

# BOMB

Interview

## Huidi Xiang by Qianfan Gu

Qianfan Gu | June 23, 2025

Huidi Xiang crafts a sculptural language that feels uncanny and challenging, drawing from the visual lexicon of classic animation to explore labor, authorship, and the anti-hero narrative. For Xiang, animation serves as a means to investigate the fluid relationship between image and object, virtual and real. Characterized by an interplay between nostalgia and hyper-contemporary sleekness, her practice evokes the flattened, high-contrast aesthetic of cartoons while materializing in crisp, metallic surfaces that resist easy categorization.

Her works reimagine moments of collective effort and overlooked agency, as seen in her recent solo exhibition at YveYANG Gallery, where she revisits Disney's *Cinderella* (1950) not through its titular heroine, but the industrious mice and birds who assemble her first ball gown, only to have their labor violently undone. By foregrounding these minor yet indispensable figures, Xiang probes the imbalanced representation of maker and product, offering a wry yet incisive take on creative work.

When I studio-visited Xiang, she was preparing for her upcoming solo at the Buffalo Institute for Contemporary Art. Our conversation began with a discussion on the nature of labor.

### Qianfan Gu:

Your work often explores the relationship between play and labor. The first works of yours I encountered, for example, were centered around *Animal Crossing*, a game that blurs the line between leisurely play and structured tasks. I'm curious—when you think about “work” and “labor” in your practice, do you see these two terms as interchangeable?

### Huidi Xiang:

I don't think they are interchangeable. My understanding of these two terms mainly comes from Hannah Arendt, who defines “work” as something linear, almost like it has a beginning and an end, like you go to work from 9 AM to 5 PM. On the other hand, “labor” is cyclical, like a circle—you never stop. I've adopted Arendt's definitions, and for me, labor is something continuous, like housekeeping: you can never achieve perfection, it doesn't have a beginning or end; it keeps going on forever.



Installation View of *the maxim of the tomato*. Courtesy of the artist and BICA.

My work tends to concern labor. When I was playing *Animal Crossing*, I felt that this life simulation game constantly demanded effort. There was always something to do, tasks that required labor, but this labor wasn't part of a job—it became a part of you. Things like cleaning, gathering fruits, even interacting with other animal characters. If you see the game as a system, it's one that continuously circulates. In some games' setting, 20 or 30 minutes might equal an entire day. But in *Animal Crossing*, the game follows real-time, and its system keeps running. It's constantly looping, and you're caught in that loop. That's what I'm most interested in: this sense of being trapped in a loop, unable to truly exist outside it.

### QG:

What about work that requires clocking in and out every day—wouldn't that be “labor”? Many office workers today refer to themselves as *niu-ma* (literally “oxen and horses,” or cooperative slaves), as going to work feels like a repetitive, inescapable cycle they long to break free from.

### HX:

Indeed. I think “work” is often tied to a job, a title, or a position. It's something defined by capitalism, while “labor” seems to be something more ancient, more physical, and less easily defined.

I know Chizuko Ueno's writings have been popular and influential, and I see her as a very specific kind of Marxist feminist. Her discussions focus on how our labor needs to be “workified.” Personally, I agree with this perspective, or rather, I share this Marxist feminist inclination.

But I also see a contradiction. My concern with scholars like Ueno is that if we transform this “labor” into “work,” doesn't that also bring it into the capitalist system? In that case, it becomes subject to the possibility of exploitation. It's obviously problematic when your labor is neither recognized nor compensated, but if you get paid, it seems like you're entering a capitalist framework, where the potential for exploitation increases. For example, the upper class can outsource labor to women of color or say the working class.



Huidi Xiang, *maxim tomato: 1 deep breath*, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and BICA.

**QG:**

Perhaps today, we can no longer distinguish these terms in terms of linear or cyclical, but rather by whether they are visible or not. Work, to some extent, can bring you “glory” or an aura; at the very least, it provides payment and a title, whereas labor remains dim and overlooked.

In your recent solo exhibition, the space at YveYANG Gallery was originally a sewing machine factory, and you foregrounded this context by centering the birds and mice tailors from Cinderella. These clues point to a very complex “work-based” condition you’re addressing—an effort that is less represented within the larger system because it comes from friendship or emotion, the “love labor”—to reference Ueno.

**HX:**

Yes, exactly. It feels very complex. It’s a bit like how an artist goes through a complicated creative process, only for it to be reduced to a sellable art piece, which, at its core, is basically just a trophy.

In this exhibition, I didn’t even address the issue of animals being exploited and cruelly treated as laborers, because in cartoons, animals exist as these magical, almost otherworldly creatures. The truth is, humans are cruel, and animations can be pretty unsettling. They often contain deeply-embedded moral messages that aim to educate and mold children’s understanding of the world.

Revisiting Cinderella for this exhibition, I noticed something I had never paid attention to before—the little mice sing lyrics like “leave the sewing to the woman,” subtly reinforcing this idea that boys get to handle “dangerous” tools like scissors, while girls are expected to do delicate, meticulous work. Also, only the male mice, like Jaq and Gus, are given names and the freedom to leave the attic, while the female mice remain trapped and anonymous to the outside world.

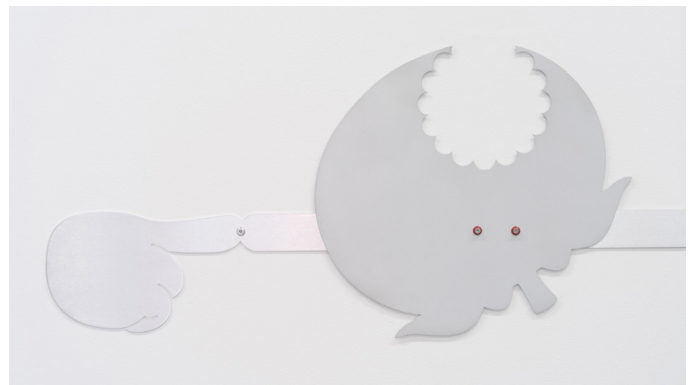
Given the time and place in which these cartoons were made, these depictions may have just reflected social “norms.” But norms are not neutral—they are constructed and reinforced. Watching these cartoons now, I am struck by how deliberately they encode moral lessons and social norms, embedding gendered messages into even the smallest details.

**QG:**

Your earlier works featured more bright colors, but your recent visual direction leans more towards silver, with a futuristic, sci-fi, almost post-apocalyptic aesthetic. Why is that?

**HX:**

Maybe I’m just trying to be cool. My visual forms might be cute, but the materials and techniques I use—metalworking, 3D printing, plastic—are industrial-level and tech-heavy, which somehow gives them a certain coolness. But I find it frustrating that the field is still so male-dominated, and I’m definitely not after this “cool tech boys club.” What draws me to these materials isn’t their association with power—it’s the emotions they hold. There’s something about them that feels sad, cold, and quietly depressive.



Huidi Xiang, *maxim tomato: genuine connection*, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and BICA.

It reminds me of a meme where a doctor asks a patient to rate their depression from 1 to 10, and the patient answers with “π,” meaning their depression level isn’t high, maybe just a 3-point-something, but it’s infinite and persistent—like running a low-grade fever. That’s the kind of emotion I want to capture in my materials and my ways of making. For the BICA exhibition, I’m trying a technique called heat coloring, which would ideally take the metal’s silver tone and transform it into black.

**QG:**

I feel you want to expose more of the “trying” part, the attempts, rather than focusing on the seriousness.

**HX:**

Yes, in a way. I think all artists are doing this—pushing their work to extremes so that the audience must take them seriously. Similarly, using serious material like metal would make people pay more attention.

It’s like being an amateur who wants to tell a joke, but whose voice can’t be heard or accepted by the mainstream. Then, in order to

carve out a place for yourself or reach a larger stage, you have to play by the rules and follow the system. You need to perform super well and, eventually, stand on a bigger stage and tell the joke.

Yet much is sacrificed in the process, and maybe I've unconsciously assimilated into the system. Perhaps once I'm on that stage, I'll no longer be able to tell the joke I wanted to tell originally. I might have contributed to the deterioration of the system, and the very thing I wanted to critique, I've become part of.

I often feel a sense of frustration and helplessness, and I want to present it as honestly as possible. This is my version of "π depression."

**QG:**

In a way, you've offered a solution by giving credit to the invisible laborers and working alongside them. In the exhibition, you created 20 aluminum hats corresponding to the 20 animal tailors, making them visible and tangible. You've even written their names on the inside.

**HX:**

I hope they can be acknowledged, but I don't want credits to be just a superficial gesture. After all, they are us—we're in the scheme together, whether good or bad. What I want to say is that we all have to bear the consequences collectively.



Huidi Xiang, *maxim tomato: a comforting embrace*, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and BICA.