

# Monkey Biz at The Phillips Collection

By [Rafael Enrique Valero](#) on Dec 12, 2009



When artist [Jennifer Wen Ma](#) projected the Monkey King over [Tiananmen Square](#) a week before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Chinese authorities saw it coming. Ma, a Chinese American invited to join the core creative team for the 2008 Olympics, had been knocking back shots with Beijing's police chief prior the stunt. And the chief of Beijing's police reports to whom? China's Communist Party, of course. Boozing up the top cop to sell the idea, Ma hoped to pin down a pre-qualified asylum.

"I can't give you memo and my stamp," the friendly chief finally told Ma, "but if you get arrested I'll bail you out."

No small favor. The Monkey King – aka [Sun Wukong](#)– as a mythic symbol of rebellion and chaos had, after all, butchered the Army of Heaven’s 100,000 celestial warriors, pissed on and [tagged](#) Buddha’s [rather large cosmic hand](#) (at the time Buddha’s fingers were stone pillars at the edge of the world, so how’s a monkey to know?) and had proudly declared himself “Great Sage Equal of Heaven” to irritate the Gods by declaring himself one. Bold for a monkey demon, but as a hero myth of popular rebellion Sun Wokung’s ancient tale was beloved by Chinese everywhere. Indeed, [Mao Zedong](#) often cited the cheeky monkey as an example of revolutionary zeal.

“There was a side of me that wanted to smash the [Communist] Party to pieces,” Ma told a rapt audience last November at the first *Intersections*, [The Phillips Collections'](#) new contemporary art series presenting artworks by [Tayo Heuser](#), [Barbara Liotta](#), and Ma in conversation with the museum’s mostly modernist works. “But,” Ma said, noting that officials kept a weary eye on her shenanigans. “I also recognized I couldn’t escape the Party’s influence.”

Context is important. With peasants [rallying, sometimes violently](#), against local government and corporate corruption in the wake of China’s exploding economy, Communist authorities likely had to calculate. It’s not hard to imagine the equation given the world was watching. Would the Monkey King spark dissent, even revolution, as it floated on a smoke cloud above Tiananmen Square, China’s symbol of a quashed democratic movement? Or had Sun Wukong devolved into oh-so-much kitsch that authorities could co-opt him with a creepy smile? The tipsy dance between Ma and the authorities could have gone anywhere, dangerously so for Ma. But in the end – lacking any widespread revolution across China – it seems the Monkey King’s mythic power had faded.

I bring this up because The Phillips Collections’ [Intersections](#) series, which intends to regularly invite contemporary artists to hang their works in odd spots (or activate “experiment stations”) in the museum – a walkway, a staircase, a gallery regularly known for other works – has, I think, very quietly returned to a once volatile conversation between modern and postmodern (or post-post modern or whatever) art. It’s an understated conversation that might explain the Monkey King’s iffy dissident status in China and why burgeoning democracies necessarily co-opt myth with kitsch.

