

## The Eyes of Asura: Song Kun's "Pure Realm"

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Asura-gati is one of the six realms of Buddhism,<sup>i</sup> a realm that is neither heavenly nor earthly, of beings between gods, demons and humanity. The demigods of this realm have the desires of humans, as well as the power of gods and the evil propensities of demons. They are good in nature, but are also often hateful, and persistently get entangled in struggles. Asuras can be male or female. Unlike the males, who have a distorted, ugly appearance, female Asuras are beautiful and alluring, standing as an impediment to personal cultivation.

In fact, in today's so called "post-human era" of fusion between natural and artificial, biological and mechanical, a paradigm shift has taken place in the carrier of the image of the Asura. The Internet, cosplay, folk beliefs and many other elements have intertwined, forming an unfathomable new image for the Asura. The artist sees this image as having the weight of truth in the real world. Song Kun attempts to turn these imaginary things into tangible, visible things. She bases her depictions on the various forms of Asuras in Buddhism throughout history and around the world, referencing subcultural motifs such as cosplay and ball-jointed dolls in hopes of finding certain possible connections between religious faith, manipulated dolls and everyday experience.

Boris Groys made the profound observation that in the digital era, the Internet has become a new pathway for the dissemination of religious faith. Meanwhile, the Internet itself has become a form of faith. Faith is invisible, and digital files are invisible as well, hidden in the same way.<sup>ii</sup> What Groys did not mention, however, is that the Internet is itself a modern variant of Indra's net.<sup>iii</sup> The endless connections and reactions between all things is a trait of Indra's net. This is not different, in any essential way, from the Internet. This also tells us that Asura is not just a Buddhist concept. It is also a dimensional category of existence. More importantly, its nature and the role it plays in Buddhist reasoning corresponds to today's subcultures, naturally taking on a certain role in subculture narratives. On one hand, computer games and the Internet have become messengers for the will of the Asuras, as well as a pathway for penetrating human nature and social reality. On the other hand, the subculture mediums that disseminate this will of the Asuras have themselves permeated our everyday life, becoming hidden controllers, or transforming into a form of faith. Song Kun uses her own artistic methods to extract this will of the Asuras from within in order to look back on the subculture mediums and capitalist industrial system that spread this will.

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Song Kun has devised this exhibition as an island. For her, this island is at once a pure land, the mortal coil and the realm of hell. It is the past, present and future. It is the land of the Asuras, as well as the reality in which ball-jointed dolls exist, and the artist's refuge. In the essay *What is the Contemporary*, Giorgio Agamben says that this island already surpasses the realm of our experience, but every existence and occurrence upon it seems to be gazing back at the obscure parts of our experience. Song Kun has no intention of speaking of Agamben's "contemporary," or of a dematerialized Buddhist pure land. Instead, she aims to create a "pure realm" in the world of the subconscious.

Thus, Asura is only a part of Song Kun's solo exhibition. The exhibition also includes the "six messengers of Ksitigarbha,"<sup>iv</sup> people in the sea of darkness, animals from the beast realm (jellyfish, snakes and octopuses), scenes from the pure land, a fabricated pure land island installation, and videos and music with primal themes such as the starry sky and the sea, for a total of seven different components.

Like the *Asura* series, *Six Messengers of Ksitigarbha* is also a series of paintings that employs readymade collage methods. These six messengers lack the fierceness and resplendence of those recorded in traditional murals, and also resemble images of ball-jointed dolls and cosplay. In the process of shaping her figures, Song Kun uses flat brushstrokes that remove color contrasts, reducing them to what appears to be a faintly discernible rainbow shrouded in gray smog, emphasizing the block structures of industrial production and the surface feel of plastic. Without being told, we likely would not imagine that she is depicting a Buddhist image, but this is indeed the real world image of the *six messengers of Ksitigarbha* in her eyes. At this time, their original world is no longer pure and natural, and the light of the Buddha symbolized by the rainbow has been shrouded in smog, only revealing faint glimpses in some layers. This is reminding us that the mission of the *six messengers* is to watch over the "six paths." Here, however, there is no specific narrative relationship between the Asuras and the *six messengers*. The Asuras, aside from possessing some self-projection, are compositional elements in the "pure realm" as Song Kun imagines it. This is why the exoteric traditions of Mahayana, rather than the esoteric, attract her. The cultivation methods of the former often utilize pure chanting, worship and confession, while the latter utilize certain behaviors or rituals of the body, language and thoughts. As a method and path to cultivation, Song Kun's creation of a "pure realm" has no requirement of ritual and form, but is instead firmly rooted in everyday experience. In this light, it seems to have some similarities to certain Zen insights. This also explains why so many Buddhist figures in her paintings have been transformed into ball-jointed dolls and self-images. Here, art, life and faith are one.

