



Empty Legs

Eduardo Abaroa, Kim Dingle, Huang Yong Ping, John Outterbridge,
Noah Purifoy, Ruth Vollmer, Gang Zhao

January 7 – March 27th, 2021

Tilton Gallery is pleased to present *Empty Legs*, an exhibition of artworks that feature legs, or their conspicuous absence. Working around the globe and across generations, each artist uses legs as a way to say something about their attitudes and concerns, in other words, where they stood.

These legs appear in bronze, oil paint, and organic matter. Their absence is articulated by empty items of clothing. They are engaged in their most basic functions - standing, stepping, sitting. These seemingly simple actions accumulate to define where we stand, what we're doing and even who we are. However, upon closer inspection, we find these particular legs often out of the control of their assumed operators. Legs can be bound, broke or rendered irrelevant; yet even in their absence we can still see what they represented. Legs convey movement and stability and are used as metaphors for agency and freedom.

Kim Dingle (b. 1951)

Lincoln's Legs in Loafers with Photo, 1991

In *Lincoln's Legs in Loafers with Photo*, Kim Dingle presents a composite portrait of President Abraham Lincoln, juxtaposing his familiar photograph next to a large oil painting of his bare legs. His pants have been stripped to reveal his pale skin, his lower half clad only in the polished black loafers on his feet. The backdrop is a brushy brown, recalling traditional American portrait painting. Both photograph and painting are framed in a dark brown wood. By isolating his legs, Dingle seems to illustrate Lincoln's literal standing in history. However, something is obviously askew without his pants. His humanity is laid bare and the scene starts to teeter on the absurd: one person's legs floating against the nebulous backdrop of history. The almost anonymous appendages lack solid ground to stand on, yet still persist and appear before us today.

Huang Yong Ping (1954 – 2019)
Border Crossing, 1999

In *Border Crossing*, Huang Yong Ping combines two dead snakeskins with a pair of Worker Land leather boots. Absent their original occupant, the boots have been pierced through and are now worn by the pair of twin snakeskins. Each snakehead extends past the rubber toe and their crooked tails trail far behind their heels. The shoes are untied and their laces left dangling by their previous occupant, who seems to have left in a hurry. The boots are staggered on the floor, frozen mid-stride.

Huang made this work in Paris, intended for his second exhibition at Jack Tilton Gallery in 2000. In transit, the works got caught in customs, delayed due to their organic material. Though the exhibition would be postponed and other animal-material would need to be sourced from a pet shop in New Jersey, *Border Crossing* was ultimately installed near the entrance of his exhibition, *TaiGong Fishing, Willing to Bite the Bait*, its placement perhaps reflected the in-between status of its title. The boots could have been standing guard as a type of hybrid sentinels, with their threatening mouths agape. Their crooked tails reveal themselves as footprints, evidence of where they've been, and perhaps placing them in flight.

“Human snakes” is a term used in Chinese slang for people who are smuggled and thus are used as stand-ins for the experience of “border crossing.” Huang himself became an immigrant in part by happenstance. In 1989 he was in Paris installing his contribution to the famous exhibition, *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, at the Pompidou when the events of Tiananmen Square unfolded. Huang would never return to China as a resident and became a French citizen, even representing France at the 1999 Venice Biennale. As a global citizen, he experienced first hand the crossing over of identity and cultures, as well as racism every time he traveled.

Untitled, 1995-1997

Untitled consists of two dracaena tree trunks chopped off at both ends. The tropical tree trunks, native to the East but resilient in the West, now wear a pair of UFO-brand blue jeans turned inside out. The ends of the trunks extend beyond the jeans and are elevated off the floor, resting on a wood block. One branch exposes its craggy roots; the other limb is cut clean, almost a foot shorter and papered over with a piece of Kou-Pi plaster. This Chinese healing paper seems to have been applied to as a balm to the wound at the end of the amputated Eastern wood, where its roots have been cut off.

Untitled was originally shown in 1997 in Huang's first gallery exhibition in America at Jack Tilton Gallery, alongside his seminal installation work, *The Pharmacy*. The installation consisted of a larger-than-life gourd, filled with traditional Chinese medicines. The organic remedies of dead creatures and earthly powders would have seemed far removed from the sterile minimalism of Western medicine. In *Untitled*, we find an Eastern transplant located in a Western land, dressed up but injured, being treated with an Eastern remedy. Through this hybrid figure, Huang doesn't seem to reconcile the incompatibilities of East and West, but rather exposes them and the resultant wounds on the level of the individual.

Huang Yong Ping wrote for the original press release that “Although this project was labeled “untitled” one may easily find that it vividly illustrates the newly immigrated artists' dilemma: their cultural root has been pulled out from their original earth, and their artistic life still attempts to survive and develop, in spite of bearing a contemporary Western icon – jeans.”

John Outterbridge (1933 – 2020)
Captive Image #4, Ethnic Heritage Series, c. 1974-1976

John Outterbridge began his Ethnic Heritage Series in 1971, creating a group of dolls, made from found materials, as a way to explain the Black experience of living in America to his young daughter. Over the next decade, he created a number of Captive Image works, which specifically address the restrictions placed upon Black Americans. The figure in *Captive Image #4* appears as a prisoner, with the symbolic

number “12” emblazoned in paint across its chest and its legs adorned in black and white prison stripes.

