

Peng Hung-chih

Taiwan

The Chinese title of Peng Hung-chih's solo exhibition at IT Park Gallery in Taipei, 'Gou Dong Xi', does not translate easily. Literally, it means 'dogs east west', but the sense of the exhibition is more 'dogs everywhere'. *Dong xi* also means 'stuff', in the sense of material objects, so the English interpretation of the title is closer to 'Dog Matters', or should that be 'Dogs Matter'? Peng's self-curated show brought together his interest in positions of viewing, and the relationship between humans and animals, showing a maturity in theme and form. Theatrical in its presentation and concerns, the eleven works in 'Gou Dong Xi' – including sculpture, video and photographs – used the tropes of stage design, filmmaking and costume to raise familiar questions about how we see, what we see, whom we see and who sees us.

In the second-floor entrance of the gallery, visitors were confronted with an over two-metre-high puppy made up of 660 wind-up Little Danny dogs, which began yapping and turning their heads when people entered the room. It was unclear whether one's footsteps triggered the dogs' movements or if it was the artist in control. Described by Peng as a 'mechanical spirit', *Little Danny*, 2001, humor-

ously played not only with ideas of reality, but also with our position as viewers. With its overwhelming size and noisy cacophony of tinny barking, it was difficult to take in the work as a whole. The small dogs coalesced into one, but on closer inspection each mass-produced Danny was somehow individual.

Climbing the next flight of stairs, the sound from *Little Danny* was mixed with the muffled barking of five pearlesque dogs, *Face to Face*, 2001, each frozen in a different pose. One dog was posed with its mouth open, another curled up on a grey rug, and another with its paws on a windowsill, staring out. One dog was caught in mid-flight, and another simply stood, a sentinel. Each dog with its own personality. Built into each was a video monitor showing footage shot from the perspective of Yuki, one of eight dogs resident in the artist's studio. With a camera strapped to his head, Yuki ran, fought, swam, walked and ate. To see the action, visitors had to position themselves near the dogs, bowing, kneeling or standing astride them. The open-mouthed dog was the most successful and complete, with repulsive but engaging footage showing Yuki eating, making viewers a part of the action. Some of the other videos



above: PENG HUNG-CHIH, *Little Danny*, 2001, mixed media, 240 x 400 x 200 cm; below: PENG HUNG-CHIH, *Face to Face*, 2001, installation view, mixed-media, dimensions variable.

were not as effective, and were more a human concept of a dog's life, particularly Peng's beach scene, which represented what a dog might dream.

Peng's photographs of dogs are more realistic. Like film stills, their large size and gloss are reminiscent of publicity shots. Taken at a local pound, this public theatre brought together dog 'actors' dressed in dog costumes, with dogs trapped in cages, awaiting death or another form of salvation. The photographs require a double take, for what at first glance appear to be dogs being dogs – sniffing, mounting and fighting – are, in fact, actors in a story. We do not know if the pound dogs view the actors any differently. By dressing dogs in cos-

tume and speaking of them in our own terms, we have for the most part removed our fear of them, anthropomorphising them beyond mere domestication. Dogs and humans are one of the closest cross-species relationships, and through his photographs Peng further blurs the line between dogs and people by adulterating the former with the vestiges of the latter.

Peng's examination of viewing and control has been ongoing, and his interest in working with dogs and dog imagery has developed since he returned to Taipei in 1998 after completing a Master of Fine Arts at the San Francisco Art Institute. His 'vision' is about re-creating vision, fracturing and repositioning our eyes and bodies, and changing perceptions of how we see the world. Psychology, film and art criticism all have variously theorised vision and control – the auteur, the scopophile and the gaze – but none of these can easily be applied to Peng's work, which draws attention to roles and makes us aware that there are many ways of seeing, and that it is not a purely human phenomenon.

Peng Hung-chih, *Guo Dong Xi*, IT Park Gallery, Taipei, 7 July – 4 August 2001.

Bronwyn Mahoney

