

Shen Shaomin uses animal skeletons to create monsters that offer a glimpse of a potentially dark future for mankind, writes **Jade Lee-Duffy**

CREATURE FEATURES



Photos: Oliver Tsang

SHEN SHAOMIN'S BONE sculptures are mesmerising, if slightly disconcerting. They resemble larger-than-life prehistoric beasts, but you won't find these menacing creatures with teeth the size of fingers or metre-long stingers in any natural history museum anywhere in the world.

The sculptures and accompanying photographs occupy two large, windowless rooms in Osage Contemporary Art Space, the city's newest and largest commercial contemporary art space. The low lighting and silence make the works seem even more macabre.

Titled *Scary Monsters*, the show explores science gone horribly wrong, with advancements in genetic engineering, biotechnology and cybernetics irreversibly transforming animals and humans for the worse.

"The sculptures make you think about our world, how artificial it's becoming," says Shen. "Science and artificial elements are influencing plants, animals, human beings, the city and our living environment. We are not growing naturally, human beings are becoming more removed from nature."

Shen illustrates a future with horrific consequences for today's scientific and consumer "innovations".

The exhibition is the culmination of three years' work by the 50-year-old artist from Heilongjiang province in northern China. Shen's art has been shown in galleries and museums including Museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf, Shanghai's Dolun Art Museum and the Fine Arts Museum of Bern in Switzerland.

This year, the Beijing-based artist will be showing 20-tonne marble sculptures at the Liverpool Biennial.

To obtain materials, Shen can't just pop into any art shop. He collects thousands of farm-animal bones from abat-

toirs and 20 bags of dead mice are culled by farmers using electric nets (using rat poison makes the bones dangerous to work with). Shen then grinds the bones into meal and moulds them with glue into new shapes and bone configurations.

And voilà, a new creature is born. The off-white bones are gleaming clean and unnervingly natural.

Shen also modifies the shapes of the bones and skulls to resemble humans, some with large orbital cavities for eyes and a central cavity for a nose.

"A few years ago, I saw scientists cloning sheep and I thought the next step would be to clone humans," Shen says.

"I think humans aren't following natural evolution. I'm worried about cloning and what a negative impact this may have. In the future, science and cloning humans might get out of control and lead us to create new enemies against man."

Shen's largest work is *Unknown Creature - Three Headed Monster*. Created from the bones of 15 cows, the beast is seven metres long and 1½-metres tall with eight legs, a spiky spine and three heads. Each menacing skull also encompasses two horns and a severely undercut jaw with two enlarged hook-like teeth.

Using dental tools, Shen has meticu-



Shen Shaomin (top right) makes sure his monsters are anatomically viable

lously carved Chinese, Arabic and English text on the bones from three religions: Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. The effect resembles erosion by desert sands.

By imprinting different languages of religious text, Shen addresses themes of war and religion. He says: "I put three religions on one body since most wars are fought because of religion."

English words such as "to their doom", "you destroy all", and "you allow no evil in" are juxtaposed with Chinese and Arabic characters. He says each phrase may complement or contradict another; it shows a religion's constant struggle to be dominant on a single body.

"The three heads represent the three different religions," says Shen. "They are always moving in different directions and will never be one."

Working with animal carcasses has its problems. When Shen's neighbours in the city of Daqing discovered he was working with dead animals, they called the police. The environmental department came and removed all of his bones, and tools. However, as a mainland citizen and Australian passport holder (he returned to the mainland in 2002 after 12 years in Australia), Shen persuaded the local government his artwork was legitimate.

Unknown Creature - Mosquito (2003) is a towering, two-metre-tall insect with six long spindly legs, two prickly antennas, an elongated stinger, a thin pair of wings and a bulbous head featuring two honeycomb eyes and a devilish human skull planted in the middle. The intricately crafted creature is an amalgamation of sheep bones, dog teeth and pig's feet, which almost seems real.

"This exhibition throws up possibilities in how the animal kingdom may evolve," says John Batten of John Batten Gallery. "The mosquito looks like it's been assembled in an ad hoc manner, but it's been carefully constructed."

Indeed, Shen consulted a veterinarian so that his creatures would seem anatomically viable, or close enough to fool visitors. He says many visitors believe his creatures were once alive, born as freaks of nature.

Worryingly, if the present rate of genetic modification continues, it may not be too long before this stuff of nightmares becomes reality.

Scary Monsters, Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm, Osage Contemporary Art Space, 4/F, 20 Hing Yip Street, Kwun Tong, Kowloon. Inquiries: 2793 4817. Ends Aug 3

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INNER SPACE

With the West Kowloon Cultural District project on the distant horizon, Agnes Lin Yin, head of Osage Group, took matters into her own hands and launched her 7,000-square foot warehouse-style art space in Kwun Tong, East Kowloon.

"There were so many things the government wants to do but we are just trying to do it on our own," says Lin, who financed the new Osage Contemporary Art Space with earnings from her garment business of 20 years. "I hope what we are doing now will benefit a lot of people. That is where I am coming from. How, through our initiative, a lot of younger artists will be encouraged by this space, how we can make Kwun Tong the East Kowloon, instead of just waiting for West Kowloon to happen."

To many in the local visual-art circle, Lin seemed to appear out of nowhere. A year ago, she set up Osage Gallery in SoHo, representing mainly Filipino and mainland artists, although the company was already running galleries in Beijing and Singapore, and will soon open in Shanghai and the Philippines.

The Osage Art Foundation, a "not-for-profit, philanthropic" organisation, was set up recently to support arts education and international cultural exchange. It works closely with the Hong Kong Christian Service to help improve art appreciation among pre-school children and is a patron of the Asia Art Archive.

Lin recruited veteran art consultant Jonathan Thomson to oversee the contemporary art space, which opened this month. The 56-year-old art collector says when she, her sister and a business partner from Singapore set up Osage Gallery, they wanted to see what they could do for the art industry.

"I think that when we were young, we didn't have much opportunity to be exposed to art," she says. "Art and its appreciation can help young people develop and lead a more balanced life."

Lin hopes to hold four major shows a year at the gallery, which has received favourable reviews, put together by different curators. She is also happy to lend the space to other local artists.

"We hope to have this platform to allow the public to understand what is going on, not necessarily in China but different parts of the world, and we will be looking at bringing different types of work to the Osage Contemporary Art Space to reflect these aims."

Kevin Kwong