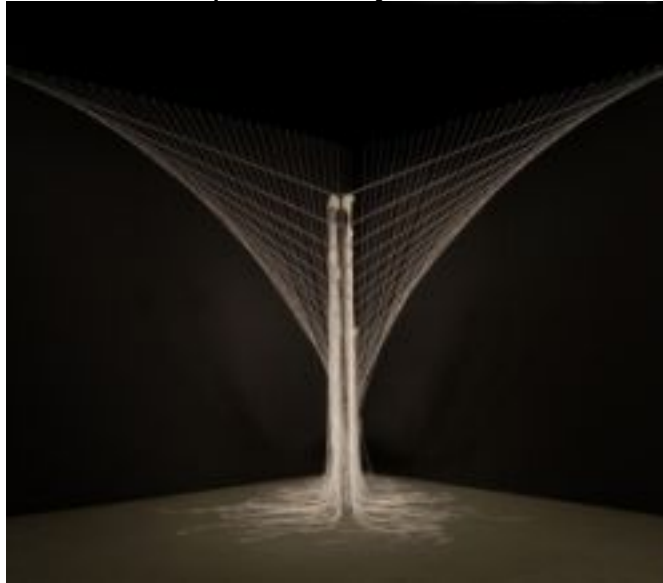


Organized by the Phillips's new modern and contemporary art curator, Vesela Streneovich, the three installations from Ma, Heuser, and Liotta are distinct and divergent "conversations" with the Phillips's artworks. Ma's ten minute Chinese ink-wash animated film - watch it [here](#) – is projected in a room adjoining several modernist works; Paul Cezanne's *The Garden at Les Lauves*, Arthur Dove's *Me and the Moon*, Vassily Kandinsky's *Autumn II*, and one half of Jacob Lawrence's *Migration Series*. Liotta's string and granite sculpture, *Icarus* – watch her assemble it for the Phillips [here](#) – is half-surrounded by Honore Daumier's *The Painter at His Easel*, Eugene Delacroix's *Paganini*, Chaim Soutine's *Woman in Profile*, and Amedeo Modigliani's *Elena Povolzky*. While Heuser has created new works inspired by the museum's collection of [Mark Rothkos](#). But with the works meant to quietly show beside their installations, visitors are mostly left to decide *Intersections'* broader context and meaning.

"I have trouble with titles. I don't like using "untitled." I want to give you a way to address the piece," Liotta explained during an *Intersections* Q&A, flatly dismissing the Greek myth of *Icarus* as a literal inspiration. "But I don't want to tell you specifically what you have to think. I don't want to give you the story."

Indeed, Liotta also scrubbed the contextual history of the Phillips paintings, recasting them rather as psychological archetypes surrounding *Icarus*, which to her mind were representations of strength. Delacroix's *Paganini* is a mad violinist. Daumier's painter is following an inspirational "ray of light." Soutine's *Woman in Profile* is an agonized, furious woman, etc.

“I’m interested in humanity,” Liotta said. “I see each painting as a figure. I see each one as a personality.”



Stripping away mythic or academic history frees Liotta’s delicate work from a lot of baggage, certainly, but it also democratizes it for the viewer. In the “postmodern” world, broadly defined – whether in art, American Idol, The Real Wives of New Jersey, or the Internet – the right to decide quality and meaning for oneself is a blessed given. [Walter Benjamin’s](#) prescient 1936 essay “Age of Mechanical Reproduction” perhaps explains why. Benjamin saw film, record recordings, and photography as artistic mass mediums that essentially kill the “aura” of fine art and empowers the individual within the masses politically. By 1977, with pop and conceptual art smothering the stringently modernist aesthetics of Clement Greenberg (read about it [here](#)), Richard Kazis writing for *Jump Cut* [summed up Benjamin’s thoughts nicely](#):

*A work of art that once could only be seen by the wealthy in a museum or gallery could be reproduced at little cost and made accessible to many more people. The advent of inexpensive illustrated newspapers meant that current events had become the business of the masses. Film allows an event or a performance to be recorded and be available for countless audiences to see.*

*Mechanical reproduction makes possible the involvement of the masses in culture and politics; it makes possible mass culture and mass politics.*

*. . . Benjamin analyzes how mechanical reproduction destroys the uniqueness and authenticity, the “aura” as he labeled it, of the work of*



*art. The withering of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction is inevitable. And, in many respects, it is a good thing.*



Quite obviously, the Mona Lisa reproduced and sold as posters – or [co-opted by Andy Warhol](#), or [here by Banksy](#), (that's his fiesty Mona Lisa above) a British street artist – makes Benjamin's point. Visiting the Musee de Louvre who hasn't been at first underwhelmed by Leonardo DiVinci's modest masterwork after having seen it enlarged and reproduced or parodied so many times. With the Internet's ascent and its impact on politics, the music industry, and our economy Benjamin's pre-postmodern thesis should probably now be thought a new cornerstone of Western democratic thinking (or at least a newly dedicated archway).

