

## **Sculptures by Gwon O sang**

### **An introduction to Deodorant Type:**

In 2007 Manchester Art Gallery became a partner venue in the inaugural Asia Triennial Manchester (ATM08)\*. Through the gallery's involvement in ATM08, which included an opportunity to visit artists, curators and galleries in Seoul, Korea in February 07, I encountered Gwon Osang's work for the first time.

Deodorant Type is one of several series of work that Gwon has created since graduating Sculpture from Hong- Ik University, Seoul. But when I visited his studio, it was clear that the immediacy, directness and human qualities of this work made it the most appealing and exciting series to bring to Manchester and show in a new context to new UK audiences. And so our project with Gwon Osang began...

The title *Deodorant Type* is at first glance confusing. How does such a title relate to these sculpted human figures, confronting us in various poses in the gallery? In fact the title refers to the artist's interest in advertising's failure in Asia. Multinational corporations' efforts to sell under-arm deodorants failed due to a complete mis-perception of Asian markets and Asian people, both socially and physically. In the artist's words:

"Their attempt was bound to fail in many respects. For once Asians do not have the problem that deodorants are designed to solve. Two, they used South East Asian Models to promote their products when a Caucasian Model would have been far more effective in North East Asia. These failures are basically rooted in mis-understand of the other. The title of my work Deodorant Type was meant in part as a reference of misunderstandings."

So this specific example of cultural misunderstanding, combined with Gwon's general fascination with advertising, brings a whole new set of meanings into play. Perhaps these figures can help us to acknowledge and engage with our own perceptions and mis-perceptions of others – the ways in which we all interpret physical appearance: clothing, hair styles, posture. As viewers we are all included in the process of interpretation, of both sculptures and people.

As well as exhibiting existing work for this exhibition, I was keen to offer Gwon the opportunity to develop this sculptural series further, and so in 2007 the gallery invited him to develop new *Deodorant Type* commissions based on a research and development residency in Manchester.

For a month Gwon lived and worked in the city, selecting and photographing Manchester models, documenting his experiences and formulating ideas for new work. It was interesting to observe the development of his ideas and his selection of models and subjects in this new environment. It became clear that he is fascinated by creativity- for him talented artists of all descriptions make attractive models simply because of their "creative spirit".

Gwon has keen to reflect the diversity of Manchester, as well as elevate his models to a status of grandeur. Many of his sculptures are literally "on a pedestal" or raised on plinths for dramatic effect.

During his first in Manchester, I went with Gwon to the launch of Yamaha's latest musical product: the *Tenori-On*, Created by Japanese artist Toshio Iwai. Several performances with this new electronic instrument took place during an evening event at Mint Lounge in the city centre and the line-up included Graham Massey, formerly of Manchester electronic pioneers 808 State, accompanied by Paddy Steer on drums. Gwon was inspired by the lively improvised set, and later asked if Massey and Steer would be models for his work. Both readily agreed and were photographed by Gwon at the gallery. For each model the photographic process takes up to three hours and each figure is captured in around three hundred frames. Every detail is accurately recorded, down to the tread on the bottom of each shoe. The finished sculpture of Massey, entitled *YAMAHA*, was positioned on a plinth beside the grand store staircase in the gallery entrance hall, alongside an androgynous sculpture from 2006 called *control* for ATM08\*. The sculpture of Paddy Steer (Apple, 2007-8) has been included in Gwon's solo exhibition.

Following his residency, Gwon returned to Seoul and started work on the new sculptures in his studio. Each figure is skillfully carved Styrofoam, before Gwon adds the Hundreds of detailed photographs that form the exterior surface: the face, hair and clothes before he left Manchester Gwon also photographed artists Andrew Bracey (*Cambod*, 2007-8) and Harriet Hall (*Back slider*, 2007-8), as well as Taye Bello from the gallery's café (*Scratch*, 2007-8) these "Manchester" sculptures are shown alongside nine sculptures of Korean models created during 2006-2008.

During his residency, Gwon Stayed in an apartment in Fallowfield, a southern suburb of the city, Each day he would watch officers from the Greater Manchester Mounted Police Unit go past his window on horseback. These mounted officers held a fascination for Gwon, as horses are not used at all by Korean police. In fact it is rare for Korean people living in a desely populated urban environment like Seoul to encounter horses so closely.

Gwon was keen to invite a mounted officer to be a model and it became clear that greater Manchester police were just as keen to contribute to the project. A visited to the mounted Police Unit involved a five hour photography session during which Snodgrass the horse and Martin Howarth the officer patiently posed while the artist captured each detail of both figures. In the artist's words:

"During my stay at Manchester, it was interesting to watch the mounted policeman on patrol every morning. I felt a sense of closeness because it was an animal, but also its large figure made me feel somewhat intimidated. In Many cases, I get influenced by ancient arts or advertisements, and I think it stimulated my interests when I associated it which the horse man of monumental sculptures. So I invited the mounted police man to be a model for my solo exhibition, and as I expected, he gladly agreed to be a model for my work."

*Manchester Mounted Police* (2008) was, for everyone as Manchester Art Gallery, the most eagerly anticipated work in the exhibition, due to the sheer feat of creating a sculpture on such a scale and the visual impact we all knew it would have when it finally arrived at the gallery. This is the largest sculpture Gwon has created to date.

It has been a great pleasure to work with Gwon Osang throughout this process: during his residency, the development of his new commisiions and towards his first UK solo exhibition. We are delighted to be showing enw work at Manchester Art Gallery by one of Korea's most exciting and talented young artists.

Clare Ganaway

Curator: Exhibitions, Manchester Art Gallery, 2008

\*The UK's first Asian art triennial (Asia Triennial Manchester 08/ATM08) opened 5 April- 1 June 2008. It showed fresh and innovative work that represents the best of contemporary visual art from Asia: a festival of visual culture and that not only celebrates Manchester's diverse communities but also explores cultural, artistic and political debates of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

ATM08 is conceived by Shisha, the UK's Premier international agency for contemporary south Asian crafts and visual arts, in partnership with Castlefield Gallery, Chinese Arts Centre, Cornerhouse, Manchester Metropolitan University (through MIRIAD and the Faculty of Art & Design).

As well as the work of Gwon Osang, Manchester Art Gallery also exhibited work by Korean artist Choe Uram (5 April-21 September) for ATM08