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ER&M 350

May 8, 2020

Capstone Project

As I explained in my presentation last week, I interned at the Contemporary Austin (<https://thecontemporaryaustin.org/>), a contemporary art museum in Austin with a large sculpture park on the shores of Lake Austin, in the summer of 2018 after my first year. The Contemporary is and was already committed to disrupting institutional conventions, conventional curatorial practices, but I was still learning how to do that when I was giving tours, which were organized thematically around themes like “beauty,” or “nature,” or “watching.” However, at the time, I hadn’t taken a single ER&M class, and I still thought I was going to be a Classics or Art History major. Things that seem obvious to me now were not on my radar then, so this class inspired me to revisit the time I spent at the Contemporary and put my two favorite sculptures in conversation with one another. For a complete set of images as well as curatorial essays by Senior Curator Heather Pesanti, visit the links listed with each work below.

I initially conceived of this project because I viewed these works as separate at the time, but there is so much that is opened up by looking at them together. Additionally, when I first started this project, I was thinking about the two-sided conversation between Water Woman and Iron Tree Trunk, but I quickly reevaluated -- such a two-sided framework is inaccurate and reifies a kind of objectivity that cannot actually exist. The conversation is better understood as being among Water Woman, Iron Tree Trunk, and me, or the viewer(s). I do not talk with much specificity about the histories/concepts we’ve encountered through this class in my exploration of these works, but I wouldn’t have thought to go back to these two art pieces without this class.

The questions and ideas that jump out to me as being at the core of these artworks were certainly not in my head at the time. Taking this course (and other courses) has fundamentally changed what I see in this art (and in art generally), and also how I would approach discussing this art in a tour. Putting them in conversation is something that didn't happen while I was at the Contemporary, and which likely wouldn't happen in a conventional museum setting, but the conversation about both is so much richer when they are not confined to separate physical and imaginative spaces.

Wangechi Mutu, *Water Woman*, 2017. Bronze. 36 x 65 x 70 inches. Edition 2 of 3. Collection of The Contemporary Austin. <https://thecontemporaryaustin.org/exhibitions/wangechi-mutu/>
 Ai Weiwei, *Iron Tree Trunk*, 2015. Cast iron. 185 x 63 x 82 5/8 inches. Edition 1 of 3. Collection of The Contemporary Austin. <https://thecontemporaryaustin.org/exhibitions/ai-weiwei/>

Ai Weiwei, a Chinese artist born 1957 in Beijing, is a political activist and dissident who has openly criticized the Chinese government for corruption and abuse of human rights. He has combined throughout his lifetime his political activism with prolific art making. Wangechi Mutu, born 1972 in Nairobi, grew up in Nairobi in the 1970s and 1980s. She was influenced by watching American TV shows and movies and noticing the lack of representation and accurate representation of black people generally, and specifically urban African people and especially young people. Through exploring *Iron Tree Trunk* and *Water Woman* together, I propose some themes and questions that emerge out of that exploration. Additionally, I did not want to be constrained by what I would actually say or ask on a tour; rather, I wanted to explore the kinds of questions I ask myself by putting these two works in conversation. These themes and questions

are all interconnected; I have arranged them as separate sections, which in some ways is insufficient because it suggests that they can be understood in isolation from one another. I certainly do not think this is the case, and it should be clear in my discussion that these themes form a web rather than separate pillars or lenses for the artworks. These themes are:

Positionality/relationality

Memory

Capitalism/commodification

Melancholy/loss

Creation/brokenness

Positionality, relationality

I understand both these works to fundamentally be about positionality and relationality. I'm very aware of my own gaze in particular with these two pieces, and I think that's a very intentional move by both artists. Both have been placed in museum spaces, surrounded by white walls, and both are now permanently outside. There is a fundamental shift in meaning in this new placement. Instead of staring at a blank wall, the water woman now gazes out at a lake. Instead of standing in an entirely man-made space, the iron tree trunk is now surrounded by real trees, inviting questions about what it is missing, what it has lost, and also about what the surrounding trees have the potential to become.

Additionally, because each artist chose the location of their artwork, the two pieces are intentionally near one another. To spend time with one is to spend time with both. *Water Woman's* placement evokes questions about her relationship to the water and to the land, and by

extension the relationship between the land and the water itself. Most significantly to me, *Water Woman* asks about the relationship between humans and nature, in which *Water Woman* occupies a kind of middle ground and exists in a space of negotiation of that relationship. *Iron Tree Trunk*, similarly, makes a statement about the environmental problems caused by deforestation, overpopulation, and emissions from coal-powered factories. All of these are recalled in the sculpture; however, these themes do not gain their full force until one thinks about how one is intended to engage with the physical sculpture. *Iron Tree Trunk* intends to make the viewer an active part of the sculpture; viewers are expected to circumambulate the sculpture, and indeed to even walk into it, as the trunk itself is hollow. Ai expects viewers to understand the sculpture in relation to their own bodies and gazes, highlighting the relationship between humans and nature and the role of humans in environmental destruction. In this way, the viewer cannot exist separately or objectively from the relationship and concerns expressed in the sculpture and must imagine themselves as an actor in this relationship to the land.

