

# Inflating Bodies and Restricting Frames

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Zhou Song's *Inflating Series* is a masterful study in pictorial framing. Each image depicts bodies, sometimes full-length, at other times only featuring sartorial details, compressed within the painting's circumscribed edges. Song's portraits of middle-class individuals expand as though balloons. Shirts unbutton, ankles bloat out of constricting heels, grubby hands grasp edges of jackets or reach for cigar nubs, trying to grab onto anything for stability, while faces redden and contort under pressure. The fleshy frame of the human body, ornamented by workwear, here risks spilling into a more immutable social and cultural boundary: that of personal space. These inflating bodies abrasively stretch their well-heeled suits and risk overflowing into adjacent expanding figures, were it not for invisible lines that seem to order each body into distinct compartments. Their expansion is further counterbalanced by Song's clever approach to the picture's frame. Rather than a standard rectangular mount, Song skews the regular shape and form of the paintings' edges. Their linearity counters the almost pillowy softness of the inflating bodies, imparting a sense of violent restriction to forms that would otherwise grow and float away freely.

Expansion and containment, freedom and restriction, inside and outside: the painting's frame has historically set into play a series of contradictions that govern acts of viewing and interpretation. The Renaissance theorist Leon Battista Alberti first conceived the concept of the painting as a window, its circumscribed edges framing an illusion of reality for a viewer.<sup>1</sup> His conception of pictorial space understood artistic representation as coextensive to lived reality. To put it simply, the artist was responsible for depicting a world familiar to the viewer's own, endowing the viewer with an interpretive authority to unravel the painting's iconographic significance. Western Modernist movements successfully challenged Albertian pictorial framing, establishing painting's independence from other media and past artistic traditions. By treating the canvas as exactly that—a surface on which to apply paint—artists distanced themselves from the task of mimetic representation, from the demand that painting had to represent something. For Song's hyperrealistic approach to painting instead hearkens back to pre-modern approaches to pictorial framing. Yet, as will be explored in this text, his photorealistic paintings do not strive toward documentary fidelity, but rather capture a heightened vision of reality in all of its contemporary promise, fear, and contradiction.

Song destabilizes the notion of the frame as the image's boundary through a critical exploration of the forces that shape human potential. On a macrocosmic level, the notion of inflation and expansion central to these works is concerned with the cosmic accidents that make life on earth possible in the first place. Earthbound bodies revolve on a planet that turns 460 meters per second, fixed in orbit around a single star within a universe in constant expansion—a universe without a limit or a frame. Yet these same bodies are grounded by an opposing force, that of gravity. From an individual's comparatively static position on the ground, it is almost impossible to conceive of the constant movement and growth of the cosmos. Though gravitational forces maintain the physical integrity of bodies and functioning natural ecosystems, Song encourages viewers to imagine the limitless expansion of the human form, pulled and extended by the same expansive forces that propel the universe's perpetual growth.

For humankind, such expansive forces driving growth, mobility, development, manifest more acutely in social processes. Modernization and industrialization dramatically revised the terms of social progress, from collective to techno-capitalistic concerns. The utopic ambitions behind the urbanization and economic acceleration of contemporary metropolises likewise reshaped the terms of political and cultural hegemony, where bourgeois elites manage both the distribution of capital and power and the cultivation of cultural taste.<sup>2</sup> As explored by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his study of social class in France, the social world functions as a system of power relations, where distinctions of taste allow for the exercise of social judgment. As a group with discretionary purchasing power, access to higher education, and opportunities to act as both consumers and creators of cultural products, the dominant class naturalizes their relationship to culture as essential and natural; that is, as they determine what constitutes taste and they move through social and cultural institutions without restrictions or confusion, what Bourdieu refers to as a “habitus.” The lower class receives such products—art, fashion, ideas—as trends that connote stylishness and contemporaneity. An upwardly mobile middle class fits somewhere in the middle. Through capital accumulation, they too are able to access an elite social world—buying clothing, education, homes—that suggest their material wealth. Yet their social mobility is not always marked by confidence and liberty, but often by anxiety, self-consciousness, and naivete, as they attempt to maneuver within a social world that often seems unnatural and uninviting. Art is bound to similar negotiations, where freedom of expression is limited by demands of taste and the market.

