

CHINA'S NEW ART, POST-1989

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CHINA'S NEW ART, POST-1989

WITH A RETROSPECTIVE FROM 1979-1989

Organised by Hanart T Z Gallery

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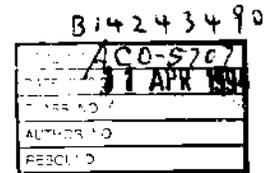
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Hong Kong City Hall,
Central, Hong Kong

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Hong Kong Arts Centre,
2 Harbour Road,
Wanchai, Hong Kong

* The exhibition's international tour will commence in Australia in June 1993, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (*Curatorial Adviser:* Dr. Nicholas Jose 周思).

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INTO THE NINETIES

Chang Tsong-zung

This exhibition, CHINA'S NEW ART POST-1989, was curated with the view to elucidate the various artistic undercurrents and general cultural sensibilities that distinguish the 1990s in China. China has experienced remarkable changes in the few years since 1989; whether these changes are the harbingers of things to come we have yet to witness, but a break with the tumultuous, idealistic and probing 1980s is definite. The visual arts, being concrete artefacts that embody attitudes and aspirations, are ideal sources for studying these cultural changes. The exhibition has been structured to provide a reading of the new phenomena although we are aware that, as in all curatorial undertakings, no interpretation is definitive and objectivity is necessarily coloured by the curators' vision.

WHY 1989?

Because this is the year that marks major changes in China's cultural scene. Art in China has since reached a new level of maturity which is in many ways the fruition of the previous decade of artistic exploration. Drastic changes in the social and economic order followed in the aftermath of the student movement that year. In 1989 China entered the 90s.

The recent history of new, or avant-garde, art in China began with the first stage of Deng Xiaoping's "open-door" policy in the late 1970s. The intrusion of the avant-garde into the cultural scene was loudly proclaimed by the first exhibition staged by the avant-garde "Stars" group in 1979, followed by the Stars' protest march staged on National Day that year. Art movements by the score and exotic creeds by the hundreds have dotted the map of new art in the ensuing years. Artistic styles were diversely inspired by Western 20th century art, and by the search into Chinese roots for auguries of Modernism; these movements and others provoked by reactions against them formed the rich background of art pre-1989. A brief history of new art is perceptively analysed by my co-curator Li Xianting in his long essay and appendix later in this book.

Since 1989, new art in China has gone through a significant transformation. Artists' perceptions of themselves are better defined, their relation to their cultural world is more mature, and as a result so is their grasp of artistic language. The keen interest in exploratory experimentation has now settled down to pursuits of themes and issues closer to home and to heart. Although many of the works we have selected for this exhibition have their roots in earlier art, a distinct artistic character and identity have emerged.

The year 1989 was marked as the year of change by two critical events: the seminal *China/Avant-garde* exhibition held in Beijing in February and the tragic ending of the student movement at Tian'anmen in June. The *China/Avant-garde* exhibition is significant because it was the first major exhibition of "unofficial" art to be granted official permission for exhibition in China, and in a sense was a semi-official acknowledgement of the status of this type of peripheral art. Over a thousand artists representing most of the active population of the avant-garde congregated in Beijing to exhibit and to view at this prestigious event. This was also the first real opportunity to compare and study at first hand the works by the major practitioners of "unofficial" art. The show was comprehensive and summed up the achievements of the avant-garde in the 1980s. It was both an exhilarating and sobering experience as under one roof it exposed to public scrutiny both talents original and derivative. Adding to the drama of the event, the show was forcibly shut down within hours of its opening after the artist Xiao Lu fired a real pistol shot into her artwork, proclaiming it "dead." (The show was later re-opened). The *China/Avant-garde* exhibition was both a high point and an ending point, marking a "full-stop" to the avant-garde art movements of the 1980s, most notably of the influential '85 New Wave.

The flamboyant student movement of the months following radically changed the cultural environment of China. After Tian'anmen, all "unofficial" culture — painting, writing, music-making, the whole lot — was again pushed to the periphery. In shock, artists came to a sudden realisation of their impotence in the face of real politics. The idealism and utopian enthusiasm so typical of new art in the 1980s met its nemesis in the gun barrels of Tian'anmen. "Unofficial" culture, which was just coming out into the open, was again forced into an iconoclastic position by official policy. But, ironically, this banishment in the end served creative art a good turn.

Inadvertently, the subsequent quasi-underground position of the artists bought time for them to gestate their experience of the seminal, and terminal, *China/Avant-garde* show, having lost all opportunity for public exhibitions for the following two years. The shattering of idealistic fancies also forced artists to re-examine the premise and validity of their artistic pursuit, and of the delicate tensions between form, aesthetic matter and reality, which eventually gave birth to an altogether stronger and more personal breed of art. In the post-'89 environment, the cultural climate in the more public quarters was predominantly cynical. Younger artists who came late on to the art scene were particularly acute to this, being free of the idealistic commitments which had charged their seniors; this set the mood for the "Cynical Realist" art of malaise and irreverence presented in this exhibition. In this light, 1989 is seen to be the demarcation point not only for the decade of the 80s, but also for the spirit of the 90s.

ORIGIN OF THE EXHIBITION

The idea for an overseas contemporary art exhibition from China first came about in a discussion between myself and the Beijing critic Li Xianting during the opening of the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition at the beginning of February, 1989. The previous month I had just presented in Hong Kong the retrospective exhibition *STARS: 10 YEARS* in honour of that pioneering group. In conjunction, the two exhibitions had quite coincidentally recapitulated the short history of China's new art since 1979. An exhibition was immediately planned for 1990, but history overtook us and we postponed the exhibition to 1992, then again to 1993. I presented the idea of holding the exhibition in Hong Kong to Oscar Ho, Director of Exhibitions at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, and he responded enthusiastically, contributing invaluable curatorial advice.

Actual planning started in spring 1991. Li Xianting and I spent countless hours studying and revising a preliminary list he had drafted, going over numerous artworks and visiting new candidates. The final selection of artists and works were agreed upon with the concurrence of Oscar Ho who helped planned the exhibition in Hong Kong.

For deciphering the artwork, we have adopted Li Xianting's original terms of "Political Pop" and "Cynical Realism," which he first created in 1991. Other terms were principally proposed by me, and finalised in discussions with Li Xianting, Oscar Ho, Liao Wen, Eric Wear and Valerie C. Doran. Valerie took over the difficult task of editing this catalogue, a complicated procedure as original texts from our essayists came from all over China, as well as from Europe and the United States. The translation and editing work involved, not to mention the organisation of the visual materials, made for a monumental job for Valerie and the entire editorial and production team. In the end, their efforts have produced a catalogue that we believe will have value as a reference book on the social, cultural and historical context for China's new art, as well as an informative introduction to the exhibition itself.

CURATORIAL OVERVIEW

The selection of artworks and the judgement of their relevance are based on the theme set out above; namely, to seek out cultural sensibilities which are emblematic of the 1990s in China. Many excellent artists have been excluded on the grounds that they do not reflect the spirit of the show. By the same consideration, most artists living abroad were excluded, exceptions being the few who left China recently and have continued to explore art in a spirit similar to their peers at home, or individuals such as Gu Wenda and Xu Bing whose works have an important bearing on the present creative scene in China.

Artistic merit is the basis for judgement. By this is meant the convincing presentation of the creative idea, the strength of artistic vision, and the inherent power of the work. We have let ourselves be guided by the artworks for insight, and most of the sectional groupings of "sensibilities" were identified after the works had been assembled.

The sectional groupings represent an effort in identifying currents that underly the medley of prevailing artistic styles. We have consciously avoided formalistic and stylistic categories, although historical reasons, and the fact that certain styles have been natural vehicles for particular creative ideas, underlie the seeming stylistic uniformity of some groups.

1. *Political Pop Art*

Although the term "Pop," and indeed the original idea, is inspired by Western contemporary art, stylistically the language of China's Political Pop is rooted in the political propaganda art of recent decades, which has evolved out of a long-term engagement, since the turn of the century in fact, between Western academic realism and socially conscious art.

In the contemporary context, the significance of such an art lies in its re-appropriation of the language of mass culture, hopefully as a means by which to tame the reifying and oppressive nature of culture in the mass-communication age. As China gradually turns itself over to the monster of capitalist consumerism, the message of Political Pop as exemplified in the works of representative painter Wang Guangyi becomes even more poignant in its explication of the subtle fusion of totalitarian and capitalist-consumer cultures. The overt political references in Political Pop works are also slowly changing over to general cultural issues as China's new market economy develops.

Political Pop is also meaningful in disengaging the historical memory of the Cultural Revolution, which for many has been clouded by trauma and emotional confusion. The Pop interpretation represents a contemporary stance on facing that period of history. The artistic messages of Political Pop artists, however, are quite diverse and the attitudes of individuals vary widely. Li Shan has focused his art on the emasculating but erotically charged machinery of power politics; while Yu Youhan has, in a goodhumoured way, through the use of famous photographic images of Mao and folk art design, relocated the leader into the tamed pantheon of folk gods. For the younger painters like Wang Ziwai, the Mao era is simply the musing nostalgia of childhood days. As a whole, regardless of whether or not the artist is politically critical, practically everyone is caught up in the glamour and theatricality of that epoch now safely past.

The present wave of Political Pop art caught on after 1989, in part provoked by the events of 1989, as a defiance against the current leadership — nostalgia for the past leader being a safe political act. But true to the original spirit of Pop, today's Political Pop is not essentially an art of socio-political criticism. In contrast to the current Political Pop, pop imagery that appeared in art in the 1980s was mostly sombre and serious-minded. One of the earliest uses of Mao-as-icon was made in the acidly cynical sculptures of Wang Keping in 1979, while in the early 1980s Mao was featured in social critical paintings by Ai Weiwei, followed by Wang Guangyi's series of paintings depicting Mao in a black grid in 1987. These were artworks of pointedly political criticism. Today, taxicabs carry talisman photos of Mao and Zhou Enlai, and revolutionary songs swing to a rock beat. Political Pop is now created in the spirit of truly popular culture.

By immersing themselves in popular culture, Political Pop artists find much common ground with the Cynical Realists discussed in the next section. Both rose out of a reaction against the ineffectual idealism so typical of 80s art, turning instead to a reality more immediately accessible. But while Political Pop deals with the visual reality of propaganda art and mass culture, the Cynical Realists accost the reality of their immediate surroundings and personal acquaintances. It is useful to compare the spirit of the British Pop artists of the late 1940s, whose affirmative attitude toward the present moment, and professed ambition for "fame and fortune now" find a kindred spirit in these contemporary Chinese art movements.

2. *Cynical Realism: Irreverence and Malaise*

In terms of age group, the Political Pop artists span three generations, ranging from fresh academy graduates to artists in their fifties. This is one reason why the phenomenon of Political Pop art is complex. On the other hand, the artists whose work most clearly reflects the spirit of irreverence and malaise found in Cynical Realist art are relatively easy to define; they are mostly in their twenties, and are uniformly concordant in their refusal to be encumbered by the baggage of idealist commitment. The experience of the Mao era to them is principally a childhood memory, mostly silly and festive, horrifying only in the second-hand experiences related through older relatives. They have no direct experience of the heroic fanaticism of Mao, nor do they share the soul-searching angst of the generation of artists born in the 1950s.

Although a common cynical spirit runs through these artists' works, their temperament leads their art in two directions: art which displays an irreverent attitude, often tending to a sort of roguish humour, but basically flamboyant and sunny even as a gnawing boredom seeps through, as exemplified in the works of Liu Wei and Fang Lijun; and those who are possessed of a melancholic malaise, or nausea in the Sartrean sense, as seen in the works of Liu Xiaodong and He Sen.

Stylistically, realism predominates. Realism as a tool for focusing upon an immediate reality of friends and acquaintances is in keeping with these artists who shun fanciful ideals or in-depth soul searching. Nor are they too keen on stylistic exploration; as graduates of the art academies they have happened on to realism almost by default. Reality that is skin deep, and social relationships of the pleasurable but non-committal sort become the portraits of their cynicism.

3. *The Wounded Romantic Spirit*

Art with a romantic spirit, fired by the passion for the grand and the heroic, has always been in the blood of communist/socialist art, and this is particularly true of so-called Maoist model art. The parting of the ways of socialist Maoist model art and individual art has not snuffed out the spirit of grand idealism in many of the more sensitive artists. What charged the imagination of many avant-garde artists in the 1980s was the spirit of humanism, and visions of the greatness of the human spirit in the face of harsh fate and adversity. The attraction to Romantic art is therefore natural. Stylistically, the realism taught in the Chinese art academies harks back directly to the 19th century European beaux arts tradition, which also explains some of the stylistic tendencies of artists in this group, in particular Ding Fang and Xia Xiaowan.

The sense of tragedy and martyrdom is inherent in the nature of this kind of art; and in the context of post-1989 culture, the mark of being wounded has become particularly distinct. The transition in mood of works before and after June 1989 by painters like Zhang Xiaogang is typical. Many of them were established figures in the 1980s art scene. They were philosophical and filled with a religious-like fervour which the younger cynical generation are wont to ridicule and mistrust.

These are artists of distinct individual character, and their artistic concerns are naturally divergent. Ding Fang's concern with the grandeur of the human civilisation is reflected in his idiom of ruins and the "sinews" of the plateaus of the Yellow River valley, shaped by centuries of human toil. Zhang Xiaogang's work is rich in drama, laden with symbols of martyrdom and salvation. Xia Xiaowan's world of monsters and misshapen outcasts are visions of Paradise Lost. Pan Dehai's *Corn* series shows an obsession with the stubborn regenerative power of life, which in the darkness of the soul still transcends to luminous spirituality. Zhou Chunya has been smitten by the magic of the Tibetan highlands since the early 1980s, and his recent works still radiate that tragic strength of humanity surviving under harsh conditions.

In the work of these artists, cultural responsibility and humanitarian concerns continue to run deep. The woundedness which they display in fact reflects the magnitude of their spirit, warped by the limitations of the human condition.

4. *Emotional Bondage: Images of Fetishism and Sado-Masochism*

Images of bondage, perverted delight in sado-masochistic activities and a sensual fetish obsession with objects are the common marks of art grouped under this section. Like the artists typified by a "wounded romantic" spirit, the artists whose work reflects this sense of emotional bondage are also maimed souls; but a crucial difference lies in a lack of the faith and vision which might otherwise lift them beyond their private obsessions. In their hurt, they have turned upon others or upon themselves. Instead of transcending their wounds, they have transferred them. As a general social phenomenon the art reflects a society in which people are physically and mentally so closely herded that their repressed drives are forced to find expression in perverted attitudes and behaviours.

The art in this section varies widely in style. In fact, stylistically or in terms of subject matter, many of the artists under this section could fit reasonably well into others — but the hint of perversity in their work has marked them out. A good example is Zhang Peili, whose paintings of famous public figures such as broadcasters and body-builders have a definite Pop flavour; yet the pervasive mood in his art is rather an obsession with manipulative delight, as characterised by the two videos on display. Song Yonghong, from a stylistic viewpoint, is better suited to his peers in the Cynical Realist group, but in Song's art something that comes across more strongly than existential malaise is a sick voyeurism, contained in strange tableaux in which his protagonists seem to partake in erotic suspense dramas.

Fetish obsession is never far from the impulse of artistic creativity, and we have been careful to include in this section only those who display distinct psychological obsessions, such as Cai Jin with her sexually luscious banana plants, or Gu Dexin with his burned plastic — sensuous lumps which refer obliquely to his earlier watercolours of preciously cute nymphs, and which produce an almost sexual sense of fondling and manipulation. Zhang Yongjian's burnt rubber art is obviously perverted, perhaps even more grotesque in its fleshlike quality, and more directly expressive of the emotional entanglement of obsession and utter disgust.

The image of bondage is distinct in many artists' work, whether in the context of healing or captivity. Its psychological message is obvious, such as in the works of Guo Wei and Ah Xian. (With these works one could include the recent sculptures of Sui Jiangguo, but we have put him under section 6, Retreat into Formalism, in consideration of the fact that his main artistic concern has always revolved around the problems of formal sculptural language).

5. *Ritual and Purgation: Endgame Art*

Represented in this section is art which goes after a total field of experience, with the ambition of making an absolute statement.

The first successful works of this genre were Dada-inspired, and created by significant artists like Gu Wenda, Huang Yongping (not in this show), and Wu Shanzhuan. Being of the generation of Red Guards, they were practically prepared for this type of art before their time. Like the Cultural Revolution itself, their art is apocalyptic, ruthless in its demands for absolute involvement, and endemically provocative. Again like the Cultural Revolution, it is "culturally" minded; therefore the world of Chinese words — picture diagrams of the mind — was a main subject of attack. Gu, Huang and Wu had all created monuments of displaced and broken words. In this light, without being facetious, probably the ultimate monumental Dada work in this spirit of revolution was created by Mao with his Cultural Revolution; and all of these artists were affected by it. Gu has lived in New York for several years, and he considers his best creative "find" to date to be his recent *Oedipus Refound* project, which, in his words, "hits a raw nerve of Western civilisation." The world revolution continues for the perennial Red Guard.

The oblique homage to Mao is more than metaphor. An apocalyptic strain runs deep in artists whose works incline toward purgation, and also in installation artists categorised elsewhere. The pronounced attacks on convention by "Endgame" artists such as Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuang and Huang Yongping are all based in their faith in the possibility for a fundamental transformation through apocalyptic destruction. The gentler dismantling of meaning in Xu Bing's project described below is no less ambitious in its aspiration to create an ultimate monument silenced by the absence of meaning. Elsewhere, the incendiary glee of Ni Haifeng, and the obsessive scorching of plastic of Gu Dexin, all exhibit a sensual delight in the magic of conflagration.

Direct references to magic and spiritual purgation are other aspects of this quasi-religious pursuit. Lü Shengzhong's installation *Summoning the Spirits* is a representative work. A different use of traditional idiom is found in Xu Bing's *A Mirror to Analyse the World* and *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*. These installations are monumental works of woodblock carving and stone rubbing, both important crafts for the traditional literati. But Xu exponentially increases the significance of the act of craft itself, so that it becomes ritualistic and actually takes predominance over the significance of the forms presented, be they words or walls.

We have termed these works "Endgame" art because in essence all of them are attempts at making ultimate statements, as a means of purging the intellect or spirit so as to make room for profound, inexpressible and mysterious experiences.

Approaching the "ultimate statement" from another direction is the New Analysts Group, working in the tradition of the so-called "cold treatment" art of the 1980s which began as a reaction against the dominant passionate romanticism of the time. The New Analysts' expressed intention is to distance passion from creativity so as to elevate art to an act of pure reason. (It is interesting to note that one of the members of the New Analysts Group is the obsession-ridden Gu Dexin).

Endgame art has been a major force on the New Art scene since the mid-1980s, and successful recent works are proofs of its continuing vitality. To turn art into a religious platform, or at least into a ritual exercise seems to be an aspiration for many New Art practitioners. There is somehow a common prejudice among artists, including painters, that painting is not "intellectual" enough: ritualistic installation work seems to have a special attraction for artists whose works fall under our Emotional Bondage section, such as Wang Jianwei and Zhang Peili, who are both painters and installation artists.

6. Introspection and the Retreat into Formalism: New Abstract Art

Li Xianting's essay and appendix notes make clear the original significance of abstract art as a reaction against the official art of realism. Throughout the 1980s, and especially since 1989, two directions for abstract art have become apparent: one being an enquiry into spiritualism, that is introspective and meditative; the other focussing upon the formal qualities of art, either in terms of medium or of aesthetic language.

Over and above any intellectual argument, the pursuit of abstraction as a spiritual art requires utter abandon and unquestioned faith in spirituality. Of those introspective painters seeking quietude and a state of spiritual elevation, some have produced their finest works since 1989. The artist Shang Yang's best abstract paintings were created before and after June 1989, and he explained that during this hugely moving time, when terms were being redefined, he could not work with art in which form had any peripheral reference.

Wang Chuan's career provides an interesting example. A representative painter of the "Scar Art" movement of the early 1980s, he abandoned realism for more spiritual forms of expression. He first experimented with symbolist works of death and rebirth, gradually changing to a spontaneous calligraphic abstract painting style. Thereafter, Wang turned to a rigid, geometric idiom, dissatisfied with the dextrous ease of calligraphic abstraction. The bright, rigid qualities of these latter works have gradually darkened, and in the past two years his art has entered a realm which is dim and mysterious, like entering into dusk.

Of art inspired by formal considerations, Liu Ming's sensitive paper work with wire was one of the much cited examples in 1989. The artist is first of all guided by his sensitivity for his medium, through which he articulates his personal expression. In the case of the painter Ding Yi, his attention is totally consumed by gauzes of colours, which are more mesmerizing than meditative. Two sculptors are included among this group. In general, the art of sculpture appears to be less successful in the realm of new art, and Fu Zhongwang's transformation of the formal language of traditional mortise and tenon succeeds in a personal, but also native, idiom. Sui Jianguo is a powerful sculptor, and his oeuvre is the preoccupation with the structural language of mending nature with artifice; the possible psychological implications of his work in terms of the metaphors of bondage and mending broken wholes is obvious and has been mentioned above.

THE ORTHODOX AND THE AVANT-GARDE

To know how these artists fit into the art scene, their relationship to the art academies and the official line is relevant to "reading" their work. Professor Shih Shou-chien's historical account of China's orthodox art academy system and its antagonists offers a working definition for the nature of the avant-garde. Also from a historical perspective, Professor Michael Sullivan discusses the role of the nonconformist in Chinese art and society. Viewing China's New Art through the lens of the market-place, Geremie Barmé's article shows the precarious line the avant-garde walks, and the subtle traps set for the spirit of creativity in any form of marketing and, alas, in exhibitions. The question at stake here, leaving aside the question of the corrupting effects of commerce, is the legitimacy of the avant-garde and the role patronage plays in influencing the claim to the "orthodox". The "orthodox" in China has hitherto been represented by the art academies and the official line: whether Imperial or Communist, the government has acted as "patron," both creating and constituting the market for art. In China's changing political and economic environment, the scope of the marketplace is expanding, and other market forces are coming into play. The nature of the avant-garde certainly will change with increasing market patronage. Whether the avant-garde will dislodge the orthodox will depend on a more complex machinery of influence, among critical circles and in the international art scene; and this function, in the contemporary world, is again largely relegated to the entirely more vulgar machineries of publicity and media.

International recognition is a very important channel for establishing "legitimacy." In recognition of this and the fact that there is in China practically no local market for new art, in major cities such as Beijing members of the foreign community have stepped in to help gain exposure for new art and in marketing art to the foreign community. An illustration of this phenomenon, nicknamed the "foreign salon," and of creative attempts to expand possibilities for exhibiting unofficial art in China, is provided by Francesca Dal Lago's journalistic account. Although international recognition is the dream, it is only when artists go abroad that they realize that to face the West on its own ground requires an entirely new perspective. Fei Dawei is a mainland art critic who now lives in France, and he discusses the problems of artistic identity for Chinese artists abroad. Looking at art created at home but from a wider perspective, Nicholas Jose's informative essay places China's post-1989 new art in the context of world art. Working within China, the avant-garde artist often has the image of iconoclast, particularly in the post-1989 world, and Jeffrey Hantover provides a reading of post-'89 art from this angle.

An important question to ask is: Who is the avant-garde's audience, real or projected, aside from the obvious candidates of immediate friends and associates? What is the Chinese equivalent of the Soho scene which used to exert such authority on new art? Unwittingly, in China it is the academy's orthodoxy, with its attendant sway over the cultural establishment, the public media, the access to prestigious exhibition places, and the market, against which China's new art must measure itself. As we all know, the secret delight of being in the "underground" is the delight of subversion, hence the intrigue of private shows and the myths of undiscovered talent. In this structure, the most powerful stamp of approval, and of legitimacy, comes from critics, who, being intellectuals, are mostly connected to publications or the academies. Liao Wen's study of how each artist's creativity is affected by his environment is an interesting insight into making art in China today. She has also given an invaluable insider's view of the relationship between artists and critics, and between the creative scene and the academies. In a country where excessive media kill is not yet the order of the day, the magazine is enormously influential, especially when a critical review is authored by someone respected in the trade. The tug of war for influence over the creative arts between the critical circle and the market has only just begun in China, and it is yet healthily in favour of the critic. Eric Wear approaches the issue of China's new art from a very different perspective, placing the work in a larger intellectual context and examining the intellectual tools for viewing art and the parameters set by them.

NEW ART AND CHINESE NEW ART

The fine arts, particularly the art of painting, have always occupied a central position in Chinese culture. It is important to see the significance of the role of the painter/scholar in the Chinese cultural world to appreciate the psychological and cultural burdens he bears. It is also in this light that many of the essays by Chinese critics should be read. The almost overbearing humdrum (and indeed including this very introduction) on "modernizing" China, on the East/West exchange, on Chineseness and "going international", are bred of this intellectual miasma that is part of the tradition. A staying focus of discussion is the interaction between Western and Chinese art and how it shapes Chinese contemporary culture; we have three essays from Chinese critics on this subject, by Liu Xiaochun, Lang Shaojun and Yi Ying. All three critics are associated with "official" academies yet they are also influential within new art circles. In the West, the modern artist is looked upon as a spirit medium, bearing oracles from Olympia, harbingers for the next new age; intellectual responsibility goes to the intellectual critic. In China, on the other hand, the artist is also an "intellectual" who is both socially and intellectually responsible for the cultural and spiritual well-being of his fellows.

Perhaps this is the latent reason why the '85 New Wave artists (in fact including most of the artists in this exhibition in their mid-thirties and above) were so well suited to this role; they all wrote voluminously — if not copious essays and treatises, at least very long philosophical statements. This also explains the spirit of communion found between Chinese artists and critics.

As a result the views taken of and demands made on "serious" art by the public are in accordance with artists' intellectual roles. The wide repercussions felt in mid-1980s film and literature from the impact of artist Ding Fang's meditations on the spirit of the northern plateaus is a telling example. Again, the Stars artists' successful political demonstration and the government's wary attitude toward "liberalising" the arts can be understood in this light. Even the cynical and irreverent young, illiterate and irresponsible by their seniors' standards, work within the context of an intellectual world made up of the official academy and the loose network of artists and critics through which their irreverence is legitimised and put into focus, such as with the currently fashionable "rogue" literature of Wang Shuo and the pop cult of Mao.

The new and the orthodox are quite dependent on each other for inspiration and influence. It is far too complacent a conclusion to deduce that the export market or the international art circuit has the last word on Chinese contemporary art.

PERSONAL NOTES

In the two years spent on preparing this exhibition, what has impressed me most of all about contemporary art in China is its artistic vision on a grand scale. Granted there is no escape from cynicism, from pandering to the art-market, and subtle persecution in various forms; yet overall there is a faith in the elevating virtues of art and culture, which looks to art as a haven for the spirit in adversity.

Particularly touching is the trenchant idealism of many artists, with its unabashed proclamations of tragic heroism. They are anachronic in the post-modern world, with their innocently outdated commitments to grand causes. One even senses a greatness in spirit in the most stubbornly self-serving cynic. Although the outward appearance of contemporary Chinese art is not what one would associate with its illustrious past, yet by boldly referring to varied artistic traditions artists seem to be creating a past, and in so doing assuming a historical role. The dynamics of incongruous traditions has stimulated the leap of awareness that their discourse may yet be established in the context of a greater order.

Perhaps it was by a similar dynamic of mixing philosophical traditions that Mao's catastrophic, yet nonetheless poetic, vision for a new Chinese order was inspired, by transplanting the apocalyptic Marx into an alien context. If this be the case, then in China after Mao, and in the wake of the brutal severance of its cultural lineage, one may at least salvage in the national spirit this legacy of vision.

Without a sense of history and vision on a grand scale no culture may lay claim to greatness, although one should hope that the future will be guided by more sober historical wisdom. The triumph of Communism assured the final dissolution of the great Chinese order; one thinks ruefully of the fall of the Roman empire and the vindication of Christianity. As a latter day evangelism, Communism is the master dissembler, but it is not the true colour of China. Sadly, a people which only one generation ago was known for its wisdom and grace, even in the state of distress and dire poverty, has been converted to one that is too often intolerant and short-sighted. We cannot tell what the Chinese order will be like for the new century, but a market economy in the guise of democracy certainly does not promise greatness. An order founded upon the exchange of goods and the lure of greed (even if regulated by law) is a feeble alternative to a regime founded on spite and retribution.

Acquaintance with artists has also given me a new perspective on contemporary China. To see the intensity of art created by those who grew up in some of China's poorest and most isolated years, one begins to appreciate the virtues and moral vigour inculcated by the fervent idealism of Mao's legacy. In this light the recent Mao fever may be interpreted with some optimism. There is much to be said for adversity; it adds lustre to the tiniest morsel of beauty and goodness, and trims the soul for greater duties. There is no glory in oppression and suffering, but to have lived through it, to have survived the days of tyrants and outlived the lies of false gods is Providence. Out of this humanity prospers.

Humanism and an intense awareness of the cultural predicament of China characterise the spirit of much of China's New Art. In spite of what we might term the "post-idealism" of the Pop pose, the ironic and irreverent stance of Cynical Realism, the scars of wounding, and the retreat into spiritualism and "formality," each is coherent within the context of China's current artistic and cultural discourse. There are no ready substitutes for newly fallen idols, but humanitarian concerns and artistic honesty are unerring guides for mapping out a better-lighted journey into the future.

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1989 AND NEW ART POST-1989

Oscar Ho Hing-Kay

The curatorial concept of the *China's New Art, Post-1989* exhibition is based on the assumption that 1989 is a specific and major turning point in the development of "new" art in China. To a certain degree such an assumption is justified because of two major events of 1989: the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition at the China Art Gallery in Beijing, which has been regarded as both a climax and anti-climax in the development of modern art in China since 1979, and the Pro-Democracy Movement in May and the subsequent Tian'anmen tragedy which drastically changed the social and political situation in China.

China's New Art, Post-1989 is not an extension of the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, although both exhibitions attempt a review of a specific stage of development in Chinese modern art. There is certainly some degree of irony that a large-scale exhibition of such nature is held in Hong Kong three years later. In a way the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition was then vaguely an official recognition of the "modern art movement" in China, but this recognition was subsequently proven to be only temporary. Interestingly, Hong Kong has taken on this role as the alternative exhibition venue. Hong Kong's geographic and cultural ties to China make it easier to organise an exhibition of this type here rather than anywhere else. The city is an important transit point for Chinese goods, including Chinese art.

Anything that takes 1989 as a starting point must inevitably fall under the shadow of the Pro-Democracy Movement of 1989. This movement and the Tian'anmen tragedy left vivid memories and powerfully altered our views on everything concerning China, including its art, leading many to look at art from a highly political point of view. Based on an antagonistic mode of the oppressor versus the oppressed, an assumption of a drastic change after a devastating experience as a direct result of the events of 1989 easily comes to mind. And the new art after 1989 is regarded as the product of a generation expressing its disillusionment and dissatisfaction after political trauma.

The assumption, to a certain degree, is reasonable. The Pro-Democracy Movement and the repression that followed was obviously a striking experience for the art community. However, there is a danger that an over-emphasis on 1989 as a turning point ignores the continuity in the development of art. The Pro-Democracy Movement and the subsequent persecution were not a series of sudden, separate incidents; they were events which made visible the growing sense of crisis in China and triggered the exposure of a long-existing authoritarian mentality within the Chinese political structure. The same principle applies to the development of art. The new art created after 1989 actually accumulates and digests the years of new experience brought about by economic reform and political change. The difference is that after going through a devastating experience, the artists express themselves more powerfully and vividly.

Given that the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition of 1989 was such an important conclusion to a period, a review of the exhibits from the exhibition should supply evidence as to whether certain stylistic tendencies had already been evident before the "turning point" of mid-1989. Obviously, for a major exhibition of that size, it would be difficult to review all the exhibits, but there are plenty of examples to illustrate the point.

Two paintings submitted by Song Yonghong, *Nobody Sells Tickets* and *The Sky Would Change*, already showed elements of bondage and repression, and the boredom and malaise of city life. The only change in Song's recent works is that they are technically more mature and compositionally more interesting. In the case of Fang Lijun, the stupefied faces crowded in his recent works were already a noticeable characteristic of his black and white drawings exhibited in the 1989 exhibition: the only thing missing is the sense of roughness which has disappeared with the introduction of colouring in his recent paintings. Of course we cannot deny the sense of irreverence, malaise, and even cynicism which might possibly emerge as a response to the political climate after 1989, but the sense of loss and irreverence is a typical experience of modern life — an experience which took shape before 1989, coming naturally as a result of social changes brought about by the economic reform in China. In addition to the new political situation, the continuous advancement of "modernisation" has further intensified that sensibility.

In addition to the artist evincing this sense of irreverence and malaise, many other participants in the 1989 exhibition, such as Ding Fang, Mao Xuhui, Gu Dexin, Pan Dehai, Ding Yi, and the New Analysts Group, are still pursuing the artistic directions which were already evident in their works during the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition.

Nevertheless, the Pro-Democracy Movement and the repression of this movement was so stunningly shocking that it intensified and solidified motivations in the creation of art, and for certain individual artists it has had some significant impact on their artistic development. In the 1989 exhibition, Zhang Peili used surgical gloves corroded by medicine as an analogy of the violence of violation. His recent performance video showing him washing a rooster continuously for three hours until all signs of resistance have been "washed out" is an intensification of that sense of violence, oppression and submission. Although Zhang Xiaogang's recent works still follow the same artistic and technical directions, the content of his works indicates drastic changes, probably as a result of political disillusion. Instead of seeking spiritual experience, Zhang's works after mid-1989 began to move into an enclosed, oppressed space where dissected bodies fall into totally helpless states.

“Political Pop” has been by far the most distinctive stylistic development in China after 1989. However, the introduction of images from popular culture in art is not new. It existed in some of the exhibits of the 1989 exhibition, such as in Wang Ziwai’s playing cards paintings and Dai Guangyu’s huge collage of posters and other street publicity materials.

On the other hand, a marriage of pop images and politics did not clearly emerge in the 1989 exhibition, although exhibits like Wang Youshen’s interestingly combined collaged photo images with a poster of police announcements in a manner similar to the works of Rauschenberg. Li Shan glued hundreds of photo images of Ronald Reagan on pieces of long red cloth, a material used for political banners during the Cultural Revolution, and created a setting especially for foot washing. This piece already contained the sense of mockery and playfulness which has been further elaborated in his recent works.

Political Pop, a strange union of socialism and capitalism, is strongly related to the rapid growth of consumerism in China in recent years. Interestingly enough, Political Pop tends to borrow a whole range of images from the Cultural Revolution era: stylistically, it shares the decorative effects of “red, bright and shining,” which are regarded as the basic aesthetic principle for art of that era. There might be malaise or cynicism hidden behind the colourful look of Political Pop, but it is still difficult to clearly define it as critically antagonistic. Similar to Pop art in the West, Political Pop in China also shows a fascination for popular culture. It mocks the marriage of socialism and capitalism. At the same time it is charmed by the new landscape created by consumerism, and ironically it is also nostalgic about the ideals, if not the reality, of the Cultural Revolution era. In Yu Youhan’s decorative portraits of Mao, there is revealed both a playfulness and a longing for a period which has long gone. This complex feeling could be the sign of a hidden cynicism which takes the form of playfulness; it could also be a reaction of both shock and delight when one suddenly encounters the chaotic and overwhelming culture of consumerism. One of the results of such an encounter might be a retreat into an idealized world of cleanliness and simplicity, a romantic nostalgia which is reflected in the renewed popularity of Mao in China.

The development of art in modern China has been a pattern of one particular style dominating the whole art scene, while the others, if they were allowed to appear at all, ended up fighting an up-hill battle for acceptance. Such a pattern has consequently dramatised the antagonistic nature of art. In addition to this historical background, putting “avant-garde” art, which has a long tradition of provocation, into the political and social context after Tian’anmen, can easily lead to an over-emphasis on the antagonistic mode when it comes to the analysis of art.

Undoubtedly, political authority remains an important issue for many artists in China. However, as China moves towards modernisation and economic reform, a simplistic mode can no longer explain the complexity of its artistic development. It would be a dangerous simplification to ignore the fact that artistic development is a continuous flow within history; or the fact that as China becomes “modernised,” it has become a diversified society where pluralism and individualism have become increasingly prominent features of both its culture and its artistic development.

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MAJOR TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

Li Xianting

The art concepts utilised in this discussion are largely derived from the aesthetic and conceptual language of 20th century Western Modernism. This is an acknowledgement of the fact that the language of Modernism has become the international language of art. To a large degree, this reality has dictated the development of modern Chinese art.

Yet there is another vitally important phenomenon that has shaped the development of Chinese art in the 20th century, and which explains the qualities of Chinese contemporary art which are different from Western art. Since the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), when China's doors were "blown" wide open by the West, China has undergone three major cultural and aesthetic transitions marked by a rejection of an established cultural and aesthetic system and the adoption of a new one, always based on a modern Western system. In the course of this process of adoption and adaptation, the Western system underwent various levels of transformation, so that in the end there has been, enacted on Chinese soil, a cultural dialectic between China and the West marked by a pattern of mutual influence and change. It is the phenomenon of these transitions and the cultural dialectic that they have engendered which sets the evolution of China's contemporary art apart from that of the West.

The first of these transitional periods began in the early part of this century, when the May Fourth movement [launched in 1919] raised the flag of anti-feudalist revolt and advocated the use of modern Western cultural ideas as a means of building a new culture for China. The May Fourth movement also signalled the rejection of traditional literati culture, and paved the way for the eventual adoption of Western-style realism as the main model for Chinese contemporary art.

The second transition occurred with the establishment of the Communist regime in 1949 and continued through the Cultural Revolution, a period which saw the establishment of new ideological foundations and the development of a new model for art — Maoist Revolutionary Realism — which advocated, on a thematic level, the introduction of utilitarian social concerns, and on a stylistic level, the absorption of elements of Chinese folk art into the imported Western and Soviet Socialist Realist models.

The third transition began in the early 1980s, when, after the isolation of the Cold War and Cultural Revolution periods, China once again unbolted its doors to the West, and information on contemporary Western culture and philosophy came flooding through the newly opened door. The revived contact with contemporary Western philosophical, cultural and aesthetic ideas led to a psychological rejection on the part of artists, particularly of the younger generation, of decades of Revolutionary Realism and its value concepts. The next ten years saw the emergence and development of Chinese avant-garde art. Just as occurred with the first instance of disillusion with existing cultural value concepts and the resulting attempts to rebuild a new culture in the May Fourth period, the world of contemporary Chinese art has seen conflict, interweaving, and mutually transformative effects among the Chinese literati tradition, Revolutionary Realism, and modern Western culture — a phenomenon which continues to be an important part of the creative process in China. Because of this, China's new art is not a continuation of the art of traditional Chinese culture, nor is it a rehashing of Western modern art: rather, it is a new integration of myriad influences and myriad cultural and aesthetic factors.

1919–1942: Disillusionment with Traditional Literati Culture and the Introduction of Western Realism.

Traditional Chinese literati art is characterised by the quest to manifest the "charm of the ink and brush"; to achieve the idealised quality of lightness and fluidity; and to transcend the everyday world. The highest manifestation of this literati aesthetic is found in post-Song literati painting [the Song dynasty ended in 1279 — Ed.], strongly representative of the post-Song intelligentsia's common ideals of "retreating from the world" (*bishi*), and "achieving tranquillity free of earthly cares" (*danpo*). Art is the spiritual manifestation of humanity: yet, with its escapist ideals and its yearning for tranquillity, the literati cast off any concern with the realities of human existence, and became increasingly effete. Its art came to be seen as an act of leisure and diversion, an elegant play, and an object of connoisseurship.

With the demise of the Qing dynasty, the internal and external turmoil affecting China awakened the more progressive of Chinese intellectuals from these other-worldly literati dreams, causing them to turn to alternative means of artistic expression, primarily to Western art trends which offered a strong contrast to the traditional literati aesthetic. Modern thinkers confronted the humiliation and sense of impotence affecting the Chinese national spirit, and embarked on a movement against tradition, characterised in part by an "aesthetic revolution" that completely rejected the cultural and aesthetic traditions of literati/feudal society.¹ Among the plethora of modern Western art trends introduced in China in the 20th century, realism held the greatest appeal for reformist artists and intellectuals as being the most closely reflective of their social concerns.

Influential and revolutionary modern thinkers such as Hu Shi (1890–1962) and Li Dazhao (1889–1927) summed up traditional Chinese culture as "passive" (*jing*) in nature. Kang Youwei (1858–1927), Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), and Lu Xun (1881–1936) further pointed out that the demise of Chinese literati painting in the modern world was inevitable, a result of its failure to objectively and faithfully depict observed reality: rather it was constantly engaged in the expression of subjective emotion, an exercise grounded in the desire to escape the world. The end result was that literati art had become increasingly empty and devoid of meaning. In its role of opposition, the May Fourth

movement planned to utilise the West's "active" (*dong*) cultural spirit to save and revitalize this "passive" (*jing*) culture, bringing in Western realism and its sense of direct engagement with the world to replace Chinese literati painting's subjective expression of emotion and ideal of transcendence.

From the point of view of aesthetics, literati art's transcendent, or metaphysical, qualities and the exquisite fluidity of its ink-and-brush play, without doubt represent one of the highest pinnacles of art. The metaphysical elements intrinsic to the literati desire for transcendence took literati artists along a path which joined the movement of ink and brush to an expression of the soul — in 20th century terms, a natural development in the evolutionary path of art.

It is important to note that just at the time when, in the early 20th century, Chinese thinkers were hoping to harness Western realism as a replacement for the Chinese literati painter's tradition of subjective expression, traditional European realism was just beginning its transformation into Modernism, a transformation in which the artist sought to escape the restraints of narrative and representation, and turned his attention to the possibilities of color, brushwork and pure form as a direct expression of the emotions.

In fact, beginning with the proponents of the "Art Revolution" led by Chen Duxiu, there were a number of artists in the 1920s and 1930s who recognized this problem. Chen Hengge (1876–1923), Ni Yide (1901–1970), and Huang Binhong (1854–1955) believed that literati painting's lack of emphasis on representational form was actually an artistic advance. These artists held that the main aesthetic question was not whether a painting or sculpture looked like "the real thing" being presented: but rather whether the form presented contained an inner "life" or "vitality." To them, what needed to be changed in traditional Chinese art was not the sublime technique of literati ink painting but rather the fact that literati art had too far distanced itself from real life. They pointed out that important Modernist movements such as Impressionism, Cubism, and Expressionism had all begun to move away from a concern with objective form, emphasising instead the free expression of a subjective world. In their minds, this was a positive trend, representing an integration of Eastern and Western aesthetics.

Traditional painters like Huang Binhong imagined the development of modern Chinese art as a process which would change the attitudes of literati art, emancipating it from its "otherworldliness." By bringing it back into the world, they hoped to transform the traditional subjective language of literati art from a classical language into a modern one. But in fact modern Chinese art did not develop in the way these artists had hoped. Instead, what emerged was a raging cultural debate between the artists who sought to reform traditional literati painting by bringing its language up to date on the one hand, and the artists who sought to replace it on the other, represented by the powerful Realist movement led by the painter Xu Beihong (1895–1953), and resulting in the emergence of realism as the major trend and the last word in modern Chinese art for a very long time.

As such, the stance of reformist artists such as Huang brought them into direct confrontation with more revolutionary artists like Xu who advocated the replacement of the "disengaged" literati aesthetic with Western realism, and for similar reasons abhorred the introduction of Western formalism advocated by Huang and others like him. This argument formed the first great cultural debate, a debate that continued for over twenty years.

Realism was of course not the only style of Western art to have had an impact on Chinese artists in the long period of experimentation, turmoil and change that characterised China in the first half of the century. In the 1920s and 30s there were a number of art students returning to China from study abroad, bringing with them experience of a wide range of Western Modernist art trends, from Impressionism to Surrealism, creating a small-scale modern art movement. Key representative artists of this movement included Lin Fengmian (1900–1991), Pang Xunqin (1906–1985), and Liu Haisu (1896–), who had all studied in France in the 1920s. Under their influence, art in styles representative of all the major Modernist schools began to appear in China, creating the impression that modern Chinese art was at the very least ideologically in step with the West.

Yet the influence of these supporters of Modernism was largely limited to a stylistic one: in the end, in the raging debate between Realists and Modernists, their position was the weaker one. Influential artists like Li Yishi (1881–1942), who had studied in Japan, and Xu Beihong, who had studied in France, argued against them, warning that it would be socially disastrous if modern art of the ilk of Matisse and Cézanne were to take hold in China: this would represent a dangerous emphasis of form over content.²

Given the social conditions of the times, to many Xu's arguments were convincing. The great cultural debate ended with the unquestioned dominance of realism. This marked an important watershed in the development of modern Chinese art: the aesthetic and ideological hegemony of realism meant that autonomy in artistic development had lost out in China. Instead, the dominant social reality "selected" a mode of art that met its ideological needs — needs that certainly would not be met by either literati or Modernist concerns.

In essence, the reason that realism became established as the single most important style in modern Chinese painting is that the Realist movement in China was not so much an aesthetic revolution as a social revolution that aimed at harnessing art to promote revolutionary ideals. The common goal of artists and intellectuals living through

the turmoil, pain and humiliation of the years of war and occupation in China was to find a way to save China from the troubles plaguing it: their advocacy of a spirit of “engagement with the world,” (*rushi jingshen*), the polar opposite of the literati ideal of “transcendence of the world,” (*bishi jingshen*), was the ideological manifestation of their sense of responsibility to put social revolution first, and to act in the name of social utilitarianism. The simplistic formula put forward by the leaders of the Realist movement went something like this: [In art] subjective expression = anti-nature and anti-reality: Realism = a respect for nature and reality = engagement with the world (*rushi jingshen*): Therefore, using a realist stance to fight against subjectivity also = engagement with the world.

Yet on an aesthetic level, this is a false proposition, because essentially the argument is founded on the assumption of the aesthetic validity of the call to rediscover “the spirit of engagement with the world” that was lost by Chinese literati painters after the Song. Once realism was adopted as an ideology, its development was no longer so much an issue of stylistic method or technique; rather, the development of the Realist movement took place on a lower plane of art, as the quest to be completely reflective of “life itself” inevitably gave rise to an increasing vulgarization. In fact the stated objective of the Realist movement was to arouse the people, and to emphasize the utilitarian social aim of “the popularization of art” — and it found a ready-made shortcut in what might be termed as the making of art “in the vernacular,” a tendency which eventually was to become the major characteristic of modern realist art in China.

Thus Western-style realism underwent a major transformation when it was transplanted into the social conditions of China at the time: it was appropriated and modified into an extension of this populist ideology which dictated the future direction of China’s own version of realist art.

Another, parallel art movement which reinforced the ideological direction for China’s contemporary art was Lu Xun’s “Woodcut Movement” of the 1930s. After Modernism and Realism, the Woodcut Movement represented China’s third major art movement of the early twentieth century.³ In essence the Woodcut Movement was similar to an underground resistance movement: it was characterised by a strong fighting spirit, a populist approach and a raging desire to liberate the Chinese people from their wartime enslavement. The Woodcut Movement was strong evidence of modern Chinese intellectuals’ concern for the suffering of the people. On an aesthetic level, the movement was responsible for introducing many types of woodcut styles, from German Expressionism to Soviet Socialist Realism, and was particularly influenced by the work of Germany’s Carl Meffert and Käthe Kollwitz, and Belgium’s Frans Masereel, giving rise to a nascent Expressionist sensibility.

The ideological connection between the Woodcut Movement and the Communist movement is an obvious one. Unlike the failed fledgling Modernist movement, the Woodcut Movement was full of the “spirit of engagement with the world.” With the end of the war and the success of the Communist revolution, the Woodcut Movement’s sense of rage gradually gave way to hope and enthusiasm for the new society. As a result, a new “pragmatic” realism came into being, reinforced by the merger of the Realist and the Woodcut movements with their similarly political orientation, and their emphasis on the popularisation of art.

The relative cultural immaturity of the times, the stress laid on social utilitarianism, and the undeveloped state of modern critical art theory also influenced the evolutionary path of China’s Realist movement. Given these conditions, all three anti-traditionalist movements (Modernism, Realism and the Woodcut Movement) carried within them an inability to absorb and digest the modern Western ideas that they were attempting to introduce. As a result, none of these movements was able to create a new and complete aesthetic language. The new “pragmatic” Realism, born of the similar aesthetic and ideological concerns of the early Realist and Woodcut movements, became the main characteristic of modern Chinese art and established the foundation for Maoist Revolutionary Realism.

1942–1979: The Emergence of the First Cultural Integration — The Maoist Model

As stated above, the Maoist model takes as its foundation the Realist movement that developed from the May Fourth period through to the 1940’s. In 1942, in his *Yan’an Talks on Literature and Art*, Mao Zedong put forth the two principles that art should serve political ends and that art should entertain and edify the masses, providing a new focus for artists of the time struggling to establish a new and culturally relevant art. In the ensuing years, Mao also issued directives putting into motion a series of large-scale political movements that emphasized the study and incorporation of folk art into the new Realist model.⁴

In 1949, with the establishment of the Communist regime, the ideological process of Sovietization began. The political idealism and folk art movements characteristic of the years in Yan’an became integrated with Soviet Socialist Realism, producing a new style of art — Maoist Revolutionary Realism. From the 1950s through to the 1970s there gradually developed new characteristics of Maoist Revolutionary Realism summed up in the slogans “Sublime, Outstanding, Perfect” and “Red, Bright, and Shining.”⁵ Maoist Revolutionary Realism became the symbol and the standard of the political idealism of this thirty-year period; at the same time, it became the first and only new Chinese art model of the 20th century since the abandonment and demise of traditional literati art.

The so-called elements of “sublime, outstanding, and perfect” mean that the individuals portrayed in paintings should appear as sublime or heroic, the pictures should convey an outstanding socialist message, and the complete, or perfect, sense of the abilities of the proletariat should be communicated. Essentially, Maoist Revolutionary Realism is the product of Mao’s concept that literature and art should politically serve the proletariat. From the point of view of Maoist aesthetics, it represents Mao’s efforts from Yan’an through the Cultural Revolution to carry out a “purge” or “purification” (*qingli*) of views on art and of those creating art, because to Mao this was the only way to achieve a realm of pure political idealism and perfection in art. The qualities of “sublime, outstanding, and perfect” are the demonstration of this pure realm.

The qualities of “red, bright, and shining” are Maoist art’s ideological characteristics, representing Mao’s principle that art and literature should entertain and inspire the masses. Maoist artists studied the bright, colourful elements of folk art so pleasing to the workers and peasants, and found the works that most incorporated these elements were the so-called “New Year’s paintings” (*nianhua*). New Year’s paintings are decorative, commemorative paintings created for folk festivals and important events in the village calendar. With their bright and festive appearance, what could be better than New Year’s paintings to commemorate the success of the Communist Revolution? Thus New Year’s paintings became the key stylistic element of the Maoist model.

In the 1950s, under the influence of the New Year’s painting movement, a number of artists created oil paintings and even sculptures based on this folk style. Some of the most successful examples are Dong Xiwen’s *First National Day Celebration*, whose bright colours, flat strokes and strongly decorative quality all show the New Year’s oil painting style at its most successful. Again, the famous plaster sculpture *At the Landlord’s Rent Collection Office*, a collaborative work of artists and peasants, is a particularly successful example of folk-style sculpture.

The close political and cultural ties between China and the Soviet Union during the 1950s naturally resulted in a process of “Sovietization” in art. Many young academy artists were sent to the Soviet Union to study art and a number of Soviet painters taught art in China during this period. However, the strong reemphasis on Chinese folk culture that emerged in the late 1950s and early 60s marked a return to the ideological concerns of the Yan’an tradition.

The Cultural Revolution was Maoist Revolutionary Realism’s high point. The fervent political idealism, combined with the increasing coldness of China-Soviet relations, did away with the solemn vestiges of Soviet Socialist Realism. Folk paintings were shown on a large scale in major national museum exhibitions, and their bright colours and romantic, festive emotion created a strong impression on artists, inspiring many, whether consciously or unconsciously, to make lavish use of reds and other bright colours in their palettes, and to paint with quick, energetic strokes that seemed to manifest an almost religious revolutionary zeal.

1979–1992: Major Currents in Modern Art

But, in the long run, Maoist Revolutionary Realism, with its absolutist ideology and pragmatist sensibility, blocked the natural and autonomous development of art, and rejected the possibility of other forms of modern art developing in China.⁶ In so doing, it also suppressed the individualism and vitality of Chinese artists. In this way, from its inception, Maoist Revolutionary Realism planted within itself a seed of self-negation: its demise was inevitable. As a cultural background and cultural point of reference it set the stage for the eagerness with which artists welcomed the influx of modern Western art and philosophy after 1979, and in itself holds the key to their desire for choice and social transformation. The loss of the Maoist model’s value structures in the post-Cultural Revolution period caused artists of necessity to begin the quest for a new set of values to support their development. They expressed their rejection of the now-discredited Maoist values in a widespread enthusiasm for modern Western culture.

The period after 1979 saw a flurry of experimentation with modern Western philosophical and aesthetic ideas, giving rise to new art trends and movements. The artists of this generation had experienced an absolutist model and wanted nothing more to do with it: instead, they took the Maoist model and its value system as their target of opposition. In this period of broadening mental and aesthetic horizons, artistic development was characterised by a three-fold quest: artists sought a dialogue with modern Western culture, a rediscovery of their native cultural identity, and an awakening of a “humanist” consciousness with its inherent element of cultural reflection and critique. This multifaceted quest became the fundamental characteristic of modern Chinese art in this period, and engendered four major stages of development.

Stage One: 1979–1983

The Demand for Stylistic Freedom and the Return to Humanism

1. The New Formalist Movement

A new demand for stylistic freedom emerged in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and the growing rejection of the Maoist model for art. This demand gave rise to a “New Formalist” movement which began in the late 1970s, and marked the awakening stage for modern art in China.⁷ Through a new exploration of the beauty of Form for its own sake, artists who had experienced the confines of Maoist Revolutionary Realism released themselves from the constrictions and the dictatorial severity of the Maoist model and expressed their interest in non-political, non-social subjects, and their desire to decide for themselves the format for artistic expression. In the spirit of the influx of popular culture from Taiwan and Hong Kong, the New Formalist movement reflected a relaxation in mind-set from the rigid absolutist mentality of the Cultural Revolution. The movement was marked by an interest in and experimentation with early Western Modernist styles such as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism.

The two most important groups within the New Formalist movement consisted of the leaders of the art movements of the 1930s and 40s, and the more rebellious of those painters who had studied under the Soviet system in the 50s and 60s. The first group included the painters Lin Fengmian, Pang Xunqin, Liu Haisu, and Wei Tianlin. After the suppression of Modernist art movements in the 1940s, and in an environment completely cut off from the developments of modern Western art, these artists secretly carried out their formalist experiments, influencing a small but select number of their students such as Chen Junde, Han Boyou and Shen Tianwan, some of whom even went so far as to drop out of the Soviet-style art academies of the times in order to pursue their own directions. Others like Yuan Yunsheng and Xiao Huixiang, art academy students in the 60s, actually underwent political purges for their experimentation with non-Socialist Realist styles.

Again, the importance of the older group of painters in the New Formalist movement lies in the fact that they represented an undercurrent of Western Modernism running parallel to the official art in China, one that managed to survive even after the suppression of the Modernist art movements of the 1930s and 40s. Once China opened up to the West again in the post-Cultural Revolution period, and there was a renewed interest in and access to Western Modernist concepts, this movement naturally came to the fore.

Another important element of the New Formalist movement of the early 1980s was that, just as Western Modernism in its movement against traditional Western representational art turned to Eastern and African folk art for inspiration in the exploration of form, so the younger painters in the New Formalist movement turned their sights to a re-exploration of art in the native Chinese idiom, including traditional ink painting and folk art. This interest developed into a distinctly “Oriental” decorative style that became the most representative style of early 1980s modern art. The most influential artists working in this decorative style were Yuan Yunsheng and Xiao Huixiang, whose mural paintings strongly influenced the art of the period. The “Yunnan School” of Chinese painting, which has found so much favour in the United States, is in fact a derivative of this style. But because this trend was still largely a stylistic one, lacking a deeper aesthetic direction, it was easily overtaken by other new aesthetic and cultural movements developing throughout the 80s.

(One point worth noting is that around 1982 this new decorative style of painting began to show increasingly abstract tendencies, a trend that was frowned upon by the academies, who ideologically rejected abstract art. Also, because the new art of the 80s was increasingly focussed on social and cultural critique, the abstract style did not gain much of a following. However, throughout the decade there were artists who showed a strong interest in and experimented with the possibilities of abstract art.)

2. Scar Art and Native Soil Painting

The “Scar Art” and “Native Soil” movements reflect an important period of social criticism and humanist reawakening. The core group in these movements consisted of young intellectuals in their late twenties and early thirties who had been “sent down” to the countryside, former Red Guards who had directly experienced both the impact of the Cultural Revolution and of the new open-door reforms of the 80s. (I will call them the “first generation” of post-Cultural Revolution artists). In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, these artists went through a period of grave critical reflection concerning the Cultural Revolution and the Maoist model, and focussed their concern on two major themes: “human nature” and “truth.” For youth of this generation, who had grown up in the closed-off world of the “new China,” the dictum that art should “truthfully reflect life” (referring to the idealised “truth” of the “New China”) was one of the most important concepts that they had absorbed in their limited aesthetic and artistic experience. But after being sent down to the countryside, these young élite, who were educated amid the glamour of Maoist Revolutionary Realism, were for perhaps the first time in their lives confronted with the harsh realities of rural poverty and misery.

Now they were faced with a perplexing duality, made up of the cruel realities of their Cultural Revolution experience on the one hand and the new perspectives of Western art and thought that they were absorbing in the open atmosphere of the early 80s on the other. This duality constituted a tremendous psychological and emotional collision between the differing realities of Western and Chinese culture, the advanced and the backward, the rich and the poor — a collision which impelled them into a period of grave reflection on the psychological and emotional pain they suffered upon realising the great deception that had been perpetrated upon them, and of a wider meditation on society and human nature. They embarked on a serious reassessment of Maoist model art, and in the process strengthened their rejection of that “reality” which had been so twisted and coloured by political ideology. The

recognition of what they now termed as "scarred" reality became their "truth." In direct response to Maoist Revolutionary Realism's principles of "sublime, outstanding, perfect," Scar Art painters adopted in their own version of "realist" painting a contrasting set of principles: "small" (*xiao*) (small topics, "small" people, particularly peasants) "suffering" (*ku*) (depictions of the real suffering involved in a life of hardship and poverty) and "old" or "worn out" (*jiu*) (the face of a backward society). They also focussed on discovering the reality of the land, and of simplicity, taking truth and kindness as their contextual basis for beauty. A sensitivity toward the dark side of society, a concern for the "little people," and praise of the pure and simple in life, constitute the main characteristics of the work of this period. Representative painters include Lo Zhongli, Cheng Conglin and Wang Chuan.

Later, Scar Art painting became increasingly co-opted for political purposes; and as the element of political utilitarianism became stronger and more obvious, the movement was abandoned by many artists. Yet the concern for and interest in the realities of rural life continued, giving rise to the "Native Soil" movement, which had a stronger focus on a rediscovery of the native landscape, and became both an influence on and a symbol of a growing nostalgia for the charms of peasant society in the face of modernization. Native Soil painting established itself as an important style whose influence continues today. Representative painters include Chen Danqing, He Dolin, and Zhou Chunya.

In the course of their development as distinct styles, the Scar Art and Native Soil movements, particularly the latter, transcended the Soviet Socialist Realist model on which Maoist Revolutionary Realism was largely based, and reoriented their artistic model toward classical European art, especially the 17th century Dutch school and the 19th century French representational painters. In the process they also were strongly influenced by the American painter Andrew Wyeth and the French Neo-Classicalists. Yet, despite the positive aesthetic achievements of these movements, they remained to a great extent stylistic trends that never attempted a thorough reassessment of contemporary Realism. In its later development Native Soil painting was weakened by an exaggerated focus on the exoticism of Chinese rural society, tending to emphasise and romanticise its unique qualities to appeal to Western art galleries and collectors, and in the process becoming more shallow. In this way the Native Soil movement lost the chance to make any significant or lasting impact on contemporary Chinese culture.

3. *The Stars Exhibitions.*

In late 1979, the seminal "Stars" art group raised the curtain on China's avant-garde art. An integral part of the activities surrounding the Xidan Democracy Wall movement, the *Stars* exhibitions of 1979 and 1980 created a major cultural impact. Their slogan of "Picasso is our banner, Kollwitz is our model" demonstrated their insistence on stylistic freedom, and the strong resurgence of humanism in art. The artists of the Stars group were largely of the same generation as the Scar Art artists. The main difference between them was that the Stars artists had not undergone the rigorous training in realist technique at the official painting academies. Perhaps for this reason, in staging their rebellion against official art (i.e., academic realist art), they didn't move in the direction of purely formalist experiments. Instead they became the first truly iconoclastic avant-garde group of the last decade.

From one perspective, the *Stars* exhibitions were milestones in contemporary Chinese art, for the first time strongly manifesting and further developing two important characteristics that uniquely define contemporary Chinese art. The first characteristic is their use of a strong social, political and cultural criticism to observe and depict the existential conditions of society. In their exhibitions, most of the works of the Stars artists, and particularly those of Wang Keping, contained strong elements of this socio-political criticism. The second characteristic is that in terms of their aesthetic vocabulary, the Stars adopted a strong element of symbolism while at the same time relying on realist technique in their execution.

In the West, realism has served as the fundamental language of art since the Renaissance. The high level of sophistication of realist vocabulary and technique in a sense inevitably engendered the exploration of form and the resultant plurality of styles that became the main characteristics of Western Modernism.

In China, on the other hand, since its introduction at the turn of the century, rather than proceeding along a linear path of development, Western-style realism has undergone constant transformations under the influence of the special characteristics and circumstances of modern Chinese culture. Thus, though it has become the main pictorial language for contemporary Chinese art, the standard of realist technique has never achieved the same level in China as existed in the West before Modernism. Because of this, many artists still feel challenged to explore further the possibilities of realist art.

Another point is that, since the 1940s, realist technique has been and continues to be the main technique taught at the art academies. This strong tradition of academic realism in modern Chinese art has had a huge and inescapable influence, overshadowing generation after generation of young artists, with the result that even those artists who have tried their utmost to break out of the realist tradition still carry its traces into their work.

The Stars made a valiant attempt to go beyond the conventional concept of realism. Yet their breakthrough lay not so much in terms of technique, but rather in their successful identification of another, more expedient way of casting off the representational realist burden: they did this by imbuing real objects with symbolic meaning. There are strong elements of symbolism in most of the work in the *Stars* exhibitions.

The Stars' failure to find a stylistic alternative to realism can be understood in light of the fact that, even though they were not graduates of the academies, their aesthetic frame of reference in the late 1970s--early 1980s was of necessity limited: in terms of technique, realism was still their earliest teacher. Only Wang Keping managed to go further: taking as his inspiration traditional Chinese "root carving" (*gendiao*), Wang exploited the fact that in this kind of art the emerging carved form is dictated by the natural shape of the root — or rather by Nature itself. Abiding by this principle in his sculpted wood pieces, Wang produced absurd and fantastical effects which had a strong influence on young artists. Yet most of the Stars, including the abstract painters among them, had not really gone beyond the fundamental aesthetic language of realist art.

Another factor in influencing the role of realism in the Chinese avant-garde of the 1980s is that, in the years following the *Stars* exhibitions, the leading exponents of avant-garde art increasingly were graduates of the art academies, with the result that in technical terms the realist element became even stronger. The main difference between the work of these young artists and that of the conventional realist painters was that they introduced into their work a greater focus on symbolic imagery, philosophical content, sense of the absurd and Expressionist elements.

Stage Two: 1984–1986 Cultural Criticism and the Elements of Heroism and Tragedy

As has been pointed out, the influx of works of Western philosophy, literature and art pouring into China in the early 1980s were eagerly devoured by young artists, and exerted a strong influence on them. This was particularly true of those artists born in the mid-to-late 1950s who were just entering the art academies in the early 80s, and were in this impressionable period of their lives experiencing new cultural perspectives and new aesthetic languages. In the mid-1980s they graduated and entered society. In their artistic activities they took as their main models Western Surrealism, Dada and Pop; took collective effort as their main method of operation; and used impromptu public (as opposed to "official") exhibitions as their main format of communication and display. Groups of young artists of similar sensibility were emerging in every area of China, eventually becoming part of the largest-scale modern art movement in recent history, which has come to be known as the "'85 New Wave" movement. The '85 New Wave was an intellectual and philosophical, as well as an art movement, involving the "second generation" of post-Cultural Revolution artists, who assiduously applied themselves to the study of modern Western philosophy and literature, who thought hard and wrote much — so much that, in their world, the writing of essays and manifestos on art became a key element of their activities and a major feature of the '85 New Wave movement.⁹

Yet, although the '85 New Wave derived its main source of intellectual and aesthetic nutrition from Western modern art and thought, the movement took as its point of departure the cultural environment of China, with the result that there was a mutual impact between artists' existential environment and their intellectual world.⁹ To the largely political focus of the earlier *Stars* exhibitions, the artists of the '85 New Wave added a broader cultural perspective. They gained an understanding of metaphysics from Western philosophy and applied it to their observation of Chinese culture and of the harsh reality of the lives of Chinese people.

Basically, there were three main concerns of the movement: an emphasis on the conceptual transformation of art; a strong cultural criticism, and reconstructionist ideal; and a consciousness of and concern with the "tragedy of life."

1) The conceptual transformation of art

In their attempt to achieve a conceptual transformation of art, the '85 New Wave artists borrowed on a large scale from Western avant-garde art in order to create an anti-art legacy. They were strongly influenced by Marcel Duchamp, Dada and Pop art and took to using found objects in their work. They declared war on traditional Chinese aesthetics and adopted the quest of Western modern art to constantly seek new forms of expression, reflected in their slogan "Respond to the challenge of the Western avant-garde!" They sought breakthroughs, à la Duchamp, on the question of the nature of art itself.

One of the most flamboyant artists of the '85 New Wave, Huang Yongping, applied Duchampian methods combined with Daoist and Zen theories of chance and constant change to create an art form that was based on, yet that would differentiate him from, his hero Duchamp. Huang invented what he called "Non-Expressionist Painting," creating his own roulette wheel and dice to determine his painting method, turning his power of decision-making in terms of what or how to paint completely over to chance. On several occasions, he burned all his works at exhibitions, seeking the most thorough way to "abandon art." On another occasion he washed a volume of Western art history and a volume of Chinese art history together in a washing machine, using the machine to represent people's cultural behaviour.

Another conceptually innovative and important artist of the '85 New Wave movement is Gu Wenda, who has consistently used Western avant-garde art concepts as a reference in his attempt to destroy and reconstruct Chinese cultural language symbols. In Gu's process of "reconstruction," he has carried Chinese language symbols into the

realm of the mysterious. In some of his major works, Gu turned Chinese ideographs into abstract symbols, putting them through a process of dissection, displacement and reordering, and presenting the result in a combined installation/performance art format that created a powerful atmosphere of ritual and worship, close to that of a Taoist temple. This ritual atmosphere has become the special feature of Gu's unique aesthetic language — a feature which he has consciously used to strike a "competitive balance" with the Western avant-garde.

2) *Cultural critique and the ideal of reconstruction*

For the '85 New Wave artists, "pure reason" and "spiritual transformation and transcendence" were the highest purposes of art. At the same time, they believed firmly in the ideal of revitalising and reconstructing Chinese culture through art, and created a whole vocabulary of new cultural and aesthetic imagery to express this ideal.

The painter Ding Fang employed references to Christianity combined with images of the rugged Yellow River loess plateaus where Chinese civilisation began, harnessing the heroic style of Western classical art and a reverential, quasi-religious spirit in an attempt to inspire and revitalize the weakened Chinese cultural spirit. Wang Guangyi used the pristine purity of the glacial wilderness as his main imagery: in his *Frozen North Pole* series, perfectly rounded forms hint at holiness and purity, while the awesome aura of a land of frozen silence echoes the potential of mankind to reach transcendental heights. Wu Shanzhuan's *Red Humour* series is a strong cultural critique, attempting to expose the truth of post-Cultural Revolution reality. Wu's creative technique is reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg, although he uses Chinese ideographs as his main symbolic unit. Taking phrases from lewd advertisements found in dark little alleyways, and combining them in a format derived from Cultural Revolution big character posters, Wu creates an absurd mockery of the actual reality of "cultural deficit" (a culture "in the red" as it were) of post-Cultural Revolution China.

3) *Consciousness of the tragedy of life*

Chinese culture has always subjugated the individual to the group: the only difference is that traditional Chinese culture subjugated the individual within the larger framework of ethics and morality, while post-1949 socialist culture subjugated the individual to the political group. This tendency has served to destroy the vitality of the quest for greater self-expression. In the early 1980s, although the advent of a "renaissance" in art caused an awakening of people's consciousness, artists' individual vitality was still sapped by life in a strongly collective society and their mentality was still highly politicized.

The '85 New Wave took a different tack, placing an appreciation of the life experience of the individual among the major concerns of art. It is important to note that in this movement many of the artists directly confronted the unavoidable traumas of individual life given the social and cultural conditions of the times, and became greatly concerned in their art with expressing the "illnesses" affecting the individual life force as a consequence. In representing this awareness of the inescapable tragedy of life, artists tended to use two main approaches, which they termed the "cool treatment" (*leng chuli*) and the "warm treatment" (*re chuli*), respectively.

The work of the artist Zhang Peili best exemplifies the characteristics of the "cool treatment." Zhang deals with the commonly seen or experienced "illnesses" of the individual psyche, especially when these illnesses arise as a consequence of abuse — whether self abuse, abuse inflicted on others, or abuse inflicted by others. In Zhang's art, elements of this sado-masochistic condition are enlarged, exaggerated, even made more insidious, transforming his works into a mocking indictment of those who would seek only to find beauty or entertainment in art. Geng Jianyi, another artist working with the "cool treatment," focusses on the embarrassing, humiliating moments faced by people in contemporary Chinese society, and depicts them in an excruciatingly frank and painfully eloquent fashion, often adding an unexpected twist that causes the viewer, almost numb to the fact that he is living in an unhealthy social environment, to be confronted with an intolerable new level of embarrassment. The works of these two artists, whether in their utilization of the flat, inexpressive strokes and sanitized colours of Western advertisements, or in the unemotional nature of their installations and performance art work, are strongly representative of the emotionally detached tenor of "cool treatment" art.

Contrarily, the work of the artists using the "warm treatment" to communicate the tragic aspects of life demonstrate strong Expressionist elements. Rather than brutal exposure of sado-masochistic illness, they seek to express a sense of sympathetic understanding, even pity, for the trials of life and death and for the individual self faced with these trials. They also differ from the "cool treatment" artists in that, rather than adopting the detached, emotionally uncommitted tone of the latter, they are concerned with expressing the passion of the individual towards life, and his quest to understand it. Representative painter Zhang Xiaogang is like a sleepwalker, pacing on the mysterious path between life and death. His canvasses are invested with the delicate yet rich sentiments of the Eastern sensibility, so that the strange spectres and broken bodies that inhabit his paintings are made eerily beautiful as well as tragic. In Pan Dehai's *Corn* series, the small, numb cellular spaces that lie within the skin of the human figures are at the same time exposed and imbued with a mysterious darkness, as though the artist were undertaking a dissection of the soul itself, revealing an inner view of the hurts of life.

The '85 New Wave movement also was characterised by a strong interest in performance art, usually conceptual in nature, that very often was used to express the sense of the tragic in life. A great deal of New Wave performance

art took the form of a kind of “bondage art,” in which the artists used a variety of materials — cloth, plastic, tape, etc. — to bind themselves. In fact, this “bondage art” now constitutes a genre of performance art almost unique to the Chinese avant-garde. Perhaps this is the result of the peculiar reality in which Chinese artists must exist — a reality which has given them a strong sense of being bound and repressed, so that for many a form of ritual self-abuse is the most relevant and perhaps the only way to express their sense of tragedy.

The '85 New Wave movement lasted three years, from 1984–1986. As pointed out above, it hungrily absorbed and made use of Western Dada, Surrealism, Pop and Conceptual art — the entire range of the Western avant-garde vocabulary. On the one hand, these artists, graduating from the official art academies with a strong technical training in realist art, were able to make use of that very training in their bid to transcend the strictures of Maoist Revolutionary Realism. On the other hand, they engaged in experiments in Surrealism, Dada and Pop, in essence finding a shortcut to the avant-garde. In a sense, Surrealism was best suited to the '85 New Wave artists as a means of conveying the common philosophical and intellectual outlook of their generation. Yet, just because of this, differences in the aesthetic vocabulary of Western Surrealism and the Chinese version become apparent. While Western Surrealism focusses on the expression of the subconscious, Chinese Surrealism as defined by New Wave art emphasizes philosophical expression. Unlike Western Surrealists, the New Wave artists do not dissect and displace realistic images in order to transform them to an extreme degree; rather, they take realistic images and somehow manage to make them alien to us. Also, because of the strong emotional factor coming into play in the work of the New Wave artists, many of them blended Expressionist elements into the language of Surrealism, reinforcing the unity of the emotionally expressive images and the metaphysical thought behind them. This characteristic is still evident in the work of many artists today.

As for the Dada and Pop aesthetic vocabularies, they were adopted by the '85 New Wave more with the intention of breaking down the traditional forms of art and conventional aesthetic sensibilities. Both Dada and Pop were used, as the old saying goes, “to smash the jade with a piece of rock from another mountain” (*gongyu jielai de tashan zhishi*) and reflected a fundamental reassessment and critique of Chinese culture. This intention was grounded in a kind of emotional complex which gave artists in the first place a sense of urgency to study and learn from Western modern art and philosophy, and in the second place a strong sense of mission to apply what they had learned in dealing with and hopefully solving the problems of their own land. In other words, artists started out dealing with questions of art and aesthetics, but in the end, no matter what kind of artistic language they experimented with, they eventually tried to apply it as a means of dealing with cultural issues rather than aesthetic ones. In doing so, the '85 New Wave attempted to shoulder a burden far too heavy for them. Thus, if the creation of a new aesthetic vocabulary defines the essential quality of creating a new art form, then the '85 New Wave was not so much an art movement as a cultural movement. That is why, in the end, there were few among the '85 New Wave artists who managed to develop a unique creative language of their own. This failure was to some extent responsible for the rise of a new movement in 1987 antithetical to the concerns of '85 New Wave art.

Stage Three: 1987–1989

The “Back-to-the-Roots” Movement and the Search for a “Purified Language”

Beginning in 1984 the literary world saw a “Back-to-the-Roots” movement which was influenced by the Native Soil art movement, and characterised by a renewed interest in Eastern philosophy and in a consciousness of the unique cultural characteristics of the motherland.¹⁰ By 1987, the Back-to-the-Roots movement had become a full scale social trend, evident in the visual as well as in the literary arts. Also in 1987, another, parallel movement sprang up, known as the “Purified Language” movement, which sought a purer visual language for art. Both movements were in a sense reactions against the heavy influence of Western Modernism and avant-garde art in the '85 New Wave. Artists of the Back-to-the-Roots movement applied elements of classical Daoist and Zen philosophy, Eastern mysticism, and the “ink-play” of traditional literati painting in response to the '85 New Wave's emphasis on Western art and philosophy, and to the excessively serious tone of its art. The “Purified Language” movement emphasised the pure and autonomous nature of art to counter the '85 New Wave's heavy philosophical and intellectual bent.

Two new art forms emerged from these movements. The first, as exemplified in the paintings of Zhu Xinjian, involved the absorption of traditional Chinese literati inkplay into what became known as “New Literati” painting, emphasising spontaneity, and a buoyant, carefree (one could say “irresponsible”) spirit, and made a strong impact at the time. The rediscovery of the aesthetic language of traditional literati painting in a way satisfied the psychological loss experienced by some artists as a result of the onslaught of Western Modernist and avant-garde art. This psychological imbalance was redressed by returning to classical Chinese painting's spirit of idle play, seen as a means of countering the '85 New Wave's heavy cultural reflection and criticism.

But the development of New Literati painting was inhibited by the fact that it relied too heavily on a mere borrowing of the uniqueness and eccentricities of classical painters as a means of fulfilling a psychological craving: in the end the artists failed to address their own current reality. The result was that the effectiveness of New Literati painting as an art form was undermined by its tendency merely to amuse and please the eye with its beauty. It quickly became a commercial more than an aesthetic success, and in the end its influence on the development of China's new art turned out to be a short-lived one.

The second, and more important trend, sought to discover and transform the fundamental symbols of traditional art and culture. For example, some artists studied the painterly qualities and expressiveness of calligraphic strokes to restructure a new vocabulary for abstract ink painting. Other influential artists such as Xu Bing and Lü Shengzhong undertook a rearticulation and semantic transformation of fundamental cultural signs such as Chinese ideographs and paper cuts used in ritual ceremonies. Both Lü and Xu were strongly influenced by the '85 New Wave. In Xu Bing's important installation *A Mirror to Analyse the World* (also known as *A Book from the Sky*) Xu borrowed the technique of '85 New Wave artists such as Gu Wenda, of altering and "miswriting" Chinese characters. The difference is that while the New Wave artists were working from a Dadaist perspective, Xu was using the miswriting of Chinese characters as a means of cutting words off from their meanings, turning them into purely abstract symbols in a quasi-structuralist fashion.

Xu spent months meticulously carving woodblock ideographs that superficially looked like Chinese characters, but which on closer inspection proved to be nonsensical. Using the radicals of Chinese characters as his basic unit of form, Xu made monumental sized scrolls and executed on their surface a number of prints and overprints to create new character structures. He then hung the scrolls according to the conditions of the specific exhibition venue, constructing a carefully determined space. Through the ceaseless and meticulous repetition involved in executing this major piece of work, Xu succeeded in creating a kind of neo-Zen atmosphere.

Lü Shengzhong, on the other hand, was responding to another important trend of 80s art that also developed under the influence of Western Modernism, involving its interest in the possibilities of ethnic art in a quest to rediscover the richness of Chinese folk art. In the mid-1980s this enthusiasm for folk art turned from the study of folk art as formalist "signs" to a study of the cultural significance of these signs. Lü Shengzhong was active in this transition. In works incorporating specific folk imagery such as the "tussle-haired baby" (*zhuaaji wawa*) motif¹¹, Lü was participating in an effort to reinterpret the mystical significance of Chinese concepts of birth, and of the soul. In his major series of installations, *Summoning the Spirits*, the artist employs a structuralist principle as his starting point. Using a repetitive structure of paper doll cutouts in linked and collaged formats, Lü transforms the traditional magical use of these paper cutouts as a means of calling the spirits, into a modern language structure whose final aim is to create a new, contemporary environment for Eastern mysticism.

Using a modern Western aesthetic language as a means of uncovering new meanings in traditional cultural symbols, Xu and Lü's works constitute a first step in constructing a new, integrated modern Chinese aesthetic language. But their work remained at the first-stage level: consciously or unconsciously, both these artists became increasingly absorbed in their personal aesthetic language, with the result that their later work showed a danger of becoming excessively formulaic and predictable — a problem that at one level afflicted the whole Purified Language movement.

Stage Four: 1989–1992 **Anti-Idealism, Cynical Realism and Political Pop**

1) The anti-idealist reaction

Like 1979, 1989 was the most sensitive year of the decade for Chinese artists and intellectuals. In early February, the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition was held in Beijing at the prestigious China Art Gallery. Nearly all the major artists of the decade participated. In some cases the art shown still manifested the tragic-heroic spirit of artists who hoped to reconstruct a new culture, while in others it demonstrated achievements of artists in integrating lessons of Western Modernist and avant-garde art and reaching the first stage in the development of an art form uniquely reflective of China's culture. In any case, no matter to which group the artists belonged, all showed a certain idealism and courage in entering for the first time an "official" gallery which was the most prestigious in China. Then, on opening day and completely unexpectedly, the sound of gunshots echoed through the gallery: the artists Tang Song and Xiao Lu had fired shots at their own installation, shocking the officials attending the show, and startling the artists and the audience. The result was that, amidst chaos and confusion, the exhibition was temporarily shut down. When the high rank of the owner of the gun used to fire the shots was discovered, the well-connected Tang and Xiao (both children of high-level officials) were released — and this only three days after having been arrested. Under the watchful eyes of plainclothes police, the exhibition was allowed to reopen.

But in the scenario of the arrest of two individuals on what in most circumstances would have been considered serious charges, followed by their subsequent speedy release, Chinese artists had effectively exposed one of the most sensitive political issues in Chinese society: the flexibility of the law. Because of this, those two gunshots transformed the entire *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition into one big, chance happening that underscored the opposition to the official line and the political sensitivity of the Chinese avant-garde since the *Stars* exhibitions of 1979–80. Thus, the gunshots fired by Tang and Xiao into their installation were also the mechanism by which the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, and the 80s avant-garde art movements that it represented, were led to the execution block. Effectively, the artists involved were thrown out of the national art museum and forced once again into the world of the underground. In a way the fate of the exhibition was a precursor to the fate of the student movement at Tian'anmen, in the sense that the *China/Avant-Garde* show became the final demonstration of 80s avant-garde art, marking the conclusion of an era and also the end of its ideals.

For those idealistic New Wave artists who still believed in the possibility of applying modern Western aesthetics and philosophy as a means of revitalizing Chinese culture, the events of 1989 in many ways recall the aftermath of the Xidan Democracy Wall movement of a decade earlier: once again young, idealistic artists were faced with a situation that crushed their idealism and broke their spirits. The reaction of many was to turn against the heroism, idealism, and yearning for metaphysical transcendence that characterised the '85 New Wave movement, and turn instead to their antithesis: a form of anti-idealism characterized by an immersion in popular culture and a deconstructionist approach that for many quickly resolved itself into the Cynical Realist and Political Pop styles.

2) *Cynical Realism and the sense of malaise*

"Cynical Realism," [the Chinese term *bopi*, rendered here as "cynical," can also be translated as "rogue" — Ed.] the term I have chosen to describe one style of anti-idealist art, employs an expression that the Chinese use to describe a certain way of dealing with the world, which generally also carries the connotations of dissipated, jaded, scoundrelly, resigned, indifferent and mocking.¹² The main exponents of the Cynical Realist style are young artists who were born in the 1960s, and who in the 80s were largely still studying at the academies. They constitute the "third generation" of post-Cultural Revolution artists, and the social and cultural environment in which they came of age was vastly different from that of the previous two. The first generation grew up in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cultural Revolution, while the second, the '85 New Wave artists, came of age under the compelling influence of modern Western thought. But both groups, whether in their search for a new humanism on the one hand or in their attempt to revitalize the cultural spirit through an absorption of modern Western ideas on the other, can be categorised as idealists who firmly believed in the possibility and the mission of saving Chinese culture. But the case was very different for the young artists born in the 1960s.

In the 1970s, many of these artists were just starting primary school, beginning their education in a social environment where concepts and ideologies were constantly changing. In the 1980s, they were studying art amidst the avant-garde challenge of applying contemporary Western ideas to save and revitalize Chinese culture. By 1989, when most of them were just emerging from the academies, they had visited for themselves the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition and seen first-hand the dreams of "saving Chinese culture" evaporate into thin air. Whether in terms of social or artistic ideals, the only legacy left to them from the hopes and struggles of the last ten years consisted of nothing but broken fragments.

With little left to hold on to, these young artists rejected what they viewed as the empty dream of structuring a new value system to save society, and gave up any pretence to heroism or idealism. Instead, they confronted the reality of their own helplessness in order to save themselves. A sense of malaise became for them the "truest" reflection of their feeling of the meaninglessness of their own lives and the social conditions in which they existed: since it was all meaningless anyway, there was no call for an attitude of reverence toward life. In the place of reverence and seriousness they adopted a kind of rogue cynicism in their treatment of the reality that confronted them.

The attitude of malaise adopted by the Cynical Realist artists was their means of expressing their rejection of the idealism and heroism of the 80s movements, and particularly of the '85 New Wave. The Cynical Realists traded in the lofty, idealist platform of the New Wave artists for a ground-level perspective which placed them and their artistic activities directly back in the middle of mundane reality. They used a roguishly cynical approach to illustrate themselves and their immediate and familiar environment, with its tableaux of boredom, chance, and absurdity. Representative artist Fang Lijun began to paint portraits of himself and his friends in the midst of executing giant yawns. Fang also created his own unique lexicon of symbols, based on what might be termed a "bald cynicism." Another important Cynical Realist painter, Liu Wei, created an irreverently cynical pictorial language centered on a series of distorted family portraits, using his own bizarre vocabulary to render ridiculous the solemn, self-important postures of army cadres and even the poses of his own family members. This "distorting perspective" of Cynical Realist art has become the signal expression of the sense of malaise widespread in post-1989 Chinese society.

At the same time, the frank directness of Cynical Realist painters naturally makes their painterly technique tend toward the realist style. Especially as these artists are not at all convinced that constant study of and experimentation with Western Modernist styles will in any degree save Chinese culture, they adopt the attitude of "why forsake the near to chase after the far?" These renegade graduates of the official art academies have at their fingertips a great facility in realist technique that is part and parcel of modern Chinese art academy training, and they are more than happy to make practical use of their talents. At the same time, they are perfectly willing to learn whatever they can from Western artists, and are especially partial to the works of Lucian Freud and Balthus.

3) *Political Pop art and the deconstructionist mindset*

The nucleus of the Political Pop movement consists of artists from the '85 New Wave movement who have given up the serious metaphysical concerns of their earlier work and have instead adopted a deconstructionist approach matched to a Pop technique, to execute works of comic satire which illustrate their view of influential political figures, particularly Mao, and major political events. In fact, from 1987 to 1988 artists such as Wang Ziwai and Yu Youhan had already begun to paint Mao. One of the key artists of the '85 New Wave movement, Wang

Guangyi, had also begun his *Mao* series in these two years, consisting of portraits of Mao Zedong overlaid with a black grid — but at this time these portraits still carried with them the serious cultural criticism typical of the 80s avant-garde. In 1990 Wang began his *Great Criticism* series, which signalled his switch to a more humorous and genuinely Pop approach.

In the *Great Criticism* series Wang employs slogans from the big character posters and propaganda paintings that were key elements of Cultural Revolution “art for the masses” and juxtaposes them with images of popular Western consumer products such as Coca-Cola. This seemingly arbitrary combination of political and commercial symbols creates a humorous and absurd effect that yet carries with it an implied cultural criticism.

Yu Youhan’s *Mao* series takes Mao’s principles of “art for political ends” and “art for the entertainment of the masses” and applies them in his own way. The basic principles of Maoist art stressed the study and absorption of traditional folk arts as the nucleus of artistic development. In his paintings, Yu Youhan apparently follows suit, using “folksy” elements such as a bright palette reminiscent of the traditional peasant New Year’s paintings, and flowered patterns taken from the patterns of dyed cloth typically found in rural households, which the artist often actually block prints on to the painting surface. But in Yu’s paintings, these elements so closely identified with “Maoist culture” are applied in unexpected ways, and take on a deeper and more complex cultural significance.

Zhang Peili’s painting, *Standard Pronunciation 1989*, demonstrates the artist’s discovery of a “national face” of China, a face that is the graphic depiction of a mentality. To the millions of Chinese for whom watching television is a daily activity, the excruciatingly familiar face of the national broadcaster is an eloquent reminder of the ubiquitous political propaganda which surrounds and oppresses them.

The post-’89 Political Pop movement in fact marks the second time that Pop art has played an important role in Chinese avant-garde art. In 1985 there was a major exhibition of the works of American Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg in Beijing, which had an enormous impact on young artists. Soon Pop was all the rage. The most significant and lasting effect of this first Pop craze was that for the first time Chinese artists were inspired to try “off-the-easel” art and were stimulated to experiment with non-traditional materials. However, artists at the time had only a narrow conception of the true intentions and significance of Pop art, perceiving it mainly as a tool for attacking the conventional Chinese view of aesthetics. They neglected Pop art’s main concern as an engagement with and reflection of popular fashions and mass culture. It wasn’t until five years later, after a confluence of factors such as the fatal wounding of the heroic idealism of the ’85 New Wave, the significant changes wrought in the social environment, and the impact of the major economic reforms of the late 80s, that society experienced the change and stimulation that allowed sensitive artists to understand and to realize the power of the Pop style to expose the realities of popular culture.

An existence saturated with politics has become the accustomed state of being for most contemporary Chinese: every person, (and particularly intellectuals), will consciously or unconsciously adjust his own position according to the changes in the political climate. Efforts to avoid this political reality, or even to adopt an alternative political stance to fight against it, are only further evidence of the power of the system. Political Pop uses the acknowledgement of this political reality as its starting point, but then proceeds to satirize politics, providing an effective (but by no means heroic) means of neutralizing the hold of a politically saturated mentality on the inner mind.

Like the so-called “Mao fever” that emerged in Chinese society in early 1990, Political Pop art reflects a complex social psychology which is rooted in the difficulty Chinese people have had in releasing themselves from a deep-seated “Mao complex.” In a sense, “Mao fever” and Political Pop art are linked in that there is inherent in both the use of past icons or “gods” to criticize, or in the case of the latter, to satirize, current reality.

In terms of aesthetic language, Political Pop has been heavily influenced by Andy Warhol and deconstructionism, and still retains a difficult-to-break link with the ’85 New Wave’s tendency to “over-conceptualize.” The tide of commercialism of the last few years has brought about a change in perspective, most clearly and naturally reflected in the work of the young artists born in the 1960s, many of whom enthusiastically jumped on the Political Pop bandwagon in 1992. These younger artists suffer less from the “Mao complex,” even though in their works they are very alive to the fact that politics is the most sensitive point of contemporary Chinese reality. In their art, political images become confused and mixed up with disparate commercial symbols, as is the case with representative artist Feng Mengbo. In his *Video Endgame* series Feng takes characters from the revolutionary “Model Operas” popularized during the Cultural Revolution and places them into oil paintings which show them as figures in video game screens. Like Wang Guangyi, Feng is making use of two major symbols of popular culture, but he creates a strong sense of displacement by transposing political symbols from the past into a cultural format specific to the present “age of technology.” In this sense, Feng’s language is more culturally targeted.

Qiu Zhijie’s installation *Homage to Vita Nuova* is a large plexiglass assemblage made of a flexible number of clear panels printed, hand-painted and silk-screened with scenes and images of the artist’s own past. As the viewer walks among the panels, the perspective shifts and changes according to the viewer’s position, so that images also shift

and change, acting as backdrops for one another, merging, or blotting each other out. Qiu has created the effect of a world with its own narrative language: a story that unfolds with the chaos and noise of a temple fair. Since the artists of Feng and Qiu's generation view the world more easily from the perspective of popular culture, in their work there is an element of "cultural" Pop which is actually stronger than the element of "Political Pop."

Given their common use of a deconstructionist language system in articulating elements of contemporary Chinese culture, Cynical Realism and Political Pop are twins born of the same root. Ultimately, they both seek to "restructure" a true sense of contemporary culture. The main difference between them is that Cynical Realism expresses a reality filled with malaise, while Political Pop transforms the reality of big politics and ideologies into uncertain popular symbols.

Contemporary Chinese society cannot be considered as either a completely industrial or a post-industrial society, and so obviously cannot have inherent in its sociology Modernist or Post-Modernist trends in the Western sense. However, in the decade since China once again opened up to the West, a peculiar cultural condition has arisen in which the elements and messages of a peasant society, industrial society, and post-industrial society co-exist. This does not make for a society that can develop according to the logic of Western Modernist or Post-Modernist theories. But this chaotic situation provides a fertile breeding ground for all kinds of art, each with its own logic for existence and evolution. Cynical Realism, in reexamining the possibilities of realist art, gained some of the benefits of a Modernist perspective. At the same time, its playful, roguish qualities demonstrate some affinity with the playful spirit of *literati* art: and yet, from a cultural perspective, it is the most anti-idealist of all post-'89 art.

