

REVIEW - 23 FEB 2016

Around Town

BY MATTHEW MCLEAN

Various venues, Shanghai, China



Hu Yun, *Lift with Care*, 2013, photograph, 44 x 60 cm. Courtesy Aike-Dellarco

In Tao Hui's video *Talk about Body* (2013), a young woman sits on the edge of a bed, wearing subtle make-up and a headscarf, which she occasionally tugs at. Mostly, her hands remain in her lap, as she tilts her head downward, suggesting modesty or even shame. Per its title – which lent its name to the group show at Aike-Dellarco in Shanghai – the woman in *Talk about Body* describes (in Chinese, with subtitles) her physical aspects, from fat content to toe-type. At times, she refers to herself with a strange, social Darwinist bent, as if she were a historical artefact: 'particularly small-boned, which makes me agile and drought-enduring'. The inscrutability of some of these statements ('My brain is round-shaped'), as well their alleged subject being



Maryn Varbanov, *MV9*, c.1970s, plasticine, clay, cardboard, 18 x 13 cm. Courtesy the artist and MABSociety, Shaghai, China

A different brand of nostalgia is displayed in 'Relics', an exhibition focusing on the painted and drawn sketches and 3D Plasticine maquettes by the late textile artist Maryn Varbanov, at MABSociety's BANK space, which occupies the second floor of a former bank near the Rockbund Art Museum. A Bulgarian who also lived in Paris, Varbanov arrived in China as part of the first wave of foreign exchange students in 1951, and eventually set up a textile school within the Fine Art Academy in Hangzhou, as well as tutoring figures like the curator Hou Hanru. Archival images document some of Varbanov's larger installations – impressive, intriguing things, which appear to link the avant-garde of post-liberation China and that of Eastern Bloc Conceptualism. Visually, they fall between the tender, brittle fibre works of Eva Hesse and Sheila Hicks's expansive textile installations. Varbanov's maquettes have some of Hesse's sickly colour palette and her sense of semi-organic, semi-geometric form; part-objects that intimate curtains, plaits and slippers, warped by a palpable erotic pulse. You could conclude from this show that Varbanov will occupy a place in future histories of contemporary art in China – not just for propagating installation as an artistic model, but also because he and his wife (the society hostess Madame Song) collaborated with Pierre Cardin, pre-empting the connection between fine art and fashion that prevails in Shanghai today. Or does it suffice to say that this was the most gorgeous show in town?