

Zhou Song's Techno-anxiety

by Alan McNairn

For centuries, the fields of philosophy and science have proven to be fertile ground for exploration by visual artists. The relationship between aesthetics, that branch of philosophy concerning art, beauty and taste, and the visual artist is mutually advantageous. The same cannot be said for the relationship between art and science. In this case the rapport is more often classically parasitical with the visual artist plundering the catalogue of advances in science and innovations in technology while returning little of substance to scientific disciplines. There are however, occasional instances where artists have worked as handmaidens of science such as serving as vehicles for the dissemination of scientific data, for example botanical and anatomical information. From time to time artists have pushed technology in directions unanticipated by innovative applied scientists but for the most part kinetic, computer, robotic, experimental film and video and electronic artists use technology without contributing to its development. Unlike artistic aficionados of technology Zhou Song has embarked on a pointed critique of the potential outcomes of contemporary applied science.

Zhou Song's works emanate from that region where science, philosophy and art converge. He takes on challenges in this venture that have become paramount in some branches of modernism, however his work is situated in this curious nexus without an obvious position in the phylogeny of art history. Such a stance lies at the very heart of post-modernism. Zhou has embarked on a project in the visual arts that finds its closest parallel in the work of post-modernist literature and its ally post-modernist film, where the conjunction extreme realism and magical elements transforms the mundane to create new and unexpected meaning. It is useful to consider that the beginnings of magical realism in 20th century literature occurred on the periphery of European culture namely in Latin America. Zhou, free from the oppression of the history of European art, has steered a unique course avoiding the influence of the realist movements of 20th century European and American art such as British Neo-realism beginning around 1914, Surrealism, the New Objectivity (*magischer realismus* and *neue sachlichkeit*) of post-expressionist German art, French *Nouveau réalisme* of the 1960's, and American Photorealism of the 1970's.



Fig 1
Soldiers Weeping
Oil on Canvas
127 x 180cm 2006



Fig 2
Dark Consciousness
Oil on Canvas
60 x 80cm 2013

Zhou's series of paintings *Soldiers Weeping* of 2006-2012 in which the cut away images of machine guns show interiors where mechanical mechanisms have been replaced by brilliantly coloured combinations of the internal organs of humans. The extreme realism of the organs and tissues references that branch of medical illustration utilizing photography. The disjunction between what one expects the interior of a machine gun to be and what Zhou has proposed in his pictures is a clear statement on the function of the weapons, recognizable as the American M16 — an extraordinarily efficient personal killing machine. Virtually independent of the skill of its user, the M16 is capable of mincing human organs causing death or serious injury. The message of Zhou's visual critique of contemporary killing technology is extraordinarily powerful because the artist has opted to utilize the techniques of extreme realist painting. This is evident when his work is compared with that of the American artist, Noah Scalin, who focused on the same idea in 2015 creating works in which polymer reliefs of human organs are enclosed within the contours of firearms. Among his sculptures are AK-47s, the global favourite in killing machines developed by Mikhail Kalashnikov to defend and expand the influence of the Soviet state. The choice of specific makes of machine guns as subjects for visual critiques of mechanized killing in Scalin's and Zhou's art seems significant. (Noa Scalin, *Anatomy of War: AK-47* <http://www.noahscalin.com/#/anatomy-of-war-ak-47/>)

Zhou took his critique of modern technology a step further in *Dark Consciousness*, a work that represents his thinking on the human impact of the proliferation of IT, and, in particular, the looming upheaval of human consciousness implicit in the era of proliferation of artificial intelligence. *Dark Consciousness*, elucidates the interconnection between human and artificial intelligence, an affinity that will become increasingly more intimate in the future. The anxiety expressed in Zhou's questioning image is symbolic of current disquiet on the meanings and effects of AI. The future facing humanity in a world of artificial intelligence is unsettling. The looming brave new world where technology is predicted to create inanimate machines that mimic conscious thought, still considered the very essence of humanity, has placed a new urgency on scientific research on the human mind. Problems that were once considered the domain of philosophy, such as the how do we, as humans, come to understand ourselves and our world and the distinction between the mind and the brain, the mechanisms of reason, are implicit in the Zhou's image of *Dark Conscious-*



Fig 3 *New Genesis* / Oil on Canvas 510x250cm 2017

Metaphysical speculation as opposed to pure science fiction is the motive behind Zhou's painting *New Genesis*. This deeper delving into the prospects of a future in which technological science or neo-physics have trumped classical metaphysics presents a prospect where the creators of a desolate dystopia are not humans but rather machines artificially endowed with what technologists conceive as intelligence. In Zhou's imagination, the brave new world is one that has consumed and replaced human thought and creativity. The inner experiences of humanity, those of desires, will and emotion that allow an inner understanding of reality beyond sensory perception, mediated by the representation of the detritus of human creativity, have been abolished by applied science.

