

# SUPERPOSITION: Equilibrium & Engagement

**Geng Xue**

*The Poetry of Michelangelo, 2015 at Artspace*

**21st Biennale**

**of Sydney**



*The Poetry of Michelangelo, 2015*  
(video still), video, black-and-white, 19 mins  
White Rabbit Contemporary Chinese Art Collection, Sydney  
Courtesy the artist

This video work depicts the artist shaping a figure from clay, her body in direct contact with her medium. Working lifesize, it is both a poetic meditation and a demonstration of skill and craft. Once the figure is formed, Geng Xue breathes air into its mouth, awakening the figure and giving it life. This reflects many cultural stories from around the world. Accompanied by subtitles taken from the sonnets of Michelangelo and punctuated by instructional steps describing the process of ceramic production, the creative act is likened to an act of divinity motivated by love. Michelangelo is often referred to as *Il Divino* (the divine one) and, by working with the figure with this title, Geng places herself within the Renaissance tradition. The artist, however, like a god, also possesses the power of destruction, as we see when Geng uses clay cutting wire to take apart her creation towards the end of the video, in preparation for casting.

*The Poetry of Michelangelo* crosses cultures and times and mediums: it is an example of the complex synthesis of ideas and forms that characterise contemporary practice in a global context, drawing threads from multiple traditions and contexts to comment on our shared human experiences and cultural forms.

## Questions for Discussion

1. This artwork is modelled on an instructional video. How does the artist use this framework to communicate something more than information about figurative sculpture?
2. This artwork also references the Renaissance and its hero figure Michelangelo. Geng Xue inserts herself into this artist lineage, and comments on the representational history of sculpture in both Western and Chinese traditions. What do you think the artist is communicating by combining these reference points, and by combining ceramics and moving image?

## Reference Points

Depicting the figure has been a central concern of sculptural practice across cultures and times. We recognise the human face and body, and the stories that art has told about life and death, society and identity. Because it is such an important subject, there are many ways contemporary artists have represented the body, and these take into account historical forms too.

Here is a survey of artists who have taken very different approaches to these ideas and forms, listed alongside their years of participation in Biennale of Sydney exhibitions: Vanessa Beecroft (2000), Louise Bourgeois (2000, 2010), Sophie Calle (1990, 2000), Jake and Dinos Chapman (2010), Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1992/93), Gilbert and George (1984), Nan Goldin (1996), Antony Gormley (2006), Bill Henson (1982, 1986, 1990, 2000), Rebecca Horn (1982, 1988, 1990, 1996, 2008), Rachel Kneebone (2010), Yasumasa Morimura (1996), Shirin Neshat (1996, 2000), Doris Salcedo (1992/93), Darren Siwes (2002), Christian Thompson (2010), Bill Viola (1982, 1988, 2010) and Gillian Wearing (2002).

## Practices and Processes

### Sculpture

Working with clay, make a sculpture in the Renaissance bust tradition.

Begin with a pinch pot technique to create a hollow head from the neck up to the crown, developing the shape and external facial features as you go. If the clay is very wet, you may need to work it until it dries a little and can support the weight of the layers of clay. If this is the case, develop the work over two sessions, with your sculpture wrapped in plas-

tic in between. You can either pair up with one of your peers to model for each other, or develop a self-portrait.

### Moving image

Working as a group, decide what to model next: you might all make a small figure, an animal sculpture, or a natural object like a flower or a seed pod. Collect images or examples to use as models. It is important to decide as a group to make versions of the same thing so that when you

display your work together it creates a dialogue between the sculptures and videos. Now divide into pairs. One person will model the clay while the other records the work using a camera phone or tablet, then swap so you both get to make a sculpture and a video. (Remember to orient your phone to landscape to record.) Display your finished sculptures together, and create a sequence from your videos to project on a screen.

### Cultural frame:

social and cultural identity and context