The simultaneous expansion and confinement of Song’s inflating bodies, pressed flush against each other, reflect the contradictory social positioning of the contemporary middle class. Their attempts to move across class divides are met with resistance, as they swell into a collective, anonymous body whose individual expression is limited. This series continues Song’s ongoing interests in exploring the technological dystopianism of contemporary societies, where the interference of machines in life and labor limit possibilities for subjective freedom. He draws upon theories of the uncanny throughout his oeuvre, a psychoanalytic concept that refers to a process of defamiliarizing reality. Reality is made strange in order to critique ideas and precedents often accepted as standard, and open viewers to critique assumptions that they might hold about the self in the world. However, unlike many of his works, including the series *Soldiers Weeping*, *Dirty Flowers*, and *Metamorphosis*, which picture fish guts filling the empty frames of machine guns or taking the shape of flowers and butterflies to explore the violent intersections between art, nature, and science, *Inflating Series* emphasizes the absurdity of daily life. It focuses on the quotidian decisions made by the middle class in order to maneuver through their social ambitions. Here, the clothing people wear and the urban communities they constitute are injected with a shrewd humor, to prompt viewers to self-reflect on the practices they engage to fit in and perpetuate hegemonic norms and behaviors.

<sup>1</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *De Pictura* (1435); on the history of pictorial framing, see Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Windows* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* [1979], trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

Dress, more than any other element, serves to establish middle class social conventions. The inflation of bodies draws particular attention to the clothing that each individual wears. Their dress is marked by conformity, rather than individuality; suits, dress shirts, pocket squares, heels comprise the costume or uniform of a business class, only distinguished by color. The repetition of bodies, each distinct but dressed similarly to adjacent bodies, merge into a unified corporate body. To this end, we may understand fashion as what Michel Foucault termed a “disciplinary practice,” a practice that constitutes the subject. In this case, professional clothing serves to discipline bodies as docile laborers within capitalist institutions, effacing any measure of individual expression.<sup>3</sup> Suits have historically served this function; their straight edges literally discipline varying human shapes into linear forms, endowing gravitas and an outward signifier of professionalism to its wearer. Song draws attention to the process by which business professionals sacrifice comfort and personal style to present themselves as serious workers. As their bodies inflate, their “disciplining” uniforms also begin to lose their order: in *Keep Calm* for example, a jacket nips at the buttons at the center of the frame, at the point of bursting, while a necktie, an accessory meant to restrain, floats freely in the air, as a pair of glasses fall off a face cut off at the edge of the frame, the individual’s foot swelling in pointed shoes that appear a few sizes too small. In comparison, *Moments of Existence* pictures the complete subsumption of self into outward appearance: a disembodied face, eyes closed, rests peacefully in a polished shoe, the triangular frame taking the shape of its pointed form.

Just as the picture’s frame struggles to contain the inflating bodies, so too do the boundaries of clothing strain by the individuals’ expansion. These willing acts of sartorial discomfort adopted daily by those jostling to advance in technocapitalistic societies is paralleled by the contorted positions that the inflating bodies assume to fit their frames: legs pitched at right angles to torsos, faces flush with the borders of the frame. Song explains this visual tension in terms of the institutional disciplining of the subject: “everyone is squeezed and in conflict with the expansion of the self...[T]he positions in the social systems are in contradiction with the self-liberalizing will of the individual.” The opposition that emerges between self-expression and social conformity is expressed compositionally. In *Us* and *Inflating Society*, Song conceives his figures as a puzzle, as interdependent though conflicting parts, together meant to reflect the physical and sociopolitical living conditions of dense, urban populations.



Fig 1 *Us* / Oil on Canvas / 120 x 90cm 2019



Fig 2 *Inflating Society* / Oil on Canvas / 160 x 160cm 2021

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975], trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).



