

# DRAWING WITH FIRE

IGNITING PASSION FOR TRUTH AND ART ALONG CONTEMPORARY ARTIST HUNG'S PERSONAL SILK ROAD

WRITTEN BY ARCHITECT CHOIE Y. FUNK | IMAGES COURTESY OF ATELIER HUNG

I've always had a fascination with fire. As kids, my brother and I would engage in chemical experiments, saving our precious pennies to set up our own laboratory...until our mother would come home from the grocery and find everything spic-and-span. Save for some nitrate or brown smoke in the air, she never detected that we used her

stove tank to light up the Bunsen burner." This is what calligraphy master and sculptor extraordinaire Hung (born Lau Kwok-Hung in 1953 Hong Kong and later christened John) related to me at the beginning of our friendly conversation, as I entered the enthralling world of his art.

His brother eventually became a chemical engineer while Hung, now at the peak of practicing

his own brand of sculpture, still plays with fire—rather than the customary chisel, he uses a 3000°C oxy-acetylene torch.

Though he always knew that he had artistic talent even at an early age, Hung was educated in a school known for its emphasis on the sciences, the Marist School in Hong Kong. It was later on that Hung discovered that he had been "seduced by the fire"—the

*spettacolo* of the Bunsen burner and the smoke in their childhood laboratory. Nonetheless, he is grateful that his scientific education taught him to be analytical and detached when need be.

Hung left Hong Kong for Loppiano, near Florence, Italy, in 1973, teaming up with other artists to run an art studio, the Centro Azur Artistico. While there, he also joined Gen Rosso, an international performing group, where he honed his artistic talents in dancing and singing, performing in 300 shows on tour around Europe and Asia until 1981. Simultaneously, he frequented the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence to study anatomy, sculpture and art history with the help of a scholarship.

Throughout his life, Hung's artistic journey had taken many

forms in which he was required to improve in all of them, but he chose to focus on calligraphy and sculpture. However, he refuses to be reduced to being referred to merely as a sculptor or calligrapher. Rather, he wants to be regarded as an artist.

This explains why the years he spent in Manila from 1981 to 1989 when I first met him proved to be fundamental to his art. He worked then as an editor and graphic artist for an international bi-monthly magazine, typing away eight hours a day for eight years. They were hungry but important years. Years of creativity alternated with years of creative deprivation, gouging out deep abysses in his soul, thus allowing for a richer personhood. After twenty years of creative fulfillment

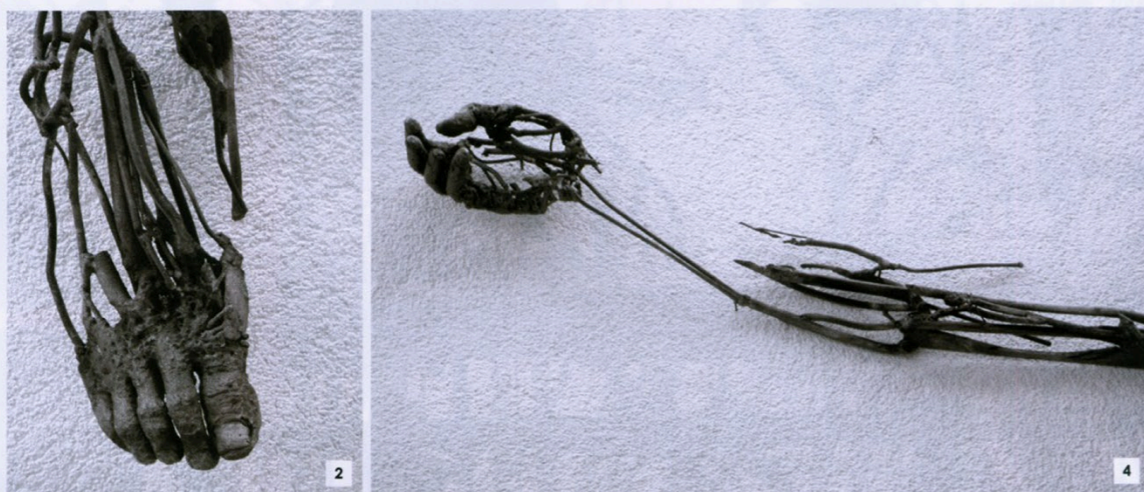
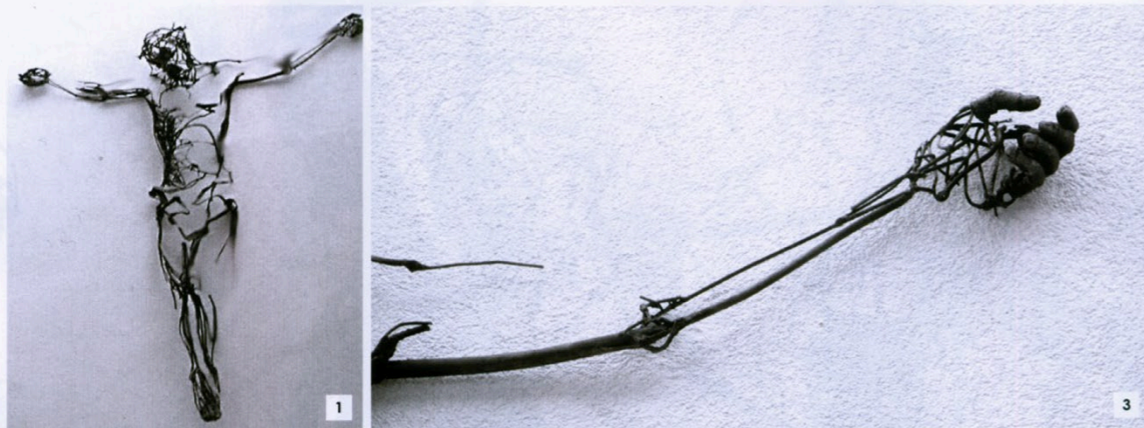
and deficit, Hung saw his homecoming to Loppiano where he established Atelier Hung as the venue of his rebirth as an artist.

