



An Te Liu, left to right: *Cactoid II*, 2024, aluminum, 10.2 × 28.6 × 76.2 centimetres; *Cactoid I*, 2022, aluminum, 23 × 10.2 × 82 centimetres. All images © An Te Liu. All images courtesy the artist.

An Te Liu's New Nature

by Eduardo Aquino

If the doors of perception were cleansed,
everything would appear to man as it is,
infinite.

—William Blake, *The Marriage
of Heaven and Hell*, 1790

When I attended An Te Liu's "Low Fidelity" exhibition at Anat Ebgi gallery in Los Angeles, in October of 2022, I sensed a sparse but penetrating landscape of natures. As I was wandering through the show, the ambiguous character of the bronze, ceramic and steel sculptures, at times elusively representative, sometimes suggestively abstract, affirmed the unstable condition of these objects. At first, they resembled live beings like plants, animals, birds or corals, I'm thinking here of *Cactoid I*, 2022, but on a closer look the works revealed instead banal, everyday objects and technologies. They did this through the subtle power of their mysterious geometry, materiality and intriguing indeterminate details. Some of the sculptures, such as *Sukuda*, 2022, and *Mikado*, 2022, left the biomorphic realm to extrapolate into machine-like appearances—some made from Vespa parts, or appliances, or some in bronze and steel like *Martin, Bruno, Felix*, 2022. Sometimes the elusive character of these sculptures turned into recognizable statements, like *Restraint*, 2022, made from a double-end punching bag or a deflated basketball pressed into a steel beam. While the source for all the pieces resided in the residue of modern life, An Te's capacity for amusing transformation turned these objects into a garden of captivating poetry and a critique of contemporary life, concurrently.

The delight of An Te's procedures lies in the game of push-and-pull through which he fabricates his objects. At times he skilfully hides the original identity of the parts in a new character, or moves in the opposite direction by exposing the factual uniqueness of the object in estranged circumstances, like the punching bag or the deflated basketball. When I first encountered An Te's work—*Airborne*, 2000; *Exchange*, 2001; *Cloud*, 2008; *Blast*, 2011; *White Dwarf*, 2012—the identification was immediate. It was clear then that his interest in utopian urbanisms was camouflaged by comfort-induced technologies like air purifiers, ionizers, ecologizers, humidifiers and air cleaners, sometimes running continuously in his incisive, staged constructions. His direct involvement with architecture was evident, and his architecture education, practice and teaching connected these sculptural gestures of that time with peers like Constant, Superstudio, Archigram and Hans Hollein. An Te's early preoccupations already indicated an interest in the dematerialization of objects for the benefit of their imaginary potential, producing propositions of architectural or urbanistic critical standpoints. While his work commented on the excesses of the architectural hyperbole of the 1980s and '90s, An Te Liu had been quietly, gradually developing a simultaneous approximation to the tradition of 20th-century sculpture.

It is not surprising that An Te's formal academic experience in art history led to the first steps in his artistic adventure. This initial fascination is what explains in part his continuous and careful dialogue with historical references and tradition, a companion of his process since then, using everyday objects to rewrite his own version of art history. For An Te it was akin to Donald Judd's embryonic art criticism, "Specific Objects," or Dan Graham's conceptual beginnings, *Homes for America* and *Detumescence*, germinating their own artistic practice through art writing and conceptual textual pieces for magazines. In 1975, Donald Judd asked himself the question: "Why write?" Looking back at his early essays and reviews, he came up with an answer: "I wrote criticism as a mercenary and would never have written it otherwise." This "mercenary" defiance, evidenced in Graham's early work as well, is the defying, groundbreaking, paradigm-shifting, politically resisting attitude of the '60s toward a redefinition of the avant-garde. Like Judd and Graham, An Te's critical positioning, using references from art history while constantly revisiting tradition, is as clever as it is subtle. Instead of practising typical historical revisionism, his work engages mischievous, elegant and humorous provocation, not defaulting to a superficial manipulation of recognizable forms.

More in connection with Malcolm Gladwell's reading of revisionist history across overlooked and



misunderstood pasts, and less aligned with Bertrand Russell's own biased revisionist philosophy, An Te taps into the delicate territory of historical reinterpretation by celebrating gestures from the past without falling into comfortable replication. Russell acknowledged his own unavoidable bias when writing history and argued that honest historical accounts must be transparent about the author's viewpoint. For him, "a truly unbiased historian does not exist." Perhaps this suspended space of An Te's procedures, more evident in his concrete columns, initially makes us think of Constantin Brâncuși's endless *Endless Column*, a motif to which Brâncuși would return repeatedly during his lifetime. While he used a doubled pyramid as a base for his sculptures, eventually realizing that this abstract block could be multiplied into a pillar form—a fully realized architectural element in its own right—An Te's columns and objects are inhabited with the friction of contemporary life in his use of the phantasmagoric

1. An Te Liu with *Ludo Disco Morior*, 2023, bronze, 40.64 centimetres in diameter.

2. *Over Time*, 2023, aluminum, 16.8 × 30.2 centimetres.