Fig 3 *Limitless* / Oil on Canvas / 100 x 100cm x 2 2019

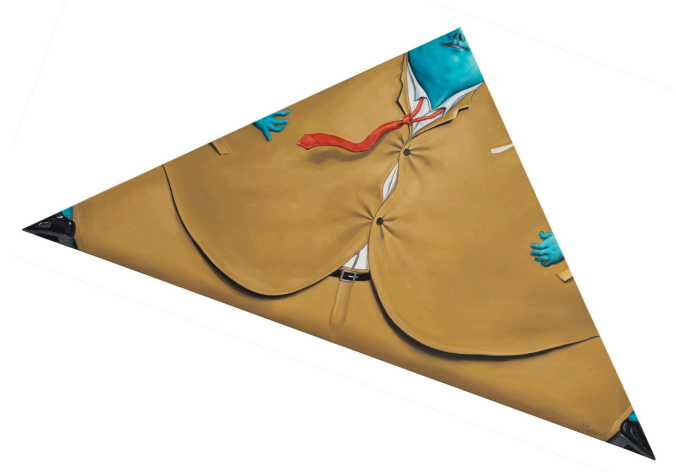


Fig 4 *«DNA»* / Oil on Canvas / 100 x 100 x 141cm 2019

Song's treatment of the pictorial frame consolidates his nuanced exploration of the middle-class condition in contemporary society. The inflating bodies are often compressed within triangular frames, a geometry as complex as it is simple. Song understands the triangle as the "simplest and most fundamental among all shapes, the most powerful and mysterious." In their simplicity, they reflect the magnitude of universal systems, from simple communities, to sophisticated ecosystems, complex industrial societies, to the impenetrability of the cosmos. The triangle is understood as an ordering geometry across historical periods and belief systems, from the Christian Trinity to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a behavioral theory that organizes human requirements for a fulfilling life across various tiers. Yet Song's use of the triangle as a framing device destabilizes as much as it orders. Whether compressed in diamonds in *Limitless*, stretched across equilateral triangles in *DNA*, or even perpetually connected in the circular form of *Reincarnation*, the unexpected geometries of the frames that contain Song's inflating bodies ask the viewer to rethink their relationship to the painting. His irregular frames solicit the viewer to break from a standard, distanced mode of artistic apprehension in order to involve their own body to follow the picture's lines and direction. A viewer, in turn, is asked to contemplate the frame of their own body, and to imagine the boundaries, physical or otherwise, that limit its growth and expansion.

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# 膨胀的身体和限制的边框

## Inflating Bodies and Restricting Frames

[加] 维多利亚·阿多纳

周松的《膨胀系列》展示了对边框效果的精湛研究。该系列的每幅图都描绘了人的身体，有时是全身像，有时只突出了服装的细节，这些身体都被压缩在限制性的边框里。在周松的画中，个体如同气球一样膨胀。衬衫上的扣子被崩开了，肿胀的脚踝突出于束缚性的鞋根之上，脏兮兮的手或是抓住外套的边缘，或是伸向雪茄烟，试图抓住任何能让身体稳定下来的东西，与此同时，一张张脸在压力之下变红、扭曲。人体的肉身边框是用工作服来装饰的，似乎马上要延伸到一个更加坚硬、更无弹性的社会文化边界，那就是个人空间的界限。倘若没有这些无形的界限，将身体密封在不同的区间里，那么，这些膨胀的、粗暴地拉伸着考究西装的身体，似乎即将挤进相邻的膨胀身体中去。另外，周松对边框的巧妙运用，也进一步遏制了身体的扩张。周松没有用标准的长方形裱框，而是把画作边缘的规则形状加以偏斜。这些画框展现出的线性，与膨胀身体那种枕头般的柔软相对抗，给原本可以自由生长和漂浮的形体带来一种强烈的限制感。

扩张与约束、自由与限制、内在与外在：从历史上看，绘画的边框曾激发出上述一系列的矛盾，而这些矛盾恰恰能主导人们观赏绘画与诠释绘画的行为。文艺复兴时期的理论家莱昂·巴蒂斯塔·阿尔伯蒂最初把绘画这个概念理解为一扇窗户，它的限制性边缘为观看者构造出一种模拟现实的幻觉。<sup>1</sup> 根据他对绘画空间的理解，艺术再现是和生活现实有着相同范围的概念。简而言之，艺术家负责描绘出与观看者所处世界相仿的另一个世界，把阐释的权力留给观看者，让他们去揭示绘画的象征意义。然而，西方现代主义运动成功地挑战了阿尔伯蒂的绘画边框理论，确立了绘画独立于其他媒介和以往诸多艺术传统的地位。通过把画布仅仅看作一个可以上色的表面，艺术家们远离了模仿现实的任务，远离了绘画必须表现某种东西的要求。现在，周松的超现实主义绘画方法，回归了前现代的绘画边框方法。然而，正如我们将在本文中探讨的那样，他那逼真的绘画并没有去努力追求纪录片式的忠实，而是在当代生活的所有期冀、恐惧和矛盾之中捕捉到了增强版的现实图景。

