



*Concrete forest: chrysanthemum*, 2008–09  
concrete with oil and wax, artist's proof

La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art.  
Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian  
Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019. © Ah Xian.  
Photo: Jia De

Chinese Australian artist Ah Xian began working with the bust format in the 1990s. From 1998 to 2004, he produced his *China China* series of porcelain busts, which have been celebrated for their technical refinement. In 2007 he began experimenting with concrete, a raw material unburdened by traditional notions of craft. He began his *Concrete forest* series the following year.

*Concrete forest: chrysanthemum* is one of the tests that Ah Xian made while developing the *Concrete forest* series. Made with cast concrete, oil paint and wax, it demonstrates the artist's continued fascination with the human figure and its relationship to the natural world. The expression of the subject is one of neither joy nor sadness, but acceptance. This is accentuated by the subject's closed eyes, which signal introspection and contemplation. The chrysanthemum leaf, representing longevity in Chinese symbolism, is repeated, imprinted, across the surface of the bust. This decoration may be read as a second skin, a protective layer that veils the body while also carrying cultural meaning.

With their roots in the tradition of Western portraiture stretching back to antiquity, busts are often associated with a desire to immortalise and venerate the subject. Ah Xian's subjects, however, are nearly always anonymous. Their individuality is preserved, but never inflated. As we can see in *Concrete forest: chrysanthemum*, the subject appears to sink below the surface of the decoration as the body becomes a carrier of collective identity and shared imagery.

Shanti Shea-An, 2022