Political Pop art is more influenced by Warhol and Post-Modernism; yet in the post-Mao era it has resurrected multifaceted images of Mao that had begun to fade from people's minds. These complex trends are a product of the increasingly pluralistic and complicated pattern of contemporary Chinese society.

The anti-idealism, irreverence, and deconstructionist approach evinced by China's new art in the post-'89 period demonstrate much that is in common with Post-Modernism as defined by Western thinkers. Naturally we do not have to insist on using the concept of Post-Modernism in discussing China's new art: in the end, the most important point is that the new trends emerging in China's post-'89 art are radically different from the trends of the 80s; and that the common thread linking these new trends is the search for an alternative entry point into the heart of reality.

A clear sense of criticism is the most fundamental characteristic of the avant-garde art produced in China in the last decade. Yet each stage of its development was characterised by a different critical sensibility: the early 1980s can be characterised as the stage of social criticism, the mid-80s as the stage of cultural criticism, and the 90s as the stage of art criticism. In the first two stages, only a handful of artists achieved a clear individual language of expression: the overall tendency still was to apply the language of Western Modernism or avant-garde art as a tool to recognize and reflect the problems of Chinese society and culture. The post-'89 stage of "art criticism" has produced art that represents a first step in being able to forcefully and innovatively wield the language of Western Modernist and avant-garde art to penetrate social and cultural realities. In this sense China's new art is now poised in the wings of the international art arena, and has launched its prologue in the establishment of a new dialogue with Western culture. Above all, it is our hope that, as contemporary Chinese art comes into its own, it will develop a unique aesthetic language that will signify and communicate the reality of our times.

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(Translated by Valerie C. Doran)

* The illustrated footnotes to this essay can be found on pp. LXXI–CII of the Appendix section.

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BRUSH-STROKES AND THE PARTY LINE: TENSIONS BETWEEN ARTISTS AND OFFICIALDOM IN CHINA

Michael Sullivan

With the arrival of Western art in China early in the 20th century, artists were forced to take a position in the intense debates between the Chinese traditionalists, the Western-style traditionalists, the modernists, and the synthesisers. Pressure on artists could be strong; they could be denounced for neglecting traditional art, or equally for preserving it without change. But ultimately the stylistic and formal challenges were those seen and defined by the artists themselves, and the choices they made depended upon their background, experience, temperament, and perhaps also on what they thought was best for China.

After "Liberation," this was no longer the case. Although in 1953 Hu Qiaomu, Deputy Head of the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party, declared that "A creative artist is free to choose his subject matter, theme and form of presentation according to his desires and talents," this statement was meaningless. From the moment the party came to power, control over the arts was total. Any momentary relaxation was followed by a tightening of the reins. If changes in style and content took place, they were largely determined by changes in party cultural policy, not by the artists themselves.

This is not to say that, at least in the early years after "Liberation," most artists did not respond with some enthusiasm to the call to make their art more popular. Support for China's reconstruction was universal, and artists were eager to contribute their talents, particularly as they now enjoyed a security that they had never experienced before.

But, like everyone else, they were instruments of government policy. When the party spoke, they fell into line. The Western observer may be surprised to discover how few of them found this to be a problem. So deep-rooted in Chinese society is the acceptance of authority, the willingness to conform, that the truly original creative artist was rare, and generally appeared only when the dynasty was dying, or in the decades of chaos following its fall.

In the highly unstable court culture of the Jin dynasty, for example, Gu Kaizhi (366–405?) protected himself by acting the fool (although there is no record that his painting was eccentric). The most strikingly original landscapes of the Tang period appeared in South China, far from the court, during and after the An Lushan Rebellion. Zhang Zhihe (second half of the eighth century), the eccentric poet and fisherman who never baited his hook, when drunk painted to music with his eyes closed, or facing away from the picture. The technique of a certain Mr. Gu, described in the *Feng shi Wenjian lu*, reads remarkably like that of Jackson Pollock. He would spread sheets of silk on the floor, pour ink and colours all over them, have someone sit on a sheet which he would drag round and round, then take his brush and with a few strokes turn the blobs and smears into mountains and islands. Wang Mo, or Wang Xia, after a few drinks, would dip his hair in the ink, butt his head against the silk, kick at it, smear it with his hands, and then, like Mr. Gu, would turn the result into a landscape. All of these performance artists lived in the Jiangnan region, far from the court, at a time when the long slow death of the dynasty was beginning to set in. Never again before modern times, so far as we know, were such outrageous performances put on by Chinese artists, although the expressionist techniques of some Chan (Zen) artists such as Ying Yujian belong to a similar period of dynastic breakdown at the end of the Southern Song. In no sense was this protest art. It was rather an example of what could happen when all allegiance to orthodoxy was abandoned.

Of overt protest art, there was even less. Yet protest could be expressed obliquely, in many ways. Zhao Mengjian's rootless *Narcissus* and Zhao Mengfu's celebrated and deliberately amateurish *Sheep and Goat*, both in the Freer Gallery, Washington, are these artists' bitter, though very restrained, expressions of the anguish of their situation under the Mongol occupation. Gong Kai's *Emaciated Horse*, of the same period, symbolises the noble spirit of the honest official neglected by a corrupt government. Qian Xuan, by rejecting the painting style of his time, and working in a pseudo-archaic manner, proclaimed his rejection of Mongol rule.

The most original, anti-traditional painting of recent centuries reflects the chaos at the end of the Ming and the sense of alienation felt by Ming loyalists after the Manchu conquest. Chen Hongshou, in an extraordinarily uncomfortable self-portrait of 1635 (in the National Palace Museum, Taipei), by deliberately violating the canons of figure and landscape painting, is saying not only that his status as a professional artist is debased, but so also is the language of painting, the tradition itself.

It was perhaps the instability of Chinese culture at that time, the crisis in belief in the validity of tradition, that made some artists, notably Wu Bin, Lu Wei and Gong Xian, more receptive than they otherwise might have been to Western influences. Once stability had been restored under the Kangxi emperor, eccentric painting no longer expressed a feeling of bitterness or alienation, or even of curiosity about Western techniques. It became rather a form of attention-attracting professionalism (Jin Nong, Huang Shen, Gao Qipei) or, more rarely, reflected the character of a genuine eccentric, such as Zhu Da and Lo Ping.

If in pre-modern China there was so little overt protest art as we understand it today, that was partly due to the fact that the range of conventional subjects and styles available to the artist was so narrow, partly because, as the literati learned to their cost, censors scrutinised works of poetry and literature for hidden meanings, and the penalties for subversion were severe. The scholar class, moreover, were marked by what Frederick Mote called "a low potential for political action," and painters were not prepared to take risks that could cost them their lives. To retire into obscurity, to become a recluse, was often the only honourable course left to them.

More important than any political or social restraints on protest art, however, was the view, universally accepted in traditional China, that, except in rare instances, that was simply not what art was for. Trained in obedience to authority, the scholar and artist distanced themselves from politics. Their ideal, in their creative as in their social life, was to contribute to order and harmony between man and nature, and between man and man. Painting, like all other intellectual and social activity, was valued to the extent that it fulfilled this purpose. The arts, to quote Frederick Mote again, “never could (nor indeed seemed to claim the need to) escape from the same responsibilities that all other activities of cultivated man had to bear.” Thus, to the traditional Chinese, beauty in art was inseparable from ethics. There was — at least in painting and calligraphy — no such thing as pure formal beauty. When once I asked Huang Yongyu what he thought of the abstract paintings that he had seen in the Whitney Museum in New York, he replied “They have no meaning.” They were, to him, merely forms.

If there was no place in traditional painting for art that did not promote well-being, still less was there room for violence, anger, unedifying subject-matter. Rare exceptions come to mind — for example a lost painting of starving people done by the Song artist Zheng Xia to shock the emperor into taking action during the famine of 1073–74. It is referred to in the inscriptions on the remarkable studies of *Beggars and Street Characters* by the Ming artist Zhou Chen (1516), which is thought to be an expression of protest at the neglect of the common people by the Ming officials and court eunuchs. But these are very rare examples in Chinese painting, not of private anger and a sense of alienation, but of the artist stepping into the shoes of the responsible scholar-official, and fulfilling his duty to warn and admonish those in authority.

So it could be said that the most profound revolution in Chinese art in modern times has not been the introduction of Western styles and techniques, not even the abandonment of a conventional language of *cunfa* and the adoption of new ways of “seeing” nature, but the acceptance of the Western idea that value in art lies not only in its contribution to the ideal of the harmony of all things under heaven, but that it can, at one extreme, arise principally from the social, political or emotional content of the work (Goya, Daumier, Käethe Kollwitz, for example), which is ethically committed, or, at the other extreme, from the beauty of pure form (Braque, Mondrian, Jackson Pollock), which is ethically “neutral.”

With the acceptance in China of these diametrically opposite views of what can constitute value in art, the traditional holistic philosophy lost much of its authority. But not all: for it is worth noting that many of the most extreme Chinese Modernists of the 1980s accepted that they had a responsibility to society, and claimed, with some justice, that their position of protest, rejection, alienation, was indeed a moral one.

Moreover, in an agnostic society such as that of China, in which history rather than religion provides the chief source of value, many artists, even the most avant-garde, draw their inspiration as much from the past and from the challenge to renew the past (*fu gu*) as they do from nature and the society around them. They struggle to free themselves from the embrace of that demanding mistress, history, even while they are still in love with her. As Ma Desheng said at the time of the *Stars* exhibition: “I am against tradition only because there *is* a tradition.”

But this is to anticipate. When Western art first took hold in China after the establishment of the Republic in 1911, these issues were barely seen, and the responses were more simply formulated. The reformers saw Western art as a tool for the regeneration of China; the conservatives saw it as a threat to all that was most precious in the Chinese heritage. When in 1915 Liu Haisu — “China’s van Gogh,” as he liked to be called, was branded a “traitor in art,” battle was joined between the two camps that raged for decades thereafter. Cai Yuanpei maintained that art was the one universal language that broke down all cultural barriers. How could he then have believed that the Chinese and Western views of the nature and purpose of art could not be reconciled? Surely not. And in fact, although extremists on both sides still keep up a battle that has contributed much to the vitality of Chinese art through the 20th century, there was room for all.

Although Cai Yuanpei insisted that Western realism was essential, his chief concern was not with style, but with the importance in Chinese life of art itself. In 1916, after spending eight years in Europe and America, Cai was proposing the creation of art schools, chairs and institutes for research in the arts, public art galleries, museums, theatres, exhibitions and concerts — all taken for granted in the West, but almost unknown in China. Although his dream was not realised for many decades, he laid the foundation for a radically new conception of the place of the arts in Chinese society.

Between the founding in 1912 by Zhou Xiang and Liu Haisu of their little art school at Baxianqiao, and the 1934 avant-garde exhibition of the NOVA group, the main styles of Western art — Academic Realism (Xu Beihong), Impressionism and Post-Impressionism (Liu Haisu), Fauvism (Lin Fengmian), Abstraction and Surrealism (Zhao Shou and the NOVA Group) — had been seen in Shanghai, although the avant-garde had a very brief life, and even its most generous critic, Sun Fuxi, noted that the movement stood on “very insecure foundations,” an understatement, to say the least.

In the meantime, artists with a social conscience had come to feel that Modernism in itself had no value for China. They also rejected completely the traditional idea of the purpose of art to promote order and harmony. The

Woodcut Movement launched by Lu Xun in 1928 was aimed at the radical social and ideological remoulding of China. A handful of bold cartoonists, notably Zhang Guangyu and Ye Qianyu, mocked the establishment. But there were other artists, less politically committed, who felt that art could stir the public conscience and, in the words of Pang Xunqin, a prominent member of the Storm Society of 1930–34, “bring art closer to the heart of our suffering people.”

The war with Japan brought all sides together in the United Front. But it was not long before the artists turned their hatred against the Nationalist “Kuomintang” (KMT) régime. If they were bitter, their bitterness — vividly illustrated, for example, in Ding Cong’s satirical scrolls of 1944 and 1945 — was directed at a specific target: the corruption of the KMT. They despaired of the present, but they were not cynical, for they lived in hope of the new China that would arise out of the ruins of war.

From the moment of “Liberation” in 1949, the artists were assigned a clear task to perform, in exchange for status and security such as they had never known. But their freedom to mark out their own destiny was gone. Until 1949, the positions on art had been staked out, and the battles fought by the artists themselves backed by their supporters — most famously in the long rivalry between Xu Beihong and Liu Haisu. Now the battles were fought over the heads of the artists by party factions in response to changes in official policy. The artists were mere spectators of these quarrels, although they would be dragged in to criticise and denounce when required. Party decisions about art affected them crucially, but they took no part in them. Can it be wondered at that, at a very early stage, the more independent among them became profoundly cynical about authority, and about their role in shaping the new China?

After the brief honeymoon period of 1949–51, there began three decades of erratic Party dictatorship over the arts: in 1951 the first Rectification Campaign, followed by two years of tightening control; from late 1953 to early 1954 a slight relaxation; in late 1954 the campaign against Hu Feng, in which leading artists were forced to denounce him; in 1956, the momentary blooming of the Hundred Flowers, when for a few months the very term Socialist Realism seemed to be forgotten, and there was a spate of exhibitions of foreign art, not only from the Soviet Union, but from Britain, Greece, Japan and France. Then, in June 1957, Mao suddenly reversed his policy. The flowers withered, and those who had spoken out were attacked as bourgeois individualists and rightist revisionists — a brand that some were to carry for the next 19 years. And yet they did not give up hope. The Hundred Flowers would surely bloom again — indeed, on the intervention of Zhou Enlai, a brief spring came in 1962 and early 1963. But before the year ended, the clouds were gathering again.

Those who survived the long deep winter of the Cultural Revolution had lost their belief in the party, but they were not cynical about the thing that really mattered — art itself, and its value to humanity. But when greater freedom came after the death of Mao Zedong, they were at first powerless to express their feelings. A striking cartoon of the thaw of 1980 by Liao Bingxiong shows the shell that had encased him for 30 years cracked open at last; but his limbs are so stiff and cramped that he cannot move. To a new generation of artists who had never known freedom — even the freedom, which the régime had been unable to suppress, to feel disgust and despair — the idea that one could paint what one felt was hard to grasp.

The great significance of the *Stars* exhibitions of 1979 and 1980 was not the art they produced — much of which is less memorable than the poetry of that era — but the courageous gesture they made in expressing, however crudely, their feelings about their life and times. The fact that these artists, with great courage, acted on their own initiative, without reference to the party cultural apparatus, was a turning point in the history of post-Mao art in China. However much they might be harried by officialdom, nothing would ever be the same again.

Once the Stars had given the signal, Chinese art embarked upon the most creative decade in its modern history. Suddenly an infinity of choices opened up, as the whole of world art, ancient and modern, became accessible to them. If there was some bewilderment, there was also hope, which survived the closing down of the Democracy Wall in January 1981, and further political setbacks in 1983 and 1987. Now official controls could be tolerated, because something far more important was happening: art had acquired a momentum of its own. Of course there was cynicism, but that cynicism was directed, not against life itself, but against the system that was beginning to lose its hold on the individual. The cultural apparatchnik, for all his power, was seen for what he was — a hollow man. That gave the artists a strength to carry them through even greater trials that were to come in the summer of 1989.

We do not need to be too starry-eyed about the art of the 1980s. As well as the works of moving sincerity, such as — to take a few examples at random — Wang Yidong’s *Shandong Peasant Girl*, Wang Yuqi’s *In the Fields*, Cheng Konglin’s *Snow on X Month, X Day*, and some of the work of Gu Wenda and Xu Bing, there was far too much facile imitation of Western Modernism, while artists were becoming skilful at exploiting the enthusiasm of foreign journalists and critics for any form of deviant art in order to attract attention to themselves. This was a game that they happily played to their own advantage.

But Tian'anmen Square, for a year at least, changed all that. The heady mood of the late 1980s, when everything still seemed possible, gave way to a feeling of helplessness. Some leading artists found refuge abroad, and it seemed to the outside observer as if the life had gone out of the modern movement. As if to cloud the scene still further, unashamed commercialism was beginning to play an ever-larger part in the art world, and many competent artists yielded to its temptations. It was no longer just the party cultural apparatus that was corrupt, but the very art world that the artists were creating for themselves. But their extraordinary energy could not be suppressed for long, and the recent work of the younger, more thoughtful artists suggests that their spirit was not broken by the tragic events of June 4.

It is not for me in this brief essay to survey the most recent developments: that is very ably done elsewhere in this book. I can only say, looking from the great distance of Oxford, that I am greatly impressed by the vitality of the new work, by its extraordinary range of moods, from the cool to the passionate, from the cynical to the deeply introspective.

In spite of the rare examples mentioned earlier from pre-modern Chinese art of protest, alienation and eccentricity — generally the product of a period of instability and decline — it is not very helpful to look to the past for close parallels to the condition of today's artists, or for their means of expression. For not only does the modern artist have an infinite range of choices unthinkable in the past, but he or she paints no longer for a handful of scholarly intimates appreciative of the utmost subtlety, but for a vast public who respond as readily to robust satire and parodies of popular icons as they do to the most inward and subjective images.

What is not new, but has its roots deep in the Confucian concept of virtue, is these artists' sense of moral obligation, and their belief that, however much they condemn the culture of their time, they are part of it, and their duty is to cleanse it. Mockery and irony imply a moral judgement, a sense of value, as powerfully as does outright condemnation.

Thus it seems that these artists are taking on the historic role of the old scholar class, and with it all the responsibilities, and the risks, that the scholars used to bear. No doubt they are encouraged by the reward of public recognition, both at home and abroad, that few of China's scholars of today can command. Whether or not that is an additional incentive, only they know. Certainly, the best of them seem to be fired by a sense of mission. This exhibition eloquently demonstrates the energy, the vitality and the morality of some of the art that has emerged out of the shadow of Tian'anmen; and is a strong reassurance about the continuing vitality of Chinese culture.

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THE ORTHODOX AND THE AVANT-GARDE: AN HISTORICAL EXAMINATION

Shih Shou-chien

The term "avant-garde" has appeared in writings on modern art for the past hundred years; but scholars have yet to come to an agreement as to what exactly defines it. To my mind, the term "avant-garde" is similar to the Chinese term *fansu*. The word *fan* means "to overturn" or "to overthrow," while the word *su* can be defined in several different ways. In terms of aesthetics, *su* means the accepted stylistic model of expression, ergo, the "orthodox." *Su* also can refer to conventional public opinion vis à vis what constitutes a work of art, as well as to the conventional modes for art in society. The two different significances of the term *su* then give rise to differences in value or merit. If a work of art displays a high level of mastery in the accepted stylistic mode, then it is regarded as "orthodox." If, on the other hand, it is in a conventional vein but fails to achieve this level of mastery, it will be classified as "vulgar." The term *fansu* then can refer both to overthrowing orthodoxy and to overthrowing the vulgar. The concept "avant-garde" is closer to the first significance of *fansu*, that of overthrowing orthodoxy. The avant-garde's target of attack are works that hold or once held the position of "orthodox." The attempted overthrow of these orthodox works takes place bilaterally, on both aesthetic and social fronts.

Orthodoxy is created and driven by certain social mechanisms. Therefore, the process of overthrowing orthodoxy is also to some extent a social process. Moreover, once the avant-garde of necessity engages with society in its movement of attack, it begins a process of "socialisation" that may lead in the end to the replacement of the current orthodoxy with a new orthodoxy, i.e. the former avant-garde, or in the event of failure to overthrow and replace the orthodox school, to results very different from what the avant-garde had originally hoped for or imagined.

In fact, based on past and present observation, once the avant-garde movement has been set in motion, it is virtually impossible for it to escape a destiny of either failure on the one hand or the ascent to orthodoxy on the other. An examination of art history shows this avant-garde/orthodox dialectic appears in many avant-garde movements. Differences, of course, do exist, the causes being many and complex, but an investigation will show that the results achieved are related to the manner and degree to which the avant-garde movement is able to transform and/or control the social mechanism for art. If the avant-garde can effectively transform the social mechanism to its purposes, and the orthodox is overthrown, then the artists and their methods can replace those of the original orthodoxy, and in doing so will become the target of the next avant-garde movement. It is then natural that the orthodox and the avant-garde exist in a competitive relationship, with the main stake in the competition the governing of the mechanism which controls the limited socio-economic resources for art.

An early example of this avant-garde/orthodox dialectic is the literati painting movement started in China in the 11th century during the Northern Song dynasty, by artists such as Su Shi, Mi Fu and Li Gonglin. The literati movement clearly displayed characteristics of the avant-garde. For one thing, it rejected its popular contemporary, the Li Cheng-Guo Xi painting tradition. The artists of the Li-Guo school used meticulous, fine brush strokes to create their landscape paintings, imbuing their works with a strong vitality and a forceful sense of composition. *Early Spring* by Guo Xi (now in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taipei) is a representative work of both the Li-Guo style and of the orthodox tradition of the Northern Song. The literati painting movement strongly questioned the Li-Guo school's emphasis on academic technique, as well as the necessity for popular themes and monumental compositional structure. Many of the leaders of the literati painting movement were recognised as consummate artists and important new forces in the art world. Yet, even though the literati painters expressed interest in the quality of "vitality" or the "life-force" (*qi*) present in the landscape paintings of the Li-Guo school, their artistic sensibility would not allow them to support the orthodox nature of the art. Instead, they sought to express their individualism and refused to conform to the popular, conventional style — nor could they regard works of this nature as real art. They promoted a style of painting that was simple, even archaic, where the orthodox was grand, and that contained a quality of fluency and fluidity which hinted at the painterly accomplishments of the artist rather than shouting them out, as was the case with the technically rigorous and compositionally "monumental" style of the orthodox school.

The new direction pursued by these "avant-garde" literati artists turned the inner significance of landscape painting away from a recreation of the outward expansiveness of life towards an introspective personal paradigm. Many of the leaders of the literati movement were scholar-officials who backed the losing side in the failed Wang Anshi Reform movement. Yet, though as officials they lost out in the drive for government reform, as artists they became important cultural figures. The ability of the literati painters to succeed in their quest to be accepted and promoted as a legitimate movement was due only in part to the fact that they belonged to the educated elite. By turning into a cultural movement rather than remaining as a casual grouping of like-minded painters, the literati movement fulfilled a necessary requirement of gaining a foothold of legitimacy. Their extraordinary artistry, combined with the spirit of collaboration and solidarity displayed at the outset of their movement, made their artistic platform an influential one. They successfully introduced new artistic elements which the orthodox Academy lacked, such as a greater emphasis on personal expression and less reliance on rigorous, standardized academic technique.

In the end, however, despite their common spirit of reform, the "avant-garde" literati artists of the late Northern Song eventually took separate paths in the development of their individual painting styles. Li Gonglin created a new style by painting idealised versions of ancient models, adding a literary dimension that allowed the model to surpass its original standardized form. Mi Fu went a totally different route. Mi's personality was eccentric, and his behaviour erratic. His art displays the strongest reaction against technically-oriented academic painting, emphasizing instead that the way to true creativity lay in the simplest of forms. He disdained Guo Xi's landscapes which he regarded as a fancy show of technique. Instead, he painted pure, idealised landscapes using simple brush strokes to form the basic

triangular shapes of mountains. Unfortunately, Mi Fu's aesthetic ideals were at odds with the aesthetic notions of Chinese culture at the time. He intended to differentiate himself from others, but his avant-garde sensibility was too close to the iconoclastic to be well-received or supported by mainstream culture, and the new style he created, which was carried on by his son Mi Youren, ceased to develop after Mi Youren's death.

The increasing division among the Northern Song literati movement hindered the ability of the avant-garde to vie for a larger control of the social and economic apparatus for art. Even though the ideals of the orthodox Li-Guo school were shaken, the supremacy of the Academy, the heart of the apparatus, did not change. On the one hand, the literati failed to create a strong, new channel of collectors as an alternative to the Imperial house, whose patronage was irrevocably tied to the Academy. Partly as a result of this lack of a market, the literati also failed to establish a long-term successor to carry on its new aesthetic legacy. These two factors caused the Northern Song literati painting movement to pause at the avant-garde, or *fansu*, stage, so that it was never able to gain the upper hand and take over the orthodox position.

The failure of the Northern Song literati movement to overthrow and replace the orthodox school was largely the result of the lack of a charismatic leader. With his upright character, Su Shi would have been ideal, but unfortunately he was not a true artist. Li Gonglin was politically irresolute, and therefore not strong enough to lead. Mi Fu was an individualist, and it was impossible to hope that he could lead the avant-garde in its quest to take over or to establish an alternative operational mechanism for art. It was not until after several other reform movements of the Yuan and Ming dynasties that this situation changed, and literati painting gained the upper hand. The ascendancy of literati painting largely came about in the 16th century with the development of the Wu school of Suzhou, where the painter Wen Zhengming played a key role. Even though the Wu school was founded by Shen Zhou, and was distantly related to the Yuan dynasty Jiangnan school of literati painting, yet the aesthetic stance of the Wu school was clearly avant-garde for its time. Wen Zhengming rejected not only the bold, dynamic and showy style of artists like Dai Zhen and Wu Wei of the orthodox Zhe school, which continued the stylistic legacy of the Song Imperial Painting Academy, but he also turned the aim of his painting away from popular appeal. Disheartened after many failures to achieve an official career, Wen developed a private art of personal sentiment, and hoped to bring art back to a foundation of the essentials. His paintings were intended only for the appreciation of himself and a few select friends: he refused to let his art serve social or political purposes.

In the late 15th and early 16th centuries the Zhe school was without question the premier orthodox school. Not only did it gain Imperial patronage, but through exceptional leaders such as Wu Wei completely controlled the social and cultural resources for art. However, after the 1520s, because of the complex political climate, and in some cases because of an inability to get past the many barriers of the 16th century Imperial examination system, a number of influential men of letters turned away from official careers, and expressed their resentment and disillusion by creating an alternative cultural patronage to that of the Imperial Academy. Many of these well-to-do scholars were attracted to the Wu school by the character of Wen Zhengming, who had gathered a large coterie of followers around him. Wen was respected as a talented artist with strong Confucian ethics. This reputation, combined with Wen's longevity and lasting popularity, made him one of the most important and influential leaders in Chinese art history. With the patronage and protection of socially prominent men of letters, the Wu school soon gained an equal footing with the Zhe school, and eventually ousted the Zhe school from its orthodox position to itself become the new orthodoxy. The dominance of the Wu school of literati painting continued until the 19th century and did not experience any major change during this long period.

In the early 20th century, during the first years of the Republic, a major revolution took place in Chinese art. The change that occurred was not so much brought about by a replacement of traditional aesthetics by Western ones, but by a rejection of the esoteric formalism pursued by the orthodox literati painting tradition. The painter Xu Beihong, a major figure in the avant-garde revolt of the time, believed that art should be not an investigation of form but a reflection of reality, and sought to create an art that could be understood and appreciated by the many rather than by the select few. To achieve these ideals, Xu aggressively promoted Western-style realism in art. As the new realism gained acceptance, Xu's style became the new orthodoxy, and even today its influence on the art of mainland China has not diminished. Xu's ability to go beyond the avant-garde stage of challenging and overthrowing tradition to achieve orthodox success is due in great part to his being exceptionally active in the cultural world. Apart from his talent as an artist, Xu Beihong was an energetic reformer who played a key role in convincing the Republican government to set up modern-style art academies (and to appoint him as head of one), where the teaching method differed from the orthodox literati system where a student studied under one master, and learned his technique by the painstaking copying of old masterpieces and rigorous self-evaluation and self-discipline. The new art academies introduced a systematic method of instruction in both traditional and modern techniques, in combination with the traditionally strong teacher-student relationship.

Xu Beihong's ideas on the best route for modern Chinese art differed greatly from those of his equally famous contemporaries such as Lin Fengmian and Liu Haisu. With his insistence on realism, he was more single-minded. In addition, his image as an elegant and idealistic man, combined with his official position, gained him strong support among the controllers of the purse strings. Xu Beihong can be said to have used his position in the new official art academy system to gain control of the mechanism on which the orthodox relied. In the end, his strong administrative

ability and his resultant influence on the educational policies of the art academies were the major reasons the Realist movement advocated by the "Xu school" gained dominance over all other reform movements competing for material resources in the 1930s.

Today, the art academies in China are not only the training grounds for professional artists, but the source of employment and other benefits. Aside from salaries for artists and teachers, they provide the evaluation and qualification for various scholarships and for official positions in the art world. In a situation where national economic means are limited, the fact that the art academies exert a direct or semi-direct control over the social and material apparatus for art becomes especially significant. For this reason, contemporary Chinese avant-garde art movements are unable to escape the necessity of some kind of relationship with the official art academies, be it positive or negative. Taiwan's avant-garde Fifth Moon Group of the 1950s and 60s, who inspired an abstract art movement, is an excellent example. The Fifth Moon Group's major source of members were graduates of the Art Department of Taiwan Normal University, the bastion of the authoritarian orthodox tradition that in essence served the same function as the traditional Imperial painting academies. These young standard-bearers of the new art bravely criticised traditionalist art — and since their own school represented the center of the orthodox tradition, they served as serious critics. Avant-garde or not, if these artists had not been graduates of the most prestigious art department in Taiwan, their criticism would have been disregarded and would have had little if any effect on jolting the orthodox tradition. However, the future of the avant-garde movement promoted by the Fifth Moon Group depended on its ability to win control of the University Art Department or to create a new mechanism for resources to support its development. Unfortunately, the Fifth Moon Group could not gain the upper hand in the University, nor did it have the means to create its own academy. Eventually the members of the group went abroad, ending the hopes for reform.

This outcome did not come about by happenstance. The Chinese government has traditionally held a forceful control over the education system, and there is little room for private institutions to develop outside of government control. It is very apparent that after 1949, both in Taiwan and in mainland China, this situation has become progressively acute. As an example, in 1950s Taiwan, Li Zhongshen of the *Jue Lan* Society, which promoted abstract art, opened classes and sought students; later, eight of his students formed the famous Eastern Painting Group. Needless to say, Li's organisation was too small and lacked the strength and the resources to compete with the University Art Department or to unseat it from its stable orthodox position. It is therefore no wonder that up to now the avant-garde has had no deep or lasting effect in Taiwan.

In 1979, when mainland China ended its period of cultural isolation from the West, a new wave of avant-garde art was already evident. The role played by the official art academies in the avant-garde movement in China is an interesting one and an important point for discussion. The pioneering *Stars* exhibitions of 1979 and 1980 provide a good example. The Stars avant-garde art group competed with the orthodox art world by using forms of expression in their works unimaginable to the Chinese academy painters. The artists expressed their disillusion and spiritual wounds through what amounted to a criticism of the "dark side" of society, including the educational system. It is important to note that the artists of the Stars group were not related to the art academies but rather a group of "amateur" painters. This amateur status not only allowed them to avoid the stylistic and thematic restrictions imposed by the art academies, it also freed them to work to "overturn" the orthodox, having no vested interest in maintaining it. On the other hand, they also faced many disadvantages, the greatest of which was the necessity of overcoming the constraints placed by the orthodox over the control of the socio-economic resources for art. The result was that the Stars resources were cut off and the members eventually went their separate ways, leaving China to find a new space in which to develop: the same fate that had befallen Taiwan's Fifth Moon Group.

Interestingly, after the disbandment of the Stars, the avant-garde movements in mainland China became an inner development of the academies, as exemplified by talented young avant-garde artists such as Liu Xiaodong, Song Yonghong, and Zhang Xiaogang, among others, who are all academy graduates and who work within national educational institutions. Whether or not this means that Chinese avant-garde movements are no longer able to develop new mechanisms of support alternate to the academy and so to compete in all respects with the orthodox, including on the artistic front, is still not clear. If this scope of competition does not exist, and if the avant-garde within the academies sustains itself by feeding off the academies, then the question arises of how it could hope to become the dominant mode of art? Will the controlling force of the orthodox within the academies become ever more powerful, or will it be possible for the avant-garde to initiate substantive change? If the avant-garde is hindered from gaining the orthodox position, will it be reduced to a role of continuously seeking an avant-garde alternative? These are questions that merit investigation.

It is unclear how long the current semi-convergence of the avant-garde and the academy will last in the art world of mainland China. However, its existence displays a complex interdependence of the orthodox and the avant-garde. This situation cannot be understood as occurring at the discretion of the avant-garde or as a result of a compromise on the part of the orthodox. Rather, it involves a situation where artists of both camps recognize a common problem and responsibility: that is, that their country is facing threatening problems, and that through their art they can and should strive to help it. An examination of the last hundred years of the development of Chinese contemporary art shows that it has taken place in an environment where there exists a strong and widespread consciousness of national crisis. Professional artists have been looked upon not only as skilled artisans but also as intellectuals bearing the

responsibility of rescuing the country from this crisis — and this is also how artists see themselves. The greatest concern of Chinese intellectuals is how to help the Chinese people. Once awakened to the grave problems confronting Chinese society, both orthodox and avant-garde artists become more urgent in their desire to do something socially and culturally constructive.

This is a major reason why, during the 1930s, Lin Fengmian adopted the styles of the Fauvists and of the Post-Impressionists. To Lin, these styles helped him more effectively to express social subjects like “the pain of humanity” and “the need to educate” in order to alert his country and its culture to the dangers facing it. A similar idealism informed Taiwan painter Liu Guosong’s rejection of orthodox painting and adoption of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s: Liu believed that his shocking new art would revitalize Chinese culture — to him, the only means of rescuing it from its imminent demise. In 1980s mainland China, the ’85 New Wave movement, and the avant-garde movements following it, produced masterful works whose messages were still related to social concerns expressed by generations of Chinese intellectuals. When Ding Fang painted the regions of the northern plateaus as his symbol of the rediscovery of an ancient and religious spirit, he was hoping to spur on a recovery of the lost national spirit of China. Even Wang Guangyi’s recent Political Pop paintings, using the political symbols of the Cultural Revolution humourously juxtaposed with commercial symbols, has a positive social message. And the art of the Cynical Realist painters such as Fang Lijun and Liu Xiaodong, in addition to serving as a “self-rescue,” are geared at waking others up to their malaise — perhaps the last hope for saving the nation. This quality, even though expressed in the most extreme avant-garde language, puts China’s new art on common ground with the orthodox art of the academy. This desire to “save the nation” and “revitalize Chinese culture” is what catapulted Xu Beihong’s avant-garde Realist movement into the seat of orthodoxy in the new modern art academies of the 1930s.

When the orthodox academy artists are also anxious to find a panacea to save their country, their counterparts in the avant-garde working toward the same goal will be supported, at least in part, for their efforts. It is in this way that the avant-garde and the orthodox “imperceptibly come together” (in the words of mainland art historian Shao Dazhen).

The relationship of the avant-garde and the orthodox in China is vastly different from that in the West. Especially in the last decade, the common social concerns of the avant-garde and the orthodox have allowed the critical avant-garde to remain within the academies in a tense but not inharmonious coexistence. It is difficult to say in which direction the situation will move in future. However, given that the avant-garde in a sense already have a share in the social apparatus for art, the question of who gains the upper hand is not only dependent on proving artistic superiority, but on who manages best to address and answer the social concerns of the times. In order to succeed, the new avant-garde must prove that they are better equipped to revitalize Chinese culture. This is a greater challenge to the avant-garde than any they have faced in the past.

(Translated by Joy Tseng and Valerie C. Doran)

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MODERN CHINESE ART – THE EARLY PHASE (1911–1949)

Lang Shaojun

Modern Western art of the Impressionist and later schools began to arrive in China around the time of the establishment of the Republic in 1911. A number of young artists then studying in Japan, Europe and America returned to China with a knowledge not only of classical Western realism, but also of the work of the various schools of modern art prevalent in the West during the early 20th century.

After the Meiji Restoration of the late 19th century, Japan had experienced the wholesale importation of Western culture, including European and American art. To the Chinese of the late Qing and early Republican era, Japan was a window onto the West and a great many students were dispatched there to study. By the 1930s, more than 100 students were there studying art alone. It was a time when modern Western art was beginning to flood into Japan and many of these young students studied the Impressionists and various other modern art movements. The Chinese artist Guan Liang (b.1900), who had travelled to Japan to study painting in 1917, remembered the situation thus:

Exhibitions of Western European art were mostly of the modern innovative schools – Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism. . . I saw paintings by Manet and Monet, by Renoir, Degas and Pissaro. I enjoyed Cézanne and Matisse too, while Gauguin and van Gogh interested me most of all.¹

Many Chinese painters of this period had experiences similar to those of Guan Liang; the artists Chen Baoyi (1893–1945), Wang Yachen (1894–1983), Zhu Bizhan (1899–), Ni Yide (1901–1971) and Ding Yanyong, to name but a few. Such painters had much influence once they returned to China to teach in art academies and organize artists' associations.

In 1935 a group of painters who had studied in Japan a few years later than those mentioned above – Liang Xihong, Li Dongping, Zhao Shou, Zeng Ming and others – established the Chinese Association of Independent Art and advocated Surrealist art. In the pages of the journal *Artistic Trends (Yifeng)* they published a "Special Issue on Surrealism" which introduced the Spanish artist Salvador Dali to Chinese readers, and appealed to artists to free themselves from "the constraints of their environment." They held a series of exhibitions in Shanghai, Nanjing, Guangzhou and Hong Kong and founded the journal *Modern Art (Xiandai yishu)* to be a forum for discussion of modern art. Liang Xihong, whose painting style resembled that of Maurice de Vlaminck in its melancholic lack of restraint, was perhaps the most influential artist of this group. In a memoir written in 1948 he stated that the Chinese Association of Independent Art was "inspired by the schools of modern art and accepted new ideology, new subject matter and new methods." He went on to argue that "Li Dongping, embracing the spirit of the Neo-Fauvists, advocated extreme modernism and freedom; Zhao Shou's paintings attempted to transcend reality and became abstract; Zeng Ming, too, wished to capture in his painting a classical beauty, while all the other artists were searching for new paths in their desire to pursue their own individual inclinations."² From this account, we can see that although not all the artists involved in the Chinese Association of Independent Art were Surrealists, they were all smitten by modern art movements and sought to discover their own individual styles therein. This association disbanded of its own accord two years later with the outbreak of the anti-Japanese war (1937–45). To study Western art in Japan was, in general terms, to do so at secondhand of course, and this group of artists saw few actual examples of modern art. As a consequence, their understanding of Western art was incomplete.

France proved the most popular destination for Chinese who went to Europe to study art, but some also went to England, Italy, Belgium and Germany. A few even ventured as far as the United States and Canada. The majority of these artists studied classical European realist painting and sculpture within the various art academies of Europe. The most prominent of this group of artists were Xu Beihong (1895–1953), Li Yishi (1886–1942), Yan Wenliang (1893–1985), and Wu Zuoren (1907–). Others, the best known among them being Lin Fengmian (1900–1991), Wu Dayu (1903–1988), Pang Xunqin (1906–1985), Chang Yu (1900–1966) and Zao Wou-ki (1920–).

In China, Lin Fengmian, Pan Xunqin and Wu Dayu proved the most influential of these artists. Lin Fengmian studied in France between 1919–1925, and also spent a year in Germany. Having returned to China, he served successively as president of the National Academy of Art in Peking and the Hangzhou Academy of Art. In his teaching he emphasised both strict training in life drawing as well as freedom of influence and creativity. He invited the French painter André Claudot to China to teach oil painting, while many of the others on his staff had studied in France. His own paintings of the 1920s and 30s, with their turgid palette and occasional use of thick lines to delineate outlines, revealed a tendency towards an expressionism reminiscent in both style and method of the French painter Georges Rouault. Lin broke fresh ground again in the 1940s when he merged the methods of Cubism with traditional Chinese monochrome ink painting. Wu Dayu, who was for some time head of the Department of Western Painting at the Hangzhou Academy of Art, had studied sculpture in France under Bourdelle. Later he was to specialise in oil painting and excelled at combining extreme simplicity of form, lightness of brushwork and clarity of colour. He devoted himself to achieving a spiritual synthesis of modern Western art and the traditional Chinese "worship of the natural." Modern Chinese painters such as Zao Wou-ki, Zhu Dequn, and Wu Guanzhong were all students of either Lin Fengmian or Wu Dayu.

Pang Xunqin returned to China from France in 1930. Whilst there he had studied the styles of many of the various schools of modern art. In 1931, he and Ni Yide established the "Storm Society," an association of painters that sought to promote modern art. Zhou Duo, Duan Pingyou, Wang Jiyuan, Zhang Xian, Yang Taiyang and Yang Qiuren were some of the most important members of this society, and they were joined later by Qiu Di, Li

Zhongsheng and others. The majority of the artists involved with this society were dissatisfied with the situation in art and were determined to hew out a new artistic path. They all enjoyed modern painting. The "Storm Society Manifesto" they issued to accompany their first exhibition stated their case:

We detest all old forms, old colours, detest all common and vulgar techniques. We wish to use new methods to express the spirit of a new age.

The artistic world of 20th-century Europe has seen the burgeoning of new phenomena — the outcry of the Fauvists, the distortion of the Cubists, the violence of Dadaism, the fantasies of Surrealism. . . .

The artistic world of 20th-century China too must see the growth of new phenomena.

Let us arise! With hurricane-like emotions and steel-like intellect, we shall create a crisscross world of colour, line and form!³

As this manifesto makes plain, the Storm Society had neither a clear programme nor clear principles. As a group, its artists simply esteemed modern art above all else and emphasised the pursuit of individualism and creativity. And thus it proved in practice, for according to one of the society's members, Liang Xihong:

The painters of the Storm Society resembled the Paris art world in their general mood. They researched all sorts of styles, distilled the essence of famous artists of many nations, and, investing their work with aspects of their own native traditions, gave full play to their own individual talents. . . . Pang Xunqin's style was a pursuit of ornamental beauty; Ni Yide pursued realism; the late Zhang Xian spared no efforts in trying to realize within his own paintings the beauty of both traditional Chinese painting and Western painting; Yang Taiyang developed his own individual style through an investigation of the various Paris schools of painting and the special nature of Chinese painting; Yang Qiuren was obsessed with the concept of classical beauty . . . Li Zhongsheng achieved pure artistic effect through his study of abstract tableaux. Women painters such as Qiu Ti, Sheng Cijun and Liang Baibo, like their French counterparts, expressed a typical femininity in their art.⁴

We can tell from reading contemporary critiques and viewing (in printed form) the extant Storm Society paintings that their paintings displayed all sorts of styles: realism, decorative art, line drawings, distorted forms and abstraction, while the influence of Picasso, Derain, Cézanne, Degas, Matisse, Modigliani and de Chirico is obvious everywhere. It would have been difficult for such a diverse and essentially imitative group of painters and their paintings to have developed into a school. But they had an influence on the painting scene in China in the early 1930s and sowed the seeds for later developments in modern Chinese art. *The First Exhibition of Independent Art* held in Chongqing in the mid 1940s as well as Li Zhongsheng's experiment with modern art in the late 1950s in Taiwan, were intrinsically related to the activities of the Storm Society. As the famous painter Chen Baoyi has said of the Storm Society: "To an oppressive age . . . they brought a touch of dazzling colour, like a single flower blooming," or again, "They made manifest the pure new breath of modern painting."⁵

In the 1920s and 1930s, the various schools of modern Western art and their Chinese practitioners evoked much debate and criticism. The criticism came from three quarters. It stemmed firstly from politicians who criticised the new investigations for political reasons. Lin Fengmian's 1929 painting *Suffering*, for example, was in both spirit and style an example of Expressionism. When it was shown at the *West Lake* exhibition, a founding member of the *Kuomintang* (*Guomintang*), Dai Jitao censured it in a speech to the Hangzhou Municipal Party Branch in the following terms: "The paintings of the Hangzhou Academy of Art annihilate the soul of man."⁶ Lin Fengmian was soon subject to political pressure. When at the third of the Storm Society's exhibitions Pang Xunqin showed his painting *Sons of the Soil*, depicting the sufferings of the peasants of the Jiangnan region during a harsh drought, he received threatening letters and telephone calls warning him to "leave Shanghai immediately for your own safety."⁷ Even in Taiwan during the 1950s, official newspapers carried articles that viewed modern painting as having "aspects in common with the materialism of the Communists."

A second type of criticism derived from a number of left-wing literary and artistic figures who believed Western Modernism to be the product of a "decadent capitalist class," of no benefit, indeed inimical, to the needs of the revolution. One such left-wing poet wrote: "The age of individualism in art and literature has long passed, yet the groans of the most wretched and hideous of these individualists can still be heard monopolizing the literary and art market." He went on to demand that young people involved in the arts "serve as gramophones" and achieve "selflessness" in their art, going as far as to warn: "Do you think that you have been insulted? In that case, there is no room for further discussion and all that remains to be done is for you to be invited to step up to the guillotine!"⁸ Radical "leftism" of this kind was later to have fearful consequences.

Lastly, criticism also stemmed from those painters who persisted with realism and who rejected all the schools of modern art, painters such as Xu Beihong and his followers. At the *First National Art Exhibition* held in Nanjing in 1929, Xu Beihong and the poet Xu Zhimo debated the merits of the Impressionists, and the Post-Impressionists, in the pages of the catalogue of that exhibition. Xu Beihong called Cézanne, Matisse and so on "shameless," likened their work to "morphine and heroin" and claimed that their paintings were done at the beck and call of the art dealers. In a letter addressed to Xu Beihong, Xu Zhimo said that his criticism "held echos of the pre-1895 Parisian marketplace" and argued that Cézanne was "a man of honour who had died for his cause" and who had never once

been tempted by material success to compromise his role as a "pure and hardworking artist." He was, Xu Zhimo claimed, "an uncrowned king" on the throne of 20th-century art. Neither man backed down from his position.

Scholarly disputation of this type was common during the early 1930s. In fact, criticism that stemmed from the political necessities of the day or which derived from factional disputes failed to reveal the reasons why modern art could not take hold and develop in China at the time. These reasons lay in the resistance to modern art on the part of those who accepted traditional Chinese concepts of art (including intellectuals) and in the fact that China at the time still lacked internal factors for the growth of modern art. Viewed in its entirety, China in the first half of the 20th century lacked the necessary pre-conditions for a modern industrial civilisation, and had not experienced the stimulus and shock of World War I; nor had it undergone the course of development from highly advanced realism to anti-realism that had taken place within the arts in Europe. In other words, China had not yet produced the conditions to nourish the various schools of modern art — such conditions only became partially evident after the Cultural Revolution.

Needless to say, the introduction of modern Western art continued uninterrupted throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In 1919, Zheng Mian (then president of the Peking Academy of Arts) published a series of lectures under the title, "The Various Schools of Western Painting" in which he sought to introduce Classicism, Romanticism, Impressionism, Cubism and Futurism. After this, journals often carried articles about or illustrations of the work of famous modern artists from the Impressionists onwards. Most representative of this trend were the journals *Art (Meishu)*, *Art Tri-Monthly (Yishu xunkan)*, *Art Currents (Meishu Sichao)*, *Aesthetic Education (Meiyu)* and *Apollo (Yapoluo)*. Articles about modern European art were written by such prominent figures as Liu Haisu, Ni Yide, Chen Baoyi, Li Baoquan, Guan Liang, and Fu Lei. The New Woodcut movement promoted by Lu Xun, apart from introducing Chinese readers to many realistic Western woodcuts and book illustrations, also introduced them to an extensive number of artists of the Expressionist, Symbolist and other schools. After his return from his European travels in 1932, Liu Haisu edited a series of books of the paintings of Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso and Derain. Once these had been published by the Zhonghua Book Company in their collection *Paintings of the World's Masters*, they began to have a certain influence. In general terms, however, these discussions of modern European art were fragmentary. There were no systematic attempts at translations and many of the books produced consisted merely of translated excerpts, with the editor cutting or condensing at will, or working from his own subjective understanding of the artists being discussed. Distorted or incorrect interpretations were unavoidable.

The year 1937 saw the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese war. National salvation became the sole pre-occupation of the Chinese art world and all artists had to involve themselves in anti-Japanese propaganda. Such propaganda was by necessity both realistic and popular. Slogans such as "popularisation" and "national forms" monopolised the artistic and literary arenas of war-time China. Under such circumstances, it was natural that both traditional literati painting and modern Western art would be neglected. Whether in Chongqing or Yan'an, art that manifested the slightest tendency towards modernism was regarded as displaying a "formalism" that was "divorced from the people." The isolation and decline of the "modern school of painting" greatly pleased Xu Beihong, who had all along persisted with realism. "What great joy it is that war has also served to exorcise such demons," he wrote, "and it has given me great pleasure to have myself witnessed their death." The *Exhibition of Paintings of the China Academy of Arts* held in Chongqing (1943) and other places by his followers consisted exclusively of realistic paintings. They also wrote articles that labelled those who were interested in modern painting as "philistines" who sought to "cheat the masses with their art." Their own exhibitions they declared to be "determining the future direction of Chinese painting and showing clearly the path along which we must continue with unstinting effort."⁹ The critic Huang Miaozi wrote an article entitled "We Require Realist Painting" in which he advocated realist art that could be easily understood by the masses and criticised both "modern literati painting" and modern Western painting as "having nothing to do with the day-to-day lives of the masses."¹⁰ In Yan'an, artists mainly concerned themselves with the production of woodcut posters and stressed the notion that "Culture has gone to the countryside." Art that served as a propaganda weapon in the war against Japan or which sought to promote the policies of the Chinese Communist Party revealed little Western Modernist influence. A few young artists from Shanghai and other large cities did however continue to have recourse to the methods of modern art. In 1939, the Fine Arts Department of the Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Arts in Yan'an criticised artists for their "formalism" and for their "exclusively methodological outlook." This criticism continued in 1941 at a meeting held to discuss the art of Matisse and Picasso.

And yet, what the circumstances require of art, and the limitations they impose upon it, are bound to change. In 1945, on the eve of the victory over Japan, Lin Fengmian, Ding Yanyong, Pang Xunqin, Ni Yide, Guan Liang, Li Zhongsheng and Zao Wou-ki held an exhibition entitled *The First Exhibition of Independent Art* in which most of the paintings on display manifested modernist tendencies. A critic at the time said that Ding Yanyong's work "resembled Fauvism," that of Li Zhongsheng revealed "an inclination towards the work of Maurice de Vlaminck," Zao Wou-ki was "influenced by Picasso" while the other work was either "similar to that of Marc Chagall" or "reminded one of Paul Klee." The critic went on to say: "All the painters base their work upon the Parisian schools and the so-called 'pure painting' which has entered the bloodstream of the Chinese people," pointing out that their motive was "not only to meet the requirements of the Chinese people themselves, but hoping even more to produce a confluence of modern world art."¹¹ All this goes to show that under certain circumstances, modern art in China was capable of staging a comeback, and that in a climate that allowed for the normal interflow between the art and culture of the various

peoples of the world, a "confluence of world art" was probably unavoidable. The minute such circumstances changed, however, such "confluence" was again restricted. No more was heard of the experimentation of the artists of *The First Exhibition of Independent Art*, for instance, once the civil war had begun, and between 1947 and 1948 "the 'World Painting Society' held a conference in Hong Kong to criticise the artistic ideology of the painter Liang Yongtai and the inclination towards 'Western formalism' of the oil paintings of Huang Xinbo."¹² In the winter of 1949, the National Hangzhou Academy of Arts, with Liu Kaiqu as the newly appointed president and Jiang Feng serving as party secretary, "severely criticised the so-called 'Modern School of Painting' (that is, the research into and appreciation of various schools of modern European art on the part of a number of staff members and students)."¹³ At the meeting, Lin Fengmian accepted complete responsibility for this deviation but even this failed to win either his students or himself the forgiveness of the meeting. He was left with no alternative but to resign his post and retreat to Shanghai to continue his experiments alone at home. Nothing more was heard of the foreign-influenced Modernist school of painting in China for the next 30 years. After the Cultural Revolution, however, from the time of the *Stars* Exhibition in 1979 onwards, the "demons" have again appeared on the shoulders of young Chinese artists. . . .

That Chinese art will one day enter the flow of world art with a voice all its own is probably inevitable, but the course towards this ideal is a long and twisting one.

Beijing
21 August, 1992.

(Translated by Duncan Campbell)

Notes:

¹ *Guan Liang's Memoirs* (Shanghai: Shuhua chubanshe, 1984).

² Guangzhou edition of the *Daguanbao*, 26th June, 1948.

³ *Art Tri-Monthly*, No. 1(5), 1932.

⁴ Guangzhou edition of the *Daguanbao*, 26th June, 1948.

⁵ "A Short Account of Progress of the Western Painting Movement," in *Shanghai Art Monthly*.

⁶ Li Shusheng, "An Interview with Lin Fengmian," in *Art (Meishu)*, 1991, No. 1.

⁷ See Pang Xunqin's memoirs, *This is How We Got Here* (Sanlian shudian, 1988).

⁸ See *A Collection of Articles on Revolutionary Literature* (Shenglushe, 1928).

⁹ Qiren, "The Creation of a New Art," *Shishi xinbao*, 28th June, 1943.

¹⁰ *Paintings of the War of Resistance*, No. 25.

¹¹ See Fu Zaobei, "Painting and Artists," *Xin minbao* (Supplement), 10th April, 1945).

¹² Zhu Boxiong and Chen Ruilin, eds., *Fifty Years of Chinese Western Painting* (Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1989).

¹³ See *The Cradle of Art* (Zhejiang Meishu xueyuan chubanshe, 1988).

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BUILDING IN A GORGE

Liu Xiaochun

Anyone who is seriously interested in folk art will have noticed the following phenomenon: the striking beauty of old traditions that are cut off from the modern world on the one hand, and the tasteless mess that results when this art is undergoing a process of modernization on the other. If this is true for folk art, is the same thing true for the "higher" arts? Cannot China be likened to one huge rural village undergoing the process of modernization?

"Our ancestors were incredibly rich!" This statement may sound funny, but it also happens to be true. Chinese scroll paintings are a magnificent repository of culture. In the history of art, the evolution from narrative painting, landscapes, and portraiture to the freer styles of Impressionism and Expressionism is a major event in cultural evolution.

Over the last ten centuries, China has produced some of the world's most outstanding artists. For example, Qing dynasty (1644–1911) artists like Shi Tao (1642–1718), Bada Shanren (1624?–1705), Hong Ren (1610–1664) and Gong Xian (1618–1689) may have lived two hundred years before Cézanne, van Gogh and Gauguin, but in sophistication their works are fully comparable. Following the gradual withering away of feudal culture in China in the 20th century, and the continual onslaught of Western culture, Chinese art underwent a period of reform, accompanied by a state of unprecedented cultural chaos. This period of reform was characterised by four major dilemmas:

- 1) Eastern versus Western culture
- 2) tradition versus modernity
- 3) refinement versus creativity
- 4) metaphysics versus non-metaphysical functionalism (which encompassed a debate of spirituality vs. the power of formalist language).

Non-conformity is natural and unremarkable in a culture undergoing radical change. But in China, in the Republican period artists had grown so self-absorbed and infatuated with themselves that they deceived themselves as well as others. In such a climate, revealing the reality of even a normal situation took on an abnormal significance.

In fact, among the great painters, talented craftsmen, eccentric geniuses and famous artists of the 20th century, no single individual has been able to resolve the four dilemmas mentioned above in his or her works. The greatest developments in modern Chinese art have been one-sided or extreme. The situation of Chinese art today can be described as a deep gorge surrounded by the historical peaks of Western and Chinese art. In other words, we are now in a transitional period between the magnificent past and the bright future.

Travelling through a gorge has its dangers, however. With their special talents, cultural sophistication and willingness to work hard, Chinese artists have established a tension-filled pattern of creativity. Their experience differs from artists in, say, India and Japan, cultures that have swayed back and forth between successive phases of Westernization and the search for native roots. From the turn of the century, China's major artists have emerged from theoretical battles only to divide themselves into several antagonistic and yet mutually influential camps: strictly "Chinese painters" and "Western painters" on the one hand, and painters who attempt an integration by "using the ancient to transform the modern" and "using Western art to revitalise Chinese art" on the other.

Huang Binhong (1854–1955), and Qi Baishi (1864–1957) are main representatives of those artists who attempted to use the ancient to transform the modern. Huang clung to the orthodox tradition of literati painting, yet in terms of stylistic achievement and metaphysical profundity, he is unmatched in this century. Although an orthodox painter, Qi Baishi stands firmly in the brilliant innovative tradition of the Qing dynasty, and not in the twilight, as some would have it. Qi's expressionistic calligraphic paintings done after the age of sixty are among the artist's greatest achievements.

In Xu Beihong (1895–1953), we find one of the most influential examples of an artist who wanted to replace the orthodox literati aesthetic with a Western aesthetic. His works convey the sense of conflict in Chinese artists of his time, between the difficulty of achieving modernity on the one hand, and the need to maintain a high level of artistic achievement on the other. Although Xu is a great draughtsman and realist painter, as an artist he cannot be compared to Huang Binhong or Qi Baishi. Of the many exponents of the narrative and realist painting that has thrived in the 20th century, Xu stands out as a master, but at the same time, his paintings clearly reflect the intensity of the conflict between Modernism and intrinsic artistic values.

The realism practised with such enthusiasm in China from the 1950s to the 1970s was a popular realism that displayed varying levels of superiority. Two good examples are Wang Shikuo's *Bloody Nights* and Huang Xiwen's *The First National Day Ceremony*. Huang, with his broad artistic vision, created a special style in the narrow gap that exists between politics and popularization. I call this style "refined New Year's paintings." These New Year's paintings are not like the traditional woodblock prints popular in the Chinese countryside, but rather are reminiscent of the sort of New Year's prints produced in New China for "new peasants." Oddly enough, the "refined New Year's paintings" based on traditional prints were poorly received by the peasants. Rather, they were drawn to the prints derived from the commercial calendars produced in the early years of the Republican period (1911–1949).

Bloody Nights was held up as a good example of Chinese realism, while New Year's paintings and prints were regarded as an excellent medium for the dissemination of art. But from the viewpoint of art history, *Bloody Nights* is a mediocre achievement, largely a derivative of Soviet Socialist Realism, while the realism inherent in both traditional and new-style New Year's pictures made more them truly representative of the new identity of China's post-1949 agricultural society.

The 1980s was an extraordinarily fruitful decade for art in China, partly a result of the sense of artistic tension. Once the door to the outside world was open, Chinese artists found themselves in a deep valley, trapped by the increasing rejection of the great artistic achievements of both the ancient East and the modern West. There was lively discourse in the arts, and the art world itself witnessed great competition and contention, leading to a situation of the survival of the fittest which, in turn, heralded a gradual return to a more natural order in which events developed at their own pace.

But with a more varied cultural diet that necessitates making clear choices, the two-sided conflict has only grown more intense, and more extreme, due in part to increasing freedom and openness in Chinese society. By observing how proponents of particular schools of art in China can immediately point out the weaknesses and faults of the other schools, it becomes apparent that we are indeed still trapped in a deep gorge, torn between two extremes that will be difficult to reconcile.

Yet any unprecedented period of chaos augurs well for a major reconciliation. In fact the past few years have seen a number of artists who have managed to integrate different influences and produce outstanding results in their works. These include Xu Bing, Lü Shengzhong, Gu Wenda, Huang Yongping, Zhang Peili, Xia Xiaowan, Ding Fang and Wang Guangyi. If the artistic evolution in China suffers no major setbacks, in the next century Chinese art will be sure to escape from its present conundrum. When that happens, world-class Chinese artists are likely to be discovered not by Western critics, but by Chinese critics, who today are also building up foundations in the gorge, gradually attaining theoretical sophistication just as artists are achieving aesthetic maturity.

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(Translated by Don J. Cohn)

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TOWARDS THE WORLD: CHINA'S NEW ART, 1989–93

Nicholas Jose

The first importance of China's new art is that it exists at all. Each work, apart from any individual qualities and meanings it may offer, asserts in its very existence a determination to reconstruct the place of creativity within China's massive, long-lived political culture. Fine art traditionally enjoyed a privileged if intensely disciplined place within a system of political, social and cultural management that was self-contained, hierarchical and totalising. The highest arts of calligraphy and painting (*guohua*) may have been enhanced by the conditions and conventions of their production, achieving through intimate engagement with philosophical and spiritual concepts, a transcendent flight into freedom, individuality and infinite expressiveness. But such achievements were paid for by a formidably conservative tradition that, in the name of refinement, narrowed the range of art's materials, objects and appeals, cutting it off from its more robust sisters, ceramics, furniture, print making, architecture, sculpture and folk arts.

From early times foreign influences proved difficult to digest, retaining a freakish quality, even in the hands of masters, whether Castiglione or Xu Beihong. In the 20th century, modernizers and reformers, quick to adopt new and foreign art forms, such as oil painting and photography, challenged the introversion of traditional Chinese painting, but the surge of artistic modernism that accompanied the years of China's national reawakening only partially survived the transition to the new communist order, when art, serving politics in accordance with Mao Zedong's Yan'an directives, turned once again to a highly codified and directed system, self-contained despite its pretense of reflecting reality, conservative despite its revolutionary claims and the cult of a New China. Innovations were absorbed, co-opted or turned Soviet. The indigenous creativity unleashed during the Cultural Revolution, defying high art orthodoxy, is even now only just beginning to penetrate, in retrospect, the self-enclosing structures of critical consciousness in China's art world. Post-Mao Chinese art begins from the perception that, like the country as a whole, creativity had become wounded, impotent and moribund.

Debility was evident too in the lack of impact of Chinese art on the outside world. There is no Chinese parallel to the interaction of Japanese art with that of the West from the time of Whistler, in developing international styles and markets. The reception of Western art in China has been filtered, largely through Soviet, and sometimes Taiwanese, models. In the 1980s poor-quality reproduction remained the chief means of disseminating images for the force-feeding of successive avant-garde styles that Chinese artists have inflicted on themselves since the open door. Art historical depth, a pre-condition of post-modernism, is parodied by a grab at novelty. A reaction among Chinese artists to the estimation of value represented by a Japanese buyer's paying millions for a van Gogh was to ask how you can learn to paint in the same successful way.¹ To a degree that is quite remarkable for so distinguished an artistic tradition — to a degree where it almost becomes a strength — Chinese art has kept to itself in the modern period, isolated from the world, innocent, or naive, or simply absorbed in its own unhappy story.

The desire to change this state of affairs underpins China's New Art, distinguishing it from contemporary Chinese art in the more general sense, which may have a contemporary inflection, but lacks the central, driving impulse to remake or restate the culture, to burst the boundaries and take on the world. In this way, China's New Art is a movement (*yundong*), with some of the characteristics of the political movements — that quintessentially PRC form of social organisation and activity — that have shaped the lives of most of the art practitioners who have emerged since 1979. Individual artists may resist the notion that a political agenda underlies their work, but that is to deny the basic conditions that have made their art possible. China's New Art is a product of the economic reforms, expressing the anarchic, individualistic, entrepreneurial and materialistic energies that have been released during the 1980s, the lurching ideological manipulations that have attempted to approve or control what is happening, and the power playing behind it all. Just as radical changes in communications in China have contributed to the inflow of information, even more important has been the knowledge that information about China can flow out, to be instantaneously presented to the citizens of the world. The display of energy, idealism, passion and violence in Tian'anmen Square in 1989, in which Chinese on all sides found themselves exhibited to an engrossed world, confirmed the awareness that the boundaries of the Middle Kingdom were newly transparent. The protest movement was, from this point of view, an act of self-expression by the lost generation of the 1950s and their 1980s heirs. It was heralded by increasingly flagrant visual art showings, culminating in the takeover of the China Art Gallery by the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in Beijing in February 1989, not two months before the demonstrations started; and, although the subsequent ideological purges singled out avant-garde art for virulent attack, artists eventually returned to their work with renewed conviction, 1989 having marked a paradoxical point of consolidation.² At last there was the prospect of Chinese art going out to the world, as speedily as if the artists had poured themselves onto a satellite transponder.

Towards the world (zou xiang shijie) [this term has been rendered elsewhere as "going international" — Ed.] was one of the slogans of the 1980s, used, for instance, to hail China's triumphal participation in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games: "Break out of Asia, head for the World!" (*Chongchu Yazhou, zou xiang shijie!*). The modern Chinese word for "world" was originally a Tang-dynasty import from Indian Buddhism, referring to "space". Not until 1876, around the time that Chinese intellectuals were recognising the need to know about foreign countries, was the term used to refer to "world," as in the Chinese translation of "World Exhibition." The cultural historian Zhong Shuhe, documenting late-Qing journeys to the outside world, called his book series, published in the 1980s, *Zou xiang shijie* (there translated "From East to West"), recognising the phrase's ancestry in the reformist attitudes of that period.³ In the 1960s, expressing support for the communists in the Vietnam war, Mao was adapting the idea: *Xionghuai zuguo, fangyan shijie* (*With the motherland in your heart, have the world in your sights.*) Resurfacing in the 1980s, in appeals to China's ambitions in the spheres of international corporatism and multilateral politics, as well as in sport,

intellectual and cultural life and economic productivity, the slogan ironically echoes Maoist doctrines of global revolution and the proletarian international. Kang Youwei's *Great Community (Datong)* was reconceived once more.

Towards the world also applied to art, where it signalled bumper harvests of productivity, emanating from artist groups rather than individuals, bold liberation from constraints on self-expression (especially erotic expression), ransacking of artistic traditions without regard to nation, history or cultural context, explosion of the boundaries that abstracted high art from the general visual culture and material world, and defiance of literal or utilitarian meaning in favour of the journey out, towards humanity, towards existential being, towards the cosmos. Chinese art would plunder the universe in order to conquer it.

Such boldness of intent is registered specifically in the subject matter of some of the paintings. Li Shan's *International Dialogue: Bush and Gorbachev* (1989), for instance, depicts the world's leaders as contending forces of creation and destruction, locked together in an exchange of fiery breath, as they emerge from cosmic lotuses against a blue heaven. It gives an olympian, cartoon-like view of world history, from the perspective of a China that stands beyond it. Wang Guangyi's 1991 series, combining agitprop Cultural Revolution images of revolutionary communism with the marketing icons of international capitalism, locks together the warring ideologies of the 20th century as one converts into the other, equal and opposite, *yin* and *yang*. Yu Youhan achieves a similar marriage of contradictions between Mao and Whitney Houston. In different ways, Ren Jian's utilisation of postage stamps from around the world in his *Stamps Collection* series (1990–91), and maps of foreign countries in his *Scanning* series (1990), and Hong Hao's silkscreen *Distribution of Guided Missiles* (1989) turn internationalist aspirations to irony.

The plethora of Mao images, revitalised by artists using methods drawn from Dada and Pop, anticipated the popular deification of Mao in 1991–92. It is a good example of how the babelish techniques of avant-gardism have allowed Chinese artists to project their own history as cosmic psychodrama onto gallery screens for the world. *Childhood* by Liu Wei, Wang Youshen's *Portrait Series* (1989) and Liu Dahong's *Four Seasons – Autumn* show reworkings of Mao — perhaps the only Chinese icon that rivals Coca-Cola in international familiarity. Universalising ambitions are seen more generally in other such key works of the New Art movement as Wu Shanzhuan's 1986 installation *Red Series 1* in which basic Chinese characters and symbols are used to chart the space as a cosmos, or Xu Bing's 1987–91 installation series *A Mirror to Analyse the World*, later renamed *A Book from the Sky*, hinting at a myth in which the Chinese ordering of the universe has been handed down from above in the form of characters that offer only an illusion of meaning.⁴ Other artists appropriate myths from Western religion and culture to serve equally fundamental metaphysical projections into realms of primary universal experience, as, for example, Ding Fang's use of Christian imagery (à *Pieta*) in *Towards Belief – Repose* (1989) and of the fortress in the *Walled City* series (1990), and Wei Guangqing's use of Adam and Eve in his *Yellow Book* series (1990). Archetypal gods and heroes, constructed from the mass of everyday materials, loom imposing and monumental in many works, strange nameless totems that have arisen from the remote past, from distant regions, or from subconscious depths, to satisfy the uncomfortable yearning for power and reverence that lies within the longing for universal presence, as in Pan Dehai's *Corn* series and Fu Zhongwang's *Mortise and Tenon* sculptures. There is irony in all this worship of cornballs and blockheads, of course, and frequently a sense that the power of myth or history has been fragmented or become inaccessible, as in the enigmatic ceremonies portrayed in Zhang Xiaogang's paintings. Elsewhere the universal is a stylisation of the erotic, with libidinal (mostly phallic) fantasies and procreative dreams and nightmares enacted in the work, as in Li Luming's *Red Tree Clan* series (1989) or Lü Shengzhong's baby boom paper-cut installation *Summoning the Spirits* (1990). Inflated balloons were used to produce huge soft porn "Erectionist" sculptures for the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition by artists who cited D.H. Lawrence to the effect that sex is the key to the rebirth of life and spirit.⁵ These obsessions perhaps reflect the anxiety among "male Chinese intellectuals ... about the lack of *yanggang zhi qi* [a spirit of steely manhood]" in contemporary China.⁶ At an extreme, self-liberation veers towards mere exhibitionism, as in Li Shan's photorealist studies of a great pink lotus sprouting from the unzipped trousers of a monochrome youth who stares down in submissive surprise, or Sun Ping's *arte povera* piece in which a grey army blanket is sprayed with abstract blotches of his own cum in a proud boyish attempt to leave his mark.⁷

Behind such playfulness, however, lies a profound need to reach beyond the specifics of culture, through the carnival of art, to obscure rituals that are designed to open-sesame the taboo doors of the universe. In this context, abstraction offers the pure end of the journey, exemplified at its most extreme in the *Analysis* (1989) project of Gu Dexin, Wang Luyan, Li Qiang and others, where universal presences are found in imaginary geometry stripped of all human reference. Or there is Xu Hong whose large *Himalayan Wind* (1989) images, formed from crushed coal applied to black-painted canvas and covered with fine white paper, evoke elemental contrasts and primordial origins. Ding Yi's geometric abstraction is a softer version, in which carefully applied layers of subtly relating colours achieve a musical beauty — and in which the work rediscovers affinities with folk textiles on the one hand and industrial design products, such as wallpaper for beautifying the home, on the other. Bourgeois commodification (a new luxury in China) comes in to oppose the artist's universalising project.

A prerequisite for producing a universal message is the language in which to express it. China's New Art has gone towards the world in a period of intense cultural and historical crisis for China. The art needs to be densely contextualised in order to be understood. At the same time, it enters an international art environment at a time of heightened post-modernist consciousness of cultural relativism, otherness and marginality, and the de-colonising

interrogation of discourses of histories and traditions (plural). In this environment, the art is contextualised and read in quite different ways. The positioning of China's New Art somewhere between "China" and "the world" makes for enlivening ambiguities of interpretation and response which the best artists are able to exploit. This is particularly the case where Chinese text is used, or non-Chinese text, as in the case of Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*, where viewers able to read Chinese may be disturbed by the work's absurdist negation of traditional Chinese culture, while those for whom the text seems to be an expression of loving traditional craftsmanship are moved by the strange beauty of the shrine-like installation.

Fang Lijun's large "Cynical Realist" paintings of bald or shaven-headed males may appear to reject the metaphysical yearnings of other contemporary artists, as they also reject revolutionary realist heroics, in favour of the gormless grotesquerie of ordinary people. But they too are inflated presences, floating in a void, eager or confused. To the Chinese superiority-inferiority complex, Fang Lijun's images can be painfully and provocatively unflattering, while to outsiders their scale and garishness give amusement an edge of threat. Despite their T-shirts and blue jeans, these are not all-American kids. The raw, painful spot where ugliness and tenderness meet is probed by Liu Wei in his comic portraits of family members, and in Wang Jingsong's witty satires of blank-faced fanatic enthusiasts, in his *Mass Choir* and *Mass Qigong* paintings. The figures in these highly social works wear fashionable, or old-fashioned, masks to conceal from the viewer — the outsider — the pathos of lost individuality of which the insider — the artist — is acutely aware. As with the staged new-realist group portraits of Liu Xiaodong, or Zeng Fanzhi's *Hospital* series, in which huge eyes stare forlornly from patients before and after treatment, the foreign viewer is likely to be discomfited by a sense that the work is derivative, and jump to identify influences — Ludwig Kirchner, Max Beckmann — before realising that the feeling of emptiness, the lack of identity, registered in the artist's homage to a foreign doppelgänger is part of the effect. The forerunner's identity is adopted as another kind of mask or imposture. (In the cases cited, the act of homage is to German Expressionist artists whose work was denounced as degenerate by the Nazis). Appropriation of kindred spirits fits with the painterly plenitude and forthright composition of these works, which boldly extend academic realism, as it appears in the Chinese curriculum, into perverse domains of cultural cross-dressing. The combination of self-portraiture with self-imposture, evolving from passionately applied powers of photographic observation, in works by Liu Xiaodong, Yu Hong, He Sen and even Song Yonghong, is part of an art that mirrors a generation to itself at the same time as displaying that generation to an outside world. It is perhaps the first time in China that art has addressed the viewer with such personal directness. "Here I am! I am You!" The response must vary with the extent to which one identifies.

Guan Wei is one artist who has taken on the ironies and misprisions of cultural crossover in a cooler, more relaxed fashion. His series *The Living Specimens* (1991) splits vertical panels into three with landmarks of modern Western art pickled in beakers in the middle while images from Chinese folk culture, or Chinese parodies of classical Western art, float above and below, suggesting humorous incongruities of symbiosis and containment. The whimsical approach suggests a new kind of individuality, less promethean ego than detached passer-by. The toy-like pieces, video ceremonies and installations of Song Haidong, Geng Jianyi and others, using an eclectic mix of traditional and new, indigenous and exotic material to produce humble, if bizarre, objects of contemplation, achieve a comparable quality of cool play. And Shen Qin's superb works of ink-and-wash on paper manage to evoke a quality of infinity and endless movement that easily steps beyond the grid of cultural-historical issues that provides the circuit-board for the New Art movement.

Chinese text and allusions to Western artworks are only the most obvious examples of elements that change their meaning as the context of reception alters. It can be argued that more general attitudes, such as a reluctance to acknowledge cultural boundaries, a determined liberation from modesty, an assertion of phallic potency, are also qualities that exhilarate in one context, but imply their own deflation in another. Even colours — the yellow-brown of the Yellow River and its yellow people; the red of good fortune, communism and blood; the black of hair and eyes, of heart and ink — are culturally coded and mutate with travel. Similarly, the materials selected and techniques used — paper cut, printed or soaked with ink; fibres daubed with mud, to produce oil painting; wood carved, joined and painted, as in temple-building — refer back to cultural fundamentals in ways that can only be touched on here. Sometimes the derivation of references, if not understood, obscures the work's meaning. In Ah Xian's *Heavy Wounds* (1991) series, for instance, the way human beings are visualised and even conceived is mediated by crude, mass-produced models. Closely following Cultural Revolution-period first-aid manuals that offered instruction on how to bandage wounds in case of emergency, the artist shows the sources of human creativity — brain, the sense organs, the genitalia — bound and gagged. The dumb emptiness of people's faces is a travesty of the spiritual emptiness suggested by the stylised Taoist waves in the background. Zhang Peili's *Anchors* (a nice conversion into English) updates the totalitarian construction of the world with images of the China Central Television news reader who brought the good news of the "peaceful suppression of counterrevolutionary turmoil" in Tian'anmen Square in 1989 — again a context-dependent image that elicits laughter at home, pathos abroad.

Longer-range references may also be at work, tacitly, as in the case of Mao Lizi, whose hyperrealist paintings include a *trompe l'oeil* effect in which scraps of paper — airline tags and so forth — appear to be stuck to the textured surfaces of doors or walls. His work uncannily unearths the old Chinese tradition of *bapo* painting, an artisan style that gradually came to represent "the Chinese literati ideal of dignity in poverty and respect for the plain and homely."⁸ The work is susceptible, simultaneously, of interpretation in terms of the most "advanced" Western

theories of deconstruction (avidly received into China in the 1980s, if only as a metaphor for what Deng Xiaoping's reforms were doing to the nominal national ideology), or as a highly marketable virtuoso exercise.

New China meets old China in portable form. Polyglot consumerism, powered by commodity fetishism, escapes like a genie from the bottle of xenophobic, non-self-owning (*wu zi chan*) collectivist materialism. Like the perky CCTV newsreader, China's New Art goes straight out towards the world, into the ether of globalised culture. In doing so, it participates in a unique and endlessly fascinating way in processes of cultural transformation, redefinition and self-reflection. Energy, talent, ambition and individual inflection are translated by the productive moment and movement that has made the art possible. The art is enhanced by its complex, problematic and ambiguous circumstances and enriched by the processes of interpretation and misinterpretation that surround it, the admiration and disgust it generates. If we can only experience it fully, China's New Art offers a set of extraordinarily fertile, movingly human expressions of social and cultural re-orientations that are probably without precedent and that may well prove to have turned the world inside out.

Notes:

¹ For a discussion of these issues, see *Art and Market* (*Yishu shichang*), 4.1991, Sichuan Art Publishing House.

² A comprehensive record of the development of Chinese art up to the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition can be found in *A History of China's Modern Art* (*Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi, 1979–89*) by Lü Peng and Yi Dan, Hunan Fine Art Publishing House, 1992. The book reproduces works by many artists referred to in this essay.

³ Zhong Shuhe, *Zou xiang shijie: jindai Zhongguo zhishifenzi kaocha Xifangde lishi*, Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1985. Qian Zhongshu writes in his introduction that "[the relationship between the inside and the outside] is like that of lovers who are both eager for and shy of intimacy." See Geremie Barmé and Linda Jaivin (ed.), *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices*, Random House, New York, 1992, p. 452.

⁴ Claire Roberts, *New Art from China*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1992, charts the evolutions of Xu Bing's work.

⁵ Lü Peng and Yi Dan, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

⁶ Linda Jaivin, "Sex, Mao and Rock 'n' Roll," *The Independent Monthly*, October 1992, p. 31.

⁷ *Huajia* (*Artist*), No. 15, January 1991 (Hunan meishu chubanshe).

⁸ Nancy Berliner, "The 'Eight Broken': Chinese Trompe-l'oeil Painting," *Orientations*, February 1992, pp. 61–70.

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CHOICE AND OPPORTUNITY: THE FATE OF WESTERN CONTEMPORARY ART IN CHINA

Yi Ying

The influence which Western contemporary art has exerted on China's New Art is not a purely artistic phenomenon. Alongside its aesthetic influence, Western contemporary art has provided an added cultural value. Adopting Western contemporary art as its model, the emergence of avant-garde art in China can be compared to the introduction of blue jeans, rock n' roll and Coca-Cola. For this reason, we have not used strictly artistic criteria to analyse and appraise Western contemporary art in an effort to extract elements of use to ourselves. Instead, ours have been rather emotional attempts at borrowing and copying, driven in part by our lack of knowledge and of theoretical sophistication.

This is not an entirely negative phenomenon, however. In fact, in its aim to transcend existing parameters in order to establish a language system relevant to contemporary society, this phenomenon can be compared to the rise of an interest in Eastern philosophy and Primitivism in Europe during the 19th century. In both cases, schools of thought from foreign cultures are adopted as models upon which to structure an alternative means of expression.

The difference between the two is that in our case we have stood in backwardness and passivity due to our previous state of isolation, a state changed only as the nation's doors suddenly flung open, creating an historical cross-section of aesthetic and cultural influences. As this relaxation of policy took effect, all the styles, schools of thought as well as developments in Western art during the past 100-odd years were suddenly ushered into China. Consequently, we are confronting a specific history, but the process by which we learn and borrow from this history has not taken place in chronological order.

The development of any school of thought or style in Western art has naturally been dictated by surrounding social, economic, political and cultural conditions. What we see, however, is only the end result or the symbols of the phenomenon known as contemporary art, and not what these symbols represent — namely, the process by which a modern society much more advanced than our own has been formed. Therefore, we employ Western contemporary art as a tool which serves two functions: the first, as signs and signals with which to express the attitudes toward a certain value system; the second, as the vehicle with which to deconstruct traditional forms and, simultaneously, as the building materials with which to construct a new formalist language. Thus, as far as we are concerned, its utilitarian value far outweighs any significant historical conditions or background against which the art itself was created.

If we were to examine the relationship between China's avant-garde art and Western contemporary art from a cultural perspective, we would find at least two major factors which have contributed to form a cultural environment which facilitated Western contemporary art's becoming the catalyst for China's new art.

The first factor is the discipline of art. Although Western contemporary art was introduced to China as early as the May Fourth movement, subsequent class struggles in China and in various other places around the world, as well as conflicts between the traditional and New China created an environment that is hardly conducive to the comprehensive study and adaptation of Western contemporary art.

Following the founding of New China, a classical academy-style teaching system was established based on the Soviet Union's arts education system. Combining European Classicism and Soviet Socialist Realism, the Soviet system taught China a lesson about the Classical Academy tradition in art. Likewise, the Socialist Realist creative approach produced very positive effects amidst the revolutionary fervor of the period.

By the onset of the Cultural Revolution, however, realism had lost its original impact, having become the tool of political propaganda. Most artists by this point knew neither what artistic character meant, nor of the movements in contemporary art that had taken place around the world heretofore.

The realism wholly dictated by political slogans could in no way adjust to fit the new visual relationships and aesthetic vocabulary being formulated in contemporary society. Nor could it reflect the unique experiences which the artists undergo as part of their creative processes. Consequently, the inception of China's avant-garde art occurred when artists began looking for a "way out" for their own art. As soon as they started searching for a new means of expression, Western contemporary art logically became the main source of reference.

The second factor can be illustrated through comparisons with developments in China's literary realm which became a part of the "thought liberation" movement during the early 1980's. This is the expected turn of events for the vital areas of any cultural system, and the same applies to art. If we were to examine Western contemporary art in the same context — that is, as part of the cultural system along with politics, the economy, etc. — it can be concluded that countercultural forms in art constitute acts of rebellion against existing social norms.

Given this understanding, the phenomenon of contemporary art in China logically takes on some degree of political colour. Likewise, avant-garde art has become synonymous with artistic freedom and liberation. The evolution of China's New Art also reinforces the point that problems in art are not restricted to the realm of art. In China's case, the development of art is inextricably interwoven with the nation's unique political environment. One will note, for example, that progressive literary and artistic movements are the first to experience repercussions of any political conflict.

Conversely, a majority of young artists view contemporary art as the guide and means to liberating their thought. To this end, their creations are significant beyond the purely artistic context because they also represent the artists' rebellion against cultural autocracy.

Art, nonetheless, has its own set of rules and regulations, and effecting valuable social changes is not necessarily its final objective. Although the borrowing and adaptation of Western contemporary art may suggest to some a veiled identification with the culture imported along with the art, in the end, China's own cultural heritage and practical needs have resulted in a paradoxical treatment of this foreign art — namely, one of simultaneous rejection and tolerance.

In other words, the acceptance of one style and the rejection of another are not decided by the will of individual artists, but determined by cultural heritage and social trends. Whether in the East or West, any style of art is only realised through tangible creations and manipulations by the artists. When a style is transplanted, it may influence and become a part of the local culture, or it may be ignored or rejected.

The fate of Western contemporary art in China demonstrates the point that the adaptability of any art form is determined by existing social needs and conditions, and that the success of a style in one culture does not guarantee its adaptability in another culture. Likewise, a certain major school in Western contemporary art may also have a great following in China, but the effect produced by China's artists will never outweigh the impact produced by artists in the West.

Since Western Modernism and China's avant-garde art have been created under completely different historical motifs, their artistic value should also be evaluated by different standards. For example, although China's avant-garde art is inspired and driven by the desire to issue cultural criticism, it does not expect its own evaluation to be based on the actual effectiveness of the critique.

Likewise, an imitation of Western contemporary art can be said to be a cultural commentary, but would not necessarily hold any value as art. The standards of art criticism are extracted from China's own cultural heritage and practical surroundings. Worth noting, then, is the paradox that it is precisely these same conditions that have caused Western contemporary art to mutate, or altogether lose its original effectiveness when transplanted to China.

We can now refer to specific examples to analyse which of the major schools in Western Modernism have influenced China's art. Please note that the categories have been established only to facilitate discussion, and that no definitive barriers exist between various schools. Also, the relationship between contemporary art in the West and China is not purely one of stimulus-response. As time goes on, sources of inspiration and the recipients of their influence may frequently exchange roles. In other words, the creator comes under the influence of that which was created. Such changes cannot always be described as passive. In fact, they are often determined by choice and are vital to evolution.

1. REALISM

The realist style is easily accepted in China. On the one hand, it fulfills the technical demands of the academy's expectations, while representing the habitual tendency towards the narrative or descriptive approach — one which always attempts to define concepts through representative techniques. For all the ease with which it has been accepted, it is interesting to note that the Modernist concept inherent in Western realism frequently becomes twisted or trivialized in China.

Although the influence of Western Modernism on 20th Chinese art can be said to be extremely far-reaching, there are three particular elements which have had greater influence than others. The first is the realist technique of Andrew Wyeth, whose style reveals both nostalgia for the past as well as hope for the future. In China this concept translated into a typical pastoral realism, which ultimately developed into commercially appealing paintings that feature ethnic scenes.

The second element derives from the quasi-Surrealist style of the Canadian painter Alex Colville. Although this artist is relatively minor in the history of modern Western art, his works enjoy a great following in China. The emulation of his style, in fact, reveals a dilemma experienced by the artists, who have settled on a rather helpless compromise between the Modernist consciousness and the academic style.

The third factor, and the one which has exerted the strongest influence, is Realist art, in particular contemporary Realist styles such as Photo-Realism, a style easily imitated by the academy-trained Chinese artists. Artists working in the contemporary Realist styles actually reflect divergent intentions. One group has adopted these styles as a tool to supplement traditional Realist techniques, while the other uses a Realist approach to record and present, with cold detachment, the existential conditions of Chinese people. The former group remains within the confines of tradition, whereas the latter group demonstrates an avant-garde consciousness.

2. EXPRESSIONISM/EXPRESSIONIST ART

“Expressionist” art includes the work of Post-Impressionists, German Expressionists and Neo-Expressionists, as well as of certain painters in the Paris School. The Expressionist style finds itself extremely well-accepted as well as widely influential in China. In content, it befits the pursuit of self-expression and personal liberation; in form and language, it is tangible, yet free, with a strong aesthetic language that yet allows for personalized expression. In essence, Expressionism does not so much reflect new visual relationships as give voice to the individual will and spirit, providing an emotional release.

In form, Expressionist art reveals utter scorn for tradition; yet in media, tools and cultural content, it is closely linked to tradition. Furthermore, it is capable of directly communicating themes of social history. In China, with its unique history, characterised in contemporary society by a strong thirst for and pursuit of a modernised society, as well as by low productivity and an equally low standard of living, Expressionist art finds a most suitable soil in which to flourish. The influences of Expressionism can be detected in works by three generations of artists, with the youngest artists exhibiting the most varied experimentation and at the same time the closest attention to Form.

At present, Expressionism in China is developing its own form, gradually evolving into a new school whose objective is not so much to understand Western Expressionist art, but rather to use an Expressionist technique to interpret China’s cultural heritage and current realities, and to more truthfully demonstrate the emotions and the perspective of the individual consciousness.

3. PRIMITIVISM

At the onset of the European Modernist movement, Primitivism referred not to a tangible school or style, but to a conceptual idea. The move to counter academism and classicism was the direct cause of the rise of Primitivism in the West, as avant-garde artists sought a new language to break out of the confines of tradition. The call to reconstruct art from the starting point of civilisation indicates the rejection of established art, in that it seeks to return to the direct expression of feelings instead of repeating the rules established by the academies. During the early stages of Western Modernism, Primitivism had an extremely broad scope, encompassing primitive, Eastern, Near Eastern, Mayan, African and Medieval European arts. It can be said that Primitivism provided the first point of reference for avant-garde art.

Primitivism surfaced in China to serve two purposes. One runs parallel to the purposes of Western Primitivism: to break through existing rules and regulations and shift the creative emphasis from subject matter to form and style. This approach has led to a reexamination of Chinese folk arts and classical painting to find representative forms. The goal of this exercise is not only to demonstrate creative freedom, but also to remind us that these forms possess the spirit of free creation in and of themselves. The archaic, simple structures reflect the workings of the human will and spirit and a natural expression of beauty which are lacking in art dictated by strictly defined rules.

The other purpose is to present a challenge. The influx of modern Western art eventually caused a reaction in the ethnic consciousness of Chinese artists, spurring them on to join in international artistic developments and participate in a dialogue with the world from their own unique perspective. Amidst the myriad Modernist schools of thought, Primitivism alone does not extract visual images directly from contemporary society, but possesses a dual nature of ethnicity and modernism.

For China’s artists, Primitivism is not only an indication of a modern art consciousness; it also firmly exposes, amidst the influx of Western art, fundamental problems inherent within any ethnic culture. As a result, Primitivism verbalizes at the same time a universal consciousness and the drive to search for ethnic roots. At the present moment, the quest is for ways to articulate the modern consciousness as it frees itself of folk art’s formal language, on which it is based, and progresses towards maturity. However, we continue to look to the West as we pursue this quest, rather than to our own culture.

4. SYMBOLISM

Symbolism in modern Western art does not so much imply a specific school as much as a psychological approach. Visually, it is tangible/realistic and at the same time narrative/descriptive. Furthermore, “Something else always exists behind the obvious form and colours — another world or a different system of meaning,” stated Lucie-Smith in *Symbolist Art*. In the history of the Symbolist movement, dating from the Pre-Raphaelites to the middle of the 20th century, Surrealism proves to be the style most representative of the Symbolist spirit. In adopting the foundations of Classicism to present a spiritual world of the unconscious mind, Surrealism encompasses a wide scope, incorporating a great variety of imagery.

Surrealism stimulated a strong response as soon as it was introduced in China, and has continued to evolve. In terms of form, this style accommodates the habitual emphasis on technique instilled by artists’ academy training in Realism: artists are comfortable with it, as they do not have to abandon what they know best for the sake of

incorporating this model. Likewise, Surrealism's symbolist and at the same time conceptual/theoretical nature functions to directly intercept and interpret reality, thus fulfilling contemporary Chinese artists' everpresent need to evaluate the way things are, especially during these times of rapid and drastic change.

In China, Surrealism/Symbolism has become the expression of counter-Realism, and an intensely critical consciousness. To some extent, it is also individualised, subjectivised, philosophised and conceptualised, reflecting more deeply a distortion in youth's individual state of mind under the great burden of tradition and society. In this sense, the Chinese version of Surrealism differs greatly from Western Surrealist art, which employs the principles of psychoanalysis to demonstrate dreamscapes and latent sexuality.

5. POP ART AND CONCEPTUAL ART

After American Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg held a large-scale exhibition in Beijing in 1985, almost overnight artists all over China began playing with Pop style, despite the fact that no one — including artists and critics — really understood the meaning of Pop art.

In the United States, Pop art was at the same time an extreme expression of commercial culture in art form, and a counter-attack on the commercialism which threatened to destroy the "humanity" of society. While China had then, and still has, a long way to go before becoming a modern commercial society, Chinese artists picked up the outward forms of Pop art, absorbed the rebellious anti-art core, and made the Pop style one of the major art forms in new art since 1985. Young people eagerly adopted this anti-art approach as a means of forcefully expressing their own existence, their own individual lifestyles and the vitality of their rebellion against the status quo.

To some, Chinese Pop art is nothing more than a shallow and pretentious imitation of the original. However, treated on a phenomenological level, there are essential differences between Chinese Pop and Western Pop.

