

# Conspicuous Consumption

Text  
Christina Ko

When Song Dong discovered his mother's hoarding problem, both a cultural product of her upbringing as a 'have-not' and a coping mechanism after his father's death, he took this overflow of some 10,000 items and turned it all into an art installation. The result, *Waste Not*, is not only one of Song's most renowned works, it's also fairly representative of his practice, which deals with the social implications of China's encroaching urbanisation, combined with notions of impermanence and consumerism.

One of China's foremost conceptual artists, Song has the unique ability to translate his ideas into installations that are at once conceptually groundbreaking and commercially palatable — sometimes literally. *Eating the City* was a series of edible metropolises created to be consumed by its viewing audience; it neatly and viscerally illustrated the way in which Asian cities are built and razed at an alarming pace, and how our very base hunger and willingness to succumb to the temptation to destroy contributes to this phenomenon.

Dong's recent solo exhibition at Pace Gallery in London, *Same Bed Different Dreams*, was a showcase of his one-man opposing force: the survey exhibition highlighted, among other things, his loyalty to his single thesis, and the way in which he has taken the same subject matter and explored it time and again through different formats.

For Song, mining the same idea over and over is a natural inclination. Change, after all, is his only constant. 'I've lived and worked through the great changes in China,' he says.

'Things are always changing, but the process is more important than the result.' In two video installations that form part of the exhibition, *Broken Mirror* and *Crumpling Shanghai*, Song smashes or crumbles reflected images of people going about their daily lives. In another, *Mandala*, he creates meditative shapes from spices and seeds. Different though these pieces are, they all return to ideas of fragility and ephemerality: 'The world has never been quiet,' he explains. 'The fight between different values and interests constantly destroys and changes the world; in the span of time, what we experience and create is only a moment. Art allows us to retain a time that is no longer usable, but this time can also generate energy beyond time, and give us thoughts about the future.'

Make no mistake, however — while Song's practice deals with themes of great gravity, he's in no way married to sadness or longing. In fact, avant-garde as it is, his art occasionally reveals a playfulness that's testament to the diversity of his approach and the breadth of his work's appeal. Examples are his edible cities, which come with cooking instructions ironically presented in elegant calligraphy, and *At Fifty, I Don't Know the Mandate of Heaven*, in which porcelain dolls re-enact Song's signature performance pieces.

But Song isn't tied to that approach either. Rather, his ultimate obsession is with freedom: 'Same Bed Different Dreams is a contrariwise meditation on control,' he explains. 'It's an appreciation of freedom — the implication of my works' multimedia presentation and diverse expression of materials and ways.'

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Artist Song Dong's exhibition *Same Bed Different Dreams* was a physical manifestation of his tireless commitment to exploring limited subject matter and material. Several works, all with unique titles and individual nuances, are created from the same materials in similar geometric forms. Pictured is *Window Door No. 3*, 2019, installation. Old windows and doors, glass, mirror, coloured plastic mirror, window and door hardware, 174 × 100 × 88 cm  
Image copyright Song Dong, courtesy of Pace Gallery







Facing page, top  
*Usefulness of Uselessness — Varied Window No. 13*, 2019, installation. Old wooden windows, mirror, mirror panel, glass. 192 × 258 × 8 cm

Facing page, bottom left  
*Window Door Screen — Single Screen No. 2*, 2018-2019, installation. Old windows and doors, glass, mirror, coloured plastic mirror, window and door hardware 174 × 80 × 15 cm

Facing page, bottom right  
*Same Bed Different Dreams No. 3*, 2018, installation. Steel, wooden windows, doors and beds, mirror, coated glass, lights, daily necessities, porcelain, 254.5 × 224.5 × 361 cm

This page  
 Dong painstakingly created works in the Mandala series from spices, seeds and condiments, once again transforming the familiar into an artistic medium

Top, left  
*Mandala 011*, 2015, installation. Dietary alkali, leaf mustard, curry powder, chilli powder, pepper, chicken powder, cumin, fennel and other condiments, knife, diameter 98.5 cm

Top, right  
*Mandala 006*, 2015, installation. Beetroot powder, purple rice, red pepper, curry powder, pepper, aniseed, chicken powder, starch and other condiments, knife, diameter 22.7 cm

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Bottom  
 Song Dong at his 2016 exhibition Surplus Value, held at Pace Beijing  
 Image by Boogi Wang

