

CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART IN THE WEST

Chinese art in the avant-garde tradition is a recent development, both in China and even more so for the international art world. It is a movement of less than thirty years and most of its artists have only come to any renown in the West in the past ten to fifteen years. As such critics are still learning the terms of reference. In the process of grappling with contemporary Chinese art on an appropriate ground, the question remains as to the extent of Western influence on the new movement. Time and again it has been accused – by Western critics and by Chinese – of continuing to mimic Western art historical movements and pandering to the tastes of the Western art market. This is something of a moot argument, since contemporary art and the teaching of art history has largely become the critical reinterpretation of the past. It is also a deeply offensive rhetoric to assume that the Chinese should exist in cultural stasis isolated from (negative) Western influences. In the short time contemporary Chinese art has had to establish itself, a more complex relationship of influences has developed between the East and West than the dichotomy might suggest.

The rise in popularity of Chinese art since the 1990s has been phenomenal. Although Chinese artists had been experimenting with contemporary art previously, it was only after the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising, when many artists immigrated and began to practise abroad that contemporary Chinese art came to the attention of the West. Their work reflected the greater freedom of expression available and often the artists chose to use their distance to reflect on circumstances in China. It was the era of 'identity art', and the issues of cultural hybridity that these immigrant artists raised were on the West's curatorial agenda. An Australian example is paradigmatic. Artist Ah Xian migrated to Australia in the wake of Tiananmen, and began to practice here. The works he has produced since use lacquer, cloisonné and the techniques and craftspeople of Jingdezhen's exquisitely patterned traditional ceramics, which he applies to busts and other sculpted forms that speak to audiences of the indelibility of his Chinese heritage. Here curators and institutions have embraced his work, followed by the pursuit of collectors such that it now commands major US dollar prices. Importantly his success and the relaxation of China has meant that Ah Xian now works between the two countries, allowing him to interpret the culture from within and afar.

The presence in Australia of a large number of artists from Asian backgrounds fuelled an interest in artwork exploring cross-cultural identity. Expatriate artists have a tendency to look with nostalgia at the more stereotypical aspects of their homelands, which can reinforce the tendency of Western curators to concentrate on Eastern art that is distinctly exotic. The Chinese presence in Europe, America and Australia in the 1990's meant that Western curators reiterated the migrant discourse of cultural hybridity when showing Chinese artwork, concentrating on work that employed Communist styles (ironically) or traditional Chinese motifs and techniques and which had cross-cultural themes.

Certain aspects of contemporary Chinese art have been embraced more readily in the West, and they are telling of both Western preconceptions and market imperatives. In the early 1990s two related movements emerged in China: Political Pop and Cynical Realism. Political Pop merged Chinese imagery of Maoist propaganda and Socialist Realism often with imagery of Western consumer culture in the mode of Pop Art and Postmodernism. The second movement, Cynical Realism, comprised often slightly surreal paintings that have an air of detachment and pathological neutrality. The relationship of the works in these movements to the recent history of China gave them a political edge that was urgent and real. Though it was rapidly lessening, these artists were working in an environment of censorship and hardship and had lived through the reprisals against artists during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Art and politics have been intertwined in China throughout the twentieth century, most

famously in the propaganda and painting movement of Socialist Realism that emerged in the second half of the century, and in Mao's dictum that art should serve the people and be relevant to their lives. Though many contemporary artists (particularly those who developed Political Pop and Cynical Realism) have been implicitly critical of aspects of communism, their use of art for purposes of social commentary and cultural critique is a product of this history of art and politics.

Across all artforms the prices realised for Chinese art are rising exponentially, but today it is still the works of Political Pop and Cynical Realism that are the most sought after, by artists such as Yue Minjun, Wang Guangyi and Zhang Xiaogang, even as the art being made today has moved away from these movements in other, more experimental directions. Most collectors of contemporary Chinese art are outside of China, although collectors from Hong Kong and the mainland are increasing. Political Pop and Cynical Realism continue to appeal to the art market because they look so distinctly Chinese, particularly when employing Maoist kitsch, and so have the appeal of difference, they retain an impression of social commentary and political dissidence, and as figurative paintings they are the most easily commodified artworks.

The 'hotness' of contemporary Chinese art in curatorial circles stems from its specific characteristics, for it is far from a mirror of the West, and can be seen as something of a panacea for the disillusionment of the West. Currently artists are more likely to address the rapidly changing cultural fabric of China as to critique their receding history. Many, such as Xing Danwen, Weng Fen and Yin Xiuzhen have taken the rapid urbanisation of the country as subject, while others have critiqued the commercialisation and social changes wrought by the drive to capitalism. Younger artists are moving away from political and social concerns to critique of the art systems that most define them now.

A striking feature of contemporary Chinese art is the preponderance of performance art, where protest and the struggle of circumstance has been dramatically staged in many works. It is this earnest and active engagement with their environment that has the most to offer the West, where we long for an art that could authentically address social or political change, lament its lack and shy away from those that try as utopian, instead pondering the failures of modernism and postmodernism, and instead engaging in cynical and self-reflexive exercises. When performance art emerged as a trend in Chinese art in the early 1990s, it was the first real flourish since the performance art of the 60s and 70s. The Chinese artists shared with their predecessors an interest in the body and abjection. Notable performances included Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* (1994), in which the artist sat in a toilet block for an hour, covered in honey, fish paste and flies, in testament to the hardships of his life and *Angel* (1993) produced in sorrow at the many abortions resulting from the one child policy. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu too created visceral performances and installations using their own bodies as well as animal and human body parts. Many works have been gory, recalling the Viennese Actionists' delving into often gruesome and transgressive territory. See for example, documentation of Zhu Yu's sensationalist performance *Eating People* (2000), in which the artist appeared to eat a human foetus. The Chinese have in part rekindled the current resurgence of interest in performance art and the body as a locus of art-making, seen in events such as the Performa biennial in New York. The operational reality of living your art, and of suffering for it, have reminded curators and artists in the West of the heady poignancy and sense of authenticity that performance art can engender.

Chinese artists are dependent on collectors and curators from the West. Chinese art is arguably at the zenith of its popularity with the bull market at the auction houses of New York, London and Hong Kong, major exhibitions around the world and numerous commercial

galleries opening in China, usually foreign owned. While Chinese artists have been savvy in working with overseas curators and are reaping the benefits of a major boom, they are also moving towards greater independence from the Western market. To ride out the inevitable market correction and the fickleness of fashion, the Chinese scene needs to develop an infrastructure to support its own galleries and artists, and indeed it is well on the way. The art produced today will be (leaving aside that that is ephemeral and performance based) the cultural heritage of tomorrow, and to stem the flow of this heritage out of the country China needs its own private collectors and collecting public institutions. There are definite advantages to the modes of exhibiting that have been developed out of necessity in China, such as makeshift exhibition spaces, performance, homes and publishing projects used for the exhibition of work. It is however a thankless and precarious existence to make art solely for your immediate community, and without the funding, museum standards and support of public institutions in your own country.

An improved infrastructure will help make the work to sustain native curators and critics that are essential to an evolving movement. With curators such as Feng Boyi, Li Xianting and Lu Jie, we see the importance of native curators to the movement, who can draw greater meaning from the movement, interpret the works back to the artists and give the broader artworld an insiders more thorough understanding of what they view. Though the efforts of Western curators have fostered and promoted contemporary Chinese art through exhibitions abroad, the reception of the art is passed through filters of language and culture, and it is preferable that Chinese curators are eventually given the resources to curate from within and control the reception of their own culture abroad. Most exhibitions of Chinese art in the West have been presented as monolithic blockbusters of 'Chinese art' that might introduce the West to the artists, but don't advance new readings of their works and reiterate a discourse of otherness. That is why the development of exhibitions such The Vernacular Terrain, curated and thematic (beyond merely national lines), and inclusive of artists for the contribution of their works to the exhibition rather than their nationality, has so much more to offer. It is not surprising that IDA Projects comes out of Australia, where Chinese immigrants constitute a large sector of the population, and where it is not uncommon for Asian artists to exhibit alongside Australian. Chinese Australian artists, such as Guan Wei, Ah Xian, John Young and William Yang, are amongst our most prominent artists. Organizations such as Gallery 4A in Sydney, the Asia Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery, Asialink and commercial galleries such as Sherman Galleries and Ray Hughes Gallery have each fostered the inclusion of Chinese art in exhibitions here.