周松用带着批判性的眼光去探索那些塑造人类潜能的力量，从而动摇了边框作为图像边界的概念。从宏观层面上讲，在这些作品中处于中心地位的膨胀和扩张的概念，关注的是最初使地球上的生命成为可能的宇宙偶然事件。地球上芸芸众生的身体跟随着这颗行星以 460 米 / 秒的速度旋转，而这颗行星则围绕着一颗恒星在固定的轨道里运行，这一切都在永恒扩张的宇宙中发生——这是一个没有极限和边框的宇宙。然而，与此同时，同样是这些身体，却被一种相反的力量——地心引力——拉回地面。从一个人在地面上相对静止的位置来看，几乎不可能理解宇宙的不断运动和增长。尽管地心引力保持了人体的物理完整性和自然生态系统的正常运作，周松还是鼓励观众去想象人类形体的无限膨胀，这种把人体拉长、延展的扩张力量同样推动着宇宙的永久成长。

对于人类而言，这种为增长、流动、发展提供了动力的扩张力量，在社会进程中表现得更为突出。现代化和工业化极大地改变了社会进步的方式，从群体的关注点到技术资本主义的关注点都受到了影响。在当代大都市的城市化和经济加速背后，各种乌托邦式的野心同样重塑了政治和文化霸权的方式，资产阶级精英既掌管资本和权力的分配，也掌管文化品味的培养。正如社会学家皮埃尔·布迪厄在他对法国社会阶级的研究中所探讨的那样，社会世界作为一个权力关系系统在运作，在这个系统中，品味的差别使社会评判得以实行。<sup>2</sup> 占主导地位的阶层，拥有的是可自由支配的购买力、接受高等教育的途径、成为文化产品的消费者和创造者的机会，这个群体将他们与文化的关系视为重要的、自然的。也就是说，他们决定什么是品味，他们在社会和文化机制中毫无限制、毫不困惑地移动，布迪厄把这种状态称为“惯习”（habitus）。下层阶级把这些产品——艺术、时尚、思想——当作传递出格调 and 当下信号的潮流来接受。而处于上升阶段的中产阶级则处于上述两者之间。经过资本积累，他们也能够进入精英社会——通过对服装、教育、住房的购买——这显示出他们的物质财富。然而，他们的社会流动性并不总是以自信和自由为标志，而往往是以焦

<sup>1</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *De Pictura* (1435); on the history of pictorial framing, see Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Windows* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* [1979], trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

虑、自我意识、天真无知为标志，因为他们试图在一个看起来既不自然、也不友好的社交环境里摇头摆尾。艺术也被束缚于类似的互相制衡之中，在那里，表达的自由受到品味和市场需求限制。

周松的画面里，膨胀的身体在扩张的同时也受到了限制，相互挤压，反映了当代人类阶级矛盾的社会定位。正当他们膨胀成一个群体性的、匿名的身体，并限制了个人的表达时，他们试图跨越阶级界限的尝试也遭遇了阻力。这个系列延续了周松对当代社会的技术“恶托邦主义”的探索兴趣，在这种恶托邦里，机器对生活和劳动的干预，限制了人们主观自由的可能性。周松在他的作品中利用了“恐感”理论<sup>3</sup>，这是精神分析学的一个概念，指的是一种对现实进行陌生化处理的过程。之所以把现实表现得令人陌生，是为了批判那些通常被公认为标准的观点和先例，让观众打开思路，去批判性地看待他们可能秉持的关于自我与世界关系的假想。周松的许多作品，包括《兵·泣》、《脏花》和《化蝶》，是用鱼的内脏填满机关枪的空架子，或者以花朵和蝴蝶的形状来探索艺术、自然和科学之间的激烈交叠，然而《膨胀系列》不同于这些作品，它强调了日常生活的荒诞。它聚焦于当下的人类在自身野心之下竭力周旋于社会中时做出的日常决定。在这里，一种世事洞明的幽默感贯注于人们所穿的服饰和他们构成的城市社群之中，促使观众反思他们所从事的活动，在这些活动中，他们适应并维护了霸权主义的规范和行为。

