

# Art in America

July 2004

## Hong Hao at Chambers

Hong Hao was born in China in 1965, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, which stifled independent creative activity. An intensely witty and sophisticated graphic artist and photographer whose work celebrates the tradition of the artist's book in contemporary Western and ancient Chinese forms, Hong graduated from the printmaking department at Beijing's Academy of Fine Arts in 1989, the year of the Tiananmen Square protests. In "The Reading Room," his first U.S. solo exhibition, he played on the Duchampian theme of the nature of books, both revering and lampooning their making and use.

In several components of a work known broadly as "Selected Scriptures," trompe l'oeil silk-screening creates the appearance of facing pages of an open book, with the edges of the pages before and after seeming to bracket them. Each finished print represents the cumulative effect of 10 to 100 screens completed over years of intermittent labor, from 1992 to 2000. A hand-painted version of the book and early silkscreens from the series were presented in a vitrine, and eight prints selected from 37 completed pages were installed on one wall, presented as part of

an encyclopedia of the world according to Hong Hao. Each measures about 22 by 29 inches and is titled by subject and page number. *The World Map (#1)* boasts a banner hailing "The New Topographical World Map," a global chart consisting of only first-world nations. China, Africa, Central and South America are ascendant in another spread. In other examples, geographies are skewed. Each spread is illustrated with visual and literary borrowings, snippets of image or text from ancient and contemporary sources, including a country and city renamed for computer giants and consumer goods.

Vivid color photographs also show Hong's interest in trompe l'oeil, as he produces claustrophobic assortments of ordinary objects, individually scanned, stored, digitally arranged and enhanced, then photographically printed. Among the larger at 4 by 7 feet, *My Things No. 6: The Hangover of Revolution in My Home* (2002) includes bountiful propaganda for industry and farms, a film box, a prophylactics package and a Chinese/English business card for Gagosian Gallery. Among hundreds of book spines that make up *My Things No. 7: Knowledge is Power* (2004) is that of the actual 1997 Venice Biennale catalogue and those of the fictive Oahgnoh biennales of 1997 and 2001. This reversal of Hong's full name is a satirical bid for place in the global annals. Adding substance to illusion, he constructs bogus volumes cataloguing the eponymous festival.

As a gallery wall label informs us, *Art in America* is among the few art magazines readily available in China, and it is valued for the access it provides to contemporary art ideas. Hong and five assistants labored three months to reproduce the 136 pages of *AiA* (2003-04), tracing in pencil every headline, letter



Hong Hao: *My Things No. 6: The Hangover of Revolution in My Home*, 2002, color photograph, 50 by 85½ inches; at Chambers.

and word, minus illustrations and ads, from selected articles and reviews in recent issues. The letters, ghostlike and silvery, quietly testify to the legacy and permissions of Duchamp.

—Edward Leffingwell