As China's economic boom breeds a new wealthy elite, new collectors are emerging and dabbling in contemporary rather than traditional arts, and where the wealthy go the rest will follow. Already the human drive for posterity sees some making public collections of contemporary art that will, with time, bring some of the Chinese public to the contemporary arts of their country. The recent development of new private and semi-public art museums such as Square Art Museum, Today Art Museum, Songzhuang Art Museum and the Ullens Center show that infrastructure emerging. Ullens Center, which is owned by Belgian collectors, has suggested that they aim to eventually become independent. If the Chinese government were to put in place the legal allowances for not-for-profit arts organizations to accept cultural gifts and for these to be tax deductible, then this would further ensure the robustness of the Chinese art community.

Governments across the world are now seizing on the marketing and tourist potential of contemporary art and the Chinese are no exception. Despite the at times fraught relationship between authorities and contemporary artists, this year the Chinese have chosen to embrace contemporary art by employing one of the most famous artists, Cai Guo-Qiang, as artistic director for the Beijing Olympics. It is a clear sign of how fast attitudes to the Chinese avant-garde have changed since the persecution of artists during the Cultural Revolution. No one

would be overly keen to seek the attention of the government – after all the main interactions contemporary artists have with authorities are through the vetting of exhibitions and catalogues and when studios are reclaimed for commercial purposes – but censorship of the arts is decreasing and a more accepting future is anticipated.

Perhaps the most important influence the movement can have on the West is as a strong reminder of the challenges artists often face. If the viewer is prepared to travel outside their intellectual and cultural comfort zone the reward can be great. Art in China is difficult and it certainly isn't a leisure activity. Two recent works by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu can stand as a metaphor for the difficulty involved in bridging the gaps of understanding when viewing Chinese art. Working together the artists stage conceptual works that challenge physically as a marker of the deeper conceptual difficulties involved. Both works were staged at the 798 District in Beijing, a vast area of reclaimed factories used for studios and galleries. Curators and arts writers from the West tend to see a visit to 798 in Dashanzi (or the other art 'districts' of China) as a bit of a safari, and I'm not going to disabuse this notion. The trip from central Beijing takes at least an hour and needs written directions and a patient taxi driver. You arrive and the converted factory district closer resembles a factory precinct than what the West considers 'converted factory'. When you endure the journey and find conceptual art waiting for you it is wonderful, and I can't see any of us giving up the journey metaphor, despite its occidental inclinations: the experience of art in China is just too foreign for that, even when it seethes with Western curators.

The first work, Higher, was staged at F2 Gallery in Beijing. In the gallery the artists had installed works from the collection of their dealer, all of them important pieces by contemporary Chinese artists. The gallery containing these works was walled off, and could only be viewed in glimpses over the wall by jumping on a trampoline at the gallery entrance. The second work, A Fierce Dragon Can Cross the River was another restrictive installation at the entrance to the group exhibition To Each His Own. Visitors were presented with a chest-deep pit of foam cubes barring entry to the exhibition. If you wanted to enter you needed to struggle across the 'river' and out the other side. From the works it is clear that the artists were demanding the audience work for their art, and even then acknowledge that it would not all be given. It's something the West should keep in mind when dealing with contemporary Chinese art.

Ultimately we can have faith in the robustness of Chinese art to continue to absorb the knowledge of the West and adapt it to their circumstance with alacrity. From the youthful movement we can take away a lesson in dedication to making work despite the circumstances, of making work that engages critically with its socio-cultural terrain, and a lesson in taking advantage of opportunities when they arise. Artists in China have had to fight to be artists, make work, to keep the factories where they make their homes and studios, and to be a visible part of the international art world. They have achieved it in three short decades, and are producing some of the most interesting work across the world. We should analyse their works as we would the conceptual art of the West, but with the humility to realise that we cannot always grasp their full meaning, should it be offered.

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