服饰，比任何其他元素都更能建立中产阶级的社会习俗。身体的膨胀，会让观看者对画面上每个人的穿着都格外注意。这些人物的服装不是个性化的，而是整齐划一的：西装、正装衬衫、口袋方巾、有跟的皮鞋，这构成了一套特殊装束、一套商业阶层的制服，彼此只能通过颜色作区分。这些身体之间有清晰界限，但却穿着与周围人相似的服装，重复出现，融合成一个统一的身体。为此，我们可以把时尚理解为米歇尔·福柯所说的“规训实践”，一种构成主体的实践。在这种情况下，职业装起到的作用是：规训身体，让身体成为资本主义制度下温顺的劳动者，消除任何一丝的个人表达。<sup>4</sup>从历史上看，西装一直起着这种作用：它们笔直的边缘将形形色色的人体统一变成了线性形体，赋予了穿着者庄严感和一种专业性的外在象征。周松让我们注意到商务专业人士是如何一步步地牺牲舒适和个人风格，以求表现自己严肃工作者的形象。当他们的身体膨胀时，他们的“规训”制服也开始失去秩序：例如，在《保持平静》中，画面中央是一件即将撑破的正装外套，被钉在了纽扣上，而原本起约束作用的领带则漂浮在空中，一副眼镜从脸上滑落下来，而这张脸则被画框截掉了一半，同时，这个人的脚在貌似小了几号的尖头鞋里肿胀着。相比之下，《存在的时刻》描绘的是自我在外部表象中的完全消融：一张无实体的脸、一双闭着的眼睛，安详地躺在一只亮滑的皮鞋里，鞋子尖锐的形状由三角形画框自然地表现出来。

<sup>3</sup> 1919年，弗洛伊德在《恐感》（或译为《暗感》）一文中阐述了“恐感”（The Uncanny / Unheimlich）概念：有些突如其来的惊恐经验无以名状、突兀陌生，但当下的惊恐可追溯到心理历程史上的某个源头，介于熟悉与陌生之间的模糊感觉；该文总结出了阉割焦虑、复影（the double）、压抑的复现或强迫性重复、被活埋的恐惧、似曾相识（désjà vu）、舞动的娃娃和自动木偶、蜡像、另一自我和镜像自我、幽灵的散发、分离的身体部位等暗恐主题。——译者注（参见 [1] 董明. 暗恐 / 非家幻觉 [J]. 外国文学, 2011(04):106-116+159. [2] 关贞兰. “恐感”理论国内外研究述评 [J]. 广东第二师范学院学报, 2016, 36(02):72-77.）

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison [1975], trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).



图1 《彼此》/ Us / 布面油画 / Oil on Canvas / 120x90cm 2019



图2

《膨胀的世界》

Inflating Society

布面油画 / Oil on Canvas

160x160cm 2021

竭力控制住膨胀身体的，不仅仅有画框，也有因个人扩张而产生的着装压力的边界。那些在资本主义科技社会中争先恐后的人们，每天都会这样自愿地钻进不舒服的衣服里；与此类似，在周松的作品中，膨胀的身体为了适应各自的画框，也采取了扭曲的姿势：腿与躯干呈直角，脸在画框的边缘处被挤得发红。周松从主体的制度规训角度解释了这种视觉张力：“每个人都受到挤压，并与自我的扩张发生冲突……社会体系中的地位与个人的自我解放意志相矛盾。”自我表达与社会顺从之间的对立是通过构图表现出来的，在《彼此》和《膨胀的世界》中，周松把他的人物处理成拼图，即相互依存但又相互冲突的一些部件，拼在一起则反映出都市里拥挤的人们在物质身体和社会政治方面的生活状况。

