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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Wu, Yue</td>
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<td>Citation</td>
<td>Wu, Y. (2013). Glamour of a wooden diamond (Outstanding Academic Papers by Students (OAPS)). Retrieved from City University of Hong Kong, CityU Institutional Repository.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2031/7174">http://hdl.handle.net/2031/7174</a></td>
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Glamour of a Wooden Diamond

WU Yue

GE1110 Exploring Contemporary Art

2013
Glamour of a Wooden Diamond

Jaffa Lam did her first commercial exhibition “1 min. Glam” in Karin Webber Gallery, in which a wooden diamond, named “One Heart” (Figure 1), grabbed my attention. It is a site-specific installation work, specially made for Karin Weber Gallery. After seeing the antique furniture and the elongated floor plan in the gallery, Lam decided to unleash its femininity (Yee, 2013), and hence she made jewelry for it. The heart-shaped sculpture has a diameter of 100 cm and mimics diamond in terms of shape, cut and facet. To make the huge diamond, Lam used recycled crate wood and she collaborated with metal workers to produce the stainless steel setting to hold it. It is difficult to cut wood in the way of cutting diamond, but Lam made it. The surface of the heart is daubed with graphite and coated with phosphor, which can glow after exposed to light. The flaws of crate wood are obvious on “One Heart” but clearly, Lam didn’t intend to disguise it. When shone with flashlight, the flaws and rough brushwork are even more noticeable. However, after the coating absorbs enough light, it is surprising that the heart-shaped woodcarving generates green light in darkness, though only lasting for 1 min.

With the high price but low cost, the diamond appearance but wood material, this artwork is both attractive and confusing. To have a thorough comprehension of it, I try to view it from three perspectives suggested by Ho (1999), which are personal perspective, exhibition perspective and social perspective. Following this idea, the secret of “One Heart” is revealed little by little.
Personal Perspective

If the artwork is interpreted based on the personal feeling and experience, it is a valuable lesson about life.

After being exposed to light, “One Heart” is able to shine but only for a very short time. Although the 1 min. glam is brilliant, it is doomed to pass quickly, which seems saying that nothing is lasting. During the one-minute gleam, people may realize the impermanence of life and think about “what am I seeking for?” and “what is really meaningful in life?” No matter you are a billionaire, popular singer or famous artist, the glorious moment always passes quickly. The short glamour can represent wealth, power or glory, none of them lasting for long. Lam said that art world is not far different from entertainment industry, because it is already a success to be remembered at this minute. Life has ups and downs and no one can escape from the rule. We have to learn to be content even if there is only 1 minute to glow.

From my point of view, it is the cuttings that enable the wood have a sudden rise of value. After suffering million cuts, a crate wood can carry as much value as a diamond does. The cuts make the wood valuable. Similarly, people also need the process of “cutting”, which means honing. Although the honing process is painful, one can gain precious skills and get stronger to move on. Only after the suffering of “cuts”, can one have personal development and achieve success.

Exhibition Perspective

The second perspective is to consider the theme of the exhibition and view the artwork as a part of the exhibition.
One of the intentions of the exhibition is reflecting the changes of Hollywood Road, beside which Karin Webber Gallery is located. As Lam specializes in site-specific work, she concerned about the environment of the gallery. It is this site that gave Lam a sense of gentleness, while the fact of urban development drove her away (Lam, 2013). Known as SOHO, Hollywood Road is used to be lively, but the street scene is getting more and more monotonous nowadays. During the last decades, street stalls and old buildings have been demolished and famous fashion brands, jewelry shops and international galleries have popped up (Lam, 2013). Lam then turned the gallery into a jewelry box to reflect the boom of jewelry shops in Hong Kong. When you walk into the gallery, it seems entering another jewelry shop, which reminds us the horrible scene of market encroaching culture. People can’t help thinking, apart from following the demand and supply theory, is it possible to keep local features stay under market force? We need to take care of the conflict between economy and local micro culture.

Another thing the exhibition did is making people rethink the art market. Are commercial galleries able to perform their responsibility in art world? For a commercial exhibition, it is not popular to show the works’ imperfection and roughness. In addition, installation art is more difficult to be sold compared to paintings (Cheung, 2013). Making of crate wood and carrying flaws, Lam’s artworks unfortunately own both of the two “disadvantages”. It seems that there is hardly any
market for the wooden jewelry, but they are displayed on a commercial exhibition, which emphasizes that commercial galleries do have ability to promote unpopular artworks in art market and benefit artistic ecology.

Social Perspective

Linking the artwork with social issues can provide a new point of view.

The contradictory of using cheap crate wood to make precious diamond brings out the thinking about value. Lam’s works are often thought to be “cheap” as she always uses recycled material, which has become her signature. For “One Heart”, recycled crate wood is used. Beneath the diamond-looking appearance, the interior is crate wood painted with graphite. Moreover, flaws of the diamond are so noticeable. Although the luminous heart is beautiful, the light makes the roughness even more obvious. However, such a coarse and low-cost work is priced at 110,000 HK dollars and that is how Lam questions the definition of value. Is what we treasure really precious? Who has the authority to set a value? Diamond ring seems a part of age-old wedding tradition to many of us, but it turns out to start with a De Beers advertising campaign in 1938 (Nisita, 2013). Since the valuableness of diamond is just the result of market operation, why can’t a wooden heart have the same price as it? From this perspective, “One Heart” resembles Pop Art in terms of artists’ intention (Cheung, 2013). Pop Art makes use of commercial art as subject matter in painting (Lichtensstein, 1997) and some of them satirize consuming culture. With “One Heart”, Lam mock diamond as well as the advertising industry that convinced us diamond is forever. At the same time, “One Heart” reminds us the values we hold now could be imposed by the few who want to make use of it. False values exist everywhere in the society, which justifies the significance of the ability to distinguish false and true.

A wooden heart has mysterious power to make people think about scores of topics and I believe this review only covers a few. Lam puts a lot of thoughts into the object and
expects to show people something meaningful. Thinking from different perspectives, an artwork can carry various meanings. Ho (1999) believes that nothing has “built-in” idea, and the meanings of an artwork are largely given by audience. Artists do have intentions to open our eyes to what otherwise would or could not be seen (Jones, 2006), whilst spectators can use their own imagination to create unique meaning of an artwork, which is exactly the glamour of “One Heart”.


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