It is particularly important to mention certain motifs that repeatedly emerge in her paintings, such as the jellyfish, snake and octopus. These three animals are all highly intelligent, and have certain primal instincts and personalities similar to humans. For instance, jellyfish have mysteriously soft exteriors, but they are venomous, and will strike back at attacks from the outside. It is the same with the snake, which is recorded in religious and traditional visual systems as a symbol of avarice and evil. The octopus is not venomous, but it is highly intelligent, and can even change its color like a chameleon, as well as its structure, echoing man's ability to deceive. In the physical sense, these beings are components of the "pure realm" island, as well as parts of the tainted real world, but I think that more importantly, these beings are subtle references to Song Kun's own psychological mechanisms. Take the jellyfish, for example, which is beautiful, but also deadly. This calls to mind the film *Seven Pounds* (2008) by director Gabriele Muccino, in which Tim Thomas, the protagonist, chooses to commit suicide by jellyfish. Thomas says, "In seven days, God created the world, and in seven seconds, I shattered mine." Perhaps the jellyfish is a metaphor for that "seven pounds of redemption" alluded to in the film. Coincidentally, Song Kun's overall plan has seven components. Buddhism (especially exoteric Zen Buddhism) and psychoanalysis (like that of Jacques Lacan) share a psychological therapy approach that is a rupture, perhaps a form of "death." Interestingly, Song Kun's so called island or "pure realm" is also rooted in such a separation.

We can see that I am seeking out latent threads between these artworks, but Song Kun reminded me that she had no intention to construct a narrative, and even consciously broke off the possible connections between the elements described above. She would prefer to see them as a series of unconnected signs or symbols. It is precisely these signs that compose the “pure realm” in Song Kun’s heart. This “pure realm” is no longer some oriental fairyland, or a poeticized naturalist outlook. It is not “naturalism” or the “pure land” in the traditional sense. It appears chaotic, but it radiates strangeness and vitality. It is just as Ksitigarbha said, that hell is the pure land. The pure land gained from seeing the truth is far away, as well as right in front of your eyes.

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Song Kun views the entire exhibition plan as an “island.” Meanwhile, she has created an “island” installation reminiscent of a Tang dynasty territory map in the center of the exhibition space. Though painting has no lack of symbols and allusions to reality, its properties as a medium determine that it will always be limited to a certain pattern logic of viewing. In comparison, installation, video and sound artworks not only present a living theater that transcends time and space, they also bring viewers inside them. Song Kun views this artwork as a scene of an island laid to waste by human decadence and the fall of civilization, presenting the viewer with a naked view of hell. Dissected fragments of human bodies are scattered across it, including a fetus still in the womb, a crystallized skull, brains, scattered bones, limbs and mutated organs, alongside glimmering neon tubes and other materials. The use of modern industrial materials such as silicone and resin, and a design evoking rubble, make this appear to be the ruins of a modern industrial culture. The Tang dynasty territory map shape also has strong connotations here, alluding to the spread and rise of Buddhism in China and standing as a symbol of religious culture, corresponding to today’s age of Dharma-decline.

We are no strangers to similar sights. We often encounter them in disaster films and computer games. Where Song Kun’s creation differs is that, first, the readymade objects and their material nature radiate with the sense of touch, and second, the creation provides us with a bird’s-eye view. At this time, the objects scattered on the ground join together with the paintings and videos around them to create a panoramic view of hell. Meanwhile, the bird’s-eye perspective itself is meaningful. I see it as according with certain behaviors or rituals of the practice of Buddhism or cultivation, bestowed with awe and reverence for life, death and time.

It looks like a future archaeological site, but Song Kun is unwilling to place it within a linear temporal dimension. From the beginning, she scrambles this distinction, her intent being to create a hybrid scene. In this sense, these objects or signs symbolize things that are happening contemporaneously. As she has said, today, smog, the loneliness of the virtual world, the explosion of diverse information, manmade “artificial nature” and “masked performances” are mixing together with the original appearance of primal nature and human nature, creating many hybrid forms. Her true interest lies in these hybrid forms, and these are the source of her imagination. Thus, it is unavoidable that such contrasts would be imbued with social implications. It is apparent, however, that her goal is not to present indicators of reality. What she truly cares about is the emotional impact, insight, wisdom and imagination that such an imagination of time and space can bring us. For the viewer, it is not necessarily alluring, and might even evoke repulsion or indifference. For this reason, we can say that this is entirely a personal world for Song Kun. Bizarrely, this imaginary world or “pure realm” always has a strong feel of realism.

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<sup>i</sup> The "six realms" refer to the six forms or planes in which mortals are reincarnated during their worldly life. The realm in which one is born is a reflection of their deeds in past lives. The six realms, in descending order, are: the realm of heavenly beings, the realm of the Asuras, the human realm, the beast realm, the realm of hungry ghosts, and the hell realm.

<sup>ii</sup> See Boris Groys, *Religion in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, *Going Public*, Su Wei, trans., Beijing: Jincheng Press, 2012, pp. 175-194.

<sup>iii</sup> Indra's net is a web of jewels that decorates the palace of the god Indra. It has an infinite number of jewels marking each knot in the net.

<sup>iv</sup> The so called "six messengers of Ksitigarbha are: Yama (for transforming those in hell), the pearl-holder (for hungry ghosts), the strong one (for animals), the Devi of mercy (for Asuras), the Devi of treasure (for humans), and the one in charge of the heavens (for the Devas).