通过对画框的特殊处理，周松对当代人类社会阶级状况进行了更加细致入微、更加坚实有力的探索。膨胀的身体往往被压缩在三角形画框内，而三角形是既复杂又简单的几何形。周松认为三角形是“所有形状中最简单的、最基本的，也是最有力量、最神秘的。”在三角形的简单之中，蕴含着宇宙系统的广度——从简单的社区、到复杂的生态系统和工业社会、直到无法穿越的宇宙。三角形被认为是表示秩序的几何形，这一认识跨越了不同的历史时期和信仰系统——从基督教三位一体到马斯洛的需求层次理论（一个关于人类为达到满意生活而在不同层次产生不同要求的行为理论）。然而，周松将三角形作为一种画框手段，使三角形在产生秩序的同时，也破坏了稳定性。不管膨胀的身体是在《无限》的菱形中被压缩，还是在《DNA》的等边三角形中被延伸，甚至在《轮回》的圆形中永久地连接，周松那出人意料的画框处理方式，都会激发观看者重新思考他们与绘画的关系。这些不规则的画框引导着观看者打破标准的、疏远的艺术理解模式，以便让他们自己的身体跟随画面的线条和方向。相应地，观看者被要求去思考自己身体的框架，想象限制自己身体成长和扩展的边界，无论这个边界是有形的还是无形的。

