

Shih Li-Jen Artist Statement

Rhinoceroses have existed on earth for more than sixty million years, surpassing that of human beings. In ancient Chinese culture, the rhino represents a sacred animal that wards off evil spirits, and is commonly found adorning prehistoric artifacts and relics. This remarkable animal is also used to symbolize the emperor through decorative motifs on bronze as well as wine vessels carved from jade. Because the rhino symbol permeated ancient Chinese culture, rhino horns were frequently utilized for crafts and aesthetic purposes. Many exquisitely detailed chalices were sculpted from rhino horns, for it was believed that by drinking from the horn of a rhino, the wine would taste sweeter. In the famous Chinese medicine and herbs guidebook *Bencao Gangmu* by Li Shichen (1518-1593), rhino horns were described as a rare medicine, an antidote to a number of deadly poisons. Additionally, the thick leather hide of rhinos made fine battle armor that protected the Yi-tribe warriors in Sichuan.

There is a Chinese expression, “xiniu wangyue,” which translates to “the rhinoceros looks over the moon.” The proverb demonstrates the loyal and optimistic nature of this mammal, for it is a “Guardian of the Forest” and is often portrayed as a self-healer and a protector due to its natural instinct to put out fires. From ancient customs to modern civilization, the rhino remains a most treasured and idolized creature. Although it is an animal from remote antiquity with its stark appearance and rugged character, the rhino retains a unique shape that plays into futurity with a sense of technology. It is for these particular reasons that I have chosen the rhinoceros as my “creative muse” in a series of sculptural works.

Rhino Father is the first work from the series of *Rhino Family*. He possesses solid limbs and a firm, unyielding body to represent his ability to defend both his family and territory. In addition, his sturdiness gives an indication of his responsibility as an adept and trustworthy leader. In my works, I do not merely sculpt copies and mimic a rhino’s outwardly facade. I merge the animalistic qualities with human and mechanical attributes.

I create these representations in order to transform the classical realism into a modern vocabulary with an exposed spirit. The rhino horn metamorphoses into a thumb that epitomizes the logo of a great leader, a representation of the strength and ambition in continuing his family. The rhino tail stands for the torch of victory, and the solid armor overlaying his body signify an indestructible and passionate character.

I plan to develop *Rhino Family* into a series of complete sculptural works. In the future, there will be a *Rhino Mother* to personify Mother Nature, the creator of all life with tenderness, thoughtfulness, and love. *Rhino Boy* will be sculpted into a mechanical shape in order to convey the industrial appearance of modernism. On the other hand, *Rhino Girl* will be sculptured into a modern, modest shape. The final work will be *Rhino House*, a sculpture shaped into a sports car -- a Lamborghini with minimal lines and a classical shape to capture the sense of confidence, determination, and resilience that embodies the rhinoceroses. *Rhino Family* expresses my personal views toward life, the world, and how through the role of family, I am able to express the essence of strength and tenderness.