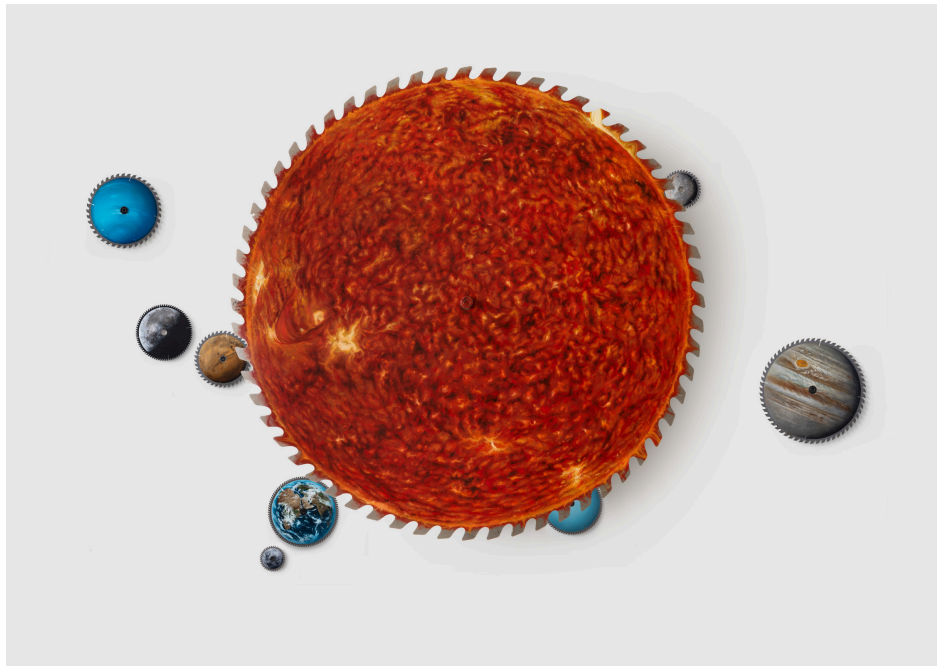


Fig 4 *The Desire of the Universe* / Oil on Aluminum Saw Blade / Size varies / Kinetic Installation 2017

Zhou's visual prognostication of a dystopian world created and populated by "thinking" machines independent of human control suggests that in one sense the order of physics is inimitable to life as we know it. However, it is the very order of the universe — its periodic movement — that creates the conditions where life is possible. The laws of physics, propounded to explain everything from planetary movement to human self-awareness and which create the conditions necessary for the development of artificial intelligence are part and parcel of a distinctly human predilection to conquer through severance of all connective tissues posited by metaphysicians. Zhou's series of rotating saw-blades bearing images of a planetary bodies is a metaphorical statement on astrophysical movement and its intimate connection to the human mind stretching from antiquity to the present. It is by means of cosmic consciousness that the human mind understands itself and indeed is what makes us human.

Zhou's visual art agenda is extraordinarily ambitious. It involves on the one hand perception with its cohort representation and, on the other hand, the inner meaning of things in themselves. In dealing with the latter he has turned to science and metaphysics for answers. At the same time, the very science or physics of reality that is the substrate of his concepts is itself subject to critical appraisal. The phenomena of humanity are set against the applied technology that destroys them.

[Alan McNairn is a former curator at National Gallery of Canada. He is the author of articles, books and catalogues on art and artists from the 17th to the 21st century. McNairn has also served as Director of the New Brunswick Museum and Director of the Royal Canadian Academy of Art. He has taught art history in various Canadian universities.]

几个世纪以来，哲学和科学领域一直是视觉艺术家探索的沃土。美学涉及艺术、美和品位等方面，是哲学的一个重要分支，与视觉艺术家之间存在一种相辅相成的关系。而艺术与科学之间的关系则并非如此。在这一方面，两者之间的关系往往是一种典型的寄生关系：视觉艺术家一方面“攫取”各类科学进步和技术创新，另一方面却很少对科学学科做出实质性的贡献。不过，在少数事例中，艺术家充当了科学的仆从——例如，艺术家一度成为植物学或解剖学等科学信息传播的载体。有时，艺术家把科技的发展推向了创新应用型科学家始料未及的方向；而更多的时候，那些从事动态、计算机、机器人、实验影片、以及电子艺术的艺术家们在使用技术的同时并没有对技术的发展做出贡献。与其他痴迷技术的艺术家相比，周松则走上了一条对当代应用科学的潜在后果进行针对性批判的道路。