3. *Study for Manji*, 2024, insulation foam, 42 × 4 × 83 centimetres.



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appearances of packaging, food containers, machine parts and unidentifiable manufactured objects. An Te does not necessarily revisit history but instead invents a history of his own. The quasi-reappearances of Brâncuși in his work is palpable in *Talismanic* 2000, 2018, alluding to Brâncuși's *Sleeping Muse*, 1910, or *Pygmalion*, 2020, which insinuates the Romanian proto-cubist's *The Kiss*, 1913.

This place of perceptible instability, with a dense sense of historical suspension, develops an affinity closer to philosopher and professor of architecture Manuel DeLanda's notion of historical entropy. He sees history more as a synergistic organization of vitality, disposed in a non-linear manner, emphasizing history as an interplay of matter, energy and diverse assemblages, than as a single, chronological progression. An Te's columns prove complexity arises from self-organization, like minerals enabling bones, or the way cities develop from intensified energy flows, challenging simplistic top-down or

teleological views of progress. Key themes in his work include history as emergent, the mix of hierarchies and meshwork and, driven by concrete interactions, made out of concrete, and not just texts, images, or ideas. An Te's experimental mashup language is concocted from unusual material combinations that include concrete, Hydrostone, foam, plaster, earthenware, sawdust, copper oxide, wax, pigments, silver glazes, patinas of different sorts, bronze, iron filings, aggregates and insulation material, as a new nature, as if the birth of each piece would have to go through an alchemical and material transformation before being born. Hence, the material nature of sculpture here is more akin to DeLanda's bio-synergic position in *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (Zone Books, 1997), where he wrote: "The emergence of organic life itself, while not representing a more perfect stage of development than rocks, did involve a greater capacity to generate self-consistent aggregates, a surplus of consistency.

The human hand may also have involved a destratification, a complete detachment from locomotive functions and a new coupling with the external environment, itself further destratified when the hand began converting pieces of it (rocks, bones, branches) into tools.”

This personal bio-synergic appropriation of history is manifested in *Wúxiàn*, 2024. Here An Te repeated, in concrete, stacked forms of the Chinese takeout box patented in 1894 by Frederick Weeks Wilcox. The artist revisits the Dragon Inn as an iconic Chinese restaurant in Burnaby, a suburb of Vancouver, opened in 1959 by Hong Kong immigrant Larry Lee. Dragon Inn was the first restaurant to offer an all-you-can-eat buffet, or what Lee, using the Swedish term, called smorgasbord. For An Te the takeout box isn’t simply a form but is something injected with histories that speak about migration, adaptation and the melding of cultures, and referring to his own personal history. The graceful column of multiplied takeout boxes in concrete is suggestive of the pagodas found in East and Southeast Asia but made unequivocally as an homage to Brâncuși as well, fusing the present with the past as mythic and aspirational totems. *Wúxiàn*, the word, also means “endless,” or “limitless,” both in extent and in amount, thereby connoting the themes of plenitude and possibility.

At this point his playful conversations with history turned into his own personal history, confirmed by his growing interest in issues of inheritance, memory, ancestry and diasporic identity, themes that had recurred in the work for some time. An Te’s father’s dying in 2022 and his subsequent trip to Taiwan with his mother in the spring of 2023 led him to focus more on his own ancestry, the passages that his family had gone through and the realization that his birth home in Tainan had fallen into ruin. In An Te’s memory the house was almost pristine and now it was crumbling and morphing into something different. The works of this period reflect on and perhaps collapse the past, present and possible aftermath. Many in this recent cycle present journeys through space and time, and the changes in perception that we may experience. In *Manji*, 2024, a work still in its rigid insulation to be cast in bronze, the artist carved the wooden lattice doors that once adorned his ancestral home in Taiwan. Bearing the Buddhist manji symbol representing harmony and flux, the house doors disappeared 10 years earlier when thieves looted the vacated house. Now they are known only from photographs and he is attempting to resurrect and reanimate them through a group of cast bronze works that address themes of generation and metamorphosis.

In the sculpture series “Vestige,” 2025, An Te uses as a reference the Japanese tradition of *kintsugi*, meaning “golden joinery,” the art of repairing



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1. *White Dwarf*, 2012, various materials, 200 centimetres in diameter.

2. *Cloud*, 2008, air purifiers, ionizers, sterilizers, washers, humidifiers, ozone air cleaners; running continuously, 520.7 × 370 × 210.8 centimetres.

3. *Mikado*, 2022, bronze, 48.3 × 23 × 75 centimetres.

