

Amy

WAX ISSUE 6 I—RUMORS PAGES 18-19



Photography by Michael Schmelling



WAX ISSUE 6 I=RUMORS PAGES 20-21

Untitled, 2014.



Skeleton, no. 4 (Asian tigers +), 2013.
Fiberglass, polyester resin and aluminum. 67.5 x 22 x 43 inches.
Courtesy of 47 Canal Gallery.



Skeleton, no. 5 (Drunk on success), 2013.
Fiberglass, polyester resin and aluminum. 45 x 19.25 x 30.5 inches.
Courtesy of 47 Canal Gallery.

WAX ISSUE 6 I=RUMORS PAGES 22-23





AMY YAO

I first met Amy in 2006. She'd invited me to speak at Yale (where she was earning her MFA) about an exhibition I'd curated called *Bring The War Home*. I remember not liking the students much. They seemed smug, convinced they were art-stars-in-waiting—not exactly interested in hearing my arguments against the whole idea of art as a commercial system (in their defense, I was far more belligerent then, still convinced that we artists could and should undermine that system). Only Amy felt like an ally. And the work she was making—even then—was mature, honest, without a lick of cynicism. So I kept an eye out for her. Last year I saw one of her ladder sculptures at Artist Curated Projects. Standing in front of them, all I could see was the brutal honesty I first felt in her grad school studio. Two of these sculptures are now included in an exhibition called *Golden State* that I curated for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tucson. I went down to her studio in Long Beach where we talked about her work, punk rock, and the August south swell that they are calling Big Wednesday. —DH

In Conversation with Drew Heitzler

Drew Heitzler: Did you grow up surfing or was that something that came later?

Amy Yao: I first surfed when I was sixteen at San Onofre. I think I surfed Four Doors. David Donahue took me there—he'd been a regular there; surfed there as a child. I was a swimmer—I swam on a team when I was young—so being in the water and paddling for a wave felt natural.

DH: Did you surf that Big Wednesday?

AY: I was there [at First Point (Malibu)], but I didn't surf. Socializing took over. There were tons of people. I was drinking on the beach, watching people like my friend Chiz. There were a lot of people [on the beach] having fun just running into old friends, new friends.

DH: I think everybody wanted to see it. I surfed Dume that day, so I just drove by Malibu. I heard there was a heavy current.

AY: Oh yeah, it was pretty wild.

DH: What boards do you surf?

AY: Right now my favorite board is an 8'6" Hobie. It's a Phil Edwards board. Triple stringer. Very narrow. And then there are the 6'5" & 8'0" Takayama Flo Eggs.

DH: I surfed a friend's Takayama the other day. It was a lot of fun.

AY: It is one of my favorite boards. I can ride it in almost every condition. I'm also into this board I have from the '70s from this Bolinas shaper. It's got this simple, trompe l'oeil effect of the actual board cutting through a wave airbrushed on the bottom. I surfed Bolinas a lot when I was at a residency in Oakland called Real Time and Space & Important Projects.

DH: A good segue. Let's switch gears now and talk about art. How did you get into it? You were in a band, right?

AY: Yeah, I was in a band in high school—'93 to '97—called Emily Sassy Lime or ESL. We were all Asian so it doubled as English as a Second Language.

DH: What was your instrument?

AY: We traded instruments. We wanted to be non-specialized.

DH: So did being in a band lead to art-making?

AY: At the time I really liked bands like Bikini Kill, all the K-records stuff, Kill Rock Stars, Babes in Toyland... Babes in Toyland had Cindy Sherman's work on their cover. I was already a fan of Cindy Sherman and it just seemed to make sense that these two worlds would intersect. Bikini Kill had a Tammy Rae Carland photograph on the cover of *Pussy Whipped* and [Carland] happened to have a show at LACE around that time, so I went. Eventually, I got a membership to MOCA and saw the *Womanhouse* show there.

DH: Did Chinatown still have a thriving punk scene at that point or was it done?

