

## Karl Patric Näsman

*Text: Ellen Suneson*

Karl Patric Näsman's oeuvre confronts us with copies, look-alikes and bad quality. His work is defined by the quest for a new kind of grammar for art. A grammar that exalts the role of repetition and craftsmanship. The skill of imitating an original should have an intrinsic artistic value.

Two of his latest art projects, *Cattle Resting in a Landscape with Riverside Castle and Rainbow Beyond* (2012-2015) and *Shanghai Pearl Market* (2015), are examples from the enormous art reproduction industry that has emerged in China. Within this industry, Chinese artists create imitations of famous works, commissioned mainly by American and European buyers. The Chinese art-copying industry has been harshly criticised in the West, where the paintings are not considered "real" art but are described as mass-produced forgeries. In *Cattle Resting in a Landscape with Riverside Castle and Rainbow Beyond*, Näsman explores the varying status of the works on the global art scene. The project involved contacting a number of art reproduction factories in China to order copies of a Dutch 18th-century painting. After receiving the reproductions, he presented them as part of his own art installation, to stress the paradox of Western attitudes to the Chinese reproduction industry. While the Chinese artists' replicas of famous masterpieces are not considered to be real art, the West has countless examples of artist, such as Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Sherry Levine and Damien Hirst, who also copy and appropriate works by others and are nevertheless counted among the most important artists of our time.

However, Chinese artists and galleries do not agree that the Chinese reproduction industry does not produce real art. On the contrary, they describe these paintings as "replicas" and consider them to be originals. Central to the Chinese understanding of these paintings is the concept of *shanzhai*. The word signifies an extolling of, and passion for, the "copy", and a disregard for the original. In China, shanzhai is very popular and can, for instance, be applied to people who are look-alikes, or to identical copies of mobiles and fashion labels. Shanzhai is often described as a means for the broader public to enjoy the things that would otherwise be accessible only to the privileged few.

In his project *Shanghai Pearl Market* (2015), Näsman collaborated with Shanghai-based artist Jiang Weitao in an examination of the shanzhai

phenomenon in relation to older traditions of copying, and to their own artist role. The project involved creating an imitation together. Initially, they agreed to explore an older technique used to imitate materials such as marble or granite. Spreading canvases on the studio floor, they used a form of splash painting to create the imitation. The manual process was performed individually, but they communicated with each other while working on it, to achieve a surface of layers of tiny, multicoloured flecks of paint. The relationship between the different shades builds an image that gives the illusion of a colourful stone material. This collaboration between the two artists can be compared to the production process at the Chinese art reproduction factories, where several artists are usually involved in creating the replica, in order to achieve maximum efficiency while maintaining a high standard of workmanship. Although Näsman and Weitao were using the same technique, they interpreted it differently. Their difference in style reveals the fact that imitating a work of art is not mass production but craftsmanship, performed by human hands.

After completing their imitations, the canvases were cut up and presented both as individual paintings and as decorative elements on a folding screen. In the work, the folding screen has a symbolic significance. This type of furniture originated in China, where it has been used for thousands of years as a decorative room divider. In the 17th century, many such screens were imported to Europe, where they became popular, in a smaller version, as a means of hiding one's body while changing clothes. In *Shanghai Pearl Market*, the folding screen alludes to the ancient tradition of imitation. Centuries of colonialism, appropriation and migration have helped to give imitation and copying a major influence on visual culture throughout the ages.

*Shanghai Pearl Market* was also a way for Näsman and Weitao to explore imitation as a *performative action*. That is, to study how copying in itself is an action that engenders and maintains particular significances in various contexts. By creating a forgery of marble, they highlighted how the imitation of certain valuable materials helps to maintain their high status. Moreover, they showed how repetitive practices in the art world – studies, previews, art spaces and criticism – serve to maintain a few of the stereotypes on which Western art relies. In this light, our notion of Chinese mass production and of the stereotypically Western idea of originality as essential to artistic value play a decisive role in our perception of copying techniques.

Näsman's body of work demonstrates a sharp interest in how the global art scene is changing traditional ideas and conceptual systems. The meeting of

different cultural systems of meaning reveals the respective value systems for artistic quality as mere constructs. *Shanghai Pearl Market* describes, among other things, how the Western art scene's dogged unwillingness to accept the copying industry as a cultural expression is a sign that something within its own system is being threatened. And how appreciation of the potential of the copy and a lack of interest in originals and artistic authenticity can pose a threat to the notions underpinning the Western art scene.

## **Background**

Karl Patric Näsman (b. 1986) comes from Örebro and now lives and works in Stockholm. In 2015, he graduated from Konstfack – University College of Arts, Crafts and Design with a Masters degree in Fine Arts. Näsman's decision to become an artist stems from an urge to think and express himself freely. Art provided a language that facilitated his exploration of various phenomena and issues. Today, Näsman appreciates the potential of art to always open up new perspectives, to be perpetually compelling and constantly offer something new.