The figure confronts us with its legs, anatomically larger in scale than the rest of its body. These legs protrude out at the viewer in different directions through the bends of its knees and ankles. Outterbridge does not depict the figure’s chains or bondage in a literal way, as the simple prison stripes make clear their own form of stricture. Though the figure seems to be seated, its legs are uplifted and perhaps orchestrated by some sort of absent puppet-master manipulating them above. They flail and struggle to reach the floor. With its feet off the ground, the figure has lost its literal connection to the world. We look up from the legs to see an antenna straining out and upward from its neck. The slender but sturdy antenna appears as its last connection to the outside world, seeking to take in information but with no microphone or mouthpiece, the figure is rendered mute.

Outterbridge stated in 1977 about his ‘dolls’ that “It has only been in recent times that the doll has come to be known as a toy. Despite its current representation, the doll as an inanimate object has continued to embrace life and energy through a resemblance of mankind.”

Noah Purifoy (1917 – 2004)
Hanging Tree, 1990

Hanging Tree is an assemblage wall-work consisting of assorted fabrics, a mop head, and a jagged tree branch affixed across its top. The fabrics fit together to form multiple planes of color, with an abstracted figure at its center that can be read as suspended from the tree. The white hairs of the mop hint at a head while two vertical planes of striped and plaid fabric form legs. Emerging from the pant legs are two forms of bright orange fabric appearing as feet. The tips of the feet protrude past the bottom edge ever so slightly, jutting out just enough to seem to dangle.

Made in his first full year at Joshua Tree after leaving Los Angeles, *Hanging Tree* incorporates familiar elements of his earlier assemblage wall-works that were intended for the indoors. The branch on top adds a natural element, bringing in a bit of the desert that would define his late, site-specific works intended for the outdoors. The disillusion he felt in Los Angeles might have been reflected in a bit of ominous text printed on the black fabric at the center of the work. In a proto-digital alarm-clock font, the text reads: “computers are killing our brains.” In a larger context, *Hanging Tree* is both a direct reference to the long history of the lynching of Black men in America and an abstracted commentary on the dangers faced by Black people still today.

Ruth Vollmer (1903 - 1982)
Walking Ball, 1959

Walking Ball is a bronze sculpture consisting of a central spherical mass from which six appendages protrude. The sphere and accompanying limbs form a sort of abstract animal-like figure, standing on three of its legs directly on the floor, the others lifted in the air. The rough surface of the bronze is intentionally left unpolished and tactile. These functional legs, of varying lengths, work together with the viewer to animate the sculpture. It can stand in multiple poses and when shifted, it can even walk.

Vollmer worked as a window-dresser, designer and educator upon her arrival in New York after fleeing Germany during World War II. Marked by both tragedy and growth, the year 1959 proved pivotal. When her husband committed suicide, Ruth took a step in her own direction, taking a studio and beginning her career as an artist in earnest. Despite the losses in her life, Vollmer filled her world with the joys of friendship, geometry and nature. Vollmer held salons in her home for artists like Mel Bochner, Sol LeWitt, Robert Smithson and Richard Tuttle. Emerging as a sort-of maternal influence, Ruth developed a close relationship with Eva Hesse. Though years apart in age, both were German refugees in America. Their friendship included trips to source industrial materials for Hesse’s work and a vacation together to Mexico. Ruth’s early influence could potentially be found in Hesse’s own kinetic work, “Legs of a Walking Ball” from 1965.

Vollmer showed with Betty Parsons from 1960. Her estate has been represented by Tilton Gallery since the closing of the Betty Parsons Gallery after Betty's death in 1982.

Eduardo Abaroa (b. 1968)

Sociopathic Real Estate Item #34701, 2004

Sociopathic Real Estate Item #34701 joins three objects: a globe, a dollhouse, and a pair of blue jeans. The globe, an educational resource for young and old, occupies almost the entire interior of the metal home, resting on its side with its base affixed to a wall. A pair of blue jeans with a belt attempts to contain the dollhouse, covering one edge of the roof and resting underneath the house, inserting itself as an uneven foundation. The undone belt and unzipped jeans are empty; the dark denim pant legs lie vacant on the ground. While the dollhouse may imply a notion of the perfect home, it is undercut by the loose pair of jeans, symbolic of the missing owner, that tries, but fails, to entirely contain either the home or the globe, the world, within.

Gang Zhao (b. 1961)

Soldier After War, 2006

Soldier After War is an oil painting of a lone figure standing in a military uniform. The title marks the figure as a soldier in the aftermath of conflict. What begins as a straightforward portrait shifts, as we see his torso has been sliced at the hip and slid to the right. His upper body floats amid the brown background. His legs and coattails remain standing where they were. While his stately pose presents him as a proud, unaffected soldier, the bisection of his body reveals the psychological state of a man at war. The soldier is also a stand-in for the artist and his self-perceived struggles to make his mark on the art world.

Untitled, 2006

In *Untitled*, we see a statue being lifted into a blue-gray sky by a pair of cables and hooks, hoisted away from its prominent perch atop a building. The statue seems to float for a second, the weight of its stone mass tilting it uneasily forward just as its aerial support kicks in. The operator of the cables is unseen, just as the sculpted figure is unidentified. The scene is at once anonymous and universal. Set in stone and designed to stand in one place for eternity, the legs of the statue were bound together from the beginning.

Empty Legs has been organized by Jacob Billiar. Simultaneous with this exhibition, Tilton Gallery presents a group show of selected works by Egan Frantz, Tomashi Jackson, Yashua Klos, Antone Könst, Jarbas Lopes, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, Joyce Scott, Berend Strik, Martha Tuttle, Cosima von Bonin and Brenna Youngblood.

For an appointment to view the exhibitions, please call 937 935-5022 or email jacobb@jacktiltongallery.com.