AY: Hong Kong Café was still around, but not a lot happened there at the time. The real place in L.A. then was this tiny, all ages club on Pico near Crenshaw and Arlington called Jabberjaw. It was real sketchy then, because it was right after the riots.

Once you were friends with the owners they would let you in for free. At some point it seemed like everyone would just go there for free. I don't even know how they made money.

DH: I feel like back then making money never seemed to be a real concern. Maybe I'm wrong. John Lurie said that before Basquiat, being rich wasn't cool and after Basquiat it was. He hates him for that to this day. And we were definitely after Basquiat.

AY: He ruined everything! [Laughs.]

DH: Did you go to college in L.A.?

AY: Yeah, I went to Art Center.

DH: And you were part of China Art Objects in the beginning? Can you talk about that a little?

AY: Yeah, sure. I was involved the first year or so. I worked at the Art Center library for work study. And Steve Hanson recognized me from this lame interview I did in a magazine called *Option*.

DH: Because Steve was really involved in the punk scene.

AY: That guy knows so much about the history of art and music in L.A. He was so into music. So we became good friends because of that. Steve and I had this idea to do a weekend club. I knew people like Jon Moritsugu (who made *Mod Fuck Explosion*) and he knew all these more established artists. So we thought, let's put our groups together. Then we met Giovanni (Intra) because he started working at the Video and Slide Library [at Art Center]. He was in the graduate program for writing and theory. At the library, he told me that he and another artist, Jason Yates, were planning to start a gallery, and so we joined forces (Jason ended up dropping out of wanting to do the gallery). We'd have weekly breakfast meetings at the old Brite Spot and Cha Cha Cha and were kinda going nowhere until we went to a desert rave in the Mojave. Somehow after that we got serious.



Photo: David Donahue

WAX ISSUE 6 I—RUMORS PAGES 26–27

DH: And China Art was born...

AY: Yeah. Steve and his old punk friend, Bob Haas from *Celebrity Skin*, were taking a stroll down memory lane in Chinatown and they walked down Chung King Road. It was completely vacant—for rent signs everywhere. The perfect place to start a gallery. Rent was cheap then—I think we rented the whole place for \$450 per month.

DH: Who was showing at China Art then?

AY: A lot of our early shows were two person shows, that were sort of about friendship and had a supportive spirit—Sharon Lockhart and George Porcari, Laura Owens and Scott Reeder, Jorge Pardo and Bob Weber, Jorge's friend who passed away. Shows like that.

DH: Were you making art at that point? Did you ever show work at China Art?

AY: No, no. But I was making art, yeah.

DH: Can you tell me about that early work?

AY: The best way to describe what I was making at the time would be to describe my senior thesis show, called *Fuck Freshmen*. I was into minimalism and psychedelic music then, and I was thinking that there's some similarity

between psychedelic imagery and minimalism. So I made these minimalist cubes, trying to suggest that they were like LSD sugar cubes. I had these three large white cubes in the gallery space and then I made this digitally rendered 3D animation of cubes coming across the screen and disappearing into an animated fractal. The background was rendered in a way that made the space appear very deep. So I projected that and I put mirrors around, so it would break up the projection and bounce it around the gallery. And then I made an eight foot pyramid out of Plexiglas that you could crawl into, installed on the lawn at school with a sand painting of an abstracted smiling sphinx. I made a wooden plywood stage that had crack cocaine on it made of chicken wire, paper mache, paint and powder. It resembled a Rachel Harrison piece, but I didn't know who she was then. It was plywood with a big blob that was white and powdery. And then, projected over it, was a video of my friend's band. And that was supposed to be the cocaine and the triangle was heroin, and the cubes were LSD. It was so ridiculous. Things like that.

DH: Can you tell me about your ladder sculptures? I'm really into those.

AY: The ladders are made of fiberglass. I purchased ladders from a manufacturer but disassembled, then

resurfaced the ladders to accept a new lamination of polyester resin and fiberglass. It's almost exactly the same techniques used to glass a surfboard, except we paint the surface before we adhere the lamination. I'm told that surfboard lamination is easier because of the way the cloth and resin hangs. Working with more rounded forms, I guess, is easier.