4. *Martin, Bruno, Felix*, 2022, bronze, 25.4 × 14 × 42 centimetres, 29.8 × 14 × 44.5 centimetres, 32 × 14.3 × 43.5 centimetres.



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broken pottery by mending the cracks with lacquer mixed with powdered gold, silver or platinum. In *kintsugi* breakage and repair are considered part of an object's history rather than something to hide, embodying the philosophy of *wabi-sabi*, finding beauty in imperfection and resilience. This ancient technique restores the broken ceramic but also denotes healing and transformation, making the repaired item more unique and valuable. An Te's

sculptures take the old broken vases of his inheritance and memory and isolate these cracks by casting them in bronze, removing the original shell and revealing a revenant of the past. "Vestige" hence poetically traces the inspired lines of ancestry, which he then hand-carves into the forms to be cast, generating ghost-like auras that result in delicate feminine gestures. These gestures, like a flower coming into bloom, or a *vaganova*—when the arms of a ballerina are curved and raised high overhead during a *pas de deux*—explore themes of memory, transformation and the recovery of occluded histories. The apparent vague interior produced by these sculptural objects gently holds a space to be filled by the spectator's imagination.

In An Te's nature we see a form of "New Realism," which is happening currently with a lot of artists who are making abstract works, like Sterling Ruby, Joe Bradley, Harmony Korine or Gedi Sibony. What they are doing is a new type of realism. The proposition revisits a duality experienced at the second half of the 20th century, both in art history and in philosophy. It refers to two distinct movements: the early 20th-century philosophical movement challenging idealism by asserting the independent existence of objects (led by figures like William James, GE Moore and Bertrand Russell); and the 1960s French art movement *Nouveau réalisme*, where artists used everyday real objects like trash and advertisements to reflect on urban life, influenced here by Dadaism. A third, and less common, significance relates to the international relations theory of Neorealism that focuses on the power of states struggling in an anarchic system.

Nouveau réalisme utilized discarded everyday objects, as in the work of Arman (through accumulations of trash), César (in a multiplicity of compressions), Jean Tinguely (with machine-making mashups), Raymond Hains and Jacques de la Villeglé (trampled, torn-up advertisements), exposing their accretions as they were found but still holding the explicit appearance of the original objects. An Te's material accumulations diverge from the literally explicit critique of the consumerism of the *Nouveau réalistes*. Through the delicate material transformation of his sources, he subtly activates the subconscious perception, counter-effecting the screen-hypnotic, manic doomscrolling of today's collective tech malaise, making the experience less visual, more tactile—an antidote to AI slop infestation. The experience of the series "Vestige," for example, transforms into palpable awareness the initially subconscious experience approaching abstract art. There is something highly optimistic about An Te's new realism via the conversion of the most vicious symbols of a dying system (aka capitalism) into a promised new life—from the most



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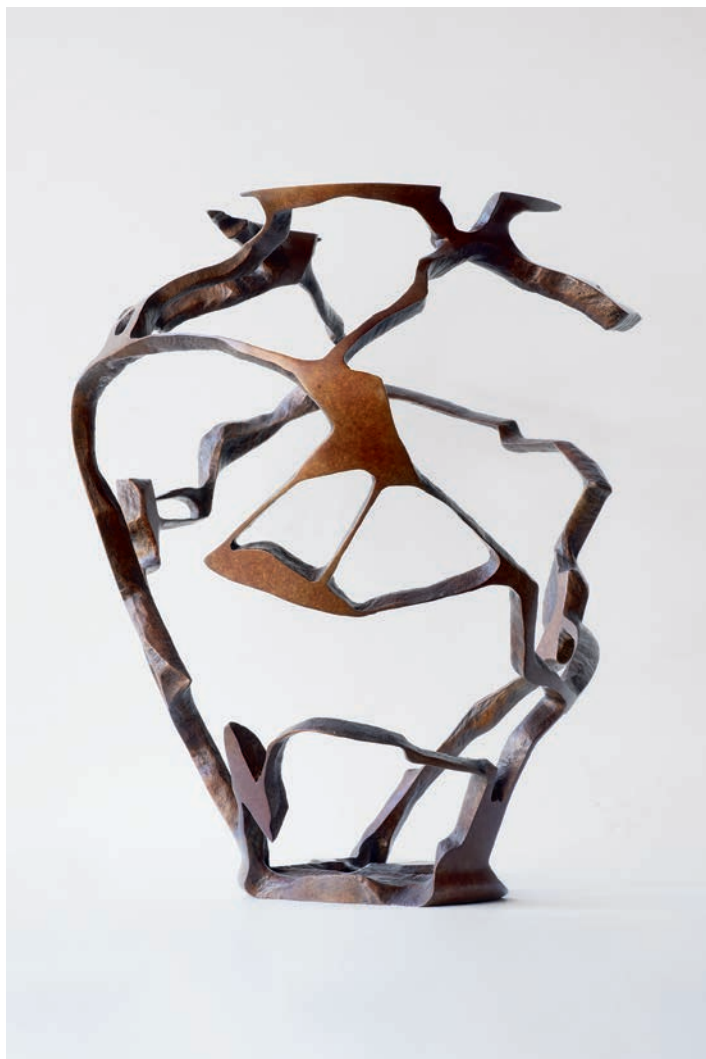
1. *Restraint*, 2022, bronze, leather,
19 × 69.2 centimetres.

