

ArtReview Asia



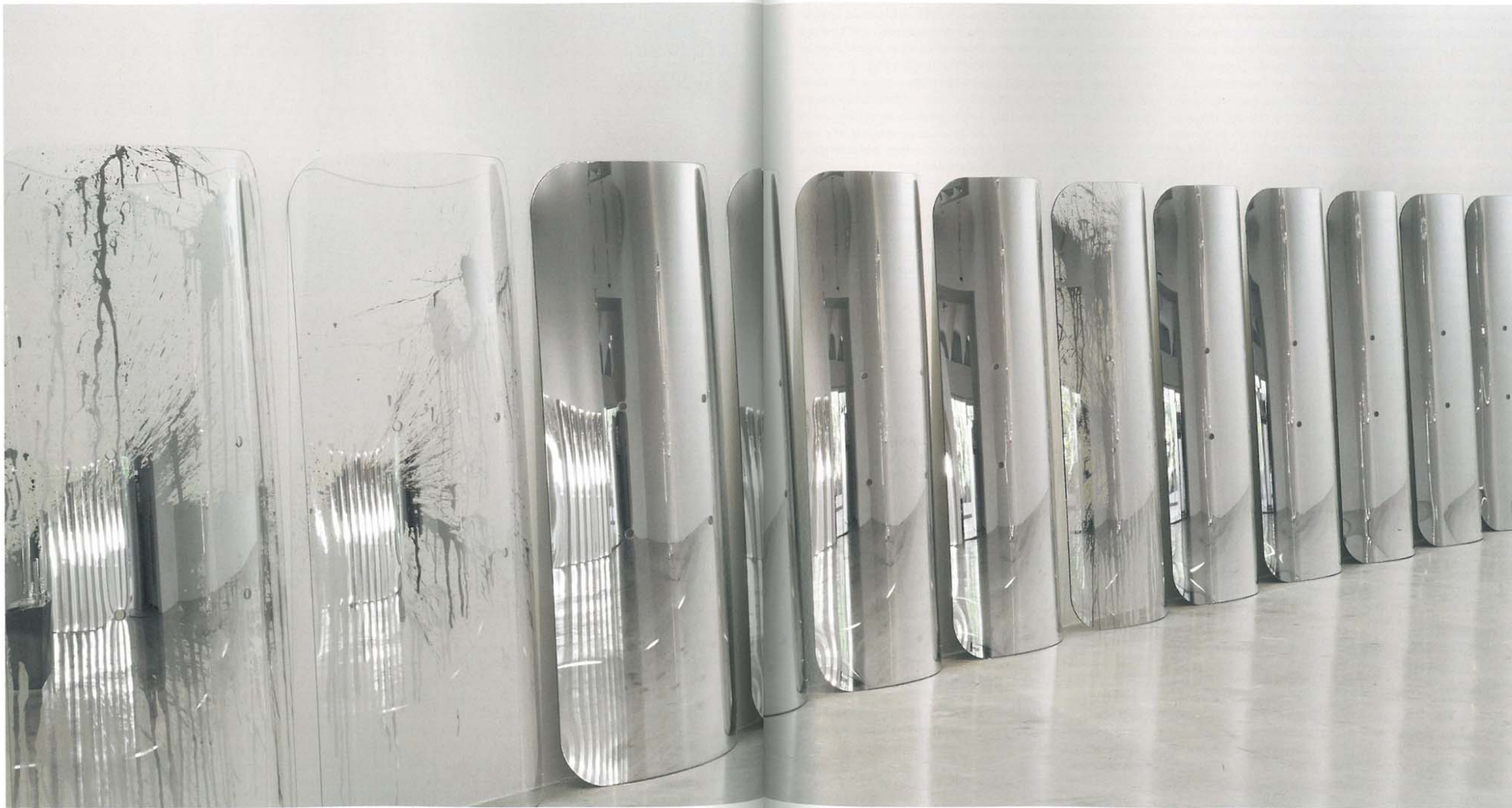
Carsten Nicolai lights up HK

Zhang Enli Sahej Rahal Koki Tanaka

Michael Joo

Through the looking glass

by Mark Rappolt



Over the last few years, most people with at least one eye on world events have become familiar with the aesthetics of oppression, protest and revolt: the tear gas canisters, the barricades, the petrol bombs, the bullets, the rocks. As I write, a guy on the radio is talking about the latest conflict zone in Ukraine. You've probably heard about it. For the non-Ukrainian, and probably for most Ukrainians, it's a confusing situation. The talk is now about a local mayor who was once pro-Russian but became pro-Ukrainian and has now been shot by people presumed to be pro-Russian, perhaps connected to the Russian military, and is being flown to Israel for medical attention, but the outlook isn't good. People we're told are Russian soldiers act as patriots, helping to barricade captured government buildings, supporting the 'will' of the people to assert their preferred national or ethnic identity. Which used to be Ukrainian but isn't any more. The word 'dissident' is used frequently, but means different things in different places and under different regimes. There are people who wear the uniform of the Ukrainian police who seem more connected to pro-Russian nationalists. It's not quite clear who is oppressing whom, or on what side democracy lies. Perhaps both. Which is weird. Not just because most people can't choose their ethnic identity, but also because in all these recent conflicts – whether it involves the various iterations of the Occupy movement or demonstrations and encampments in Tahrir Square or Gezi Park – we're conditioned by the liberal Western press to think that there's one side that's right (you can identify them because they have no uniforms and only homemade defences and weapons) and one side that's wrong (you can identify them because they have uniforms, purpose-built defences and weapons). But in Ukraine right now it's clear that that's an aesthetics that can be easily manipulated. It's precisely this kind of slippery identity, or perhaps more

properly aesthetics of identity and their formation, that Michael Joo, an American artist born to Korean parents (he represented South Korea at the 49th Venice Biennale, in 2001), has been exploring for a number of years.