DH: When did you start making them?

AY: Early 2013. It feels very far away now. I knew I was doing a show at 47 Canal about a year in advance and I was trying to figure out what to do. I wanted to do something that was slick. I was thinking a lot about my background. I'm from California and a lot of my friends when I was at Art Center were really into light and space artists, Finish Fetish and structural filmmaking. I was also into it and knew that some of the artists—like Craig Kauffman, Bengston, Ken Price—or their associates were surfers. I'd also started to surf again. I mean, not like I surfed a lot before... my conception of surfing when I was younger was very different than it is now. When I was young, I thought I was a good surfer just because I could catch waves and go. Then I started going more consistently and realizing there's so much more to know. It's odd because I was living in New York when I started surfing regularly—not California. I would go to Rockaway. It's funny because it's so hard to surf in New York, because it's freezing in the winter and you have to take the train, but there's something about it that makes you feel stoked to surf there.

DH: Because it's few and far between?

AY: Winter surfing there is intense and people look at you like you're crazy. But at the same time they seem to be rooting for you. Some seem to want to try it. It's actually really cute because everyone wants to talk to you. On the train, I had a woman tell me she couldn't swim, but she always dreamed of surfing. Her plan was to learn to swim, go to Waikiki and surf.

At Rockaway, a woman with two kids in tow asked me if it was hard and then told me she was going to try that summer. They see me, and I'm a girl and I'm alone and I'm surfing, and perhaps it gives a sense that they could do it too, which is cool I think, you know? It's always women who ask me.

DH: So surfing actually informed the ladder pieces?

AY: Yeah, it did. Prior to this, I was thinking about the history of L.A. and I was thinking about identity and my identity as a Chinese-American. I was interested in this idea of selling your own identity: how much of it is you, how much of it isn't, what is performed, how much of it is projected onto you? And there are all these different levels, right? So then I was thinking of my Californian identity. Even though I hadn't lived in California for seven years, it was still there and I could use it. I was also thinking about this idea of the artist-surfer and the recent resurgence of that.

DH: Right, which is a tricky one.

AY: Yeah. And not many women have this artist-surfer identity. There's Jennifer Bartlett, but she abandoned it. Or Mary Heilmann, but she never claimed to actually surf. It just informs her practice. It's mostly a guy thing. So I thought it'd be funny to play with that a little bit. It was also interesting to employ surfers to help make my work. A lot of the troubleshooting was done by David Donahue and Chiz Ballreich, who used to design and make things for Gato Heroi.

DH: The actual material troubleshooting in terms of laying the fiberglass?

AY: How to make it work, yeah.

DH: The ladders are embedded with text and in some cases, logos too, right?

AY: It is the same kinds of material used to put logos on a surfboard... lightweight polyester rice paper or

synthetic cloth. All the ladders have some text that relates either to an art space or a social entity like a dance club or deejay. But they're taken out of their contexts, so they can also exist as just words, language. I didn't want to reference anything that was well known. I wanted to reference things that were more obscure, that could really be lost on people. It could be "cool", as in it being "desirable to be attached to or associated with." I was thinking about that aspect of coolness and being an artist. Coolness could be like being Basquiat and making a ton of money, but then coolness could also be being associated with some super obscure kind of thing, you know? Like how obscure can you go or how cynical can you be?

DH: That kind of coolness feels like an old fashioned type of success these days.

AY: Yeah. Street cred.

DH: You want to make things that people you like like.

AY: Right. But it's also this kind of network—association and context and how artists put so much on that, which I'm a little bit suspicious of, even though I'm likely guilty of it. All the galleries and spaces that I reference I've done something with, or I am associated with in some way. So I'm also implicating myself. The ladder form becomes important because of this idea of social mobility. There's a question of accessibility: accessibility of reference, access to success, access to social situations.

DH: You can climb the ladder but you can also fold it up and carry it somewhere else.

AY: Yeah. And you're not supposed to admit that, you know? If you're underground, you're not supposed to admit that you are aspirational. But maybe you are, you know? Or you can pack up and find another space to exist in.