Says Hung: "If an artist looks for truth—rather, for beauty where truth and goodness are also incorporated, somehow he will also find it within himself." Forged by the spirituality of unity as a member of the Focolare Movement founded by Catholic activist and leader Chiara Lubich in 1946 in war-torn Italy, Hung's search for God through the years and his efforts to be true to himself were answered deep within him. Nestled in the beautiful Tuscan region of Italy, his studio is now a sanctuary for artistic creation, where cultures intersect and spiritual life is extolled. To date,



1 Silk Road Symphony, iron, life-size (2005) 2 Sagrada Famiglia, Terra Promessa, iron, life-size (2003)

Each artwork is like a pen and ink sketch suspended in air, a drawing in 3D, with fluid lines more suggestive than literal (leading some to describe his style, for lack of a better word, as “unfinished”), and with certain portions of the sculpture fleshed out so realistically as to be lifelike. And yet the slender iron rods that form the barest of outlines of his figures are no less lifelike in their portrayal of human motion and emotion.



Atelier Hung has welcomed more than 30,000 visitors.

Hung’s sculptures seem to mimic Chinese calligraphic brushstrokes, but a closer look reveals iron rods and flat bars cleverly interwoven and fused to form human figures in highly-charged stances. In order to arrive at these anatomical representations, Hung assiduously overlays his sculptures with molten iron, drop by drop, until the form slowly takes shape. In his “Dancing Figures,” sinewy silhouettes prance about bewitchingly,

remembrances perhaps of his performing arts experience.

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but also of transcendence” captures his artistic achievement perfectly. Drawn in space by metal and fire, his sculptures are utterly imbued with humanity yet possess a quality above and apart from this material world.

*Symphony* is an octet of musicians playing Chinese and Western musical instruments, regarded as the most impressive work that the artist has created and the archetype of his signature “unfinished” style. Only the musicians’ eyes, lips and hands—those body parts that most clearly exude the pulsations of the



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soul—are finished in great detail, while the rest are rendered in the barest of lines suggesting form and movement. This style may be seen in some of the works of Michelangelo and Rodin, two great artists who worked at a time when it was not uncommon for artists to leave works unfinished. In fact, Hung affirms, “Not all things that are finished are done, and what is done is not always finished.”

A completely different way of viewing Hung’s works is to imagine that his human figures start out fully fleshed and clothed, in other words, “finished”, and then, having passed through the crucible, as it were, of life’s tests and trials emerge transcendent and pure, stripped of adulteration and the non-essential, leaving only the truths that define their individuality: Christ’s thirty-three year walk on earth condensed into a foot on the cross; an athlete’s years of training concentrated into a few iron droplets forming sinew and bone. These figures are the end product of Hung’s scorching vision and torch that in the words

of Chiara Lubich (and reminiscent of the apocalyptic biblical prophet Jeremiah) “pass like fire that consumes all that has to fall and leaves only the truth standing.”

Another interesting masterpiece is *Terra Promessa* (Promised Land), which shows a group of people in exodus—the Holy Family lost among a crowd after they received word to flee Bethlehem because King Herod, threatened by the news of a newborn king, had ordered the execution of all young male children within the area of the town. Hung imagined that if this had happened in this day and age, Joseph would have also passed the message on, perhaps by SMS, hence the flight in numbers. The piece won the Jury’s Award at the Biennial of Contemporary Art in Florence in 2003, an event participated in by 900 artists from 74 countries. The piece has been dedicated to the victims of war, calamities and poverty.

Every year, Hung spends two to three months in China as well as his summers around Europe giving workshops and promoting artistic

exchanges to spread a culture of reciprocity. This is his way of reviving the Silk Road, an ancient caravan trade route that greatly influenced the growth, spread and development of ideas and culture in China, Central Asia and the West. Reviving the Silk Road has become a theme and metaphor for the advocacy of many artists (such as master cellist Yoyo Ma) from the East who, like Hung, wish to re-establish connections among different societies and cultures. It would not be a bad idea if Hung’s annual journeys led him back to Manila, for a visit, an exhibit or a job commission in the near future.

Before we parted, Hung expressed the joy he feels when people from far and away see his work, enabling him to cross boundaries and commune with others even without words. His search for truth has brought him in deeper communion with his life within, and serves as his continuous source of inspiration. May Hung’s infatuation with fire long continue and ignite in many more people a passion for truth in art. ■

Top: 1 || Crocifisso, iron, life-size (2004)  
 2 Detail, || Crocifisso 3 Detail, || Crocifisso  
 4 Detail, || Crocifisso 5 Agony and Ecstasy, iron, 60 cm (2000)  
 Right page: 6 Flautista, iron, life-size (1992) 7-8 Dancing Figures, iron (2000-2002)