One of his earliest works, *Saltiness of Greatness* (1992), reduced the iconic Asian figures of Genghis Khan, Tokyo Rose (the Allied forces' nickname for Japanese female propaganda broadcasters during the Second World War), Bruce Lee and Mao Tse-tung to a graphlike series of salt pillars, their heights relative to the energy they expended (speculatively calculated by the artist, who researched records of their activities, diet and alleged sexual habits – the sum total also measured in calories on the trays supporting each pillar). In an Ozymandian twist, over time the

monument was eroded by dripping vats of artificial sweat positioned above each column. Each figure was weighed, assessed and measured, and then slowly dissipated. Subsequent works have involved more salt, as well as urine, firearms, aeroplane fuselages, lasers, vegetables, minerals, religious icons, and the horns, antlers and skin of a variety of animals; and in a number of performance works, Joo himself. This month, at the Hong Kong branch of the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), he will show a series of recent works that derive their forms from the stanchions and velvet ropes commonly used to segregate public or private spaces, and from the curving carapace of police riot-shields with which we're all too familiar these days.

Among the works on show is *Farmers & Merchants* (2012), a series of mirrored glass ropes supported on mirrored glass stanchions that meander apparently aimlessly (while generally ascending) across the floor and up the wall. The title is one of a number that refer to US banks (this one Californian) that were bailed out by the government during the financial crisis. *Death of a Party* (2013) contains a collection of mirrored glass stanchions, of varying heights and in various states of disassembly, together with a collection of the hooks used to attach ropes (if there were any) to the stanchions, some of these hooks mirrored, some clear glass and some stained with various states of silver nitrate (used to create the mirroring, and also once a key chemical in the analogue photographic process), the whole lot sitting on a boatlike polished stainless-steel plinth, and evoking the kind of debris that survives a fun party in which the glass was used to hold alcohol (although that could be because the first time I saw it was at a party involving alcohol in Joo's Brooklyn studio) and the collapse of a party grouping (social or political) that has dropped its defining barriers and ceased to exist. Also on show is *Plexus* (2013), a collection of 20 glass riot shields, more or less mirrored with silver nitrate (in some instances the silver is more of a splatter – as if it had been hurled against the shield like a paint or petrol bomb, although Joo uses lightbulbs), lined up and mounted on a wall.