Interestingly, Benjamin's "mechanical reproduction" theory was more broadly a Marxist response to Capitalism's unfettered appetites in the 1920s and, more to point, if I can take you there, really a questioning of who had the right to declare oneself a "Great Sage Equal of Heaven" as the Monkey King dared. That is to say, the right to question who decides the "aura" of art – its quality and authenticity – or who decides who is a God is one in the same thread of thinking isn't it? As a "democratic" myth, the Monkey King's populist inspiration was a revolutionary ideal widely disseminated first by the oral tradition, scrolls, then books, in pamphlets from Mao, and now today by the Internet.

So what happened? Why wasn't Ma's Monkey King ultimately a threat that Chinese officials needed to squash? Well, it doesn't help that trendy Chinese clothing lines like [Akufuncture](#) have [co-opted SunWukong](#) even as his tale, *Journey to the West*, has been [re-imagined in near pornographic terms](#), turning Sun Wukong into a revolutionary product third to only [Che Guevera](#) and, yes, [Mao Zedong](#). Exactly as mechanical reproduction destroys the "aura" it also erodes the necessary mythic dialectic that inspires rebellion, which art really can't do anymore in the light of, say, [Damien Hirst's](#) ridiculous shark in *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* being [re-pickled for God knows how much](#). In the attempt to hand art over to the masses, postmodernism eventually destroyed the necessary tether between art and myth's aura. Sounds awful, I know, but with *Intersections* I think the Phillips has begun to help repair that dialectic. Indeed as the [art world struggles to reconcile modern and postmodern contradictions](#), the Phillips is perhaps best positioned to refine that conversation with *Intersections* as the sounding board.



After a second look at Liotta's work it becomes clear that *Icarus* – as much as it adheres to postmodern conceits – is fundamentally mythic even without contextual constraint, which is to say it's *refreshing*. Meanwhile, Heuser's abstract "Pulse" paintings are as much a by-product of process – her works were created on "Turkish" paper she made using ancient Ottoman Empire techniques at a [Manhattan boutique papermill](#), as they were a natural progression from her early expressionist days.

"The only other way I could have learned this was to go to Turkey," Heuser said of the unique paper she made for the paintings. "But it's really hard to find a master there that would help you to learn this." Heuser's works line the stairwell of the Goh Annex, drawing their visual inspiration from the Phillips's Rothko paintings – in particular the [Ochre and Red and Red](#) work – which I'd say are also "mythic" despite the lack of an ancient narrative tied to the work. And Heuser, I think, would agree. At ten-years-old, she was taking drawing lessons at the Corcoran Gallery of Art's art and design school and happened to pass by a Rothko exhibit with her father.

"I feel like I'm floating!" Heuser cried, she told the Phillips audience during the Q&A, her father promptly putting his hand on her forehead. "I said 'no, no, no, the paintings! The paintings! They're making me feel like I'm floating!"



But it's Ma's *Brain Storm* that may be the perfect example of a contemporary artist addressing art's communication breakdown between aura and myth. If you haven't watched the vid yet, a recap: At the open, Ma's ink brush paints a man and horse who then begin an endless walk through a Chinese ink-wash wasteland. The pair never journey off-center stage and never arrive anywhere as ink splashes past the film into storms or starry night skies. It's psychological, Ma said, a brain storm. But just as their journey becomes tedious and pointless – much like life – Ma's hand rubs in an astonishingly bright silver moon. Asked to describe how she cut ten hours of film into a ten-minute narrative, Ma insisted that there was no narrative. Nothing happens and then black ink absorbs the film like death. All said, *Brain Storm* was fundamentally a work emphasizing process, she explained. But what about the Buddha-like hand that makes several appearances just when it seems “nothing” is all there is, I asked?

“I guess it comes with a feeling like sometimes there is something else besides you in this world,” Ma said, a faint whimsy in her voice. “That maybe there *is* something more to this than just what is going on in your head.”

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