In its early phase, Western Modernism upheld as its mission the creation of a new cultural language to replace the language of the capitalist culture that had lost its effectiveness. Also entertained at this time was the fantasy of liberating art from the capitalist market and the bondage imposed by money. However, the fate of Modernist art was to become an anti-capitalist, bourgeois sub-culture, a subjugated appendage of commercialized society.

Consequently, for Pop art to negate an already commercialised Modernist tradition during an era of high consumerism, is to negate art itself. In its act of negation, the Pop phenomenon in China's new art is comparable to original Pop art: it is in the object of negation or denial that the two differ.

Though China's own Pop phenomenon does not have all the distinguishing characteristics of Pop created in a commercial culture, it does extract from Western Pop art the important concept of using ready-made products. That is to say, the employment of existing commercial items in lieu of painting or sculpting automatically is a statement of scorn and provocation against tradition and the status quo.

From Pop art, Chinese artists made the essential connection to conceptual art, although in the West this development took place against a very complicated background. That is, it involved a developmental logic based on Modernist art and Formalism, the political storm that shook Europe and the United States during the 1960's and 1970's, and also from a certain romanticism towards the high-tech era.

In China, conceptual art (including performance art and installation art) tends to be executed in a rather superficial and blind manner because it lacks not only the cultural readiness provided by the Modernist experience, but also the materials and technical expertise of the Post-Industrial age. Yet it occurred just the same, and with such force that it soon became New Art's focal point, a fact which had to be acknowledged by audience and critics alike, regardless of their opinion on the matter.

In tracing the reasons for the major impact and controversial nature of conceptual art in China, one must bear in mind there are other causes than the oft-proffered explanation that contemporary Chinese art inevitably replays all aspects of avant-garde Western art, and that the intense social response conceptual art arouses drives numerous talented young artists to taste this forbidden fruit. If we were to consider China's adaptation of Pop art as a plagiarism of form, then Conceptual art by definition encompasses a much more complex thought process and consciousness, which occurs on two levels. On one level, an extreme approach is used to express oneself, forcing others to take note of one's action and thereby affirming one's own worth. This in fact functions as a nearly desperate outcry in the plea for social recognition of values which artists believe to be oppressed or overlooked. Viewed in isolation, this appears as a ludicrous phenomenon unrelated to art; in fact, it is actually a fair portrayal of the way a segment of young people, both on the campus and out in society, examine their own value systems and way of life.

The second level is theoretical in nature, in that it treats Conceptual art as an art form to be analysed as a basis for creation. The effort at this level is particularly keen to discover similarities between elements in traditional Chinese

culture and Conceptual art, and has sparked a group of well-trained, young academy artists toward arduous experimentation. Their goal is to finally establish China's own modern art that would be capable of communicating with contemporary international art at the same level of articulation. Whether or not such utopian objectives can be realized is unimportant, as the sentiments are positively driven, and the pose optimistic. It should be added that, in New Art, such a position remains unique because it requires, after all, a higher level of cultivation.

For the most part, the introduction of major schools of Western Modernism has met certain needs in the development of China's own contemporary art, however distorted or misinterpreted these prototypes may have become during the process of experimentation and adaptation. Other important schools or styles, however, failed to exert the expected influence, not only underscoring the potential clash in the exchange between Eastern and Western traditions, but also reemphasising the symbiotic relationship of particular modes of Western Modernist art and modern industrial society. Without the latter, all efforts to assimilate these art forms would of necessity prove utterly futile. Two examples are cited below to illustrate this point.

1. ABSTRACT ART

Clement Greenburg, champion of Abstract Expressionism in the United States, dubbed "flatness" as the symbol of Western avant-garde art. He cited the process of deconstructing traditional classicism's three-dimensional structure, then building up a purely aesthetic language and system of forms based on the visual relationships inherent in modern industrial society.

The value of abstract art, therefore, does not exist in its purely aesthetic exterior (although numerous critics have worked very hard to establish its aesthetic qualities). Rather, its worth is intrinsic and attached to the cultural values it reveals. Similarly, the significance of abstract art is also determined by concrete conditions of the era, society and history.

Unlike the West, China does not possess the classical formalist tradition in art which evolved from and is driven by a humanist foundation. There was, however, a potent humanist spirit inherent in the induction of Western realism into China in the early 20th century as part of the drive to reform artistic language begun during the May Fourth movement.

As far as academic Chinese art is concerned, realist art from the West continues to provide fresh visual experiences. At the same time, this imported art brings with it a powerful potential as a tool for social criticism — powers lacking in traditional Chinese art. Once removed from concrete cultural restrictions and historical conditions, abstract art often leaves only a purely visual aesthetic effect. But China's art, at this time, cannot free itself from the temptation to use art as a means to express social consciousness.

Since the *Stars* Exhibitions of the 1979–80, individual artists in China have continuously carried out experiments with abstract art, but precious few have been successful. In addition to the larger macro-cultural context previously described, two other possible reasons present themselves.

The first is the lack of an effective point of entry. In the history of modern Western art, the evolution from the re-enactment of realism to abstract art was an historical process: an integrated system for abstract art developed only after countless experiments, comparisons and choices by several generations. In China, on the other hand, neither the concept nor the models for abstract art evolved as the result of the nation's own tradition, and to effect new breakthroughs based on purely visual communication is a task not easily accomplished.

The other reason is that the limitations of abstract art's aesthetic vocabulary and its deceptively simple executional style can easily lead back to the beginning. In other words, it would be easy to reach the limitations of the original works, leaving very little room for exploration and breakthroughs.

2. STRUCTURALISM

This refers to the kind of "structuralist" art which reflects the close relationship between modern art and modern industry, and that is typified by Malevich, Mondrian, American Minimalists and Pop art's "Op art." Modern industry is in itself a kind of culture. Machinery, architecture, consumer products, advertising, fashion, and interior design are only some of the phenomena whose purely structural and abstract beauty is altering people's traditional habits of appreciation, while at the same time providing them with new materials and the technology to realize fresh concepts.

It is noteworthy that the understanding of this abstract beauty must derive from first-hand experience. In other words, it comes from the influences exerted on visual relations by personal surroundings and has its foundation in a certain degree of materialistic culture. One can imagine that it is truly difficult to appreciate the aesthetics of a tidy, well-lit and stream-lined structure when one lives in a crowded, noisy and dark space.

Minimalists' metal sculptures appear quite cold, detached and monotonous on the surface, yet embody the ambiguity felt by people in the post-industrial era toward a mechanized civilization. On the one hand, the sculptures present human emotions as objects that are impossible to describe or experience in human language terms. On the other hand, the beautifully crafted, monumental geometric structures conjure up romantic associations with civilization's progress.

Perhaps it is this last realm of association that is the most difficult for China's new artists to enter. Those who dare set foot in this forbidden region soon find themselves in an embarrassing situation — their abstract structures appear to be either some kind of arbitrary stack totally without identification to the artist, or merely decorative geometric pieces; and the installation experiments look like nothing more than ready-made items found in Pop art! After all, without the capital or technology to fund and produce the exquisite pieces, one has no choice but to pick out a hodge-podge from the scrap metal pile.

It is not my intention to deny the talent and courage of these artists. It is just that the question they continue to ponder is the same which arose at the inception of Modernism — "What is art?" — rather than the more urgent question of how, given the specific cultural and sociological context, contemporary technology and new techniques should be applied to realize new concepts and new forms. That is the limitation of history and geography.

(Translated by Rachel Wang)

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EXPLOIT, EXPORT, EXPROPRIATE: ARTFUL MARKETING FROM CHINA, 1989–93

Geremie Barmé

It is both a cruel and happy fate to be an artist in Reformist China.

Cruel because chances for exhibiting one's work are slight, recognition rare and distorting, and there is little or no chance of having an impact on society at any level. One is engaged in a solipsistic project, auto-Orientalizing and forced to curry favour with the Occidental Other. Cruel too that cultural repression is not what it used to be. An erratic toleration has replaced pervasive totalitarianism; a laissez-faire *realpolitik* has been instituted for the rebellious who act within reason. Dissident and diverse art thus become another jewel in the crown of Chinese socialism.

Happy too is this fate. Repression gives life and creation a thrill missing in other systems. Whereas it may be true of post-industrial cultures that everything is interesting while nothing has any meaning, in China few things are of any interest yet some have a modicum of meaning. Significance is occasionally significant. The art markets of Hong Kong, Taiwan and the West cautiously welcome the perennial-avant-garde of China with its alluring patina of the illicit underground. Success in the international market place brings rewards the like of which many younger official artists can only dream: a measure of hard-currency wealth, exhibitions and private (not officially controlled and supervised) trips overseas and even a grudging, if jealous, acceptance among one's fellows.

While many have said that the cultural and political scene in China was reaching a point of unprecedented liberalisation in 1988–89, there is much evidence to show that it was in fact nearing bankruptcy and the tumultuous events of mid-1989 offered a kind of redemption.

The economic, political and social chaos of the proceeding months/years led me to comment in late 1988: "What perspective is possible now that the China Art Gallery, the proletarian palace of socialist art, makes its halls available to virtually any self-styled avant-garde artist who can afford the rental fee? The end result of Reform may well be the creation of a new avant-garde art-to-order: dissent on tap. Works of striking individuality continue to appear both in Beijing and the provinces. However, the government's erratic and hedonistic economic policies tend to encourage a soul-destroying cynicism in artists of lesser genius."¹

A number of powerful artists have been active in Beijing since 1989. Among these are Liu Wei, Fang Lijun and Liu Xiaodong. Along with some other artists, writers (in particular Wang Shuo) and certain members of the entertainment industry, they belong to or are at least fringe dwellers in the world of the *liumang*, the lout, hoodigan, rogue or picaro.² They are part of "what may be called the other Cultural Revolution generation, not the idealistic and disillusioned Red Guards, but their younger brothers and sisters who witnessed it all but grew up not disillusioned but dismissive, for many of them never believed the strident rhetoric at all. . . . They spent their childhood in a world that was both chaotic and mendacious and came of age in the materialistic 1980s, enjoying the consumer culture of the Reform age with few of the ideological, intellectual or emotional qualms experienced by older generations."³

Fang Lijun and Liu Wei, both graduates of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, are noted for a carefree lifestyle that is the envy of their fellows. Their work, particularly the bizarre portraits done by Liu Wei, illustrates the world of the *liumang*. They have exhibited together⁴ and were excluded from one semi-official exhibition in 1991,⁵ presumably for not conforming to the image of the upwardly mobile academy graduate. Liu Xiaodong, a provincial who has made it good in the capital, while not necessarily a picaro by nature, peoples his canvases with the *liumang* denizens of late-80s and early-90s Beijing. Fang Lijun sums up his philosophical outlook as follows: "Only a stupid bastard would allow himself to be cheated time and time again. We would rather be called hopeless, bored, dangerous, rogues and confused than be cheated again. Don't try any of your old tricks on us, for all dogma will be thoroughly questioned, negated and thrown into the rubbish bin."⁶ It is not an attitude calculated to please the authorities or the critics.

Baudelaire remarked that: "The chief task of genius is precisely to invent a stereotype." Wang Shuo's depiction in fiction of the *liumang* or wise-cracking young operator has created just such a stereotype. Other works in the genre of "*liumang* art" are included in this exhibition under the rubric of "Cynical Realism." The artists include Wang Jingsong, Song Yonghong, Yu Hong, Shen Xiaotong, et al., many of whom are provincials now active in Beijing. It is a cynicism, however, that is often tempered by a large measure of irony and humour.

On the provincial scene of recent years Liu Dahong is particularly noteworthy. Born in the seaside city of Qingdao, Shandong, in 1962, he graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts to become a teacher in Shanghai. Many of Liu's most extraordinary works exude the atmosphere of this city, yesteryear's adventurers' paradise and one of China's most intriguing carpetbagger enclaves today. His work ranges from political pastiche to the neo-baroque; more than any other painter working in China today, Liu can truly be dubbed the artist of the reform era.

But the economic marvels of reformist China have also taken their toll on the semi-official art scene. Previously I spoke of a "soul-destroying cynicism" that has grown in tandem with ideological collapse and the economic boom. It is a cynicism which differs in many respects from the existential condition of the above artists. Mocking society and politics as a creative attitude it also derides self-respect and integrity, feeding on and betraying the new-found dignity of the individual that has been the bedrock of China's fledgling post-Maoist culture. It is a cynicism that seizes on and exploits any market trend; one minute modernist, the next porno. Often hard to distinguish from the more profound and self-aware questioning of rogue artists, it is a creative attitude that is unredeemed by humour and bloated with a sense of its own importance. It is a cynicism that is cynical even about itself.

In early 1989, the China Art Gallery hosted the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, a grand gathering of China's then-new art, an art that was both nascent and senile at the same time. Nascent in that so many trends of international art freshly introduced (or reintroduced) to China were represented there; and yet senile because even the most up-to-date "isms" and foreign fads flooded the scene on a wave of popularity, impressed artists and viewers for a while and then went out of fashion. The *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition to a certain extent was a display of quick-frozen styles, innovations that seemed to lead nowhere and tired-out artistic trends of academic rather than artistic interest.

The local intelligentsia and the commentators have seen cynicism in the arts as symptomatic of the unsettling "post-ideological" age of reformist China; overseas observers and buyers have often interpreted it in the formulaic language of Soviet and Eastern European dissent; and all the while artists and writers have been engaged in the unsentimental project of adorning themselves and their works with it. But the cynicism — one that can be both positive when irony-laden and self-reflective as well as destructive of the creative impulse as we have observed in the above — that runs as a thread through so much of the most interesting literature, music and art from China today should not simply be seen as a product of a post-Mao ideological malaise. It is more a mood that is the product of the long-term marginalisation of élite culture.

The basic tenor of 20th-century Chinese intellectual life has been determined by a belief among intellectuals (writers, artists and thinkers) that they can and should play the pre-eminent role in the transformation and modernisation of the Chinese national character. Often ignoring their own inadequacies as independent individuals, they have shown a cocky eagerness to reform, educate and lead. More often than not they have been ignored. They have readily equated modernity with superiority and a lack of the same as being a mark of the inferior. This neophilia, the need to be modern, new and up-to-date, became a protean impulse and any ideology or cultural form that promised to satisfy this need was embraced. As the guardians of the traditional ways, their predecessors had failed egregiously to maintain cultural vitality and in this century intellectuals have been regularly shunted to the sidelines to embellish or justify the status of the rulers.

In the late 1980s, the liberal atmosphere of the society made the mannered poses of the suffering artist often appear shallow and unconvincing, even when they were genuine. Then with the unfolding of the events of 1989 redemption seemed possible. The student protests, popular enthusiasm and the international media hype followed by the massacre and vicious state repression validated Angst literally overnight. And here lay the root of the painful dilemma for mainland intellectuals and cultural figures in the late 1980s. They had increasingly come to enjoy a social prominence and sense of self-esteem unknown at any other period in Party rule. At the same time they were forced to bear witness to a national economic transformation that obviated their role in the society. The frustrations from this heightened sense of impotence — public profile without a concomitant political impact — in no small part led to the rebellion within the intelligentsia in 1988–89. The political and economic crises of the period that resulted in the protest movement in Beijing and other cities in April–June 1989 seemed to offer cultural figures a chance finally to play a decisive role in public life. But like many others they misjudged the situation and their own importance. To be cynical about the Party's hypocritical economic policies was easy, to reject its self-righteous cruelty and dated ideology after the Beijing massacre an act of self-affirmation and measured daring. But the horror of June 4 and its aftermath gradually gave way to further economic and cultural laxity and many of the works in this exhibition reflect the emotional and ideological confusion that artists have experienced as a result. Again we are faced with a spectrum of cynicism as well as a scale of Angst. At one end there is heart-felt sincerity and depth, at the other a shallow and callous wish to manipulate and exploit.

The 1989 exhibition and June 4 may also be taken as a convenient marker for the end of the artistic-historical narrative in mainland China. That narrative, the story of development from the late 1970s marked by discoveries, innovations and new perceptions, all too readily culled from overseas, had run its course. It is a narrative in which "making art was understood to be carrying forward the history of discovery and making new breakthroughs."⁷ From 1989 many mainland critics and artists have commented that the earlier narrative cohesion had unravelled. Innovation and variation inspired both by foreign models and native traditions continues but a growing cultural pluralism and the marginalisation of political ideology in the society have left creative artists in all areas increasingly unsure not only of their impact but of their relevance. The avant-garde of the 19th century was a reaction to the commodification of art; but the commodification of the avant-garde in China has been a major factor in the rise of the spirit of cynicism (be it the ironic disinterestedness of artists like Liu Wei or the calculated pose of others) in culture. It is a cynicism that plays with the tropes of life on the mainland while fixing a gimlet eye on the international market.

June 4 and the repression that unfolded in its wake did not close China off from the world again. Factions in the government were soon forced into an uneasy compromise and it is the resultant stalemate in the early 1990s that has made even cynicism a near comic platitude. While it is the general rule that totalitarian governments have a low toleration level for satire, from late 1990 political satire of a type not formerly seen in China was beginning to appear. In early 1992, satire and the widespread attitude of cynicism even made it onto television with the screening of the sitcom "The Editors." Not only was the series given government awards, the language of the Beijing *liumang* found popularity with a mass audience and the media promoted it.⁸ It is doubtful whether the style of flippant cynicism seen in all the arts in China today would have been similarly welcomed during earlier periods of official "liberalisation" in 1986 and 1988–89. Even the orthodox don't know what orthodoxy is any more. June 4 provided independent

artists a chance for transcendence, the egregious failures of totalitarian government to be its ruthless self then stole that moment away. China has joined the world, and the works in this exhibition reveal to what extent this has happened.

Many of the efforts of mainland Chinese artists are directed at "going international" (*zou xiang shijie*).⁹ This is a Chinese attitude that shares something in common with the program of late-19th-century Japanese thinkers who wanted to "slough off Asia" (*datsu a*)¹⁰ in the bid to become a modern, "civilised" nation. The difference is that while the Japanese desired to identify themselves with the West, Chinese concerns today are more with "breaking out of Asia" (*chongchu Yazhou*) to prove themselves on the world stage while still championing Chineseness. A repeated theme of the 1989 student agitation and the popular responses to it was that the massive, peaceful pro-democratic demonstrations staged on and around Tian'anmen Square proved that the Chinese had come of age. They had caught the world's attention and took, for the allotted 15 minutes, the centre stage of electronic media fame. Momentarily, China was part of the narrative of international contemporary life, comprehensible because the crude and universal (dare we say Hollywood?) paradigm was applied to harsh and contradictory realities: the young against the old, the people against the powerholders, dissidents against ideologues, free spirits against an ossified status quo. The outline of the story is so familiar as to be clichéd; only the names had been changed to confuse the guileless.

International interest in the types of Chinese art represented in this exhibition has led to some significant reactions on the local scene. There are those who, while applauding the efforts of contemporary artists to produce export-quality goods, caution against the pitfalls of international recognition. Fearful that overseas buyers and critics will lavish wealth and fame on the undeserving, they want to create and manipulate an art market on their own terms. There is a concerted effort being made by a group of (generally) younger critics, in particular Lü Peng from Sichuan, to create a "market awareness" for this "new" art in China, and an attempt to keep the art at home by buying it up. It is not unlike an investment in the futures market and they encourage state enterprises and entrepreneurs to get in on the ground floor.

There are also sincere patriotic reasons for developing the local art market. China's history as a colonised and subjugated nation was marked by cultural ransacking. Now, rather than see the overseas market replace the colonial powers of the past and carry off the spoils of unofficial art, local critics are justifiably mounting a fight-back. Within this context the non-official *Guangzhou Art Biannual* first held in October 1992 is the most significant.¹¹ The exhibition featured mostly regional artists from Hubei and Sichuan, yet it was attended by art critics, writers and others from China's major cities. In his opening address, Lü Peng, the energetic critic behind the event, said: "We are writing the history of Chinese art in the 90s. This Biannual is but the first page in that history. Industrialists, artists and creators are all equally important in our enterprise."¹² Among other things the organisers of this "art fair," as it is dubbed (bringing to mind the twice-yearly Guangzhou Trade Fair), claim it will help Chinese art to "compete in the international art market in a regulated fashion." Whether this means local prices can be competitive with those offered by offshore buyers and whether the artist gets to pocket as much as in a foreign sale is not clear. Since the communist party officially enshrined the "socialist market economy" in its political program in October 1992, one is led to speculate: How long then before the authorities finally abandon the role of censor and don the guise of promoter, championing the avant-garde as but one more pulchritudinous and profitable blossom among the hundred flowers of sanctioned Chinese culture? There were just such tendencies in the cultural sphere during the late 1980s, and as orthodox Maoist culture-crats make way for the young there are great possibilities for the future.

While recognizing the endeavours and cultural significance of mainland Chinese critics and how they reflect the ambitions and frustrations of intellectuals generally, one must not discount the practical dimensions of their role to maintain their privileged position as the "gate keepers" of aesthetic taste and arbiters of the new cultural canon. By creating a market for the product at home the critics are validating their own role as connoisseurs and conduits to fame, those who can guide and inform the taste of the collector-as-investor.¹³ Again we are seeing a disparate group of disenfranchised Chinese intellectuals attempting to regain a position of prestige and influence. Their efforts are urgent and genuine enough, though it may well be that radical market reforms will ultimately relegate them to the sidelines just as radical political change did from 1949.

An editorial in the early 1992 issue of the Sichuan-based journal *Art & Market* cautioned Hong Kong, Taiwan and other overseas collectors to avoid the manifold pitfalls of the fledgling mainland art market by keeping in close contact with informed mainland art historians, theoreticians and critics.¹⁴ Previously content with their role as mentors and discoverers of the young, it would appear that some critics are now increasingly anxious to become the insider-traders/compradors of the arts scene. One of their number has even gone so far as to suggest to artists a scale of payment per thousand words they should make to critics depending on the extent of the critic's international fame and theoretical influence. "Criticism is the love a critic presents to the artist," writes Peng De, a love that must be repaid by the artist in kind. That's right, the artist or his/her agent should pay for the privilege of critical approbation. Peng divides critics into five classes and suggests those in the highest category (people with an international reputation, who have published theoretical works of influence, have a title and are over 60) should be paid RMB 1,000 per thousand words.¹⁵ These are market conditions that are all too familiar, ones which lead one to speculate just how honest a critic's investment in an artist may be. This change in China is sudden and extreme.

Erratic government policies concerning arts publications and exhibitions have made regular comment and analysis of art trends uneven at the very best. Unlike other art markets, in China the covert actions of artists and critics active outside or on the rim of official culture since mid-1989 (up to October 1992) have given them an added cachet which makes them more marketable. Given this confusing topography it may not be hard to create an atmosphere of critical acceptance for undiscovered talent; but what happens when people indulge in "discovery for discovery's sake," or what Robert Hughes calls "the slide of art criticism into promotion?"¹⁶

In this exhibition we have a selection of some of the most noteworthy products of an extraordinary range of mainland Chinese artists (a number of whom have physically "broken out of Asia" to live overseas). This collection provides a unique and fascinating view of works by many of China's leading younger, semi-official artists. There's work from the fallen Stars, the political parodies of Liu Dahong, Wang Guangyi et al., the disturbed urban human-scapes of Liu Wei, Fang Lijun, Liu Xiaodong and others, as well as a range of abstract, conceptual and installation art. The 1989 exhibition was important in that it took place; the value — and tragedy — of this rich presentation comes not only from the works but the fact that it is only possible outside China. While the Guangzhou Biennial promised much, it was still a regional exhibition showcasing a limited number of artists and styles. This present exhibition, on the other hand, covers a much larger territory both physically and creatively. Only major changes in the structure of the official cultural bureaucracy in Beijing would make such a display possible there. Now that Hong Kong and Taiwan are increasingly integrated with Southeast China as an economic region, it is significant that a commonwealth of cultural exchange is possible. This exhibition is part of that commonwealth.

The barriers in China between élite and mass culture are breaking down in many areas (film, literature, television, advertising, music) but change is more glacial in the art world, and in particular in the art of the academy. There is no doubt that most of the works in this exhibition are done by artists trained in academy. Many of them are waiting in the wings to return to its embrace or find a niche in the academically-endorsed artscape of the West. If this art is daring, innovative and dissenting within the Chinese context (although I would argue that such terms are misleading) in the non-Chinese context the question begs itself: have the artists here moved only marginally away from the status of the "primitive pet" who can enjoy the largesse of patrons while maintaining a status as the exotic or dissident Other?¹⁷

In the early 1990s there was one moment when academic concerns, the world-weary street culture of Beijing and the marketplace came together. This was in the T-shirts (*wenthua shan*) of Kong Yongqian. From early summer 1991, Kong, an arts editor turned artistic-entrepreneur, produced some 50 T-shirt designs bearing witty and ironic legends often accompanied by striking visual images. Drawing on a range of sources, including Party propaganda, illustrated Daoist texts, the fiction of Wang Shuo and Beijing slang, and reacting against the narrow concerns and impact of academic art, Kong staged through the clothing stalls of Beijing a user-pays exhibition of what he termed "mass performance art." The T-shirts filled the streets, creating a massive commercial success and a popular craze. The authorities were, however, unsettled by the inferences of many of the shirts and their anarchic presence was brought to an end with a ban on unauthorized slogans and images. Kong was eventually fined for "disrupting the marketplace."¹⁸ But the lessons of his work are intriguing. Other artists — Wu Shanzhuan, Gu Wenda, Xu Bing and Ye Yongqing — have manipulated, distorted and deconstructed Chinese characters in their work, thereby adding another layer to the ideographic jungle of their culture. Kong Yongqian chose a different direction taking his message into the streets. Here was an artist/designer who availed himself of the language and images of élite culture to create a place for irony and self-reflection in the marketplace. Attacked for "anti-culturalism" as was the Beijing novelist Wang Shuo, Kong's T-shirts gave "voice" to the images and ambience we find in the artists Liu Xiaodong, Fang Lijun, Liu Wei and others whose paintings are gathered in this exhibition under the rubrics of "Cynical Realism" and "Political Pop."¹⁹

Many artists in this exhibition play glibly with political images and themes, most conspicuously that of Mao Zedong, whose renewed popularity in China dates from the late 1980s, reaching a height in 1991–92. Elsewhere I have commented on this phenomenon in terms of "camp transition," one in which a former style of politics "which has lost its power to dominate cultural meanings, becomes available, in the present, for definition according to contemporary codes of taste."²⁰ A number of artists here have taken to playful mis-representations and rehearsals of the Chairman. They include Wang Guangyi, Liu Dahong, Yu Youhan, Wang Ziwei and Liu Wei. "It is not surprising, however, that much of the cultural iconoclasm that plays with Chinese political symbols tempers its irony with a disturbing measure of validation: by turning orthodoxy on its head the heterodox engage in an act of self-affirmation while staking a claim in a future regime that can incorporate them. On this most sublime level Mao has become a consumer item."²¹ Mao and other dated icons of the militaristic phase of Chinese socialism can now safely be reinvented for popular and élite consumption. Madonna titillates her audiences with naughty evocations of Catholic symbols, ones that are culturally powerful and commercially exploitable. Political parody in China works in a similar fashion. Things might be very different — and dangerous — if Deng Xiaoping was the icon being given the Warhol treatment here.

And it is in the dialectic of commodification and consumption that much of the art in this rich exhibition fulfills its promise of newness. The artists are exploiting or commodifying the images of their world — political, social, cultural and emotional — and this off-shore exhibition allows these works to take part in the international process of display and consumption.

Notes:

* My thanks to Linda Jaivin for her comments on the first draft of this essay, and to Valerie C. Doran for her detailed suggestions. I am also grateful to Claire Roberts and Nicholas Jose for access to their Chinese-language art publications.

¹ See G. Barmé, "Arrière-pensée on an Avant-Garde: The Stars in Retrospect", *The Stars*, Hong Kong: Hanart T Z, 1989, p. 82.

² See G. Barmé, "Wang Shuo and *Liumang* ('Hooligan') Culture", *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 28, July 1992, pp. 28–31, 34, 51.

³ Op. cit., pp. 24–5.

⁴ "The Painting Den: Liu Wei, Fang Lijun Exhibition" held at the Beijing Capital Museum, Wanshousi in April 1992.

⁵ The "New Generation Art" (*Xin shengdai yishu zhan*) exhibition sponsored by *Beijing Youth News* and held in the Chinese History Museum on Tian'anmen Square, July 1991.

⁶ See "A 'Rogue's' Words" quoted in Claire Roberts, "New Art from China", from the catalogue for the exhibition *Post-Mao Product: New Art from China*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, September–October, 1992.

⁷ See Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1992, p. 10.

⁸ See G. Barmé, "The Greying of Chinese Culture", *China Review 1992*, edited by Kuan Hsin-chi and Maurice Brosseau, Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1992, Chapter 13.

⁹ See Nicholas Jose's contribution to this volume, "Towards the World: China's New Art, 1989–93".

¹⁰ This translation was suggested to me by Gavan McCormack.

¹¹ See *Art & Market* (*Yishu shichang*), No. 6 (February 1992), pp. 67–8.

¹² Quoted in Xu Hailing, "The First Art Biennial Held in Guangzhou" (*Guangzhou shouci juban yishu shuangnian zhan*), *China Times Weekly* (*Zhongguo shibao zhoukan*), November 1–7, 1992, p. 81.

¹³ Li Xiaoshan, the Nanjing-based critic noted for his fiery attacks on traditional Chinese painting in 1985–6, has himself been enshrined in oil. See the reproduction of Mao Yan's *A Portrait of Xiaoshan* in Xu Hailing, "The First Art Biennial Held in Guangzhou", p. 81.

¹⁴ "Preface by the Editor", *Art & Market*, No. 6, p. 2.

¹⁵ Peng De, "Criticism and Gratuities" (*Piping yu runge*), *Art & Market*, No. 5, p. 49. For details of Peng's "scale of critical worth," see p. 51.

¹⁶ Robert Hughes, "Jean-Michel Basquiat: Requiem for a Featherweight", in *Nothing If Not Critical: Selected Essays on Art and Artists*, London: Harvill, 1991, p. 310.

¹⁷ For more on the role of the "primitive pet" see Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word*. Also Barmé, "Arrière-pensée on an Avant-Garde: The Stars in Retrospect," p. 80.

¹⁸ See G. Barmé, "Life, Be out of It", *China Review 1992*, 13, pp. 12–4.

¹⁹ Li Xianting, (*Dangqian Zhongguo yishude 'wuliaogan' — xi wanshi xiangshizhuyi chaoliu*). *Twenty-first Century* (*Ershiyi shiji*), No. 9 (February 1992), pp. 69, 75. In my view, lumping together a range of artists, Kong Yongqian's T-shirts, Wang Shuo's comic fiction and Cui Jian's music, encourages a distorting simplification of a complex and not necessarily complementary range of cultural phenomena.

²⁰ This quotation is from Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp", in *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture*, New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1989, p. 139. See "The Greying of Chinese Culture," p. 20.

²¹ See Barmé, "Reformist Baroque: Liu Dahong and the Chinese Fin-de-Millennium," in *Liu Da Hong: Paintings 1986–92*, Hong Kong: Schoeni Fine Oriental Art, 1992.

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Conversely, a majority of young artists view contemporary art as the guide and means to liberating their thought. To this end, their creations are significant beyond the purely artistic context because they also represent the artists' rebellion against cultural autocracy.

Art, nonetheless, has its own set of rules and regulations, and effecting valuable social changes is not necessarily its final objective. Although the borrowing and adaptation of Western contemporary art may suggest to some a veiled identification with the culture imported along with the art, in the end, China's own cultural heritage and practical needs have resulted in a paradoxical treatment of this foreign art — namely, one of simultaneous rejection and tolerance.

In other words, the acceptance of one style and the rejection of another are not decided by the will of individual artists, but determined by cultural heritage and social trends. Whether in the East or West, any style of art is only realised through tangible creations and manipulations by the artists. When a style is transplanted, it may influence and become a part of the local culture, or it may be ignored or rejected.

The fate of Western contemporary art in China demonstrates the point that the adaptability of any art form is determined by existing social needs and conditions, and that the success of a style in one culture does not guarantee its adaptability in another culture. Likewise, a certain major school in Western contemporary art may also have a great following in China, but the effect produced by China's artists will never outweigh the impact produced by artists in the West.

Since Western Modernism and China's avant-garde art have been created under completely different historical motifs, their artistic value should also be evaluated by different standards. For example, although China's avant-garde art is inspired and driven by the desire to issue cultural criticism, it does not expect its own evaluation to be based on the actual effectiveness of the critique.

Likewise, an imitation of Western contemporary art can be said to be a cultural commentary, but would not necessarily hold any value as art. The standards of art criticism are extracted from China's own cultural heritage and practical surroundings. Worth noting, then, is the paradox that it is precisely these same conditions that have caused Western contemporary art to mutate, or altogether lose its original effectiveness when transplanted to China.

We can now refer to specific examples to analyse which of the major schools in Western Modernism have influenced China's art. Please note that the categories have been established only to facilitate discussion, and that no definitive barriers exist between various schools. Also, the relationship between contemporary art in the West and China is not purely one of stimulus-response. As time goes on, sources of inspiration and the recipients of their influence may frequently exchange roles. In other words, the creator comes under the influence of that which was created. Such changes cannot always be described as passive. In fact, they are often determined by choice and are vital to evolution.

1. REALISM

The realist style is easily accepted in China. On the one hand, it fulfills the technical demands of the academy's expectations, while representing the habitual tendency towards the narrative or descriptive approach — one which always attempts to define concepts through representative techniques. For all the ease with which it has been accepted, it is interesting to note that the Modernist concept inherent in Western realism frequently becomes twisted or trivialized in China.

Although the influence of Western Modernism on 20th Chinese art can be said to be extremely far-reaching, there are three particular elements which have had greater influence than others. The first is the realist technique of Andrew Wyeth, whose style reveals both nostalgia for the past as well as hope for the future. In China this concept translated into a typical pastoral realism, which ultimately developed into commercially appealing paintings that feature ethnic scenes.

The second element derives from the quasi-Surrealist style of the Canadian painter Alex Colville. Although this artist is relatively minor in the history of modern Western art, his works enjoy a great following in China. The emulation of his style, in fact, reveals a dilemma experienced by the artists, who have settled on a rather helpless compromise between the Modernist consciousness and the academic style.

The third factor, and the one which has exerted the strongest influence, is Realist art, in particular contemporary Realist styles such as Photo-Realism, a style easily imitated by the academy-trained Chinese artists. Artists working in the contemporary Realist styles actually reflect divergent intentions. One group has adopted these styles as a tool to supplement traditional Realist techniques, while the other uses a Realist approach to record and present, with cold detachment, the existential conditions of Chinese people. The former group remains within the confines of tradition, whereas the latter group demonstrates an avant-garde consciousness.

2. EXPRESSIONISM/EXPRESSIONIST ART

“Expressionist” art includes the work of Post-Impressionists, German Expressionists and Neo-Expressionists, as well as of certain painters in the Paris School. The Expressionist style finds itself extremely well-accepted as well as widely influential in China. In content, it befits the pursuit of self-expression and personal liberation; in form and language, it is tangible, yet free, with a strong aesthetic language that yet allows for personalized expression. In essence, Expressionism does not so much reflect new visual relationships as give voice to the individual will and spirit, providing an emotional release.

In form, Expressionist art reveals utter scorn for tradition; yet in media, tools and cultural content, it is closely linked to tradition. Furthermore, it is capable of directly communicating themes of social history. In China, with its unique history, characterised in contemporary society by a strong thirst for and pursuit of a modernised society, as well as by low productivity and an equally low standard of living, Expressionist art finds a most suitable soil in which to flourish. The influences of Expressionism can be detected in works by three generations of artists, with the youngest artists exhibiting the most varied experimentation and at the same time the closest attention to Form.

At present, Expressionism in China is developing its own form, gradually evolving into a new school whose objective is not so much to understand Western Expressionist art, but rather to use an Expressionist technique to interpret China’s cultural heritage and current realities, and to more truthfully demonstrate the emotions and the perspective of the individual consciousness.

3. PRIMITIVISM

At the onset of the European Modernist movement, Primitivism referred not to a tangible school or style, but to a conceptual idea. The move to counter academism and classicism was the direct cause of the rise of Primitivism in the West, as avant-garde artists sought a new language to break out of the confines of tradition. The call to reconstruct art from the starting point of civilisation indicates the rejection of established art, in that it seeks to return to the direct expression of feelings instead of repeating the rules established by the academies. During the early stages of Western Modernism, Primitivism had an extremely broad scope, encompassing primitive, Eastern, Near Eastern, Mayan, African and Medieval European arts. It can be said that Primitivism provided the first point of reference for avant-garde art.

Primitivism surfaced in China to serve two purposes. One runs parallel to the purposes of Western Primitivism: to break through existing rules and regulations and shift the creative emphasis from subject matter to form and style. This approach has led to a reexamination of Chinese folk arts and classical painting to find representative forms. The goal of this exercise is not only to demonstrate creative freedom, but also to remind us that these forms possess the spirit of free creation in and of themselves. The archaic, simple structures reflect the workings of the human will and spirit and a natural expression of beauty which are lacking in art dictated by strictly defined rules.

The other purpose is to present a challenge. The influx of modern Western art eventually caused a reaction in the ethnic consciousness of Chinese artists, spurring them on to join in international artistic developments and participate in a dialogue with the world from their own unique perspective. Amidst the myriad Modernist schools of thought, Primitivism alone does not extract visual images directly from contemporary society, but possesses a dual nature of ethnicity and modernism.

For China’s artists, Primitivism is not only an indication of a modern art consciousness; it also firmly exposes, amidst the influx of Western art, fundamental problems inherent within any ethnic culture. As a result, Primitivism verbalizes at the same time a universal consciousness and the drive to search for ethnic roots. At the present moment, the quest is for ways to articulate the modern consciousness as it frees itself of folk art’s formal language, on which it is based, and progresses towards maturity. However, we continue to look to the West as we pursue this quest, rather than to our own culture.

4. SYMBOLISM

Symbolism in modern Western art does not so much imply a specific school as much as a psychological approach. Visually, it is tangible/realistic and at the same time narrative/descriptive. Furthermore, “Something else always exists behind the obvious form and colours — another world or a different system of meaning,” stated Lucie-Smith in *Symbolist Art*. In the history of the Symbolist movement, dating from the Pre-Raphaelites to the middle of the 20th century, Surrealism proves to be the style most representative of the Symbolist spirit. In adopting the foundations of Classicism to present a spiritual world of the unconscious mind, Surrealism encompasses a wide scope, incorporating a great variety of imagery.

Surrealism stimulated a strong response as soon as it was introduced in China, and has continued to evolve. In terms of form, this style accommodates the habitual emphasis on technique instilled by artists’ academy training in Realism: artists are comfortable with it, as they do not have to abandon what they know best for the sake of

incorporating this model. Likewise, Surrealism's symbolist and at the same time conceptual/theoretical nature functions to directly intercept and interpret reality, thus fulfilling contemporary Chinese artists' everpresent need to evaluate the way things are, especially during these times of rapid and drastic change.

In China, Surrealism/Symbolism has become the expression of counter-Realism, and an intensely critical consciousness. To some extent, it is also individualised, subjectivised, philosophised and conceptualised, reflecting more deeply a distortion in youth's individual state of mind under the great burden of tradition and society. In this sense, the Chinese version of Surrealism differs greatly from Western Surrealist art, which employs the principles of psychoanalysis to demonstrate dreamscapes and latent sexuality.

5. POP ART AND CONCEPTUAL ART

After American Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg held a large-scale exhibition in Beijing in 1985, almost overnight artists all over China began playing with Pop style, despite the fact that no one — including artists and critics — really understood the meaning of Pop art.

In the United States, Pop art was at the same time an extreme expression of commercial culture in art form, and a counter-attack on the commercialism which threatened to destroy the "humanity" of society. While China had then, and still has, a long way to go before becoming a modern commercial society, Chinese artists picked up the outward forms of Pop art, absorbed the rebellious anti-art core, and made the Pop style one of the major art forms in new art since 1985. Young people eagerly adopted this anti-art approach as a means of forcefully expressing their own existence, their own individual lifestyles and the vitality of their rebellion against the status quo.

To some, Chinese Pop art is nothing more than a shallow and pretentious imitation of the original. However, treated on a phenomenological level, there are essential differences between Chinese Pop and Western Pop.

In its early phase, Western Modernism upheld as its mission the creation of a new cultural language to replace the language of the capitalist culture that had lost its effectiveness. Also entertained at this time was the fantasy of liberating art from the capitalist market and the bondage imposed by money. However, the fate of Modernist art was to become an anti-capitalist, bourgeois sub-culture, a subjugated appendage of commercialized society.

Consequently, for Pop art to negate an already commercialised Modernist tradition during an era of high consumerism, is to negate art itself. In its act of negation, the Pop phenomenon in China's new art is comparable to original Pop art: it is in the object of negation or denial that the two differ.

Though China's own Pop phenomenon does not have all the distinguishing characteristics of Pop created in a commercial culture, it does extract from Western Pop art the important concept of using ready-made products. That is to say, the employment of existing commercial items in lieu of painting or sculpting automatically is a statement of scorn and provocation against tradition and the status quo.

From Pop art, Chinese artists made the essential connection to conceptual art, although in the West this development took place against a very complicated background. That is, it involved a developmental logic based on Modernist art and Formalism, the political storm that shook Europe and the United States during the 1960's and 1970's, and also from a certain romanticism towards the high-tech era.

In China, conceptual art (including performance art and installation art) tends to be executed in a rather superficial and blind manner because it lacks not only the cultural readiness provided by the Modernist experience, but also the materials and technical expertise of the Post-Industrial age. Yet it occurred just the same, and with such force that it soon became New Art's focal point, a fact which had to be acknowledged by audience and critics alike, regardless of their opinion on the matter.

In tracing the reasons for the major impact and controversial nature of conceptual art in China, one must bear in mind there are other causes than the oft-proffered explanation that contemporary Chinese art inevitably replays all aspects of avant-garde Western art, and that the intense social response conceptual art arouses drives numerous talented young artists to taste this forbidden fruit. If we were to consider China's adaptation of Pop art as a plagiarism of form, then Conceptual art by definition encompasses a much more complex thought process and consciousness, which occurs on two levels. On one level, an extreme approach is used to express oneself, forcing others to take note of one's action and thereby affirming one's own worth. This in fact functions as a nearly desperate outcry in the plea for social recognition of values which artists believe to be oppressed or overlooked. Viewed in isolation, this appears as a ludicrous phenomenon unrelated to art; in fact, it is actually a fair portrayal of the way a segment of young people, both on the campus and out in society, examine their own value systems and way of life.

The second level is theoretical in nature, in that it treats Conceptual art as an art form to be analysed as a basis for creation. The effort at this level is particularly keen to discover similarities between elements in traditional Chinese

culture and Conceptual art, and has sparked a group of well-trained, young academy artists toward arduous experimentation. Their goal is to finally establish China's own modern art that would be capable of communicating with contemporary international art at the same level of articulation. Whether or not such utopian objectives can be realized is unimportant, as the sentiments are positively driven, and the pose optimistic. It should be added that, in New Art, such a position remains unique because it requires, after all, a higher level of cultivation.

For the most part, the introduction of major schools of Western Modernism has met certain needs in the development of China's own contemporary art, however distorted or misinterpreted these prototypes may have become during the process of experimentation and adaptation. Other important schools or styles, however, failed to exert the expected influence, not only underscoring the potential clash in the exchange between Eastern and Western traditions, but also reemphasising the symbiotic relationship of particular modes of Western Modernist art and modern industrial society. Without the latter, all efforts to assimilate these art forms would of necessity prove utterly futile. Two examples are cited below to illustrate this point.

1. ABSTRACT ART

Clement Greenburg, champion of Abstract Expressionism in the United States, dubbed "flatness" as the symbol of Western avant-garde art. He cited the process of deconstructing traditional classicism's three-dimensional structure, then building up a purely aesthetic language and system of forms based on the visual relationships inherent in modern industrial society.

The value of abstract art, therefore, does not exist in its purely aesthetic exterior (although numerous critics have worked very hard to establish its aesthetic qualities). Rather, its worth is intrinsic and attached to the cultural values it reveals. Similarly, the significance of abstract art is also determined by concrete conditions of the era, society and history.

Unlike the West, China does not possess the classical formalist tradition in art which evolved from and is driven by a humanist foundation. There was, however, a potent humanist spirit inherent in the induction of Western realism into China in the early 20th century as part of the drive to reform artistic language begun during the May Fourth movement.

As far as academic Chinese art is concerned, realist art from the West continues to provide fresh visual experiences. At the same time, this imported art brings with it a powerful potential as a tool for social criticism — powers lacking in traditional Chinese art. Once removed from concrete cultural restrictions and historical conditions, abstract art often leaves only a purely visual aesthetic effect. But China's art, at this time, cannot free itself from the temptation to use art as a means to express social consciousness.

Since the *Stars* Exhibitions of the 1979–80, individual artists in China have continuously carried out experiments with abstract art, but precious few have been successful. In addition to the larger macro-cultural context previously described, two other possible reasons present themselves.

The first is the lack of an effective point of entry. In the history of modern Western art, the evolution from the re-enactment of realism to abstract art was an historical process: an integrated system for abstract art developed only after countless experiments, comparisons and choices by several generations. In China, on the other hand, neither the concept nor the models for abstract art evolved as the result of the nation's own tradition, and to effect new breakthroughs based on purely visual communication is a task not easily accomplished.

The other reason is that the limitations of abstract art's aesthetic vocabulary and its deceptively simple executional style can easily lead back to the beginning. In other words, it would be easy to reach the limitations of the original works, leaving very little room for exploration and breakthroughs.

2. STRUCTURALISM

This refers to the kind of "structuralist" art which reflects the close relationship between modern art and modern industry, and that is typified by Malevich, Mondrian, American Minimalists and Pop art's "Op art." Modern industry is in itself a kind of culture. Machinery, architecture, consumer products, advertising, fashion, and interior design are only some of the phenomena whose purely structural and abstract beauty is altering people's traditional habits of appreciation, while at the same time providing them with new materials and the technology to realize fresh concepts.

It is noteworthy that the understanding of this abstract beauty must derive from first-hand experience. In other words, it comes from the influences exerted on visual relations by personal surroundings and has its foundation in a certain degree of materialistic culture. One can imagine that it is truly difficult to appreciate the aesthetics of a tidy, well-lit and stream-lined structure when one lives in a crowded, noisy and dark space.

Minimalists' metal sculptures appear quite cold, detached and monotonous on the surface, yet embody the ambiguity felt by people in the post-industrial era toward a mechanized civilization. On the one hand, the sculptures present human emotions as objects that are impossible to describe or experience in human language terms. On the other hand, the beautifully crafted, monumental geometric structures conjure up romantic associations with civilization's progress.

Perhaps it is this last realm of association that is the most difficult for China's new artists to enter. Those who dare set foot in this forbidden region soon find themselves in an embarrassing situation — their abstract structures appear to be either some kind of arbitrary stack totally without identification to the artist, or merely decorative geometric pieces; and the installation experiments look like nothing more than ready-made items found in Pop art! After all, without the capital or technology to fund and produce the exquisite pieces, one has no choice but to pick out a hodge-podge from the scrap metal pile.

It is not my intention to deny the talent and courage of these artists. It is just that the question they continue to ponder is the same which arose at the inception of Modernism — "What is art?" — rather than the more urgent question of how, given the specific cultural and sociological context, contemporary technology and new techniques should be applied to realize new concepts and new forms. That is the limitation of history and geography.

(Translated by Rachel Wang)

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EXPLOIT, EXPORT, EXPROPRIATE: ARTFUL MARKETING FROM CHINA, 1989–93

Geremie Barmé

It is both a cruel and happy fate to be an artist in Reformist China.

Cruel because chances for exhibiting one's work are slight, recognition rare and distorting, and there is little or no chance of having an impact on society at any level. One is engaged in a solipsistic project, auto-Orientalizing and forced to curry favour with the Occidental Other. Cruel too that cultural repression is not what it used to be. An erratic toleration has replaced pervasive totalitarianism; a laissez-faire *realpolitik* has been instituted for the rebellious who act within reason. Dissident and diverse art thus become another jewel in the crown of Chinese socialism.

Happy too is this fate. Repression gives life and creation a thrill missing in other systems. Whereas it may be true of post-industrial cultures that everything is interesting while nothing has any meaning, in China few things are of any interest yet some have a modicum of meaning. Significance is occasionally significant. The art markets of Hong Kong, Taiwan and the West cautiously welcome the perennial-avant-garde of China with its alluring patina of the illicit underground. Success in the international market place brings rewards the like of which many younger official artists can only dream: a measure of hard-currency wealth, exhibitions and private (not officially controlled and supervised) trips overseas and even a grudging, if jealous, acceptance among one's fellows.

While many have said that the cultural and political scene in China was reaching a point of unprecedented liberalisation in 1988–89, there is much evidence to show that it was in fact nearing bankruptcy and the tumultuous events of mid-1989 offered a kind of redemption.

The economic, political and social chaos of the proceeding months/years led me to comment in late 1988: "What perspective is possible now that the China Art Gallery, the proletarian palace of socialist art, makes its halls available to virtually any self-styled avant-garde artist who can afford the rental fee? The end result of Reform may well be the creation of a new avant-garde art-to-order: dissent on tap. Works of striking individuality continue to appear both in Beijing and the provinces. However, the government's erratic and hedonistic economic policies tend to encourage a soul-destroying cynicism in artists of lesser genius."¹

A number of powerful artists have been active in Beijing since 1989. Among these are Liu Wei, Fang Lijun and Liu Xiaodong. Along with some other artists, writers (in particular Wang Shuo) and certain members of the entertainment industry, they belong to or are at least fringe dwellers in the world of the *liumang*, the lout, hoodigan, rogue or picaro.² They are part of "what may be called the other Cultural Revolution generation, not the idealistic and disillusioned Red Guards, but their younger brothers and sisters who witnessed it all but grew up not disillusioned but dismissive, for many of them never believed the strident rhetoric at all. . . . They spent their childhood in a world that was both chaotic and mendacious and came of age in the materialistic 1980s, enjoying the consumer culture of the Reform age with few of the ideological, intellectual or emotional qualms experienced by older generations."³

Fang Lijun and Liu Wei, both graduates of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, are noted for a carefree lifestyle that is the envy of their fellows. Their work, particularly the bizarre portraits done by Liu Wei, illustrates the world of the *liumang*. They have exhibited together⁴ and were excluded from one semi-official exhibition in 1991,⁵ presumably for not conforming to the image of the upwardly mobile academy graduate. Liu Xiaodong, a provincial who has made it good in the capital, while not necessarily a picaro by nature, peoples his canvases with the *liumang* denizens of late-80s and early-90s Beijing. Fang Lijun sums up his philosophical outlook as follows: "Only a stupid bastard would allow himself to be cheated time and time again. We would rather be called hopeless, bored, dangerous, rogues and confused than be cheated again. Don't try any of your old tricks on us, for all dogma will be thoroughly questioned, negated and thrown into the rubbish bin."⁶ It is not an attitude calculated to please the authorities or the critics.

Baudelaire remarked that: "The chief task of genius is precisely to invent a stereotype." Wang Shuo's depiction in fiction of the *liumang* or wise-cracking young operator has created just such a stereotype. Other works in the genre of "*liumang* art" are included in this exhibition under the rubric of "Cynical Realism." The artists include Wang Jingsong, Song Yonghong, Yu Hong, Shen Xiaotong, et al., many of whom are provincials now active in Beijing. It is a cynicism, however, that is often tempered by a large measure of irony and humour.

On the provincial scene of recent years Liu Dahong is particularly noteworthy. Born in the seaside city of Qingdao, Shandong, in 1962, he graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts to become a teacher in Shanghai. Many of Liu's most extraordinary works exude the atmosphere of this city, yesteryear's adventurers' paradise and one of China's most intriguing carpetbagger enclaves today. His work ranges from political pastiche to the neo-baroque; more than any other painter working in China today, Liu can truly be dubbed the artist of the reform era.

But the economic marvels of reformist China have also taken their toll on the semi-official art scene. Previously I spoke of a "soul-destroying cynicism" that has grown in tandem with ideological collapse and the economic boom. It is a cynicism which differs in many respects from the existential condition of the above artists. Mocking society and politics as a creative attitude it also derides self-respect and integrity, feeding on and betraying the new-found dignity of the individual that has been the bedrock of China's fledgling post-Maoist culture. It is a cynicism that seizes on and exploits any market trend; one minute modernist, the next porno. Often hard to distinguish from the more profound and self-aware questioning of rogue artists, it is a creative attitude that is unredeemed by humour and bloated with a sense of its own importance. It is a cynicism that is cynical even about itself.

In early 1989, the China Art Gallery hosted the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, a grand gathering of China's then-new art, an art that was both nascent and senile at the same time. Nascent in that so many trends of international art freshly introduced (or reintroduced) to China were represented there; and yet senile because even the most up-to-date "isms" and foreign fads flooded the scene on a wave of popularity, impressed artists and viewers for a while and then went out of fashion. The *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition to a certain extent was a display of quick-frozen styles, innovations that seemed to lead nowhere and tired-out artistic trends of academic rather than artistic interest.

The local intelligentsia and the commentators have seen cynicism in the arts as symptomatic of the unsettling "post-ideological" age of reformist China; overseas observers and buyers have often interpreted it in the formulaic language of Soviet and Eastern European dissent; and all the while artists and writers have been engaged in the unsentimental project of adorning themselves and their works with it. But the cynicism — one that can be both positive when irony-laden and self-reflective as well as destructive of the creative impulse as we have observed in the above — that runs as a thread through so much of the most interesting literature, music and art from China today should not simply be seen as a product of a post-Mao ideological malaise. It is more a mood that is the product of the long-term marginalisation of élite culture.

The basic tenor of 20th-century Chinese intellectual life has been determined by a belief among intellectuals (writers, artists and thinkers) that they can and should play the pre-eminent role in the transformation and modernisation of the Chinese national character. Often ignoring their own inadequacies as independent individuals, they have shown a cocky eagerness to reform, educate and lead. More often than not they have been ignored. They have readily equated modernity with superiority and a lack of the same as being a mark of the inferior. This neophilia, the need to be modern, new and up-to-date, became a protean impulse and any ideology or cultural form that promised to satisfy this need was embraced. As the guardians of the traditional ways, their predecessors had failed egregiously to maintain cultural vitality and in this century intellectuals have been regularly shunted to the sidelines to embellish or justify the status of the rulers.

In the late 1980s, the liberal atmosphere of the society made the mannered poses of the suffering artist often appear shallow and unconvincing, even when they were genuine. Then with the unfolding of the events of 1989 redemption seemed possible. The student protests, popular enthusiasm and the international media hype followed by the massacre and vicious state repression validated Angst literally overnight. And here lay the root of the painful dilemma for mainland intellectuals and cultural figures in the late 1980s. They had increasingly come to enjoy a social prominence and sense of self-esteem unknown at any other period in Party rule. At the same time they were forced to bear witness to a national economic transformation that obviated their role in the society. The frustrations from this heightened sense of impotence — public profile without a concomitant political impact — in no small part led to the rebellion within the intelligentsia in 1988–89. The political and economic crises of the period that resulted in the protest movement in Beijing and other cities in April–June 1989 seemed to offer cultural figures a chance finally to play a decisive role in public life. But like many others they misjudged the situation and their own importance. To be cynical about the Party's hypocritical economic policies was easy, to reject its self-righteous cruelty and dated ideology after the Beijing massacre an act of self-affirmation and measured daring. But the horror of June 4 and its aftermath gradually gave way to further economic and cultural laxity and many of the works in this exhibition reflect the emotional and ideological confusion that artists have experienced as a result. Again we are faced with a spectrum of cynicism as well as a scale of Angst. At one end there is heart-felt sincerity and depth, at the other a shallow and callous wish to manipulate and exploit.

The 1989 exhibition and June 4 may also be taken as a convenient marker for the end of the artistic-historical narrative in mainland China. That narrative, the story of development from the late 1970s marked by discoveries, innovations and new perceptions, all too readily culled from overseas, had run its course. It is a narrative in which "making art was understood to be carrying forward the history of discovery and making new breakthroughs."⁷ From 1989 many mainland critics and artists have commented that the earlier narrative cohesion had unravelled. Innovation and variation inspired both by foreign models and native traditions continues but a growing cultural pluralism and the marginalisation of political ideology in the society have left creative artists in all areas increasingly unsure not only of their impact but of their relevance. The avant-garde of the 19th century was a reaction to the commodification of art; but the commodification of the avant-garde in China has been a major factor in the rise of the spirit of cynicism (be it the ironic disinterestedness of artists like Liu Wei or the calculated pose of others) in culture. It is a cynicism that plays with the tropes of life on the mainland while fixing a gimlet eye on the international market.

June 4 and the repression that unfolded in its wake did not close China off from the world again. Factions in the government were soon forced into an uneasy compromise and it is the resultant stalemate in the early 1990s that has made even cynicism a near comic platitude. While it is the general rule that totalitarian governments have a low toleration level for satire, from late 1990 political satire of a type not formerly seen in China was beginning to appear. In early 1992, satire and the widespread attitude of cynicism even made it onto television with the screening of the sitcom "The Editors." Not only was the series given government awards, the language of the Beijing *liumang* found popularity with a mass audience and the media promoted it.⁸ It is doubtful whether the style of flippant cynicism seen in all the arts in China today would have been similarly welcomed during earlier periods of official "liberalisation" in 1986 and 1988–89. Even the orthodox don't know what orthodoxy is any more. June 4 provided independent

artists a chance for transcendence, the egregious failures of totalitarian government to be its ruthless self then stole that moment away. China has joined the world, and the works in this exhibition reveal to what extent this has happened.

Many of the efforts of mainland Chinese artists are directed at "going international" (*zou xiang shijie*).⁹ This is a Chinese attitude that shares something in common with the program of late-19th-century Japanese thinkers who wanted to "slough off Asia" (*datsu a*)¹⁰ in the bid to become a modern, "civilised" nation. The difference is that while the Japanese desired to identify themselves with the West, Chinese concerns today are more with "breaking out of Asia" (*chongchu Yazhou*) to prove themselves on the world stage while still championing Chineseness. A repeated theme of the 1989 student agitation and the popular responses to it was that the massive, peaceful pro-democratic demonstrations staged on and around Tian'anmen Square proved that the Chinese had come of age. They had caught the world's attention and took, for the allotted 15 minutes, the centre stage of electronic media fame. Momentarily, China was part of the narrative of international contemporary life, comprehensible because the crude and universal (dare we say Hollywood?) paradigm was applied to harsh and contradictory realities: the young against the old, the people against the powerholders, dissidents against ideologues, free spirits against an ossified status quo. The outline of the story is so familiar as to be clichéd; only the names had been changed to confuse the guileless.

International interest in the types of Chinese art represented in this exhibition has led to some significant reactions on the local scene. There are those who, while applauding the efforts of contemporary artists to produce export-quality goods, caution against the pitfalls of international recognition. Fearful that overseas buyers and critics will lavish wealth and fame on the undeserving, they want to create and manipulate an art market on their own terms. There is a concerted effort being made by a group of (generally) younger critics, in particular Lü Peng from Sichuan, to create a "market awareness" for this "new" art in China, and an attempt to keep the art at home by buying it up. It is not unlike an investment in the futures market and they encourage state enterprises and entrepreneurs to get in on the ground floor.

There are also sincere patriotic reasons for developing the local art market. China's history as a colonised and subjugated nation was marked by cultural ransacking. Now, rather than see the overseas market replace the colonial powers of the past and carry off the spoils of unofficial art, local critics are justifiably mounting a fight-back. Within this context the non-official *Guangzhou Art Biannual* first held in October 1992 is the most significant.¹¹ The exhibition featured mostly regional artists from Hubei and Sichuan, yet it was attended by art critics, writers and others from China's major cities. In his opening address, Lü Peng, the energetic critic behind the event, said: "We are writing the history of Chinese art in the 90s. This Biannual is but the first page in that history. Industrialists, artists and creators are all equally important in our enterprise."¹² Among other things the organisers of this "art fair," as it is dubbed (bringing to mind the twice-yearly Guangzhou Trade Fair), claim it will help Chinese art to "compete in the international art market in a regulated fashion." Whether this means local prices can be competitive with those offered by offshore buyers and whether the artist gets to pocket as much as in a foreign sale is not clear. Since the communist party officially enshrined the "socialist market economy" in its political program in October 1992, one is led to speculate: How long then before the authorities finally abandon the role of censor and don the guise of promoter, championing the avant-garde as but one more pulchritudinous and profitable blossom among the hundred flowers of sanctioned Chinese culture? There were just such tendencies in the cultural sphere during the late 1980s, and as orthodox Maoist culture-crats make way for the young there are great possibilities for the future.

While recognizing the endeavours and cultural significance of mainland Chinese critics and how they reflect the ambitions and frustrations of intellectuals generally, one must not discount the practical dimensions of their role to maintain their privileged position as the "gate keepers" of aesthetic taste and arbiters of the new cultural canon. By creating a market for the product at home the critics are validating their own role as connoisseurs and conduits to fame, those who can guide and inform the taste of the collector-as-investor.¹³ Again we are seeing a disparate group of disenfranchised Chinese intellectuals attempting to regain a position of prestige and influence. Their efforts are urgent and genuine enough, though it may well be that radical market reforms will ultimately relegate them to the sidelines just as radical political change did from 1949.

An editorial in the early 1992 issue of the Sichuan-based journal *Art & Market* cautioned Hong Kong, Taiwan and other overseas collectors to avoid the manifold pitfalls of the fledgling mainland art market by keeping in close contact with informed mainland art historians, theoreticians and critics.¹⁴ Previously content with their role as mentors and discoverers of the young, it would appear that some critics are now increasingly anxious to become the insider-traders/compradors of the arts scene. One of their number has even gone so far as to suggest to artists a scale of payment per thousand words they should make to critics depending on the extent of the critic's international fame and theoretical influence. "Criticism is the love a critic presents to the artist," writes Peng De, a love that must be repaid by the artist in kind. That's right, the artist or his/her agent should pay for the privilege of critical approbation. Peng divides critics into five classes and suggests those in the highest category (people with an international reputation, who have published theoretical works of influence, have a title and are over 60) should be paid RMB 1,000 per thousand words.¹⁵ These are market conditions that are all too familiar, ones which lead one to speculate just how honest a critic's investment in an artist may be. This change in China is sudden and extreme.

Erratic government policies concerning arts publications and exhibitions have made regular comment and analysis of art trends uneven at the very best. Unlike other art markets, in China the covert actions of artists and critics active outside or on the rim of official culture since mid-1989 (up to October 1992) have given them an added cachet which makes them more marketable. Given this confusing topography it may not be hard to create an atmosphere of critical acceptance for undiscovered talent; but what happens when people indulge in "discovery for discovery's sake," or what Robert Hughes calls "the slide of art criticism into promotion?"¹⁶

In this exhibition we have a selection of some of the most noteworthy products of an extraordinary range of mainland Chinese artists (a number of whom have physically "broken out of Asia" to live overseas). This collection provides a unique and fascinating view of works by many of China's leading younger, semi-official artists. There's work from the fallen Stars, the political parodies of Liu Dahong, Wang Guangyi et al., the disturbed urban human-scapes of Liu Wei, Fang Lijun, Liu Xiaodong and others, as well as a range of abstract, conceptual and installation art. The 1989 exhibition was important in that it took place; the value — and tragedy — of this rich presentation comes not only from the works but the fact that it is only possible outside China. While the Guangzhou Biennial promised much, it was still a regional exhibition showcasing a limited number of artists and styles. This present exhibition, on the other hand, covers a much larger territory both physically and creatively. Only major changes in the structure of the official cultural bureaucracy in Beijing would make such a display possible there. Now that Hong Kong and Taiwan are increasingly integrated with Southeast China as an economic region, it is significant that a commonwealth of cultural exchange is possible. This exhibition is part of that commonwealth.

The barriers in China between élite and mass culture are breaking down in many areas (film, literature, television, advertising, music) but change is more glacial in the art world, and in particular in the art of the academy. There is no doubt that most of the works in this exhibition are done by artists trained in academy. Many of them are waiting in the wings to return to its embrace or find a niche in the academically-endorsed artscape of the West. If this art is daring, innovative and dissenting within the Chinese context (although I would argue that such terms are misleading) in the non-Chinese context the question begs itself: have the artists here moved only marginally away from the status of the "primitive pet" who can enjoy the largesse of patrons while maintaining a status as the exotic or dissident Other?¹⁷

In the early 1990s there was one moment when academic concerns, the world-weary street culture of Beijing and the marketplace came together. This was in the T-shirts (*wenthua shan*) of Kong Yongqian. From early summer 1991, Kong, an arts editor turned artistic-entrepreneur, produced some 50 T-shirt designs bearing witty and ironic legends often accompanied by striking visual images. Drawing on a range of sources, including Party propaganda, illustrated Daoist texts, the fiction of Wang Shuo and Beijing slang, and reacting against the narrow concerns and impact of academic art, Kong staged through the clothing stalls of Beijing a user-pays exhibition of what he termed "mass performance art." The T-shirts filled the streets, creating a massive commercial success and a popular craze. The authorities were, however, unsettled by the inferences of many of the shirts and their anarchic presence was brought to an end with a ban on unauthorized slogans and images. Kong was eventually fined for "disrupting the marketplace."¹⁸ But the lessons of his work are intriguing. Other artists — Wu Shanzhuan, Gu Wenda, Xu Bing and Ye Yongqing — have manipulated, distorted and deconstructed Chinese characters in their work, thereby adding another layer to the ideographic jungle of their culture. Kong Yongqian chose a different direction taking his message into the streets. Here was an artist/designer who availed himself of the language and images of élite culture to create a place for irony and self-reflection in the marketplace. Attacked for "anti-culturalism" as was the Beijing novelist Wang Shuo, Kong's T-shirts gave "voice" to the images and ambience we find in the artists Liu Xiaodong, Fang Lijun, Liu Wei and others whose paintings are gathered in this exhibition under the rubrics of "Cynical Realism" and "Political Pop."¹⁹

Many artists in this exhibition play glibly with political images and themes, most conspicuously that of Mao Zedong, whose renewed popularity in China dates from the late 1980s, reaching a height in 1991–92. Elsewhere I have commented on this phenomenon in terms of "camp transition," one in which a former style of politics "which has lost its power to dominate cultural meanings, becomes available, in the present, for definition according to contemporary codes of taste."²⁰ A number of artists here have taken to playful mis-representations and rehearsals of the Chairman. They include Wang Guangyi, Liu Dahong, Yu Youhan, Wang Ziwei and Liu Wei. "It is not surprising, however, that much of the cultural iconoclasm that plays with Chinese political symbols tempers its irony with a disturbing measure of validation: by turning orthodoxy on its head the heterodox engage in an act of self-affirmation while staking a claim in a future regime that can incorporate them. On this most sublime level Mao has become a consumer item."²¹ Mao and other dated icons of the militaristic phase of Chinese socialism can now safely be reinvented for popular and élite consumption. Madonna titillates her audiences with naughty evocations of Catholic symbols, ones that are culturally powerful and commercially exploitable. Political parody in China works in a similar fashion. Things might be very different — and dangerous — if Deng Xiaoping was the icon being given the Warhol treatment here.

And it is in the dialectic of commodification and consumption that much of the art in this rich exhibition fulfills its promise of newness. The artists are exploiting or commodifying the images of their world — political, social, cultural and emotional — and this off-shore exhibition allows these works to take part in the international process of display and consumption.

Notes:

* My thanks to Linda Jaivin for her comments on the first draft of this essay, and to Valerie C. Doran for her detailed suggestions. I am also grateful to Claire Roberts and Nicholas Jose for access to their Chinese-language art publications.

¹ See G. Barmé, "Arrière-pensée on an Avant-Garde: The Stars in Retrospect", *The Stars*, Hong Kong: Hanart T Z, 1989, p. 82.

² See G. Barmé, "Wang Shuo and *Liumang* ('Hooligan') Culture", *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 28, July 1992, pp. 28–31, 34, 51.

³ Op. cit., pp. 24–5.

⁴ "The Painting Den: Liu Wei, Fang Lijun Exhibition" held at the Beijing Capital Museum, Wanshousi in April 1992.

⁵ The "New Generation Art" (*Xin shengdai yishu zhan*) exhibition sponsored by *Beijing Youth News* and held in the Chinese History Museum on Tian'anmen Square, July 1991.

⁶ See "A 'Rogue's' Words" quoted in Claire Roberts, "New Art from China", from the catalogue for the exhibition *Post-Mao Product: New Art from China*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, September–October, 1992.

⁷ See Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1992, p. 10.

⁸ See G. Barmé, "The Greying of Chinese Culture", *China Review 1992*, edited by Kuan Hsin-chi and Maurice Brosseau, Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1992, Chapter 13.

⁹ See Nicholas Jose's contribution to this volume, "Towards the World: China's New Art, 1989–93".

¹⁰ This translation was suggested to me by Gavan McCormack.

¹¹ See *Art & Market* (*Yishu shichang*), No. 6 (February 1992), pp. 67–8.

¹² Quoted in Xu Hailing, "The First Art Biannual Held in Guangzhou" (*Guangzhou shouci juban yishu shuangnian zhan*), *China Times Weekly* (*Zhongguo shibao zhoukan*), November 1–7, 1992, p. 81.

¹³ Li Xiaoshan, the Nanjing-based critic noted for his fiery attacks on traditional Chinese painting in 1985–6, has himself been enshrined in oil. See the reproduction of Mao Yan's *A Portrait of Xiaoshan* in Xu Hailing, "The First Art Biannual Held in Guangzhou", p. 81.

¹⁴ "Preface by the Editor", *Art & Market*, No. 6, p. 2.

¹⁵ Peng De, "Criticism and Gratuities" (*Piping yu runge*), *Art & Market*, No. 5, p. 49. For details of Peng's "scale of critical worth," see p. 51.

¹⁶ Robert Hughes, "Jean-Michel Basquiat: Requiem for a Featherweight", in *Nothing If Not Critical: Selected Essays on Art and Artists*, London: Harvill, 1991, p. 310.

¹⁷ For more on the role of the "primitive pet" see Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word*. Also Barmé, "Arrière-pensée on an Avant-Garde: The Stars in Retrospect," p. 80.

¹⁸ See G. Barmé, "Life, Be out of It", *China Review 1992*, 13, pp. 12–4.

¹⁹ Li Xianting, (*Dangqian Zhongguo yishude 'wuliaogan' — xi wanshi xiangshizhuyi chaoliu*). *Twenty-first Century* (*Ershiyi shiji*), No. 9 (February 1992), pp. 69, 75. In my view, lumping together a range of artists, Kong Yongqian's T-shirts, Wang Shuo's comic fiction and Cui Jian's music, encourages a distorting simplification of a complex and not necessarily complementary range of cultural phenomena.

²⁰ This quotation is from Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp", in *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture*, New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1989, p. 139. See "The Greying of Chinese Culture," p. 20.

²¹ See Barmé, "Reformist Baroque: Liu Dahong and the Chinese Fin-de-Millennium," in *Liu Da Hong: Paintings 1986–92*, Hong Kong: Schoeni Fine Oriental Art, 1992.

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UNREPENTANT PRODIGAL SONS: THE TEMPER OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

Liao Wen

A Tribe of Prodigals

When I checked the entry for the word "prodigal son" (*lang zi*) in the authoritative dictionary of the Chinese language *Sea of Words (Cihai)* I found the following quotation: "Everyone says you are a prodigal son, famous throughout the town for your hundred amorous adventures." I couldn't help laughing. I've been involved with Chinese artists for years now, and although I call them "prodigal sons,"¹ there's no doubt that they've been involved with more than a "hundred" amorous adventures. But there is a crucial difference between these modern-day prodigals and the urban good-for-nothing. For their ventures are a result rather of an innate rebelliousness, a rejection of the traditional conventions that have constantly hampered cultural development in China. They have a heartfelt desire to break free of all outmoded restraints on individual freedom. They also dream of creating a new world order.

The prodigal spirit was no better expressed than in autumn 1979 when twenty-three artists calling themselves the "Stars" displayed their highly controversial works along the fence outside the China Art Gallery. Having been stymied by the police, they took to the streets to demonstrate for individual rights. This marked the beginning of what I regard as the "vagabond career of" modern Chinese art. The "Stars" spirit of resistance soon spread throughout the country. Since then, group after group of artists have launched a thoroughgoing rebellion, in the process of which they have reconstructed their spiritual values, art and lifestyle. The stories that mark this progress, the defeats and setbacks, the joys and sorrows, are too numerous to recount here. Throughout, however, the artists have expressed an unwavering prodigal spirit. They have taken as their slogan the words "U-turns Prohibited."²

Why a Vagabond Career?

It is inevitable that any government that attempts over a number of decades to regiment its people as it would an army and enforce strict compliance, intellectually as well as physically, will eventually find itself faced with a dilemma: should they continue the repression or allow a measure of freedom, knowing that either choice may result in all-out rebellion?

The Chinese leaders who had come to power prior to 1979 faced just such a quandary. Their political victory [in 1976] did little to help them find a course through the ideological minefield that lay before them. Initially, there were indications that the leaders would opt for limited liberalisation. But it was only ever a cautious and reluctant relaxation of control that in no way impinged on the ideological basis of Party rule. The popular "artistic revival" made possible by this loosening up still encountered numerous obstacles.

These were the dying moments of the 1970s. In the West, the German artist Joseph Beuys had been recognised as a master, having broken down the divisions between art and non-art. Yet in China, artists were engaged in a painstaking struggle to liberate art from political utilitarianism. How could the authorities expect perceptive and energetic young people in China to react when they realised there was such a yawning gap between themselves and the outside world?

Prodigals Will Be Prodigals

In 1977, art academies reintroduced entrance examinations and numerous young people set their sights on a university education. Many of them thought naively that all their problems would be solved once they made it into art school. Nearly every member of the younger generation of artists in China has a "horror story" to relate concerning their university entrance.

Zhang Peili was unsuccessful in his first attempt to get into the Zhejiang Fine Arts Academy in 1978. The school had placed a moratorium on accepting students in the Oil Painting Department for two years. He took the exams finally in 1980, confident he would pass. But a painting included in the work he submitted for review displeased one of the examiners. The other examiner, who Zhang knew supported his application, was away on business. When Zhang went to pick up his "saviour" at the train station he was so emotionally exhausted that he nearly cried.

Wang Guangyi failed the exams three times in a row. "It left me a complete emotional wreck," he recalls. "My mother and friends were all at their wits' end. When I finally passed the entrance exams for the Zhejiang Academy I was in a state of shock for days."

Prior to his taking the exams, Ding Fang was a designer in an industrial art research centre. He was told by his employers that he would only be allowed to take the examination once; if he failed he wouldn't get a second chance. Wang Chuan was given permission to take the exams with a similar proviso.

The hell of exams and the rigours of art school, however, seem an integral part of the rites of passage for every contemporary Chinese artist. According to a survey of the artists who participated in the '85 Art Movement ('85 *meishu yundong*), 98% graduated from art school.

But why did these artists, men and women noted for having rebelled against tradition, set so much store in a conventional artistic education?

In the first place, in China a solid education is always regarded as being the premise for any worldly achievement, a belief to which the Confucian saying "after success in education, one should serve in office" (*xue er you ze shi*) testifies. A successful official career has generally determined the social status and importance of the individual. The university entrance exams of the late 1970s were seen by young people as a competition that could prove their true talent and knowledge. They bestowed on a person the right to a higher education and thereby a chance to have a career in keeping with his or her ambitions. With a good job would come a stable social position and even the possibility for considerable personal advancement.

Secondly, artists such as those who formed the Stars group were mostly from average families and had no formal art training. Indeed, they were often actively discouraged from pursuing art by their families. Most of them embarked on this career during the Cultural Revolution more by accident than choice. The younger artists who went to art school consciously chose a career in art.

But prodigals are still prodigals.

From the early 1980s, increasingly lax cultural policies allowed for the dissemination of Western art and culture in China. This had a tremendous impact on conventional notions of art, particularly among young students at the art academies.

Generally speaking, art books were always in short supply, although things were a little better at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing and the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. According to Zhou Chunya and Zhang Xiaogang, when they were studying at the Sichuan Art Academy there was only one book on Impressionism available. The book lay open in a glass display case, a new page being turned every day. After classes students would stand in front of the case to copy the painting on display that day. Deprived of books, students turned to art journals and exhibitions as their main source of information.

Then, as there was increasing cultural contact between China and the West, there were major exhibitions of art works from overseas, in particular of American art collections. For students who had only ever seen reproductions, the impact of these exhibitions can well be imagined.

Young people flocked to the China Art Gallery to see visiting exhibitions and they would linger day after day drinking in the exhibits with an untiring fervour that artists outside China find hard to imagine.

At the time the monthly journal *Art (Meishu)* was the most important publication in the official cultural world. It was noted for its efforts to introduce modern Western artistic genres and recent developments in Chinese art to its readers, as well as for organising forums for the discussion of major artistic issues. This was only possible because of two editors who worked for the journal: He Rong, the editor-in-chief, and Li Xianting.

He Rong was a liberal-minded old man who, although he did not know much about modern art himself, was open to new ideas to a degree rarely seen among members of his generation. He was in favour of creating a liberal academic environment and gave his full support to Li Xianting, a man of great sensitivity and vision, also a man somewhat given to extremism. At the time of the second *Stars* exhibition in 1980, the only article to appear in the media was written by Li. Since the time that report appeared his fate has been extricably tied to that of avant-garde art in China.

And so, with He and Li as its champions, modern art found its way into the pages of *Art*, from van Gogh to German Expressionism, Picasso to Bauhaus, Constructivism to Op art, allowing Chinese artists a window on a new and fascinating world.

The question of "realism" remained the most knotty and implacable problem faced by the Chinese art world. "Realism" was the hegemon of the arts and although by the early 1980s it had been established that it was only one of many possible creative methods, to push the borders of the permissible any further was more than the authorities could tolerate.

In the first 1983 issue of *Art*, Li Xianting published a discussion on abstract art, the aim of which was to break free once and for all from the pull of the loadstone of "realism." But this call to abandon verisimilitude as the basic aesthetic standard of art was too much for the ideologues and Li was relieved of his position. His request to be allowed to continue with the journal as a librarian was rejected; he also refused to accept a new "work assignment" as a concierge. Although the peculiarities of our "superior" socialist system meant he still received a subsistence wage of RMB 30 yuan [US\$6.00] a month, Li was in effect unemployed and destitute. When these artists embarked on their rebellion they soon realised that there was more involved than simply rejecting "realism" per se. "Realism" had been adopted in the 1920s and 30s for specific political reasons. In the 1950s, again it was for political reasons that it was melded with Soviet Socialist Realism, and in the 1960s and 70s Mao Zedong developed his Revolutionary

Realism with particular political ends in mind. In China realism has always been enmeshed with Marxist theory, socialism, the dictatorship of the proletariat and Party leadership. Any attempt to rebel against it has had complex and wide-ranging political ramifications.

Uproar in Heaven – the Style of the Prodigal Sons

Monkey, or Sun Wukong, is a fictional character familiar to everyone in China. The protagonist of the classic Ming dynasty novel *Journey to the West (Xiyou ji)*, Monkey is the symbol of irreverence and rebelliousness. His immense popularity comes from the fact that his personality combines all the strengths of the rebel as well as many loveable human frailties. He was born out of a stone without parents or possessions. His unconventional antics infuriated the gods and he ended up doing battle with a vastly superior heavenly army. His situation is not all that different from the one the new artists faced in the mid-1980s. Whereas Monkey had magical weapons, the only defence the artists had against the forces of convention and orthodoxy was modern Western culture. And we should not forget that it was specifically as a weapon in this struggle with establishment forces that Western culture served its purpose. The artists were not necessarily imitating the West when they availed themselves of its culture — rightly or wrongly — in their own battle with the status quo.

A State of Mind

The artists of the mid-1980s were voracious readers and they engaged in enthusiastic debates with each other in a fashion unparalleled in any other cultural sphere. Their interests ranged from philosophy, literature and art to sociology and psychology. Every newly-translated book would be eagerly sought after and absorbed. Hegel, Kant, Nietzsche, Eliot, Hesse, Camus, Kafka, Hemingway, Jack London, van Gogh, Cézanne, de Chirico, Dali, Picasso, and Duchamp, among many others, were particularly popular. One way or another, young artists were drawn to the Western thinkers, writers and artists who had the most keenly developed sense of tragedy.

It is no surprise that young artists were attracted to such figures. For over a century these cultural giants have been at the forefront of the battle for personal freedom and the disruption of the establishment. The cultural paradox faced by modern Chinese artists had been completely different. Unable to inherit the defunct literati tradition, young artists were also repulsed by the revolutionary romanticism of politically utilitarian art. An acute fear of being disinherited gave them a sense of mission, a hope to salvage the national spirit and culture. All of their exertions — reading, thinking, discussing, creating and even living itself — have been intimately connected with this project.

How I miss the discussions we all used to have! In small and large groups we would gather, thrown together by chance or at someone's invitation. We would heatedly debate a whole range of issues knowing full well there were no conclusions. It is difficult now to recapture that atmosphere, but at the time you couldn't help being drawn to these intense meetings. On so many occasions I remember sitting in a corner observing them silently, these generous, unkempt fellows who blew thick clouds of smoke as they discussed universal rationalism, ultimate values, the experience of tragedy, transcending the self, the supreme ideal, the spirit of sacrifice and so on and so forth. They were filled with an overwhelming sense of mission.

They were not given only to empty talk, however, for many of them were also energetic writers. In their prose, as in their discussions, they employed an abstract and difficult style. Sometimes the result was so odd that it read like an inept translation from a foreign language. But it was all done for effect, one that would embrace the reader in a vague ambience, the message hidden somewhere in the mists.

Creative Impulses

Their sense of mission only served to further spark their critical faculties and desire for positive action. All of their discussions, writings and thoughts were aimed at the sublime act of creation. They had availed themselves of a new range of intellectual, emotional and spiritual resources in their pursuit of artistic expression. They were highly sensitive to the rapidly-changing cultural scene, reassessing and modifying their own work in keeping with the times. Equally, they were constantly aware of the importance of cultural responses to their work, ceaselessly studying and imbibing new information.

Just as important have been the friendships between artists. Discussions among friends, a chance conversation, a letter from another province could all have a great impact, sending an artist rushing home so he could throw himself into his work with renewed inspiration. They have influenced, excited and incited each other.

Today artists still share similar hopes for their work: self-satisfaction, critical approval and social impact. Very few artists work solely for their own sake, and if that is what they tell you then be wary, for no contemporary Chinese artists can divorce themselves from the social and cultural realities of China, not that any really want to.

Showmanship

Comparatively speaking, the '85 Art Movement (also known as the New Wave Movement) put a premium on exhibitions. Most artists had organised themselves into groups and they were anxious to get public shows for their work. According to statistics, 92% of the artists who exhibited during the movement belonged to a group or collective. From 1984 to 1989, there were some 80 unofficial artists' groups in China, most of them concentrated in the large cities.

It was no coincidence that artists coalesced into groups. In the first instance, all of their rebellious acts, their challenging of orthodox ideology, was aimed at achieving complete spiritual liberation. It is not surprising that those who shared a common artistic perspective would come together. Secondly, the official art world maintained its monopoly over major exhibitions such as the *All-China Art Exhibition*, that showcase for orthodoxy, and artists outside the establishment mainstream had no choice but to organise unofficial and autonomous displays of their work. These "underground activities" took place in a legal no man's land. They were always open to political attack, in particular during ideological campaigns like the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign of 1983–84 and the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalisation Purge of 1987, when exhibitions were closed or cancelled. In a country like China it is always easy for the authorities to find an excuse for censorship. They can impose restrictions on artistic freedom for any number of reasons: "to enhance indigenous culture," "to ensure public safety," and even "to prevent arson and theft." Given the uncertain situation in 1985–86, there was at least safety in numbers.

Thirdly, underground exhibitions generally had to be organised by the individuals concerned. This always presented problems for the artists. They had to find an exhibition space and then get approval from the authorities. In the early days there were no suitable places for art shows and it was usually necessary to rely on friends who could arrange for a sponsor. If all else failed there was always the possibility of exhibiting *alfresco*. Gradually venues became available, but this meant artists had to agonise over finding sufficient funds to rent the space. The minimum rental for a show would be a few thousand Renminbi, usually money that came from the artists' work on the side, doing interior design, painting advertisements or drawing children's comics. Sometimes they could also get support from a sponsor. However you want to look at it, staging an exhibition was always a major feat. (The leading artists of the '85 New Wave Art Movement — Zhang Peili, Wang Guangyi, Zhang Xiaogang, Ding Fang and Li Shan never had individual shows.) The authorities would have to give their approval for any activity accessible to the public, and getting passed the censors always required the "collective wisdom" of the artists. Although there were occasional setbacks, artists gradually learned to hone their skills in sidestepping or deceiving the authorities.

But exhibitions were not everything. Although they did not give a whit for the opinion of the experts lauded in the official art world, artists craved the approval of the art critics they admired. The approbation of their preferred critics would, of course, have to come in the form of published articles. Here again artists faced an obstacle: the official media was inimical to reports on non-official contemporary art. Following the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign of 1983–84, the editors of *Art*, the official organ of the Chinese Artists Association, were cautious to the point of being conservative and there were few other publications that could or would report on contemporary art or reproduce works by artists.

In 1985, five research fellows in the Art Research Centre of the China Arts' Research Institute took out a loan and set up *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*), China's first non-official art journal. Throughout the existence of this weekly tabloid there were disputes about editorial direction, but Liu Xiaochun, the editor-in-chief, Zhang Qiang, the publisher, and other editors like Li Xianting, were steadfast in their support for contemporary art. This paper became a major source of information on new art and through the seminars and other activities it organised, artists throughout China were kept informed of developments in the field as well as of upcoming exhibitions. But the paper's popularity and influence were an affront to establishment figures who were featured in its pages. Following June 4, 1989, the authorities made their move and *Fine Arts in China* was shut down. Its closure also marked the end of the '85 New Wave Art Movement with which it had been so intimately connected.

The Editor-Critic

In China there has never been a clear distinction between critics and editors. Artists are not free to engage exclusively in creative pursuits, nor are "editor-critics" above the complex cultural realities of their environment. They do, however, enjoy a measure of power and their support and enthusiasm can influence and broaden a popular trend. The editor-critics who came to prominence during the '85 New Wave Art Movement played just such a role.

Li Xianting, cashiered from *Art* monthly in 1984 for his support of abstract art, came to the fore once more when *Fine Arts in China* began publication. Not only did he observe and study the art movement as it unfolded, he became involved with an enthusiasm virtually unique among Chinese critics, actively encouraging new trends as soon as they appeared. As a true member of the "avant-garde" he was all too readily labelled an extremist by the establishment and consequently isolated. I've often seen his frustration when discussing key issues; sometimes tearfully he would warn his fellow editors that if they were not careful they'd "miss out on an historic opportunity." Liu Xiaochun, the editor-in-chief of the paper, would always wait until he had calmed down before trying to find a way to incorporate Li Xianting's ideas without crossing the bounds of acceptability. After *Fine Arts in China* was closed down, Liu Xiaochun wrote an essay about Li Xianting which shows the extent of the empathy that existed between the two men.

Meanwhile, back at *Art Monthly*, Gao Minglu and Wang Xiaojian, both editors, were crucial in turning that journal into an important official forum for contemporary art in 1985–86. Wang Xiaojian took up very much from where Li Xianting had left off and, like Li, he was finally sacked for evincing too great an enthusiasm for new art. Meanwhile, Gao Minglu's theoretical view of contemporary developments had a major impact on the '85 New Wave Art Movement. Gao Minglu might look like a bookish individual but there is also an air of authority about him. In my view, he is one of those people who has achieved a key cultural and social position by dint of hard work and relentless study.

In 1985, Peng De started publishing *Art Currents (Meishu sichao)* in Wuhan, Hubei Province. It was a journal that made its own contribution to the analysis and development of contemporary art. Peng De is a soft-spoken but clear-thinking individual. His writing style is both pointed and powerful. After 1989, an article published in *Artists' Newsletter (Meishujia tongxun)*, a limited circulation magazine issued by the Chinese Artists Association, made strident denunciations of contemporary art. *Fine Arts in China* came in for the most abuse, and Peng De was the art critic who was singled out for special criticism.

Jiangsu Pictorial (Jiangsu huakan) became a monthly publication in 1985 and has remained a major supporter of new art. With the addition of Chen Xiaoxin, a man with a youthful passion for art despite his age, the editorial direction of the magazine was, if anything, strengthened in favour of new art.

Not long after these developments Li Luming and Zhou Jiangping used their power as editors in a Hunan publishing house to produce *Artist (Huajia)*, an important forum for new art and in particular for the introduction of recent developments in Western art.

These editors have been vitally important in the history of contemporary Chinese art. Although numerous people participated in the '85 New Wave Movement and a range of intellectual trends intersected during it, the rebellious message of much of the actual art work made it very difficult for artists to exhibit. They were delighted with every opportunity they got, each chance being seen as another shot at "becoming part of history". Every article published on their work, every review, would be treasured. It is hardly surprising then that so many artists half-jokingly refer to the critics as "the leadership."

A Way of Life

Prior to the influential 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition most artists lived in relative poverty. Most taught at art schools, worked for art companies or were art editors employed by journals or newspapers. Occasionally they could expect to supplement their meagre salaries with part-time work such as interior decorating or book illustrations. Being an artist, and buying the necessary materials, is a costly business. There are always economic limitations on what can be done and chances to sell paintings are few and far between. Finding adequate studio space is also a major logistical problem. Things are generally better in Beijing where artists can often rely on the support of their "foreign friends."

When Chinese neo-realist oils began to sell for high prices at international art auctions, the Chinese authorities gave their blessing to the genre and many artists decided to jump on the bandwagon and adopted this lucrative style. Very few contemporary artists have been able to resist the enticement to produce immediately marketable wares. Perhaps, one day, the work and self-sacrifice of those who have remained true to themselves will be recorded in the annals of history, as they hope it will. But how will the historians depict these free spirits, their humour, their lifestyles and their amorous adventures?

So many things come to mind as I cast my thoughts back to those times. Perhaps one day I will be able to tell you all the stories I know of my good friends Zhang Peili, Wang Guangyi, Ding Fang, Zhang Xiaogang, Geng Jianyi, Xia Xiaowan and Shang Yang, that very admirable artist. . . . But for now I'll concentrate on the things they all share in common.

In the first place, they stand apart from the crowd, in their dress, personal habits and speech. They may be bohemian in appearance but they are completely natural, quite free of normal social affectations. One thing that marked all of them a few years back was that to a man they sported dirty long hair. Eventually, this became the social mark of the "artist." Now that all the rock 'n' rollers, actors and some city kids have got into growing their hair long, these artists have gone in for crew cuts or shaved heads. Back then they probably preferred long hair because they were too lazy to get it cut. It was not a pose, but part and parcel of a whole attitude to life.

Secondly, many of them appear to be morally loose. You get the impression that they go to bed with everyone they meet and are at a complete loss when they don't have a woman. They all enjoy discussing pretty girls and exchanging dirty stories which they relate amidst uproarious laughter.

Thirdly, although these prodigal lads never play according to the rules, they are punctilious when the situation calls for it. Apart from painting they all have other professions. They might not enjoy their work or the fact that it

interferes with their art, but without exception they apply themselves to their jobs seriously. This sense of responsibility is a basic element of their personalities.

