary pop cultural connoisseurs like Takashi Murakami.

The artist's juxtaposition between classical, figurative sculptural traditions, contemporary materials and political concerns, and mythic subject matter offers three different ways of experiencing time. Meeting Yong Ho Ji's mutants, one simultaneously exists in evolutionary time, art historical time, and fantastic time, which here is both suspended and cyclical. One is never mired in the past, however. In considering these time-lines concurrently, Yong Ho Ji manifests his most forward-thinking visions that are, in his words, "real possibilities for the future."

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