周松的作品融合了科学、哲学和艺术等多种元素。他勇于探索现代性议题中某些最高深的领域，不过，在艺术发展史中，我们很难为他的作品找到准确的定位。而这种立场也正是后现代主义的核心要义。周松试图通过其视觉艺术作品找寻一种最接近后现代文学和后现代电影的表达形式，使极端现实主义和魔幻元素的相互结合，转化世俗世界，并赋予其新的、意料之外的意义。正如 20 世纪魔幻现实主义源自位于欧洲文化边缘的拉丁美洲，周松并没有经历欧洲艺术史的“压迫”，而是另辟蹊径，完全避开了 20 世纪欧洲和美国艺术界现实主义运动的影响，如 1914 年开端于英国的新现实主义；19 世纪 60 年代德国后表现主义艺术出现的超现实主义和新客观主义（magischer realismus and neue sachlichkeit）、法国的新现实主义；以及 19 世纪 70 年代美国的照相现实主义。



图 1
《兵·泣》
Soldiers-Weeping
布面油画 / Oil on Canvas
127x180cm 2006

周松在 2006-2012 年间创作的《兵·泣》油画系列展示了各种机枪的剖面图，其内部的机械装置被替换为颜色鲜艳的人体器官。这些器官和组织的极端现实主义表现手法灵感源自以摄影术为基础的医学插图。人们对机枪内部构造的认知与周松的作品所展示的样貌之间构成了一种断裂，以作品中的美式 M16 机枪为例，清晰的传递了武器作为一种高效杀人机器的功能。M16 机枪这类武器几乎不需要使用者拥有多么精湛的技术就能对将人体器官打成碎末，进而造成死亡或严重伤害。作者使用了极端现实主义绘画的创作手法，通过对当代杀戮技术的视觉批判，传递了一个异常强烈的信息。将周松的作品与美国艺术家诺厄·斯卡林的作品对比后，我们就可以很明显地看到这一点。2015 年，诺厄·斯卡林创作了一副以武器为外框架的人体器官聚合物浮雕来表达相同的思想。他的雕塑作品还表现了 AK-47 步枪，这是卡拉希尼柯夫为捍卫和扩大苏联影响力而开发的享誉全球的杀人武器。很明显，斯卡林和周松的作品都选择了特定制式的机枪作为对机械化杀戮进行视觉批判的对象。(Noa Scalin, Anatomy of War: AK-47 <http://www.noahscalin.com/#/anatomy-of-war-ak-47/>)

在《暗意识》中，周松把对现代科技的批判提到了一个新的高度。该作品展现了作者对信息技术尤其是人工智能技术广泛扩散可能引起的人类意识剧烈动荡的忧思。《暗意识》阐述了人类和人工智能之间的愈加紧密的相互联系。周松通过质询性的画面传递了他的焦虑，以象征性的手法表达了当前人们对 AI 意义和作用的忧思。对人类来说，一个充斥着人工智能的未来世界是令人不安的。在这个若隐若现的新世界，科技有望创造能够模仿意识思维——人类区别于其他动物的本质特征。这为人类思维的科学研究提出了新的急需解决的课题。作为人类，我们是如何理解自身和人类世界的？思维、大脑和推理机制之间的区别是什么？这些曾经被归属为哲学范畴的问题都在周松的《暗意识》作品中有所影射。



图 2
《暗意识》
Dark Consciousness
布面油画 / Oil on Canvas
60 x 80cm 2013



图 3 《新创世纪》 / New Genesis / 布面油画 / Oil on Canvas 510 x 250cm 2017

周松的油画《新创世纪》则揭示了作者形而上学思辨式的——而非纯科幻——的创作动机。该作品深入探讨了一种有可能会发生的未来前景。在这里，技术科学或者说新物理学击败了经典形而上学，缔造了一个荒凉的反乌托邦世界，其创造者并不是人类，而是被技术主义者人为赋予了所谓“智能”的机器。在周松的想象中，人类思维和创造性已经在这个崭新的世界中被湮灭、被取代。人类的欲望、意志、情感等内在体验使他们能够在感官直觉之外对现实产生一种经由人类创造力的琐碎表达所调节的内在理解。在这部作品中，所有这些理解都被应用科学撕得粉碎。