Liaising Around

The underground aspect of contemporary Chinese art is particularly evident in the fashion in which artists keep in touch with each other. You definitely won't be able to find them if you make enquiries at the Ministry of Culture, the Chinese Artists Association, the official art galleries or institutions.

This is despite the fact that some of them might even be working in such organisations. But to be able to appreciate where they fit in with regard to contemporary art, what they are doing and what their relationship is with other artists, you have to get involved in the scene. They always keep in contact through private connections, and regardless of their social position, their status in the art world is determined by other criteria.

In effect, you have to play according to the rules of your circle of associates. It's all a little reminiscent of the bands of warriors you find depicted in Chinese martial arts novels. There's also a touch of the traditional "beggar gangs" about these groups. Following 1989, Gao Minglu and a number of other authoritative critics moved overseas, leaving Li Xianting to become the boss of the Beijing "gang." Li's small house has been turned into the headquarters and the centre of an art information network, one completely unrelated to both official culture and politics. There are always people there, day and night, and the place sometimes seems to be little more than a hotel or studio workshop.

There is an old Chinese saying that "there is nothing more precious than the return of a prodigal son." The prodigals who attempted to make a return during the February 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, however, found themselves instead playing out a tragedy.

The year 1989 was as complex and politically sensitive as 1979. Once more an atmosphere of disquiet enveloped the country. It was Spring Festival and the China-Art Gallery was the scene of uncharacteristic activity with long-haired and ill-kempt artists bustling around preparing an exhibition of contemporary art with the blessing of the authorities. The rebellious art of the past decade was now welcome in this bastion of official culture. What had happened? Did the young artists who had worshipped Duchamp and his rejection of museums now suddenly find some overwhelming allure in this gallery? Was it possible that the prodigal sons who had been wandering beyond the reach of convention for the past decade wanted to "come home?"

Gao Minglu, the head of the organising committee, had finalised the details of the exhibition with the curators of the gallery only five months earlier. Their agreement included a ban on performance art and erotic art. It was a compromise aimed at getting the artists into the gallery; a compromise, unfortunately, that deprived the exhibition of its most "avant-garde" content.

I was with the artists over the two days and nights during which they set things up, rushing through the gallery with friends helping to hang paintings and arrange things. I remained, however, an observer throughout. At the time I caught myself asking: is this really how history is written? But it was obvious from their excitement, their seriousness and self-importance that, yes, indeed the artists saw History looking over their shoulders and taking stock.

It had all the makings of a tragedy from the start. The moment contemporary underground artists accepted the recognition of officialdom they lost their very *raison d'être*. None of the artists involved in the exhibition, however, seemed willing to pause and consider the repercussions of what they were doing. Ten years earlier the Stars had taken to the streets and demonstrated against the forced closure of their exhibition outside the gallery only to accept a compromise with the authorities and put on an officially sanitised exhibit the following year. The grim shadow of compromise now cast itself over the 1989 exhibition. This whole business highlighted how much the younger rebels cherished an opportunity to be in the prestigious China Art Gallery. It also proved they still harboured illusions about the authorities.

Its not so easy to get written into the annals of history either. It certainly doesn't happen overnight. The artists proved themselves to be a little too ingenuous, even presumptuous. The number of people and range of artistic genres involved in the exhibition meant that anything could happen. Some people were primarily interested in taking advantage of the show to make the news and become famous. Given such complex and mutually contradictory currents many works of unique value and significance were overlooked during the resultant *melée*.

None of this came as a surprise to Li Xianting, the supervising curator of the exhibition. He did his utmost to counteract the conventional viewing habits of those who came to the exhibit and at the same time to use the occasion to achieve the maximum social impact. Privately he also gave the go-ahead for artists to exhibit performance art and erotic art. (Details of his role can be found in Li's article "Confessions of the Organiser of the *China/Avant-*

garde Art Exhibition" written shortly after the exhibition was closed). During the show the incident that won the greatest international attention — no less than that achieved by the street march, staged by the Stars ten years earlier — was that involving two artists who fired gunshots at their own installation (*Dialogue* by Tang Song and Xiao Lu). The authorities responded by banning the exhibition which put paid to the dreams of the artists who believed that to be shown at the China Art Gallery meant that they had finally "arrived."

Nonetheless, the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition has indeed been written into contemporary art history. It was an event that forced the artists involved to confront both China's reality and themselves. The symbol of the exhibition, a sign meaning "U-turns Prohibited," has achieved a new significance: the prodigal sons of Chinese art really can't go home. The incidents surrounding the exhibition also forced those engaged in China's new art to take stock. This taking stock has resulted in a greater maturity and the new wave of post-'89 art.

Still a Wanderer's Life

Despite their repeated attempts to assimilate modern Western art, Chinese artists have not found the "cultural quick fix" for which they have been searching. By the same token, Western-style democracy has been a long-cherished dream for China's intellectuals; it's a dream from which they were rudely awakened on June 4. Others' gods proffer no salvation for China. Today, surrounded by the ruins of bankrupt idealism, people have finally come to an unavoidable conclusion: extreme resistance proves only just how powerful one's opponent is and how easily one can be hurt. Humour and irony, on the other hand, may be a more effective corrosive agent. Idealism has given way to ironic playfulness and this has been the underlying sentiment in China since 1989. The greatest achievement of June 4 may lie in this commonly felt sentiment: why didn't we have the good sense to beat drums and gongs and stage a big song and dance to welcome the martial law troops surrounding Beijing in May and June 1989, just as our parents did when the People's Liberation Army entered the city in 1949? No wonder it is fashionable again to sing the revolutionary ditties of the Cultural Revolution, hang up portraits of Chairman Mao and wear T-shirts with tongue-in-cheek statements printed on them.

The art world has made its own contribution to the tenor of the times. There is the school of Political Pop whose artists have undertaken the deconstruction of Party symbols, and there is the comic and "liumang-esque" style of Cynical Realism. The leading exponents of Political Pop were prominent in the '85 New Wave Art Movement, but they have put gravitas behind them now. The creators of Cynical Realism are a younger crowd, some call them the "new generation" (*xinshengdai*), who have only recently graduated from art school. They never had to share the burden of idealism shouldered by the '85 New Wave artists. There is a generational difference between the two groups and they have found different ways to express their anti-idealism.

There have been other changes as well. The way artists think and feel, as well as the way they live, have all undergone a transformation. Now when friends get together they get business out of the way quickly and then they are only interested in eating, drinking and having a good time. Good jokes are highly prized, particularly, if they are obscene. It is hardly an atmosphere conducive to the serious discussion of art, culture and the human condition. People these days find all that stuff irrelevant.

Gone too are the artists' salons and groups. People prefer to work by themselves nowadays. Everyone wants to have his own say as to what life is all about. Nor do they set any store by the official media or public exhibitions. They have noted the increasing opportunities for contact with the outside world and they see their future in the international art scene. News about trends in art and opportunities for exhibitions now tend to come from sources outside the mainland. Accordingly, art criticism plays a more important and influential role than ever. With the increasing impact of contemporary Chinese art both inside and outside China, the art market is coming into its own. Artists now dress in silk clothes and wear expensive leather shoes; they show the "presentable" face of contemporary Chinese art to the world. Increased income means improved lifestyles as well. More people can afford lavish sound systems, CDs and other luxuries. You know things have changed when an artist like Wang Guangyi rents a hotel room for US\$200 a night just to see what it is like to be a painting "superstar." But I miss the good old days, when enthusiasm made us forget about the poverty. . .

Maturity has come at a price. But nothing can turn the clock back. Orthodoxy has been lost forever and contemporary "avant-garde" art is finally at home with its role as the new wave. This is the achievement of three generations of artists, men and women who will continue to contribute to the advancement of Chinese art in the international scene.

Wanderers, after all, know no borders.

(Translated and Condensed by Geremie Barné)

1. Translator's note: Liao Wen has chosen the expression *lang zi* to describe the temper of contemporary Chinese artists. In Chinese, *lang zi* has a range of connotations such as "dissolute youth," or "young person who refuses to take up a proper trade or career." *Lang zi* is also the word for "prodigal son," an expression inspired by the Biblical story of the son who, having been given

his patrimony, "wasted his substance with riotous living." (See Luke 15: 11–32). Rembrandt's famous religious painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son* is known to all students of art in China as *Lang zi hui tou*. It is significant then that Liao Wen uses this title (that is, *Lang zi bu hui tou* — literally, *The Prodigal Sons Who Do Not Return*). Note also that Liao's use of *lang zi* pares neatly with Li Xianting's concept of *bopi* art.

2. Translator's note: The street sign symbolising "U-turns Prohibited" (*bu xu diao tou*) was the emblem of the 1989 *China/Avant-garde* exhibition.

Liao Wen was an editor at the seminal journal *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*) until it was closed down in June, 1989. She is the author of the recently published book *An Encyclopedia of Contemporary Mainland Chinese Artists* (*Zhongguo dalu zhongqingdai meishujia bairenzhuàn*).

THE PROBLEMS OF CHINESE ARTISTS WORKING OVERSEAS

Fei Dawei

The 1985 New Wave art movement and the trend for Chinese artists to go abroad are two remarkable phenomena in the Chinese art world. Actually, the two phenomena are related: they are different aspects of a spiritual adventure that took place at a turning point in Chinese culture. This breaking away from the constraints of long-rigidified cultural patterns and from personal impoverishment is the common goal of the present generation of artists.

More than one thousand Chinese artists have emigrated since the early 1980s, most of them young, and constituting half of the principle figures in the 1985 New Wave movement. But emigrating has not necessarily given these artists a better environment in which to create. Even though some artists have improved their material circumstances, they still have to confront the complex problems inherent in dealing with a new culture and society. In addition to making a living and learning a new language, these artists must, through the medium of their works, establish a new and positive relationship with the society in which they find themselves. For many artists, the experience abroad turns into a life and death challenge. Yet, despite the difficulties, many artists still take the plunge, putting their lives on the line in order to bring contemporary Chinese art out into the world.

Chinese artists living abroad can be divided into four types: 1) those who give up art and pursue other professions; 2) those who make their livings as portrait painters; 3) those who link up with galleries (and often earn huge amounts of money); and 4) those who remain "pure" artists.

The number of artists who fit into the last category is very small. One of the first overseas exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art took place at York University in Canada in 1987, with works by Gu Wenda and Gu Xiong. This was followed by other major exhibitions in France in 1989 and 1990. In particular, the outdoor exhibition entitled *Chine Demain pour Hier*, held in the south of France in 1990, was the first exhibition of Chinese New Wave art following the fragmentation of that movement in China in 1989. This was first and foremost an exhibition of "contemporary" art, and only secondarily an exhibition of "Chinese" art. The placement of the objects — some of which had over ten thousand square metres to themselves — gave the exhibit a spontaneous, "in situ" quality.

A similar exhibition entitled *Exceptional Passage* was held in Fukuoka, Japan in 1991. The exhibits were displayed both indoors and outdoors in the Kaschii railroad switchyard.

There are two factors behind the interest in holding exhibitions of contemporary art overseas:

1) after the events of 1989, the risks involved in holding exhibitions of contemporary art in China increased radically; and,

2) the Chinese artists who emigrated have matured over the last few years, and their works can stand alongside those of other professional artists overseas. This raises the question of the relationship between contemporary Chinese artists and modern art in the West.

It is important to recognise that the artistic consciousness of most of the Chinese artists overseas was formed during an artistic movement that took place during the mid-1980s and had a distinct avant-garde ideology, an ideology influenced mainly by the concepts and techniques of modern and avant-garde Western art. This meant breaking away from the ossified situation of contemporary art in China, and striking a new balance between realism and Chinese tradition.

Gu Wenda's manifesto of "Challenge the Western Modernists!" Huang Yongping's "action burnings," Xu Bing's *A Mirror to Analyse the World* and Tang Song and Xiao Lu's "shootings" are all anti-traditional actions in nature. And the way they carry out this opposition to traditional Chinese culture is to make use of ideas that are already representative of the mainstream of Western culture. Avant-gardism as a state of mind is a historical fact in the West, and the language of the avant-garde is now regarded as the language of orthodoxy. Further breakthroughs in the realm of culture have resulted in the emergence of post-modernism. The concrete nature of the opposition to mainstream culture on the part of Chinese artists is inappropriate for this new environment. The object of their protest, in this new context, has disappeared entirely or changed its appearance. This leaves Chinese artists with three choices:

1) give up the protest entirely, and take a cooperative attitude towards this reality, in order to succeed in it; 2) maintain an attitude of protest, negatively, by withdrawing from any activity, or giving up all artistic activity; or 3) participate in the artistic establishment with an attitude of protest, while reevaluating the methods and contents of protest. This involves a critique of the contemporary artistic "dynasty" and contemporary society as a whole, as well as using one's own creativity as a critical tool within the confines of the artistic establishment. I believe that the latter approach is the only one suitable for contemporary Chinese artists in their confrontation with Western art.

However, this choice could lead to a double misunderstanding. Because of their tradition of protest, Chinese artists will not easily be able to change their work to suit the whims of Western tastes and meet a ready success. The creative work of Chinese artists can only emerge from the artists' accumulated understanding of reality, something that is necessarily out of step with Western society, with its emphasis on short-term gains and efficiency.

Following their own needs and imagination, Western people project onto Chinese artists their own image of what contemporary Chinese art should be. But in fact these images are mostly drawn, inaccurately, from Soviet and Japanese art. For example, they believe that contemporary Chinese art should be clearly anti-communist and still have a strong Oriental flavor, but it should also make use of contemporary artistic forms. It should be an idealistic art that is readily comprehensible by Western viewers, and should represent an alien culture *in an inoffensive way*, like an appealing folk craft.

Westerners want to observe a variety of elements of different cultures existing simultaneously, for from this they can draw inspiration, and at the same time free themselves from the egocentricity in which Western culture is trapped, and thus gain new vitality. However, Western people are not aware that the present cultural differences between East and West do not lie in the realm of superficial form, but rather in the realm of spiritual needs. This gap is based in differences of tradition, history and social structure. The superficial forms of culture are by definition neither permanent nor immutable, but are controlled by the overall state of the culture itself.

Cultural emancipation means something different to East and West. In the confrontation that results from the differences in spiritual needs, the East should not become a sacrificial object. The essential mission of Chinese art today is certainly not to become an immediately acceptable "foreign presence" in the new world order arranged by the West, but rather to struggle out of its own limitations itself and become involved with the problems shared by all mankind as a way of finding its unique identity. Only in such circumstances can traditional Chinese culture be revitalised. I believe that the Chinese artists overseas are in an ideal position to take part in this process, and have actually taken steps forward in its realisation. It may be a long while before this can be understood by Western people, but this time the process is increasingly controlled by the artists themselves.

The second misunderstanding arises between the overseas artists and certain artists and critics in China. Since 1989, contemporary art has undergone progressive fragmentation due to high-pressure cultural policies and the progressive commodification of art, and this has had an obvious effect on contemporary Chinese art in China. Although there is insufficient communication between artists in China and Chinese artists abroad, the activities of Chinese artists abroad have attracted much attention among artists at home. One common misconception among artists and critics at home is the notion that Chinese artists overseas should bear the responsibility for promoting Chinese contemporary art abroad, and that the form this promotion takes should be at one with the creative thinking of artists in China, or at least on the same general track. But when the works of artists abroad cease to deal with strictly China-related questions and develop in new directions, certain artists and critics in China are left in a state of confusion. In their eyes, we are "dissidents" detached from the Chinese reality, and "are not qualified to represent Chinese art." Others call us "dried-up" or accuse us of having "sold out to capitalist culture." This sort of extreme position is in part the result of problems concerning aesthetic language. But more important it is the question of the place of contemporary Chinese art in the modern world, and the relationship between contemporary Chinese and Western art.

The problem is one of social context. When our energies turn from the cultural transformation practiced in China to concerns with the problems of mankind as a whole, we no longer have the authority to adopt the position of "Chinese" whose work is constantly compared with Western culture. We must start by transcending the differences inherent in national cultures: Western artists (such as John Cage) can borrow concepts from Chinese culture, and Chinese artists can do likewise with Western culture. This is essentially the same process as Chinese artists choosing to use Chinese cultural elements in their works, and Western artists choosing to use Western cultural elements in their work. Cultural choices made on this level are profoundly voluntary and individualistic, and the concept of "motherland" should play no role at all. Only under these circumstances can contemporary culture develop with vitality.

For the above reasons, Chinese artists abroad have been unable to bear the responsibility for promoting contemporary Chinese art, nor have they been able to "represent" anyone. We only want to free ourselves from our conceptual limitations by means of individual creativity. We do not want to be pure "Chinese artists," nor do we want to be "Western artists." We do not want to be avant-garde artists, anti-avant garde artists, or post-modernists. Only by daring to liberate ourselves from every sort of absurd limitation, can we find our way to our true spiritual home. Our art is Chinese, but it also belongs to the world. Our art can help to resolve the differences between China and the rest of the world.

In fact, we were already following the path home before we left China.

Stuttgart
September 1992

(Translated by Don J. Cohn)

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NOTES AND ILLUSTRATIONS TO MAJOR TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN CHINESE ART

Li Xianting

1.

Chen Duxiu and Lū Zheng were the first to call for an “art revolution” in 1917 when they published an exchange of letters in the leading May Fourth periodical *La Jeunesse (Xin qingnian)*, Vol. 6. 1. In his letter, Chen Duxiu said it was imperative that “the vile Chinese painting” (*Zhongguo ehua*) prominent from the Mongol-Yuan to the Qing dynasty be discarded.

Also in 1917, Kang Youwei expressed a similar sentiment in his Introduction to the *Catalogue of Paintings in the Wanmucao Tang Collection (Wanmucaotang canghua mu xu)*. Liang Qichao and Lu Xun, a prominent figure of the New Culture Movement, shared Kang’s view.

Xu Beihong, the leading exponent of Chinese realism, later claimed that he was a “disciple” of Kang Youwei (see Xu’s Beihong’s “Life” [*Beihong zishu*] published in Companion [*Liangyou*] magazine in 1930). Xu’s decision to pursue his passion for realism in France, as well as his later efforts to establish realism as the mainstream form of contemporary Chinese art, were most probably linked to his early exposure to Kang’s ideas.

2.

For details of this debate, see Lang Shaojun’s *On Modern Chinese Art* (Nanjing: Jiangsu chubanshe, 1988), pp. 25–9, and Li Xianting, “A Critique of the May Fourth Revolution in Art” in the periodical *Duoyun* (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe), 1990, No. 3. The controversy raged during the *First National Art Exhibition* organised by the Nationalist (KMT) Nanjing government in 1929. It was sparked off by an article by Xu Beihong published in the exhibition catalogue. Xu averred that the “best thing about the exhibition” is the fact that none of that brazen stuff by Cézanne, Matisse or Bonnard has been included.” He went on to say that “it would be an outrageous waste of public funds and probably little better than importing a load of morphine or heroin” if the Chinese government established a national art gallery and “packed ten rooms with paintings by Cézanne and Matisse (things I can churn out at the rate of two an hour) priced at three to five thousand *yuan* each. If they do this I’ll have no choice but to shave my head and become a monk, only then will I be spared exposure to such despicable, muddleheaded and vile decadence.” The poet Xu Zhimo held the diametrically opposite opinion. Declaring Cézanne to be the “uncrowned king” of modern art, he observed that Beihong’s remarks were “petulant” and no better than the ill-informed criticisms that Parisians had levelled against Cézanne in the past. Li Yishi, another participant in the controversy, sided with Xu Zhimo. Li, however, felt that works by Cézanne and Matisse should not be encouraged in China for “if they become popular they will have a great and, I fear, deleterious impact on society”

Illustrations 1–10

It is possible here to discern the influence of a range of early Western Modernist artistic styles like Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism and Surrealism on the Chinese art of the 1930s and 40s.

Illustrations 11–32

The following points should be noted when considering the history of realism in modern China:

1. What started out as sketching from life was later influenced by more utilitarian social elements.

2. It was used to transform traditional Chinese landscape painting. This is particularly evident in the paintings of Xu Beihong and Jiang Zhaohe. Figures are depicted with realistic anatomical detail, shading is emphasised as is the relationship between figures and their background, whereas traditional Chinese landscape painting often used “positive” blank space (*kongbaishide xu*) in backgrounds.

3. The rapid infiltration of popular art led to the production of calendar paintings (*yuefenpai nianhua*) which became extremely popular and the standard aesthetic for modern (pre-1949) mass taste. The bright, clean and comely forms and colours of these works exerted an undeniable influence on the evolution of official art, in particular “Maoist art.”

3. & Illustrations 33–36

In 1929, Lu Xun and Rou Shi co-edited four art books, two of which were collections of woodcuts. In 1930, Lu Xun edited and published *Selected Paintings from the New Russia (Xin’e huaxuan)* and another volume of illustrations (*Meipeierde muke (Shimitu) zhi tu*) done by the German woodcut artist Carl Meffert for Cement (*Shimi tu*), a novel by the Soviet writer Gladkov.

Encouraged by this success, we immediately planned another event, an exhibition of oil paintings and mixed media art by Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, two Hangzhou painters who had taken part in the famous 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition and already had reputations as strong representatives of China's new art. This marked a radical departure from the *guohua* painting we had exhibited at the very beginning, and expressed our commitment to demonstrating the rich variety and strong vitality of Chinese contemporary art.

This exhibition was not as easily mounted as the others. The greatest problem was finding a venue. We had decided to stage the show around 15 May, as in early June the works of the two painters would be shipped overseas to take part in a European exhibition. We first thought that the same temple we had used for the previous exhibition would be quite suitable, but because of a misunderstanding with the manager, at the last moment we were told that the hall had already been rented to somebody else who had agreed to pay a higher rental fee. (I should mention that all arrangements and "deals" concerning the renting of premises and other contacts with Chinese units were directly handled by the artists themselves in order to avoid compromising the exhibition by arousing suspicion about our involvement.)

So two weeks before the planned opening, and with the catalogue already printed, we found ourselves without an exhibition space. We started asking around and considered a wide variety of possible venues, including ones that would never be considered as "exhibition spaces." But one after the other each possibility fell through: sooner or later, there was always some cadre who would refuse permission because the works were "not suitable," or because news of the "questionable" reputation of the two painters had already reached him. Despite the help of many people, some of them personally unknown to us, we had no luck. After repeated failures, we finally discovered what the real problem was: having postponed the show to the end of May because of location problems, we had entered the "dangerous period" which in China precedes the infamous date of June 4. During that period controls are strengthened at all levels in order to prevent any activity that might be interpreted as politically critical, with the result that nobody would take the risk of staging an exhibition of "dubious" content.

One week before the last possible date, we were still without a venue. Then a friend made a suggestion that gave us one last chance: why not organise a "party" (or at least call it so) and pretend that, to make it different, we wanted to hang some paintings on the walls? We found a discotheque, very near the embassy quarter, and rented it for a Friday evening. We told the manager that it would be a going-away party for some colleagues and that we wanted to decorate the hall in a special way, with paintings and videos. There was no problem on his part, largely because the price he asked was quite high and we had not refused it.

We now had the venue, but we still had to solve other problems, like locating television sets for Zhang Peili's video installation and devising an appropriate lighting system, no simple task as the disco itself was very dark and absolutely unsuited to an exhibition. But finally, with a great deal of effort and not a little stress, we were ready for opening night. We were worried to the last that something would go wrong, especially as, during the setting up stage, we had noticed unknown people who came and left the hall several times, and realised they must be plain-clothes policemen. We were sure that at the very last minute they would suddenly appear and announce that the exhibition was to be closed.

But, to our great relief, this did not happen. Perhaps because we labelled the activity as just a "party" they decided there was no real cause to disturb us. In any case, the exhibition opened on schedule. A large number of people attended, both foreign and Chinese. Many of those who came were part of the art world, including well-known critics and established artists. A number of foreign correspondents were also present. What's more, even though we were only able to hold the exhibition for one evening, the news of the event spread quickly and it was talked about for some time after. Somebody even published a brief, careful account of it in an official art magazine. The success of our unorthodox exhibition was a positive sign that even during such a tightly controlled period, with a little ingenuity this type of activity could still take place.

Most importantly, we had succeeded in putting on an exhibition of new works that was equally popular among Chinese and foreign viewers, and where socially relevant art was being shown, appreciated and talked about by a large number of people. This was in keeping with our intention to demonstrate and enhance the value of Chinese "unofficial" art by inventing ways to show it publicly in China. Because we had greater means at our disposal than the artists, and more knowledge about contemporary Chinese art than most other foreigners, we felt we should make an effort to join these two otherwise very separate worlds. Also, because the Chinese public has had little opportunity to see these works, we thought we could be a positive influence in helping to present this art to a Chinese audience — especially as the original motivation behind its creation was the desire of the artists to supply their peers with a different vision of modern Chinese society. We may not have been completely successful in realising this goal, but the satisfaction of having made even a small contribution to bringing this vital new art to a larger audience is a feeling that will stay with us for a long time.

Beijing,
December 1992

Francesca Dal Lago first came to China from her native Italy in 1984 and studied art history at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts from 1985 to 1987. She currently works in the Cultural Section of the Italian Embassy in Beijing.

WHAT YOU SEE IS NOT WHAT YOU GET: CHINESE PAINTING AFTER JUNE 4

Jeffrey Hantover

At the end of Oz's yellow brick road, Dorothy pulled the curtain aside and found the omnipotent Wizard a gentle, old bumbler. Wiser, Dorothy left Oz for her home in Kansas. On June 4, 1989 the artists of China saw that what lay behind the smiling avuncular portraits of Mao, behind ideology's claim to rule by divine right, was the barrel of a gun. They saw behind "the blood-drenched curtain" and knew with certainty the corrupt charade that Marxist rule had become, but unlike Dorothy they could not return home — they were home.

Underneath the luxuriant divisions and labels of Chinese painting, there is a connective current of disillusionment. Even among the most personal, the apparently least political of Chinese paintings — Ding Fang's landscapes or Fang Lijun's grimacing baldies for example — there is a darkness whose source lies outside the psyche, a sense of unease, a shadow of disillusionment. History intrudes.

Labels can create a sense of community among artists. They are for critics and academics an analytic lens through which to impose order on a diverse world; and not inconsequentially help dealers to market art — movements and schools give the works a cachet and an added sense of art's historical importance. In the case of post-Tian'anmen Chinese paintings, they may obscure the more powerful ties that bind artists in a shared vision. "Cynical Realists" are not the only cynics, "Political Pop" is not the only art that is political.

It is not a question of the presence or absence of cynicism, but only a matter of degree. These artists see the theatricality of power. They know the Wizard has no clothes, only tanks and guns. They see through the political kitsch, the "miniature propaganda" that invades the citizenry's daily life. Totalitarianism shrinks the private realm, and life becomes a Potemkin village of forced smiles that artists like Wang Jingsong and Yu Youhan pierce and portray.

Things are not what they appear. Some Chinese artists, like Liu Wei, are the children of high-ranking cadres, and they are in a natural position to see the rift between reality and representation — Liu's paintings within paintings are visible confirmations of this insight. If a prince is no hero to his valet, then how much more vulnerable is he to his own children who project into the public political realm not only the ethical absolutism of youth but the psychodynamics of family politics?

To call the artists born in the late 1950s and early 1960s a lost generation, as some critics have, may distort the reality of their artistic stance, if by "lost" we assume they care for nothing, think only of themselves and are culturally adrift, totally alienated and cut off from the past.

What happens when the emancipatory promise of revolution proves empty, when the revolution brings constraints even more confining than tradition? What is one to think when the party line fluctuates from year to year and today's purity of ideological passion becomes tomorrow's heresy? Where does one go when one is already in the promised land? Cynicism in such a socio-historical situation may be a rational response.

When the artists of the lost generation found that art did not change the world as they wanted, Beijing critic Laukung Chan writes that they abandoned "serious problems" and turned to "subjective/instinctive reality." But it would be wrong to consider the absence of political rhetoric a solipsistic escape: Chinese artists saw that the reigning rhetoric was not only empty, but deadly. Many Chinese artists may be hip, but they are not so hip that they value only their hipness. Wang Guangyi's anti-heroic manipulation of icons of Maoism and capitalism are not less serious in purpose than the tortured, Dantesque figures of Xia Xiaowan's lunar landscapes.

The assertion of self that the Stars group injected into Chinese painting at the end of the 1970s turned by the mid-1980s into an ideological apotheosis of subjective concerns which found expression in what Richard Strassberg terms "a universal Humanism which privileges the concerns of the self." Perhaps this was to be expected as a reaction to Revolutionary Realism which had no place for the self and in which subjective expression was a traitorous, reactionary act. The earlier assertion of the self over society was an act of high courage. While June 4 may have turned New Wave artists from metaphysical concerns — Wang Guangyi now calls for "clearing away the passions of Humanism" — the paintings remain, beneath their ironic surface, works of telling gravity.

Recent Chinese paintings are collusive, collaborative works of artist and viewer. We see the work filtered through memories of the flickering images of tanks rolling into Tian'anmen Square, the Goddess of Democracy tumbling to earth. In his *Mao Series*, Yu Youhan paints with a vivid Wizard of Oz palette: all is brightness and light as a family with empty smiles poses with a smiling Mao wearing a flowered shirt against a background of extravagantly flowered wallpaper. Yu, like Wang, knows that we viewers know that he knows that the gun barrel positioned outside the canvas's frame is the real cause of these vapid smiles. In this collusive creation, it is what we know is not and cannot be shown that makes the images so disturbing.

Disillusionment permeates Wang Guangyi's canvases. And again, we participate in a collusive act — he knows that we know what he knows. We know that to paint in the heroic mode now is an anti-heroic act. We laugh at his ironic juxtaposition of commodities, Marxist and capitalist, sold by ideological and entrepreneurial purveyors with equal cynicism. We do him an injustice if we think him only a jester à la Warhol: his stance is more engaged, his intent more political. However, he may be seriously misguided if he is equating these false roads to earthly salvation. Fair to attack them both, misguided to make them equivalent in human costs and consequences.

The artistic reactions to June 4, an accentuation of preexisting dispositions, is explained both by the particularistic conditions of Chinese history and the more general situation of the artist in a communist society. For the emigré Polish poet and Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz, the anger of a poet (read any artist) convinced that making noise is useless “goes underground and emerges only in disguise, transformed into irony, sarcasm, or icy calm.” Andrew Solomon’s recent book on “unofficial artists” in the now dust-bin Soviet Union is aptly titled, *The Irony Tower*.

The paintings in this exhibition are very much art of their times, unlike the recent deluge of academic oil painting which lies outside of time in a netherworld of kitsch and sterile technique. The China portrayed in this exhibition, despite a bright palette or cartoon characters, is not a happy place — Ding Fang’s tortured, writhing plateaus; Xia Xiaowan’s purgatory of naked figures; Zeng Fanzhi’s fearful patients cowering in front of doctors bearing a cure worse than their illness; Liu Wei’s pale, prematurely aged infants; Liu Xiaodong’s scenes of claustrophobic anomie: there are no heroes here, no comforting answers. Yet this “irony, sarcasm, or icy calm,” this subjective expressionism, seems much less an escape from the world than either academic realism or the ink and brush work of the New Literati painters. This is engaged painting. Those closer to the scene are better able to gauge these Chinese artists’ views of the future. Yet there is nothing on the canvas that suggests that while today may be lost, all is lost forever.

Kafka remarked to a friend that there was of course hope, plenty of it, but not for us. Because theirs is a socially conditioned, not existential, despair and anger, Chinese artists may harbour hope even for themselves as a post-1989 return of economic freedom brings with it calls for cultural freedom. Perhaps without hope there can be no anger. In the long shadows of Tian’anmen, anger saves negation from becoming nihilism.

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INTERPRETATIONS

Eric Wear

Introduction

Whenever one wants to discuss and evaluate new art, the problem of choosing appropriate standards is acutely felt. Even if an interpreter begins with the hope of seeing art as the product or message of a cultural community, one must still determine how to do this. As the meaning of artworks is not fully determined by artists' intentions, one often tries to talk about works in terms of the response of viewers (whether professional critics or anyone else). But the audience for China's new art has not yet been formed or remains notional. These works are not "popular" nor even widely known, even if one feels this is the result of unnatural and unjust social arrangements.

In trying to step beyond a chronicle of artists' biographies and psychological explanations for their behavior, I will attempt in this essay to consider their art in terms of the way it relates to customary interpretations of media. That is to say, I hope to place their work against a background of usual practices, in order to see what is retained and what is transformed, and how these choices may create meaning and significance for these works.

In addition, I want to consider the question of how one can see artworks in relation to society. What can it possibly mean to speak of an artwork in terms of "China" or to say that it represents "contemporary Chinese experience?" Ultimately, my interest here is in drawing attention to some ways in which interpretation of culture is also about struggles for legitimacy and authority in society.

Working within Media

Like other art, the making and understanding of these objects are consequences of education and social training. One has learned how to use and interpret media, and one approaches even new works with assumptions about how they can be intelligible. This is roughly comparable to speaking of art and its uses as though they composed a language or a game with rules.

Emerging from the environment of China's art academies and publications, much of the substance of this work is formed within traditions of Socialist figurative realism and modernist graphic design. (The first of these is often noted, but the second may be equally important for pointing to those common forms and compositions that populate "commercial" images.) These traditions incorporate both an aspiration to record observable perception, as well as a concern for idealisation which pictures exemplary cases (e.g. model workers in moments of overcoming hardship, or the beaming faces of ecstatic consumers) or distills reality into symbolism (e.g. Liberation, or product logo.)

In both painting and graphics the viewer is often led toward strongly emotional responses through the portrayal of human gestures or moving events, and by various compositional devices which sentimentalise or dramatise. In painting, one experiences clarity and solidity, while in graphic works dynamic balance within flat continuity and clear colours.

Largely, these Socialist Realist and graphic techniques present an active and aggressive setting forth of presences that the viewer experiences as emotionally coherent and full. (It might be argued that these techniques for experience have, in the twentieth century, largely displaced those which allow for comprehension of traditional Chinese painting. There is a rift here, though perhaps it always existed as a class division between forms of folk art and cultivated taste. But this problem is beyond the scope of this discussion.)

Taken together, these "modern" approaches have been conveyed by several generations of teachers within an atmosphere pervaded by political justifications. They have provided in large part the standard of criticism for public communication. The dissemination of these forms and their appropriate methods of perception have been grounded in seemingly common-sense notions of public accessibility and pleasure. These methods are offered as clear forms of communication for all people. And while they may have emerged from Western cultural history, they are felt to be as distinct from it as modern science. A relation to both a positive materialism and something like scientific objectivity hangs like a mist around these techniques.

If many of these new paintings also involve figurative and realist, and graphic methods, how can they be compared to conventional expectations for technique and subject matter? One may describe a range of differences through which they are set apart.

Corrections

A correction is offered when the subject or the social reference is replaced, but the media is used in much the same way as before. Persons and places may continue to be represented as part of some sort of Everyman experience, even if one abandons the obligatory optimism of Revolutionary Realism. Very little of the work in this exhibition seems to neatly occupy this position, but it should be imagined as a feature in the environment. Perhaps closest to this kind of activity are those works labelled as "Wounded Romantic" including the paintings of Xia Xiaowan and Zhang Xiaogang.

In their works, a customary "metaphysical" style of figuration is filled out with largely private symbolisms which one might guess to have some relation to Romantic or existential meditations where broken bodies suggest alienation or self-absorption. Tense, taut compositions with isolated forms present the typical form of these paintings.

Displacements: "Political Pop" and "Cynical Realism"

Figurative painting and modernist graphic design are in many respects profoundly amoral. The truth of observation and emotionally charged responses to dramatic composition may be had in advertising, political propaganda or pornography. While different protocols and circumstances prevent mistaking one category for the next, they may be easily confused. Fundamentally the techniques involved only present an allusion of truthfulness or presence. The Beijing crowds who came to see nude paintings certainly may have experienced pornography.

Where institutions control categories and uses of imagery, a strategy of displacing specific images and bringing them into conflict with other sorts may create feelings of doubt or a denial of the validity of circumstances. In other words, the customary messages attached to the use of a medium are undermined or satirised. Sensations of cynicism or disgust against a variety of social or political circumstances seem to be central to responses to those works labelled as "Political Pop" or "Cynical Realism." (However, these reactions are not equally felt, and the kind of importance any viewer gives to them may depend greatly on differences in political and social experience. While both Chinese urban intellectuals and other kinds of viewers may speak of feelings of cynicism, etc., the actual meaning and importance of cynicism may not be at all the same.)

"Political Pop" paintings, such as those of Wang Guangyi, which mix revolutionary poses with consumer graphics, set up a simple, open comparison between these two social circumstances and the role ascribed to art or design in either case. The objective and the purely self-serving are mingled. Recollections of the emotions of political mobilisation colour reactions to present-day consumer fantasies. Yu Youhan similarly compares trivial imagery of wallpaper and fashion with political icons. In Li Shan's paintings politics oozes pornographic liaisons. Video game display graphics are used by Feng Mengbo for painted versions of revolutionary operas.

Another approach to disrupting expectations may be seen in those works which appear to rest within a genre, but distort and mutilate it, suggesting some malaise in which the original is implicated. The irreverent or "cynical" realism of Fang Lijun, Liu Wei, or He Sen all set images of degeneration, decay or lack of clarity within such well-defined areas as portraiture. The polish and skill is present but degenerate, echoed by the mishappen faces and bodies that may be taken as signs of spiritual decay. This is simply turning on its head the correlation of harmony and usual standards of beauty, so that an opposite understanding is had.

In large measure these works may be taken for destructive gestures at the expense of usual understanding. Like jokes which amuse in confusing contexts and behaviours, one begins with humour but ends in criticism. However, the distrust of the subject of imagery does not involve any real distrust of techniques or means of representation. And if one looks at composition, there is an almost seamless continuity between these works and their academic or graphic sources.

Fetishisms

The communicative order is both maintained and crippled simultaneously when ordering itself consumes vision, filling all possibilities. Apparently endless repetition eclipses any interest in the ostensible subject. Perhaps significantly the mutilation of bodies and sexual violation are present, a sign of the humiliation of persons, and their reduction to objects. Repetition squanders purpose. A video shows Zhang Peili washing a chicken until it gives up the will to live. In his paintings, Song Yonghong mutilates technique, creating an awkwardness that is both distressing and direct.

In these fetishistic works, as well as in all the works discussed up to this point, the human body is a constant and often dominant feature. This seems to reflect a particular training which principally addresses the human condition through representation of bodies. One might even say that academic standards are strongly implicit in an understanding of these works; they gain their sense and force when seen as deviations. That academic standards are present in publications and public exhibitions in China (and abroad, as in the attention paid to Chen Yifei), is a necessary comparison which allows these new works to be experienced as a reaction within (and dependent upon) a field of activity.

Analytical Procedures: "Endgame Art"

An attention to the structure of media and its claims may be seen in the conceptual work of Xu Bing and Gu Wenda, where a medium is essentially taken to pieces, so that only the emptiness of an alphabet remains. This avoids or closes the prospect of meaning and virtually terminates the work of a medium. It can provide a meditation on the vanity of signification and the pathetic mechanism by which it appears.

Conventions and non-cooperation

Within figurative and graphic models, these artists have begun by mastering conventional techniques. They have turned away from them only in part. Even where opposition to typical expectations is mounted in terms of subject matter or finishing, an adherence to organisational or technical approaches remains. Perhaps these things allow for a smooth reading of oppositional signals. And even where novelty is introduced into the Chinese milieu, much of it is built on existing foreign models, such as 1960's Pop Art and recent Western works on themes of social and political dissent.

However, unless one supposes that they have disappointed some imperative for change in all dimensions, there is no difficulty in pointing to the largely conventional character of these works; it is partly a way of making the paintings and their topics available to an audience.

This line of interpretation ultimately must lead one to ask why media is being manipulated oppositionally. Beyond the meanings attributed to individual works, what is the sense of this approach to art for the artists and viewers who are involved with it? One could explain all this activity as a desire for frissons of novelty and violation. This suggests boredom with practices that no longer bring rewards of significance.

How does one think of non-cooperation with the usual forms of practice? A childish lack of seriousness or a form of moral critique? Immaturity is another form of resisting standards, even if it issues none of its own. If the common currency of images is false, misleading or otherwise inadequate, one might correct or dispose of these images, mocking their usual forms or flaying their logic. It may be that one refuses to participate in that which is felt to lack value or which has disappointed one's expectations. Previously inflated expectations for the role of art in society may partly explain the kinds of nihilism and denial that appear in the atmosphere of new art.

An irony of opposition is the degree to which resistance is emotionally adequate. The thrill of being an opponent may be felt as a sort of completion. That these works are sometimes presented as "dissident art" ultimately signifies very little, and may tend to exaggerate the role of these artists as agents of social transformation. An over-emphasis on opposition may also deny one from holding a constructive position. That which one opposes remains the only possible means to grasp experience. One doubts, but defaults.

Of course, besides the form of constructing meaning, topical political and social meaning attract one's interest. But even these messages are not straightforward. How can one talk of content without also wanting to talk about the relative importance or significance of content? An inevitable uncertainty remains in the separation between the immediate context in which this work was made, and the exhibition context in which it is now viewed. One cannot simply imaginatively bridge this gap; one cannot easily understand the experience of persons living in drastically different circumstances. And so it remains that the interpretation of these works is the creature of several very different and separated audiences.

The present exhibition suggests an understanding of the work as part of a larger cultural and social event, which is national orientation amid development and change. These works may well work to symbolise and activate this discussion, but one should not ignore that as paintings they may also have been firstly formed of comparatively personal references and private social relations. These are re-used by present viewers and commentators to speak of more and other things. Somehow amid these meditations on culture and national spirit one must keep a clear sense that such things are essentially speculative and hardly empirical.

Terms of culture

How can these works be related to an idea of contemporary China? To say that they are the "best work by people living in China" is facile and unhelpful. The relation and position of these works is not self-evident. That they are presented as representative of recent Chinese art is an act of critical and curatorial intervention. But it may have some kind of foundation. To consider this I want to make an extended digression along the fundamental terms of this debate.

What does it mean to speak of (let alone display) "contemporary Chinese art?" While this may appear to be an objective distinction, it is little more than a conjunction of sets of interests and concerns. If one separates this label into its parts, one may begin to see both the assumptions and values that it marks.

With the readiness of many present-day audiences to accept anything as "art," it may seem that there remains little to discuss, that "art" is what people identify as art and little more. Yet, basic questions remain and their understanding is frequently alluded to in debates over meaning and value. Does one, for instance, accept that any art object speaks for itself? Or is the meaning entirely dependent on the viewers and their preparation? And what interest is there in knowing the intentions of the artist; is not his or her view only one among those possible? There remains a large confusion of what is objective and subjective in this event, with subjective experience confused with the physical existence of an object — that it is nevertheless somehow related to and motivated by. It becomes deceptively satisfying to sweep aside the confusion, declare a specific subjective experience to be inherent in a particular object, and dismiss all objections as lacking in adequate subtlety of feeling.

It may be less satisfying to see art as a vague and complex cultural event, which is the actual activity of small numbers of people for whom its meaning is confused with personal and social orientations. How can one possibly speak of the art "of a nation" or "of an epoch"?

Culture

A multitude of terms may be used to outline the nature of a culture. In some cases the application of a term rests on observation of all or most of a population. For instance, that a culture is "literate" may follow from the observation that virtually all adults can read and write.

Or one could describe a culture in terms of an essential character that is not so much observed as abstracted from observation. That, for instance, a culture is "concerned with spiritual matters." One may give greater importance to one abstracted characteristic over another, and talk of the core values of a culture.

One could also give priority to one group in a culture as containing important values, such as an educated class or rural communities. A great deal of idealisation is possible, and the expression or neglect of a cultural characteristic may acquire moral value. Cultural terms may exist in ways that have little to do with land and language, so that anyone may have an American idea, or be "modern" by concern.

Culture may be spoken of in essentialisms that resist time, so that one may insist that a group of people have "lost" some cultural characteristic that they should have. In this sense, a cultural term may have less to do with observation of the present, and may be created from a selected use of materials from the past.

Similarly, cultural terms may represent ideals that are not yet realised. The use of a term like "modern" or "avant-garde" may reflect a teleological understanding of some direction of becoming. Any talk of the "aspirations" or "goals" of a culture represents a competition of interests and ideology.

In most instances a variety of cultural terms might be used to describe situations. In what way are terms suitable and how do they coincide with other meanings? "Modern" transcends ideas of place, while terms of place and language create "foreigners."

When terms and categories are applied to and by portions of a population they are weapons of knowledge. Their application gives moral and real advantage to groups of people.

"Contemporary" "Chinese"

And so what does one mean by "Chinese"? Again, an apparently straightforward term becomes very complex if we attempt to specify it. In the context of this exhibition, it minimally means that artworks are Chinese in that they are made by Chinese people on territory of the People's Republic of China. This excludes people elsewhere who may call themselves Chinese by ethnic identity, and it probably excludes people within the PRC who do not think of themselves as ethnically Han. The construction becomes more complex if one means to refer to more than race and language.

If one presumes to speak of Chinese values, then one is likely to privilege one set of education or way of living over another. "Chinese" as a term used to label certain values and behaviors as preferable. The support for this is familiar: the selective use of historical and literary references to support a view about what constitutes authentic Chinese behavior, whether it is spiritual, inquisitive, ironic, authoritarian, etc. Denying both the actual behavior of present persons and any sense of plurality of understanding; dressing up an essentialist claim in historical rags.

Who may speak for a culture? Rationally it is an impossible project, but it carries tremendous emotional gravity. To carry it out in writing cultural history is to privilege some set of behavior and attitudes, and quite possibly to place these beyond dispute by claiming for them an essential and natural origin. It is a comedy to see different groups claim to be more Chinese than others; all that one may observe is that making such claims is a characteristic of conscious cultural activity among some people who identify themselves as Chinese.

The addition of "contemporary" provides a division to acknowledge empirical differences in economics and manners. But in valuing "the contemporary" one acquires a means for dismissing some differences as outmoded or inconsistent with those goals and interests deriving from a "modern" or "international" perspective.

The problem of media and its usual understandings recurs as a difficult problem for relating art to culture. On account of their historical origins in Europe or America, the methods and interpretations of these works are part of a wide-flung practice with no specifically Chinese characteristics. Should the work therefore be explicitly compared to other points in the spatial and temporal dispersion of representational techniques? Only if one takes the view that there is a unitary history of the media can it make any sense to judge this work as better or worse, advanced or laggard. But while it is doubtless of interest to compare experiences of art and culture from one instance to the next, little is served in imagining the activity as an extended competition or some kind of parallel to scientific objectivity.

Particular understandings in different places and times are so disparate that they merit separate consideration and cautious comparison. This however does not remove the anxiety of dependence and competition which is often felt by those involved with this work.

So what might one conclude that honestly catches the nature of this work and exhibition? To what service do we put the understanding we believe we have of these works? Clearly there is no natural forum (nor can there be) which determines the value of art or its pertinence to whole populations. There are only works and suggestions for how to reasonably understand them in relation to other aspects and conditions of life.

These works exist in conjunction with all those debates which question the current state of affairs among Chinese on political, social and personal levels. The kinds of apprehensions and circumstances which they experience (or which we think about) are at once their own and also a moment within the possibilities of being human. To the extent that these works exist in relation to our thoughts about these things, they acquire kinds of value. Of course, they may have other values in other contexts (international, future, etc.)

One can find little reason to consider most of these works as relating to novel usages of media or tactics of criticism, but then a romance of novelty may be a rather trivial, shallow way to experience works of art. Certainly these are paintings and objects which may prompt reflections on the lives of artists or other Chinese, or on other abstract issues. The speculative nature of these relations is not a failure; that cultural activity is not open to "proof" is perhaps its essential charm. That art does not change society does not prevent it from being a vehicle for meditation on the understanding of public spheres and private lives.

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Appendix

NOTES AND ILLUSTRATIONS TO MAJOR TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN CHINESE ART

Li Xianting

1.

Chen Duxiu and Lū Zheng were the first to call for an “art revolution” in 1917 when they published an exchange of letters in the leading May Fourth periodical *La Jeunesse (Xin qingnian)*, Vol. 6. 1. In his letter, Chen Duxiu said it was imperative that “the vile Chinese painting” (*Zhongguo ehua*) prominent from the Mongol-Yuan to the Qing dynasty be discarded.

Also in 1917, Kang Youwei expressed a similar sentiment in his Introduction to the *Catalogue of Paintings in the Wanmucao Tang Collection (Wanmucaotang canghua mu xu)*. Liang Qichao and Lu Xun, a prominent figure of the New Culture Movement, shared Kang’s view.

Xu Beihong, the leading exponent of Chinese realism, later claimed that he was a “disciple” of Kang Youwei (see Xu’s Beihong’s “Life” [*Beihong zishu*] published in Companion [*Liangyou*] magazine in 1930). Xu’s decision to pursue his passion for realism in France, as well as his later efforts to establish realism as the mainstream form of contemporary Chinese art, were most probably linked to his early exposure to Kang’s ideas.

2.

For details of this debate, see Lang Shaojun’s *On Modern Chinese Art* (Nanjing: Jiangsu chubanshe, 1988), pp. 25–9, and Li Xianting, “A Critique of the May Fourth Revolution in Art” in the periodical *Duoyun* (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe), 1990, No. 3. The controversy raged during the *First National Art Exhibition* organised by the Nationalist (KMT) Nanjing government in 1929. It was sparked off by an article by Xu Beihong published in the exhibition catalogue. Xu averred that the “best thing about the exhibition” is the fact that none of that brazen stuff by Cézanne, Matisse or Bonnard has been included.” He went on to say that “it would be an outrageous waste of public funds and probably little better than importing a load of morphine or heroin” if the Chinese government established a national art gallery and “packed ten rooms with paintings by Cézanne and Matisse (things I can churn out at the rate of two an hour) priced at three to five thousand *yuan* each. If they do this I’ll have no choice but to shave my head and become a monk, only then will I be spared exposure to such despicable, muddleheaded and vile decadence.” The poet Xu Zhimo held the diametrically opposite opinion. Declaring Cézanne to be the “uncrowned king” of modern art, he observed that Beihong’s remarks were “petulant” and no better than the ill-informed criticisms that Parisians had levelled against Cézanne in the past. Li Yishi, another participant in the controversy, sided with Xu Zhimo. Li, however, felt that works by Cézanne and Matisse should not be encouraged in China for “if they become popular they will have a great and, I fear, deleterious impact on society”

Illustrations 1–10

It is possible here to discern the influence of a range of early Western Modernist artistic styles like Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism and Surrealism on the Chinese art of the 1930s and 40s.

Illustrations 11–32

The following points should be noted when considering the history of realism in modern China:

1. What started out as sketching from life was later influenced by more utilitarian social elements.
2. It was used to transform traditional Chinese landscape painting. This is particularly evident in the paintings of Xu Beihong and Jiang Zhaohe. Figures are depicted with realistic anatomical detail, shading is emphasised as is the relationship between figures and their background, whereas traditional Chinese landscape painting often used “positive” blank space (*kongbaishide xu*) in backgrounds.
3. The rapid infiltration of popular art led to the production of calendar paintings (*yuefenpai nianhua*) which became extremely popular and the standard aesthetic for modern (pre-1949) mass taste. The bright, clean and comely forms and colours of these works exerted an undeniable influence on the evolution of official art, in particular “Maoist art.”

3. & Illustrations 33–36

In 1929, Lu Xun and Rou Shi co-edited four art books, two of which were collections of woodcuts. In 1930, Lu Xun edited and published *Selected Paintings from the New Russia (Xin’e huaxuan)* and another volume of illustrations (*Meipeierde muke (Shimitu) zhi tu*) done by the German woodcut artist Carl Meffert for Cement (*Shimi tu*), a novel by the Soviet writer Gladkov.

In his Introduction to *Selected Paintings from the New Russia* Lu Xun noted that "woodcuts have an immediate relevance and value during a time of revolution, for they can be produced with great haste."

In the following years Lu Xun published and arranged for exhibitions of both foreign and indigenous woodcuts that he had collected. His activities inspired a nationwide woodcut movement. Lu Xun's advocacy of woodcuts was linked to his perception of the social revolution that was unfolding in China at the time. To a certain extent he saw the movement as being aimed against "those who enjoy introducing the artistic oddities of the European fin de siècle. Such works only encourage artistic folly and our art world is clogged with grotesqueries as a result." This quotation comes from a letter Lu Xun wrote to Xidi (Zheng Zhenduo) on 2 June, 1934, shortly after the publication of *Yinyuji*, a collection of woodcuts. Heavily influenced by works Lu Xun had introduced from overseas, in particular those of Meffert, the Belgian Frans Masereel and the German Expressionists, most Chinese woodcuts from this period lack their own artistic vocabulary.

4. & Illustrations 37–40

During the Yan'an culture movement artists and writers joined the revolutionary ranks of the Communist Party; culture itself became a form of propaganda in the service of the workers, peasants and soldiers. For a detailed chronology of this period, see Ai Ke'en's *A Record of the Flourishing of the Yan'an Arts Movement (Yan'an wenyi yundong jisheng)*, (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1987).

According to Mao Zedong, an artist could only be effective if he immersed himself in the life of workers and peasants, and became familiar with their language. Only then would it be possible to create artistic works which the masses of workers and peasants could truly enjoy. The phrase "workers and peasants" denoted the peasantry, especially during the Yan'an period. The basic aim of the Yan'an arts movement was, therefore, the assimilation of peasant artistic styles. This was particularly so after Mao Zedong spoke at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in May 1942. The cultural line Mao promoted at that forum led to the production of works that contained salient elements of folk art and peasant culture. They included, for example, the *yangge* opera *The Brother and Sister Pioneers (Xiongmei kaihuang)*, the Western-style opera *The White-Haired Girl (Baimao nü)*, Zhao Shuli's novel *Rhymes of Li Youcai (Li Youcai banhua)*, as well as the woodcuts of Gu Yuan.

The Yan'an period marked a turning point in modern Chinese art history with folk art in particular having a fundamental impact on the discourse of élite Chinese culture. Prior to this, modern Chinese art was essentially the product of Western influence. Yan'an, however, the holy land of the Chinese revolution, had attracted large numbers of progressive and Westernized artists, and the folk art movement transmuted their art. One artist whose work is symbolic of this process is Gu Yuan. Originally influenced by Western artistic representation which emphasised chiaroscuro, Gu Yuan found that in Yan'an the peasants thought these shaded countenances were ugly, calling them "yin-yang faces." He modified his approach, absorbing elements from paper-cuts done for window decoration, woodblock New Year's pictures and paper funeral objects (in particular paper money), creating a style that gave prominence to line over shading, and leaving the faces in his works blank. His prints were to have a widespread impact on Chinese woodcuts and art in general. (See illustration).

Another basic element of the Yan'an culture movement, and one Mao repeatedly emphasised both in his "Talks" at the May 1942 forum and in subsequent "directives" on culture, was the need for artists to extol the positive and uplifting aspects of life. The Yan'an arts movement was part of the larger Yan'an Party Rectification Campaign which was, to an extent, aimed at denouncing works that exposed the negative side of the Party and the revolution. Jubilation was the cornerstone of Chinese folk culture and it meshed perfectly with Mao's calls to praise the positive aspects of the revolution. The folk art of Yan'an determined the course that Chinese art followed up to the Cultural Revolution (1966).

5. & Illustrations 41–61

In 1949, the Communist Party came to power on the Chinese mainland and launched the first of many ideological purges of artists and writers. In July 1949, the All-China Congress of Representatives of Literary and Artistic Workers was held and the All-China Literary and Arts Association, a unified government body overseeing the arts, was established. Its mission was to apply Mao Zedong's line on the arts.

In November of the same year, *Wenhui Daily (Wenhui bao)*, the Shanghai-based newspaper, sponsored a discussion on whether it was permissible for the petit bourgeoisie to be represented as protagonists in literary and artistic works. He Qifang, a poet and literary critic, drew the discussion to a conclusion with the statement that "they [the petit bourgeoisie] should not be written about too much and when they are written about it should be done critically."

On 10 May, 1950, *Literary Gazette* (*Wenyi bao*), the official organ of the Ministry of Culture, published an article by Zhou Yang, the Minister of Culture, in praise of the play *Song of the Red Flag* (*Hongqi ge*), a paean for the workers. On 8 September, Jiang Qing called on writers to "concentrate on the major themes of the age" at a meeting on film.

On 20 May, 1951, Mao Zedong wrote a major editorial for People's Daily (*Renmin ribao*) entitled "We Must Pay Attention to the Discussion of the Film *The Life of Wu Xun* (*Wu Xun zhuan*)" in which he called on cultural workers to create works that praised "the uplifting economic situation, the strength of the new ruling class, as well as emergent heroic figures and revolutionary thinking." He denounced Sun Yu's film *The Life of Wu Xun* for depicting outdated social types, using the attack on the film as an excuse for a major cultural purge.

In late December 1951, Mao launched the "Three and Five Antis" political purge [Translator's note: The Three Antis were "to oppose corruption, waste and bureaucracy inside the Party and state organs." The Five Antis were "to oppose bribery, tax evasion, theft of state property, cheating on government contracts and stealing economic information."]

On 10 May, 1952, *Literary Gazette* began serialising a "Discussion on How to Create New Heroic Figures."

On 10 January, 1953, *Literary Gazette* published a key editorial, "Overcome Backwardness in the Arts, Put a Premium on Reflecting the Magnificent Realities of Today."

In February 1955, the arts world launched a denunciation of Hu Feng's theory that art should reflect human nature. Mao Zedong wrote an editorial note for *People's Daily* to introduce the material collected to criticise Hu at the same time as condemning Hu and his associates as a "counter-revolutionary clique." They were subsequently purged and arrested.

In 1957, Mao launched an even larger purge, the "Anti-Rightist Movement," during which numerous cultural figures and many university students were denounced. Some of these art students were guilty of nothing more serious than having expressed a liking for styles of art other than realism, such as Impressionism.

In 1958, Mao's political idealism reached a pinnacle. On 22 March, at a National Art and Science Research Symposium held in Chengdu, Sichuan, Mao made a speech in which he declared that "proletarian literature and art should avail themselves of a creative method that combines Revolutionary Realism with Revolutionary Romanticism." On 26 September, *Literary Gazette* published an editorial which explicated Mao's view as "demanding [of cultural workers] that they realistically represent the changing realities of continuous revolution at the same time as giving full play to the sublime and lofty ideals of communism." In this year a massive wall-painting movement resulted from large numbers of artists being sent to the countryside to work with peasants. Romantic and cartoon-like murals soon covered walls throughout rural China. (See illustration 45. This is a depiction of a bumper harvest in an impoverished village in Jiangsu Province.)

In 1964, Mao Zedong launched the Socialist Education Movement. During this movement and the subsequent Cultural Revolution, which began two years later, the majority of artists were purged. Art became little more than a vehicle for the glorification of the workers, peasants and soldiers and a means for lauding the achievements of socialism.

On 23 May, 1968, *Wenhui Daily* published an article, "Let the Stage of Literature and Art Forever be a Front for the Propagation of Mao Zedong Thought," which outlined the "three prominences" (*san tuchude chuangzuo yuanze*), Jiang Qing's creative principle for the arts. The "three prominences" were: to give prominence to positive characters; to give prominence to the heroic characters among the positive characters; and to give prominence to the central heroic character among the heroic characters. The Maoist cultural principle of creating "sublime, outstanding and perfect" (*gao, da, quan*) heroes thus reached its peak.

The creation of "Red, bright and shining" (*hong, guang, liang*) works was a Maoist cultural principle that resulted from a confluence of nativist and Soviet influences after 1949. In October 1949, the vice-chairman of the Soviet Artists' Association visited China, leading to the formal introduction in China of Soviet Socialist Realism. From the early 1950s, China sent students to study in the Soviet Union.

In March 1951, the Chinese Artists' Association held a *National Exhibition of New Year's Paintings* which led to a New Year's Painting Movement that lasted for some years. It had the effect of standardising art so the majority of artists produced works of gaiety and dazzling colour.

Dong Xiwen's *First National Day Celebration* (*Kaiguo dadian*), created in 1953, initiated the style of New Year's painting in oils.

In 1955, the Soviet artist Maximov taught oil painting in China with students from the major art academies throughout the country attending his classes.

From the late 1950s, Maximov's students, along with art graduates returning from the Soviet Union, formed a powerful cadre in China's art academies. In the late 1950s and up to the mid-1960s, Soviet Socialist Realism was the predominant artistic style in Chinese painting. Of crucial importance was the fact that the Soviet style of realism was used as the basis for the curricula of the nation's art academies. Institutionalised in this way, Revolutionary Realism took hold in the minds of generations of Chinese artists.

(Soviet-style Socialist Realism was a form of 19th Century European realism reformulated by the Russian democratic revolutionaries and theoreticians B. G. Peilinsky (1811–48) and N. G. Chernichevsky (1828–89). They highlighted the dimension of subjective criticism in the realist tradition, one that is also known as "Critical Realism." Under the Soviets this element of criticism was replaced by the political requirement for artists to glorify reality. The evolution of realism in China was strikingly similar. Actually, this totalitarianisation of art was part and parcel of the history of all Communist states.)

Mao Zedong never failed to emphasise that art had to appeal to the broad masses; he was particularly insistent on this during periods of political uncertainty. The repeated discussions concerning the "nationalisation of art" (*yishu minzuhua*) from the late 1950s to the mid-60s, as well as the call for artists to learn from folk artists and peasants, produced examples such as the famous sculpture *At the Landlord's Rent Collection Office* (*Shouzuyuan*) — the result of artists working with peasant artisans to set up a class education exhibition in the Sichuan countryside. These were all the outcome of Mao's directives on art.

The year 1966 saw the unfolding of the Cultural Revolution. The *Hu County Peasant Art Exhibition* was given entrée to the China Art Gallery in Beijing, helping spur the popularisation of worker and peasant art. The bright and simple colours of these works, their romanticism and vibrance had a profound impact on artists, particularly those trained in the Soviet tradition.

6.

The political utilitarianism of art in China from the last century to the end of the Maoist era was, in reality, the product of the internalisation of Confucian values by generations of educated Chinese. The cultural cornerstone of Confucianism was that "art should be used to express the Way" (*wen yi zai dao*). People were inculcated with a spirit of social engagement and a sense of mission. This has made it impossible for creative people to break free of political utilitarianism to strive for the metaphysical spirit so necessary for artistic creativity. The Confucian tradition of moral perfectionism has, during its evolution, incorporated elements from both Daoism and Buddhism, thereby achieving a measure of otherworldliness. But this amalgamation of influences spawned a contradiction at the very heart of Confucianism: on one hand there was a need "to cultivate the self" (*xiushen*), and, on the other, a duty "to bring order to the nation and through it all under heaven" (*zhi guo ping tianxia*). This deep-seated antagonism produced a schizophrenia among generations of Chinese intellectuals. The saying from the ancient Confucian sage Mencius that "If you prosper, then work to serve the whole kingdom; if you remain impoverished, then nurture your own virtue in solitude" was accepted as a personal philosophy by Chinese intellectuals throughout the ages. "To prosper" means to be able realise the ideal of political involvement. If it is not possible to prosper then one must retire from active involvement in the world. This is the philosophy behind the actions of some modern innovative artists like Lin Fengmian who eventually chose the time-hallowed path of abandoning the world. Chinese artists have consistently failed to develop an interest and involvement in human life itself. The scholar-gentleman, or "literati," painting that evolved from the Song dynasty gradually superseded the belief that "art should be used to express the Way," but it marked a rejection of the world. The powerful trend in favour of realism championed by modern Chinese thinkers, including Mao Zedong, was a reaction against Song-Yuan literati art. Ironically, in the end the proponents of realism reaffirmed the Confucian dictum that "art should be used to express the Way." Thus, in the end, no basic revolution in art was achieved at all.

7. & Illustrations 62–64

The most important representative exhibition of formalism (*xingshizhuyi*) was held during the Spring Festival in February, 1979, in Shanghai. The works were almost exclusively landscapes and still-lives done basically after the style of Impressionism and Cubism. These three illustrations are of works by artists born in the mid 1930s who had a close association with Lin Fengmian, Guan Liang, Wu Dayu and Liu Haisu in Shanghai during the 1930s and 40s.

Of these three, Shen Tianwan was studying at the East China Art School (later renamed the Nanjing Art School) when the curriculum was transformed along Soviet lines in the early 1950s. Unable to accept these changes, Shen left the school. Han Boyou, influenced by the Chinese artists mentioned above, was enamoured of modern painting and in 1963, at the height of Soviet cultural influence, he resigned from his position with the Chinese Artists' Association and began experimenting with Cubism. After graduating, Chen Junde stayed on at the Shanghai Drama Academy to teach and came under the influence of the modernist teacher Min Xiwen and then sought out Lin Fengmian for instruction, thereby freeing himself from Soviet influence to embark on a career as an Impressionist.

Illustrations 65–68

The *Oil Painting Exhibition of Beijing Spring Landscapes and Still-Life* was held during the Spring Festival of 1979. Featuring only landscapes and still-lives this exhibition effectively rejected the political utilitarianism of Maoist Revolutionary Realism. Over forty artists, most of them well-known and established figures, took part in the exhibition. Many of them, including Dong Xiwen, Liu Gongliu, Zhan Jianjun and Lin Gang, were prominent during the Maoist years; yet the paintings they showed in this exhibition revealed they had freed themselves from the constraints of art in the service of politics. The exhibition also provided artists like Liu Haisu, Pang Xunqin, Wu Guanzhong and Yuan Yunsheng with an opportunity to reveal publicly their “underground” explorations in realms not dominated by Revolutionary Romanticism. Jiang Feng, the former chairman of the Chinese Artists’ Association denounced as a Rightist in 1957 and not rehabilitated until the end of the Cultural Revolution, wrote the formal introduction to the exhibition, one which caused a sensation at the time. The central theme of Jiang’s essay was an appeal for artists to be allowed freedom of association and expression. He was of the opinion that “unofficial art salons are beneficial to the development of art.”

Works by Pang Xunqin done in the early 1970s show his exploration of the decorative style of exoticism (see illustration). Yuan Yunsheng’s work reflects his interest in decorative art similar to that seen in the mural he did for the Beijing International Airport. At the time the works of new artist Feng Guodong done in both Fauvist and post-Surrealistic styles enjoyed considerable attention.

The artists who participated in this exhibition later formed the Oil Painting Research Association. This group held three exhibitions and had a considerable impact on the Chinese art scene at the time.

Illustrations 69–70

The Beijing International Airport mural, a decorative work by Yuan Yunsheng and Xiao Huixiang, had a considerable influence on the changing artistic style of the early 1980s. Decorative art was, for a time, synonymous with modern art. It was a peculiarly Chinese style which had a revolutionary impact on attitudes formerly determined by Revolutionary Romanticism and political utilitarianism.

Illustrations 71–72

The members of the “Anonymous Painting Association” (*Wuming huahui*) in Beijing were not trained in the academy. Its chief members were Zhao Wenliang and Yang Yushu, artists who began doing impressionistic works in the 1970s, at the height of the Mao era. They attracted the attention of many younger artists who were anxious to reject the straightjacket of Maoist culture.

Illustrations 73–75

Born in 1948, Xue Mingde attended the middle school attached to the Sichuan Art Academy. He was criticised by the school authorities for his interest in Impressionism. In early 1979, he “exhibited” his works — a cross between Impressionism and Expressionism — on the Democracy Wall at Xidan in central Beijing.

The Contemporaries (Tongdai ren) exhibition in Beijing and the Yunnan Monkey Year Society (Shenshe) exhibition held in Kunming were important examples of formalism in early 80s’ China. The Yunnan school of artists developed out of the Monkey Year Society, giving an added lease on life to the decorative style of contemporary art.

Illustrations 76–78

Abstract art reached a height of popularity during 1981–83. In *The Path of Beauty (Meide lucheng*, Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1981), the academic Li Zezhou made the point that art evolved from the representation of concrete forms to the expression of the abstract. This statement had a tremendous impact in the art world. As an editor of the authoritative official journal *Art (Meishu)*, I noted the move towards abstract art and produced an issue of the journal devoted to the subject (*Art*, No. 1, 1983). This led, however, to my being purged during the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign later that year for maintaining a “bourgeois artistic standpoint.”

The abstract art produced in China in the early 1980s was the result of formalism; form and decoration were the wellsprings of these works. At least they indicated that artists had made a clean break with realism. The development of contemporary Chinese culture, however, is dependent upon shifts in values. Such a shift took place, for example, in the early 1980s. Following this change, experimentation with abstract art became little more than an empty gesture imitating Western models.

After 1985, however, things changed. There were two distinct new developments in abstract art. The first of these was the appearance of works that took their inspiration from traditional Chinese painting, architecture and bronzes. This is evident in the paintings of Xiao Huixiang and Chen Xiangxun whose use of lines is influenced by the

brush work of ink painting. Fu Zhongwang, meanwhile, used traditional furniture as a resource and Sui Jianguo's work reflects an appreciation of inlaid objects such as porcelain. (For examples of Fu's and Sui's work, see the illustrations in this catalogue). The second form of post-1985 abstract art is represented here by the paintings of Shang Yang and Shen Qin (see illustrations), who use the vocabulary of abstract art to express the tranquil inner world of Eastern spirituality.

Illustrations 79 to 81

An example of "Scar Realism" (*shanghen xieshijuyi*). The word "scar" was popularized in 1978 by Lu Xinhua, a Shanghai rusticated youth, who wrote a highly popular short story about the sufferings of young people in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. After the publication of Lu's story the word "scar" came to be used to describe any creative work (whether it be in literature, cinema, photography or art) that revealed the dark side of society or the tragic fate of common people. The majority of "scar artists" were former rusticated youths, and many of them were in the first batch of post-Cultural Revolution university entrants.

"Scar art" made its initial appearance in the Sichuan Art Academy. The main reason for this was that teachers at the school encouraged students to paint creatively and take part in exhibitions rather than simply spending all their time in classrooms perfecting basic technique. The students were, however, the product of Maoist culture. Their rebellion against it was an emotional rejection of what they felt they had suffered at the hands of society, but as such it did not encompass a denial of their roots in realist art. Given their limited exposure to international art they found Russian Critical Realism particularly appealing. As we can see from the painting by Cheng Conglin reproduced here, it is, in terms of the dramatic elements employed, as well as in its composition and style, obviously the result of the Soviet artist Sulikov's influence.

Scar art and literature suited perfectly the ideological requirements of post-Mao politics while in no way exceeding the boundaries of state-sanctioned realism. It is no wonder that Scar art and literature was the first form of post-1976 culture recognised by the authorities. Luo Zhonglin and Cheng Conglin, painters who produced Scar art, received major government awards and promotions, becoming the youngest professors in the academies and new leaders in the official art world.

Illustrations 82–85

Rustic realism. The influence of 17th century Dutch oil painting is obvious in the work of Chen Danqing. The solidity and richness of rural idylls held a powerful appeal for artists used to the lightness and prettiness of Maoist art. His oils reflected an aesthetic that had nothing to do with the political emotionalism of Scar art, and he was widely emulated. This fad for rural lyricism lasted for some time.

Yuan Yunsheng produced his painting *Return, My Soul!* (*Hun xi guilai*) in the hope of reviving the long-lost virile national spirit of the Han and Tang dynasties.

He Duoling, a Sichuan artist influenced by Wyeth, created in his rural works an ambience of solitude and sentimental nostalgia.

In sketches inspired by the landscape of northern Shaanxi, Ding Fang realized the hope first expressed by Yuan Yunsheng, creating a space in Chinese art for an aesthetic that favoured the ungainly and sodden.

Illustrations 86 to 96

Works from the *Stars* exhibitions (*Xingxing meizhan*). The Stars held two exhibitions. The first of 163 works was held on the pavement outside the China Art Gallery on 27 September, 1979. It was closed down the same day by the police. Following the forced closure, the Stars gathered at Democracy Wall in Xidan and marched on the Beijing Municipal Government in protest, calling for artistic democracy. Some prominent art bureaucrats like Jiang Feng and Liu Xin sympathised with their plight and the exhibition was eventually reopened at Beihai Park on 23 November. Initially, there were twenty-three members of the Stars, the majority of whom were young amateurs without a formal academic education.

The most important artists who participated in the first exhibition were Wang Keping, Huang Rui, Ma Desheng, Qu Leilei, Bo Yun, Yan Li, Yang Yiping, Li Shuang, and Shao Fei. Most of their work featured social criticism; their artistic vocabulary was predominantly symbolist, although Yan Li showed he had an understanding of and talent in dealing with Cubism. The most noteworthy artist was Wang Keping, who combined the sense of absurdity of modern Western discourse with the root carving popular among Chinese folk artists. He created works steeped in the Chinese world, showing himself to be the most unique artistic innovator of the last decade.

The second *Stars* exhibition opened on 20 August, 1980, at the China Art Gallery. It ran for fifteen days. The most important addition to the ranks of the Stars at this time was Bao Pao. Bao's abstract sculptures drew considerable attention.

8.

From its inception, the new Chinese art was in opposition to official culture. It took the form of an underground movement with artists forming their own associations and finding funds for privately-run exhibitions. The early 1980s' groupings called themselves "associations" (*huahui*), while those that appeared in the '85 New Wave Art Movement preferred the term "colony" (*qunti*), a term popularised by the publication of the manifesto and works of "The Northern Art Colony" (*Beifang yishu qunti*) in *Fine Arts in China* in 1985. As an editor of the paper I began a regular column to introduce the new artistic collectives appearing around the country.

The '85 New Wave Art Movement saw the development of these artists "colonies" for a number of reasons. In the first place, the authorities at the time were as unwilling to recognize new artists as they had been at the beginning of the 1980s. Maoist art still held sway in official circles as evinced by the *Sixth All-China Art Exhibition* held in 1985. This left young artists with no alternative but to find different outlets for their views and their work. Secondly, the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign of 1983–84 quashed most of the artists' associations that had formed in the early 80s. At the Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists in 1985, the authorities sanctioned "creative freedom," allowing for a relatively relaxed cultural atmosphere. Artists readily took advantage of this. Thirdly, the '85 New Wave Movement was the result of group discussion and deliberation, not of individual action. As it was predominantly an underground movement, people gathered in mutually supportive groups. According to partial statistical information, 79 art groups appeared in the years 1982–86 in 25 cities, autonomous regions and provinces. From 1978 to 1984 there were 37 group exhibitions; in 1986 alone there were 110.

9.

There are a number of questions to be considered when discussing the tendency of artists to engage in theoretical discussions and their pursuit of philosophical questions in their art works. 1. The majority of artists shared an enthusiasm for writing and publishing articles on philosophy, culture and art. 2. Many of their works contained an obviously philosophical dimension. This is particularly apparent, for example, in the works of Wang Guangyi, Shu Qun, Liu Yan, Huang Yongping and the artists' discussions of their philosophical endeavours. 3. The artists adopted this approach as a result of their contact with Western works of philosophy and culture. Gu Wenda, for example, used his years as a graduate student (1978–81) to read virtually all of the Western works (modern philosophy, the natural sciences and literature) translated into Chinese as well as the Daoist classics, Laozi and Zhuangzi. Huang Yongping claimed that he spent the summer of 1984 "immersed in Ludwig Wittgenstein." Shu Qun said that in 1984 he "had the good fortune to get a photocopy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* which I devoured avidly." (These quotations are from letters written to the author).

Illustrations 97–105

Works influenced by Duchamp, Dadaists and Pop art. The Pop-meister Rauschenberg held an exhibition in Beijing in 1985 which had an seismic impact on the Chinese art scene. Rauschenberg clones appeared overnight throughout China. They may have misinterpreted the American artist but it was a misinterpretation within a specifically Chinese cultural context. After all, these imitations appeared at a time when the art inspired by the "Stars" had run its course and amidst an atmosphere of nativist revival and nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution. They were rebelling against new conventional art, whether it be rehashed literati painting or Native Soil art.

These younger artists used Pop art (some may prefer to call it a "misuse") to launch an assault on neo-Conservative post-Mao art. They wanted to get art off the walls and out of the new straightjackets of officially condoned painting. In the '85 New Wave Art Movement they may have misconstrued Dadaism but they got the message right: upset aesthetic conventions. The epicentres of this movement were the Xiamen Dadaists, the *Zero Art* exhibition in Hunan and the *Modern Art* exhibition in Taiyuan, Shanxi.

The Xiamen Dadaists started up in 1983, although their most active period began in 1985, under the leadership of Huang Yongping. In 1986, they staged three events: a mass exhibition; a mass burning of works; and an exhibition of building materials and rubbish in the Provincial Art Gallery of Fujian. They declared that, "It took us five years to learn everything we know about art and it's going to take us another ten to unlearn it." In 1987, Huang Yongping created his work *The History of Chinese Art and A Short History of Modern Art after Two Minutes in a Washing Machine*.

Illustrations 106–119

Works representative of cultural criticism and reconstruction. Because they wanted to express a supra-experiential hypothesis concerning the new culture of the future, these artists generally chose a surrealist style of artistic discourse. Generally speaking, these works are referred to as “rational painting.” Theirs is a metaphysical, abstract pursuit aimed at a type of expression different from the emotive or personal experience of the life-force. The representatives of this school of art are the “Northern Art Collective” of Northeast China and “The First Station Group” of Nanjing. (See note 9).

At the height of the Pop art craze in late 1985, Wu Shanzhuan, Ni Haifeng and four others created the *75% Red, 20% Black and 5% White* series, the most successful Chinese adaptation of Pop art. It was also the first work of Chinese Pop to use Chinese characters (Gu Wenda’s use of characters, although predating this, was nonetheless limited to a more early Modernist style of artistic expression).

This work is noteworthy because of the following points:

1. *75% Red, 20% Black and 5% White* used the black poster characters familiar from the days of the Cultural Revolution when such characters were used universally for political propaganda.

2. The coloured background of *75% Red, 20% Black and 5% White* is again an echo of the “red deluge” of the Cultural Revolution. (In 1967, there was a nationwide call for the streets in all Chinese cities to be painted red. This combined with the red flags that adorned buildings and streets created the effect of a “red deluge” or “sea of red.” This is combined with elements taken from the simplistic political slogans also dating from the Cultural Revolution period. (Again, slogans were an integral part of public life throughout the Cultural Revolution. Obvious examples of such slogans are “struggle against individualism and denounce revisionism,” “obliterate the bourgeois and encourage the proletariat,” “grasp revolution and increase production,” “the red, red, reddest red sun in our hearts, Chairman Mao,” and so on.)

3. The use of popular Cultural Revolution styles for written characters, although what the characters actually spell out are sentiments and attitudes more in keeping with the mood of the mid-1980s. For example, “cabbage 3 cents a catty,” “neighbourhood committee,” and so on.

It is for these reasons that I include these works in the genre of cultural criticism. Later on, Wu Shanzhuan’s *Red Humour* series and Ni Haifeng’s *Village Broadcasting Station* were a continuation of this train of thought (see the comments on Wu and Ni in this volume). Both Wu and Ni were to participate in the 1989 art exhibition: Wu with his *Selling Prawns* and Ni’s *Slaughtering a Chicken*. These works were inspired more directly by Joseph Beuys than Pop art. Their goal, however, remained the same: cultural criticism.

Illustrations 120–143

The artistic works that reflected a basic interest in life and the life-force are those that perhaps offer the richest range of creativity of the whole ‘85 New Wave. They are also the works which are least hampered by the limitations of the movement’s generally simplistic philosophising. They emphasise the individual experience of life.

“The Southeastern Art Research Collective,” the most famous of the groups involved in this endeavour, declared “a person is both part of humanity but also an individual, and it is this principle that leads us to delve into the dark recesses of the mind in search of the chaotic ‘inner symbolic universe.’ We locate our art in the entire process of life.” — Mao Xuhui

“You are confronted by a canvas. It feels like all of the thrill and challenge of life is there staring at you. You are involved in a fight to the death.” — Pan Dehai

In the notes he wrote at the time he was creating *The Spirit*, Zhang Xiaogang said the following:

“Illness affords us that unique experience whereby we are allowed to wander in the borderlands between life and death. Only then can one really learn the meaning of dreams. . . . It is at this point that our love is cleft in two: on one hand there is a longing for the rich mosaic of life, while on the other there is an irresistible urge to die. It is our humanity that transforms death into a type of religion.”

Another prominent group, “The Southwest Shandong Collective,” chose to use a more convoluted form of expression to “reject so-called ‘culture.’ We are drawn to the earth, and the primitive. We glorify it. We are incapable of creation, we just do what comes naturally.” — Huang Chao

Because of the input of the individual, the works of this “school of life” carry a hint of Expressionism added to the influence of philosophy (its advocates all liked reading); the imagery of their works also reflects an interest in the discourse of Surrealism.

A colder and more clinical approach to this humanism, or "school of life" approach is found in the works of the New Spaces Exhibition '85 of Zhejiang Province and the "Pond Society" that resulted from it. Since there were superficial similarities to the work of the "Northern Art Collective" both were dubbed by some critics at the time as being proponents of "rational painting." This group of southern artists, however, emphasised the clinical nature of direct impressions, an interest in life experiences and non-philosophical thought. The most representative artist of this school is Zhang Peili. In discussing his composition *X? — The Glove* Zhang said he was interested in the properties of "the intermediary objects" (the gloves) in their relationship with other things. Here the concern is for the restrictions and limitations placed on life, while maintaining an interest in the symbols of the uncertain. We are including in our illustrations a large range of works from this school including paintings, installations, performance art, postal art and video art. They are all related to the offensive dimensions of language and the direct experiences of life. (See also the comments on Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi in this volume).

The first appearance of performance art in China was in December 1985, when the Beijing artist Wu Guangyao wrapped himself up in cloth. This was followed in November 1986 by the Shanghai artists Ding Yi and Qin Yifeng doing cloth sculptures in the streets of the city, including self-mummification. They claimed this "represented the tension of the life-force of objects with static images."

In 1987, the Beijing "Ideas 21" group wrapped people up in cloth, then cut these "mummies" open layer by layer until they were exposed nude to the freezing temperatures of the winter. This was done so they could "experience the bone-rattling coldness of the air".

Also in 1987, the artists in "Ideas 21 — the Signalpost of the Great Tragedy" (see illustration) wanted to "avail [themselves] of a chord as natural as that of folk songs that will reverberate between Heaven and Earth. Evoke the spirits of the ancestors who built the Great Wall. Experience the harmony of Nature and Man while also groaning with the agony of oppressive weight and displaying resistance".

The most extreme expression of this school of art was seen in the "Tibet fad" of the '85 New Art Movement when many artists went to Tibet in search of adventure and danger, "hoping to awaken the power of the soul through a direct experience of the lifeforce" (Ding Fang in *Fine Arts in China*.)

Illustrations 144–147

Surrealist-style art.

10.

In the early 80s the "Back-to-the Roots" movement was a school of artistic and literary endeavour involving the use of a staid set of traditional elements to engage in the search for the "national spirit." The aim was to express a self-reflecting and critical consciousness. Following 1987, however, as a social temper it reflected rather an extreme opposition to Western culture in favour of a traditional Chinese spirit.

We can get some idea of the shift in popular tastes from the number of books published at the time. In the early and mid-1980s, Western works of literature and philosophy filled bookstore shelves. They were gradually overtaken by Chinese philosophical works, in particular pre-Qin philosophical texts as well as a range of works of Eastern mysticism (including works on physiognomy, fortune-telling, *qigong* and longevity) after 1987. Dozens of books related to the *Book of Changes* also appeared.

11.

The tussle-haired baby (*zhuaji wawa*) is a popular motif that appears in Shaanxi folk papercuts and decorative foodstuffs made from flour. Many artists and academics went on field trips to Shaanxi from the early 80s, returning to Beijing to hold various exhibitions. These had a considerable influence and led to an artistic fashion favouring folk art that has lasted many years. The impact of this fashion was also reflected in the decision by the Central Academy of Fine Arts to establish a Department of Folk Art under Jin Zhilin, the first artist to study Shaanxi folk art. He has written a monograph on the *zhuaji wawa*.

Illustrations 148–156

Some of the artists involved in the "Purified Language" movement gathered under the banner of "New Academic Art." Most of the artists in this school accepted the language and symbolism of '85 New Wave art or were in part inspired by it. The illustrations show Chen Wenji's use of Surrealism and the defamiliarisation of the everyday, inspired by '85 New Wave art. Xu Bing's use of Chinese characters also rehearses the '85 New Wave movement. New Academic Art emphasises the importance of an academy training in basic techniques and attention to fine and detailed work.

The most important representatives of the Purified Language movement were the abstract artists in Shanghai. They were opposed to any social involvement on the part of art and artists, concerning themselves rather with the purity of artistic language and elements of Eastern philosophy. The following are some of the titles of works done by artists in this school in 1987.

Li Shan's *Expansion* series; Zhang Jianjun's *Being/Non-Being* series; Liu Yaping's *Extremities and Body* series; Chen Zhen's *Qi Flow Chart* series; Ding Yi's *Extended Borders*; Yu Youhan's *Circle* series; Qian Ping's *Chan/Zen* series, and so on.

In their various notes on their work we find such comments as:

"Laozi's dialectical view of movement and development is a paramount achievement of Chinese culture. His remarks on nature, non-action, the void-static and the submissive are the very things that one searches for in artistic creation." — Yu Youhan.

Hai Qing remarked on Zhang Jianjun's works that: "He has carefully delineated the 'small universe' within himself. The harmonising of stillness and movement are representative of the unity of the universe and this is the core of his pursuit."

Lin Han comments on Qian Ping: "Joy, comfort, silence, mystery . . . are all part of the Zen-like secrets sought after by this artist."

12.

Popi is a colloquial expression that originated in Imperial times. I use it to describe a cultural phenomenon which covers a range of popular and artistic sentiments characterised as cynical, loutish, lackadaisical, world-weary and dissolute attitudes. Geremie Barmé has pointed out to me some references to this concept in 1920s' and 30s' Chinese literature, including a 1924 essay by Zhou Zuoren called "Phacakueh" (*Pojiaogu*) in which Zhou mentions the loutish character Niu Er in the classical novel *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*) being a *popi*. Zhou compares Niu Er to figures who feature in the "novelas de picares" or picaresque literature of Spain, and is the type of personality described by the Japanese as "hoods" or the British as "rogues." In *My Country and My People* Lin Yutang claims that being "dissolute" (*fanglang*), in its unique Chinese sense, is the most sublime purpose of life, the most lustrous aspect of decadent authoritarianism."

Zhu Xinjiang and Zhou Jingxin, the founders of the school of "New Literati Painting" (*xin wenrenhua*), participated in a seminar held as part of the *Hubei Invitation Exhibition for New Traditional Chinese Painting* in 1985. It is no coincidence that they produced a painting entitled *The Popi Niu Er* in which the loutish Niu Er is shown swaggering about the streets of Kaifeng. This comic representation was, I believe, the first example of the artistic representation of a common social mood that encourages an attitude of "approaching life playfully" (*wan'r rensheng*). New literati artists, however, could do little more than imitate traditional themes and styles in expressing their *popi* sensibility. Cynical Realism, on the other hand, has been able to adapt the spirit of the *popi* in its contemplation of contemporary realities.

A number of Mainland commentators noted this *popi* mood from the late 1980s, and have utilised the term "hippy spirit" when describing it. As Geremie Barmé pointed out to me, however, there are various levels of idealism within hippy culture which are in strong contrast to the anti-idealism of the *popi*. The *popi* is grey in his approach to life, an approach similar to that common among the scholar-gentry of classical times who were frustrated in their official careers. This is particularly evident in the careers of men during the Wei-Jin period of the 4th Century and again finds expression in some works of the Mongol-Yuan dynasty.

The Sinologist John Minford expressed a similar view in 1985 as follows:

"... on this post-Mao wasteland a strange new indigenous culture is evolving, which could, perhaps a little provocatively, be called the culture of the *liumang* (an untranslatable term loosely meaning loafer, hoodlum, hobo, bum, punk). The original *liumang* is to be seen cruising the inner city streets on his Flying Pigeon bicycle, looking (somewhat lethargically) for the action, reflective sunglasses flashing a sinister warning. *Liumang* in everyday speech is a harsh word. It is the word for anti-social behaviour, a category of crime.

But the *liumang* generation as I see it is a wider concept. Rapist, whore, black-marketeer, unemployed youth, alienated intellectual, frustrated artist or poet — the spectrum has its dark satanic end, its long middle band of relentless grey, and, shining at the other end, a patch of visionary light. It is an embryonic alternative culture, similar in certain striking ways to that of the 1960s in the United States and Europe." (Quoted in Geremie Barmé and Linda Jaivin, eds., *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices*, New York: Times Books, 1992, p. 248.)

(Notes translated and edited by Geremie Barmé)



1
丁衍鐸
青春 30年代初
DING YANYONG
YOUTH early 1930s



4
林風眠
構圖 1933
LIN FENGMIAN
COMPOSITION



7
陽太陽
靜物 30年代
YANG TAIYANG
STILL LIFE 1930s



2
龐薰琹
丘堤女士像 1933
PANG XUNQIN
PORTRAIT OF LADY QIU TI



5
關良
靜物
GUAN LIANG
STILL LIFE



8
殷平佑
海 30年代
YIN PINGYOU
THE SEA 1930s



3
方幹民
秋曲 1933
FANG GANMIN
AUTUMN MELODY



6
劉海粟
黃山溫泉
LIU HAISU
HOT SPRING AT HUANG SHAN



9
倪貽德
河岸 1934 65X54cm
NI YIDE
BY THE RIVER



10
潘玉良
秦淮河 30年代初
PAN YULIANG
QIN HUAI RIVER early 1930s



13
徐悲鴻
女人體 1924
XU BEIHONG
FEMALE NUDE



16
顏文樑
臥室
YAN WENLIANG
BEDROOM



11
李鐵夫
音樂家肖像
LI TIEFU
PORTRAIT OF A MUSICIAN



14
常書鴻
雞
CHANG SHUHONG
CHICKEN



17
劉開渠
裸女(雕塑) 1933
LIU KAIQU
FEMALE NUDE (Sculpture)



12
馮鋼百
自畫像
FENG GANGBAI
SELF PORTRAIT



15
許幸之
柿
XU XINZHI
PERSIMMONS



18
方君璧
人體
FANG JUNBI
HUMAN FIGURE



19
徐悲鴻
僕我後 1933 230×318cm
XU BEIHONG
WE HAVE WAITED FOR OUR PRINCE



22
梁鼎銘
前仆後繼
LIANG DINGMING
MOVING FORTH



25
徐悲鴻
愚公移山 1940 144×431cm
XU BEIHONG
YU GONG MOVING MOUNTAINS



20
唐一禾
窮人
TANG YIHE
THE POOR



23
蔣兆和
賣綫(局部) 1937
JIANG ZHAOHE
THREAD PEDDLER (detail)



26
蔣兆和
流民圖(局部) 1943
JIANG ZHAOHE
REFUGEES (detail)



21
司徒喬
放下你的鞭子
SITU QIAO
PUT DOWN YOUR WHIP



24
徐悲鴻
泰戈爾像 1940 51×50cm
XU BEIHONG
PORTRAIT OF TAGORE



27
徐悲鴻
紅葉雙鶻(局部) 1953 88×59cm
XU BEIHONG
MAGPIES AND FOLIAGE (detail)



28
李慕白·金雪塵
早期月份牌年畫
LI MUBAI & JING XUECHEN
EARLY NEW YEAR CALENDAR



31
金梅生
優秀的女飼養員 50年代末
JIN MEISHENG
OUTSTANDING BREEDER
late 1950s



34
野夫
搏鬥 1933 18.4×14.5cm
YE FU
STRUGGLE



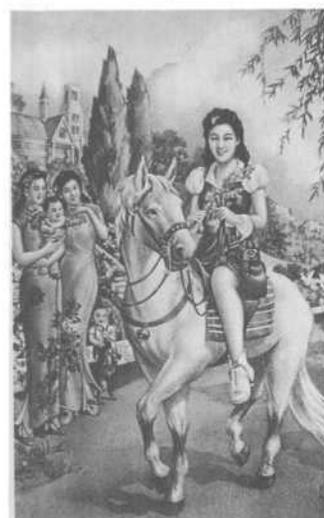
29
早期月份牌年畫
EARLY NEW YEAR CALENDAR



32
李慕白·金雪塵
革命傳統代代傳 70年代
LI MUBAI & JING XUECHEN
PASSING DOWN
THE REVOLUTIONARY TRADITION
1970s



35
張望
負傷的頭 1934 13.2×7.9cm
ZHANG WANG
HEAD INJURY



30
早期月份牌年畫
EARLY NEW YEAR CALENDAR



33
江豐
到前綫去 1932 6.7×9.7cm
JIANG FENG
TO THE FRONT LINES



36
李樺
怒吼吧中國 1935 23×16cm
LI HUA CRY OUT, CHINA



37
古元
區政府辦公室 1942 10.2×10cm
GU YUAN
DISTRICT GOVERNMENT OFFICE



40
夏風
瞄準 1945 10×13cm
XIA FENG
FOCUS ON AIM



43
人民的西湖 1951
(漢雅軒藏品)
WEST LAKE FOR THE PEOPLE
(Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



38
古元
減租會 1943 20×13.5cm
GU YUAN
RENTAL NEGOTIATION



41
侯逸民, 鄧澍
慶祝中國共產黨三十周年 1952
HOU YIMIN & DENG SHU
CELEBRATING THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF
THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY



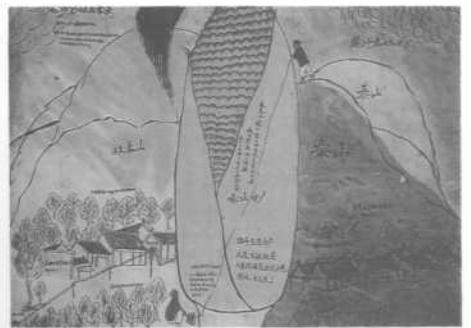
44
金浪, 顧生岳
迎紅旗 (漢雅軒藏品)
JIN LANG and GU SHENG YUE
WELCOMING THE RED FLAG
(Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



39
郭鈞
宣傳新法接生 1944 12.5×10cm
GUO JUN
PROMOTING NEW METHODS OF
CHILD DELIVERY



42
林崗
黨的好女兒: 趙桂蘭 1951 (漢雅軒藏品)
LIN GANG
ZHAO GUILAN: GOOD DAUGHTER OF
THE PARTY (Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



45
遮山影日玉米王: 江蘇邳縣農民畫 1958
KING OF CORN THAT BLOCKS MOUNTAINS AND
SUN FROM VIEW: JIANGSU,
PI PROVINCE PEASANT MURAL



46
董希文
開國大典 1953 230×405cm
DONG XIWEN
FIRST NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATION
(Copy of 1953 painting)



48
王式廓
血衣(素描) 1959 192×345cm
WANG SHIGUO
BLOODY SHIRT (Sketch)



51
孫滋溪
天安門前 1963 220×332
SUN ZIXI
IN FRONT OF TIAN'ANMEN



47
董希文
開國大典 (1972年修改版)
DONG XIWEN
FIRST NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATION
(1972 revised version)

(此作品前後修改過三次，圖46根據一九五三年原作複製，一九五五年原作的高崗，前排右數第一人，因涉嫌反黨集團，被毛清洗，此作即把高從畫中抹掉。後劉少奇在文化大革命中被清洗，此作即把劉從畫中抹掉，見七二年修改稿。)

NOTE: The original painting, done in 1953 and depicting the major Communist Party leaders at the First National Day Celebration, has been altered three different times. In 1959, Gao Gang (first from right, front row) was accused of anti-Party activity and ordered purged by Mao. His image was subsequently obliterated from the painting. Later, Liu Shaoqi was purged during the Cultural Revolution, and his image was also removed from the painting, as can be seen in the 1972 version. (Altogether there are four different versions of this painting).



49
李琦
毛主席走遍全國 1960
LI QI
CHAIRMAN MAO TOURS
THE NATION



52
收租院(泥塑) 1965
AT THE LANDLORD'S RENT COLLECTION OFFICE
(plaster sculpture)

(原作立於四川省大邑縣地主莊圍階級教育展覽館。原作吸收了民間泥塑諸多手法，諸如眼睛用玻璃珠、着色等。共塑一百一十四個與真人等大的人物。分交租、驗租、過斗、算賬、逼租、反抗六個部份。文革中為了加強反抗形象共修改過四次。)

Note: The original sculpture was first exhibited in Sichuan province at the Dayi county Landlord's Estate Educational Exhibition Hall. The work uses many elements of folk sculpture, such as glass eyes, bright colors, etc. The sculpture depicts a group of 114 life-sized figures engaging in activities typical to the situation; there are people paying the rent, settling bills, assessing levies, trying to avoid payment, and protesting against the landlord. During the Cultural Revolution the sculpture was altered four different times to emphasize the protest element.



50
侯一民，鄧澍，周令釗
永遠跟着共產黨，永遠跟着毛主席
HOU YIMIN, DENG SHU & ZHOU LINGZHAO
FOREVER FOLLOW THE COMMUNIST PARTY,
FOREVER FOLLOW CHAIRMAN MAO



53
劉春華
毛主席去安源
LIU CHUNHUA
CHAIRMAN MAO GOES TO AN YUAN



56
陳衍寧
毛主席觀察廣東農村
CHEN YANNING
CHAIRMAN MAO TOURS A GUANGDONG VILLAGE



59
蔡迪安
革命代代如潮湧 1976 (漢雅軒藏品)
CAI DI AN
EACH GENERATION IS A REVOLUTIONARY TIDE (Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



54
侯一民，鄧澍，靳尚誼，詹建俊，羅工柳，楊林桂，袁浩
要把無產階級文化大革命進行到底 1974
HOU YIMIN, DENG SHU, JIN SHANGYI, ZHAN JIANJUN, LUO GONGLIU, YANG LINGUI and YUAN HAO
WE MUST FOLLOW THROUGH WITH THE PROLETARIAN CULTURAL REVOLUTION



57
唐小禾
在大風大浪中成長 七十年代中
TANG XIAOHE
TO GROW UP AMONG STORMS AND WAVES mid-1970s



60
查世銘
朝氣蓬勃 1976 (漢雅軒藏品)
CHA SHIMING
YOUTH OF THE REVOLUTION (Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



55
高虹，彭彬，何孔德
步調一致才能得勝利：1928年毛主席在桂東沙田頒布《三大紀律八項注意》 1974
GAO HONG, PENG BIN, HE KONGDE
CONSISTENT APPROACH IS THE ONLY WAY TO VICTORY: CHAIRMAN MAO DELIVERS "THREE GREAT DISCIPLINES AND EIGHT REMINDERS" SHATIAN, EAST GUIDONG



58
劉文西等
毛主席與八路小兒 七十年代 (漢雅軒藏品)
LIU WENXI AND OTHERS
CHAIRMAN MAO AND THREE CHILDREN OF REVOLUTIONARY SOLDIERS 1970s (Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



61
馬振龍
(戶縣農民)公社春長在
MA ZHENLONG (Hu County Peasant) LONG LIVE THE PEOPLE'S COMMUNE



62
陳鈞德
山景 (參加12人畫展) 1978
CHEN JUNDE
MOUNTAINSCAPE



65
龐薰琴
靜物 1972
PANG XUNQIN
STILL LIFE



68
馮國東
自在者 1980 120X408cm
FENG GUODONG
AT EASE



63
沈天萬
風景 (參加12人畫展) 1978
SHEN TIANWAN
LANDSCAPE



66
詹建俊
風景 1979
ZHAN JIANJUN
LANDSCAPE



69
袁運生 北京首都機場壁畫：
潑水節——生命的贊歌 (局部) 1979
YUAN YUNSHENG
WATER FESTIVAL - A CELEBRATION OF
LIFE: MURAL AT BEIJING'S CAPITOL
AIRPORT (detail)



64
韓柏友
戰馬超 (參加12人畫展) 1978
HAN BOYOU
BATTLING MA CHAO



67
馮國東
鄉村 1978
FENG GUODONG
VILLAGE



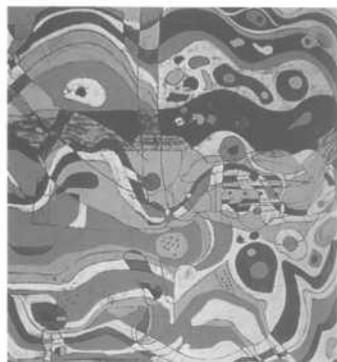
70
蕭惠祥 北京首都機場壁畫：
科學的春天 (局部) 1979
XIAO HUIXIANG
SCIENTIFIC SPRING: MURAL AT BEIJING'S
CAPITOL AIRPORT



71
趙文量
殘荷 1975
ZHAO WENLIANG
WILTED LOTUS



74
汲成
肖像 1979
JI CHENG
PORTRAIT



77
蔣鐵峯
抽象 1982
JIANG TIEFENG
ABSTRACTION



72
楊雨樹
劫後、中國瓶花 (參加無名畫會) 1975
YANG YUSHU
AFTER THE RAID, CHINESE VASE AND
FLOWERS



75
蔣鐵峯·陳之川
蝴蝶 1978
JIANG TIEFENG, CHEN ZHICHUAN
BUTTERFLIES



78
王克平
無題 1983
WANG KEPING
UNTITLED



73
薛明德
肖像 1978
XUE MINGDE
PORTRAIT



76
包炮
抽象雕刻 1980
BAO PAO
ABSTRACT SCULPTURE



79
羅中立
父親 1980
LUO ZHONGLI
FATHER



80
程叢林
1968年X月X日雪
CHENG CONGLIN
SNOW ON X MONTH X DAY IN 1968



83
何多苓
春風已經蘇醒 1980
HE DUOLING
AWOKEN BY THE SPRING WIND



86
王克平 沉默 1979 (漢雅軒藏品)
WANG KEPING
SILENCE (Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



81
王川
倖存者 1981 200X150cm
(漢雅軒藏品)
WANG CHUAN
SURVIVORS (Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)
鄉土寫實



84
何多苓 灰色的天空 1983
HE DUOLING GREY SKIES



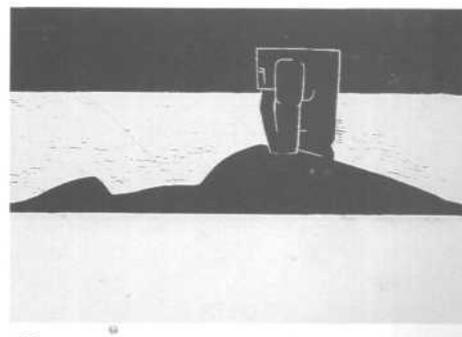
87
王克平 偶像 1979 (漢雅軒藏品)
WANG KEPING
IDOL (Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



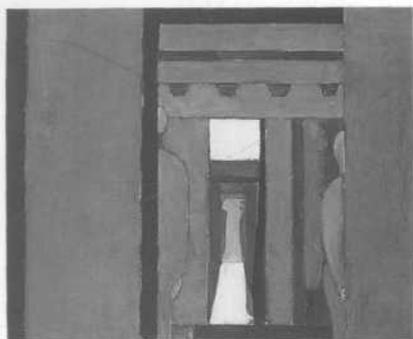
82
陳丹青
西藏組畫·進城 1980
CHEN DANCHING
GOING TO TOWN from TIBET SERIES



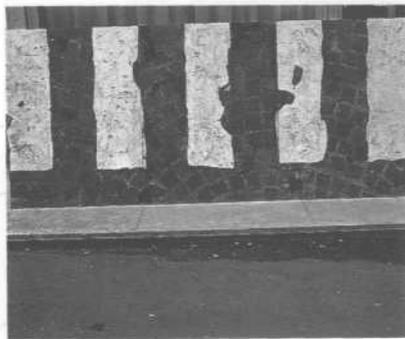
85
丁方 抗旱 1983
DING FANG FIGHTING THE DROUGHT



88
馬德升 無題 1978 (漢雅軒藏品)
MA DESHENG
UNTITLED (Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



89
黃銳
無題 1980 (漢雅軒藏品)
HUANG RUI
UNTITLED (Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



92
毛栗子
琴鍵 1991 (漢雅軒藏品)
MAO LIZI
KEYBOARD (Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



95
楊益平
睡眠的紅衛兵 八十年代末
(漢雅軒藏品)
YANG YIPING
RED GUARD ASLEEP late 1980s
(Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



90
黃銳
墨 1992
HUANG RUI
INK AT MODERN ART CENTRE, OSAKA



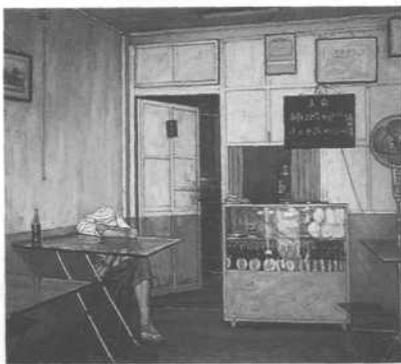
93
嚴力
對話 1978
YAN LI DIALOGUE



96
楊益平
舊事 八十年代末
(漢雅軒藏品)
YANG YIPING
MEMORY late 1980s
(Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



91
毛栗子
紅牆 1979 (漢雅軒藏品)
MAO LIZI
RED WALL (Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



94
楊益平
小食店 八十年代末
(漢雅軒藏品)
YANG YIPING
RESTAURANT late 1980s
(Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



97
黃永砵
熱帕勒(垛草) 1978年在上海展出
1984
HUANG YONGPING
HAYING, exhibited in Shanghai in 1978



98
 黃永砫，林嘉華，焦躍明，俞曉明
 發生在福建美術館的事件展覽 1986
 HUANG YONGPING, LIN JIAHUA,
 JIAO YAOMING, YU XIAOMING
 A HAPPENING AT THE FUJIAN MUSEUM OF ART



101
 谷文達
 難道要我們批閱三男兩女所寫的
 靜字嗎？ 1986
 GU WENDA
 ARE WE REALLY GOING TO
 CRITIQUE THE "JING" WRITTEN
 BY THREE MEN AND TWO WOMEN?



104
 邢勝華
 對話（現成品） 1985
 XIN SHENGHUA
 DIALOGUE (found objects)



99
 黃永砫，林嘉華，焦躍明，俞曉明等
 焚燒作品的藝術事件 1986
 HUANG YONGPING, LIN JIAHUA,
 JIAO YAOMING, YU XIAOMING
 BURNING ART WORKS AT A HAPPENING



102
 谷文達
 地上有一盤沒有下完的險棋 1987
 GU WENDA
 AN UNFINISHED GAME OF DIFFICULT CHESS
 REMAINS ON THE FLOOR



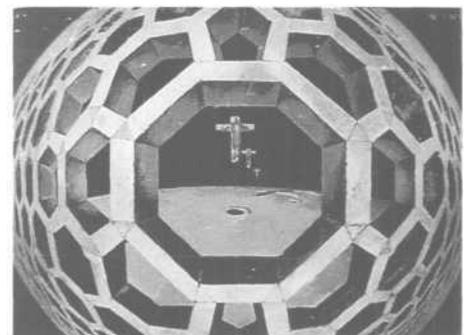
105
 艾尼瓦爾
 無題（現成品裝置展覽一角）
 1985
 AINI WA'ER
 UNTITLED (installation)



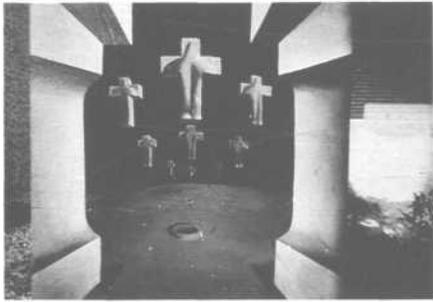
100
 黃永砫
 中國繪畫史與西方現代繪畫簡史
 在洗衣機裡攪拌了兩分鐘 1987
 HUANG YONGPING
 HISTORY OF CHINESE PAINTING
 AND HISTORY OF MODERN
 WESTERN PAINTING TOSSED
 TOGETHER IN A TWO-MINUTE
 WASHING MACHINE CYCLE



103
 王紀平等
 旗（裝置） 1985
 WANG JIPING AND OTHERS
 FLAG (installation)



106
 舒羣
 絕對原則系列之一 1985
 SHU QUN
 from ABSOLUTE PRINCIPLES SERIES



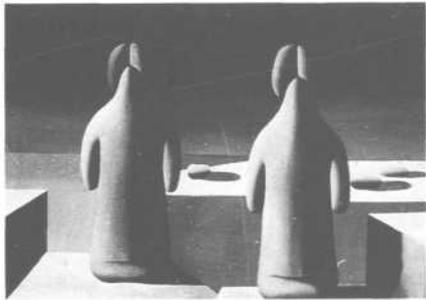
107
舒羣
絕對原則系列之一 1985
SHU QUN
from ABSOLUTE PRINCIPLES SERIES



110
王廣義
毛澤東1號 1988 200×480cm
WANG GUANGYI
MAO ZEDONG NO. 1



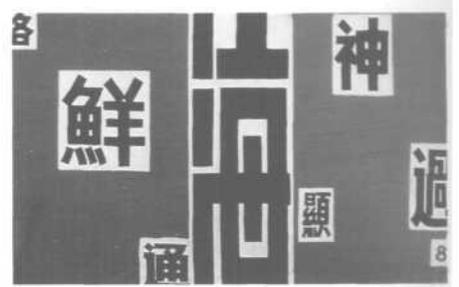
113
孟祿丁，張羣
新時代亞當夏娃的啟示 1985
MENG LUDING, ZHANG QUN
A SIGN FOR ADAM AND EVE OF
THE NEW AGE



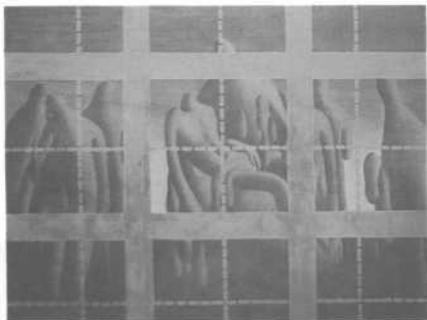
108
王廣義
凝固的北方極地之一 1985
WANG GUANGYI
from THE FROZEN NORTH POLE SERIES



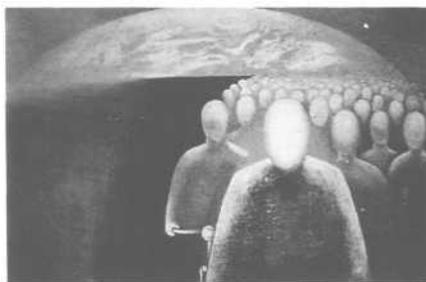
111
丁方
悲劇的力量 1987
DING FANG
THE POWER OF TRAGEDY



114
吳山專，倪海峯，張海舟，宋澄華，駱獻躍，
呂海舟，黃堅
紅75%黑20%白5%系列之一 1986
WU SHANZHUAN, NI HAIFENG, ZHANG HAIZHOU,
SONG CHENGHUA, LUO XIANYUE, LÜ HAIZHOU,
HUANG JIAN
from 75% RED, 20% BLACK, 5% WHITE SERIES



109
王廣義
紅色理性：偶像的修正 1987
200×150cm
WANG GUANGYI
RED RATIONALE: CORRECTION OF
AN IDOL



112
成肖玉
東方 1985 45×65cm
CHENG XIAOYU
THE EAST



115
吳山專，倪海峯，張海舟，宋澄華，
駱獻躍，呂海舟，黃堅
紅75%黑20%白5%系列之一 1986
WU SHANZHUAN, NI HAIFENG,
ZHANG HAIZHOU, SONG CHENGHUA,
LUO XIANYUE, LÜ HAIZHOU, HUANG JIAN
from 75% RED, 20% BLACK,
5% WHITE SERIES



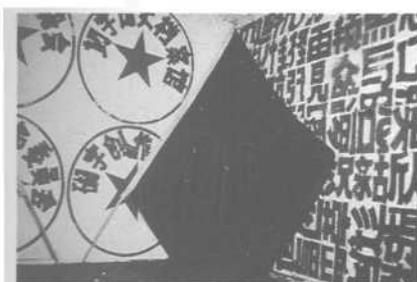
116
吳山專
紅色幽默 1987
WU SHANZHUAN
RED HUMOUR



119
唐宋·肖魯
《中國現代藝術展》槍擊事件現場 1989
TANG SONG, XIAO LU
SITE OF PISTOL SHOT HAPPENING DURING
"CHINA/AVANT-GARDE" EXHIBITION



122
張曉剛
生生不息之愛系列之一 1987
ZHANG XIAOGANG
from FOREVER LASTING LOVE SERIES



117
吳山專
紅色幽默：紅印 1987
WU SHANZHUAN
RED HUMOUR: RED STAMPS



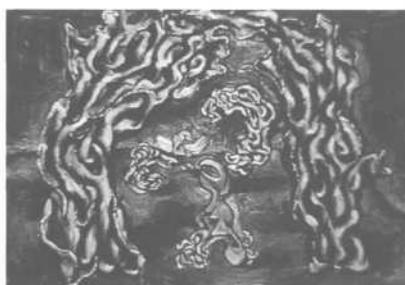
120
陳宇飛
肖像 1984
CHEN YUFEI
BUST



123
毛旭暉
水泥房間裡的人體·正午 1986 100X65cm
MAO XUHUI
BODY INSIDE A CONCRETE CELL, NOON



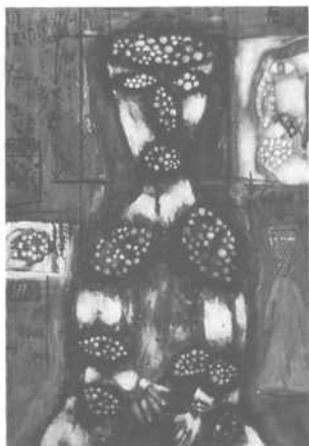
118
倪海峯
無題 1987
NI HAIFENG
UNTITLED



121
張曉剛
幽靈系列之一 1984
ZHANG XIAOGANG
from SPIRITS SERIES



124
葉永青
春天喚醒冬眠者 1986
YE YONGQING
SPRING WAKES THE WINTER
HIBERNATOR



125
潘德海
苞米系列之一 1988
PAN DEHAI
from CORN SERIES



128
王强
第五交響樂第二樂章開頭的柔板
(雕塑) 1985
WANG QIANG
OPENING OF THE SECOND
MOVEMENT FROM BEETHOVEN'S
SYMPHONY NO. 5 (sculpture)



131
張培力·耿建翌·曹學雷
捆扎件·舊報紙·尼龍繩 1986
ZHANG PEILI, GENG JIANYI,
CAO XUELEI
TIED PIECES · OLD NEWSPAPERS
NYLON ROPES



126
管策
無題 1986 140X100cm
GUAN CE
UNTITLED



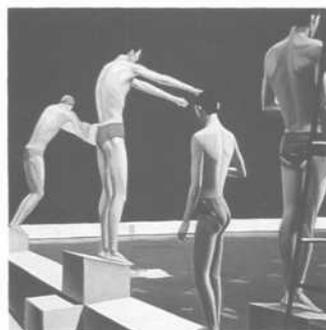
129
柴曉剛
未竟之渡 1985 (漢雅軒藏品)
CHAI XIAOGANG
INCOMPLETE PASSAGE
(Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



132
張培力
X?系列之一 1987
ZHANG PEILI from
X? SERIES



127
侯文怡
無題(現成品裝置) 1984
HOU WENYI
UNTITLED
(installation from ready-made objects)



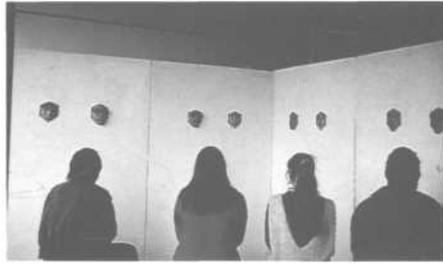
130
張培力
仲夏的泳者 1985
ZHANG PEILI
MIDSUMMER SWIMMERS



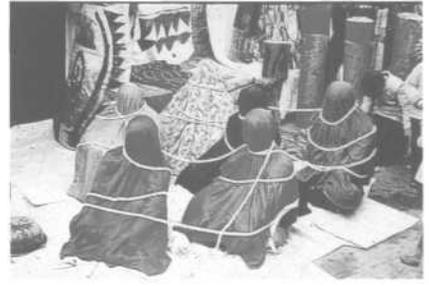
133
張培力
X?系列(裝置) 1987
ZHANG PEILI
X? SERIES (installation)



134
張培力
30X30 (錄像) 1988
ZHANG PEILI
30X30 (video frame)



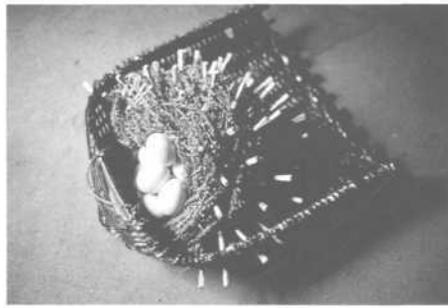
137
耿建翌
自來水廠 (一個互相窺視的裝置) 1988
GENG JIANYI
WATER FACTORY: A MUTUALLY VOYEURISTIC
INSTALLATION



140
武平人等
'87行爲 1987
WU PINGREN AND OTHERS
'87 ACT



135
耿建翌
1985年夏季的又一個光頭 1985
GENG JIANYI
ANOTHER SHAVED HEAD IN THE
SUMMER OF 1985



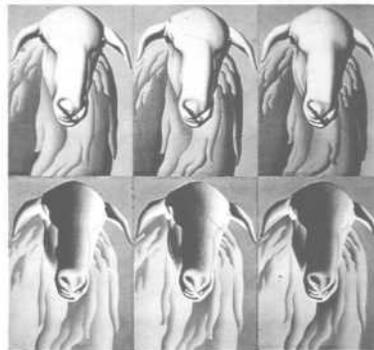
138
唐宋
巢 (千根火柴做成的裝置) 1988
TANG SONG
NEST (Installation made from 1,000 matches)



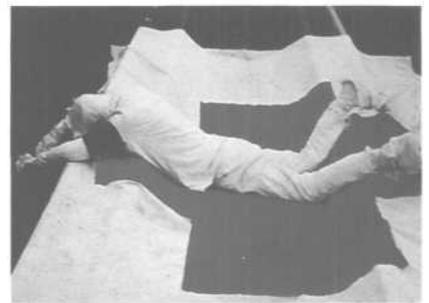
141
趙建海, 盛奇, 鄭玉珂, 康木
大悲劇烽火台系列 1988
ZHAO JIANHAI, SHENG QI, ZHENG YUKE,
KANG MU
MAJOR TRAGEDY, SIGNAL STATION SERIES



136
耿建翌
第二狀態 1987 200X145cm
GENG JIANYI
THE SECOND STATE



139
宋陵
無意義的選擇? 1987
SONG LING
A MEANINGLESS CHOICE?



142
魏光慶
自殺系列 1988
WEI GUANGQING
SUICIDE SERIES



143
顏磊
膠帶捆扎 (行為藝術) 1991
YAN LEI
TAPE BONDAGE (Action Art)



146
徐一暉
海 1985 (漢雅軒藏品)
XU YIHUI
OCEAN (Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



149
徐冰
析世鑒·世紀末卷 (裝置)
1988
XU BING
A MIRROR TO ANALYSE
THE WORLD (installation)



144
任戎
圓寂的召喚 1985
REN RONG
THE CALL OF NIRVANA



147
徐一暉
莫勒亞特南部 1985 (漢雅軒藏品)
XU YIHUI
SOUTHERN PART OF MOJAVE
(Collection Hanart T Z Gallery)



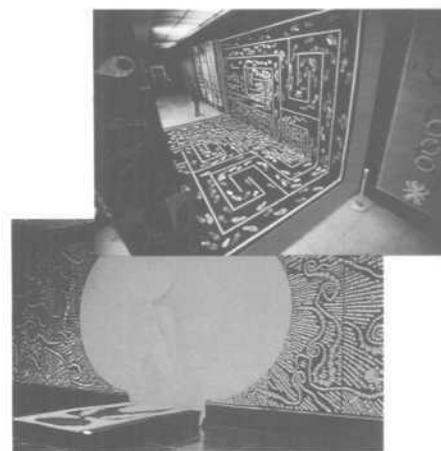
150
徐冰
析世鑒·世紀末卷 (原版局部)
(漢雅軒藏品)
XU BING
A MIRROR TO ANALYSE
THE WORLD (detail)



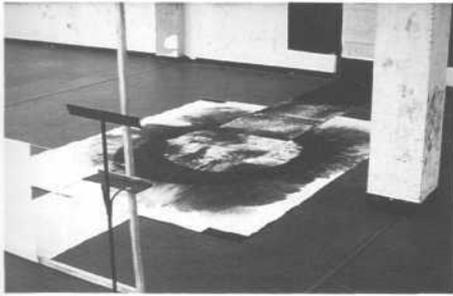
145
任戎
北方的暗示之四 1986
REN RONG
INTIMATION FROM THE NORTH NO. 4



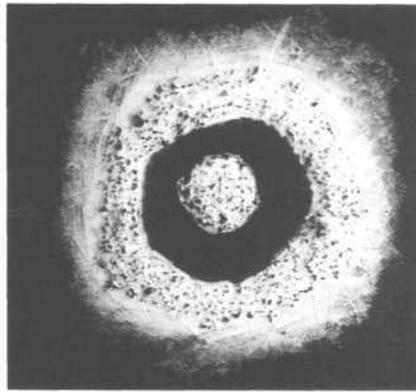
148
陳文驥
灰色的環境, 藍色的天 1987
CHEN WENJI
BLUE SKIES · GREY ENVIRONMENT



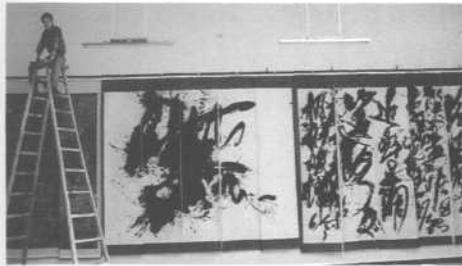
151
呂勝中
神路·召魂 (剪紙裝置, 展覽局部) 1988
LÜ SHENGZHONG
SPIRITS' PATH · SEANCE
(paper cutting installation, detail)



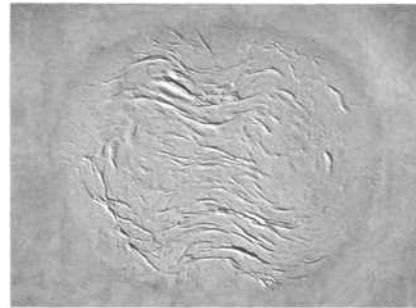
152
王公懿
水墨(装置) 1977
WANG GONGYI
INK (Installation)



155
徐虹
喜马拉雅山系列 1988
XU HONG
from HIMALAYAN SERIES



153
宋刚
活页日记系列之一 1988
SONG GANG
from LOOSE LEAF DIARY SERIES



156
尚扬
状态:5 1989 (汉雅轩藏品)
SHANG YANG
CONDITION: No. 5



154
余友涵
圆 1977
YU YOUHAN
CIRCLE

Footnote 1
No illustration

Footnote 2

- (1) Modernist Movement in the 1930s and 1940s
illus. 1 to 10
- (2) Realist Movement
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- (3) Realism and the Restructuring of Ink Painting
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- (4) Realism and New Year Calendar of the 1930s and 1940s
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Footnote 3

Woodcut Movement
illus. 33 to 36

Footnote 4

The Yan'an Cultural Movement and Woodcuts
illus. 37 to 40

Footnote 5

New Year's Painting and its Influence on Oil Painting
illus. 41 to 61

Footnote 6

No illustration

Footnote 7

- (1) Wave of Formalism
illus. 62 to 64
- (2) New Year Landscape and Still Life, Oil Paintings of the 1970s
illus. 64 to 68
- (3) The Decorative Style (Capitol Airport 1979)
illus. 69 to 70
- (4) The Anonymous Painting Association, Beijing
illus. 71 to 72
- (5) The "Contemporaries" (*Tongdai ren*) exhibition in Beijing and the Yunan "Monkey Year Society" (Shenshe) exhibition
illus. 73 to 75
- (6) Abstract Art of The Early 1980s
illus. 76 to 78
- (7) Scar Art
illus. 79 to 81
- (8) Native Soil Movement
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- (9) The Stars Exhibitions
illus. 86 to 96

Footnote 8

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Footnote 9

- (1) Dada and Pop-Inspired Art
illus. 97 to 105
- (2) Cultural Criticism and Reconstruction
illus. 106 to 119
- (3) School of Life
illus. 120 to 143
- (4) Surrealist-Style Art
illus. 144 to 147

Footnote 10

No illustration

Footnote 11

The Purified Language Movement
illus. 148 to 156

Footnote 12

No illustration

PERFORMANCE ART POST-1989

1. XIAO HONG 小紅

An Experiment In Impersonation: Throw Ink on Mao

Time: June 1992

Place: Beijing



Biography: Xiao Hong was born in Shaanxi Province in 1964. He graduated from the Zhejiang Art Academy in 1989.

Artist's Description:

Xiao Hong wasn't born to create trouble; he was only looked upon as a trouble-maker when he started to grow tired of school. From then on he gradually came to be known as one who is 'dissatisfied with society.' Only then did he realize that all the trouble he caused was really the reflection of his honest attitude toward everything he was tired of.

An incident confirmed all his doubts about this realisation.

In spring 1992, CCTV exuberantly told the whole nation that they were going to witness the launching of a communications satellite by the Chinese government for the Australians. But the launch failed and not only did the government lose another opportunity for boasting, it made them lose face in front of a billion Chinese. Xiao Hong was perched in front of the television set as this happened, and what he felt was more than glee: he was practically exhilarated. Xiao Hong claims that this sort of response after 1989 was not surprising. This perverted pleasure at other's expense lies at the root of his trouble-making.

The targets he usually attacks are familiar to everybody, and the means of trouble-making are also common. Whenever possible he tries to undermine the symbolic significance and aesthetic value of his actions. He hopes this would prevent witnesses of his actions from getting the wrong idea. He says he prefers his actions to be misunderstood or ridiculed, than to be judged cleverly as artistic.

As to difficulties in publicising his actions, Xiao Hong is nonchalant. After all, he has more faith in the spread of news by word of mouth which, he emphasises, is a proven means of communication in China. Of late the government has become more skilful in maintaining a semblance of stability; as a result the attitude of the masses has become increasingly ambivalent. Xiao Hong sees a difficult time ahead for himself.

2. SUN PING 孫平

From Document To Action: Issuing Sun Ping's Renminbi Currency Share Certificates (A)

Time: October 1992

Place: Guangzhou



Biography: Sun Ping was born in 1953 in Heilongjiang province. He graduated from the Printmaking Department of the Guangzhou Art Academy, and is currently chief editor of the magazine *Contemporary Art (Dangdai meishu)*. In 1991 he founded the influential magazine *Art and Market*. In 1990–92 he created three major series of works: *Evolution of Traces*, *Meridian and Acupuncture Cure*, and *Issuing Share Certificates*.

- Captions:**
1. Public announcement of the issuance of Sun Ping Art Company share certificates.
11 a.m., 20th October, 1992
 2. Share Certificate. 184 × 126 mm, computer graphics, 1992
 3. Public reading of articles of company.
9 a.m., 23rd October 1992
 4. "Investors" buying shares with privately issued "money" in "renminbi."
 5. Announcement board at sales agency.

3. XIAO HONG 小紅

The Third Type Of Humanity in 1992
and
The Fourth Type Of Humanity in 1992

Time: October 1992

Place: Room 571, Holiday Inn, Beijing

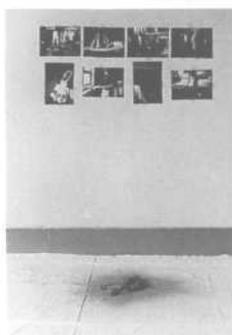


4. XIAO HONG 小紅

Inhaling The Dust Of A Labour Union

Time: October 1992

Place: Auditorium of a certain labour union headquarters, Beijing



5. YAN LEI 顏磊

Breaking A Whole Into Parts: 1,000 Hard Currencies

(To stamp images of the split hammer and sickle on each currency note, and then spend them).

Time: December 1992

Place: Beijing



Biography: Yan Lei was born in 1965 in Hebei province. He graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1991.

Artist's Statement:

"Miracles and illustrious histories always send shivers through our spines, and this is the very reason for which we exist in the absurdity of the present. Artistic creation is politically ambiguous, therefore, even as it inspires it sends repercussions through society. Such repercussions enrich art and stimulate the artist. This is the pleasure of artistic creativity."

6. SONG SHUANGSONG, WANG YAZHONG 宋雙宋, 王亞中

Street Action: Crush Bicycles

Time: December 1992

Place: On the street outside the Youth Cultural Palace, Taiyuan, Shanxi Province



Biography: Song Shuangsong was born in 1961 in Taiyuan. Wang Yazhong was born in 1963 in Taiyuan. They both graduated from Tianjin Art Academy, in 1983 and 1984, respectively. They were representative artists of the Shanxi Group during the 1985 New Wave Art Movement. Song teaches at the Hubei Institute of Broadcast Television and Wang is an editor at the Shanxi People's Publishing House.

Artists' Description:

Ten bicycles were loaded on to a lorry and then discarded on to the fast lane of the street. The artists then instructed a 12-tonne steam-roller to crush the bicycles; this action was repeated until the bicycles were completely flattened. Wang Yazhong then poured 10 litres of kerosene on the bicycles and set fire to them. A few minutes later Song Shuangsong put out the fire with an extinguisher. Then the three painters painted parts of the burnt bicycles and wrote "1992.12.3 China Shanxi Taiyuan" on the ground.

The local television and the local evening post reported the event. At the interview Song told the reporter: "The surge of economic activity in China has brought dynamism to Chinese life, but its shock to culture is also apparent. Our action today is a direct reaction against this shock."

Wang's comment was: "To reeducate you about the functions of the bicycle. Not only does the bicycle take you home but in our hands it has other uses, as you witnessed just now."

Lastly they brought a lorry of bricks and invited the audience to bury the bicycles with them. Before they left they took a souvenir picture with a car repair worker. They were moved to reflect that they are all in the same profession.

The final home for the bicycles was a children's play park.

THE 1985 NEW WAVE ART MOVEMENT

Gao Minglu

ORIGINS

After the *Sixth Annual All China Art Exhibition* was held in 1984, numerous art exhibitions were organised by groups of young artists all over China. These exhibitions were streams that eventually flowed into the main course of the New Wave movement that took place in 1985.

This art movement has a complex background. It is a reflection of the comparative studies of Western and Chinese culture that have burgeoned in China in recent years, and it is also an outcome of confrontations between Chinese and Western culture. The spirit behind this movement is a reconsideration of tradition in the face of yet another assault by Western culture following the opening of China to the West, an examination of the last creative period, and bold experimentation in bringing Chinese art into the modern world. In the realm of theory, contrary schools of thought developed out of questions of nationalism versus internationalism, tradition versus modernity, etc. But in actual practice, the predominant ideology was "importism," the borrowing, copying and outright theft of ideas from Western art.

When criticising this new trend for following in others' footsteps or copying the West, let us not forget that the history of modern and contemporary Chinese culture is one of constant borrowing from and interacting with Western culture. And if we admire the courage with which such artists as Lin Fengmian and Xu Beihong absorbed foreign elements into their art, we must consider the differences between the Western culture they studied at that time, and that same culture today, and ask the question of whether or not they attained their ultimate goal. If they did attain their goal, then is their way of attaining it an immutable model for all future activity in this regard?

Discussions about these questions were heard in the early years of China's opening to the West, when the eventual group nature of the 1985 New Wave movement first became evident. However, there were differences in terms of motivation on several levels. The early years were characterised by acts of defiance on the emotional level which grew out of anger at and frustration with the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), which rarely was raised to the level of rational discourse in the cultural context.

The post-Cultural Revolution period saw the appearance of such trends as "scar art," "art for art's sake," "stream of life," and "pseudo-naturalism." At the *Sixth Annual All China Art Exhibition*, these new styles appeared for the first time alongside idealistic realism, the "official" style of Chinese painting that had taken three decades to develop, thus characterising the "pluralism" of contemporary Chinese art. The exhibition provided a conclusion to and an overview of one creative period in modern Chinese history. Psychologically speaking, it prepared contemporary Chinese painters for the 1985 New Wave. The dramatic reversals of history, and the cultural self-examination inspired by China's economic and materialistic opening to the outside world provided the climate and the soil in which this movement took root.

APPEARANCES

After the *Sixth All China Art Exhibition*, the majority of the art exhibitions were organised by groups of young artists, while only a few were connected to official international youth events. There were also exhibitions by middle-aged artists. Although few of the exhibitions lasted very long, they set off much controversy. The number of exhibitions was unprecedented in recent history, and was doubtless a positive outcome of the post Cultural Revolution period.

The 1985 New Wave can be divided into three trends: 1) rationality and religiosity; 2) intuitionism and mystery; and 3) renewed concepts and behaviorism. These will be discussed separately below.

1. Rationality and religiosity

This trend is represented by the Northern Art Group, Zhejiang 1985 New Space, and the *Jiangsu Youth Art Week Exhibition*. Most of the works in this trend were influenced by specific theoretical considerations. The Northern Art Group was made up of more than a dozen painters, writers and social and natural scientists. Their slogans, "After the Frigid Zone" and "Northern Culture," drew upon the idea of the movement of civilisations northwards over the course of history and the disintegration of culture in the tropics. The artists believed that both Eastern and Western culture face a predicament of unprecedented dimensions, the antidote for which is art that is rational, noble in its aims and serious in its intent. In their art they sought to convey the grandeur and eternity of the world. Their works convey religious feelings without any elements of superstition.

The Zhejiang painters also have respect for the rational spirit, but most of their thinking takes place before the act of creation, which they see as reliant on intuition. According to Gu Wenda, reason is historical and vertical, while intuition is the major factor in creativity. Gu is opposed to self-expression, and believes that the self is mere egotism. Human feeling should be sublimated onto the plane of the spiritual, which does not rely on visual experience, but rather on spiritual images that can be inferred from beyond the visual world. His huge ink paintings "express" his spiritual world and the rationally structured universe.

The paintings of the Zhejiang group have been criticised in the following words: "The subjects of the paintings appear to be numb, stupefied and eccentric. Is this the way things really are, or is this the painter's detached, cynical approach to reality?" Other discussions dealt with questions of imitation and originality, form and content, miscomprehension and philosophy.

Like the Zhejiang painters, the works of the *Jiangsu Youth Art Week Exhibition* start out from "stream of life" painting. But they differ from the Zhejiang group in their greater emphasis on man, the temporal aspects of history and dynamic comparisons, while the Zhejiang group emphasises simultaneity and static comparisons. They also believe that "stream of life" paintings cannot depict real human introspection, but rather display the spirit of "an eye for an eye" and have no sense of regret. Thus they reject dramatisation and superficial appeal in their works, preferring reality and reason. Ding Fang's *City* series (with its cultural and philosophical notions) and Shen Qin's *Dialogue between Master and Disciple* (with its religious and cultural notions) are representative of this school. On the whole, they lack theoretical direction, and thus they are sometimes forced to act as their own theorists. But their own thinking is so concretised that it never ceases to play havoc with them.

Another group of young and middle-aged artists in Shanghai also takes the road of reason. They draw upon Eastern and Western philosophy, anthropology and modern physics in the belief that tradition should be considered from the viewpoint of all mankind. To them, all painting from all cultures and eras is about one subject — man. In Zhang Jianzhong's *The Human Race and their Clocks*, representatives of every human type are placed in a strange sort of universal space where time runs backwards. This expresses the idea that the human race is always undermining its ability to understand itself in the search for "super-knowledge."

The paintings of the Anhui Oil Painting Research Society attempt to depict mental structures by breaking up thematic elements into distinct conceptual units, assigning certain images or themes to them and linking them up in a lively manner.

In their exhibition, entitled *Search, Discovery and Expression*, five young painters from Gansu expressed their philosophy through cool abstraction. Circles, squares and triangles symbolized heaven and earth and the mysteries of human life and the universe. Reason was also the guiding force in works by a group of Hunan artists in their *Zero* artists group exhibitions, but they also displayed a tendency towards cultural retrospection.

In many works, a concern with religion accompanied the pursuit of reason, but religion here had less to do with belief than with a reflection of culture and tradition, a pan-religiosity. For these painters, religion is a spiritual vehicle for a rebellion against an uninhibited outpouring of secular emotions (self-expression) and a poetic and romantic interpretation of reality (in the ideal). Through the vehicle of art, the mental attitude of looking reality in the eye is expressed through thoughts that transcend reality, the self and the human mind. Thus all the adjectives that can be applied to the external manifestations of religion — indifferent, isolated, mystifying — can be applied to the external appearances of these paintings. But a truly valid critique requires penetrating the philosophical, psychological and social concepts that lie behind their art, in order to solve the mystery of the "new religion."

2. *Intuitionism and mystery*

This tendency appeared in the *November Painting Exhibition* held in Beijing, the *New Image Exhibitions* held in Shanghai and Yunnan, the *Zero Exhibition* held in Shenzhen, and the *Contemporary Art Exhibition* held in Shanxi. It is noteworthy that this trend also appeared in exhibitions where the rational factor was the dominant trend, just as reason played a subsidiary role in many other exhibitions.

The catalogue of the Shanghai and Yunnan exhibitions began with the following statement: "Most importantly, we seek to shake up people's souls, rather than provide delight for people's eyes. Our works are not games of color and lines." They emphasise that to obtain truth it is necessary to return to the childhood of mankind, even to the origin of life itself — protozoic life. In the *New Image Exhibition*, Mao Xuhui and his colleagues painted moving, expanding and swelling hulks, which for them represent human instinct and blood types, which are synonymous with life. One of their credos is: Art is prayer, music, the song of the human soul. Art is the soul rocking the soul. All external forms are the symbols of the soul and the enlightenment of the soul. Wang Chuan of the *Shenzhen Zero Exhibition* depicts the struggle for survival on the part of the human race, individual nations, and even the animal kingdom in his restless canvases that are bursting with life and history.

By comparison the *Beijing November Painting Exhibition* was significantly more modest in its approach. The Beijing painters express life through a certain aloofness. They worship pure art and disdain the social factor in art, while the Shanghai, Yunnan, Shanxi and Shenzhen groups take an opposite view and believe that art must deal directly with people. The Beijing artists are deeply concerned with self-perfection and inner purification, and oppose external expression. In seeking his own place in the world and his own will, Xia Xiaowan elevates them to the plane of religion, which gives his paintings a mystical cast. Shi Benming's drawings seem to be narrating an episode of a love story that the soul is telling itself.

Among young artists, there is a divergence of opinion concerning reason versus intuition, and even among the anti-reason schools there is divergence of opinion about the ultimate purpose of painting. This particular divergence can be summed up as follows: self expression versus anti-self expression; and individuality versus anti-individuality.

Another intuitive group deals with the pursuit of vanishing and emerging fantasies, but these fantasies lack the absurdity of Dali and the analysis of Freud. They are prototypical fantasies drawn from a misty, mysterious world. Their pursuit is not an attempt to explain a particular philosophy of life, or reveal personal secrets, but a means for the artist to express his temperament. Perhaps this medium is something of a protest against the prevailing mode of narrative or literary expression of the self.

In spite of their differences, all intuitive painters share one thing in common: mystery. This is primarily because they use abstract forms, but also due to the fact that the feelings and ideas they want to express — be they individual or universal — remain in an unknowable, confused state. In other cases, although the artist may have a clear goal and ultimate image in mind, because the creative process makes a point of being “unknowable,” the viewer has great difficulty grasping the real intentions behind the work.

3. Renewed concepts and behaviorism

1985 saw an unprecedented renewal of artistic concepts, one important step on the way to the modernisation of Chinese art. It first manifested itself in the realm of theory and criticism, and later became an object of attention for painters.

The renewal took several concrete forms:

1) A new emphasis on the value of the work done during the process of creation, and on the common will. In the past, artists also spoke of the process of creating a work of art. What was new was the idea that actual labor was involved as an integral part of the work. Several works of art, both paintings and sculptures, could be considered as a single work, or as part of a single work. As a result, the layout for the exhibition hall took on greater importance than the works themselves for, taken as a whole, they embodied the intentions of all the people involved. Other elements, such as audio, video and lighting played an important role as well.

2) Behaviorism. Based on the concept of creative work, the process of creation could be more important than the results, the atmosphere more important than the work. And since the result had already been foreseen in the planning, the result came first, and the cause later. This reversal of cause and effect is a form of behaviorism. Exhibitions of this sort would have their anticipated “effect,” which would at least amount to some form of stimulation.

3) Pop fever. The Robert Rauschenberg exhibition held in the China Art Gallery in Beijing was the most exciting foreign exhibition to be held in the country for many years. As Chinese artists were looking for new ideas, while suffering from the narrow limits of permitted thought, the exhibition came as an important breakthrough. And even though the works were “old tricks” from the 1960s, in China’s special environment, they seemed very new.

While some artists want to discover new ways of traditional depiction, and enrich the artistic language, others want to renew the entire artistic vocabulary. For example, the former would discuss the best way to paint a vase, while the latter would replace the vase with a urinal. For the latter, the question is not a matter of choosing between a vase or a urinal, but the act of exchange itself. Chinese artists know that string, cardboard and paper boxes have been used too many times in the past, but they also know that oil paints have been used thousands of times before. Whether they are used too often or not depends on the need to narrate something, an inherent trait in a particular cultural setting.

UNDERCURRENTS

It is evident that the three areas we have explored above coincide with three major trends in contemporary art in the West. Is there anything uniquely Chinese here? Perhaps the fact that there is nothing Chinese to be found in the works of young artists in China today is in itself “uniquely Chinese.” Progress in art requires movements and trends: without movements there can be no development. But it should be remembered that art itself is not a movement, and that no movement necessarily produces great masters.

The unrestrained “importism” described above is an obvious outcome of China’s opening to the West, and may be destructive to some degree. To quote Clive Bell: Before a great renaissance of feelings takes place, there must first be a destructive movement that will act as a prelude to the emergence of new schools and great masters. But over time, the movements and trends will cause the disappearance of many artists and their works. The value of movements is that they affect the entire world of art, and not individual works. But they also produce many talented artists and fine works.

This aspect of the 1985 New Wave has inspired many young artists with a sense of tragedy and sacrifice.

Confronted with the highly influential traditions and trends of Western art that they are unable to adopt as their own, young artists in China respond with doubts about their own identity. With new concepts, nationalism, the vague ideal of perfect harmony between East and West and the unmitigating assault by Western culture on the ancient cultures of Asia — which leaves many holes in the dike and pushes the dike back — the only solution is to take action and create the highest possible values in art. Many young artists would like to build a perfect palace, but can they build it on a dike? In this situation, it would be better to be a stone and disappear in the flow.

While the Western artistic language draws on Eastern ideas to nourish and transcend itself, some young Chinese artists have given up the old pursuit of “drawing on the ancients to stimulate the modern” and actually go against

tradition — a tradition that in another cultural context would be perceived as something exquisite, while in China it is nothing but a burden.

Many young Chinese artists have a sense of impending doom, and fear that their artistic careers will end early. Some artists in the Zhejiang school compare finishing a work with dying. Self confidence and tragedy, impetuosity and sacrifice seem to be inevitable in the modern world. These painters want to be great artists, but they know that this may not be the right time for great artists.

For most young artists, the sense of tragedy and sacrifice is a positive force in a world of constant negation, reflecting the state of mind of those willing to play a minor role. To participate in world culture, one must make choices and take up the challenge. Although it may only be an attitude, the artists of the 1985 New Wave movement have had the courage to meet the challenge.

To do this, it is sometimes necessary to “import” ready-made forms. But this is not importing for the sake of importing. Rather, once something is imported, its value changes. And behind this attitude there is a question of personal choice. Thus the act of importing cannot be called wholesale imitation.

This phenomenon is part of a world trend, and has two components:

1. *The threat of self-understanding*

The rational nature of the 1985 New Wave does not derive solely from knowledge and cultural self examination, for there is a strong component of criticism as well. The awakening of reason begins with doubt. Is everything rational because it exists, or does everything exist because it is rational? Of course this question can never be answered. But what emerges, particularly in times of cultural ferment, is the question of what is human nature? For this reason, broad knowledge and objective analysis are critical tools for making judgements and choices in the world. Painters must also make judgements and choices, and thus the mysteries of the universe and the structure of time have been popular themes in art in recent years.

2. *The loss of self value and regression*

Value here refers to the value of human nature, or, in other words, judgement: to have the confidence to judge right and wrong in society, ways of human existence and man's place in the universe. The “detached,” “stupefied,” and “eccentric” figures in New Wave painting may have something to do with this attitude of detached judgement that is reflected in Ernest Cassier's statement: “People tend to take their own lives as the center of the world, and their own personal habits as universal standards. People must give up these illusions, pettiness and provinciality. As science and culture expand the frontiers of people's lives, people tend to lose their own powers of judgement. This sense of loss is in a sense a sign of progress in human thinking.”

The appearance of many paintings with themes that deal with time, space and the universe seems to suggest a conscious or unconscious desire to return to individual judgement. In some works, most of them rational, this desire is sublimated in visions that transcend the human race, the individual, society, and time and space. When it appears in more intuitive works, it is expressed through the way line, color and three-dimensional space swell, elongate and move about restlessly.

From out of the contradiction between doubt and the search for knowledge, between regression and negation, the search for values from different points of view creates a distinct quantity of works and phenomena with disparate and disassociated meanings and language, connotations and forms of expression. Out of their eagerness to expand the breadth of thought and depth of meaning reflected in their paintings, some artists pay insufficient attention to the breadth and depth of their artistic language, rashly falling into stereotyped patterns. But attaining uniqueness is not an easy thing. At times, for art's sake, artists may borrow ready-made forms from other artists. They suffer for this, and when others see these “scars” the artists are accused of “copying” or “imitating indiscriminately.” But this is a necessary process, and perhaps a form of sacrifice.

In sum, the 1985 New Wave came about as a result of the Chinese Communist Party's policy of opening China to the outside world. It represents a continuation and development of the spirit of the new culture movement in modern China, and is worthy of our close attention.

(Translated by Don J. Cohn)

Originally published in *Artists' Newsletter (Meishujia tongxun)*, No. 5, 1986

Gao Minglu is a respected art critic and a former editor of China's *Art* magazine. He currently lives in the United States.

POLITICAL POP

政治波普

WANG GUANGYI 王廣義

YU YOUHAN 余友涵

LI SHAN 李山

GENG JIANYI 耿建翌

WU SHANZHUAN 吳山專

YE YONGQING 葉永青

WANG ZIWEI 王子衛

FENG MENGBO 馮夢波

HONG HAO 洪浩

LIU DAHONG 劉大鴻

REN JIAN 任戩

WEI GUANGQING 魏光慶

GUAN WEI 關偉

WANG YOUSHEN 王友身

QIU ZHIJIE 邱志傑

NI HAIFENG 倪海峯

WANG GUANGYI

(b. 1956, Harbin, Heilongjiang Province)

王廣義

Wang Guangyi graduated from the Oil Painting Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1984. He is presently a professor in the Oil Painting Department of the Hubei Institute of Art and Technology.

Wang Guangyi is one of the most important figures of the Chinese avant-garde movement of the Eighties, and a major exponent of the Political Pop style. Wang's art has always aimed at cultural critique. In his 1985 *Frozen North Pole* series, the artist uses a balanced and simple compositional format and round clusters of unembellished shapes to demonstrate the coldness and quietness of the desolate northern plains. The dignity and solemnity revealed in the paintings express the artist's yearning for tranquillity and transcendence. The following year the artist created his *Post-Classical* series, a group of works which marked a new phase typified by the borrowing of classical Western cultural images, particularly images from Christianity, and indicating a contextual movement away from themes of nature to more overtly cultural themes. In 1987, the artist adopted the ambiguous slogan "purge humanist enthusiasm," and began a new series of canvases filled with familiar political and cultural images seen through a grid, in an attempt to dispel the metaphysical elements present in his earlier works. Wang's *Mao Series* is typical of this period.

Wang's *Great Criticism* series, begun in 1990, marks his switch to Political Pop. In these works, the artist applies a deconstructionist approach to a clear language of symbols: slogans and images from the worker/soldier/peasant movements of the Cultural Revolution are juxtaposed with the logos of Marlboro, Coca-cola and other famous consumer brands. This seemingly arbitrary combination of political and commercial symbols creates a humorous and absurd effect that carries with it a biting satire of both the ideology of the Mao era and the blind craze for Western consumer products prevalent in today's China, coupled with a frank delight in the silly glamour of Cultural Revolution and pop marketing images.

"It has been said that [as a means of communication] the medium of writing is better than speech, and that the medium of printing is even better. We have to say that painting is better in this sense than thinking, and exhibitions are better than painting. Through the printed word and image fanciful ideas such as mine can become a part of history, where others unknown to me can read and interpret them."

— Wang Guangyi

WANG GUANGYI
王廣義

1
Great Criticism
Oil on canvas
1992
149.5 × 120 cm
大批判

2
Great Criticism: Band Aid
Oil on canvas
1992
149.5 × 119.5 cm
大批判：邦迪





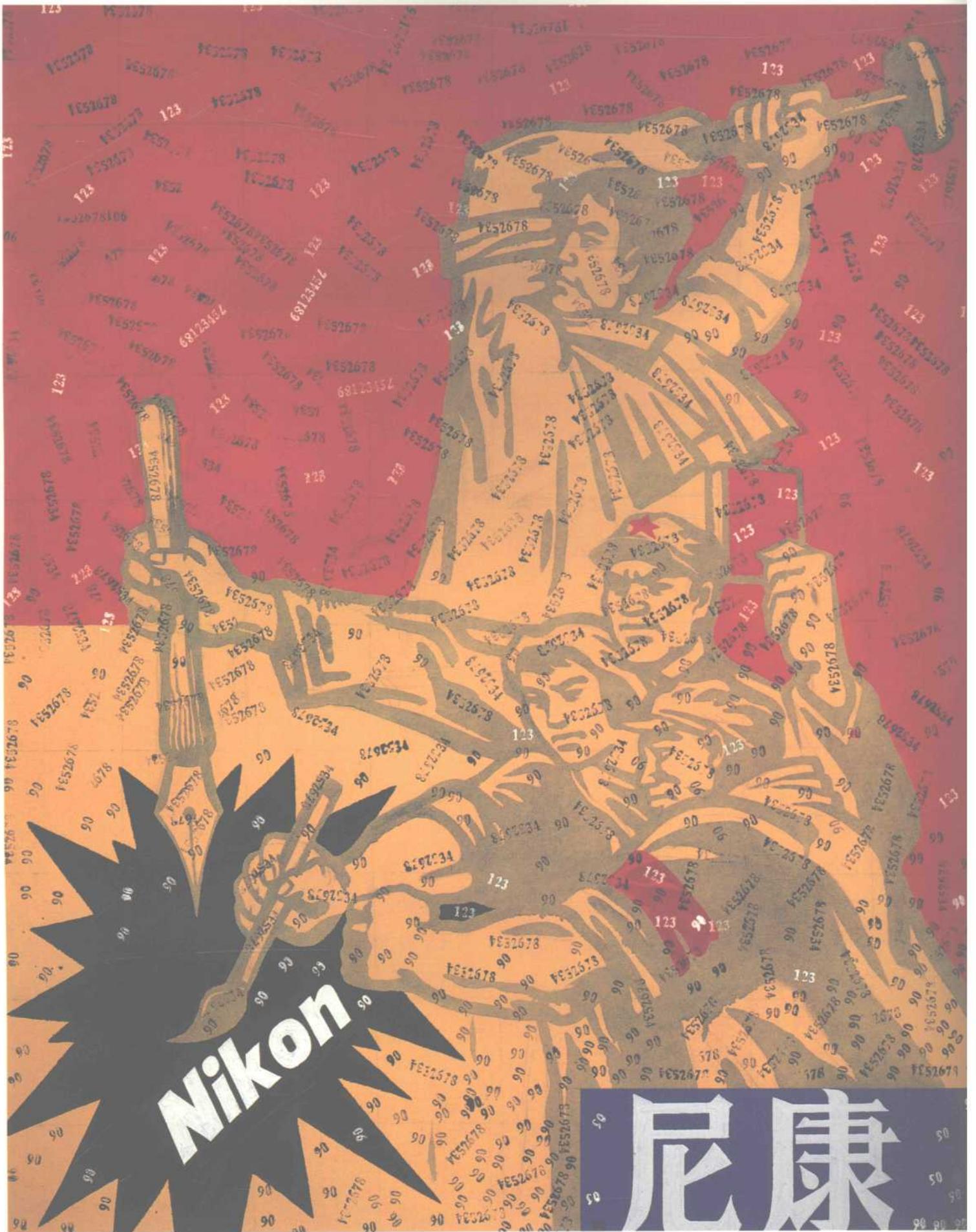
BAND-AID®

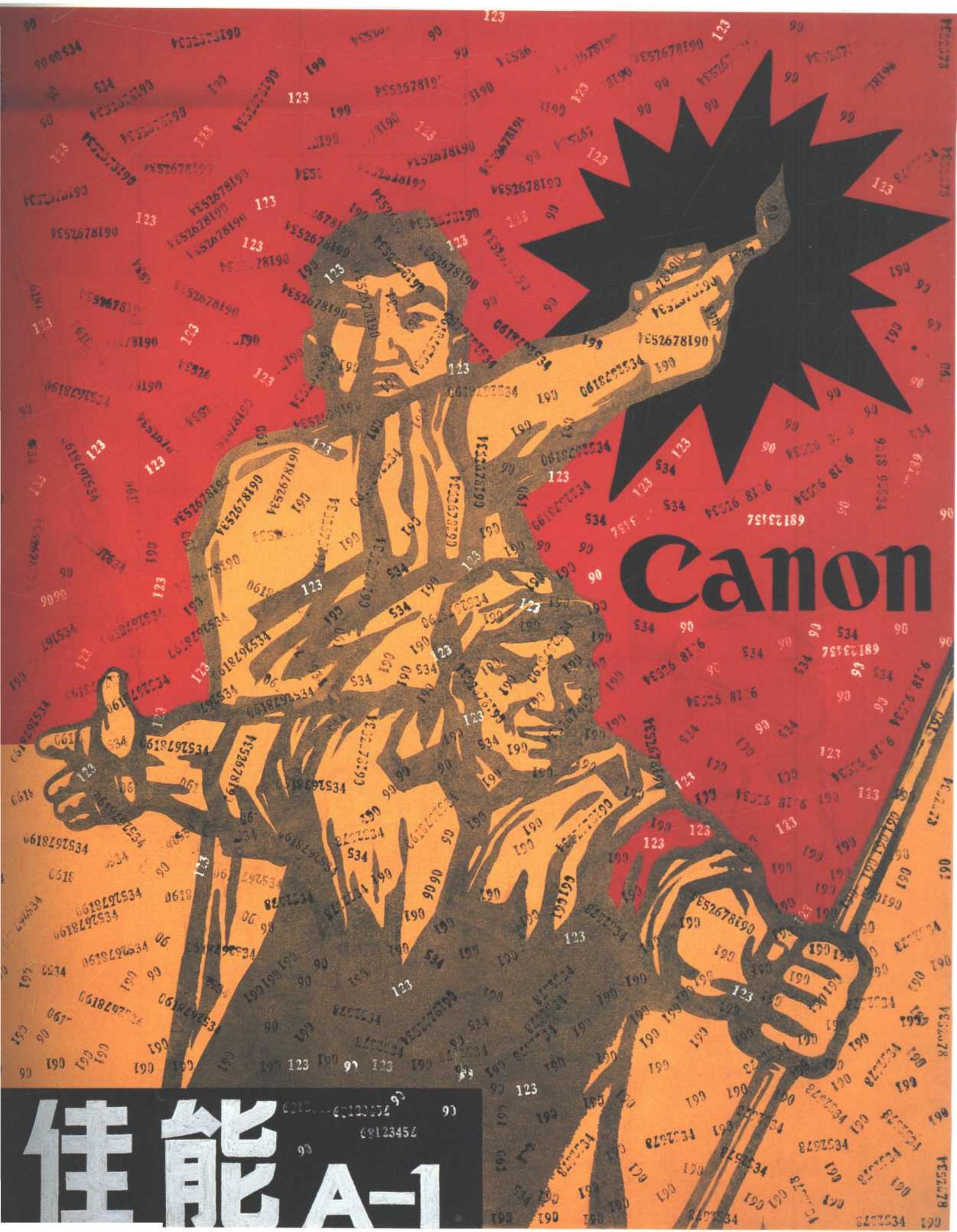
邦迪®

创可贴

3
Great Criticism: Nikon
Oil on canvas
1992
148 × 119 cm
大批判：尼康

4
Great Criticism: Canon
Oil on canvas
1992
148 × 119 cm
大批判：佳能





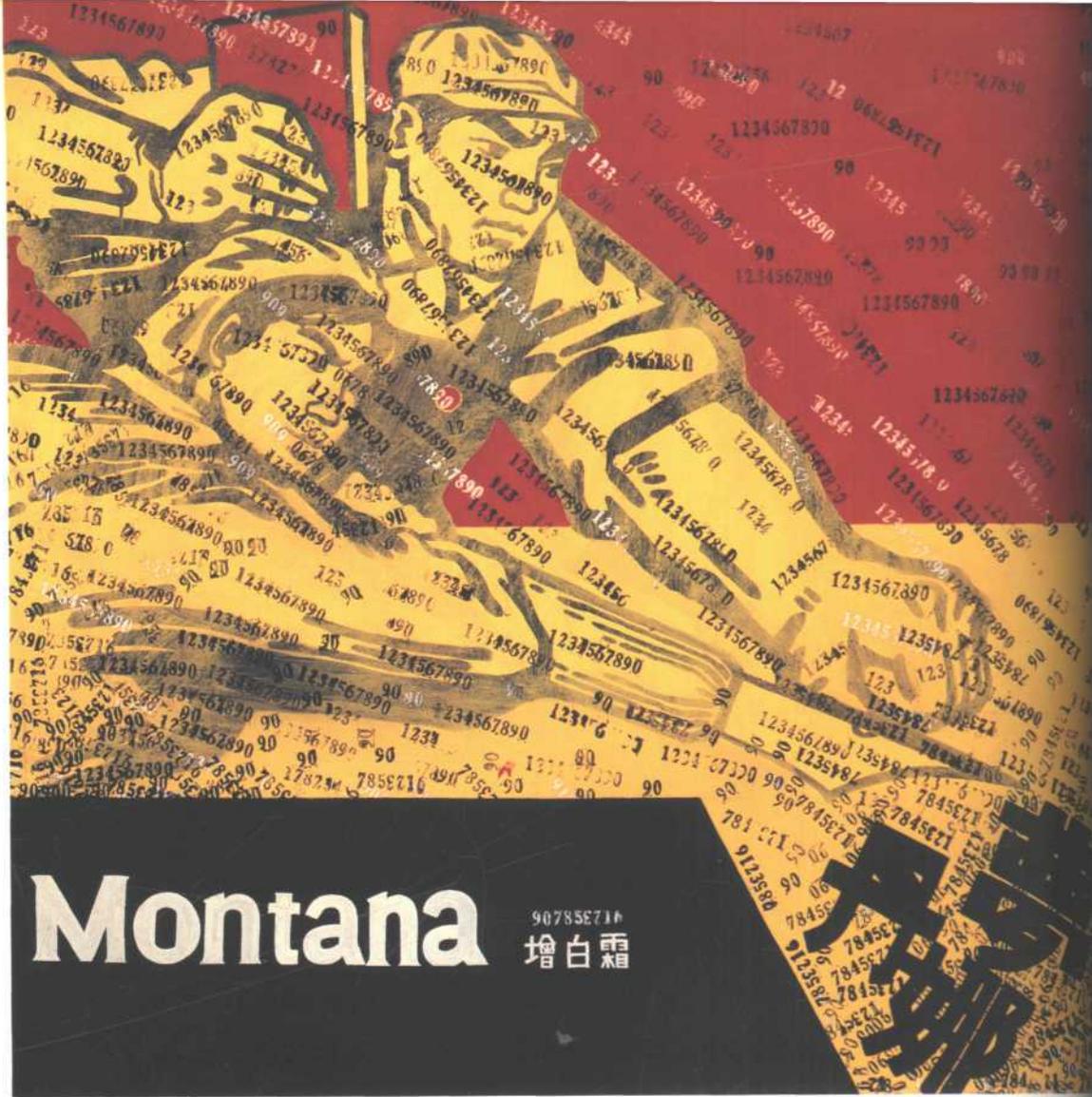
5
Great Criticism: Montana
 Oil on canvas
 1990
 97 × 97 cm
 大批判：夢丹娜

6
Great Criticism: Tang
 Oil on canvas
 1991
 97 × 97 cm
 大批判：葉珍

7
**The Wide World:
 The Necessary Parade**
 Oil on canvas
 1992
 120 × 149 cm
 大世界：必要的行列

8
**The Wide World:
 The Necessary Wave of
 the Hand**
 Oil on canvas
 1992
 120 × 149 cm
 大世界：必要的揮手

9
**The Wide World:
 The Necessary Diplomacy**
 Oil on canvas
 1992
 118.5 × 147.5 cm
 大世界：必要的外交



5



8

6



7



8



9

YU YOUHAN

余友涵

1

The Waving Mao

Acrylic on canvas

1990

145 · 130 cm

招手的毛澤東

YU YOUHAN

(b. 1943, Shanghai)

余友涵

Yu Youhan graduated from the Central Institute of Technology in Beijing in 1970. He presently teaches at the Shanghai Institute of Industrial Arts.

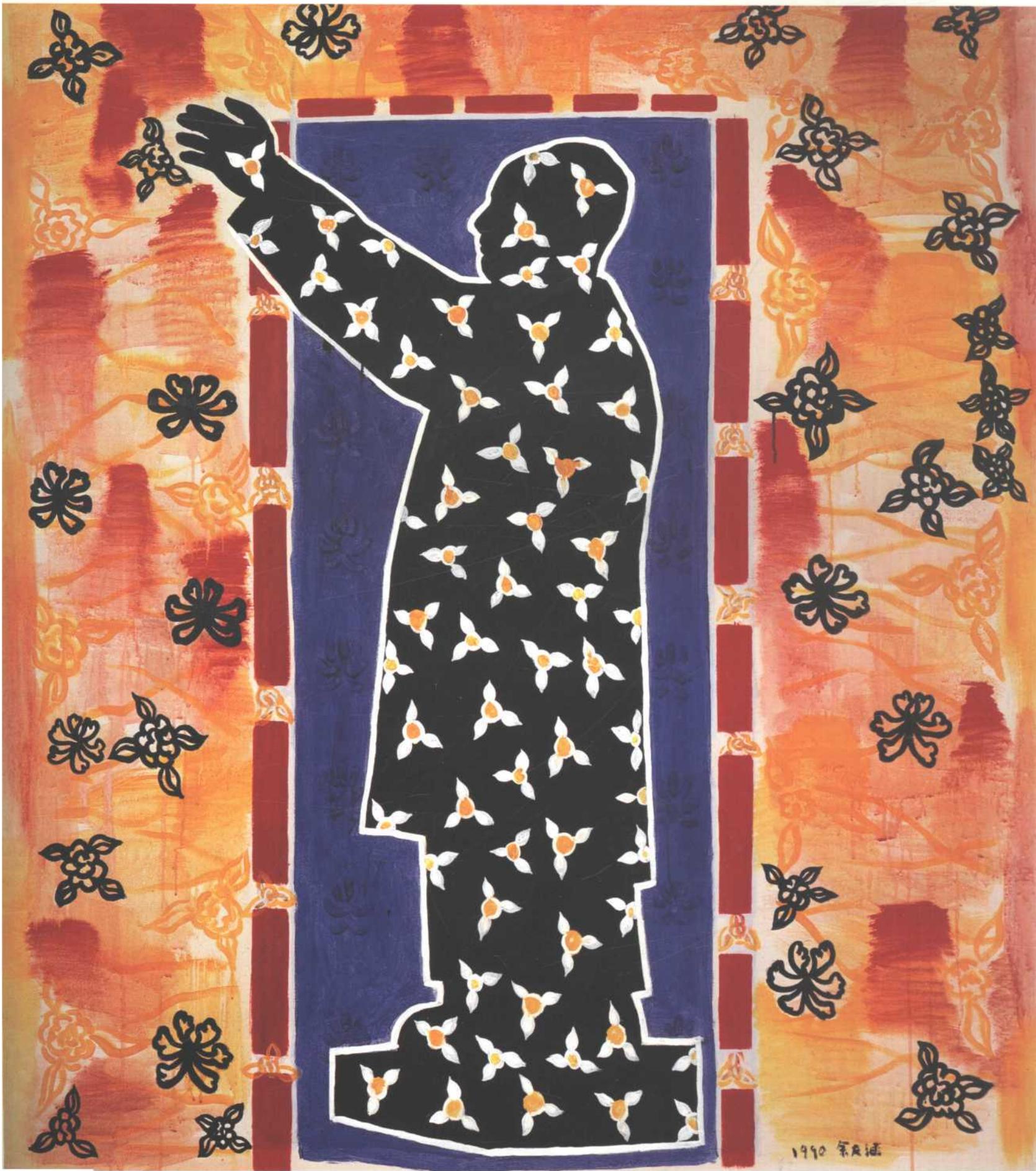
Yu Youhan is a key figure in the Political Pop movement. His influence on Chinese avant-garde art has been felt since the mid-Eighties, when he was a major figure in the Shanghai Minimalist movement.

With his *Mao* series, begun in 1989, Yu once again has emerged as a major force, but this time in the very different realm of Pop. The *Mao* series consists of portrait-like depictions of Mao's everyday life excruciatingly familiar to every Chinese. But in Yu's flamboyantly coloured, floral-strewn portraits, Mao's principles of "art for the purpose of political instruction" and "art for the pleasure of the masses" set forth in his *Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art* are given a new twist. During the Mao era these two principles gave rise to art movements that stressed the absorption of folk art as their nucleus. Yu Youhan apparently follows suit, but his masterful rendering of the bright folksy patterns and his whimsical compositional approach create a distinctly bizarre effect.

"I like to express my thoughts through images of Mao Zedong. I have also painted other subjects, such as the Chinese currency, the *renminbi*; bicycles; playing cards; and abstract works, the *Circle* series. The reason I have chosen Mao as a favourite subject is because he is a popular character, both among Chinese and Westerners. I myself consider him a legendary figure worth depicting. During the Cultural Revolution, portraits of Mao were deified: they exuded a feeling of political passion and cultureless superstition. Mao advocated getting rid of the "Four Old Principles." He opposed the use of the dragon and phoenix pattern, which to him was a symbol of the blind worship of the monarchy. . . .

My goal is to depict the figure of Mao in a new light."

— Yu Youhan



2

Mao Image in Rose

Acrylic on canvas

1992

110 × 88 cm

玫瑰色的毛澤東像

3

**Mao Image with
Patterned Print**

Acrylic on canvas

1992

111 × 88 cm

帶花的毛澤東像

4

**Mao in a Colourful
Lounge Chair**

Acrylic on canvas

1992

118 × 98 cm

彩色躺椅上的毛澤東

5

Mao Out-of-Focus

Acrylic on canvas

1992

133 × 157 cm

毛澤東·雙影：
天安門上

6

**Red Image of Mao
Waving**

Acrylic on canvas

1992

166 × 118.5 cm

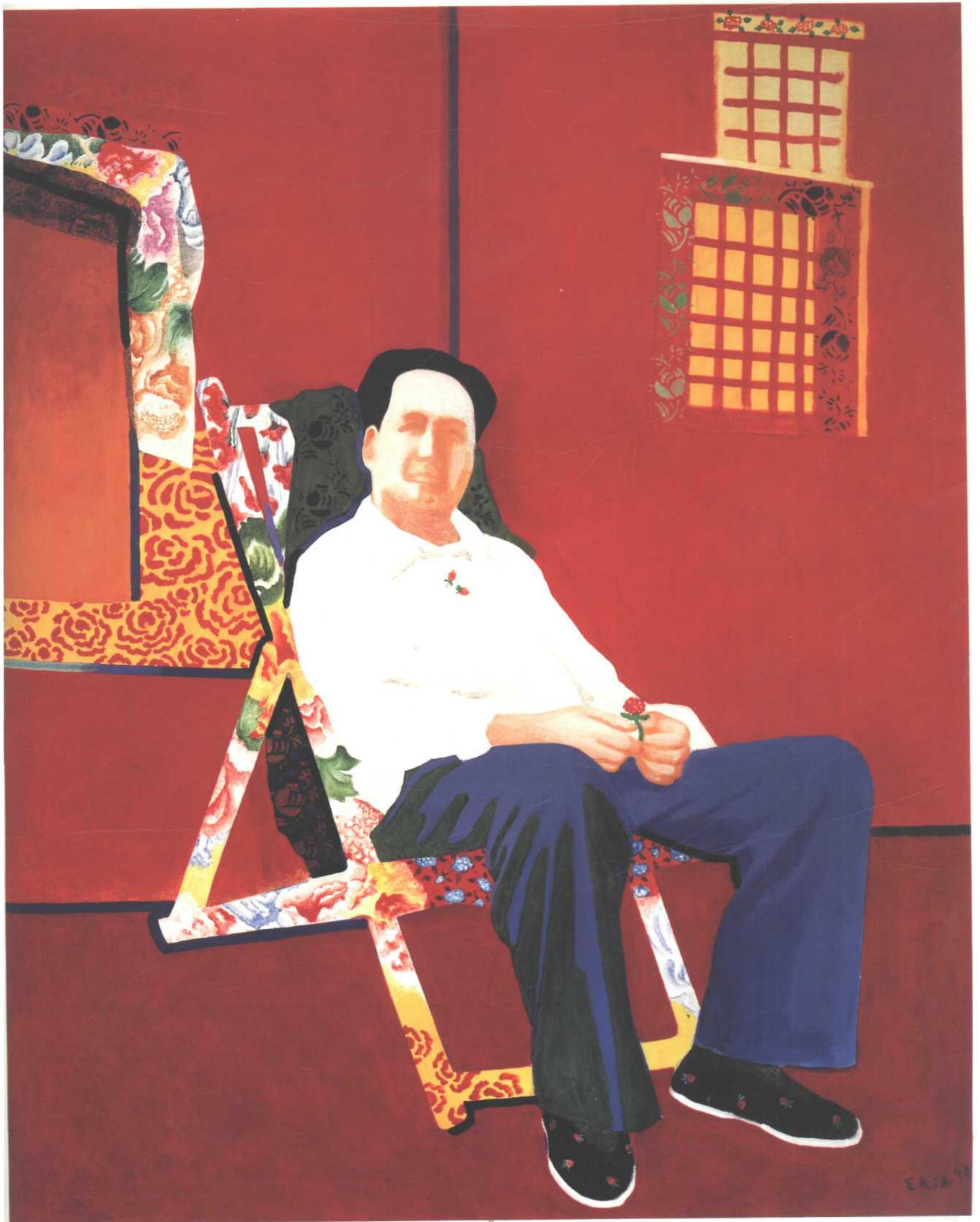
紅色的毛澤東招手像



2



3







7

You Handle It, I'm

Relieved

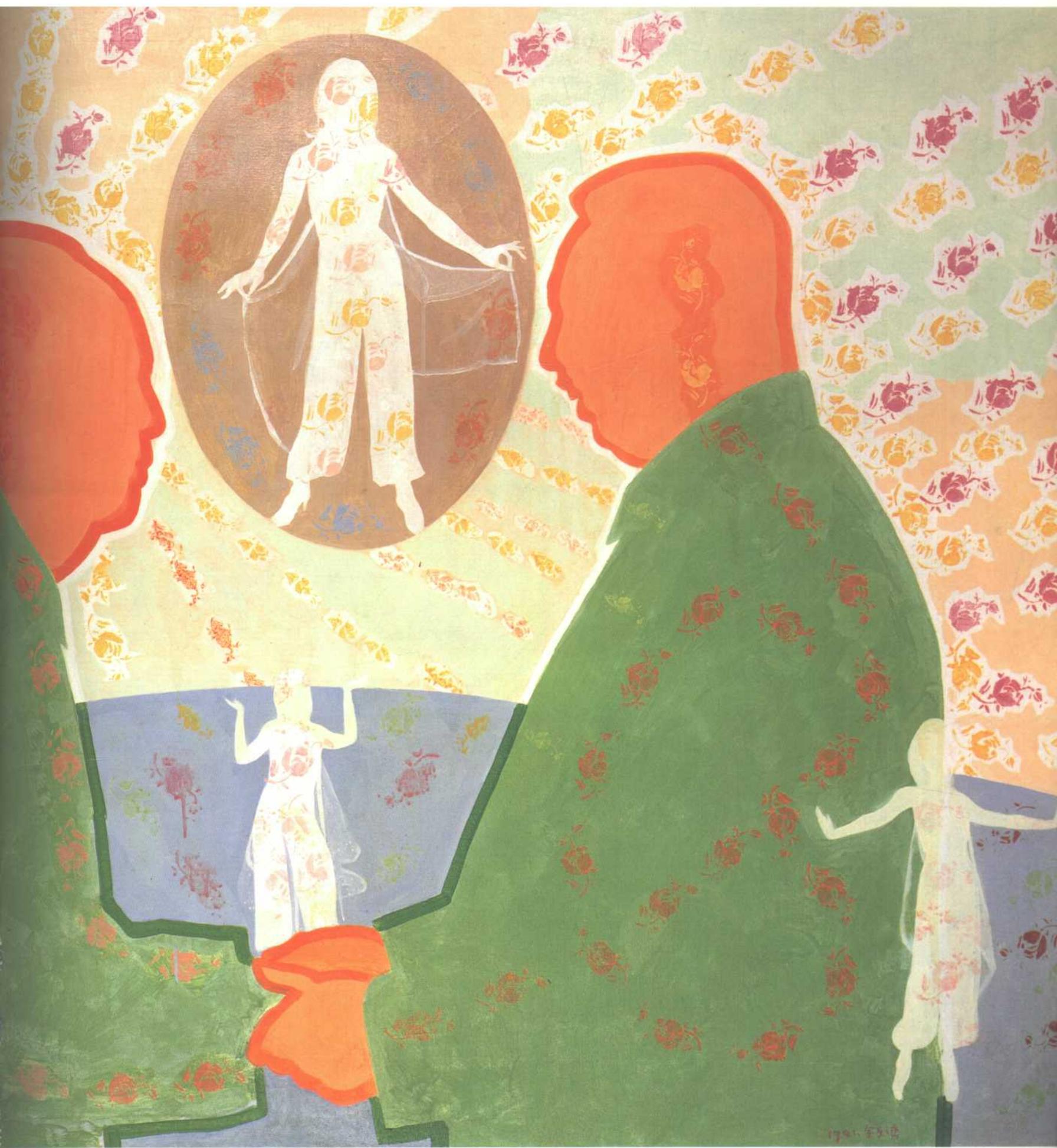
Acrylic on canvas

1991

118 × 165 cm

你辦事，我放心





LI SHAN

李山

1

Rouge A

Acrylic on canvas

1989

140 / 258 cm

胭脂系列 A

2

Rouge B

Acrylic on canvas

1991

140 / 340 cm

胭脂系列 B

3

Rouge C

Acrylic on canvas

1991

140 / 365 cm

胭脂系列 C

LI SHAN

(b. 1944, Heilongjiang Province)

李山

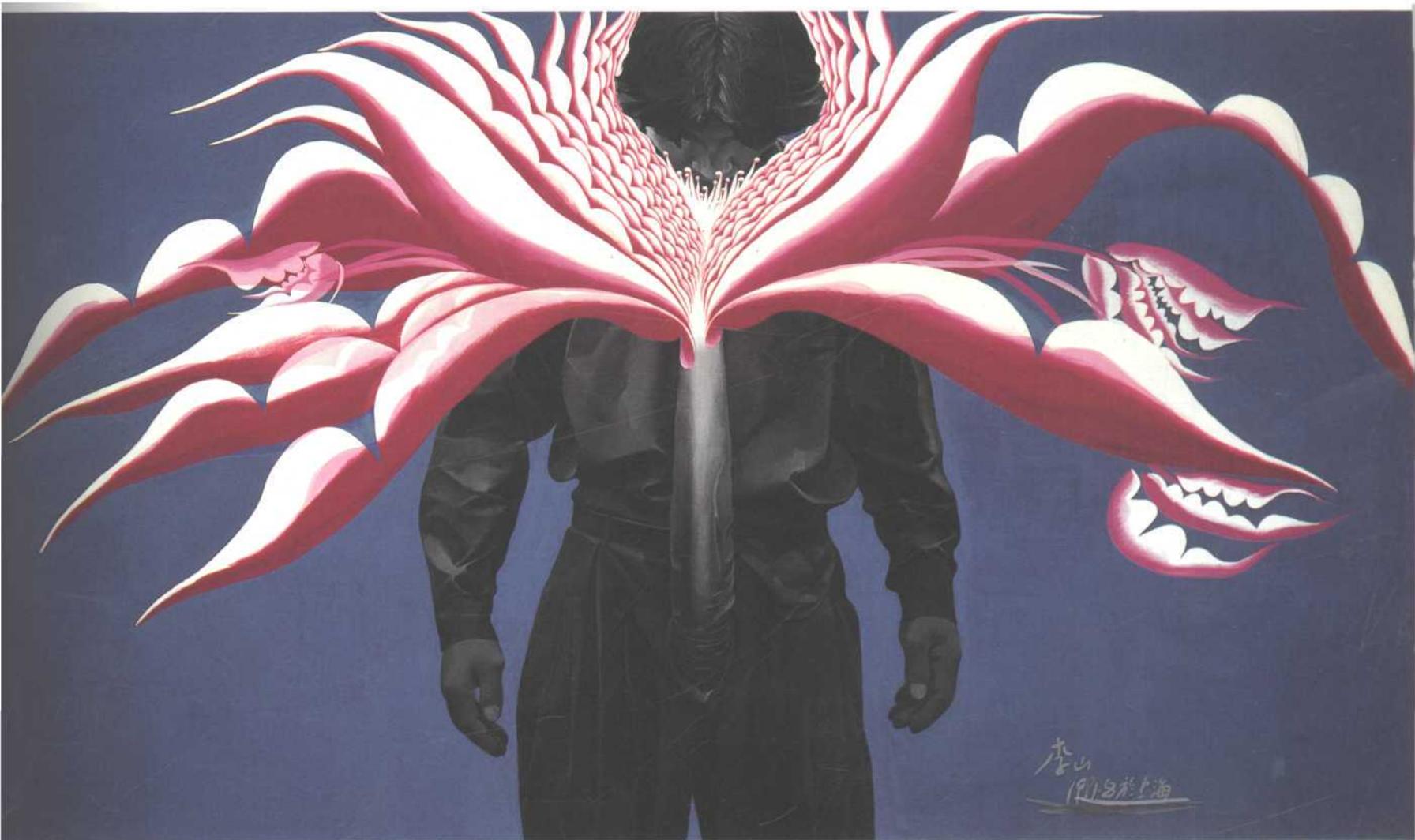
Li Shan graduated in 1968 from the Shanghai Drama Academy and is currently Assistant Professor in the Set Design Department of the same institution.

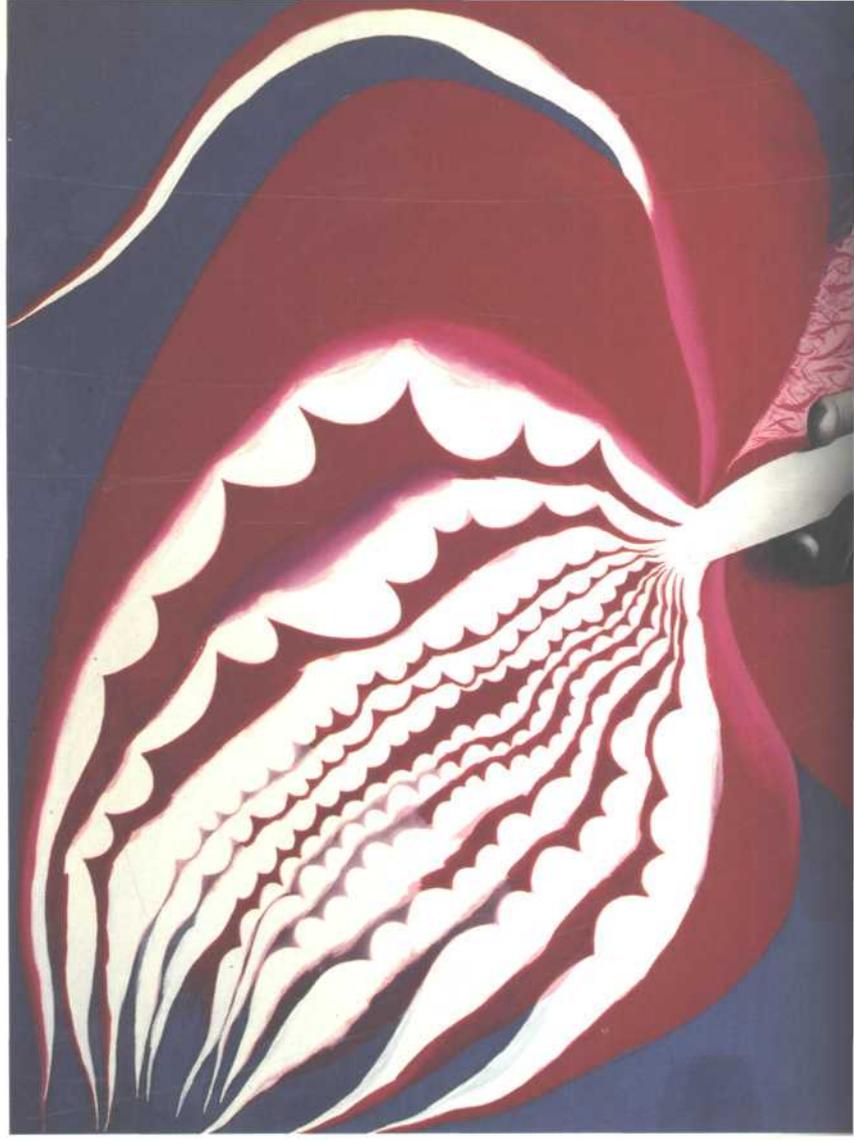
Li Shan's paintings have demonstrated a strong Expressionist vocabulary since the Seventies, and since then have shown increasingly Primitivist tendencies, including the incorporation of sexual imagery — a taboo subject in Maoist era painting. The paintings of his *Primal Beginnings* series are intense expressions of the emotional turmoil hidden in the depths of the human psyche, a main thematic concern of the artist.

In 1988 Li Shan created his *Mona Lisa* series, a combination of lotus flower imagery from popular paintings and images of the Mona Lisa, which seeks to demonstrate the expressive power of allegorical symbols embedded in vulgarised images. This theme becomes stronger and clearer in his recent *Rouge Series*, in which the artist uses huge canvases, finely detailed airbrush technique and hermaphroditic images to create a climate of emotional unease and to express the sense that people have been “neutered” by the combined social effects of knowledge, language and authority.