（维多利亚·阿多纳：哈佛大学艺术与建筑史博士、麦吉尔大学艺术史与传播研究系博士后研究员、艺术评论家）

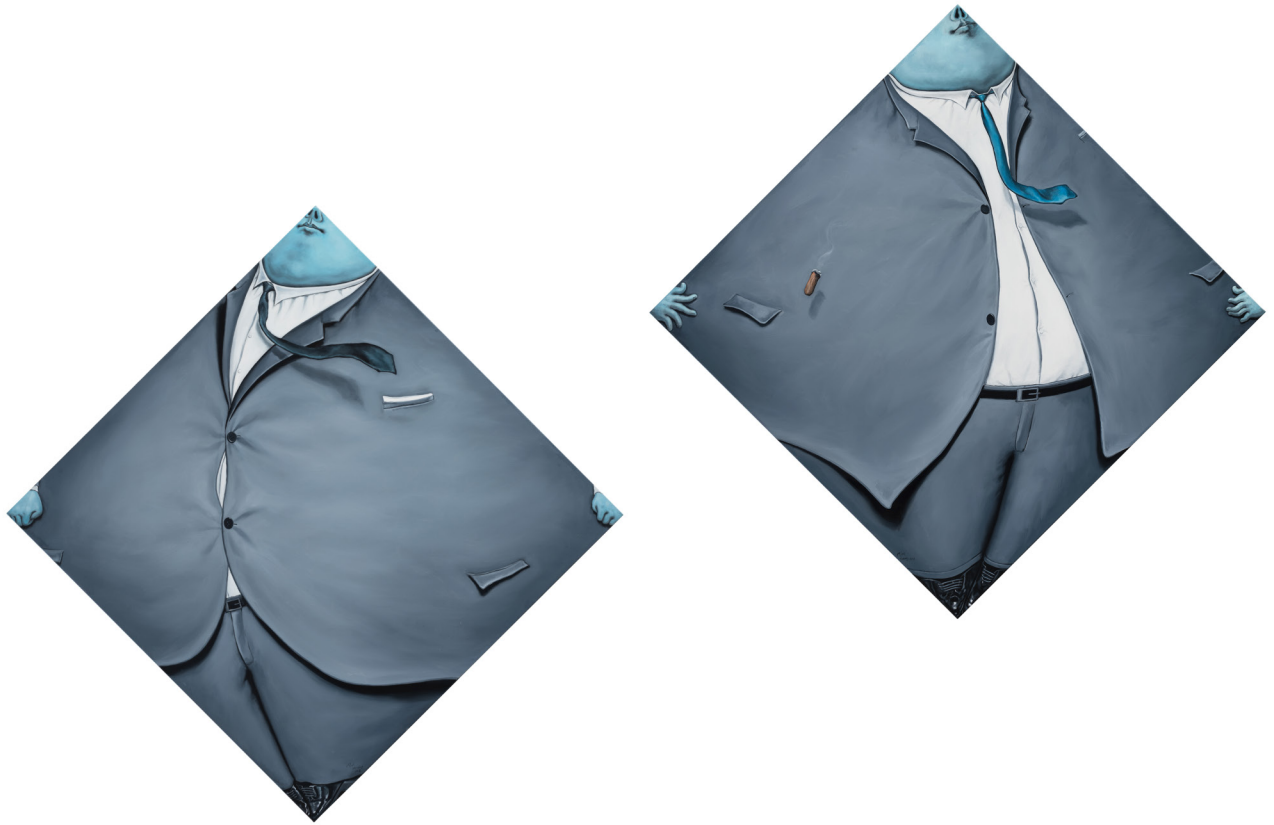


图3 《无限》/Limitless / 布面油画 / Oil on Canvas / 100x100cm x2 2019

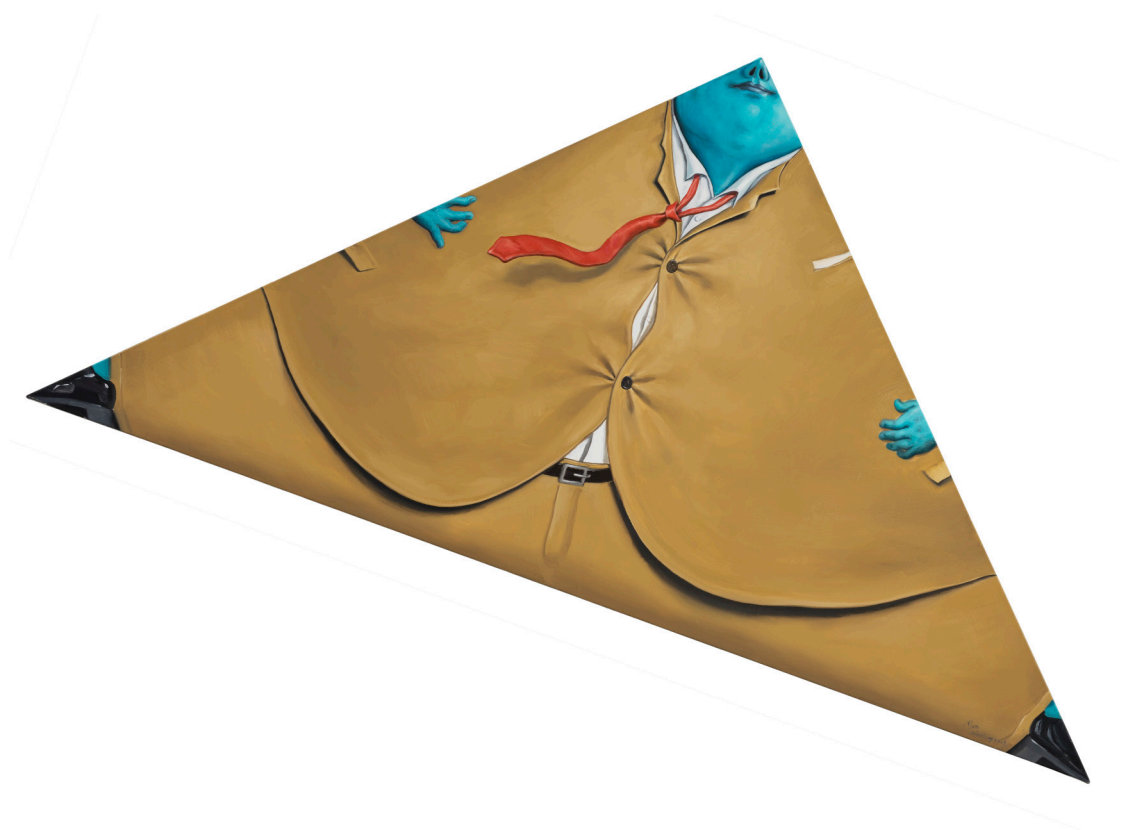


图4 《DNA》 / 布面油画 / Oil on Canvas / 100x100x141cm 2019