Most of the works derive from a series that Joo has been developing and exploring since the early 2000s. In the past Joo has used stanchions to support a chain of plastic casts of salamilike Italian sausages (*Access/Denial*, 2002), and 'velvet ropes' made of terracotta on which plants are growing (*Denial*, 2000), while the riot shields have appeared in a variety of configurations, as walls or roofs, and in works such as *Untitled* (*Santiago, 7.9.11 – V1*) (2012), which deploys the riot shields in reference to specific events (in this case the Chilean student riots of 2011).



above *Farmers & Merchants*, 2012, borosilicate glass, silver nitrate, lacquer, 216 × 155 × 157

preceding pages *Plexus*, 2013, low-iron glass, silver nitrate, lightbulbs, lacquer, 1,433 × 122 × 10

Both the stanchions and the shields also relate to the artist's interest in creating Duchamp-style enhanced found objects, most obviously in the *Improved Rack* series (1999–) of animal horns that are sliced and then extended using metal supports. But while these last focused on objects 'found' in nature, there's nothing natural about the tools of segregation that constitute the 'found' objects at SCAD.

However, the shields, as Joo has composed them (both materially and organisationally) in *Plexus* (Latin for a network of vessels or nerves), look more decorative than threatening – perhaps they could be part of an elegant but minimal DIY rococo interior. The mirroring suggests that it's only yourself on either side of the shield (a related work featuring ten riot shields, *Vorpal Dream*, 2013, conjures Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, 1871), while also taking what's behind the barrier into realms of inscrutability (rather like Paul Valéry's description of shells, in a 1936 essay on the subject, as creating a perceptual paradox: most obvious to the eye, but most mysterious to the mind intrigued by what's inside). But Joo's choice of materials – glass and its association with transparency – both plays with paradox, being materially present yet visually fluid, and removes it by providing encouragement to treat these structures as more mental than physical barriers. Somehow they are empty; it's only us, as viewers, who can render them substantial, by relying on the conditioning that causes us to view these objects in terms of their familiar usage as tools of exclusion. Of course all this is a bit of a gimme for

both a critic and the viewer: these works provoke you to wander off into essays on the structures of repression and revolt, to treat them as a glib critique of the former and an exhortation to the latter. But there's a lot more to them than that. In art it's all too easy to look for a statement and ignore a provocation. But these works are a bit more subtle than that. They force you to think. To think about how space and the artificial divisions imposed on it serve to construct identity (inside/outside; chosen/rejected; and, in Hong Kong, as the artist points out, its history of 'one country, two systems', etc). And to make up your own mind.

Perhaps to look at Joo's wall of riot shields is to find oneself sliding into Victor Hugo's famous description of Quasimodo's relation to his home, the cathedral of Notre Dame, and how his twisted body mimicked the cathedral's gothic architecture (a description that is also a key part of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, 1958): 'It was his home, his hole, his envelope... he adhered to it, as it were, like a turtle to its carapace. This rugged cathedral was his armour.' The stanchions and the shields are ours. But, Joo suggests, only as long as we want them to be. "They are meant to suggest we look deeper into the distorted looking glass of the works' surfaces to see there is no 'other' without an 'us,'" the artist says. ar

Michael Joo: *Transparency Engine* is on show at the Moot Gallery, SCAD, Hong Kong, 14 May – 29 August



Death of a Party (detail), 2013, borosilicate glass, silver nitrate, stainless steel, porcelain, lacquer, 183 × 173 × 71

all images Photos: Sebastiano Pellion di Persano. Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul