



*Experimental field series no. 1 peapod*, c. 2002  
bone, bone meal

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

Shen Shaomin's artistic practice closely reflects on nature, death, mutation and the consequences of human intervention in the natural environment. Shen's *Experimental field* series explores these themes and disrupts the boundaries of what is real and imaginary. The works in this series primarily use animal bone as a sculptural medium, creating forms such as a peapod, cabbage, poppy flowers and sunflowers, with the latter two incorporating laboratory beakers as vases. These creatures, emerging and mutating from their former shells, present a sense of movement ceased, with a fossil-like appearance similar to things viewers might encounter in a natural history museum.

The concept of time is central to these sculptures. In *Peapod*, the past is represented in both the creature's original form (peapod) and its skeletal appearance. The present is the creature's transformation and our response as viewers when experiencing the work. Finally, the future is displayed in the absence of results or a conclusion, that is, in what is left to the artist's and viewer's imagination.

In Chinese beliefs, the peapod represents fertility, thus expanding the reading of the work to ideas of evolution and what is accepted as 'artificial' and 'natural'. The blurring of these two categories is strongly felt in the context of the climate crisis, where our actions have caused critical harm to the planet; however, restoring the environment would also need to involve human intervention and artificial reconstructions. By viewing these contrary forces as an indivisible whole, Shen's sculpture reminds us of the conflicting relationship between nature and humans, reality and imagination, past and future and the importance of *balance*.\*

Bianca Winataputri, 2022

**Note:**

\* The Chinese philosophy of yin and yang describes how opposites are complementary, interconnected and interdependent in the natural world. The concept is often associated with understandings of balance and its relationship to prosperity (two halves mutually becoming whole).