

# ARTFORUM

500 WORDS

## Adrian Wong

12.07.12

### View of “Rodentia in Absentia,” 2012, Saamlung, Hong Kong.

*Adrian Wong is an American artist based in Hong Kong. His works typically engage with superstitions, urban myths, and folktales, through a humorous aesthetic treatment. Here he talks about the role that live animals played in his latest solo exhibition, “Rodentia in Absentia,” which is on view at Saamlung in Hong Kong until December 29.*

**STORYTELLING** has always played an important role in my work. But straightforward narrative doesn't tap all the potentials that objects can communicate. In my last solo exhibition, “In Search of a Primordial Idiolect IV,” I dealt with language—how it mediates our experience, and how that ultimately buys us a view of ourselves and what a story is. I recorded myself for thirty days, and then I erased all the words, in order to test how much content could be gleaned from vocalizations that are not linguistically oriented. Another work, a short play that I wrote, was based on people's conversations with their pets, and it really got me thinking about animals—for instance, the fact that a dog can be talked at necessarily colors his internal experience in a profound way.

I approached “Rodentia in Absentia” with an open perspective, and the animals I worked with were totally incorporated in the creative process. I lived with a rabbit, two hamsters, and a team of rats for six weeks. I grasped their natural behaviors and instincts, while I situated myself as the observer. Each of the sculptures in the show was built sequentially in conjunction with the behavior of the animals. The general structure was built first, and then, as the animals chewed, scratched, and played with the objects, I made changes accordingly—such as adding additional layers of coating or paint. I organized the animals with each object depending on their physical behavior: For instance, as rats tend to chew inorganic materials, they lived with plastic decor and faux leather upholstery.

There is a fair amount of literature suggesting that animals have an inability to mentally time travel—their perception of the past is mediated by instinct. These works are a way of tracking time. I played with the idea of telling a story without the potential of looking linearly, without a beginning or an end. Most of the aesthetic decisions draw from the context that I observed every day with the animals. The patterns and decorative objects were taken from my apartment—so that the spaces that I was physically in to create this work were completely overlaid. The elements in this show were heavily influenced by my daily routines.

It's easy to argue that my subjects—Feng Shui consultants, exorcists, energy readers, and animal psychics, to name a few—are absurd. But I'm not taking sides. The people who do believe in such ideas fascinate me. When I interact with someone with defined expertise, without a shadow of doubt, I'm in no position to judge.

I trained in psychology, and one of the things that ultimately drove me away from that discipline is the limitation of research methodology, which is crucial—you have to follow rules. The things I ultimately became interested in extended far beyond the boundaries of what I was supposed to be researching. I'm not looking for universal facts; I'm looking for more subjective and affective entry points.

— As told to Xue Tan