“If we make ‘rouge’ a verb, and wish ‘to rouge’ something away, this is not so much a matter of will and method, as a question of attitude. There is a warning here: there is no integral relationship between Art on the one hand and works of art and artists on the other. Art has nothing to do with critics, agents, museums, collectors, the viewing public or the media. And once Art itself becomes an object of attention, it becomes a shoddy, vulgar copy of itself, which everyone is capable of possessing.”

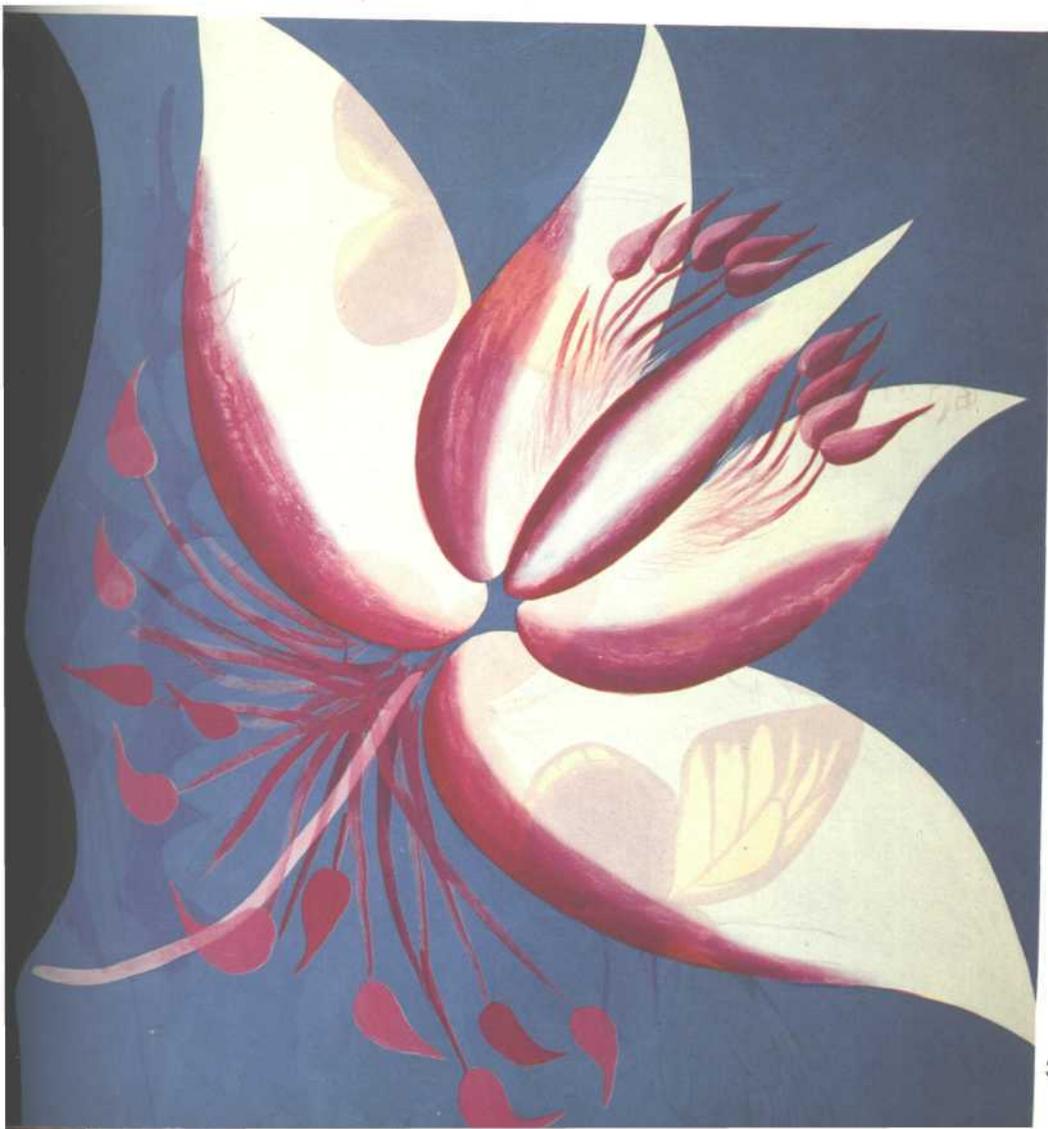
— Li Shan







2



3

4
The Rouge Series, No. 31
Acrylic on canvas
1992
100 x 200 cm
胭脂系列·31



5
The Rouge Series, No. 22
Acrylic on canvas
1992
140 x 258 cm
胭脂系列·22

5





4



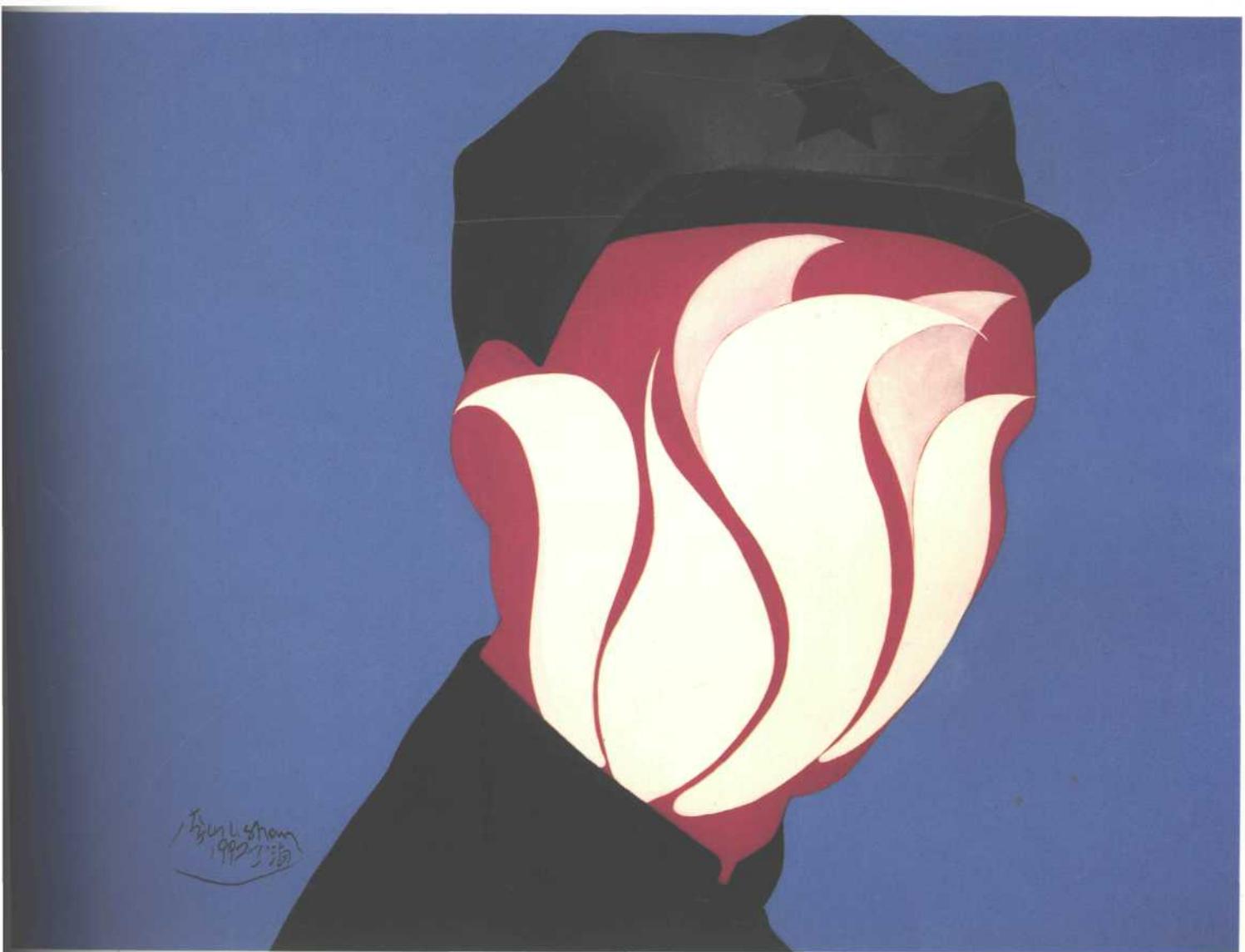
6
The Rouge Series, No. 34
Acrylic on canvas
1992
110 × 113 cm
胭脂系列 · 34

7
The Rouge Series, No. 24
Acrylic on canvas
1992
100 × 140 cm
胭脂系列 · 24

8
The Rouge Series, No. 33
Acrylic on canvas
1992
100 × 140 cm
胭脂系列 · 33



6



9

The Rouge Series, No. 21

Acrylic on canvas

1992

140 × 300 cm

胭脂系列·21

10

The Rouge Series: Three Stars

Stars

Acrylic on canvas

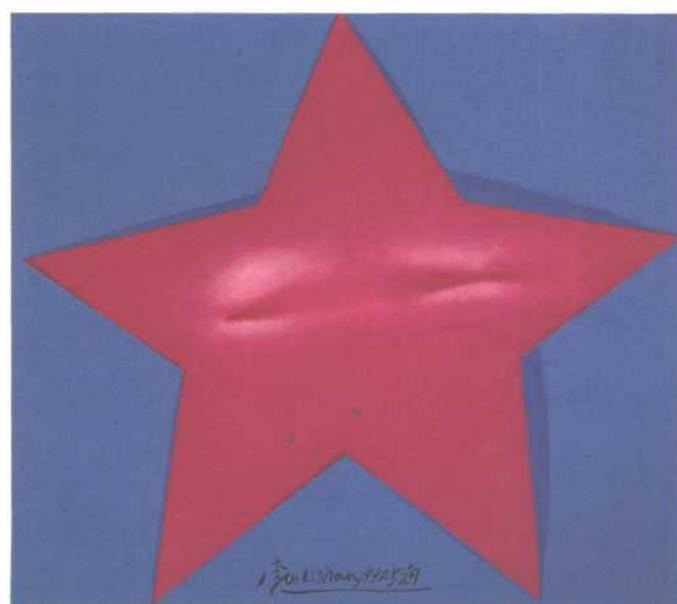
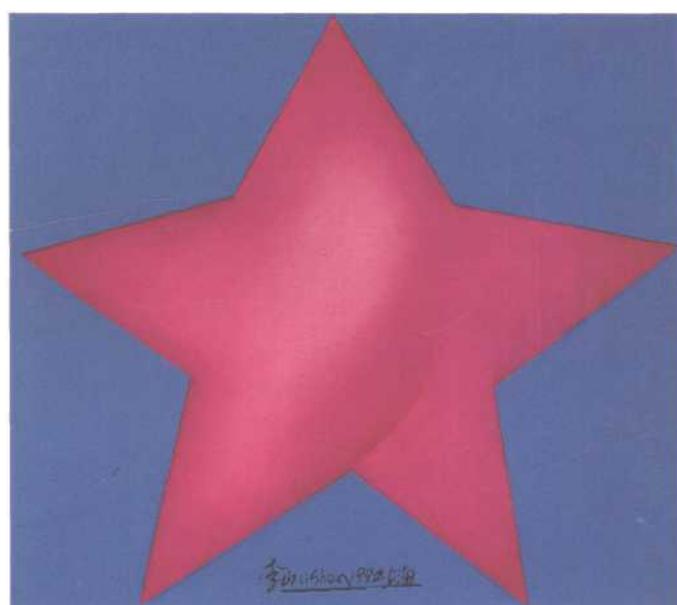
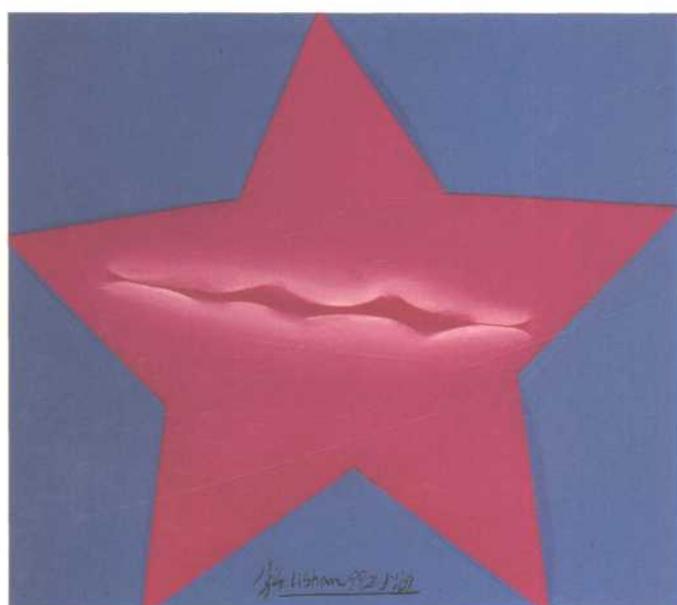
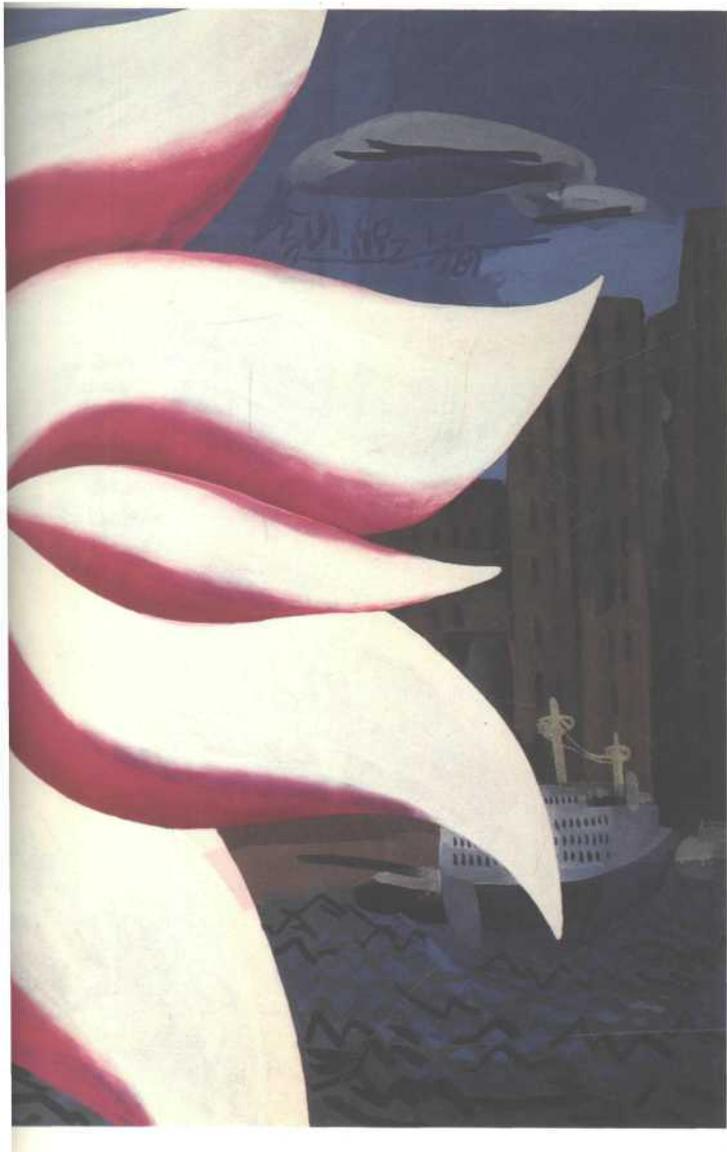
1992

58 × 66 cm @

胭脂系列·三星



9



GENG JIANYI

耿建翌

Mispriated Books

18 Hard-cover books and
shelf

書 (錯印的)

2

Untitled

Oil on canvas

60 × 90 cm

120 × 90 cm

60 × 60 cm

無題三幅

GENG JIANYI

(b. 1962, Henan Province)

耿建翌

Geng Jianyi graduated in 1985 from the Oil Painting Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. He presently is a professor at the Zhejiang Institute of Technology.

Geng Jianyi has always focused on the embarrassing situations of everyday life. In his earlier works such as *The Second Condition*, he uses images of huge, grimacing faces to explicitly portray the alienation and hypocrisy of human relationships. Beginning in 1988, Geng almost completely abandoned the medium of painting, and began to experiment with a wide variety of media to further develop the conceptual nature of his work.

Geng's conceptual platform is "the principle of attack," targetted at accepted norms of behaviour, and his installations seek to represent the breakdown of these everyday rules and values. Geng's works deal harshly with the viewer: it is as though a scab had been lifted, putting them in an uncomfortable and embarrassing situation.

In his recent installation, *Mispriated Books*, Geng creates books made of superimposed printed layers of images and words which dispel any idea of significance and play havoc with the traditional notion that a book is a record of valuable information. By focussing his attention on creating awkward contexts and embarrassing situations, Geng underscores the origins of human emotional discomfort, which lie in paranoia and perpetual doubt vis à vis the value of human existence.

"I used to think that a completed artwork was like the completed act of taking a piss: when it's finished it's finished — you don't go carrying the contents of the chamber pot around with you. But now things are different, you can't just take a piss whenever you like anymore and be done with it. There are special bathrooms, like museums and art galleries, that want to expose you in your most basic acts. And doesn't everybody now accept this situation as normal? The people going in for a look are all very interested, comparing who is big and who is small. How is it that I was born in this age of organisation? and how is it that I want to be proclaimed the champ? It's really a shame."

— Geng Jianyi

WU SHANZHUAN

(b. 1960, Zhoushan, Zhejiang Province)

吳山專

Wu Shanzhuan graduated from the Education Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. He currently lives in Germany.

Wu Shanzhuan's environmental art employs an absurd vocabulary by which he creates a fantastical realm of language that lampoons and exaggerates the "red" atmosphere of the Sixties political movements. Although the vocabulary of his works derives from the "notice boards of daily life," his random combinations create a symbolic and illusory effect, bringing out the deeper, implicit level of meaning of the reality of the Cultural Revolution. For Wu, this inner "revolutionary reality" was patently absurd, and resulted in an external reality marked by the complete impoverishment of culture — putting a new spin on the idea of a culture "in the red."

"To me, a work of art is not about any particular form or materials: a work of art is simply an example of a work of art. The form that exposes a work already demonstrates that it is peripheral to, and temporary for, the existence of Art. Because Art is the sum total of everything that we know about life.

I intend to deposit the 'material cost of Art' into a bank. I request to seek employment on the premise of art shows: this art becomes the "example reason" for me to seek employment.

— Art is not the reason for me not to be otherwise employed (for example)

— Art is not the reason for me not to do other things (for example)

I know that I am being polemical in the way I define the term 'Art.' But because I have long been a 'man without reason,' a labourer with working conditions imposed on my physical being, I am an innocent who executes my work without a concept. The reason I put money into a bank is because the bank manages on my behalf the time, the manner, and the place, of investment. As a depositor I am innocent, I have no control over how the money is used or where it is placed and so I and my possession are beyond the law.

My responsibility is to make 'apparent' my enterprise:

1. 'Labour force' solves what I understand to be Sisyphus' irresponsible attitude toward the concept of work.
2. To deposit money in a bank solves what I understand to be Narcissus' irresponsible attitude toward the concept of work.

Hereby I formally declare that I insist on the material cost of art, and I will deposit it in a bank. The least, symbolic sum would be US\$1,500, because to believe that one has the right to fish by simply adding one bowl of water to a river is ridiculous.

To me, to 'prove wrong' is disastrous. To 'prove right' I have yet to find the answer."

— Wu Shanzhuan

TOURIST INFORMATION

觀光者信息

姓 名 国籍 身高 性别 生日 出生地 地址 电话

劳动力的申请书
Application for a labour of (香港)
Surname: 吳 WU
Given name: 山专 SHAN ZHUAN
Nationality: 中国人 CHINESE
Height: 1.74 M
Sex: 男 MALE
Weight: 59 Kg
Date of birth: 1960.10.25
Place of birth: 中国浙江 ZHEJING. CHINA
Permanent Address: WARTENAU 16
2000 HAMBURG 76 GERMANY
Phone: 0049.40.2984.3228

香港
I hereby apply for a Labour of (HONG KONG)
I declare that to the of my knowledge the above particulars are correct and complete
我申请做劳动力()。
我保证 以上我所知的细节是准确的和完全的。
吳山专
RED HUMOUR INTERNATIONAL
国际红色幽默 22-11-92
汉堡

hanart
T Z Gallery
漢雅軒

December 10, 1992

Mr. Wu Shanzhuan
c/o International Red Humour
Hamburg, Germany

Dear Mr. Wu:

Thank you for your labour application of November 22, 1992. Though as a gallery we do, of course, work with artists, we are yet not in the habit of employing "artist labourers." We appreciate very much your special qualifications, so vividly communicated in your application letter, and regret that we are unable to offer you a position that would meet our requirements at this time.

Very truly yours,

Tsong-zung Chang
Tsong-zung Chang
Director

Central Branch: 5/F, The Old Bank of China Building, Bank Street, Carmar, Hong Kong. Tel: 526 9019 Fax: (852) 521 2001
Kowloon Branch: 28-30 Brasserie Street, Kowloon, Hong Kong. Tel: 733 9286 Fax: (852) 761 9553
中環店: 香港中環銀行大廈中國銀行大廈五樓 九龍店: 香港九龍嘉道德中心五號中環
Taipei Branch: 104 Chung Shan North Road, Sec. 2, Taipei, Taiwan. Tel: 882 8772 Fax: (886) 21 881 1189
Taipei Chung Shan Branch: 3/F, 41 Chung Shan North Road, Sec. 2, Taipei, Taiwan. Tel: 531 6778 Fax: (886) 21 531 6774
臺北店: 臺北臺北中山北路五段一零四號 臺北中山店: 臺北中山北路二段四十七號二樓

所以有的品是 = 在“鸟先于和平”“物件是消遣品”的前提下
“人先于艺术家”
“劳动力先于表演者”
“钱先于被购买的艺术品”
鸟是“双鸟”但是“塔塔”
此段 = “劳动力的敬礼”

吴山专
国际红色幽默 22-11-92
汉堡

Therefore, under the precepts of “Birds Come Before Peace” and “Physical Bodies Are Above The Law” I believe:

Man Before Artist!
Labourer Before Performer!

I may be a “tourist,” but I am also an entrepreneur.
To labour, salute!
Humble Student,

Wu Shanzhuan
c/o International Red Humour
Hamburg
22-11-92



YE YONGQING

葉永青

1

Big Poster Display

Detail of one panel

大招貼

2

Big Poster Display, in 3

Panels

Oil and mixed media on
canvas

1991-92

180 × 180 cm @

大招貼 (三聯屏)

YE YONGQING

(b. 1958, Kunming, Yunnan Province)

葉永青

Ye Yongqing graduated from the Painting Department of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts in 1982. He presently teaches in the Education Department of the same institution.

A representative painter of the Eighties avant-garde movement, Ye is known as an intellectual painter, and a sensitive scholar/artist. His early, lyrical works developed from the Sichuan "Native Soil" painting style and have a striking inner vision. From 1985, the artist's works began to demonstrate an increasingly critical sensibility. Paintings of this period such as *Spying* and *Pursued* portray the conflict between man and his environment as the paradox of existence. In later works the artist continued to focus on this theme while developing a concern for the symbiotic relationship between compositional structure and material. Recently Ye has developed a series of mixed media works and installations, such as the *Big Poster* series, using techniques of sign-drawing, dotted codes and marginal painting to create a new form of "public message."

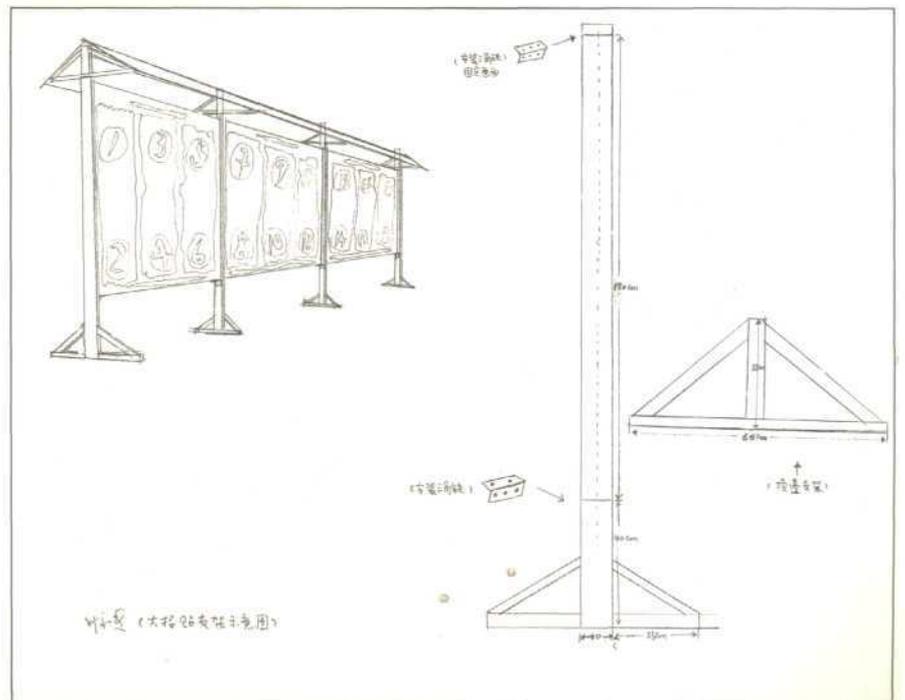
"The things that have informed the major visual experience of my generation are the big character posters of the Cultural Revolution and the big commercial billboards of today. Fragments of these images are embedded in our perceptive frame of reference, and exposing these fragments is an exposure of the path from political inflation to commercial inflation that Chinese society has travelled in the past twenty years.

Political and cultural posters have certain features in common: they are non-individualistic, vulgar, easily understood, repetitive, seductive and sensational. Accordingly, in my work *Big Poster* I am not expressing an individual emotion or narrating a specific incident: rather, I am trying to expose the secrets of the modern age hidden in these graphics. One has to be very observant: one has to view these fragments from a heightened perspective which will allow one to grasp the "overall picture" they form, and to decode their real meaning. At the same time, my work is done with an attitude of self-mockery. I want to achieve the kind of humorous self-reflection on the weakness of my generation, that Lu Xun achieved on the weakness of his in *The True Story of Ah Q*. By putting ourselves in this embarrassing situation we are forced into a new perspective which dispels our illusions of empty humanism and inflated heroism."

— Ye Yongqing



1



2

WANG ZIWEI

王子衛

1

Leader and Flag

Oil on canvas

1989

79.3 × 189.5 cm

紅旗和老毛

2

Certificate of Merit

Oil on canvas

1990

91.5 × 147.3 cm

獎狀

WANG ZIWEI

(b. 1963, Shanghai)

王子衛

Wang Ziwei graduated from the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts in 1983. He presently is a designer in the Nanfang Advertising Company in Shanghai.

Wang Ziwei is a major exponent of the Political Pop style. His meticulous painterly technique is evidenced by the works he did in the mid-Eighties when, together with his mentor Yu Youhan, he was at the nucleus of the Shanghai abstract art movement which sought to merge Daoist philosophical elements with the distilled language of Minimalism. A representative work of this period is Wang's *XXXX Square*, which appears to be a series of printed works of neatly arranged, densely packed, black squares, with up to 700 squares in each piece. In fact, these works were completely hand-painted on unmarked canvases.

Wang has always enjoyed the simple, rural way of life, and says he feels a kinship with Mao Zedong, who came from peasant origins and always expressed his views with the countryman's forthright directness. Wang Ziwei finds Mao inspiring, and considers him the true 'pop' icon. In 1987, he began to paint his *Mao* series of portraits, which by 1989 indeed had helped elevate Mao to the level of Pop icon.

Wang was born in the Sixties: for him Mao Zedong is only a childhood memory, and his images of Mao are lighthearted and childishly sentimental rather than the awesome and godlike images that flourished during the Mao era. Wang's depictions of Mao and of political paraphernalia such as flags and banners are painted in bright, silkscreen-like patches of color that echo the celebrity prints of Andy Warhol. Yet, (despite Wang's seeming ingenuousness) this treatment renders the images both peculiar and unreal, at the same time hinting at a deeper truth vis à vis the true intention of visual propaganda, whether commercial or political in nature: to glamourise in order to mislead.

"I prefer reading books by Mao Zedong to philosophy books. Mao's understanding of freedom is much more profound than that of an intellectual. Sometimes, cultural issues become too complicated. Images of red flags seem very warm. Mao cares for the masses and communicates with them. This is quite a Pop attitude."

— Wang Ziwei



1



3

**The Great Wave:
Revolution**

Oil on canvas

1992

122 × 204 cm

大招手：革命

4

A Female Nude

Oil on canvas

1990

182.5 × 137.7 cm

女人體

5

K × 3

Oil on canvas

1989

105 × 184.4 cm

三皇

6

Marlboro

Oil on canvas

1989

83.4 × 199.3 cm

萬寶路

7

**The Great Wave:
Greetings, Comrades**

Oil on canvas

1992

104.5 × 179.5 cm

大招手：同志們好



3

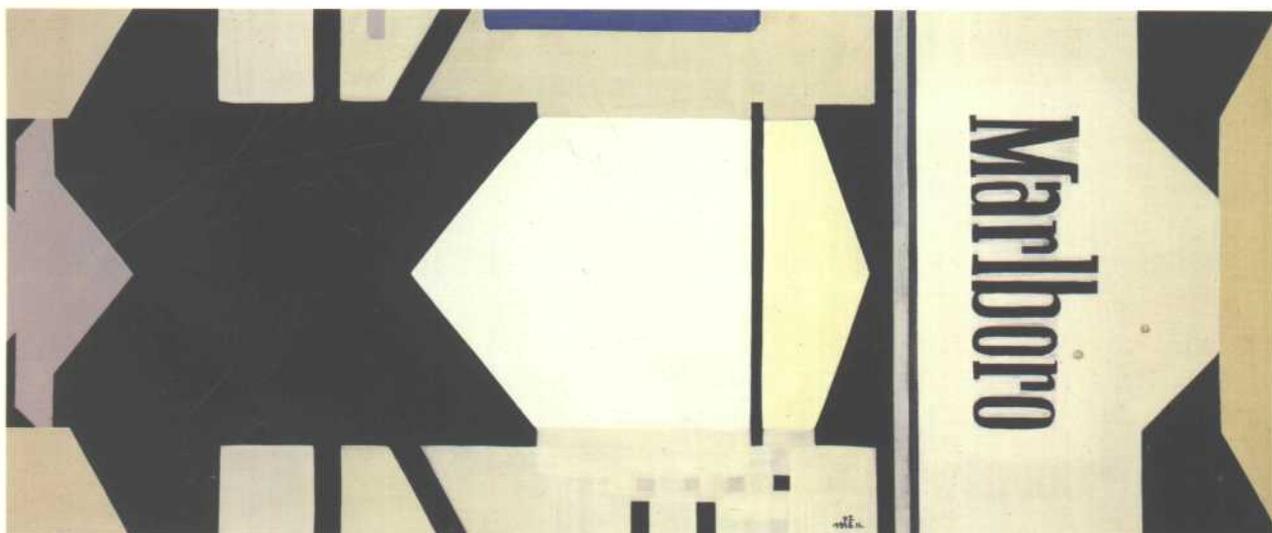




4



5



6



FENG MENGBO

馮夢波

1-4

The Video Endgame

Series: *Taking Tiger*

Mountain by Strategy (Set of 4)

Oil on canvas

1992

88 · 100 cm (x)

遊戲終結：

智取威虎山（四幅）

5, 6

The Video Endgame

Series: *The Red Lantern*

(Set of 2)

Oil on canvas

1992

88 · 100 cm (x)

遊戲終結：

紅燈記（兩幅）

7, 8

On With the Revolution

and Up With Production

(Set of 4)

Oil on canvas

1992

100 · 88 cm

抓革命，促生產

（四幅）

9-23

AIR DRY SERIES

Installation: handmade

paper and mixed media

1990-91

Approx 210 × 900 cm

晾乾系列

9, 10

Air Dry Series (Overview)

晾乾系列（整體作品）

11

Forgery 4: Newspaper

Handmade paper

偽造之四：報紙

12

Forgery 2: Private Album

Handmade paper

偽造之二：私人照相簿

13 left

Forgery 1: ID

Mixed media

偽造之一：身份證

13 right

Forgery 3: Stamp

Handmade paper

偽造之三：郵票

FENG MENGBO

(b. 1966, Beijing)

馮夢波

Feng Mengbo graduated from the Printmaking Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing in 1991. He makes his living as a professional artist.

Like many of the new generation of young artists, Feng Mengbo adopts a seemingly relaxed and almost playful approach to life. In 1991, Feng experimented with a blender. He put various types of coloured paper into a blender to make a paper pulp, which he fashioned into images from popular culture, such as military regulation-issue rubber shoes; jeans; identity cards; and television personalities. These fragile paper products were then hung to dry slowly on a net, hence the name of the series, *Air Dry*. Five thousand years of Chinese culture weigh heavily on this young artist's consciousness. Although paper is the vehicle by which history has been passed down through the generations, it is nonetheless transient and fragile, as is culture — especially contemporary culture. Feng uses these fragile paper products as a metaphor for his experience of culture.

In 1992, Feng began experimenting with video game formats. In his *Video Endgame* series, he uses characters from the Revolutionary Model Operas popularised during the Cultural Revolution and paints them as figures manipulated on a video screen. By juxtaposing representative images from two very different periods of contemporary cultural history, Feng creates a superficially whimsical yet effectively almost shocking Political Pop effect. Here, there is no political standard, no code of conduct, but only order and procedure. These paintings bring home the artist's sense that in contemporary culture, the ultimate reality lies in games.

I

"I wove a net to catch some fish. I cast the net, and caught something. I wasn't sure exactly what it was, but I knew it was alive.

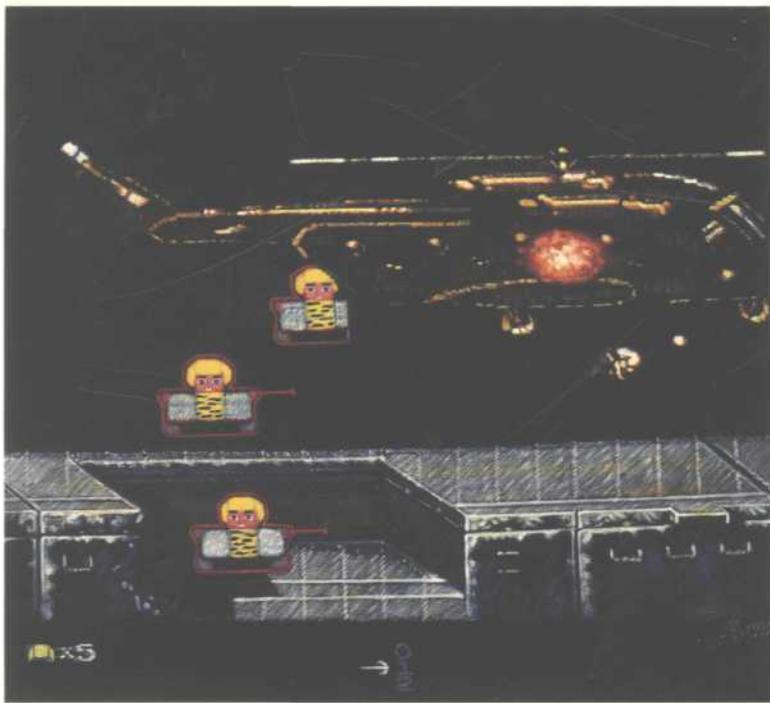
When I go fishing in China today, I still catch fish: but they are very different from traditional fish.

II

Now when I pull up the net, the big fish and the tiny shrimp are all mixed up together with old photographs soaked in seawater, and crushed Coca-cola cans with hermit crabs living inside.

But this doesn't bother me at all. I don't trouble to separate the things one from the other: I just lay the whole mess out under the sun to dry."

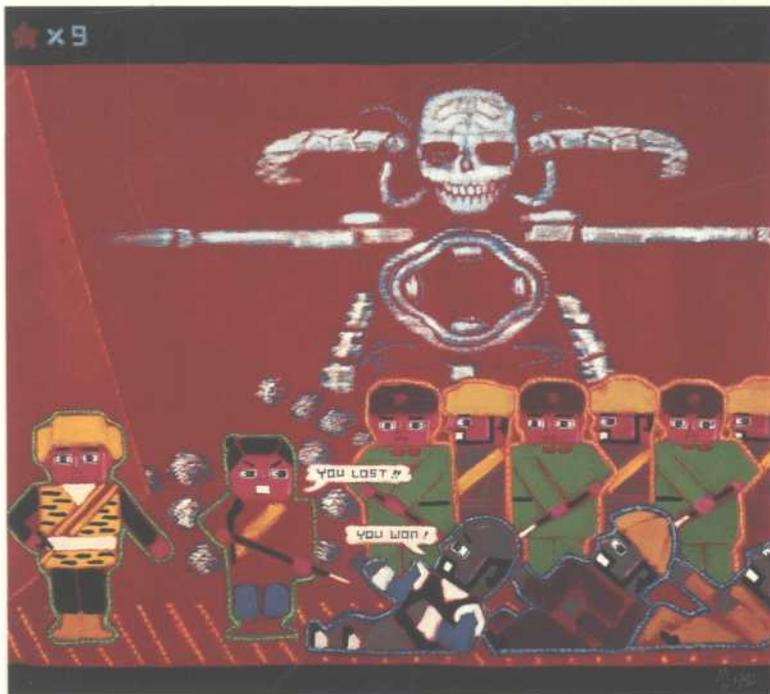
— Feng Mengbo



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3



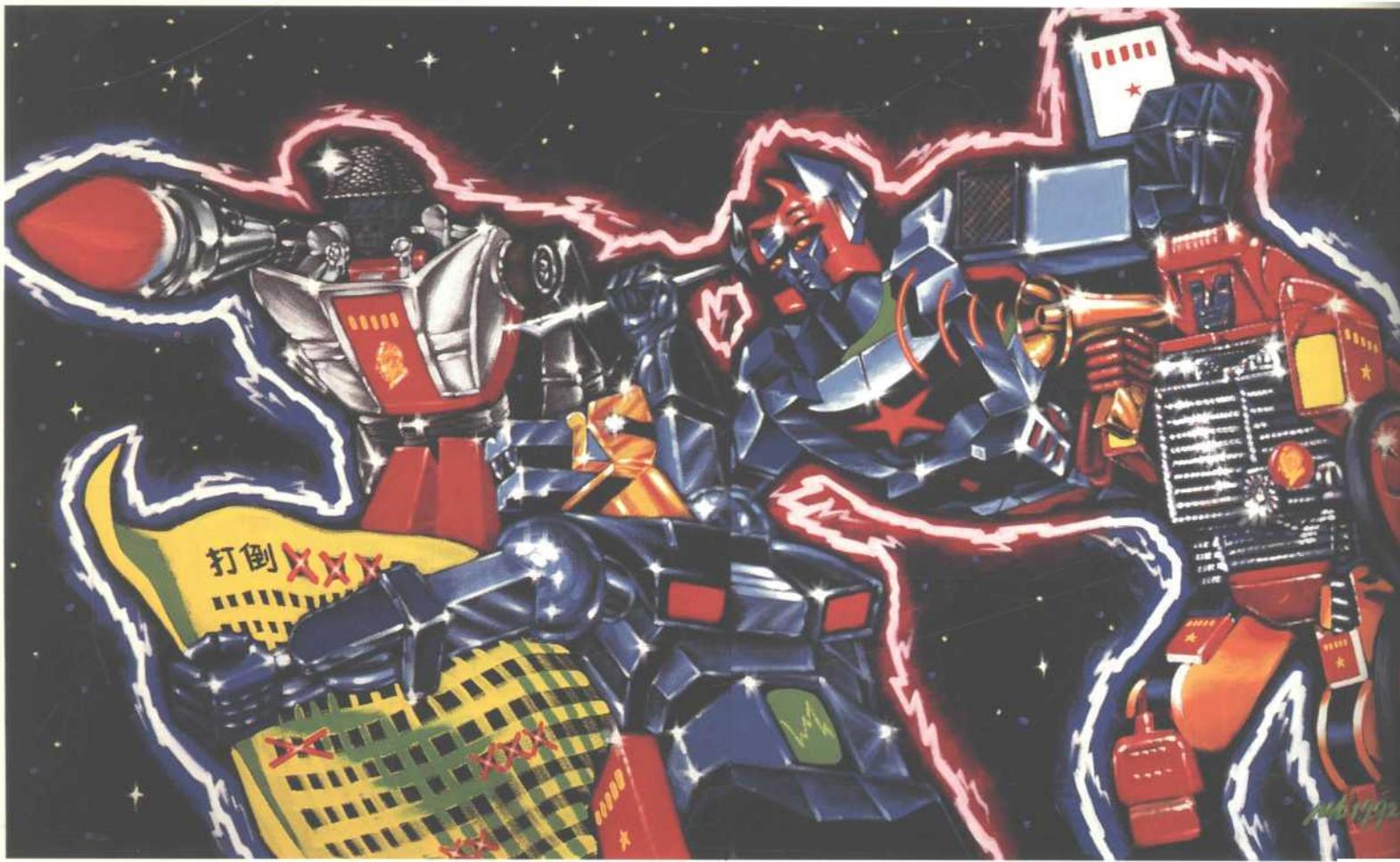
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5



6





9



10



11



12



13

14, 15, 16, 20, 21, 22

Dish: *Hors d'oeuvres*

Handmade paper

菜：冷拼

17 top

Couplet 2: *Sprite*

Mixed media

對聯之二：雪碧

17 bottom

Couplet 1: *Coca-cola*

Mixed media

對聯之一：可口可樂

18

Dish: *Poker*

Handmade paper

菜：撲克

19

Anonymous Letter

Mixed media

匿名信

23

Dish: *Solemnly Braised in Soy Sauce*

Handmade paper

菜：莊嚴的紅燒

not illustrated

Cookbook

Mixed media

菜譜

Calendar

Mixed media

掛曆

Menu

Mixed media

菜單

Suggestion Book

Mixed media

意見本

Dropsy 1

Handmade paper

浮腫之一

Dropsy 2

Handmade paper

浮腫之二



14



15



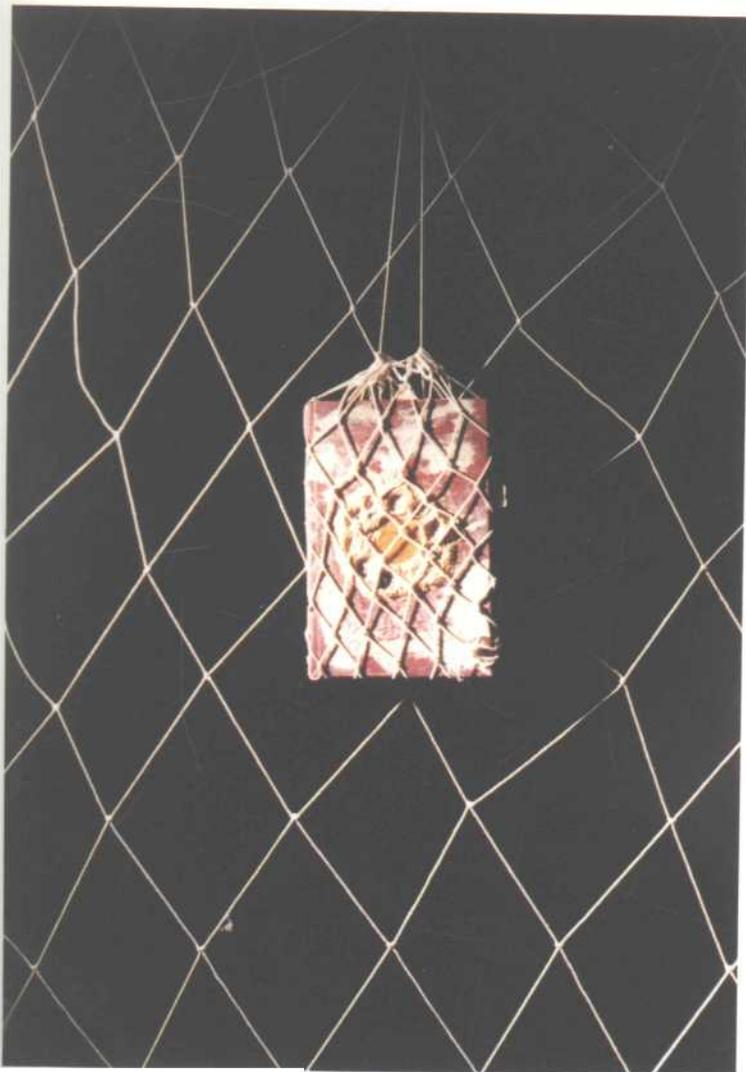
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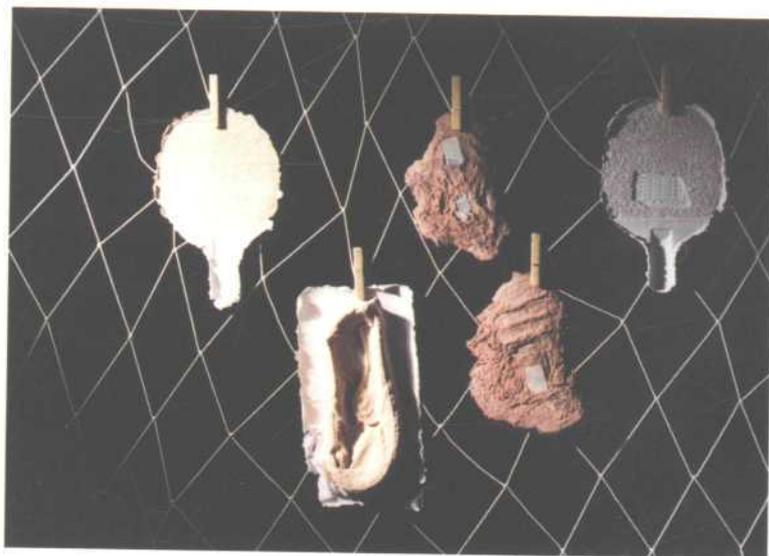
17



18



19



20



21



22



23

HONG HAO

洪浩

*The World Distribution of
Guided Missiles*

Silk screen

1992

46 · 60 cm

藏經一九二一頁：
萬國導彈佈防圖

*Acupuncture. Middle
Volume*

Silk screen

1992

53 · 78 cm

藏經一九六六頁：
藥王神篇中篇

Acupuncture Diagram

Silk screen

1992

53 · 78 cm

藏經一九六六頁：
藥王神篇

Sacred Grottos

Silk screen

1992

53 · 78 cm

藏經：聖窟待訪圖

HONG HAO

(b. 1965, Beijing)

洪浩

Hong Hao graduated from the Printmaking Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1989. He makes his living as a professional artist.

Though in many ways a definitive Political Pop artist, Hong Hao is sensitive to the relationship between traditional and contemporary culture. He is focussed on the contradictions and dissonances caused by this relationship in the realm of the mind.

In his *trompe l'oeil* silkscreen works, Hong has taken the outer “shell” of traditional Chinese thread-bound books, and filled it with the “flesh” of contemporary cultural symbols. He has created visual manifestations of cultural time-lag and space-lag that defy verbal description. At the same time, his works are replete with a lighthearted, resilient Pop humour.

Meticulous in seeking a balanced relationship between the whole and its parts, in his silk screen prints Hong will use anywhere from 10 to 100 separate screens to achieve a desired texture.

“I have lost interest in depicting the visual manifestations of the external world. I prefer to look for some ‘paradoxical’ object that has independent meaning, such as a fantasy that defies the conventional order of things but yet appears to be real; something that exists in the immeasurable space between the two extremes of the universe. Such things continually supply my spirit with pleasant surprises, and give me the confidence to create my own personal and sanctimonious space. The bindings of traditional Chinese books provide me with wonderful creative possibilities. ‘Absurdity’ becomes something glorious.”

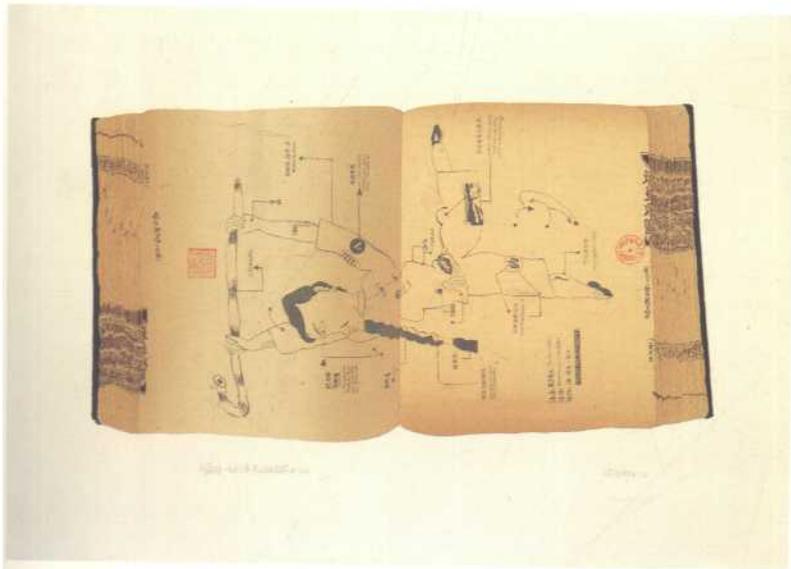
— Hong Hao



1



2



3



4

LIU DAHONG

劉大鴻

1. 5

Four Seasons: Spring

Oil on canvas

1991

70 × 40 cm

四季：春

2

Four Seasons: Summer

Oil on canvas

1991

70 × 40 cm

四季：夏

3

Four Seasons: Autumn

Oil on canvas

1991

70 × 40 cm

四季：秋

4. 6

Four Seasons: Winter

Oil on canvas

1991

70 × 40 cm

四季：冬

LIU DAHONG

(b. 1962, Qingdao, Shandong Province)

劉大鴻

Liu Dahong graduated from the Oil Painting Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1985. He presently teaches in the Art Department of Shanghai Normal College.

Liu Dahong's success lies in his creative discovery of a "historical vaudeville." Drawing upon major historical events (such as the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution) and popular Chinese culture (myths, operas, popular tales, folk customs), Liu's narratives juxtapose images with little regard for temporal and spatial logic. The result are works that offer acute criticism of history and present reality.

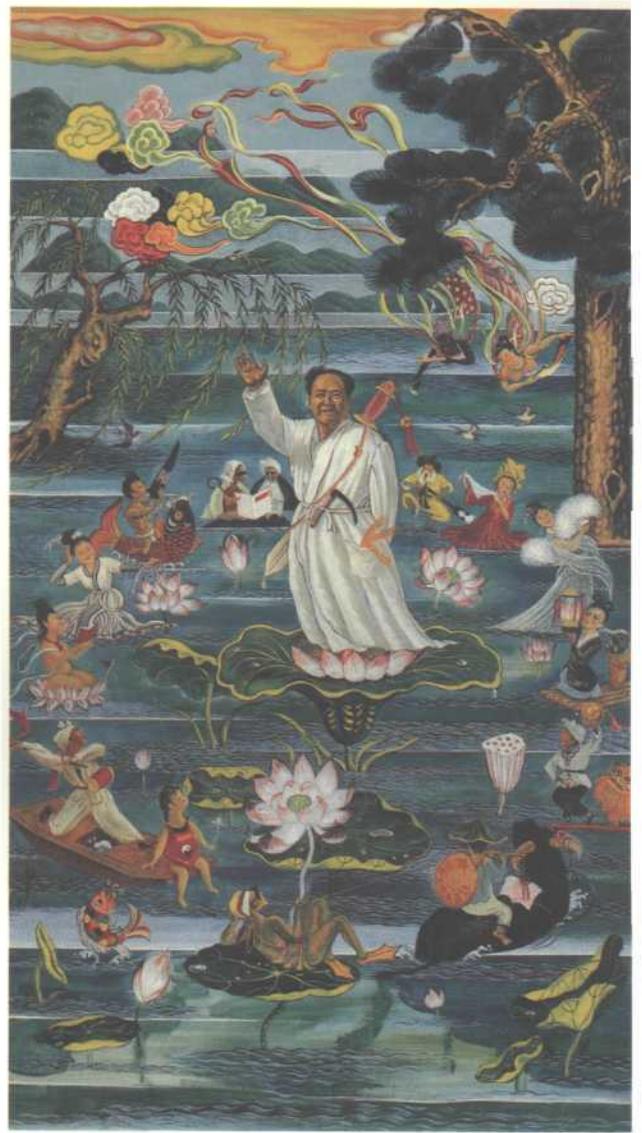
Drawing on the collective consciousness of the Chinese people, Liu's works speak in the primal mother tongue of the Chinese nation. Liu's human figures (and objects) are distorted and clumsy to the point of being comic. They are combined in a technique that can be described as "vaudeville montage," which imbues these objects with their own particular wisdom, satire and sarcasm.

"Art is not an entirely pure or noble pursuit. Art is a complex process that offers the possibility of catharsis. I paint to cleanse myself of the problems, complexities and filth I find inside me and in the world around me. No single painting can help me to achieve this aim. Cleanse the soul once, and it immediately becomes filthy again. But each new bath of filth can be distinguished from the last."

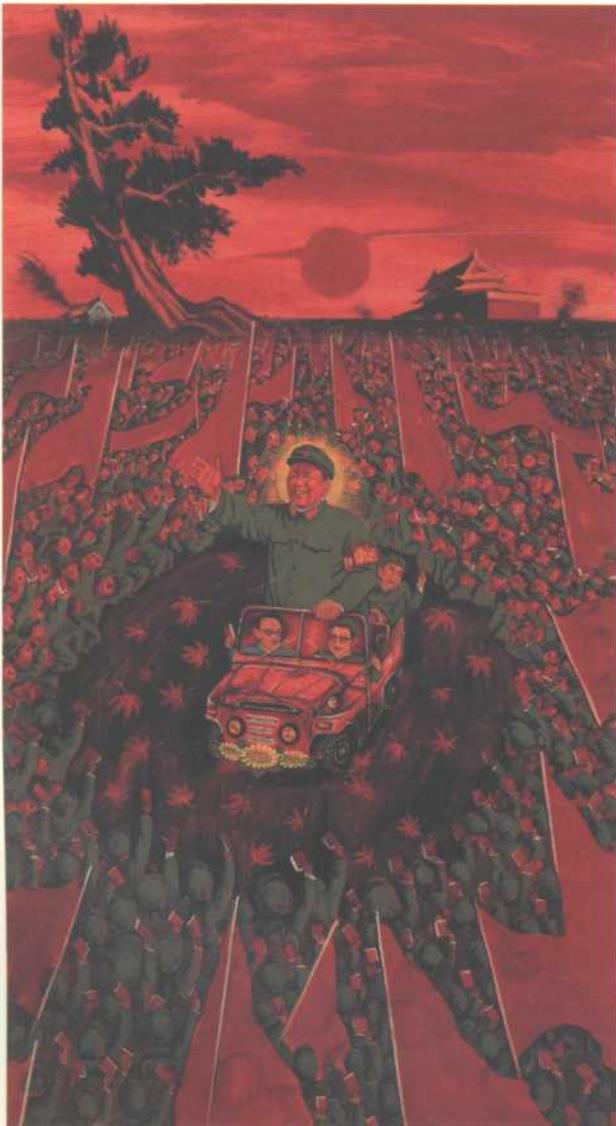
— Liu Dahong



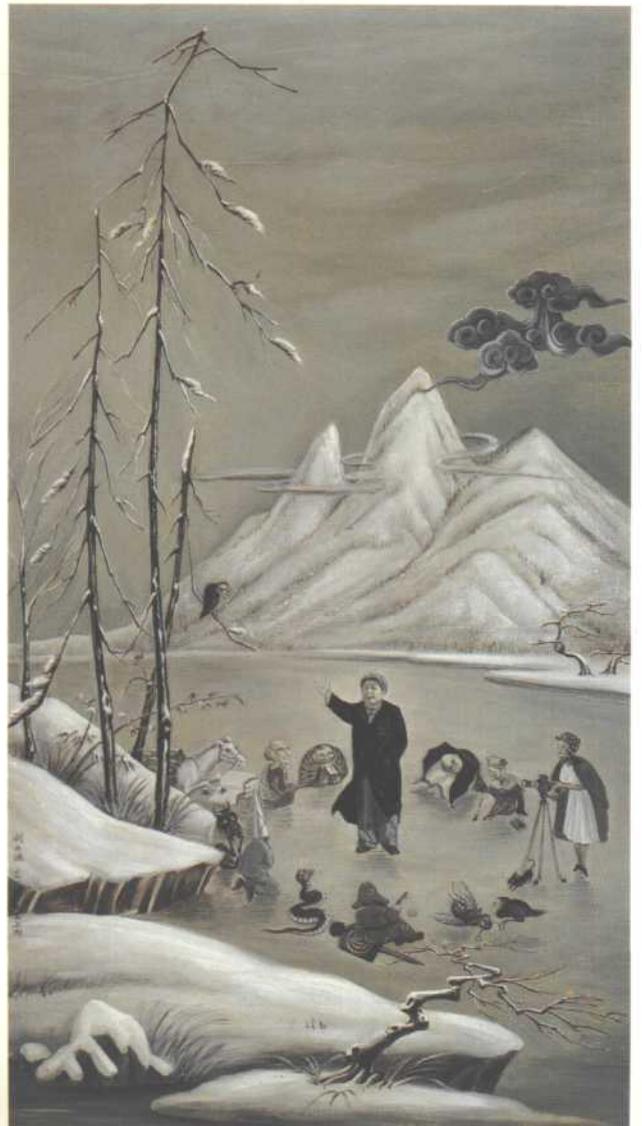
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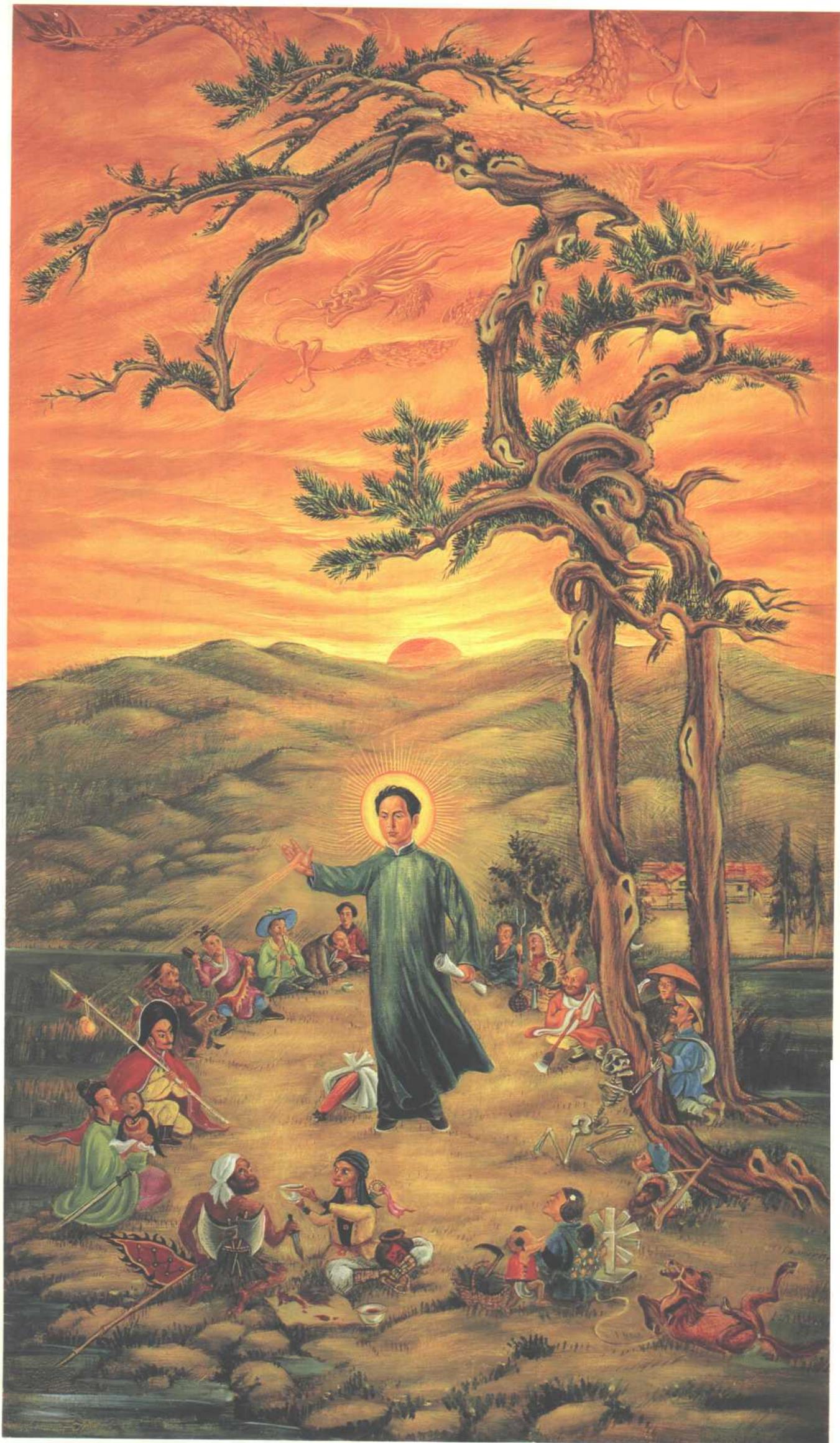
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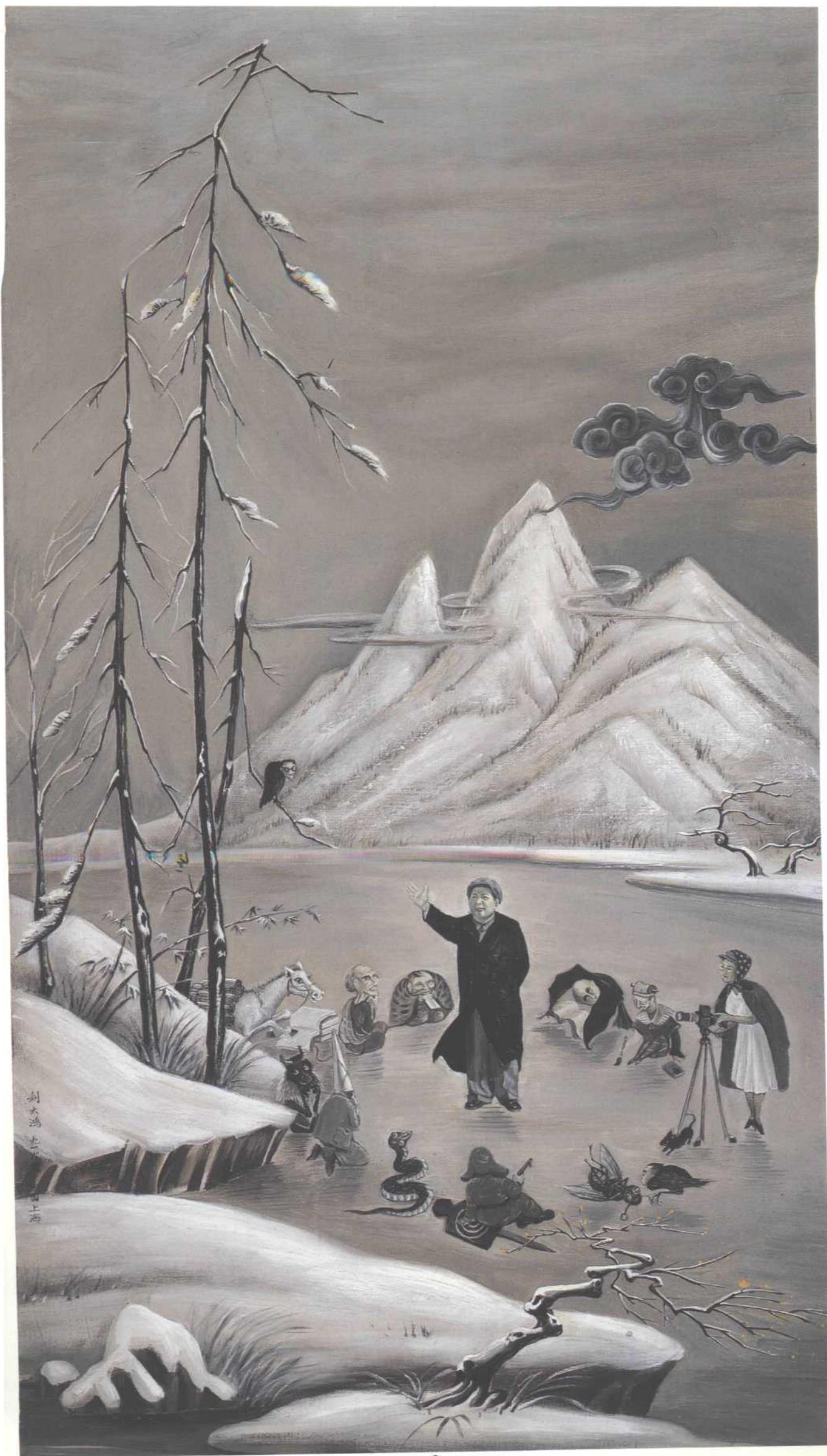


3



4





刘大鸿
画上海

REN JIAN

任戩

Stamp Collection (Set of
multiple pieces)

Oil on canvas

1991-92

50 × 50 cm (4)

集、郵 (組畫)

REN JIAN

(b. 1955, Liaoning Province)

任戩

Ren Jian received his Master's degree in 1987 from the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts. He currently teaches in the Architecture Department of Wuhan University.

Another of the key figures of the Eighties Chinese avant-garde movement, Ren Jian has gone through a number of stylistic and thematic changes in his painting. His early work contained relatively clear themes and a strong literary/descriptive quality, which he used to demonstrate his spiritual exploration of the universe and human existence. In 1987 his work *Primal Unity* pushed this sense of exploration to the limit and represented a conclusion of his search "for a unified universe through art." In recent works, such as *Scanning*, the artist employs an analytical language gleaned from Western structuralism in a calculated treatment of Pop Art's typical "lines and dots" structure to create a new compositional style, which is in effect an eradication and denial of the spirituality of his earlier works.

"I have seen people lose themselves in the present chaos, and only a few people who have managed to retain the spirit of humanism. If this humanism is lacking, all motivation only leads to chaos, to the manufacture of garbage, which will lead the world into a state of gloom. If the world is to make progress or develop, there must be cooperation and coordination between the human spirit and present experience to make art and culture develop in an orderly fashion, both regularly and without diversions or detours."

— Ren Jian

WEI GUANGQING
魏光慶

1
Yellow Covered Book:
Crucifixion
Paper maché & oil on
board
1990–91
38 × 46 cm
黃皮書：耶穌受難

2
Yellow Covered Book:
Adam & Eve
Paper maché & oil on
board
1990–91
38 × 46 cm
黃皮書：亞當與夏娃

3
Yellow Covered Book:
Car-Man
Paper maché, oil, plastic
toy on board
1990–91
38 × 46 cm
黃皮書：汽車人

4
Black Covered Book:
Desert Storm
Paper maché & mixed
media
1991
53 × 75 cm
黑皮書：沙漠風暴

WEI GUANGQING

(b. 1962, Hubei Province)

魏光慶

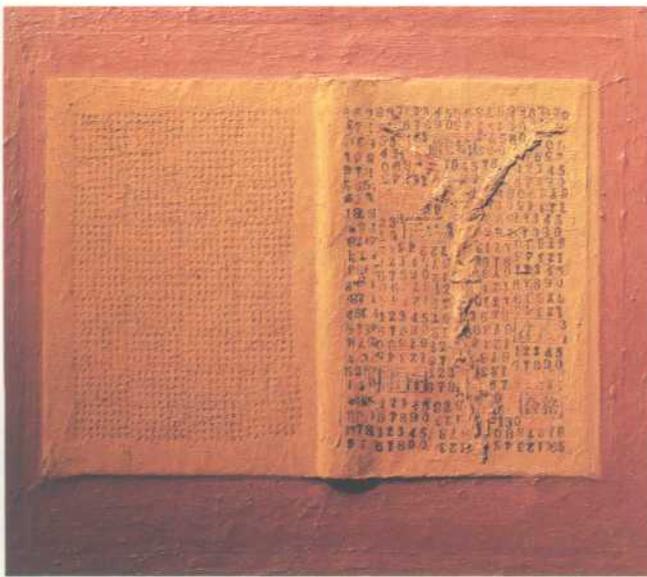
Wei Guangqing graduated from the Oil Painting Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1985. He presently teaches at the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts.

At the core of Wei's paintings lie the artist's understanding and interpretation of contemporary Chinese culture. His works communicate a strongly irreverent and deconstructionist slant, first demonstrated in his 1989 performance piece *Experiment in Simulated Suicide*, which underscored the artist's rejection of aesthetic beauty, and his determination to develop the relevance and critical incisiveness of his work vis à vis social and cultural issues.

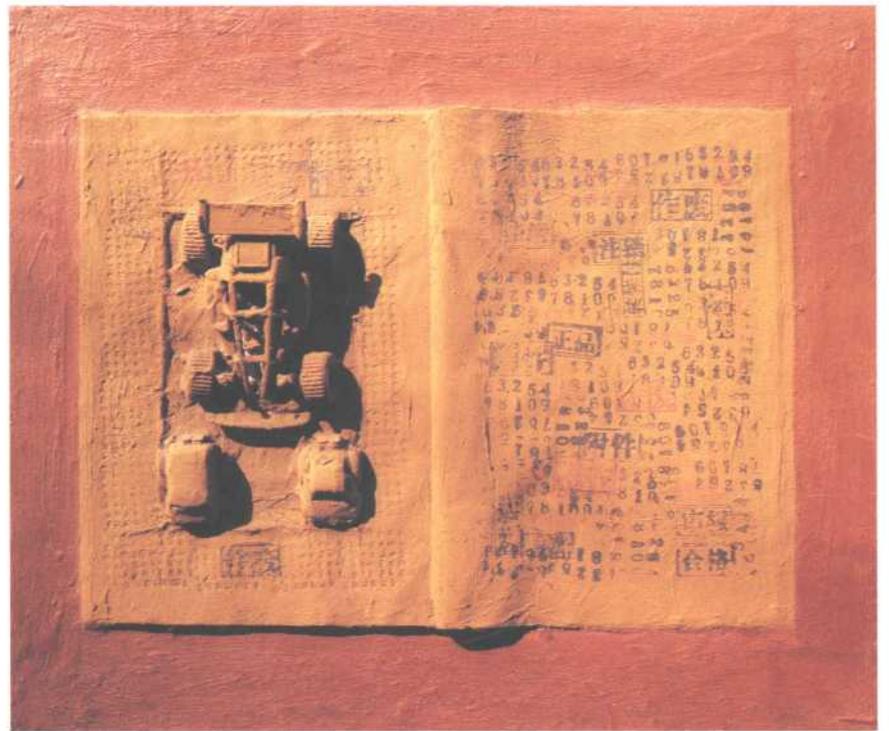
In his recent works, such as the *Red Wall* series, Wei utilises the language of Political Pop to express actions and events, at the same time rendering his vocabulary more complex by adding cultural references to mythologised characters and situations.

"Contemporary painting exceeds the boundaries of traditional art, and is no longer limited to any particular materials. The wide choice of materials enjoyed by the contemporary artist presents him with a wide range of possibilities: in other words, with free choice, which enables him to transcend previously accepted limits and functions, and frees him from the oppression of stereotypes. We are encouraged by our freedom to pursue questions that interest us, problems of cultural relevance, which make our art more vital. It is imperative that art create new forms not only by reexamining its own internal development, but by dealing directly with questions of contemporary culture. Only in this way can it make an impact on history."

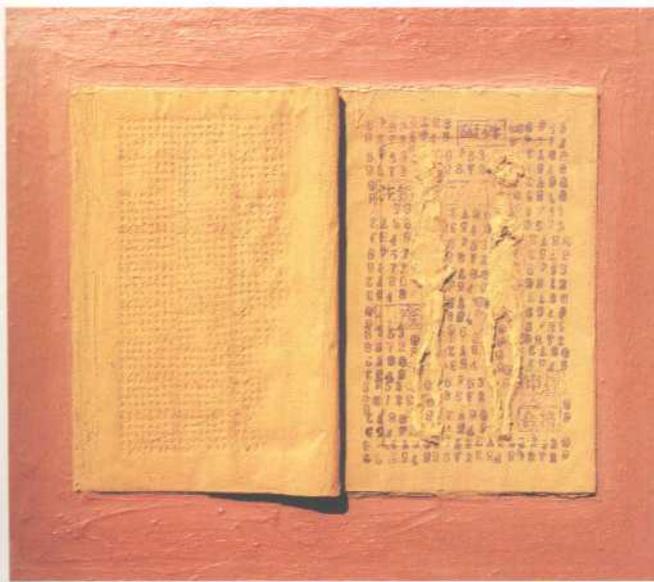
— Wei Guangqing



1



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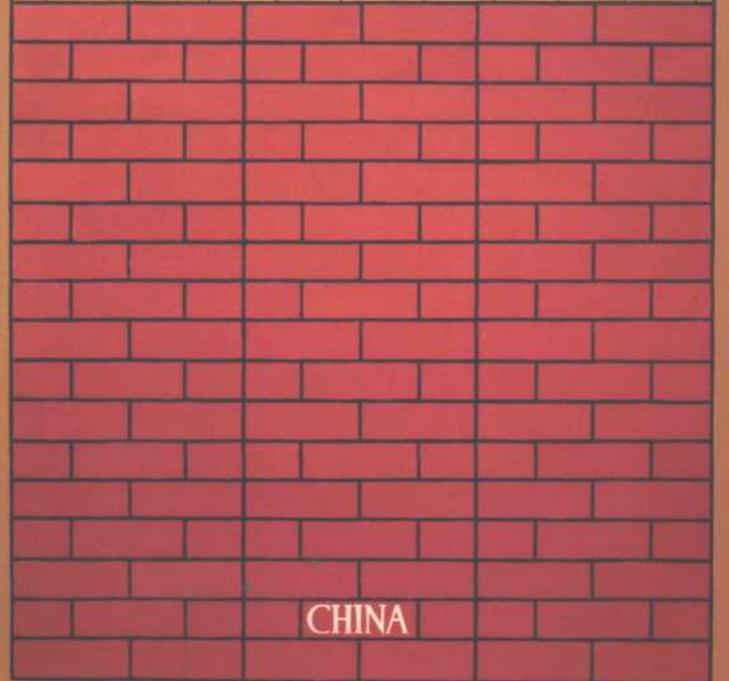
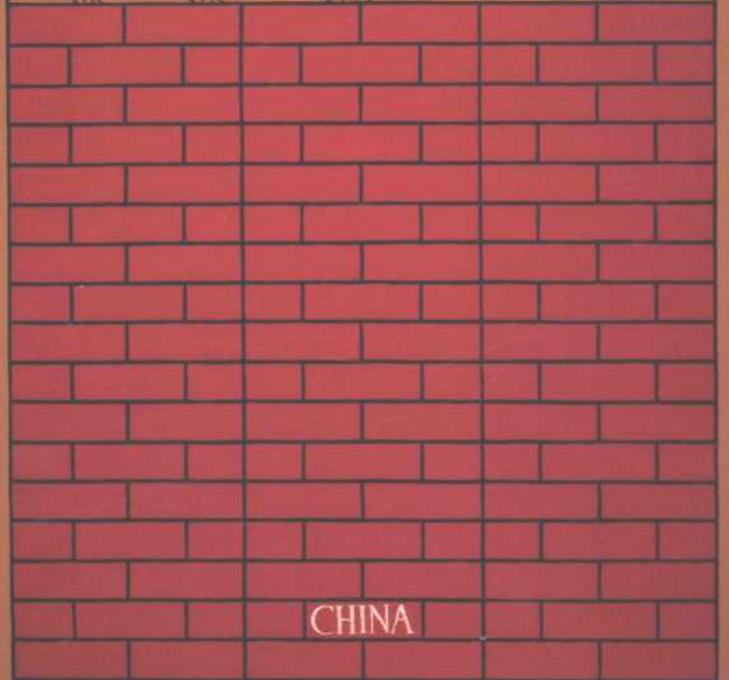
2



4

5
The Red Wall Series (Set
of 6)
Oil on canvas
1992
146 x 114 cm @

紅牆系列：
心存君國
押囉惡少，久必受其累
分多潤寡
家門和順
國課早完
恣殺性禽





CHINA



CHINA



CHINA



CHINA

GUAN WEI

關偉

1

Straw Hat

Acrylic on canvas

1992

127 x 49 cm

草帽

2

Red Nose

Acrylic on canvas

1992

127 x 49 cm

紅鼻子

3

Toad

Acrylic on canvas

1992

127 x 49 cm

蟾蜍

4

Venus Vanishing

Acrylic on canvas

1992

127 x 49 cm

離去的維娜斯

5

Sunflower

Acrylic on canvas

1992

127 x 49 cm

向日葵

GUAN WEI

(b. 1957, Beijing)

關偉

Guan Wei is the son of an opera singer and grandson of a Manchu bannerman. He graduated from the Art Department of Beijing Normal College and is now engaged as artist-in-residence at the Tasmania School of Art in Australia.

At an early stage of his artistic life, Guan Wei discovered as his subject the tragicomedy of the strange human creature which laughs and cries, loves and despairs, within its own peculiar space, in a state of confusion about the larger constructs of history, culture and social order. His art turns on its head the injunction that art should serve society; it doesn't know what society is. His work is cartoon-like; the elements are simplified and stylised, playfully placed together. The characters and the props invite being read as signs. His palette is restricted, based on the colours of traditional Chinese ink and wash painting, translated to oils or acrylics.

The Living Specimens series represents the gradual integration of images he came to absorb during his recent encounters with Western culture, which he sees to be laced with icons of hero-worship. The series is intended as gently poking fun at this "new authoritarianism." At the centre of this art is the element of humour, which is the artist's way of elbowing room for the self within the tightly structured cultural world in which we live.

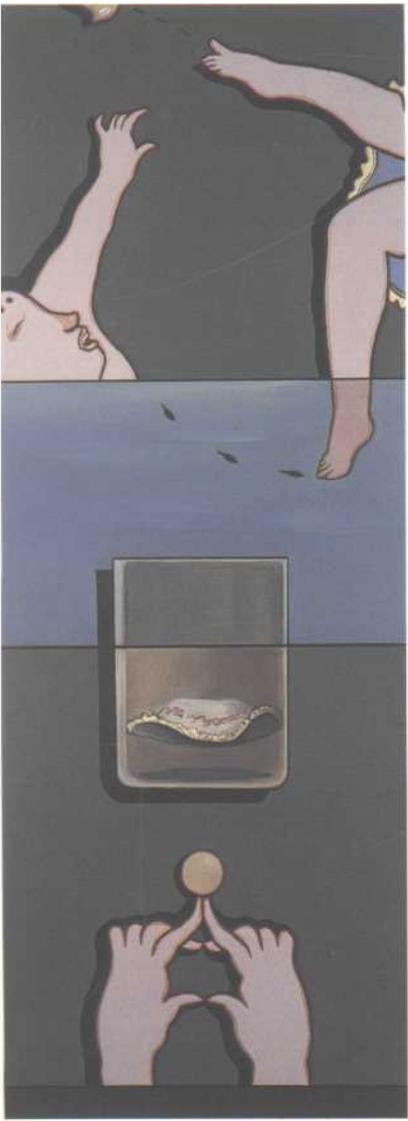
"... while Chinese art encompasses many things, through all of it runs the notion of 'nesting.' How precise are the parameters of the nest? How deep is this nest? Can you find the Tao in your own little nest?"

In classical times, people used to nest in the mountains, forests and lakes, and from their 'nests' hatched poems about the fields and painted landscape paintings. Those with the most ascetic tastes became monks and nested in temples, where they sat in meditation and hatched feelings of total purity and emptiness.

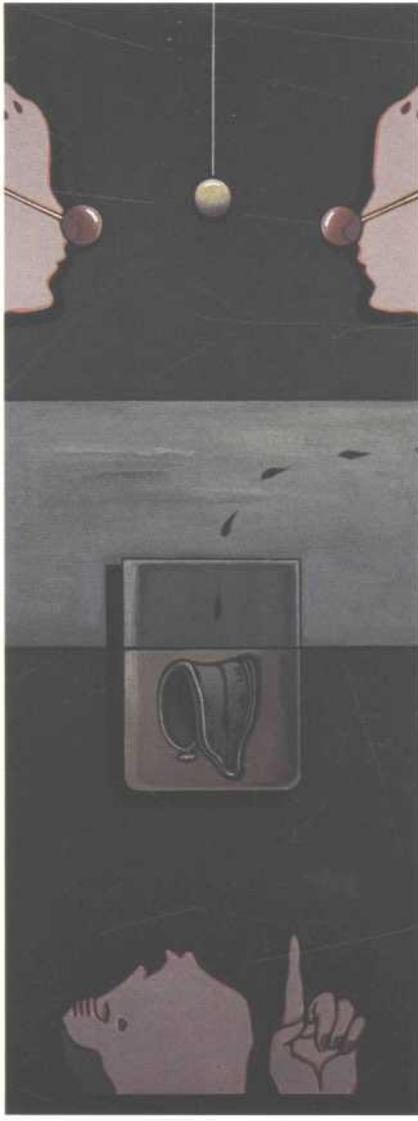
Today it is so hard to find a place to nest. There are no mountains in which to lose yourself, no ancient forests in which to hide. . . . Even the temples have become tourist spots. There's nowhere to hide in China. . . .

The most brilliant nest and hardest to cleave to is the one found in the jungles of steel and concrete. For here what you eat and what you shit are the same rarefied manna: 'concepts.' All the live-long day you screw around with 'concepts.' All is suffering; all is empty. In a way this is not that different from the monks of yore, though you don't see anyone today coming up with pastoral poems or landscape paintings like in the past."

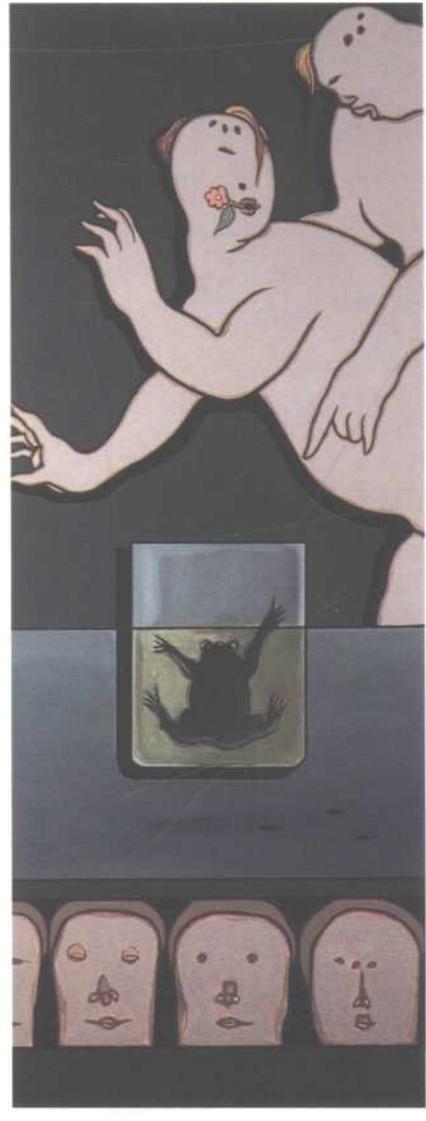
— Guan Wei



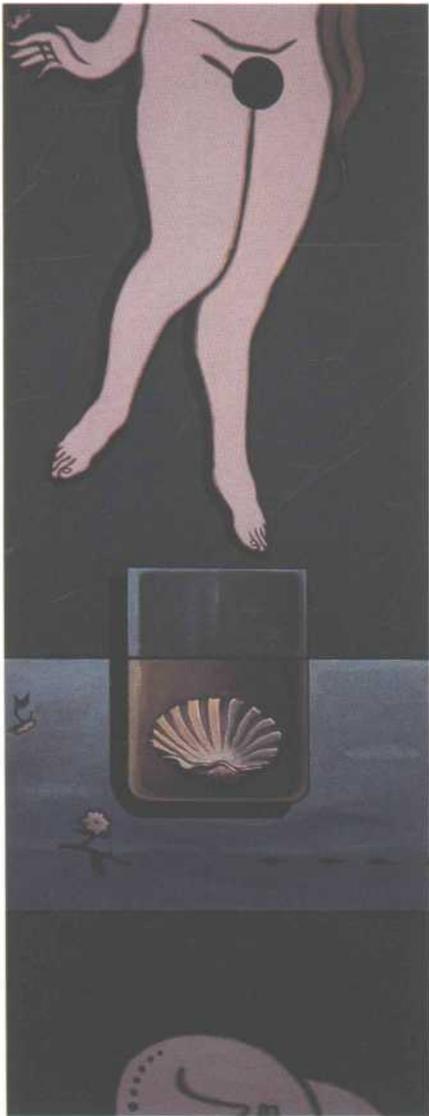
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2



3



4



5

WANG YOUSHEN

王友身

Newspaper, Vision Test:

Lightbox

Newspaper film, glass,

lightbox

1992

80 × 56 × 14 cm

Lightbox

報紙、測視（燈箱）

2-4

Newspaper, Vision Test

(Detail)

Newspaper film, glass

1992

55 × 70 cm

報紙、測視（局部）

WANG YOUSHEN

(b. 1964, Beijing)

王友身

Wang Youshen graduated from Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1988 and is now the Art Editor of *Beijing Youth Daily*. In 1992, Wang's works were exhibited in Germany and Australia.

Wang Youshen's art focusses on the dilemmas of culture and the limitations it imposes on the human mind. He sees the internal dilemmas posed by culture as displacement of the self by cultural artifacts such as historical writing and news entries, whose original intention was to inform and to enrich. He avoids emotional expression in his work, as he considers it to be self-indulgent. Wang's strategy for exposing the limiting aspects of culture is to superimpose disjointed pieces of information so that the viewer escapes the seduction of beauty and information to see the essentially incoherent nature of cultural information. An accomplished painter, in recent years Wang has switched to conceptual art to articulate his cultural concerns. In works such as *Cultural Refrigerator* and the *Newspaper* series, Wang creates a juxtaposition of media information through which he intends to expose the rules of the game of cultural enterprise.

"One characteristic of contemporary life is the great variety of restraints imposed upon the individual. For example, television shows are all planned in advance. Only after acknowledging this form of restraint can you make your choice of what programme to watch. I express this restraint in my art, most importantly in terms of the limitations imposed upon the individual by paper and printing. It can be said that the limitations of paper and printing are essentially the constraints imposed on the individual by culture.

Editing is my job, and it is my art. In other words, my daily work is my art. As an editor involved in the mass media, my work consists of arranging a wide variety of social phenomena in a logical fashion, and then transmitting this information back to society via the media. I like to apply my creativity to this work and observe the physical and psychological variations and deviations in the audience response."

— Wang Youshen



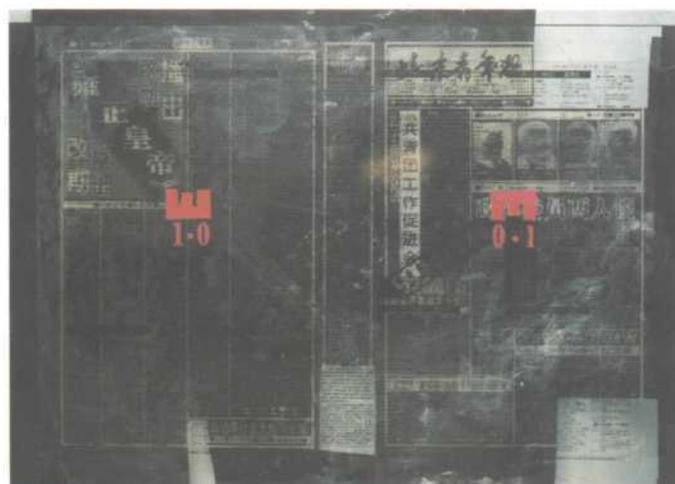
1



2



3



4

QIU ZHIJIE

邱志傑

Homage to Vita Nuova

Installation of Painted &

Silk-screened plexiglass

1992

獻給新生活

QIU ZHIJIE

(b. 1969, Fujian Province)

邱志傑

Qiu Zhijie graduated from the Printmaking Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1992. He makes his living as a professional artist.

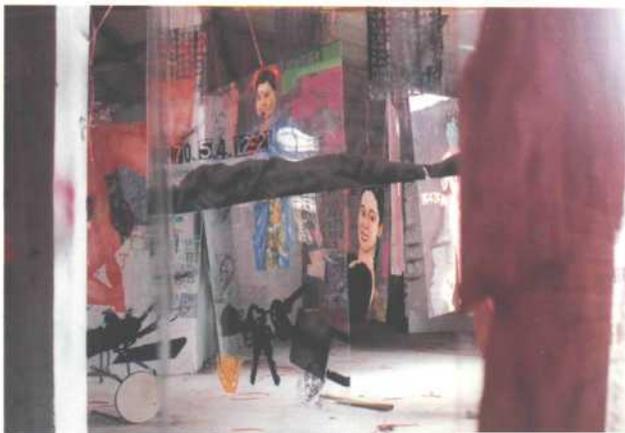
Qiu Zhijie's graduation work, *Homage to Vita Nuova*, captured the attention of the art world. The work consists of 26 glass panels of 2m by 1.5m, on which are silk-screened and hand-painted a kaleidoscope of human figures, images and words which are the configurations of the artist's life experience. Rendered in a cartoonish, quasi-realist style, the installation creates a feeling of disunity and discord. Depending on the exhibition space, the flexible assemblage consists of three to four glass panels. The transparency of the glass panels and their shifting perspectives as the viewer moves between them result in the images "accidentally" overlapping, acting as backgrounds but at the same time dispelling each other, hinting at the social confusion caused by an excess of information.

The work uses what might be termed a "supermarket" format, laying out the experiential "goods" of the artist's life and education in a linear fashion. Though Qiu's work is strongly Pop in flavour, it nonetheless differs from the work of other Political Pop artists in that its object of critique is less political than cultural. *Homage to Vita Nuova* symbolises the vision of a new generation of young artists that reflects the jumble of agricultural, industrial and information-age elements that characterises the social structure of China in the Nineties.

"My overall inspiration stems from my interest in the factors of chance, time, and dissonance. Glass offers me the possibility of creating mobile and accidental compositions. Moreover, it allows me to combine varying elements and styles, for example representative images, calligraphy, and cartoons, and to merge them into narrative accounts that act as backgrounds for one another. Naturally, I have a model for my work, which derives from my excitement over the structure of the supermarket, and the television screen.

I try to transform my own world of images into a tumultuous, post-modern fair, where everything is in a state of flux. As for painting, we must change the traditional notion of how to appreciate this art. Art cannot be appreciated passively: it is the record of an accidental happening, a chance event."

— Qiu Zhijie



NI HAIFENG

(b. 1964, Zhejiang Province)

倪海峯

1
The Shifting Earth
Installation: paper and
mixed media
1992
移動的土地

2
Slaughtering Chicken
Installation: mixed media
1989
殺雞

3
Broadcasting to Peasants
Installation: mixed media
1990
對農民廣播

4
*Encyclopedia: Dangerous
Goods*
Installation: mixed media
1990
百科全書：危險品

5
Encyclopedia: Apertures
Installation: mixed media
1989
百科全書：小洞

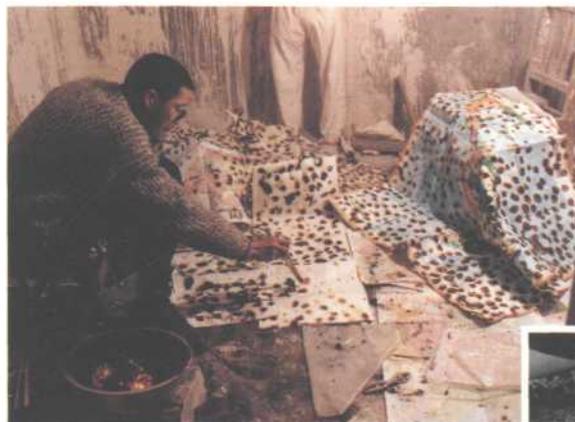
Ni Haifeng graduated from the Oil Painting Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1986. He teaches at Zhoushan Normal School in Zhejiang.

