

Nick Hornby COPY THAT / 收到

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COPY THAT / 收到 begins with two found objects in Ningbo: a 16th-century carved stone stele from The Tianyi Pavilion, used to make ink rubbings, and a full-scale bronze reproduction of Michelangelo's *David*, standing in the piazza of the Ningbo National Theatre. One is a three-dimensional object designed to generate a reproducible image; the other is itself a reproduction, translated across material, geography and culture.

In a piazza outside the theatre, the bronze *David*, gifted to the city by Florence in 2006, stands around 9,200 kilometres from the marble original in Florence. Finding *David* in Ningbo is both surprising and strangely inevitable. It is one of the most reproduced sculptures in the world, an object whose identity survives almost any change of scale, material or setting. Hornby describes it as "almost the Coca-Cola of sculpture": revered, endlessly copied and strangely universal. In Ningbo, marble has become bronze, Florence has become China, and an original sculpture has become both a copy and a civic monument.

The Tianyi Pavilion, also in Ningbo, is one of China's oldest surviving private libraries. Its collection includes the Mingzhou Stele Forest, 173 carved stone steles, including examples dating back to the Song dynasty. Here the distance between object and reproduction is almost nothing. Damp paper is pressed directly against the surface of the stone, a soft brush working it into the incisions before ink transfers the information held in its surface onto the paper. The stone remains fixed in place while its image can be lifted away and carried elsewhere.

David travels 9,200 kilometres because its form can be reproduced; the stone does not travel at all, but produces an image that can. In one, reproduction allows the object to reappear elsewhere. In the other, it begins with the intimate physical contact of paper against stone.

Michelangelo completed *David* in 1504. The Tianyi Pavilion was founded in 1561. In Florence, a sculpted body became charged with civic, historical and symbolic meaning. In Ningbo, a private library was created to preserve and transmit accumulated knowledge. They offer two different models of cultural memory. The Tianyi Pavilion is an archive built to contain objects and information; *David* is an object that has itself become an archive, carrying ideas of the Renaissance, the ideal body, perspective, authorship and Western cultural history.

Together they became the starting point for a new body of work concerned with what happens when objects move between two and three dimensions, sculpture and image, physical and digital reproduction, material presence and representation, and more broadly between different codes, signs and cultures. The exhibition asks how meaning is carried through figurative recognition, symbolic recognition and cultural connotation, and how those meanings shift as forms move between object, image and sign.

Rubbing, photography, scanning, digital modelling, 3D printing and animation belong to radically different technological moments, but all separate information from an original object and make it transferable. Hornby began to think of the carved stones as a kind of solid-state memory: physical objects designed to store information and transmit it through time. Digital technologies have amplified the possibilities of copying and circulation almost beyond recognition, yet the underlying problem persists. Reproduction is never neutral. Each system preserves certain qualities, discards others and creates new possibilities. A copy may repeat its source, but it also translates it.

The exhibition title performs the same instability. In English, "copy that" carries two meanings at once: reproduce this, and message received. In Chinese, 收到 means "received" or "understood". The phrases are not exact equivalents. Something is copied, transmitted, received and understood, with the possibility of alteration at every stage.

Processes are swapped, reversed and deliberately misapplied throughout the exhibition. Sculpture becomes image; images become objects; rubbing meets scanning and digital fabrication; Renaissance perspective becomes a contemporary spatial construction. Forms move between drawing, sculpture, animation, wireframe and volume. Reproduction becomes a chain of translations in which something is continually gained, lost or transformed.

One new sculpture folds the two Ningbo starting points directly together. *David* is conceptually returned to stone. A digitally fabricated sculpture approximately six feet high resembles a monumental carved block, with Michelangelo's figure cut into its surface as though it were the matrix for an enlarged Chinese rubbing. The Western sculptural body becomes information contained within a Chinese form of reproduction. One cultural form is not used to illustrate the other; each alters the terms of the other.

Sculpture traditionally insists upon physical presence. It occupies the same space as the viewer and cannot be seen in its entirety from a single position. An image behaves differently: it collapses an object onto a surface and offers a particular view all at once. Moving towards flatness is therefore not merely a formal reduction. It moves the object further into the realm of representation, symbol and sign. Meaning can be carried through figurative recognition, symbolic recognition or the connotations accumulated around an image. A three-dimensional thing has physical presence; once rendered as an image, it can circulate more freely as meaning.

