

## Out of Nothing

Miao Xiaochun's meticulously reconstructed renaissance masterpieces approach the subject of transfiguration, the theme of the Chinese Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale. He tells Ric Bower why he chose a Western tradition to explore this theme.

Transfiguration, in Xiaochun's mind, is not clearly contained within a set of defined spiritual hierarchies. Through the process of translation between very different media he brings his own narratives and interpretations to a number of familiar compositions. Below he describes an intense and laborious process; the contemporary equivalent of painting the Sistine Chapel:

"I learnt about Chinese art history at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, but I then I studied European art history on the postgraduate programme at Kassel Academy of Fine Arts in Germany. When I began this series of works, it was quite natural for me therefore to use a western tradition as my starting point. Michelangelo's Last Judgement being a case in point. I had been wanting to make this work for a while, I realised that the fresco, being a two dimensional work, is always seen from the front, but never from the back or from any other viewpoint. I discussed this fact with a friend way back in 2005; we simply wondered what it would be like to see the scene represented in this particular fresco, from another position.

"I started by just making one 3D computer figure, using my own face, and then I tried to put it in the exact position of one of the figures in the original fresco. This process alone took me more than a year. You can imagine then how long it took to put every figure in the exact position they



were in the original fresco. Michelangelo, of course, painted some of his figures much bigger than others, especially the figure of Christ at the pinnacle of the composition; this compounded our difficulty when trying to place the figures exactly in three dimensional space. It took us a further eleven months, to work it all out. During that time, I was only using a home computer; it was a painfully slow process! But I have now transformed a complex fresco into a virtual world, (and in the case of Out of Nothing, the representation of the Martyrdom of St Peter, into virtual reality and then back into oils). This environment only exists on the computer, but it is a world in which I can travel and in which I can take pictures with a virtual camera.

"I remember saying to my assistant, "God created everything in only seven days and our world is still not perfect after 11 months!" I only used one subject throughout the recreation, and that was me. Michelangelo's piece has at least 400 different characters; the good, the bad and the ugly. What's become interesting to me is that I have assumed the role of a 'character of our time', a clone. We originally used a clone as it was technically easier, but this in turn has had an unexpected impact on the meaning of the work.

"In the original work the morally deficient people

are dispatched to Hell. But in my work every person is the same. The question then is how we can judge ourselves to be good or bad and where we should go as a result of that decision. In the past, religion has told us what is right, what is wrong and what we should be doing at any moment. In our time we have to think about what is wrong and what is right ourselves, it is our own individual responsibility, especially for me as a Chinese person. We have had so many changes

in the last century. China still had an empire 100 years ago, then there was political revolution followed by a cultural revolution and now

we are wide open to the world. When there have been so many changes it is not the time to think 'what is wrong, what is right'. It is a difficult subject we all have to engage with though and it is no doubt occupying the thoughts of many contemporary philosophers.

Once I had completed this project, I showed it all over the world, but never in Italy. I felt very strongly I should show it in Italy, the birthplace of the original work."

Above: *The Last Judgement in Cyberspace, The Below View*, C-Print, 289 x 360 cm 2006, Miao Xiaochun

Opposite: *Out of Nothing*, Oil on canvas, 400x400cm, 2012, Miao Xiaochun

"...I have assumed the role of a 'character of our time', a clone."