Ni started out painting abstract works in 1984. In 1985 he joined seven other artists and produced the series of works entitled *70% Red, 25% Black, 5% White*, which were informed by a rational critique of the Chinese national consciousness. In 1986 and 1987, he began painting graffiti on houses, alleyways and streets with oils, chalk and dyes. This writing bore no relationship to aesthetics or rational meaning, for Ni's intention was to reduce writing to the "zero level" as a way of intensifying "the delimitation of experience and cultural criticism" in the act of creation.

From his early works, *Pure Mathematics*, a series of large numbers of equal size drawn in poster style, and *Impure Mathematics*, in which paper covered with numbers is torn up and pasted on a wall, to his more mature work *Warehouse*, Ni Haifeng has attempted to fill public spaces with his own ultra-individualistic myth as a way of fostering an active intervention into human inertia.

"The individual is a vacuous concept put forward by culture. When culture invades private life on a large scale, the individual cannot escape being raped. From this viewpoint, my zero-level writing can be taken as a protest against the act of rape. I also want to warn people of the dangers inherent in cultural rape. I want to challenge contemporary human experience, in small ways or big ways. In my mind, the highest goal of art is to make more flexible the rational structure on which human inertia is based."

— Ni Haifeng





2



4



3



5

CYNICAL REALISM:

IRREVERENCE

AND MALAISE

無聊感

與潑皮風

FANG LIJUN 方力鈞

LIU WEI 劉煒

WANG JINGSONG 王勁松

LIU XIAODONG 劉曉東

XIN HAIZHOU 忻海洲

HE SEN 何森

FANG LIJUN

(b. 1963, Hebei Province)

方力鈞

Fang Lijun graduated in 1989 from the Printmaking Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. He makes his living as a professional artist.

Fang Lijun is a major exponent of the Cynical Realist style. His works employ a subtle humour, depicting the ridiculous and lamentable reality beyond trivial feelings. In 1990, Fang began a series of black and white oil paintings, whose images and situational contexts, such as the yawning self, the man with his hands in his pockets or the inexplicable laughing crowd, reflect the artist's main thematic concern with "the absurd, the mundane and the meaningless events of everyday life." Regardless of the characters' age or gender, they are all idle. The fact that Fang chooses to depict most of his characters with shaved heads creates a symbolic language whose visual syntax eliminates differences of age, status or gender. This is compatible with Fang's own philosophy of life that everyone is equal, thus dismissing the cultural differences created by human society.

Fang's absurd characters seem to mock irreverently at the viewer, as though announcing that everything is meaningless. The categorisation and repetition of certain character types increases the sense of dispersion and mundanity. The characters are always posed in a preconceived environment, such as the sky, the sea or historical sites, ironically evoking a sense of romance and timelessness. This poetic treatment of the absurd renders the paintings even more preposterous and humorous. Fang's most recent series of paintings makes use of vibrant, pastel colours tightly confined within smoothly sketched human figures, underscoring the sense of loss and confusion beyond the ostentatious presentation.

"It is ridiculous to seek eternity. Eternity transcends the universe, therefore it exists at all times without anybody paying any special attention to it. It is only when [in your art] you capture the individual essence in the most fleeting moment that you have captured eternity. This is because the viewer can appreciate that fleeting moment through your creation, regardless of time or place. If we try to communicate in an alien language, nobody will understand it even if we are saying the simplest things. However, people will understand if a common language is used, even if we are speaking about the universe or abstract philosophical issues. This should certainly be a good inspiration to the Academy if they ever want to gain the acceptance of me and my artist friends."

— Fang Lijun

FANG LIJUN
方力鈞

1

Series II, No. 6

Oil on canvas

1991-92

200 x 200 cm

第二組·第六幅

2

Series II, No. 1

Oil on canvas

1991-92

200 x 200 cm

第二組·第一幅

3

Series II, No. 7

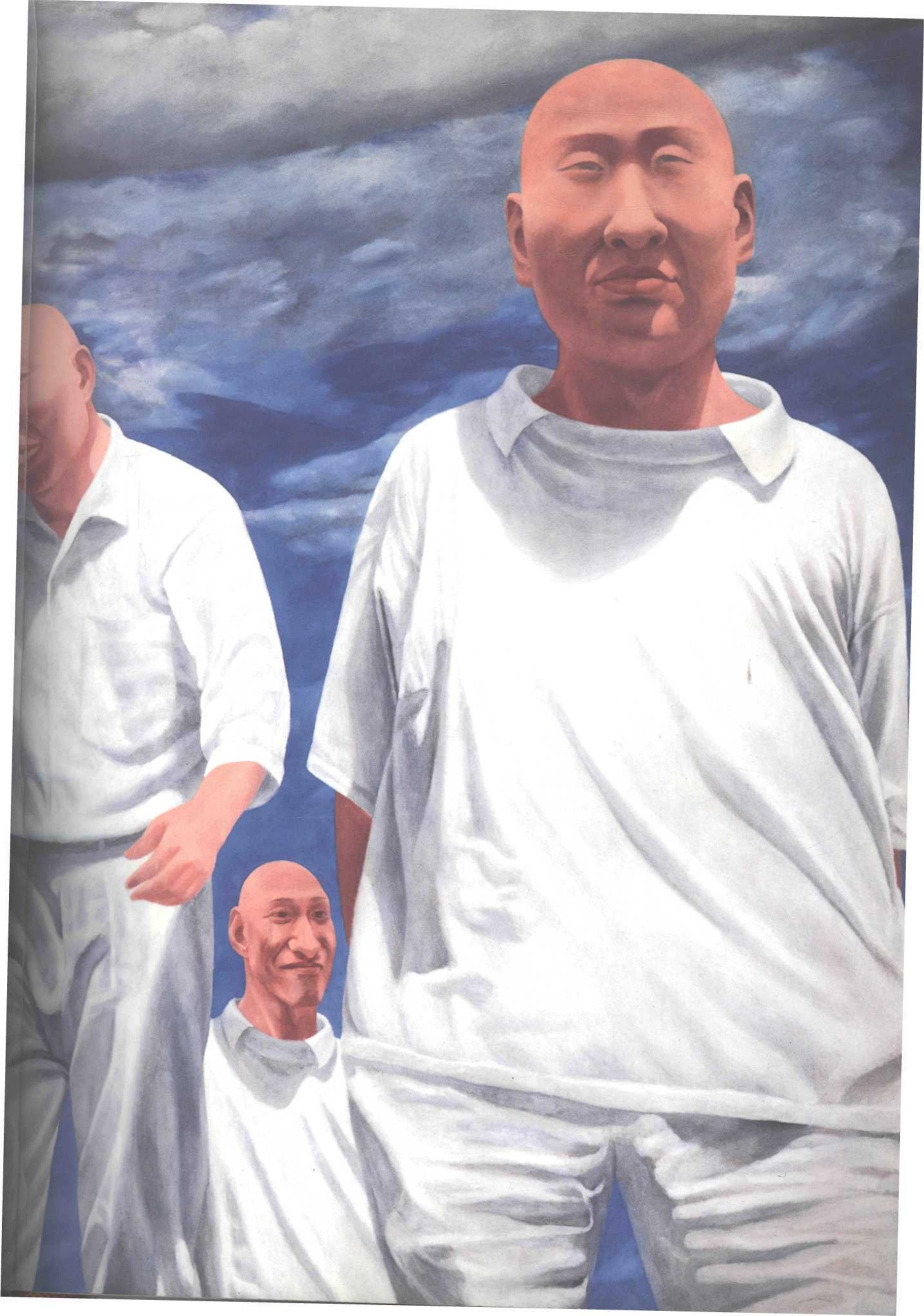
Oil on canvas

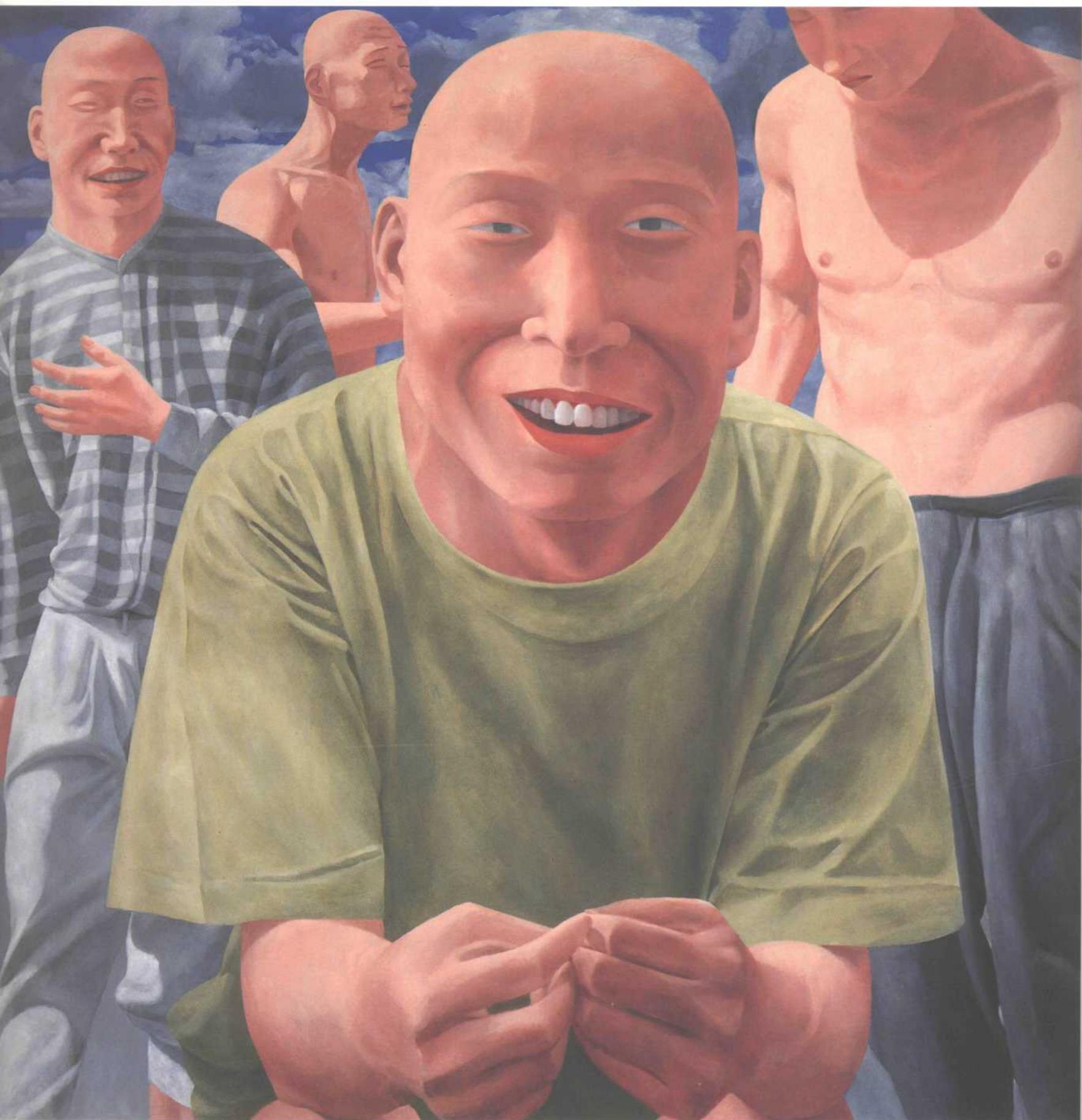
1991-92

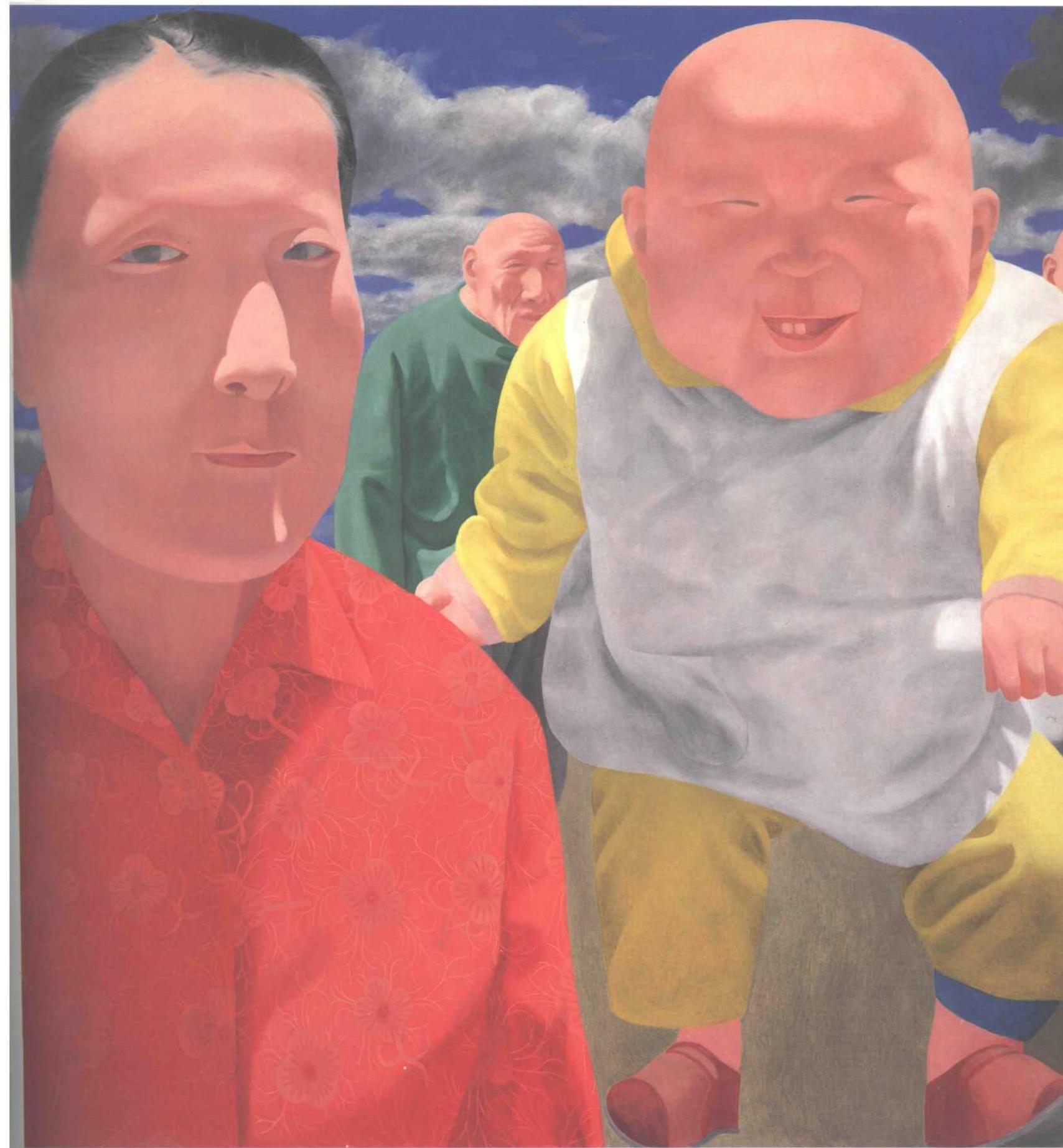
200 x 200 cm

第二組·第七幅

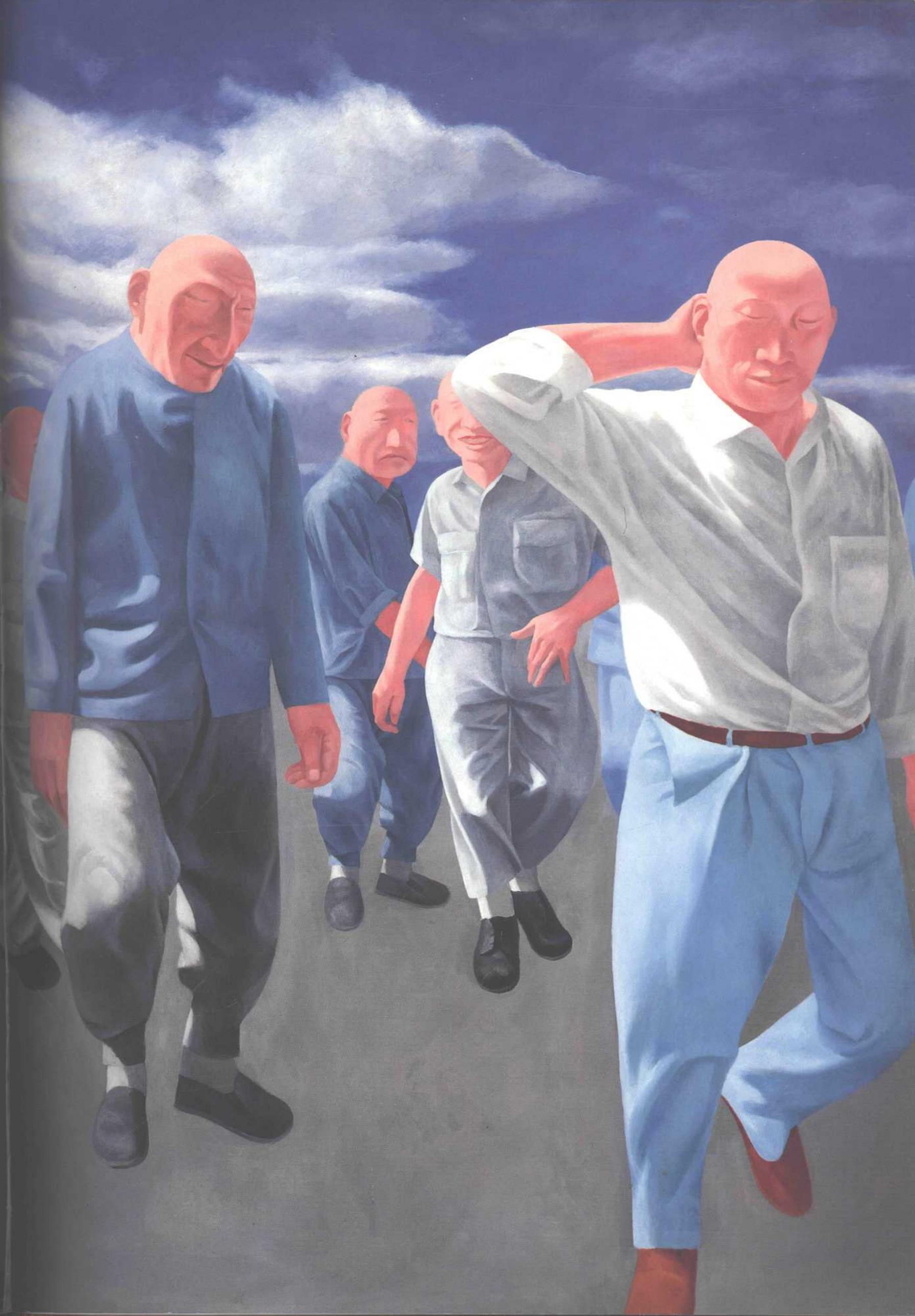












LIU WEI
劉煒

1
The New Generation
Oil on canvas
1992
150 × 100 cm
新生代

LIU WEI

(b. 1965, Beijing)

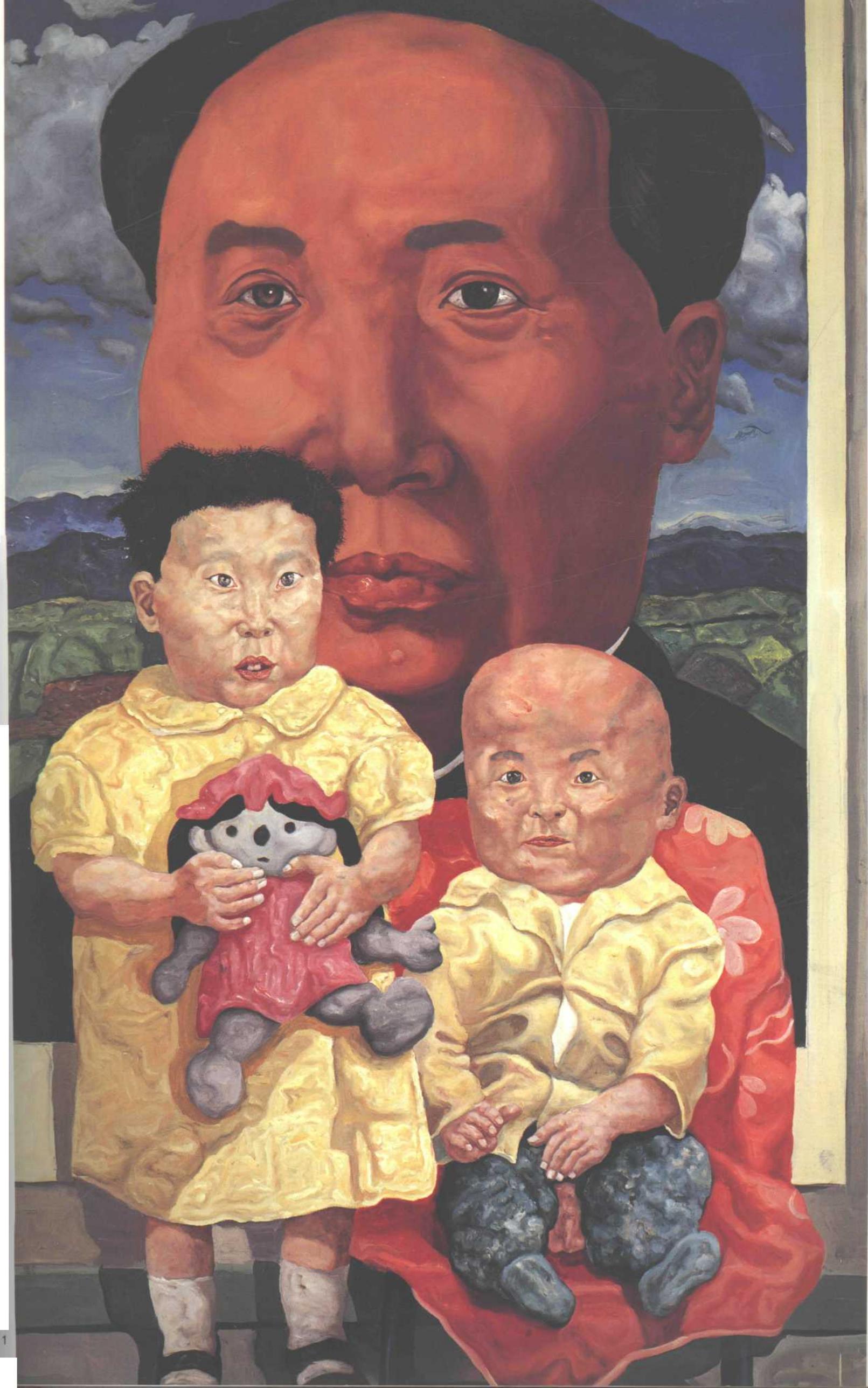
劉煒

Liu Wei graduated from the Mural Painting Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing in 1989. He makes his living as a professional artist.

One of the major exponents of the Cynical Realist style, Liu Wei paints from a perspective of what he calls “new blasphemy” to expose and “dispose” of what has been traditionally considered as sacred subject matter. The artist is very sensitive toward appearances, and likes to portray the self-important postures of political leaders, military cadres, and bureaucrats using casual, loose strokes and a distorted *trompe l'oeil* effect that convey an ironical and mocking message that “things are not what they seem.” In his recent *Revolutionary Family* series even the “average Chinese household” is subject to capture in his mercilessly satirical frames.

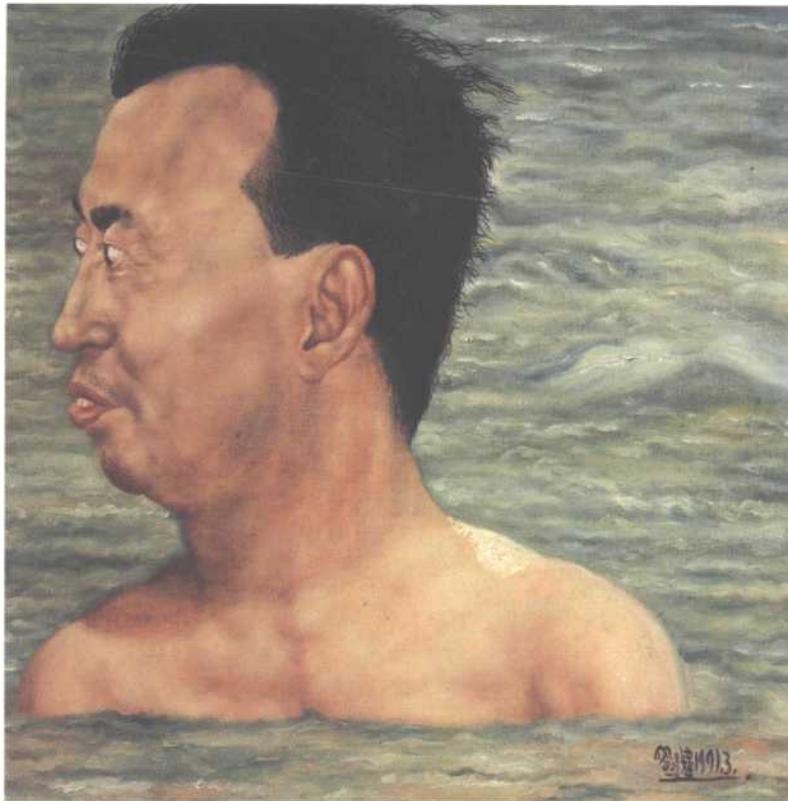
“Art is suffering, it is impossible to speak about it. After thinking about it, it seems better to come up with some ideas and draw a few pictures. In this way, the self is never deceived.”

— Liu Wei



2

Good Old Dad
Oil on canvas
1991
50 x 50 cm
老爹



2

3

**The Revolutionary Family:
Dad & Mum**
Oil on canvas
1990
80 x 80 cm
革命家庭：爹媽

4

**Spring Dream in A
Garden: Dad in Front of
The TV**
Oil on canvas
1992
80 x 100 cm
遊園驚夢：電視前
的老爹





5

*The Revolutionary Family:
Dad In Front Of A Poster
Of Zhu De*

Oil on canvas

1990

100 × 100 cm

革命軍人：爹爹在
朱德像前

6

Dad with Mum

Oil on canvas

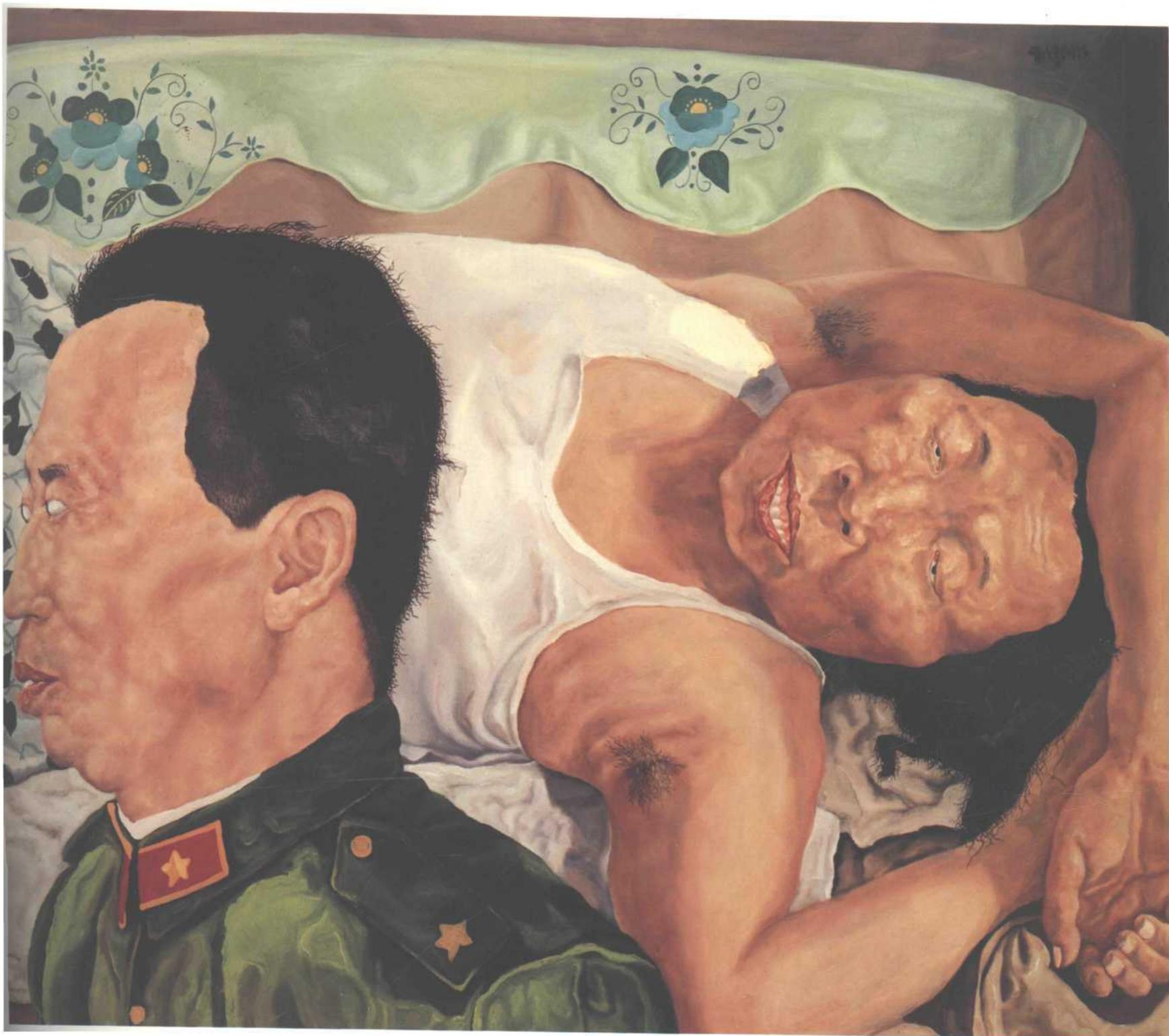
1992

80 × 99.6 cm

爹媽



5



7

Two Drunk Painters

Oil on canvas

1990

150 × 100 cm

酒鬼：兩個畫家

8

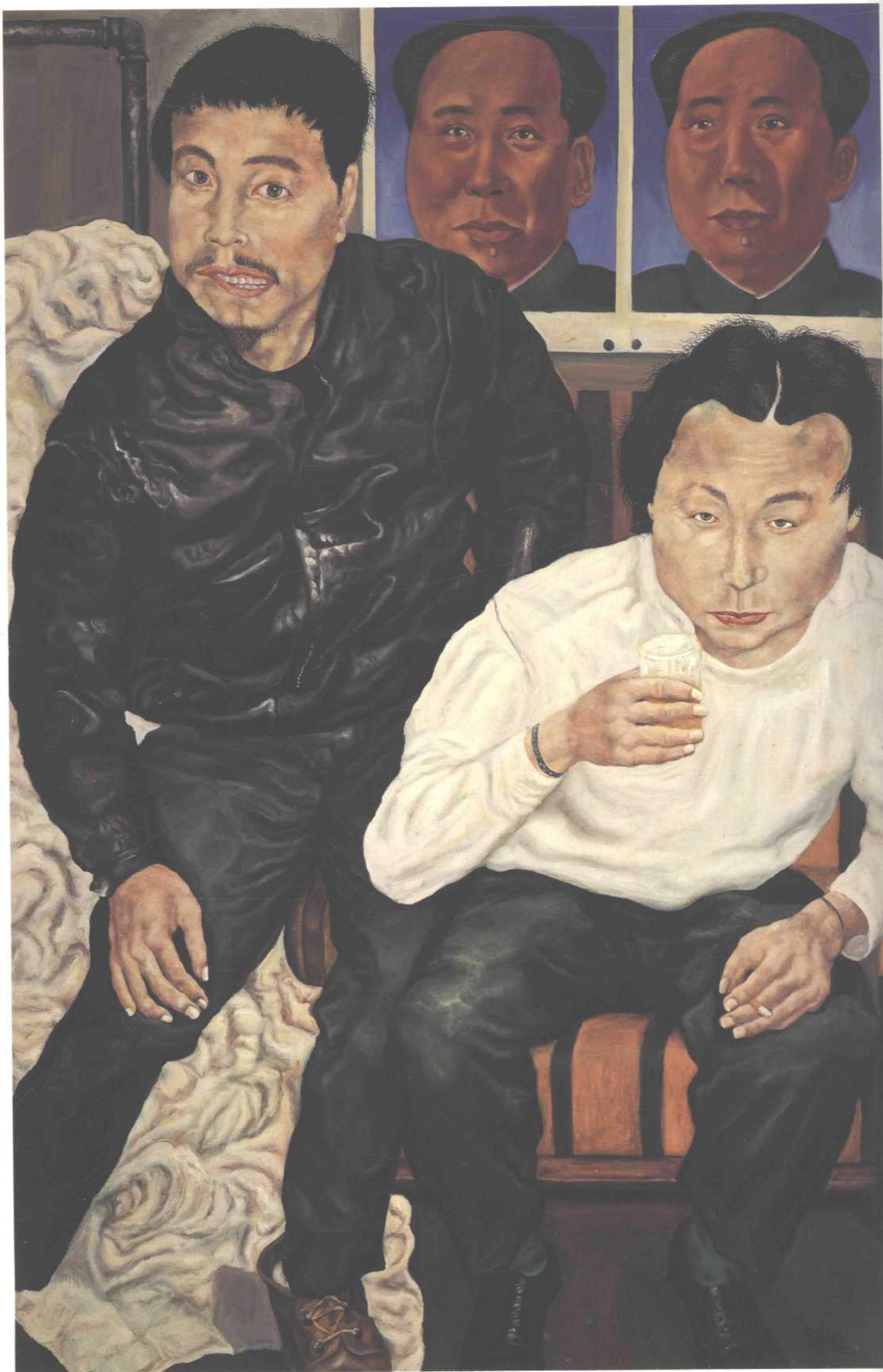
My Girl and I

Oil on canvas

1991

100 × 100 cm

情人



7



WANG JINGSONG

王勁松

1

*Taking A Picture in Front
of Tiananmen Square*

Oil on canvas

1992

125 x 185 cm

天安門前留個影

2

Chorus Line

Oil on canvas

1990

149.5 x 149.5 cm

大合唱

3

Stage Show

Oil on canvas

1990

100 x 100 cm

表演唱

4

Group Picture

Oil on canvas

1990

81 x 100 cm

拍照片

WANG JINGSONG

(b. 1963, Heilongjiang Province)

王勁松

Wang Jingsong graduated from the Ink Painting Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1987. He presently teaches in the Fine Arts Department of Beijing Normal University.

Wang Jingsong's brand of Cynical Realism involves the satirisation of both political events and everyday phenomena, especially those phenomena considered by most people to be "normal" but which on further inspection contain some element of perversity.

Wang's painting is replete with the exaggerated humour of an existentialist theatre of the absurd. His unexpected introduction of elements of traditional literati inkplay into his oil paintings intensifies the effect of lightness as well as the comic deftness of his work.

"I have always advocated a free and cheerful creative spirit. This does not come as a product of the elation of intuitive drawing; nor from lonely and unrestrained attempts at individualisation. Rather, it derives from being an observer of life's events and from an ability to get excited. That's why I always use a kind of unique, relaxed humour to portray inner emotions."

— Wang Jingsong







3



4

5

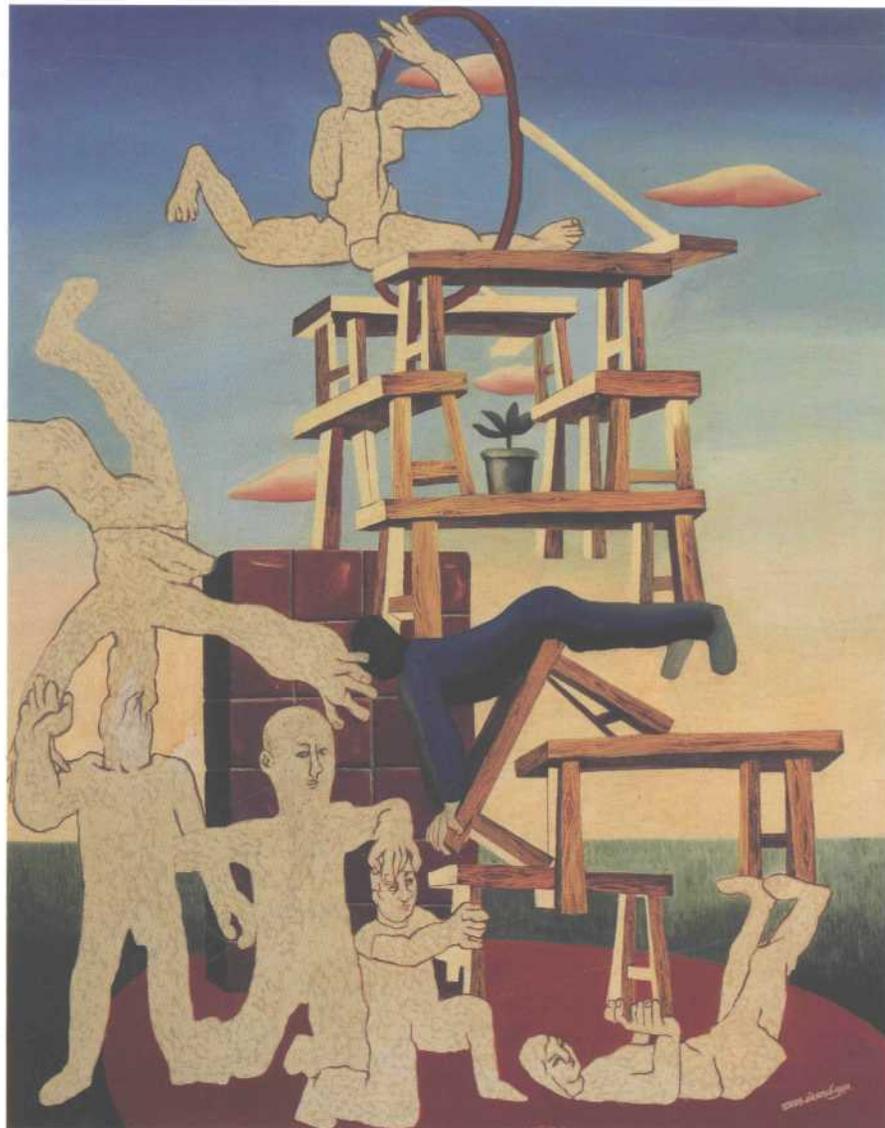
Acrobatics

Oil on canvas

1990

100 × 80.5 cm

雜耍



5

6

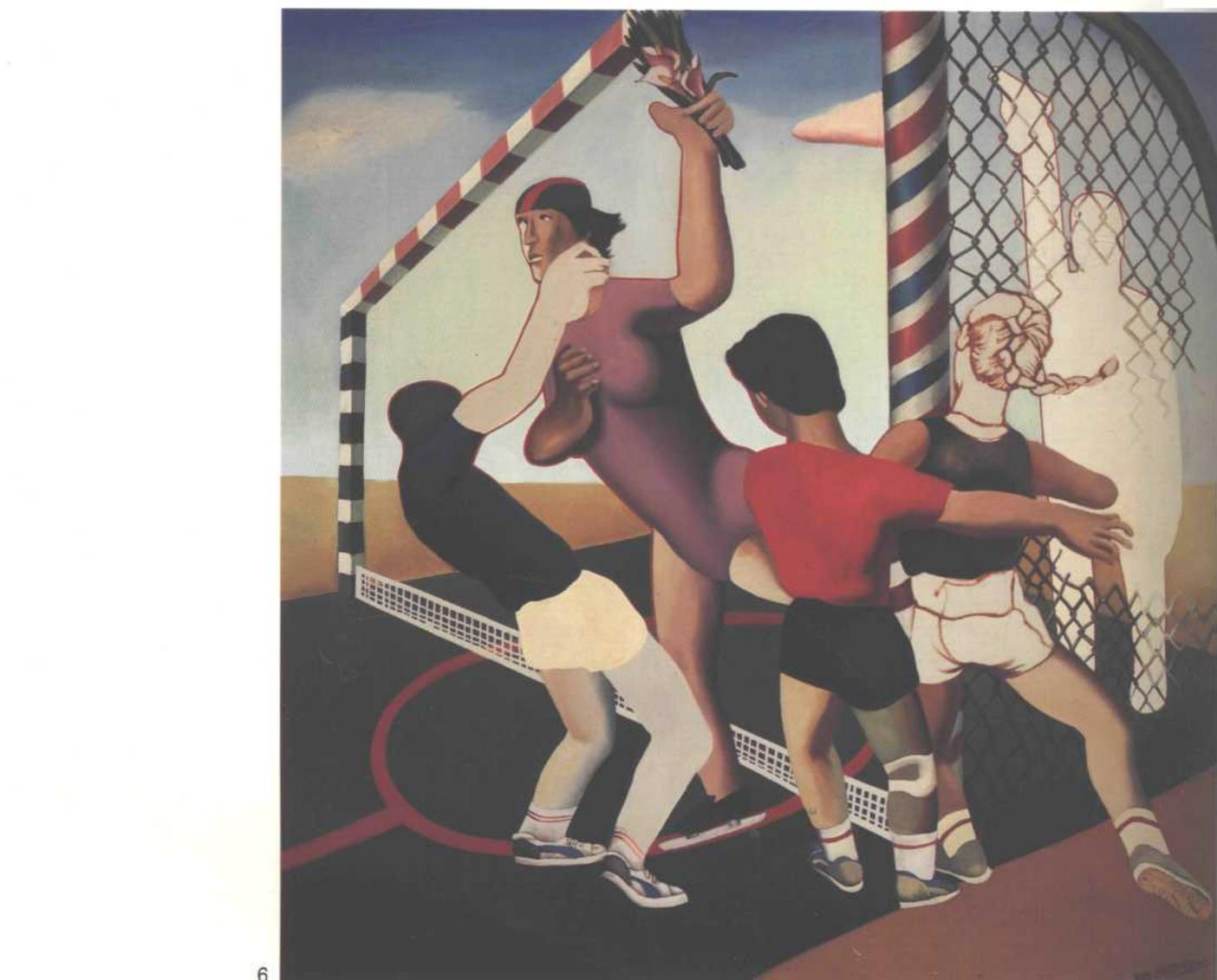
Sports

Oil on canvas

1990

100 × 100 cm

運動



6



8

'Qi Gong' Cure
Oil on canvas
1990
80 x 100 cm
氣功療法



9

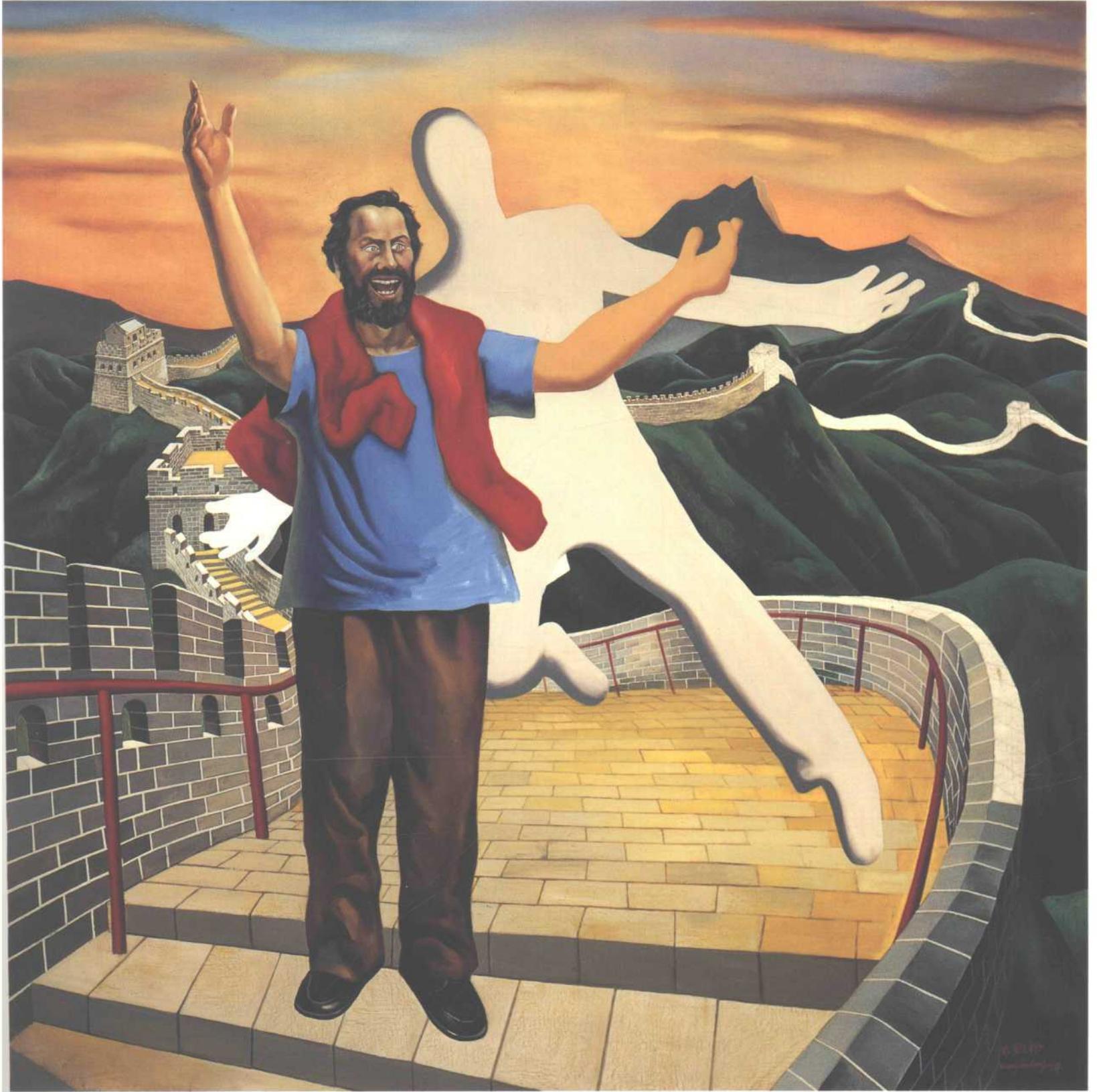
Vaccination Station
Oil on canvas
1990
80 x 100 cm
預防感冒

10

Climbing the Great Wall
Oil on canvas
1992
150 x 150 cm
上長城



8



LIU XIAODONG

(b. 1963, Liaoning Province)

劉曉東

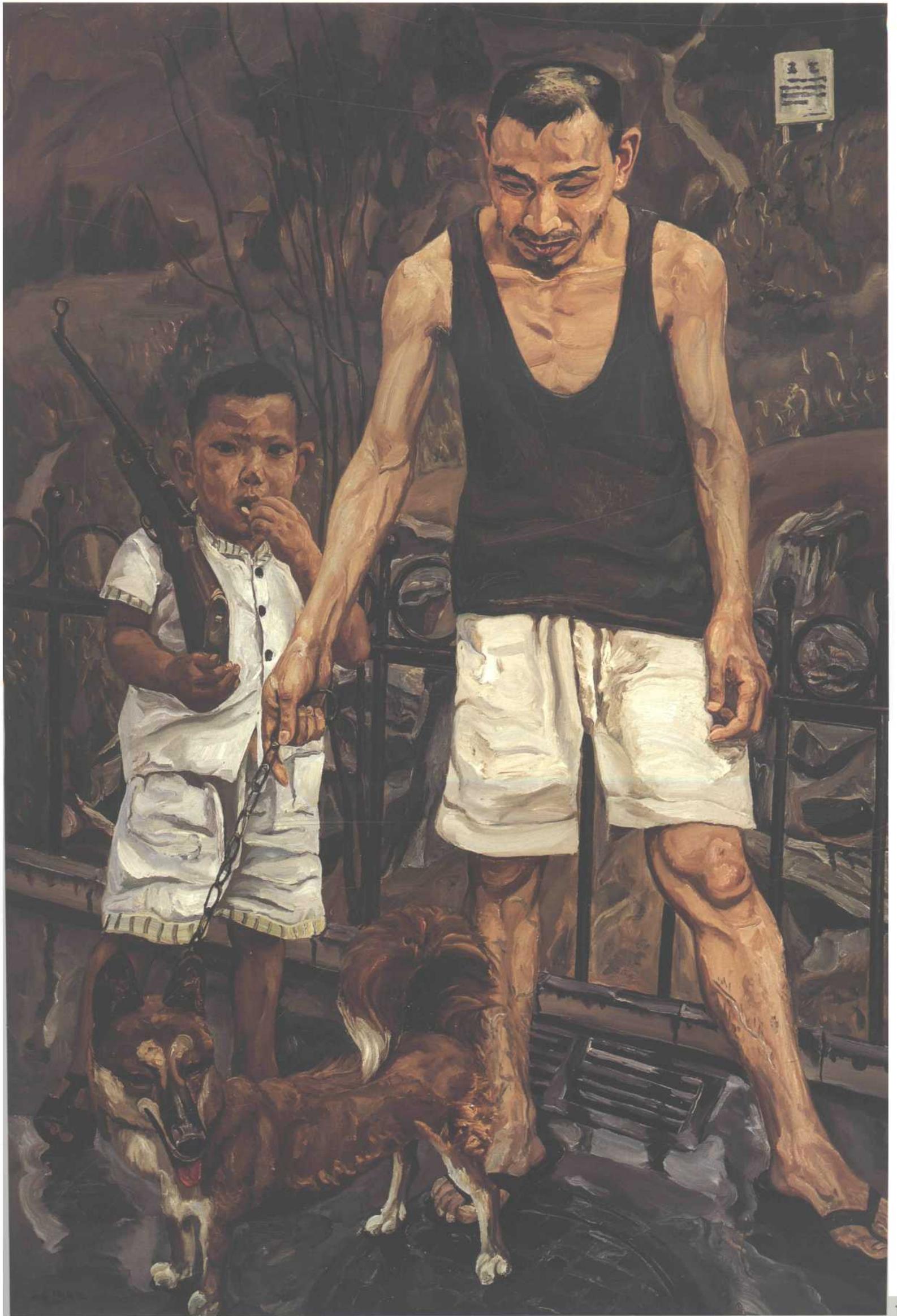
Liu Xiaodong graduated from the Oil Painting Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1988. He presently teaches at the Central Academy of Fine Arts.

Like other artists working in the Cynical Realist style, Liu Xiaodong focusses on the alienation in human relationships and the modern sense of existential and spiritual oppression. He has an acute grasp of the mindset of Beijing's alienated youth and depicts them with remarkable accuracy. But rather than looking to the shady underground characters from the Beijing *hutongs* for his subjects, in many of his paintings Liu uses his classmates and young teachers at the Central Academy of Fine Arts.

Liu's work embraces the emotions that erupt when one is confronted with an "exposed" reality. He draws his figures in states of uninhibited inebriation, or laughing out loud as if there were no one around to watch. His paintings are almost uncomfortable to look at: the images seem distorted, and there seems to be too much light, too much colour. The effect is of tableaux suddenly exposed in a lightning flash. Liu's approach of utilising a heightened existential awareness to get closer to the truth of objective reality enables the artist to achieve a compelling expression of the uncomfortable actualities of human existence.

"I believe that an artist's life experience and his art should be integrally linked. I myself am a realist, so I feel that art should also reflect reality. In the world right now there are all kinds of "isms," but always I choose realism as the most direct expression of what I see, feel and experience."

— Liu Xiaodong



2

Wedding Party

Oil on canvas

1992

186 × 195 cm

婚宴





XIN HAIZHOU
忻海洲

1

Rules of the Game, I
Oil on canvas
1992
199 / 180 cm
遊戲規則 (之一)

2

Rules of the Game, II
Oil on canvas
1992
199 / 180 cm
遊戲規則 (之二)

XIN HAIZHOU

(b. 1966, Chengdu, Sichuan Province)

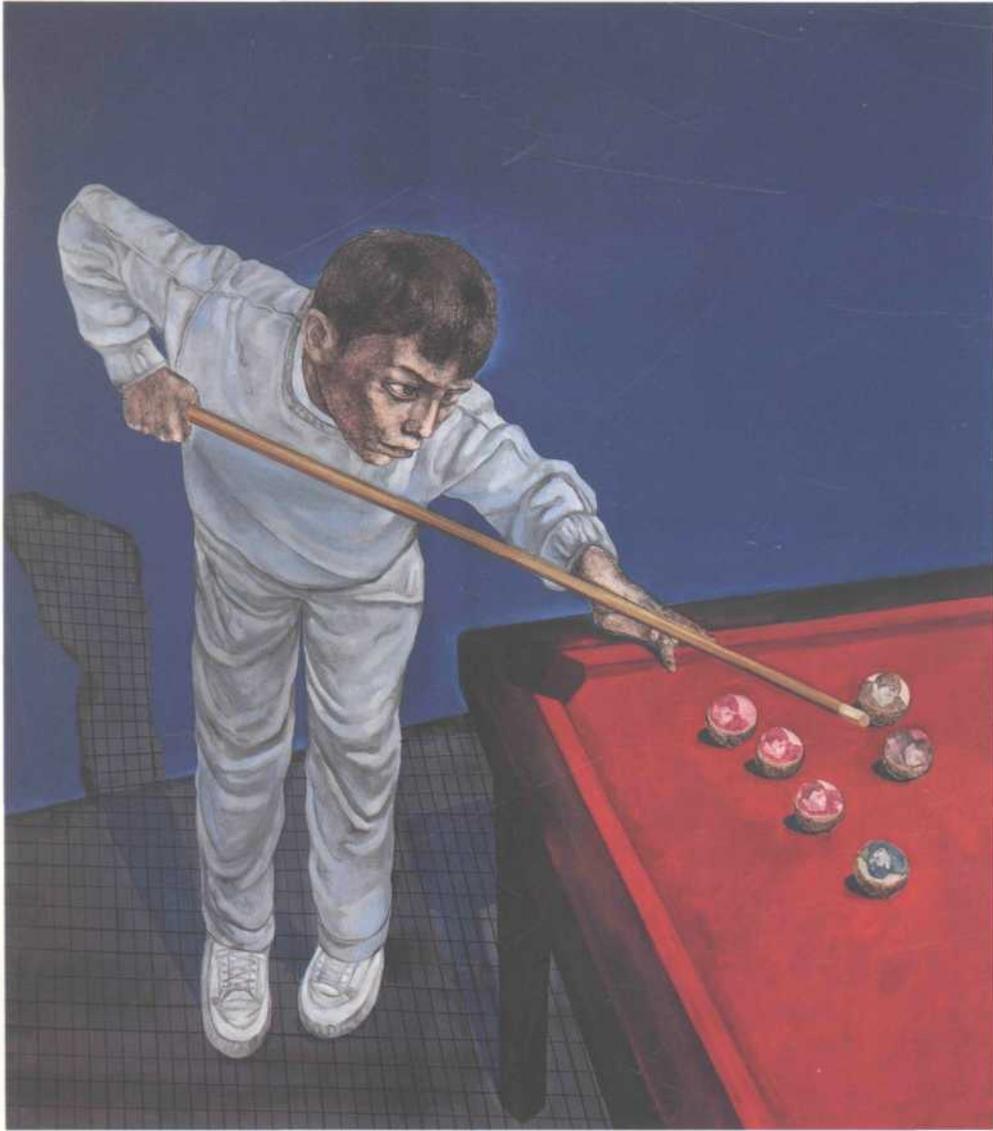
忻海洲

Xin Haizhou graduated in 1989 from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. He presently teaches in the Education Department of the same institution.

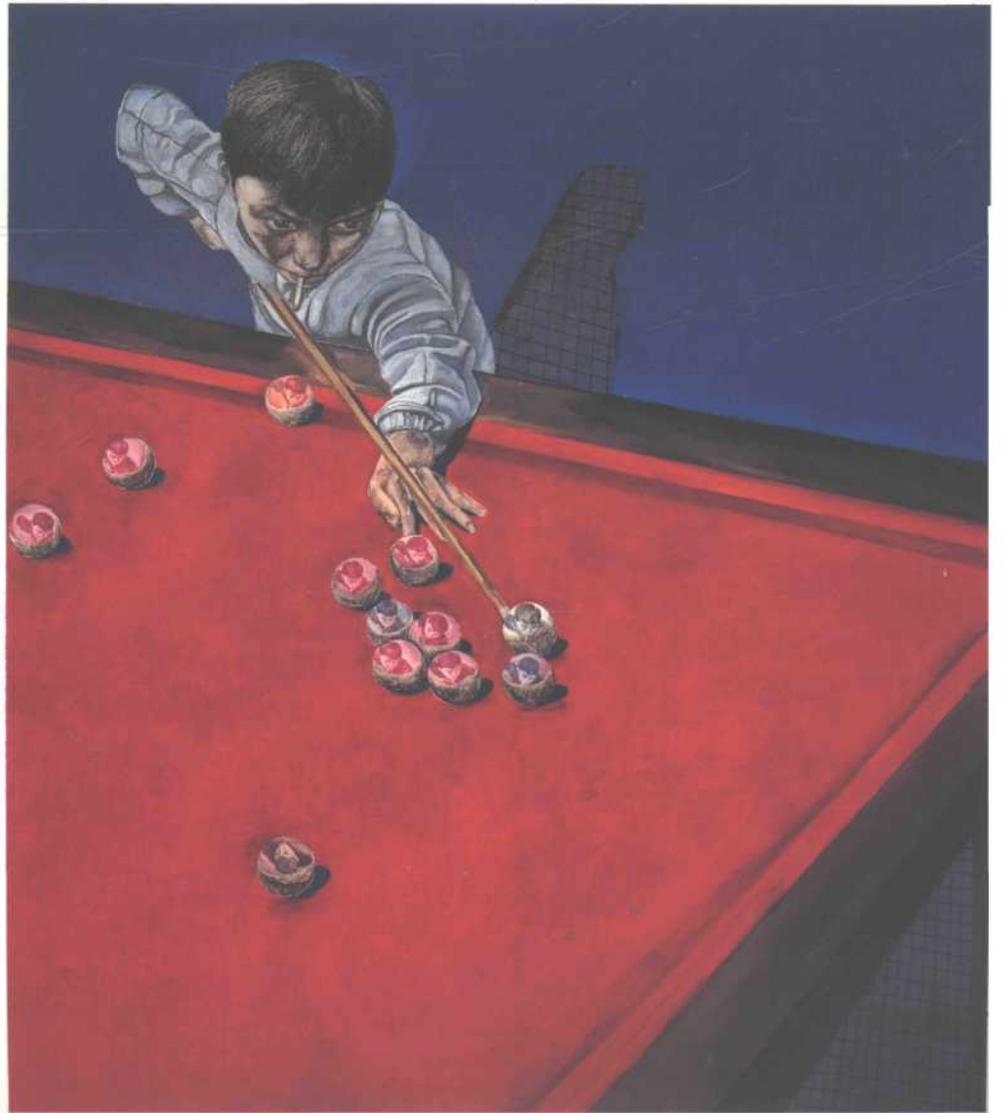
Xin Haizhou's main concern in his painting is to depict "true psychological reality." His earliest paintings are portraits of people in different states of anxiety: they seem to have undergone some misfortune or serious loss, for they appear on the canvas cringing, impoverished, embarrassed, helpless and isolated. To Xin, their fear and doubts are an expression of the attitude toward life of his generation. In his series of works created in the late Eighties, Xin uses a strong chiaroscuro effect and sense of spatial displacement to represent his growing conviction that life is essentially absurd. In his most recent works Xin is more concerned with the concrete social environment, placing his subjects in realistic settings, such as poolhalls, that innately hint at the alienation, isolation and confusion of urban culture.

"Life is actually a matter of accidental opportunities. Every experience is unique and instantaneous. While society has progressed, our lives have become more complex. Urban living 'embellishes' our lives with the joys of consumption and the beauty of packaging and decoration. Television culture enables us to experience many new things, but to experience them in a more stratified way. . . . All this fine packaging has caused us to live behind masks. All this fancy consumerism has deprived us of the quality and flavour of rural life. Human nobility, faith and idealism have been wiped out by money. . . . This is all a well-planned joke . . . a highly serious game."

— Xin Haizhou



1



2

3

Rules of the Game, III

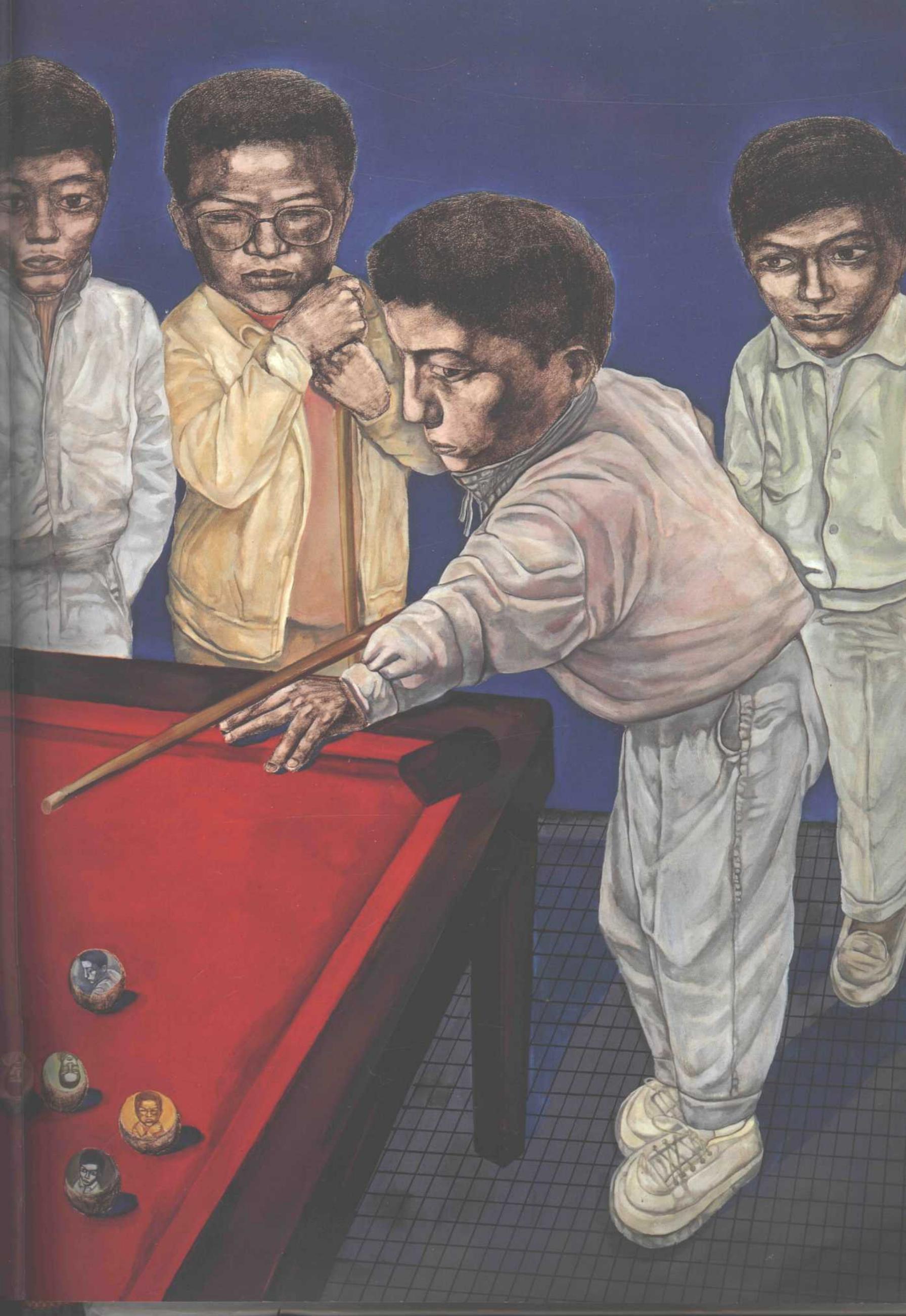
Oil on canvas

1992

199 x 180 cm

遊戲規則 (之三)





HE SEN
何森

1
Two Friends in a Chair
Oil on canvas
1991
180 × 150 cm
椅上的兩人

HE SEN

(b. 1968, Yunnan Province)

何森

He Sen graduated from the Art Education Department of Sichuan Art Academy, and makes his living as a professional artist.

In terms of life experience, artists in Southwest China are concerned with intuition, emotions, and humanistic values. In the post-1989 period, they have sought greater spiritual depth in their work while carrying out exposés of popular culture. He Sen does not shrink from expressing a slightly exaggerated heroism that grows out of a sense of oppression. His works depict loneliness, pain, anxiety and inner turbulence.

He works mostly in black and white, following in the Sichuan tradition. Examined from the viewpoint of painterly expressiveness and experience, some of his earlier paintings either go too far, or not far enough. But his more recent paintings, such as *Piano Playing*, are successful from both of these viewpoints. Despite the complexity of the compositional structure, the painting is eloquently expressive of the artist's own life experience. In these works, He Sen reveals himself as an artist who continues on a quest for greater spiritual enrichment, and a higher sense of moral purpose.

“Art is the natural manifestation of the mental state of the artist. But this manifestation should never be provoked blindly, when one is in a state of mental or emotional agitation, or under pressure of any sort. Rather, art should be the direct and unrestrained outpouring of the mind in a supra-rational and supra-emotional state. Art can thus make people play the most noble and at the same time the most despicable roles in life.”

— He Sen



2

Carefree Days
Oil on canvas
1991
180 × 150 cm
愉快年華

3

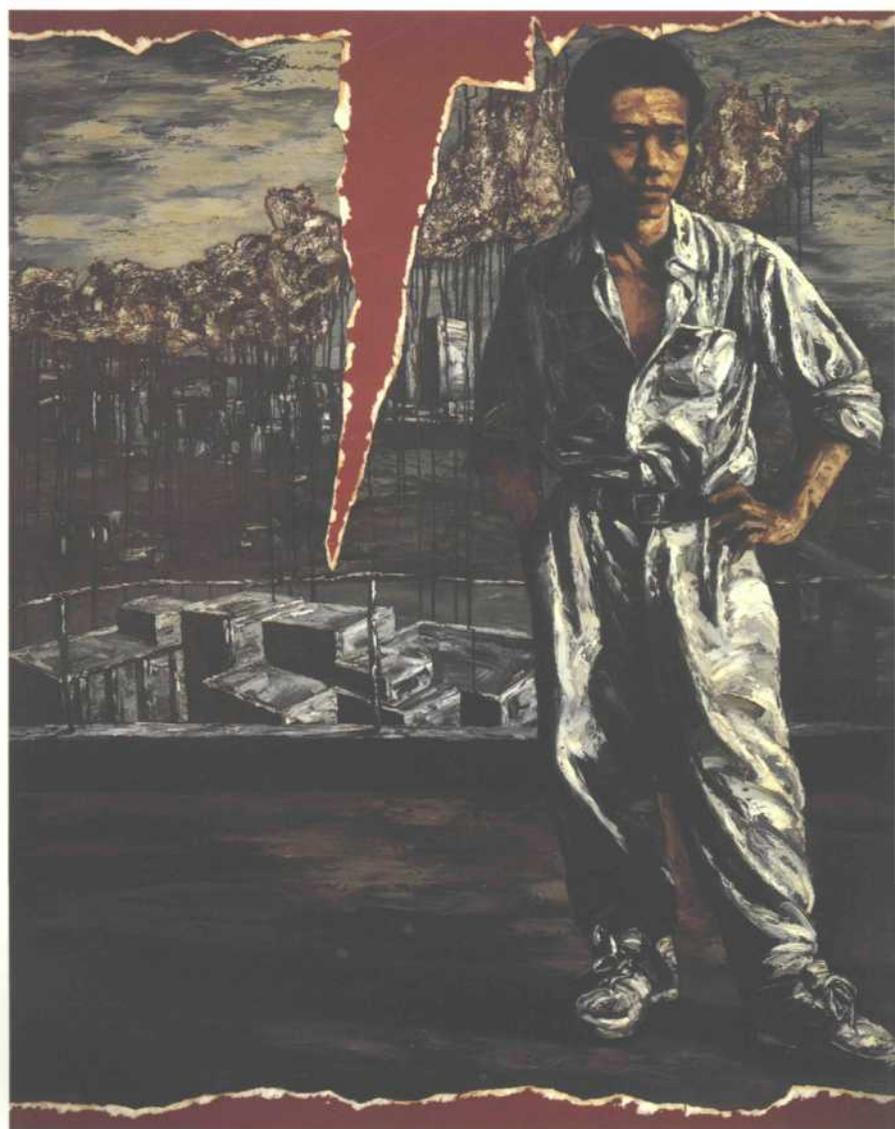
Silent City
Oil on canvas
1991
180 × 150 cm
靜與城市

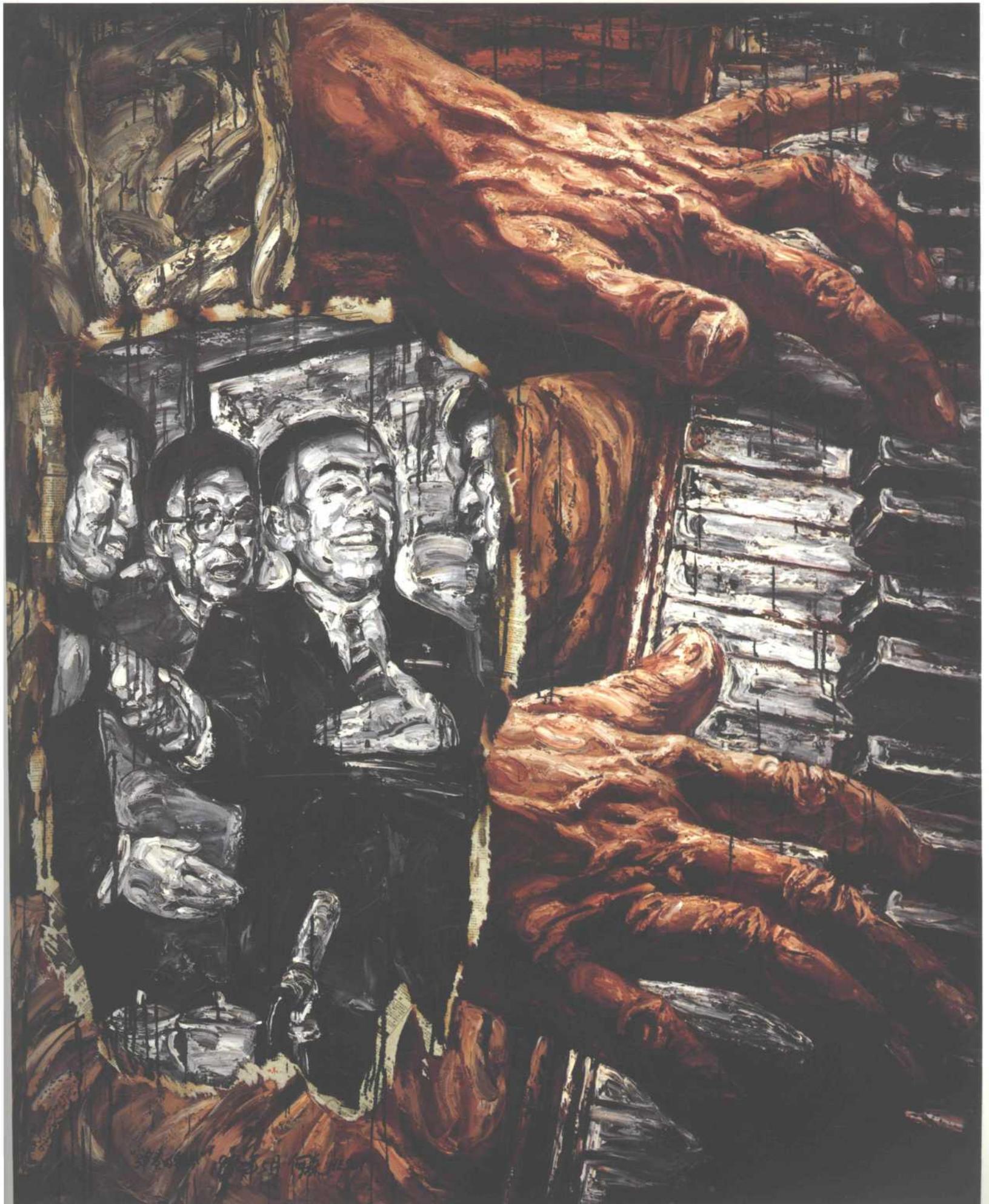
4

Piano Playing
Oil on canvas
1992
180 × 150 cm
彈奏的鋼琴



2







THE WOUNDED

ROMANTIC SPIRIT

創傷的

浪漫精神

ZHANG XIAOGANG 張曉剛

DING FANG 丁方

XIA XIAOWAN 夏小萬

PAN DEHAI 潘德海

ZHOU CHUNYA 周春芽

MAO XUHUI 毛旭輝

ZHANG XIAOGANG

(b. 1958, Kunming, Yunnan Province)

張曉剛

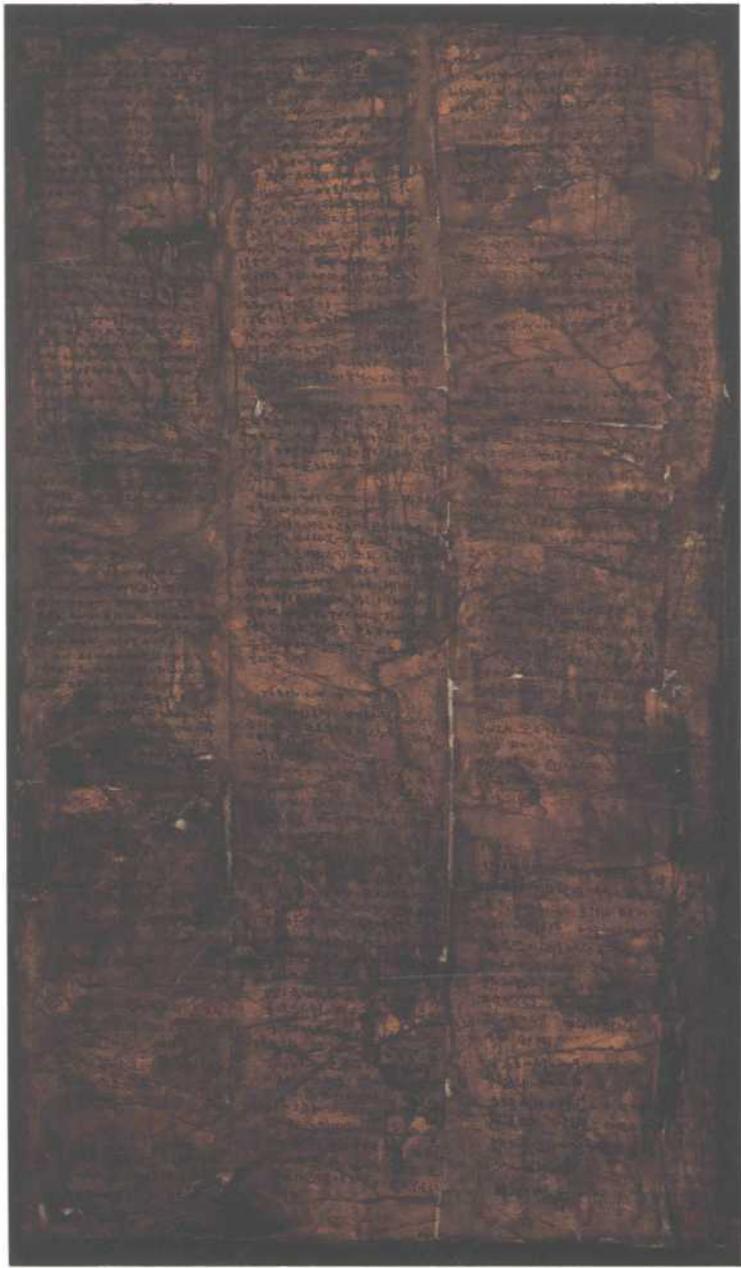
Zhang Xiaogang graduated in 1982 from the Oil Painting Department of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. He currently holds the position of Lecturer in the Education Department of the same institution.

Zhang Xiaogang is one of the foremost painters of the Chinese avant-garde movement of the Eighties. His painting has followed the same path of development as his life. His earlier works emphasised the expression of the power of natural emotion. The artist's 1984 *Phantom* series of paintings was inspired by a period of time he spent ill in hospital. The hospital environment, with its plethora of neurotically textured white linen, made a forcible impression on him, becoming an important symbol in his aesthetic vocabulary. Two paintings done in 1986, *Abandoned Dreams* and *Endless Love*, use allegorical symbols as a means of expressing a gentleness very different from the gut-wrenching emotions and pain of his work done in 1984. At the end of 1989, however, this gentle emotion abruptly disappeared from his painting. In his works since 1990, he casts off lyricism and confronts reality. In his most recent works the artist has focussed increasingly on mourning and martyrdom as his main themes, using a mannered, remote drawing style to communicate a desperate and solemn emotion.

"To me, the most seductive thing about art is its vagueness, or perhaps one may call it its state of neutrality: through this, I gain greater intimacy with the shadows in my soul, which, like a sphere of bloody flesh, weighs heavily on me, exuding its own unique scent.

My painterly skills are the vehicle by which I am able to approach the deep abyss in the soul. Through artistic control I am able to continue my search for meaning in life and the value of freedom, and to experience many new things."

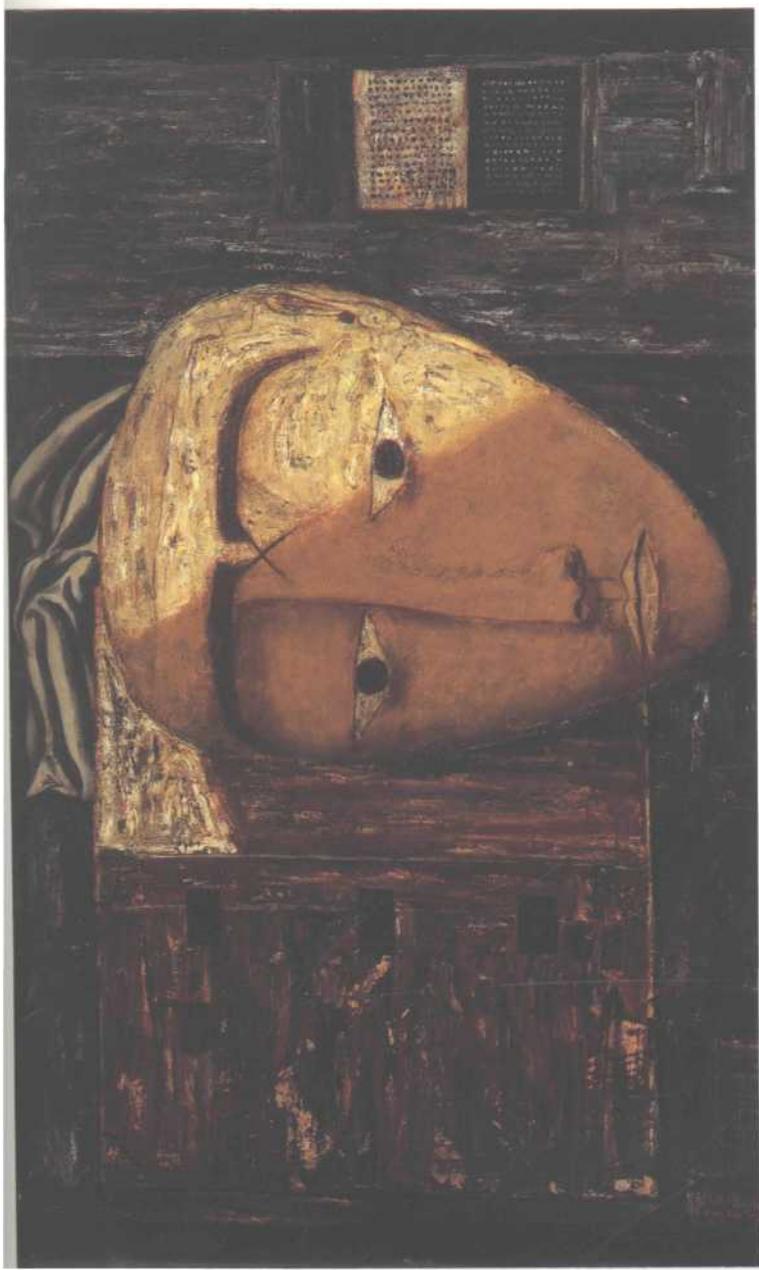
— Zhang Xiaogang



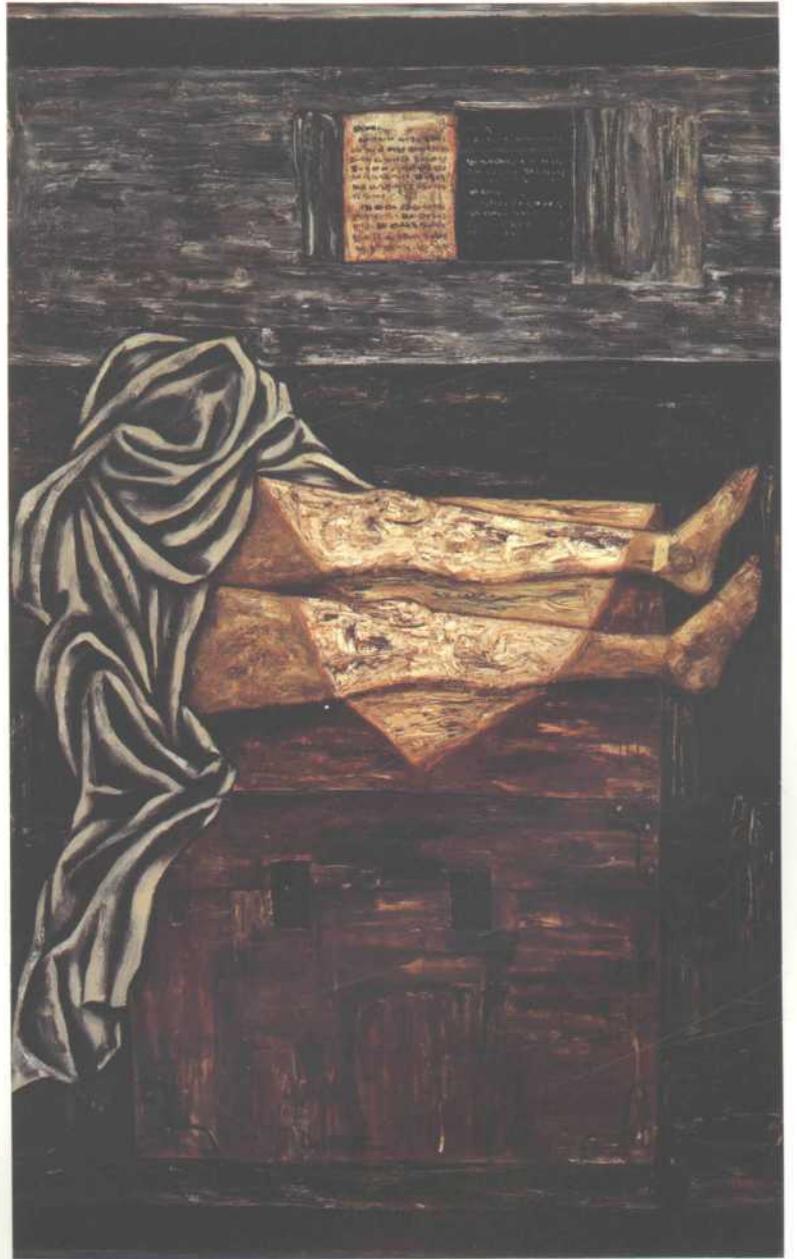
1



2



3



4

ZHANG XIAOGANG
張曉剛

1

Private Notes: Three, No. 1
Oil on canvas
1991
179 × 110 cm
手記三號(之1)

2

Private Notes: Three, No. 2
Oil on canvas
1991
179 × 115 cm
手記三號(之2)

3

Private Notes: Three, No. 3
Oil on canvas
1991
179 × 115 cm
手記三號(之3)

4

Private Notes: Three, No. 4
Oil on canvas
1991
179 × 115 cm
手記三號(之4)

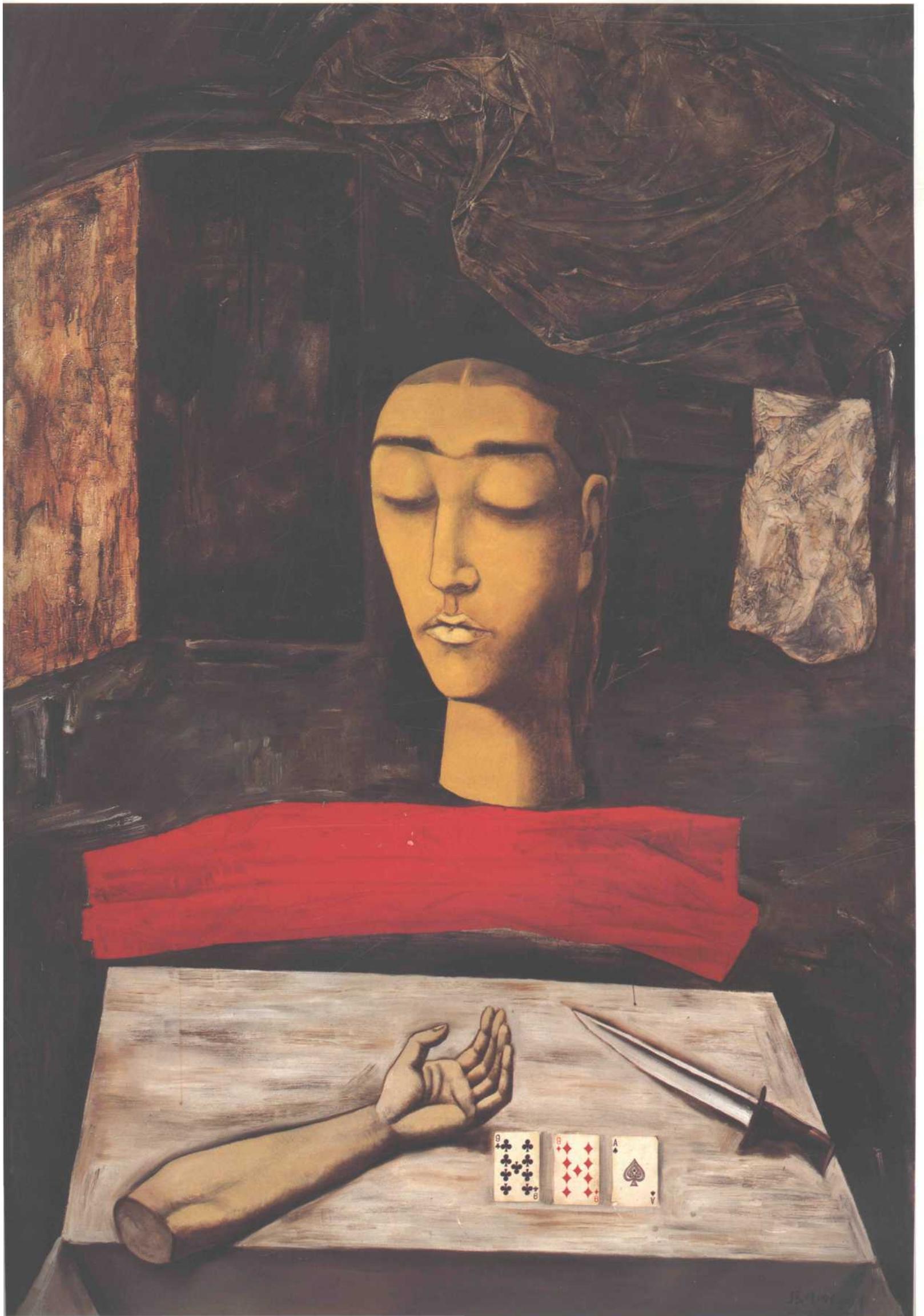
5

Black Diptych, No. 1
Oil on canvas
1989-90
178 × 113 cm
黑色兩部曲(之1)

6

Black Diptych, No. 2
Oil on canvas
1989-90
178 × 113 cm
黑色兩部曲(之2)



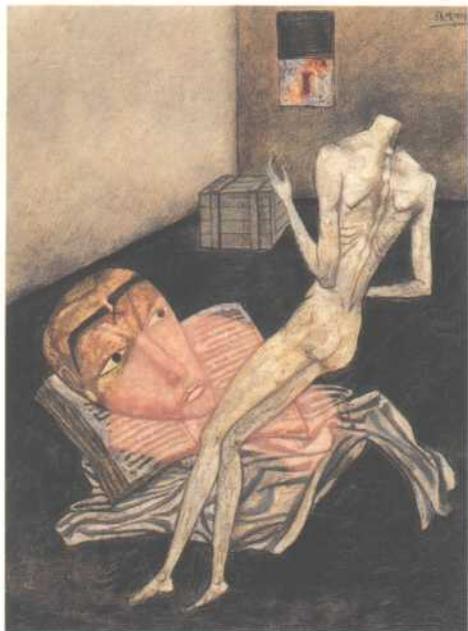


7-13
Private Notes: Four (Set of 7)
 Oil on paper
 1991
 approx. 53 × 39 cm @
 手記四號 (七幅一組)

14
Private Notes: One
 Oil on canvas
 1991
 84.1 × 98.6 cm
 手記 (一號)

15
Night: One
 Oil on canvas
 1990
 129.2 × 96.6 cm
 夜 (一號)

16
Private Notes: Two
 Oil on canvas
 1991
 127 × 98 cm
 手記 (二號)



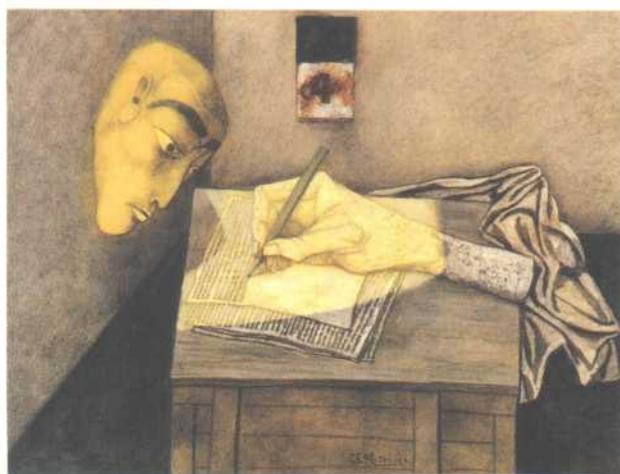
7



8



9



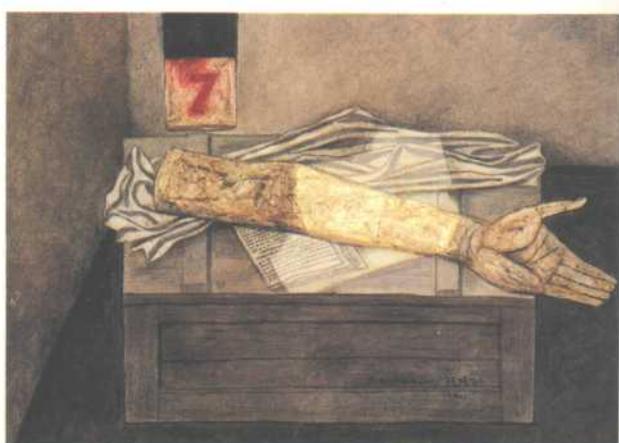
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11



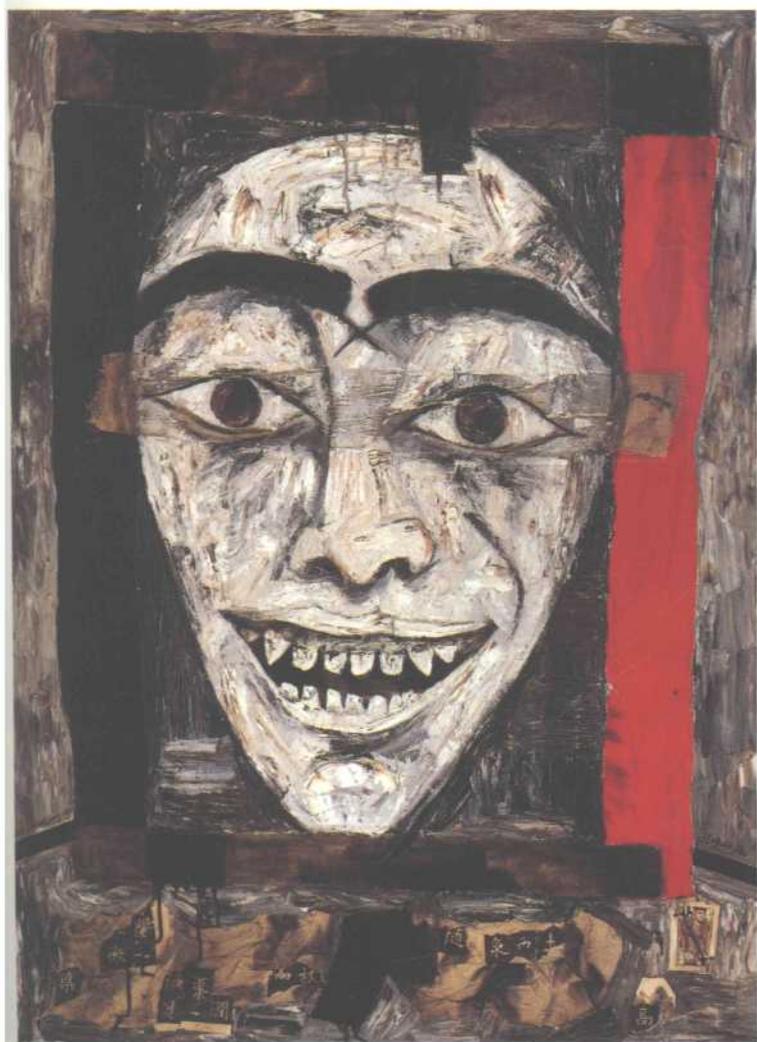
12



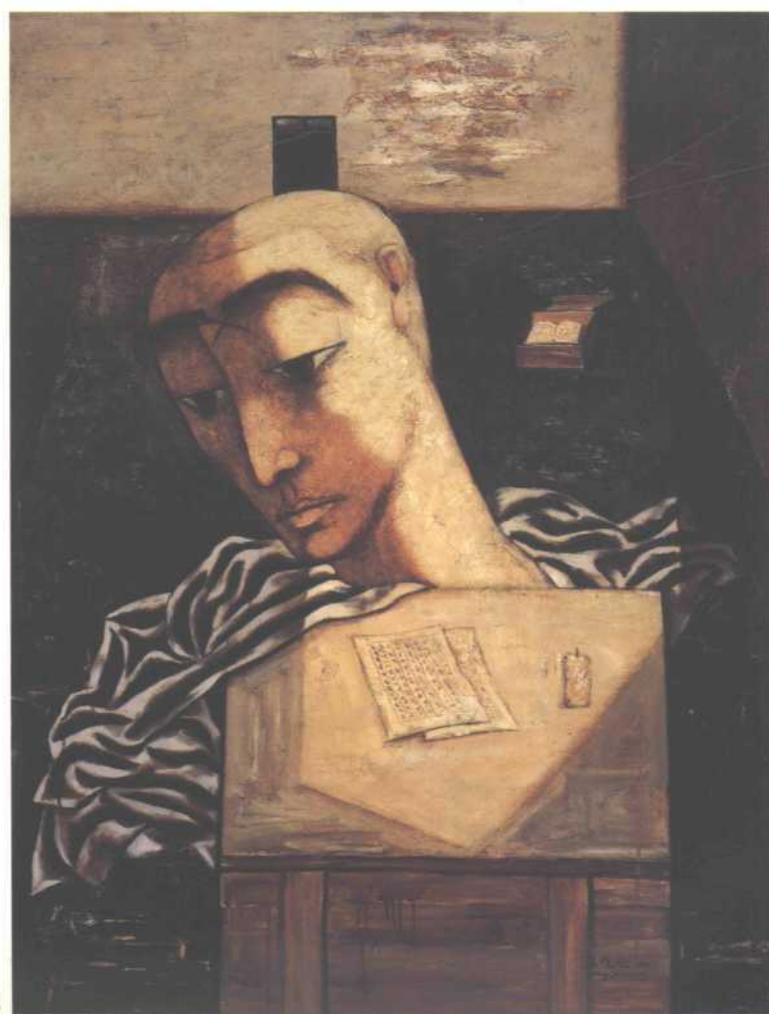
13



14



15



16

DING FANG

丁方

1
A Glimpse of Reality and Eternity

Oil on canvas

1990-91

160 · 250 cm

現實與永恒的一瞬

2
Ray of Hope Upon the Earth (Dipltych)

Oil on canvas

1992

180 · 280 cm

降臨大地的希望之光

(二聯畫)

DING FANG

(b. 1956, Shanxi Province)

丁方

Ding Fang graduated in 1982 from the **Industrial Art Department** of the Nanjing Academy of Art, and in 1986 received his Master's degree from the **Oil Painting Department** of the same institution. He currently is a full time professional artist.