2. *Talismanic 2000*, 2018, bronze,
45.7 × 22.2 × 23 centimetres.

3. *Pygmalion*, 2020, walnut,
25.7 × 17.2 × 34.3 centimetres.



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superficial, banal, quotidian and obsolete discarded things into objects full of spirit, producing a new possibility for redemption. These obsolete things are reinvented as a manifesto toward a kind of utopia. It is a way of taking a scenario from the real world and making it abstract. That's the elegance of An Te Liu's language—a paradoxical quietude that is viscerally critical of our consumerist behaviour, presented through a serene spirituality.

The disjunction between the state of object refinement and the devastating corruption by the likes of Amazon, Temu or Alibaba places the spectator in a skeuomorphic state, a state typically used to make something new feel familiar and thus easier to understand and use. An example of skeuomorphism is the desktop trash can/recycle bin icon on everyone's home screen. This icon resembles a physical bin, so users instinctively understand that by dragging files into it, it will delete them. In An Te's collection of inverted skeuomorphic objects, the reference is directly linked to the mass production of everyday things, except he is not reproducing the actual contents of, say, packaging but instead the absence of it, making his sculptures ghost architectures of manic consumption. An Te's works,

then, become abstractions experienced in real life, with his manufacturing subconscious landscapes of perception. While his works may appear abstract, they are deeply rooted in his personal experiences and perceptions of reality, functioning as a form of "visual almanac" or a new kind of realism, a new nature.

During a recent visit to An Te's studio in Toronto's Chinatown, a shared affection we both have for a book that profoundly influenced our experiences as young artists came up in conversation: *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*, by Lawrence Weschler. *Seeing Is Forgetting* is a poignant narrative of the sweeping transformations Irwin went through in his own artistic process. It is synthesized by the radical shift from the confinement of visibility (as in the experience of painting) to approaching art as conditional, open and expansive to all kinds of experimental and experiential possibilities and operating in response to the conditions of a given situation.

In the same conversation An Te revealed that his own eyesight is limited and diminishing due to advanced glaucoma, leading him to explore ways

1. Installation, left to right: *Wúxiàn*, 2025, concrete, 12.1 × 12.7 × 118.1 centimetres; *Wúxiàn*, 2024, concrete, 16.5 × 16.5 × 180.3 centimetres.

2. *Vestige No. 3* (Zhu An), 2025, bronze, 39.5 × 35.5 × 45.8 centimetres.

3. *Vestige No. 1* (Qing Yún), 2025, bronze, 31.5 × 31 × 40.3 centimetres.



We Are Floating in Space, 2025, oil on canvas, 43.2 × 35.5 centimetres.

of working more haptically, with less dependency on vision and increasingly with other senses. Paradoxically, *We Are Floating in Space*, 2025, a fresh new painting—a cartography constructed from a 3D scan of his ancestral home in Tainan—is a mark of his rich visuality, mapping his ancestralism through a pictorial medium. The procedure “to construct” this painting is akin to the way architects survey the location of a prospective project to initially produce what is commonly called a site plan. Along with resourcing his skills as an architect, An Te operates, in the making of *We Are Floating in Space*, like an archaeologist or an anthropologist in search of a trace of the recently discarded, the dying items that marked our past lives. These are either void of any significance, as in packaging or single-use containers, or, in the opposing case of his Tainan home, the object is embedded with the significant meanings of an engaged autobiographical moment. In An Te’s own words: “These images simultaneously present facts and conjure fictions. I have chosen to use

these scans as the basis for a series of oil paintings, which bear vestiges of the past while telling stories of further transformations to come.” Time is fleeting, sometimes gone, but An Te’s time is suspended in the recent past of yesterday, or even a more recent time, like this morning, when we were putting outside the recycling bin for the recently discarded things to be taken away. These gestures, as An Te’s procedures in art, are reminiscent of DeLanda’s vision of a history that is alive in the present: “Our organic bodies are, in this sense, nothing but temporary coagulations in these flows: we capture in our bodies a certain portion of the flow at birth, then release it again when we die and micro-organisms transform us into a new batch of raw materials,” creating, like An Te Liu’s entire oeuvre, a new form of energy source. ■

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