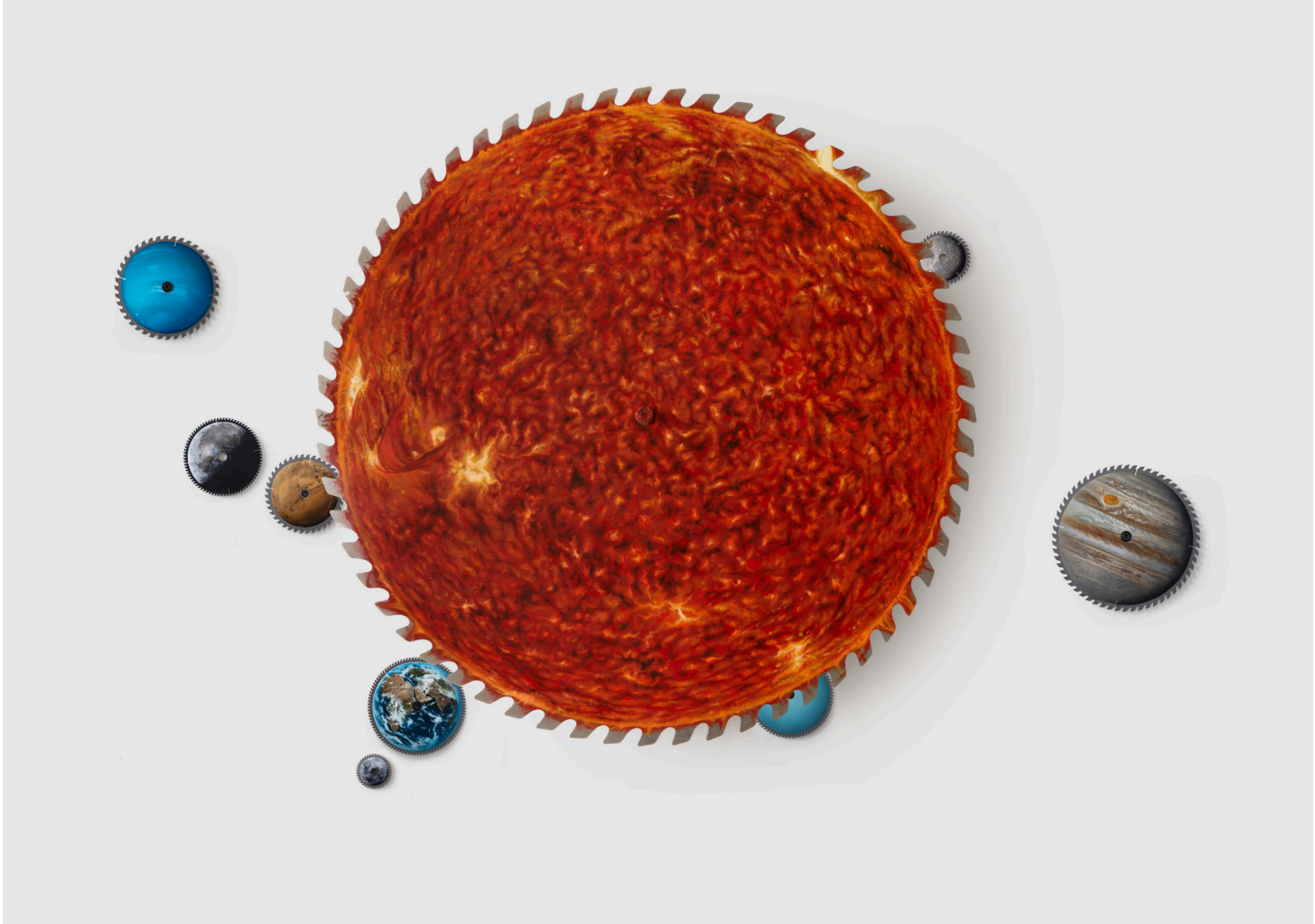


图4 《宇宙的欲望》 / The Desire of the Universe / 铝板锯盘油画 / Oil on Aluminum Saw Blade / 尺寸可变 / Kinetic Installation 2017

周松的视觉化预言作品描绘了一个由不受人支配、能够独立“思考”的机器所创造和填充的反乌托邦世界，从某种意义上反映了物理秩序并不能模仿我们所知的。然而，也正是宇宙的秩序——以及宇宙的周期运动——才为生命的诞生创造了条件。人类所提出的物理规律被用来解释从行星运动到人类自我意识等一切事物，并为人工智能的发展创造了必要条件，由此，这些物理规律被用来割裂形而上学者们所假定的一切事物之间的联系，进而成为了人类特有的征服欲的一部分。周松的旋转锯片系列采用了行星天体的构造，是对天体物理运动及其与古今人类思维联系的一种隐喻性陈述。人类思维也正是藉由宇宙意识才得以理解自身以及“人何以为人”这一本质性问题。

周松的视觉艺术作品隐含着—个雄心勃勃的议题。它—方面关乎对其系列表达的某种感知，另—方面则关乎事物的内在意义。在后者的处理过程中，他转向了科学和形而上学来寻求答案。同时，被其作为概念根基的科学或现实物理学本身也称为了批判分析的对象。人类这一现象在其作品中与应用技术形成了一种对立，而后者也正是摧毁人类的力量。

(艾伦·麦克奈恩：加拿大国家美术馆现当代馆的前策展人，出版过多部涵盖现当代艺术的著作。曾担任加拿大新不伦瑞克省博物馆的馆长、加拿大皇家艺术学院的院长，并在加拿大多所高等院校教授艺术史)