Rodin's *The Age of Bronze* pushes this movement towards flatness further. First exhibited in 1877, its naturalism was so startling that Rodin was accused of casting directly from his model rather than modelling the figure himself. Questions of copying, representation and authenticity were present in the sculpture's reception from the beginning.

Hornby compresses a digital model of the figure until the entire body is only ten millimetres deep. A sculpture renowned for its bodily presence becomes almost an image. Sculpture approaches relief; relief approaches drawing. Volume becomes surface and bodily presence becomes information. The logic of the rubbing is reversed: rather than using a flat surface to record an existing object, an existing sculpture is reconstructed specifically in order to become flat.

A series of Conté rubbings crosses the same technologies in a different sequence. Sculptural forms are flattened digitally, fabricated as shallow physical surfaces and then transferred manually onto paper. Sculptural form becomes digital information; digital information becomes a fabricated object; the fabricated object becomes a handmade image. Each stage changes the status of what is being carried forward. A copy is never simply the same thing again.

In another work, the familiar outline of Michelangelo's *David* lies flat against the floor while its edges rise through space and converge towards a single point. From most positions the object appears radically distorted and almost abstract. From one precise viewpoint, looking with one eye, the distortion collapses and *David* resolves again. The sculpture turns the logic of single-point perspective into a physical object.

David is arguably shorthand for the Renaissance, which in turn is emblematic of the creation of single-point perspective. Hornby's work takes a system developed to make a flat image appear convincingly three-dimensional and reverses it, using perspective to make a three-dimensional sculpture resolve as an image. What appears coherent depends upon where the viewer stands. Move around the work and its identity shifts between figure, abstraction, object and image. Recognition is constructed from a position.

A moving-image work places a photographic image of Cindy Crawford across the surface of a biomorphic reclining figure recalling the visual language of twentieth-century modernist sculpture. As the digital body stretches, contracts and deforms, the photograph moves with it. The body becomes a surface for the image, while the image reveals the changing geometry of the body. Neither remains stable. A recognisable

photographic image becomes dependent upon an unstable sculptural support, and the border between representation and abstraction continually slips.

A second moving-image work combines canonical Western architecture with forms drawn from William Chambers' eighteenth-century publication *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils*. Chambers' engravings had already transformed buildings and objects from China into reproducible European images. Hornby reconstructs them as digital wireframes and combines architectural fragments into continuously rotating intersections. Architecture becomes engraving, engraving becomes digital line, line becomes spatial model, and the model becomes moving image. There is no final or authoritative state.

Across COPY THAT / 收到, ancient and digital technologies are not arranged in a hierarchy, nor are Chinese and Western cultural forms placed on opposite sides of a comparison. They collide, exchange roles and alter one another. A carved stone becomes a rubbing. A marble sculpture becomes a bronze copy in another city. A three-dimensional body becomes ten millimetres deep. A Renaissance figure becomes a perspectival construction. Architecture becomes engraving, wireframe and moving line.

Walter Benjamin's famous discussion of mechanical reproduction described a profound shift in the status of the original. Digital technology has amplified that shift dramatically, allowing images and forms to be copied, altered, circulated and recombined with unprecedented ease. Hornby's interest lies less in mourning what may be lost than in exploring what this mobility makes possible.

The work developed by looking at Ningbo rather than arriving with a fixed idea of what "China" might mean as subject matter. Objects, histories and systems of reproduction found in the city were passed through processes already central to Hornby's practice: scanning, compression, extrusion, intersection, reproduction and changing points of view. Cultural objects are examined closely, but not treated as fixed. Reverence and irreverence operate together.

Some things travel extraordinarily well. Others remain embedded in their local material, linguistic or historical contexts. *David* can appear in Florence and Ningbo and still unmistakably be *David*. A rubbing can preserve information from a stone while radically changing its material form. A phrase can be translated without arriving at precisely the same meaning.

COPY THAT / 收到 occupies the space between copying and invention, transmission and reception, object and image. It asks what culture retains as it moves, what it sheds, and what new meanings become possible in the process. To copy something is also to look closely at it. To translate it is to discover that equivalence is never perfect. Every reproduction changes its source. Every translation produces another object. Every act of reception creates the possibility of beginning again.