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2016.11.04 Fri, by Alessandro Rolandi

Beijing Hit List

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"Ho Sintung: Dusty Landscape"

Chambers Fine Art (Red No.1-D Caochangdi Chaoyang District Beijing 100015), until Nov 20, 2016

"Dusty Landscape" is what I call an unexpected surprise. In the gallery's right-hand space, instead of the kinds of topics, media, and aesthetic one might have become used to amid the Beijing art scene, one is confronted by a personal and refreshing angle on how to approach both contemporary art and "images."

The Hong Kong artist Ho Sintung—who is known for opting to work on a small scale and for using simple materials and traditional media such as pencil drawing—has filled the gallery space with a reflection on her private passion: cinema and movie posters; quietly, this unveils further levels of meaning. The fact that film posters are neither a hot topic for contemporary art nor a contender for originality among other globalized trends in visual culture is already a pleasant surprise.

Ho Sintung loves cinema; she loves old movies, vintage movie posters, and old movie theaters in a personal way, with attention to their aesthetic aspects, but also the social and political ones. For this show, she has invented a series of hand-drawn posters for imaginary horror movies. These are displayed in the metal boxes typical of old Hong Kong movie theaters.

Each of the hand drawn posters is an original artwork, an appropriation of a well-known aesthetic form, a quote from a certain period (some might remind Italian neorealism, Hollywood noirs or spaghetti Westerns, for example) and an exercise in imitation and imagination. Ho's pencil work and technique are highly sensitive and skillful without being narcissistic or "precious" because they do not stand alone, but serve a smart and provocative conceptual purpose in which humor and unpretentiousness walk hand in hand with discipline and care.

I also think Ho Sintung's interest in horror movies is an intelligent and subtle one when it comes to choosing a different path (that is, from those commonly seen in the art world) in order to address contemporary social and political issues. She understands how horror movies are experienced both subjectively and socially; for example, they often occupy an important phase of our adolescent life in which abjection, lack of confidence, anger, and fear accompany the daily experience of reality, bodily transformation, and imagination in both the private and public spheres. The special pleasure in the mix of transgression, fear, and disgust these films evoke and celebrate can often be a vehicle for teenagers to transpose deep insecurity and a sense of inadequacy, as much as they can simply be a refuge in which the sudden realization of the *horror vacui* of existence takes the shocking but more bearable forms of imaginary monsters, zombies, and killers.

Besides this, horror movies are a popular form, the cultural references of which bounce between science-fiction doomsday scenarios and ancestral/ancient superstitions, between social and religious dogmas, myths and urban legends. Their visual forms come from art and design as much as from comics or from carnival, and from old sacred iconography as much as from the profane.

Ho Sintung perceives how horror movies, in their own way, can activate history by interconnecting past, present, and future nightmares in their grotesque but accessible and popular manner. For her posters, she invents horror movies dealing with mass poverty, inequality, authoritarian state abuses, and other sensitive references. Through these, she responds to reality as an artist, as a woman, and as a Hong Kong citizen showing in mainland China. Moreover, she seems to suggest, similarly to what happens in science fiction, that the different clichés presented by horror movies often change with time, and from being perceived as trash or low culture in the moment they appear, they can in hindsight seem prophetic.



[See all photos \(9\)](#)