Memory

Water Woman deals with memory primarily in terms of the capacity of the body to hold collective memory, trauma, and intergenerational memory. Mutu's earliest work explored forms of violence and misrepresentation forced on black women, such that the body carries the memory of that violence into the present. This same theme is taken up in *Water Woman*'s fictional body. The sculpture is a statement both about the specificity of the violence of slavery and sexual violence imposed or inflicted on African bodies, and specifically black women's bodies, and also statement about the capacity of the body to hold memory. Dr. Pesanti talks about *Water Woman* as melancholy, which will come up throughout this essay. I think Mutu's focus on the

legacy of the history of violence on black women's bodies is something that she views as inherited; even this fictive water woman bears that pain while at the same time Mutu engages in this practice of mythmaking, of proposing worlds within worlds to escape pain that is in many ways inescapable. In other words, even this hybridized female figure who belongs to a world that is not our own is burdened with these violent histories.

Iron Tree Trunk explores the memory of the land, of nature, and in particular of wood. Ai observed the practice of collecting and selling dry wood and tree trunks for their unique shape and aesthetic and was inspired to take a cast of a massive dead found tree trunk. In this way, *Iron Tree Trunk* is frozen in time and makes permanent the memory of this wood. The memory that's contained is a history of pollution, of capitalism and commodification that led to environmental destruction. Additionally, the artist's own memory is wrapped up and encapsulated in his work; both Ai and his father have been targeted, and Ai continues to be targeted, for their political radicalism, dissidence, and their use of art to express the same. However, I don't think the message of *Iron Tree Trunk* is that there exists a pure form of embodied history that cannot be "touched." Even in its metal form, the tree shows signs of age as it oxidizes, suggesting that history and memory take on new meaning as they move into new contexts and are taken up by different individuals and generations

Capitalism, commodification

I view both works as heavily occupied with capitalism and commodification and how these systems and processes are disruptive in a multitude of ways -- disruptive to the body, to nature, and to the relationship between the two. In this way, capitalism emerges as an organizing logic behind multiple forms of oppression and of disruption and pollution of the relationships

I've discussed above. *Water Woman*'s body is on display for the viewer; being in her presence invites the question, "what is she doing when we're not looking." Of course, there is no real way to know. As a result, there is something voyeuristic and unsettling about viewing this sculpture in person, and this feeling is heightened by how peaceful and serene the setting is. There is the sense that even as the sculpture invites us to reflect on histories of the commodification of black and particularly black female bodies, the viewer is also complicit in that history both in their engagement with the sculpture and also in life more generally. *Iron Tree Trunk* invites questions about the commodification of nature, turning pieces of wood into things to be sold for their aesthetic value, and also the environmental destruction caused by capitalism. The way in which the viewer takes an active role in this sculpture again reveals the viewer's even unintentional participation in destruction and capitalist commodification.

Melancholy, loss

Returning to Dr. Pesanti's mention of *Water Woman*'s melancholy, the sculpture to me suggests a kind of loss of home and of peace by violence and dispossession. One way I think about this is by reflecting on her placement on the land rather than in the water. Practically, of course, she must be on land for viewers to see her. However, she is also a water woman separated from the water, perpetually confined to a plot of land to look at rather than be in her natural habitat. As a result, there's this sense of separation, of being in a literal sense a "fish out of water." For me, that feeling is an invitation to reflect on the ways that violence and dispossession are so fundamentally incorporated into the capitalist society and way of life that those affected by the violence and dispossession must exist in this perpetual state of loss and melancholy. Another way to think about this is through the idea of home and the disruption of

that home. This disruption is slightly different in *Iron Tree Trunk* -- the concavity of the trunk and its hollowness show that it's been rent into pieces. It is incomplete and fragmented, and it has this empty space that can be physically occupied by the viewer. Thinking about this hollowness reveals that *Iron Tree Trunk* can be viewed as being about a loss of life, a loss of completeness, and an emptiness that is caused by or in service of human profit.

Creation, brokenness

Mutu is practicing a kind of myth-making in which both real legacies and bodies are merged with stories drawn from East African folklore and with animal imagery; in this fusion, Mutu creates something new that is more than the sum of its parts. In this creation, Mutu opens up new possibilities and alternatives for what femininity and the female body are imagined to be. In other words, Mutu uses this myth-making to create a female figure through which she forges an alternative to the world of violence that produces a femininity that is perpetually subject to exploitation and cruelty. Similarly, *Iron Tree Trunk*, while it is a monolith, it is still only a part from the whole tree. By casting it in iron, Ai freezes the tree but also imbues it with meaning, creating a statement about capitalism and the earth and people's relationship and obligation to it. I understand both works, then, to be forging alternate understandings to shared histories of destruction and dispossession. They are a call to futures that both carry the memory and legacy of these painful, violent, destructive histories, and also imagine alternatives to pain and violence and destruction.