



*Well – disciplined Kids is an interactive 3D video installation. The work is constituted by three channel MAYA animations. The interactivity is achieved by a motion sensor, customized MAX/MSP Jitter program and Arduino controller.*

The rise of China on the global stage has received a great deal of attention from media and governments around the world. However, within the changing global landscape China is not without its own interior tensions and struggles. Wang Ye-Feng's (Frank) newest interactive video installation, *Well-disciplined Kids* (2012), is an allegory of power, history, and propaganda in the contemporary moment. Utilizing virtual technologies usually found in the video gaming industry Frank has created a parade of military power, patriotic indoctrination, and historic iconography of Chinese contemporary society. The result is a surreal environment of menacing figures and empty symbols of power.

I met Frank on a cold raining Saturday for lunch. He picked me up and we drove down to Chinatown for some warm food. Spending time with Frank is always a broad existential experience. Our conversation weaved in and out of public concerns like politics and the global economy to the private difficulties of continuing to make artwork outside of art school while trying to pay bills and rent. Whatever the difficulties, since graduating with an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2011 Frank has been busy with exhibitions at the Hyde Park Art Center and the Gene Siskel Film Center. This June he will take his artwork outside of Chicago Land to the Santa Fe International New Media Festival where he will be a featured artist. A transplant from China, Frank's artistic practice has developed in interesting ways while he has been in the States; richly layered, critical, and pleasantly disturbing.

Frank told me he was taught at a young age, like all school children, how to be a patriotic Chinese citizen of the Communist Party. He would go on to help design public statues for the Chinese Government. One particular statue was of the celebrated Chinese General Dehuai Peng who led an army on the Long March, a year long strategic retreat from anti-Communist forces in China. Only one tenth of the soldiers who started the March survived, but the myth and history of the period boosted Mao and his communist party into power. After questioning Mao's leadership Dehuai Peng was stripped of his position and, for several years, was made an example though publicly humiliating confessions and prison torcher. A year after Mao's death his reputation was posthumously rehabilitated at the end of the Cultural Revolution by sympathetic allies inside the Communist Party.

A student of history and a collector of ancient Chinese artifacts, Frank is hyper aware of how historical figures are manipulated over time and how power is derived from those figures. He finds these images of so-called heroic figures empty and riddled with contradictions that are hard to reconcile with contemporary culture. "There is no content," Frank told me. It is within

this emptiness his newest video installation finds its meaning. In Frank's words, "No content is content."

*Well-disciplined Kids* is a triptych that responds to viewers movements as they walk in front of the projection. Large babies in the background stare and reach out at the viewer across all three frames. On the left and right, smaller babies in the foreground crawl and climb on China's newest jet-fighter and hang off the nozzle of a tank. This mash up of killing machines and expressionless babies is a schematic of the game-like arms race between global powers and the early indoctrination of children into a Chinese society that is sometimes regulated by the disappearing of detractors. For the center frame of the triptych Frank had tapped into China's historical use of animals as symbols to convey power. He has created his own heroic figure. A nude woman, babies strewn about, with a head that is an amalgamation of deer antlers and a pig's snout. She is rendered in the same monochromatic grey as the war machines making her a prop similar to the military jet and tank. This figure, flanked by symbols of military might, is a menacing mother of well-disciplined children.

As a viewer walks in front of the images the figures respond with jerky, rapid movements, and stare out at the viewer. The exchange of gazes and movements implicates viewers in a feedback loop. We are the audience of a military parade, an integral part of the propaganda. We are not removed from this surreal world, but an essential element of it. In the end the military parade is undermined, as some of the well-disciplined babies seem to be playing "fornication" on the tank. Like any great nation, adults show-and-tell their new war toys like children while babies, properly indoctrinated, try to play adult games.

Frank's images land in an area of extreme juxtapositions revealing the weakness and weirdness of nationally inherited images that no longer hold much credence for younger generations. He likens it to the feeling of "wanting to lift the world, but you have no leverage." This empty void is where Frank's surreal world-scapes, mirroring our reality, thrives.

Ross Jordan 2012