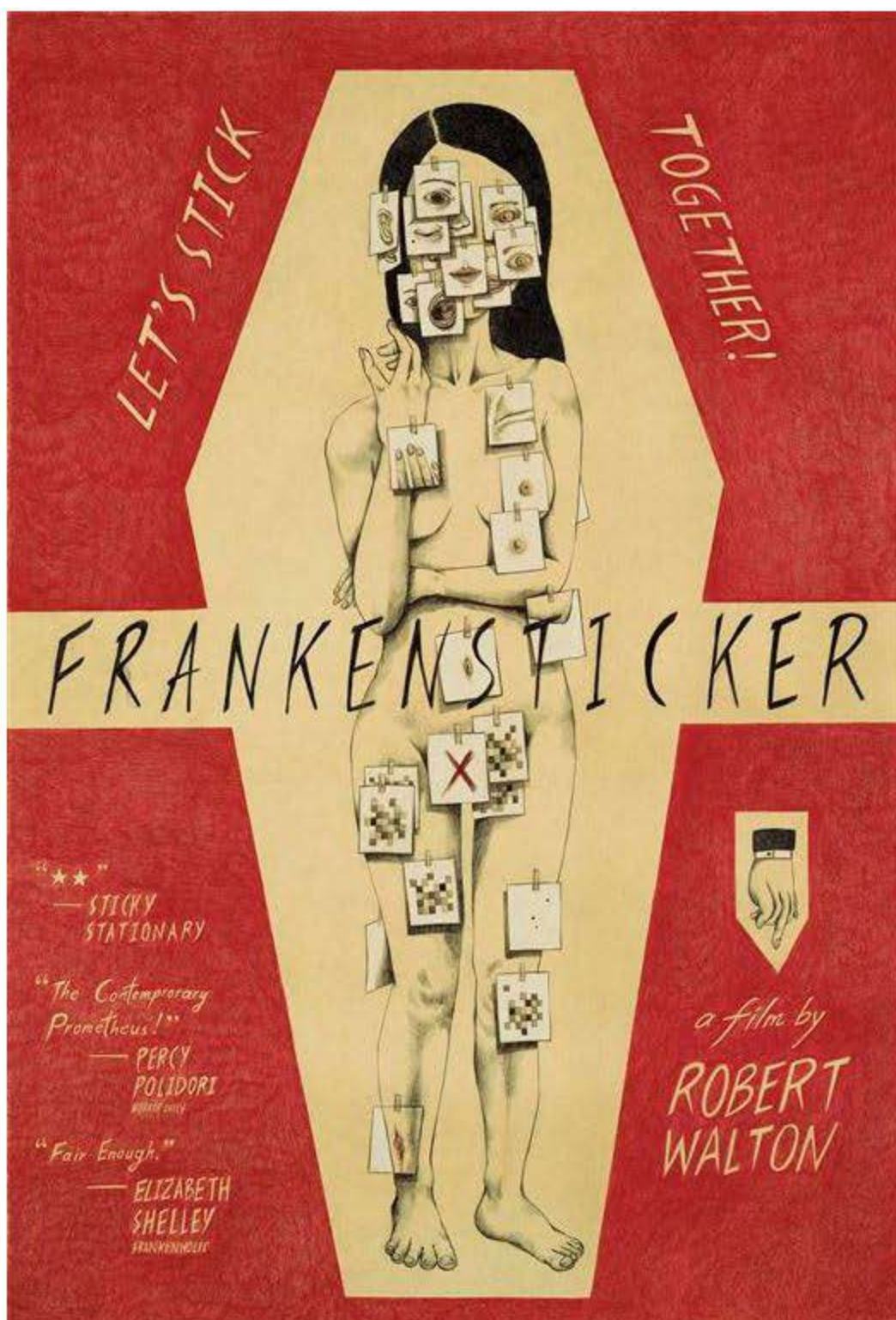
If their distance from high culture, high art, and high literature always worked as a guarantee for horror movies to be democratic and available to anyone (and even, to a certain extent, to bypass censorship), looking at Ho Sintung's sophisticated but firm attempt to introduce them, in the partially disguised form of personal fixation, into contemporary art, can also be interpreted as a suggestion about how art can engage with a larger audience on important topics using humor and a relatively traditional visual approach instead of the often mannerist and repetitive language of pure avant-garde contemporary art.

Contrary to a lot of contemporary art which ends up as simply a "comment" on reality, this exhibition offers an elaborate but still accessible and unpretentious imaginary journey that makes us "look" and "think" (and even "enjoy"). The artist achieves this not through some sort of shock, but via a conscious desire to establish intriguing and intellectually provocative communication with a larger public using a re-invented visual language that is nonetheless familiar.

Beyond this already rich level, however, the show continues in the small, dark room next door, where an installation pays homage to Pierpaolo Pasolini with a remake of the carpet from the infamous film *The 120 days of Sodom* occupying the whole floor and small painted portraits of both the victims and the butchers from the movie hanging on three of the walls.

After seeing this room, I realized that the show can be read and felt as a complex allegory about cruelty and its contingency to human beings, history, and culture. Richard Rorty, in one of his analyses of the distinction between the public and private, suggests distinguishing between books that help us to be more autonomous and books that help us to be less cruel.

Perhaps when artworks, as in this case with Ho Sintung, are so articulate and sensible, and not self-reflexive, they have the potential to help us in both ways: by fostering individual autonomy through reflection on the idiosyncratic fantasies which artists and non-artists who attempt autonomy spend their lives reworking, and by helping everybody to notice the effects of our actions on other people, and trying to prevent cruelty.



Ho Sintung, "Frankensticker", color pencil on paper, 102 x 70 cm, 2016