Ding Fang is a key figure of the **avant-garde art movement of the Eighties**. His art is characterised by a strong critical reflection on Chinese culture and has had a profound impact on contemporary Chinese art. In particular, the wave of cultural fever for the northwestern loess plateau in the mid-Eighties was originally inspired by Ding Fang's art. In his creative work, the artist seeks to explore the dynamics of suffering through meditation, conflict and sacrifice. Since 1980 the artist has engaged in an exploration and "excavation" of the spiritual strength and power of the landscape of the plateau regions of China. His recent works are **stylistically very different** from his earlier, more meditative art, and contain very strong **Expressionist elements**. The monumental structures and powerful imagery of his paintings communicate a richly heroic spirit. In his *The Soul of the Plateau* series the artist employs large, thick brushstrokes and dense colours to create a heavy, almost metallic, visual impact. These works open up a new realm of spiritual experience, and reflect the artist's deepening understanding of the power of hardship, suffering, and determination.

"I am a disciple of humanism who is glad to bear the cross of spreading this gospel, in this age of spiritual weakness and shallow postures of transcendence.

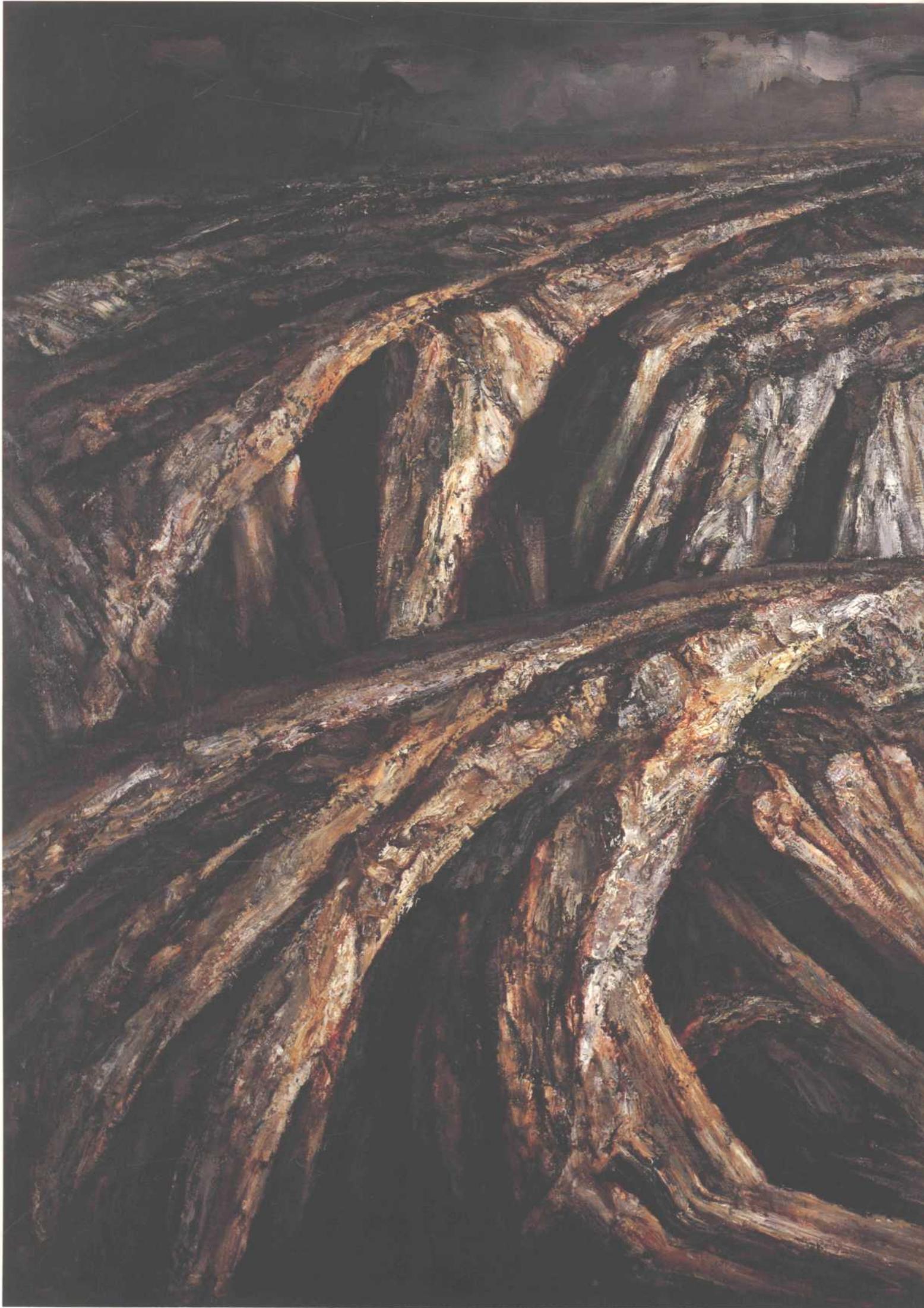
In these days the great inner spirit is wounded. A tremendous historical regret gnaws at my heart, and the pain is sometimes so powerful I feel I cannot go on living.

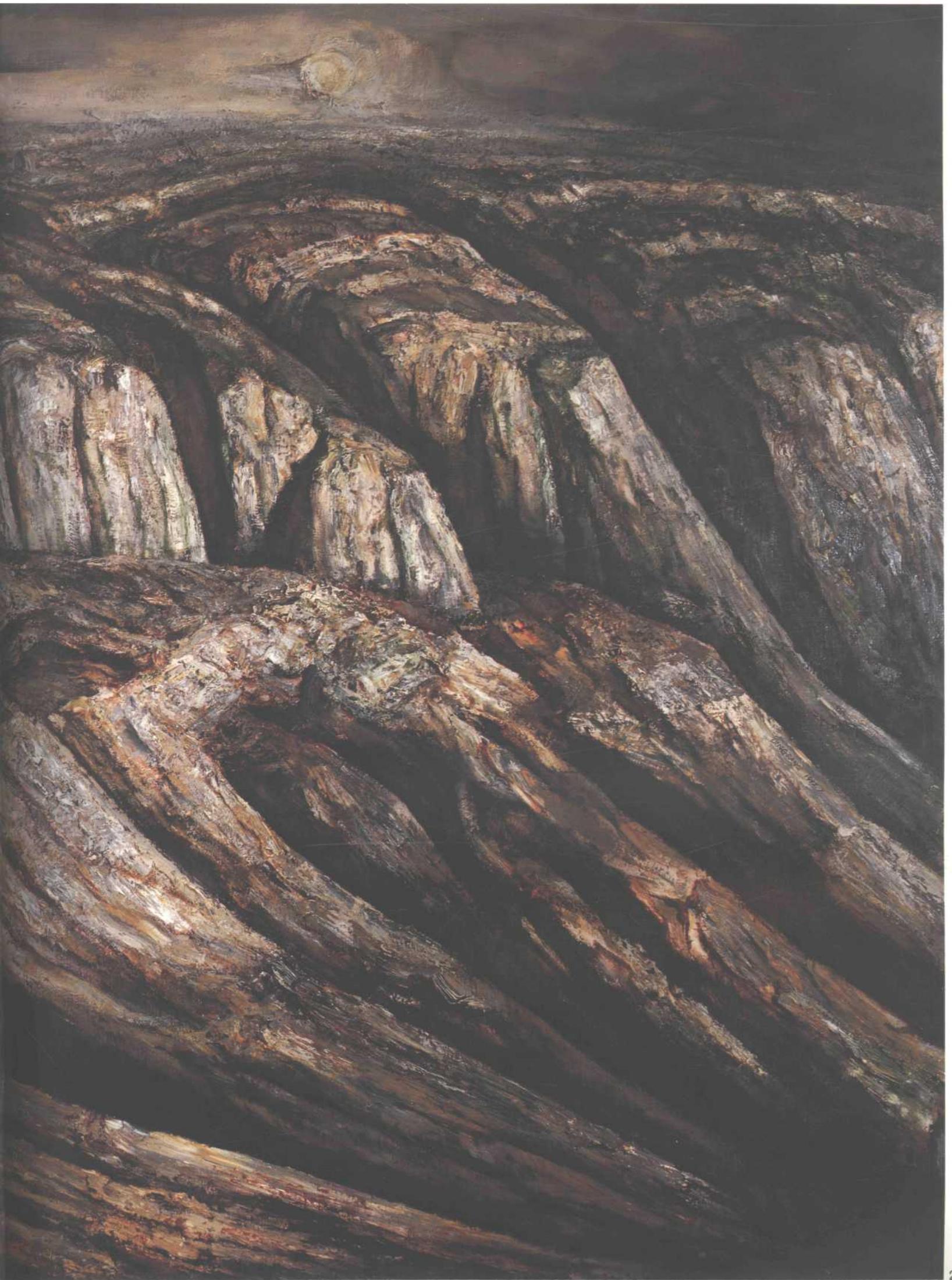
Often I am inspired by the spirit of the medieval acolytes, who in deep meditation use their hearts to experience the power of the human force. Only by following their example can I draw from the wellspring of my deepest suffering to grasp the essence of the age.

Sometimes I feel that I am a sinner carrying the burden of a deep human guilt. But I believe it is through this burden that there is hope for the salvation of the human spirit."

— Ding Fang







3

Polis: Meeting of Lonely Souls

Oil on canvas

1991

80 × 117 cm

城：孤魂相交

4

Cruel Highland Torrents: Intrusion (Diptych)

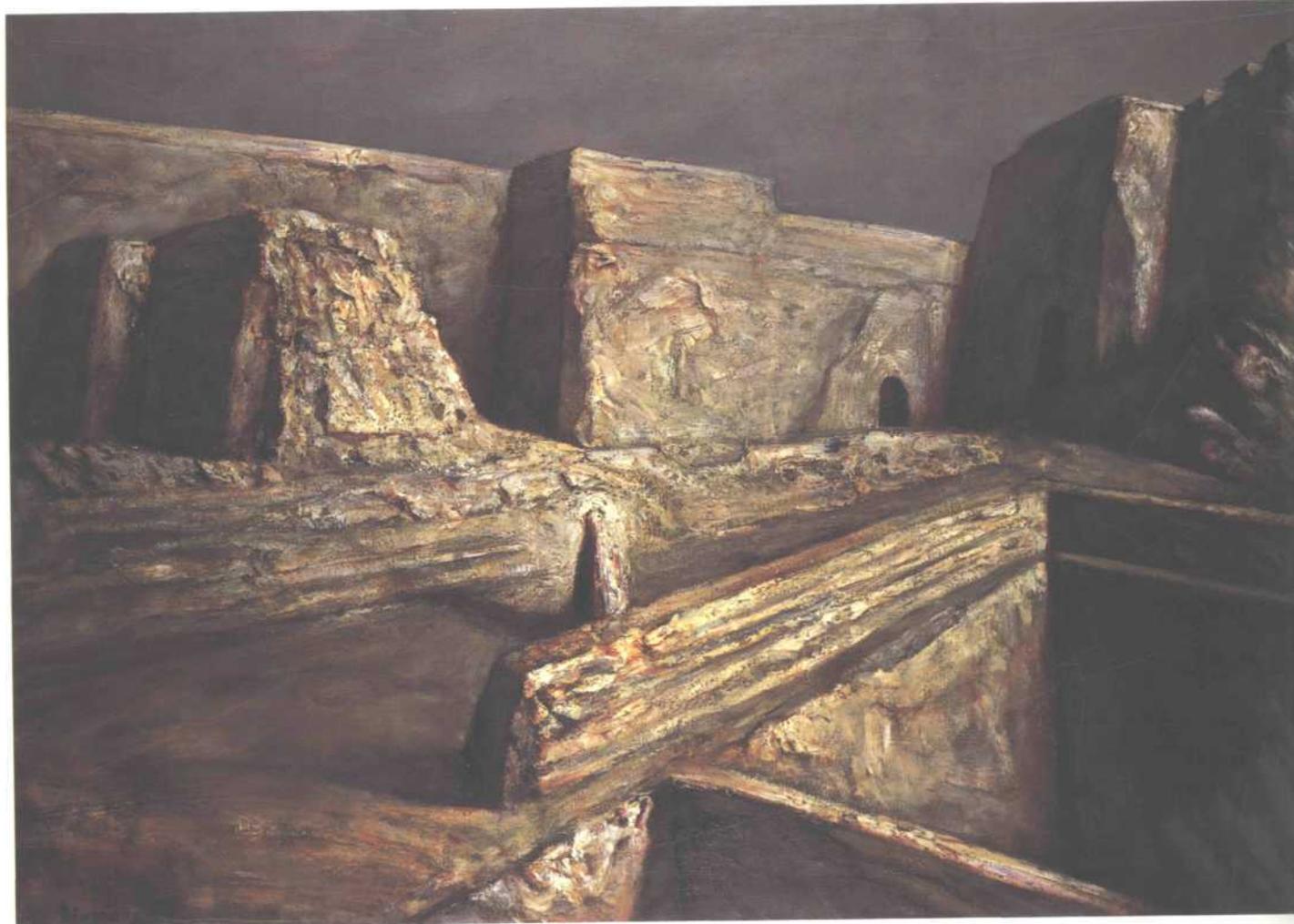
Oil on canvas

1992

180 × 280 cm

高原酷流：

神聖突入此域



3



XIA XIAOWAN

夏小萬

1

Dreaming of Heaven

Oil on canvas

1991

180 × 199 cm

空想天穹

2

Sea of Life

Oil on canvas

1991

180 × 199 cm

生涯

3

Goodbye, Mother Love

Oil on canvas

1990

171 × 121 cm

告別母愛

4

Wild Disorientation

Oil on canvas

1990

115 × 148 cm

迷狂

5

Pastorale

Oil on canvas

1992

50 × 61 cm

牧人

6

How Sad

Oil on canvas

1990

199.5 × 179.5 cm

多麼悲傷

XIA XIAOWAN

(b. 1959, Beijing)

夏小萬

Xia Xiaowan graduated from the Oil Painting Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1982. He presently teaches at the Central Drama Academy in Beijing.

Xia Xiaowan's works reflect the strong metaphysical concerns of the Eighties New Wave movement. His 1983 series of paintings, *Distorted Youth*, represents the artist's spiritual awakening. In these works Xia applies strange, distorted figures to express his indescribable anguish in the face of harsh reality. This spiritual condition evolved into the creation of the artist's *Cosmos* series of the mid-Eighties, in which bright and scintillating astral bodies signify the artist's seeking for spiritual transcendence.

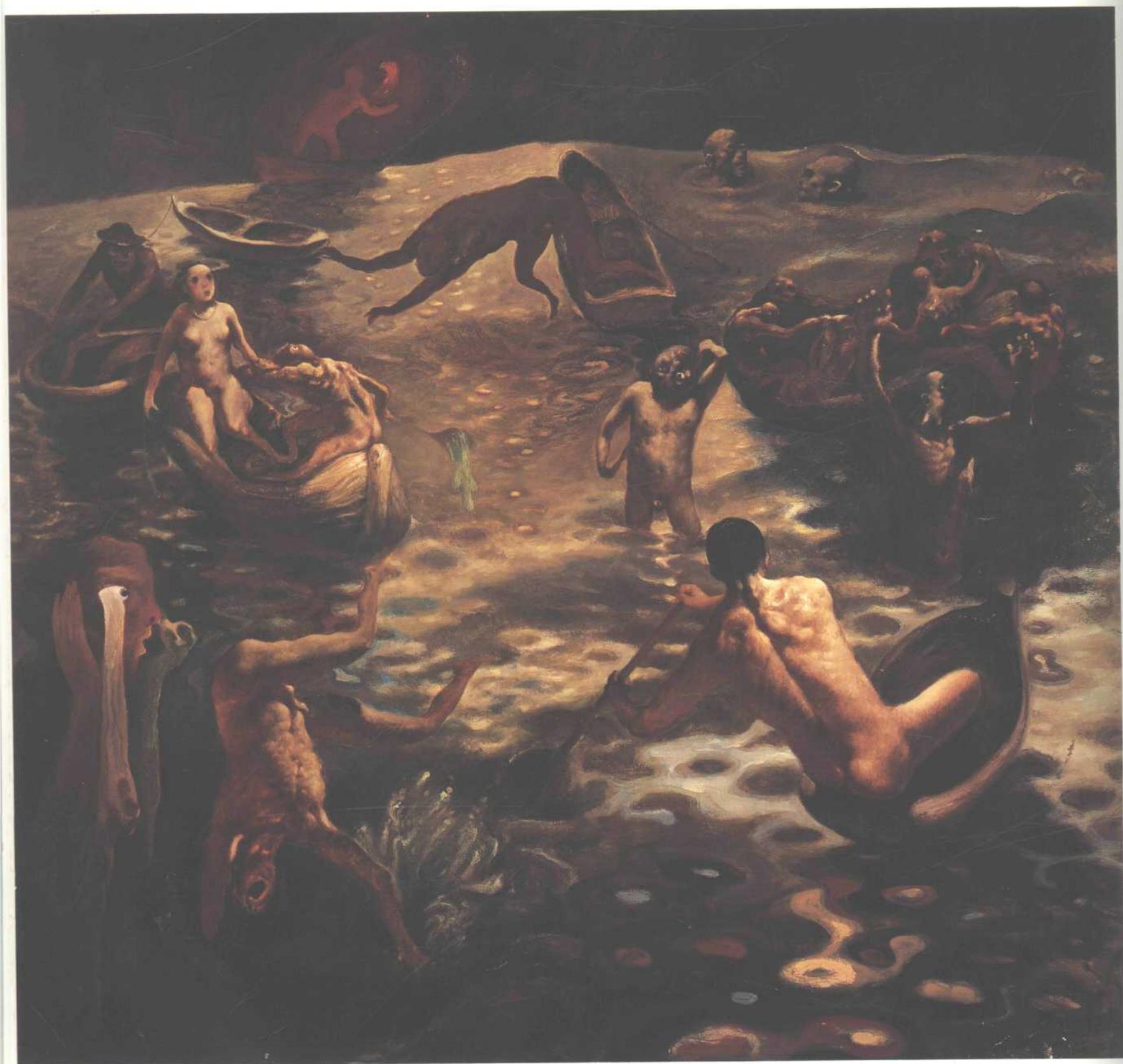
Xia's later works indicate yet another spiritual transition, hinting at a soul who has gone through a baptism and come back to earth ready to confront the realities of human nature. From his works *Devil*, *Baroque*, and *Spirit of the Ancestor*, to his more recent works *Fright* and *How Sad*, Xia Xiaowan has repeated this theme, while his executional style has become progressively more complex and eerie. In these works, the contrasting elements of light and darkness, and purity and distortion strike a balance between the acutely expressionist style and the strictly classical technique that has become the hallmark of his work.

"The choice of art as a career can result from ignorance, from a willful decision, or from superficial, hidden intentions, all of which can harm one's sense of self-respect. For this reason, in art, ideology and reason are more important than enthusiasm. When people complain that they have been deprived of their individual feelings and will, it is just their very stubbornness and sense of self-importance that is taking over their lives and controlling them.

No matter how meaningful something is, it can never overcome the weakness of human nature. But, there is hope in the fact that people in the end are courageous enough to reveal their weaknesses. In fact, both human weakness and the tragic nature of human destiny represent ultimate goodness — both moving and comforting at the same time."

— Xia Xiaowan

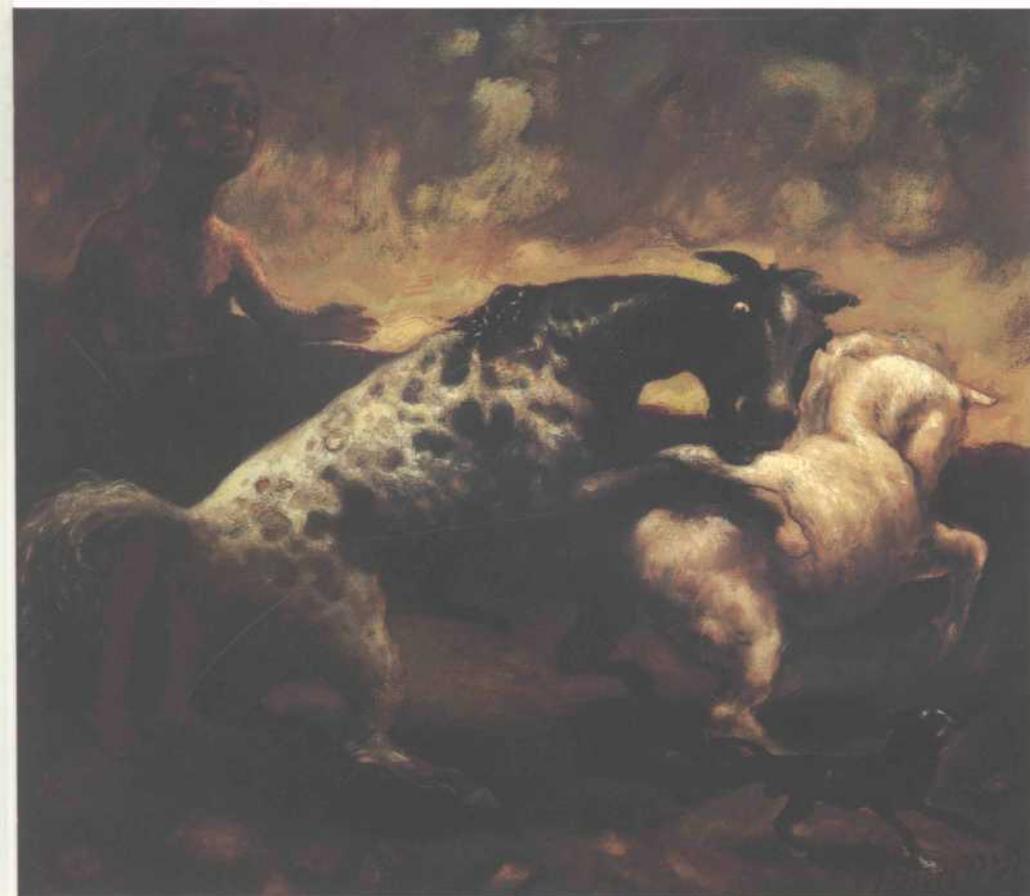








4



5



PAN DEHAI
潘德海

PAN DEHAI

(b. 1956, Jilin Province)

潘德海

1
*The Corn Series: In the
Depth of Nature, No. 3*
Acrylic on canvas
1992
170 × 200 cm
苞米系列：
自然的深處（三號）

2
*The Corn Series: Wanted,
No. 3*
Acrylic on canvas
1992
200 × 170 cm
苞米系列：
尋人啟示（三號）

3
*The Corn Series: Wanted,
No. 4*
Acrylic on canvas
1992
200 × 170 cm
苞米系列：
尋人啟示（四號）

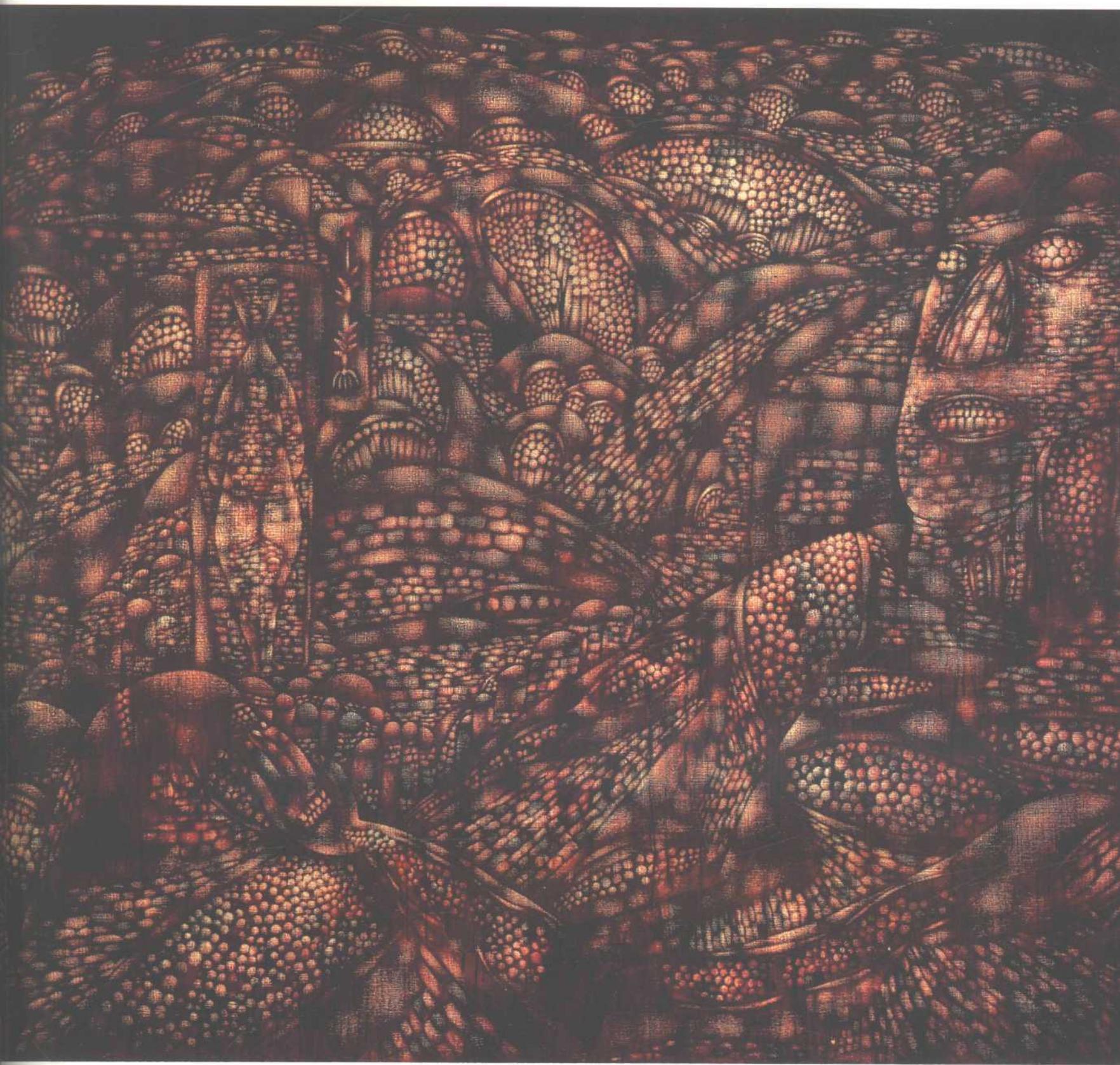
4
*The Corn Series: Wanted
(Diptych)*
Oil on canvas
170 × 300 cm
苞米系列：
尋人啟示（二聯）

Pan Dehai graduated in 1982 from the Oil Painting Department of Dongbei University. He is currently teaching at Kuangju High School in Yunnan Province.

Pan Dehai is a representative painter of the Chinese avant-garde movement of the Eighties. His early works contain obvious stylistic references to Post-Impressionism and Cubism, and thematically tend to reflect the tragic side of life. In 1987 Pan created his most important work, the *Corn* series. In Pan Dehai's aesthetic vocabulary, the eccentric corn imagery of these paintings has emerged as the primary symbol of the artist's life experience, and of his long contemplation on life's origin and the tragic character of human existence. In his paintings, these innumerable, cellular-shaped, densely-packed round kernels, both alien and familiar, form patterns on the human body that appear like a dissection of the body and the spirit. Within the spots or "sores" formed by these kernels are concentrated all human sensitivity, suffering and helplessness. The kernels seem to multiply endlessly, exposing and yet again concealing the mystery of reality.

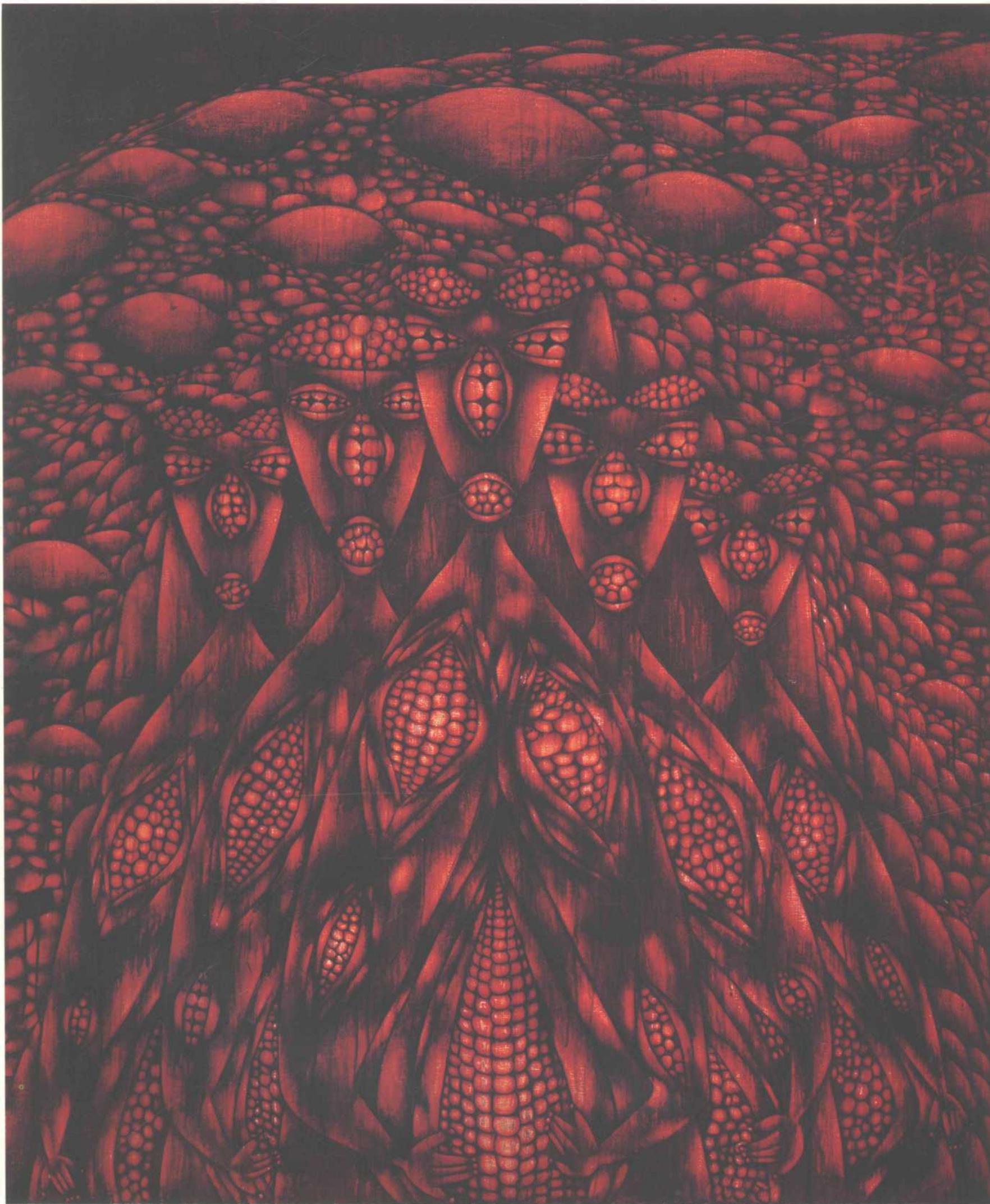
"Corn kernels evoke for me the most basic physical unit that comprises the world. They are a perfect manifestation of the origins of life, the very substance of life and matter, and a profound symbol of the inner life spirit. They are not limited to any particular emotions; but I feel they can best express a sense of loss, tragedy, helplessness and other expressions of human frailty. The space formed by these round kernels is like a dense petrified rock that blocks the human mind from penetrating the basic nature of the world."

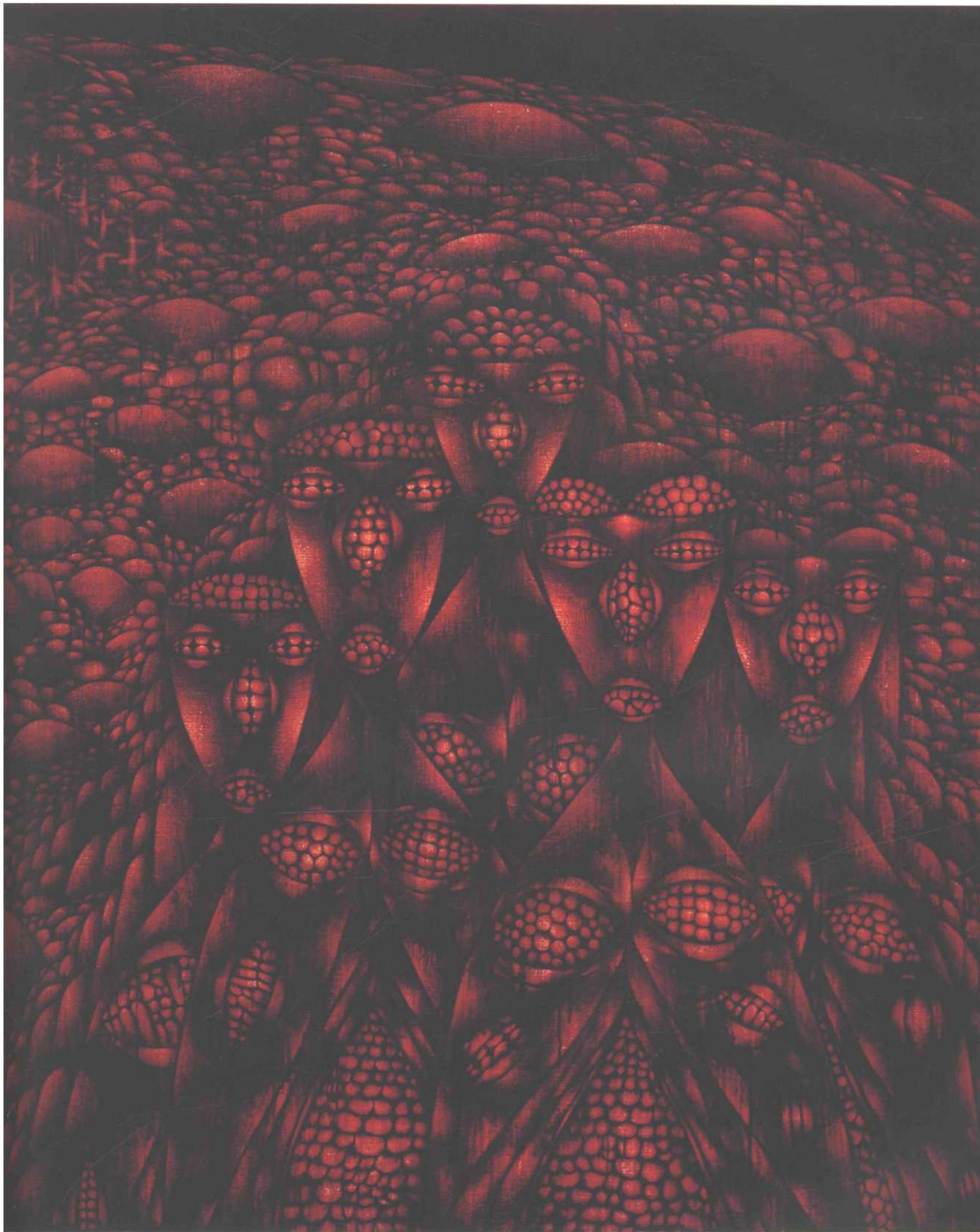
— Pan Dehai











ZHOU CHUNYA

周春芽

1

*A Portrait Tied to an
Outcropping of Rocks*

Oil on canvas

1992

150 × 120 cm

與石頭相連系的肖像

ZHOU CHUNYA

(b. 1955, Chengdu, Sichuan Province)

周春芽

Zhou Chunya graduated in 1982 from the Oil Painting Department of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. He is currently artist-in-residence at the Chengdu Institute of Art.

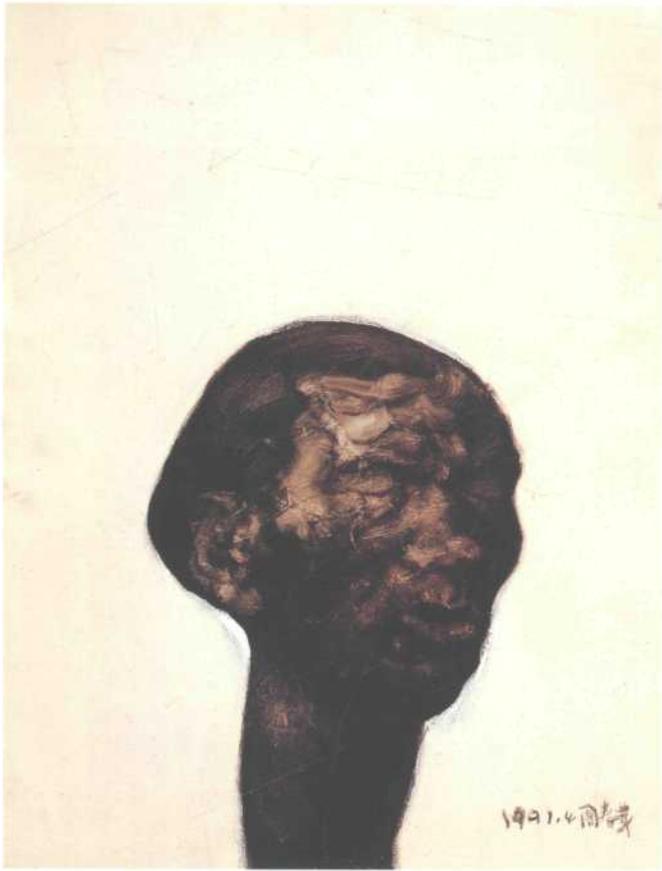
Zhou Chunya's paintings have a close relationship with the pastoral. In his works of the early Eighties, such as *The New Tibetans* and *Sheep Shearing*, his intention is not to address social issues: rather, the artist focuses purely on the rugged beauty of the Tibetan people and landscape. Starting in 1985, the artist's pastoral paintings show a reversal of the passionate, unconstrained quality of his earlier work. Instead they demonstrate a mysterious and unbounded loneliness, that reflects the artist's experience of the loneliness one feels amidst the wild grasslands — a theme that predominates in much of his later work. In recent works Zhou's painting style has benefitted from Expressionism, but is heavier and more grounded. Into his Expressionist-influenced technique the artist introduces a multi-layered textural treatment, whereby the dynamic tension of the painting surface is enhanced by the application of densely compacted textured clusters.

"Some people say that art is about reproducing things. Others say that art is a form of expression. For me, art is primarily about discovery. The artist is like an adventurer, who is adept at finding beauty in nature and people in the most remote places."

— Zhou Chunya

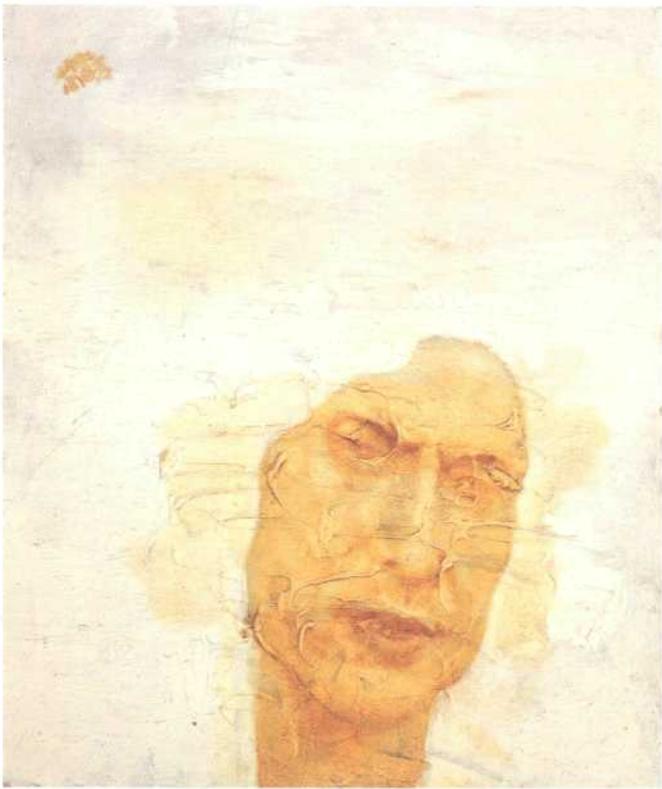


2
Man with Closed Eyes
Oil on canvas
1991
54 x 41 cm
閉著眼睛的男人



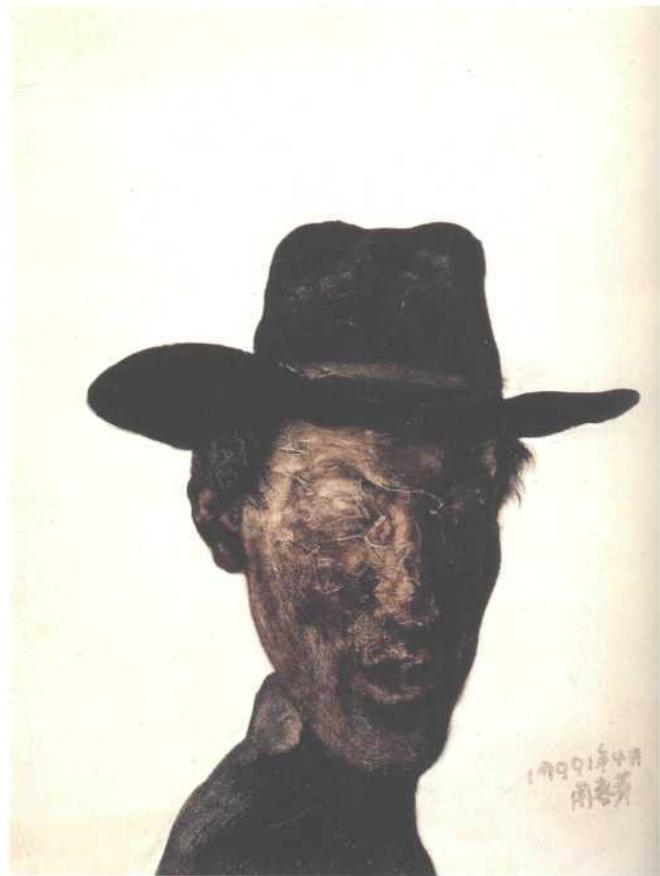
2

3
A Painter
Oil on canvas
1991
53 x 45.5 cm
一個畫家



4

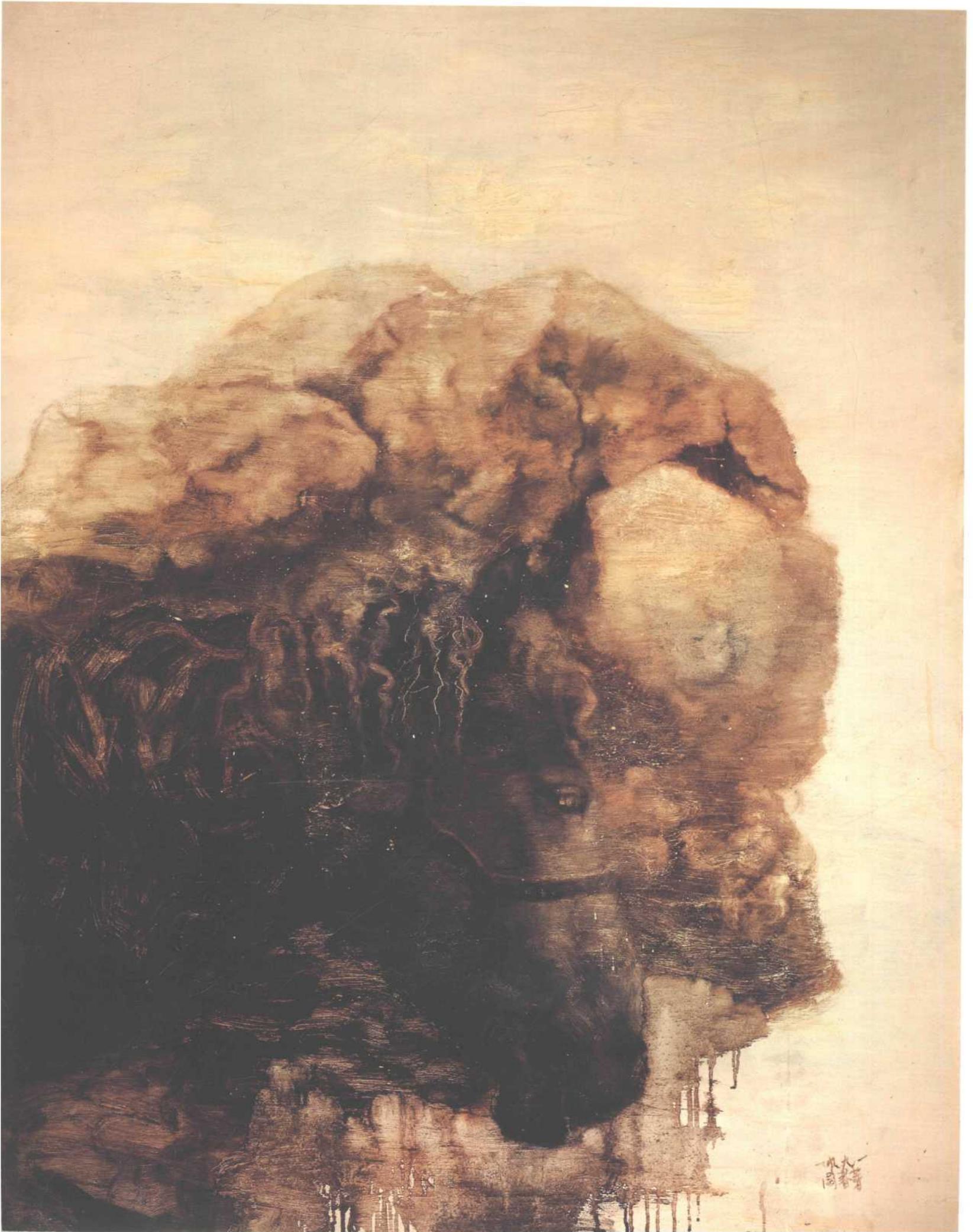
4
Man with a Hat
Oil on canvas
1991
53 x 41 cm
戴帽子的男人



5

5
Dishevelled Man
Oil on canvas
1991
53 x 45.4 cm
蓬著頭髮的男人

6
Horse and Rockery
Oil on canvas
1991
149.3 x 119.5 cm
石頭與馬



7

A Boy

Oil on paper
1990
39.5 × 55 cm
小男孩

8

Woman with Blood Type A

Oil on paper
1990
39.5 × 55 cm
A 型血的女人

9

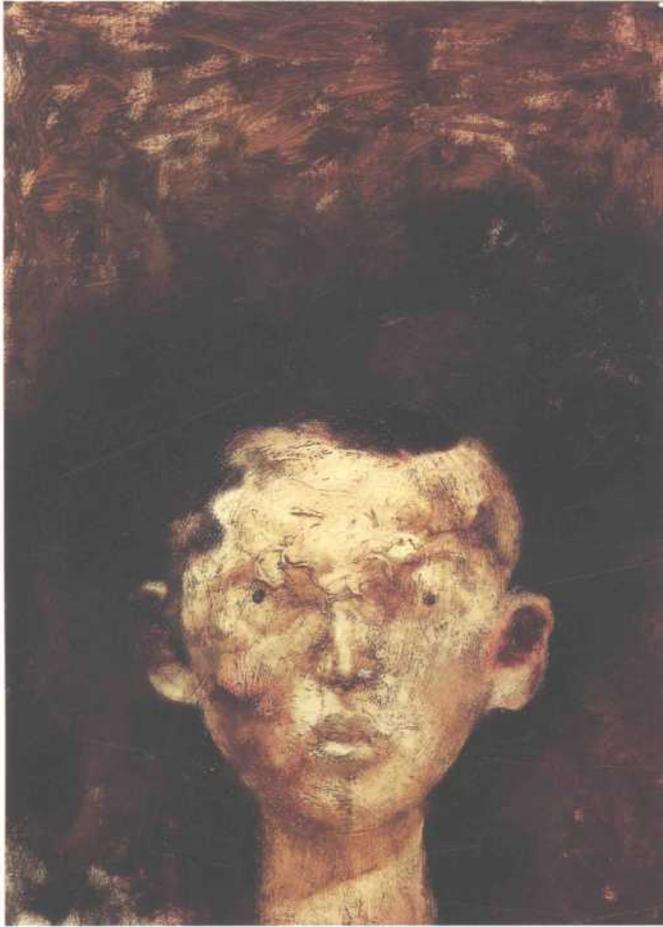
Boy from the Country

Oil on paper
1990
39.5 × 55 cm
市郊的小男孩

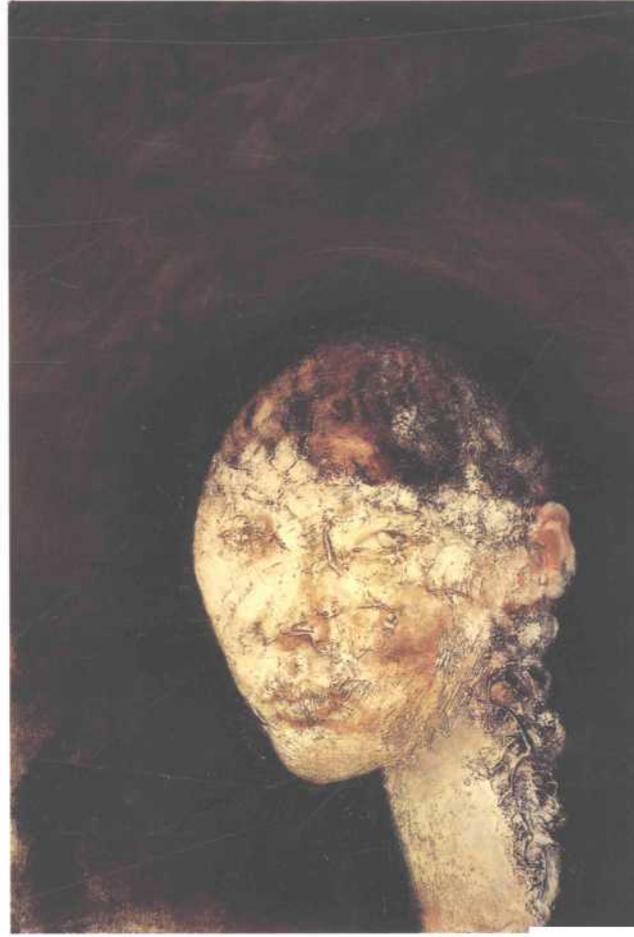
10

Horse in Front of Rocks

Oil on canvas
1991
149 × 129.5 cm
石頭前面的馬



7



8



9



MAO XUHUI
毛旭輝

1
*Parents Diagram with
Red Arch*
Oil on canvas
1990
150 x 120 cm
有拱門的紅色調家長圖

MAO XUHUI

(b. 1955, Chongqing, Sichuan Province)

毛旭輝

Mao Xuhui graduated from the Oil Painting Department of the Yunnan Academy of Fine Arts in 1982. He is currently Art Director of the Kunming Film Company and Secretary for the Yunnan Chinese Artists' Association.

Despite the moving and often disturbing imagery of his paintings, Mao Xuhui believes in the vitality and passion of life. He uses the canvas as an outlet for his emotions, which in turn determine the direction of his artistic approach. The artist often uses human figures with distorted limbs as the main elements of his symbolic vocabulary, conveying the sense of the unease and distorting malaise just below the surface of everyday life.

Mao's vitality is grounded in his call to question the significance of human existence and to protest against death. His series of paintings, *Personal Space*, serves as a protest against the often cruel reality of existence. The contrast between the cold, enclosed area of concrete walls and the living body and soul, creates an unbearable image. The figures in the room are frozen in the act of fleeing, and appear cramped, contorted and petrified, creating a suffocating sense of oppression and persecution. In Mao's recent *Parents* series, the human forms have become increasingly simple and more blurred, yet at the same time convey complex and contradictory emotions. In a typical composition, the blurred and shrunken image of an elderly parent occupies the centre of the composition, enveloped by his own aura which dominates like the altar of a sacred shrine.

"When I place the intangible, irrational, powerful yet vague elements of existence into the magic crucible of Form I experience a sense of pleasure and delight. And this pleasure is also a release.

I am motivated by strong primal impulses and desires. I sometimes want to use violent force to blast open my inner universe, my brain, my soul, all my secrets. To open up, to experience release, to exorcise all my demons; then hang them on the scaffold and walk away."

— Mao Xuhui

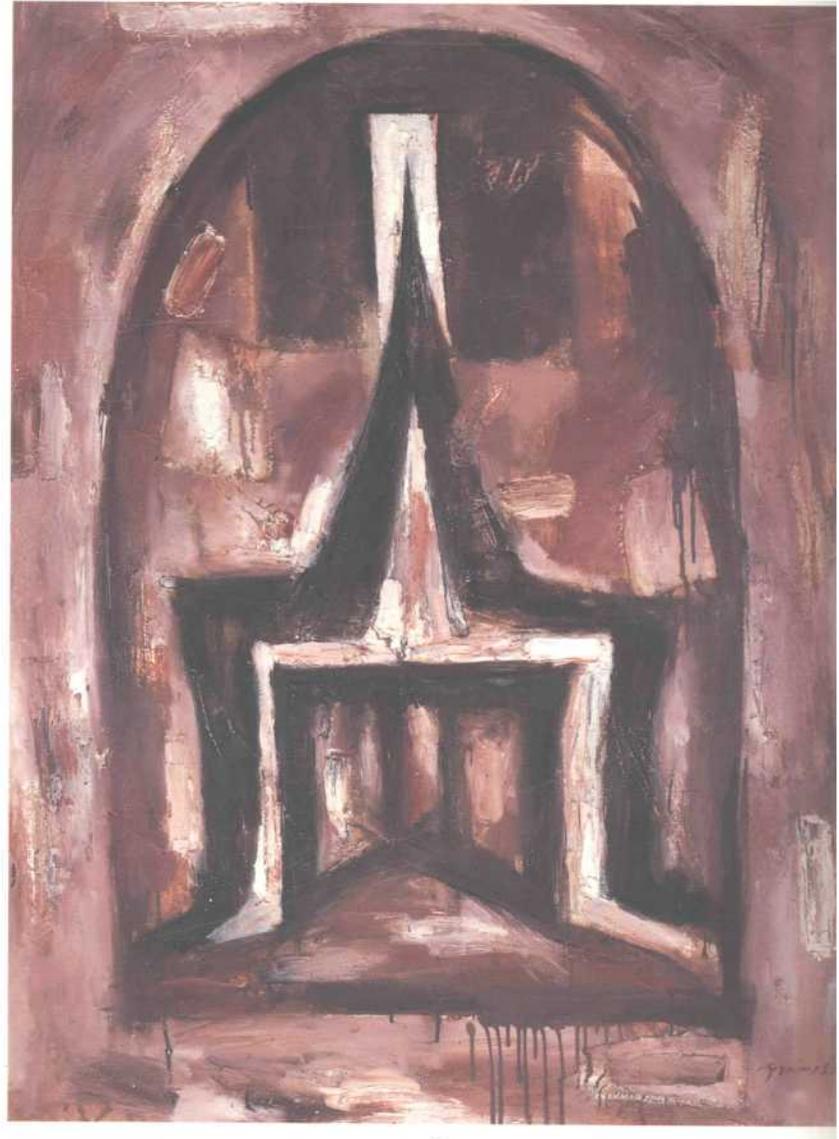


2
**Parents Diagram with
Ochre Arch**
Oil on canvas
1990
120 × 90 cm
有拱門的土紅色調
家長圖

3
**Parents Diagram with
Yellow Arch**
Oil on canvas
1990
120 × 90 cm
有拱門的黃色調
家長圖

4
Parent Series: Black Bell
Oil on canvas
1992
137 × 112 cm
家長系列：黑鐘

5
**Parents Series: Great
Yellow Bell**
Oil on canvas
1991
137 × 112 cm
家長系列：大黃鐘



2



3



4



5

EMOTIONAL BONDAGE:

FETISHISM AND

SADO-MASOCHISM

情結意象：

施虐與受虐

ZHANG PEILI 張培力

ZENG FANZHI 曾凡志

GU DEXIN 顧德鑫

ZHANG YONGJIAN 張永見

SHEN XIAOTONG 沈曉彤

CAI JIN 蔡錦

SONG YONGHONG 宋永紅

WANG JIANWEI 汪建偉

GUO WEI 郭偉

AH XIAN 阿仙

TANG SONG and XIAO LU 唐宋與肖魯

ZHANG PEILI

(b. 1957, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province)

張培力

Zhang Peili received his Master's degree from the Oil Painting Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. He is currently teaching at the Hangzhou Institute of Art and Technology.

Zhang Peili's creative art is sharply pointed at life itself. It is largely a critique of the existential environment of modern Chinese society expressed against the background of modern urban culture. In his works of 1985, the artist reduced human figures to abstract signs and employed grayish, flat colour tones to express the meaningless absurdity of urban culture. Since 1986, the artist has experimented with a variety of media outside of painting. His use of conceptual art and the targeted nature of his expressive language have become increasingly apparent. The artist's main concern is to expose the damage done to the essence and quality of life in specific cultural contexts and living environments, as can be seen in his works *X? – The Glove* and *Art Project, No. 2*. His most recent series of works utilises a reinterpretation of the ubiquitous icons of popular culture and meaningless, repeated gestures to portray the reality of a living environment and an existence that is saturated with authoritarianism.

“Today what we need is a simple spirit, and a clear mode of expression which is easily comprehensible to most people. Although each individual has his own set of standards, basically people's experience is more or less the same. We should not build barriers in the name of art. It is high time that artists were toppled from their pedestals.

The extension of artistic language and expansion of media seem to offer numerous possibilities: but in actuality what we really can select and make use of for our own purposes is limited. In the end, economy and sparseness of language is a virtue.

— Zhang Peili

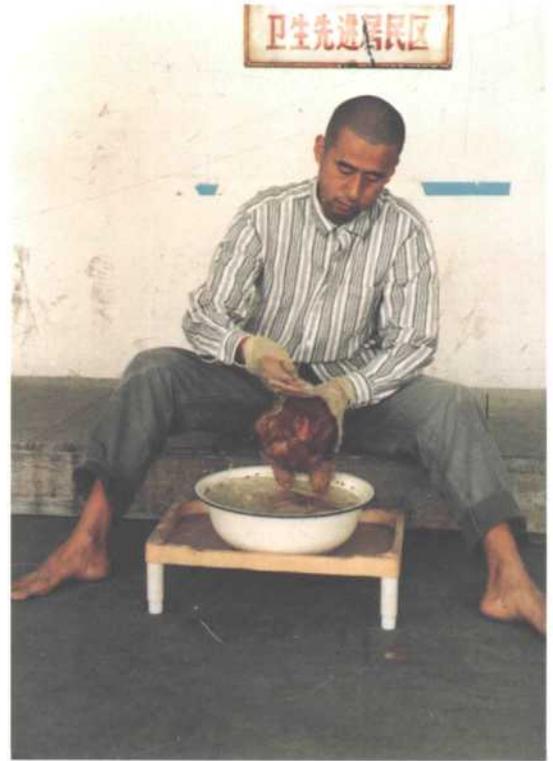
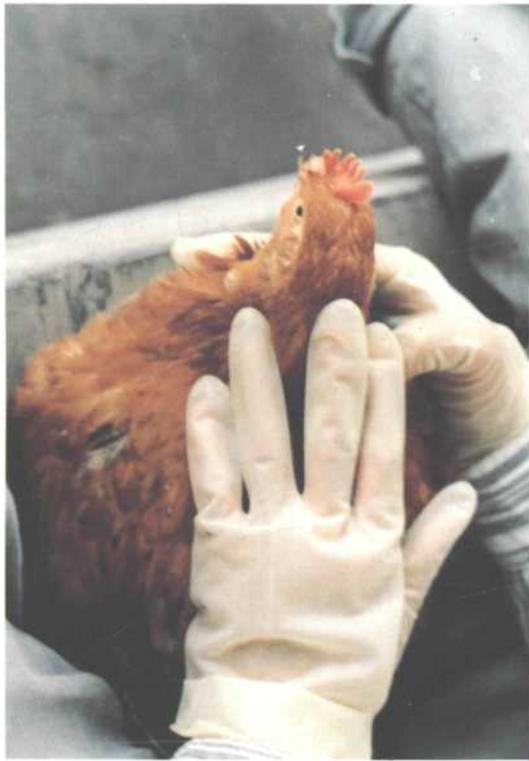
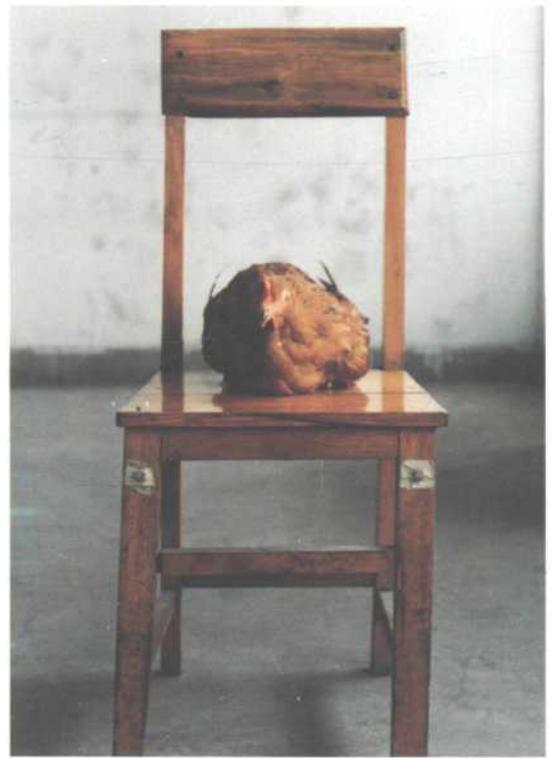
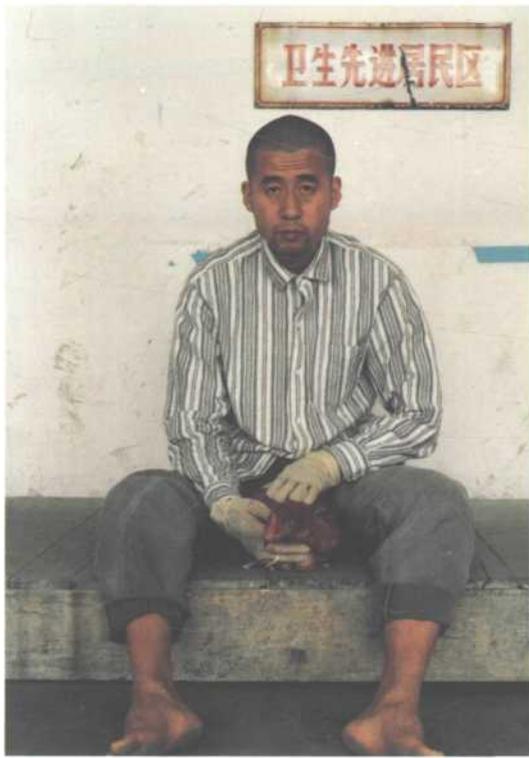


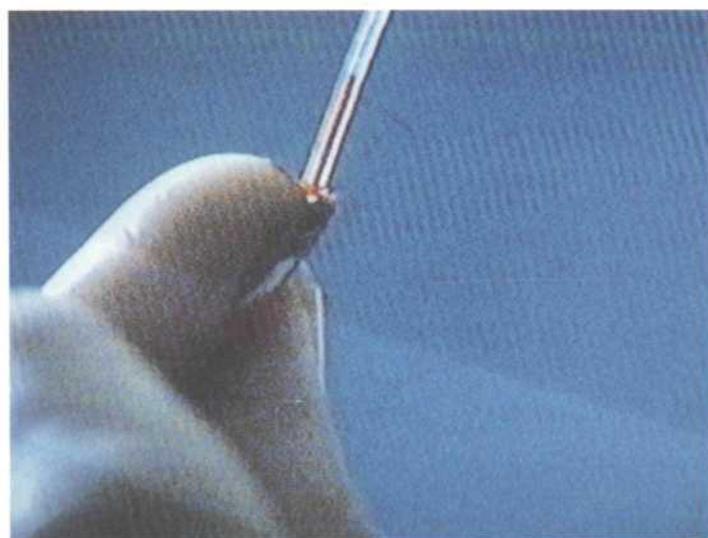
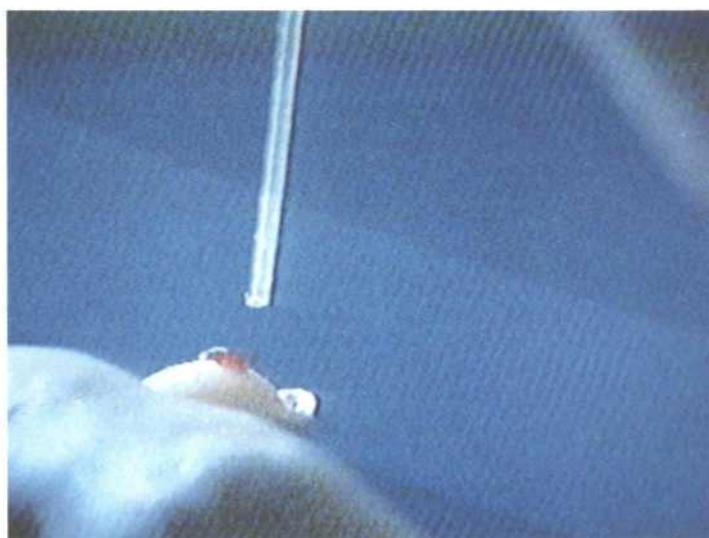
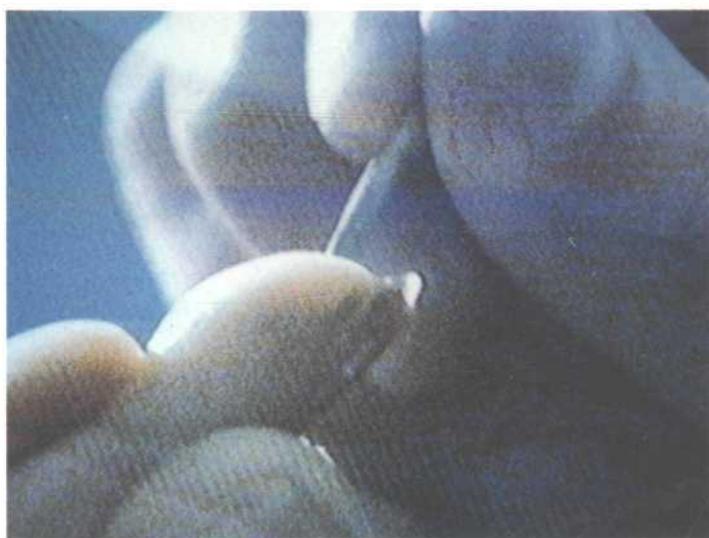
ZHANG PEILI
張培力

1
Red Body Builder
(Diptych)
Oil on canvas
1992
200 × 200 cm
紅色健美

2
Hygiene No. 3
Installation: Video
1991
衛字三號

3
Operation No. 1
Installation: Video
1992
作業一號





ZENG FANZHI
曾凡志

Meat
Oil on canvas
1992
180 x 150 cm
肉

ZENG FANZHI

(b. 1964, Wuhan, Hebei Province)

曾凡志

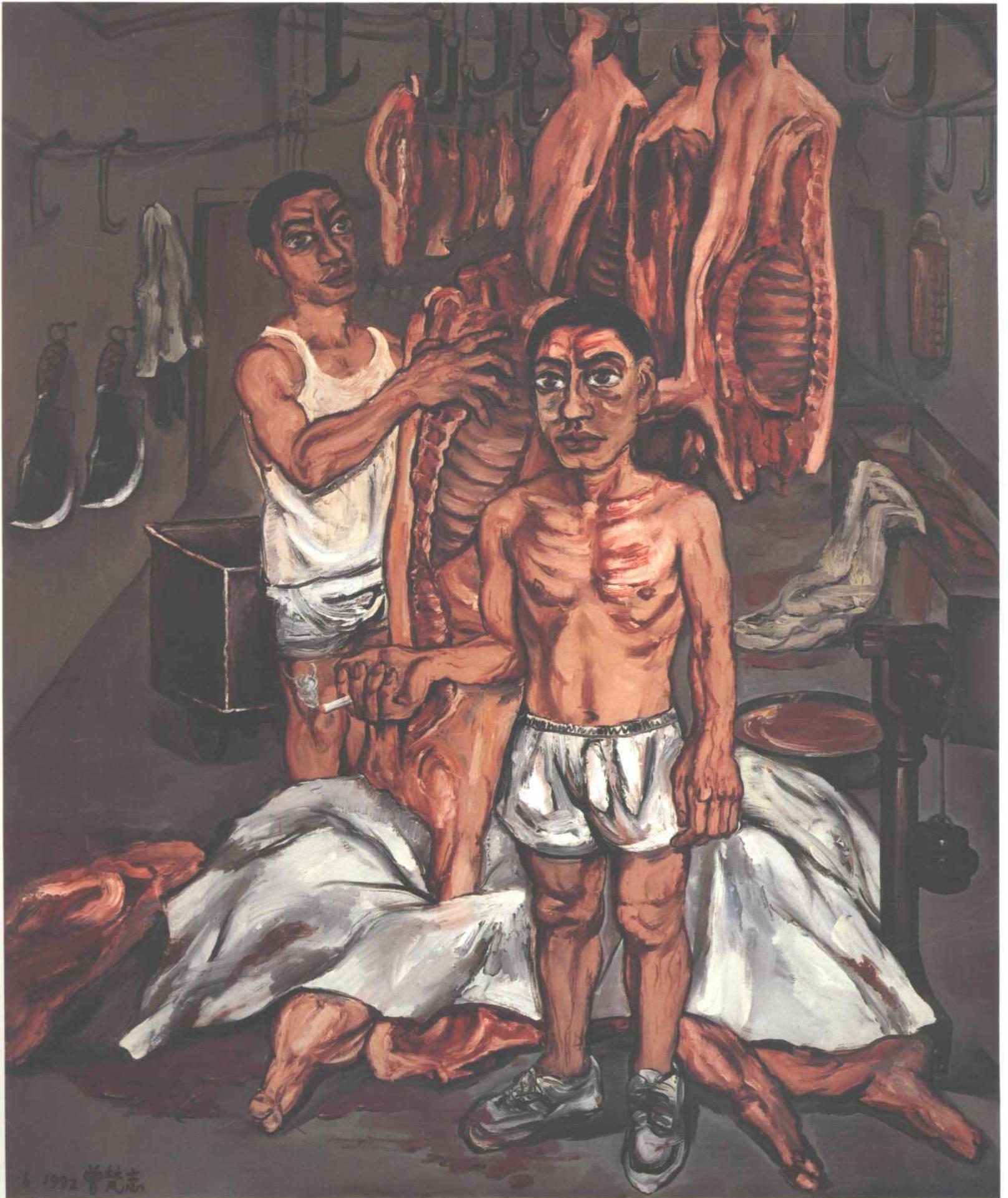
Zeng Fanzhi graduated in 1991 from the Oil Painting Department of the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts. He is currently a full time professional painter.

Zeng Fanzhi utilises variations on the doctor-patient relationship to express his own view of reality. His cold-blooded and cutting Expressionist technique twists and transforms the original relationship of the scientific saviour and the saved into a sado-masochistic relationship of molestor and molested. Hidden just below the surface of these disturbing images is the artist's skepticism toward the possibility of human freedom and dignity.

"Painting is a painful process; it forces the human figures in my painting into a state of pain and anxiety. I paint images of people in tragic situations, and they express everything that I want to express.

I don't want to paint everything I see. I only want to paint what appears in the depths of my soul. I firmly believe that I can only reproduce my own image; actually, this is my only choice."

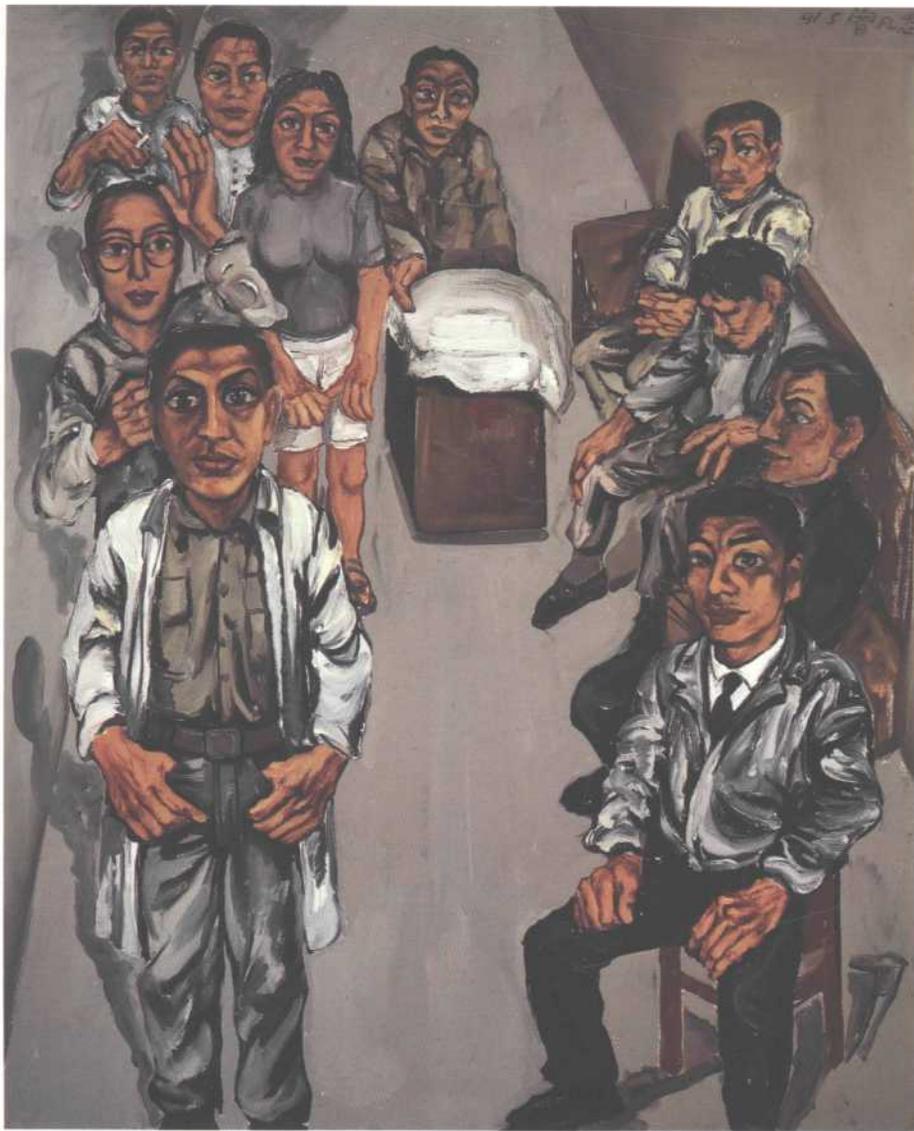
— Zeng Fanzhi



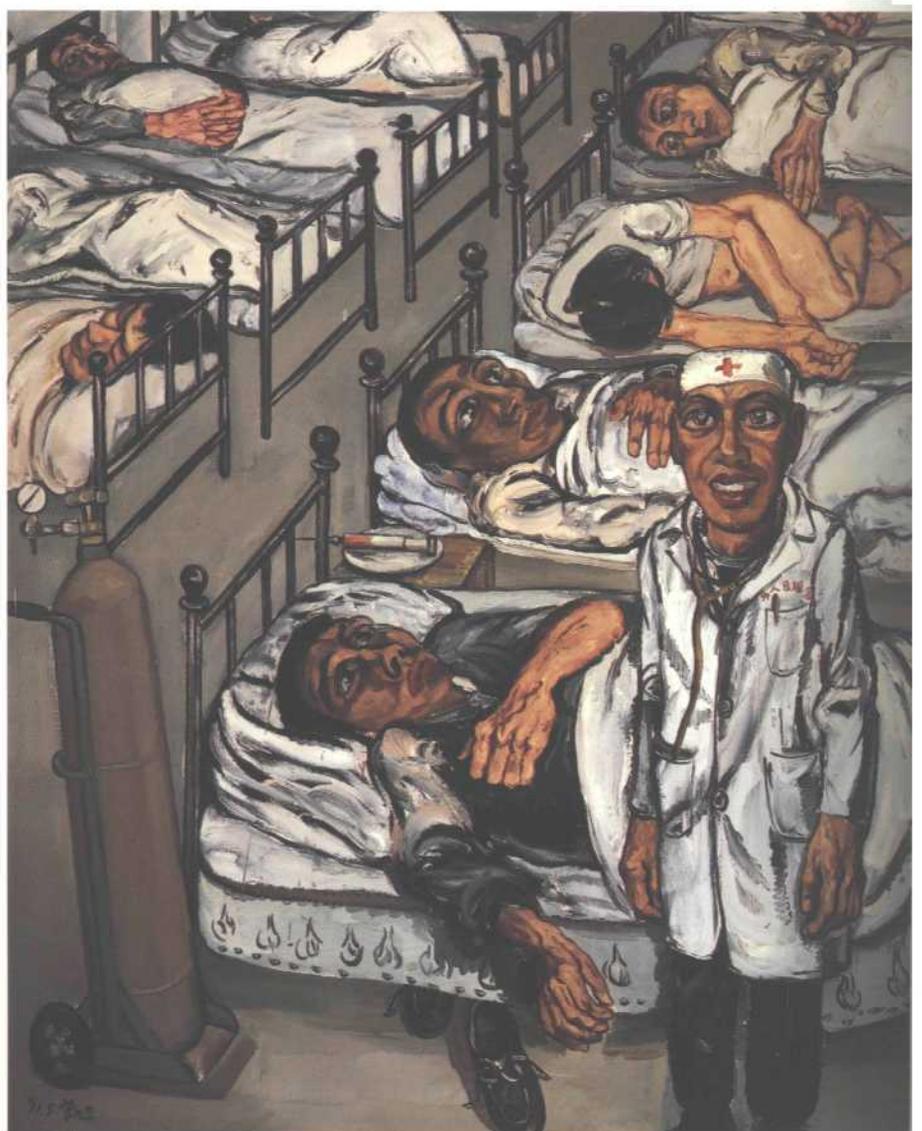
2
Hospital Triptych (Left)
Oil on canvas
1991
180 × 150 cm
協和三聯系列 (之左)

3
Hospital Triptych (Right)
Oil on canvas
1991
180 × 150 cm
協和三聯系列 (之右)

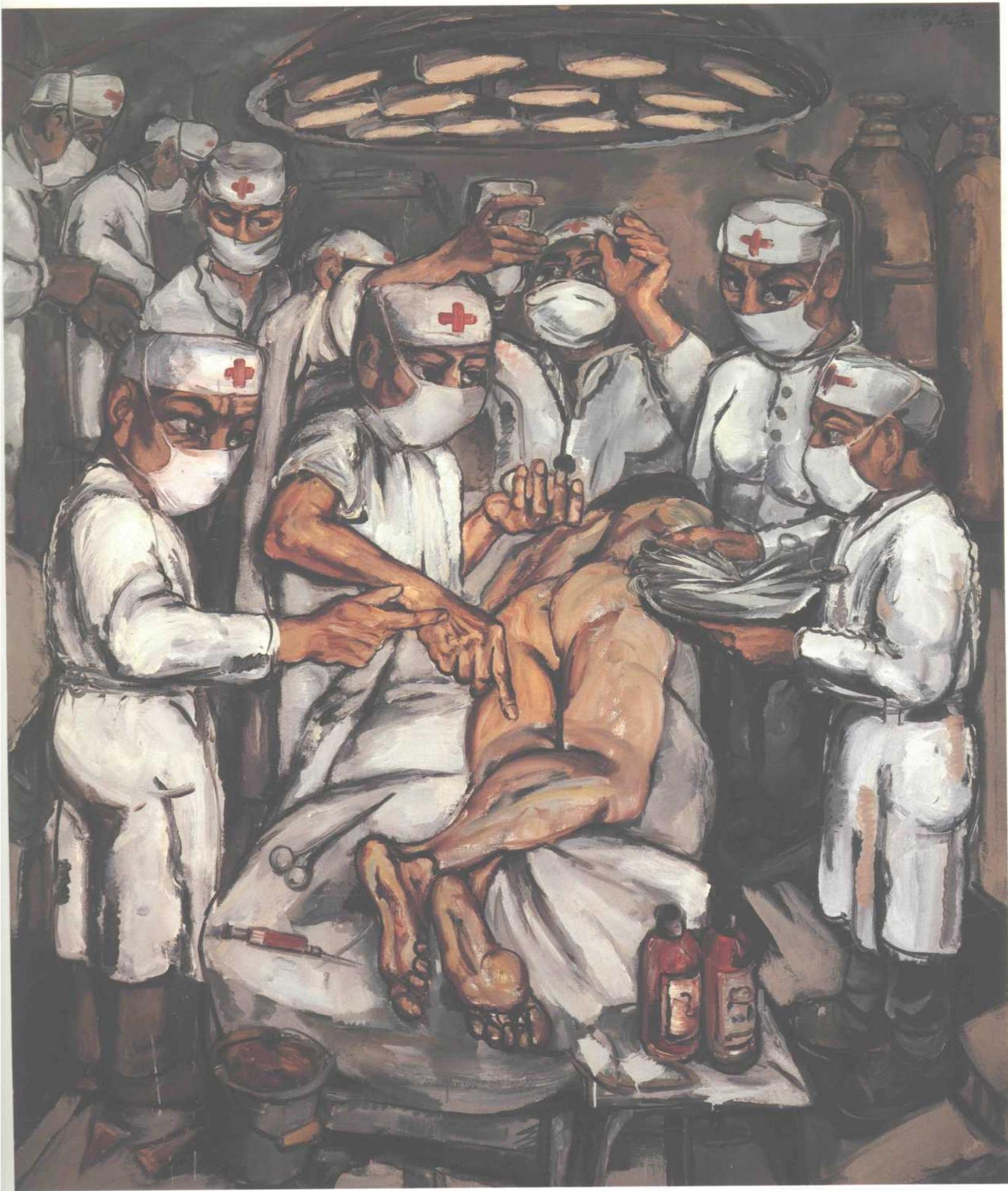
4
Hospital Triptych (Centre)
Oil on canvas
1991
180 × 150 cm
協和三聯系列 (之中)



2



3



GU DEXIN

(b. 1962, Beijing)

顧德鑫

Gu Dexin is a self-taught professional artist.

Compared to other artists who are constantly struggling to come to terms with their cultural destiny and issues of the history of art, Gu Dexin is an unconventional artist. Gu has never received nor desired a formal academy training, which in part has enabled him to break away from the tangled metaphysical questions of art and culture and to turn instead to a direct confrontation with his own nature.

The primal emotional state is Gu's point of entry into existential questions. Gu's earlier works, in particular his groups of half-human, half-beast clay figures with their outrageous forms, bright colors and exaggerated body parts reveal a lusty and ingenuous primitive humour.

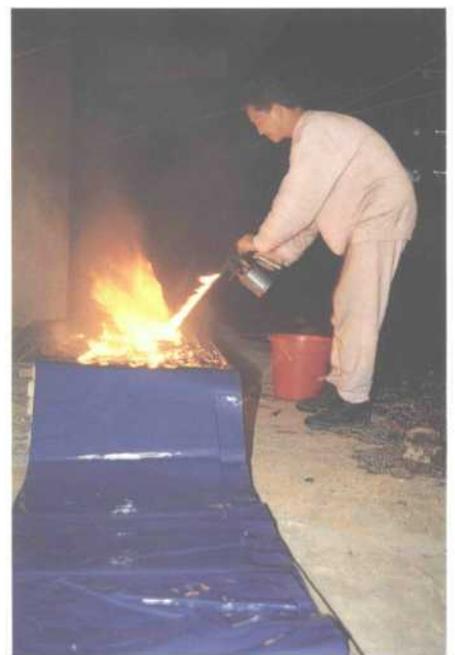
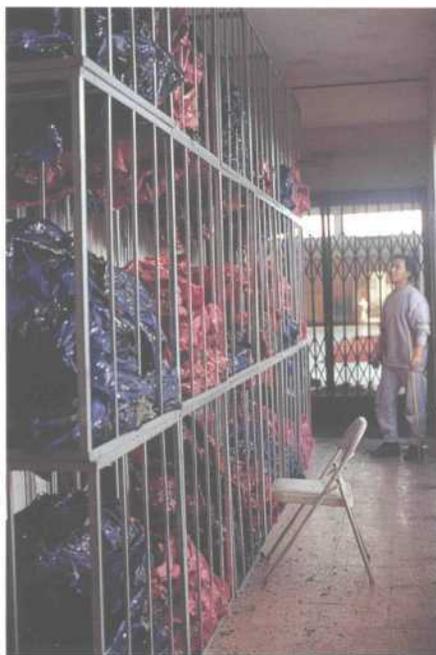
In Gu's more recent *Plastic* series, this romantic yearning for the primitive evolves into a more conceptual expression of the suppression of the primitive in present existential reality. Gu uses plastic waste materials which are put through a firing process, after which they are revealed as unexpected, twisted shapes, like tortured and deformed life forms, harbouring a painful and suppressed sense of being, and a cruel sense of alienation. The process of burning, with its quality of manipulation, has become the essential element of Gu's vocabulary in expressing the distortion of the human spirit when the positive vitality of the primitive is denied.

"I have always been interested in people. Anyway, one is forced to find inspiration outside of art. There is nothing more to discover within the realm of art itself."

— Gu Dexin



1



1

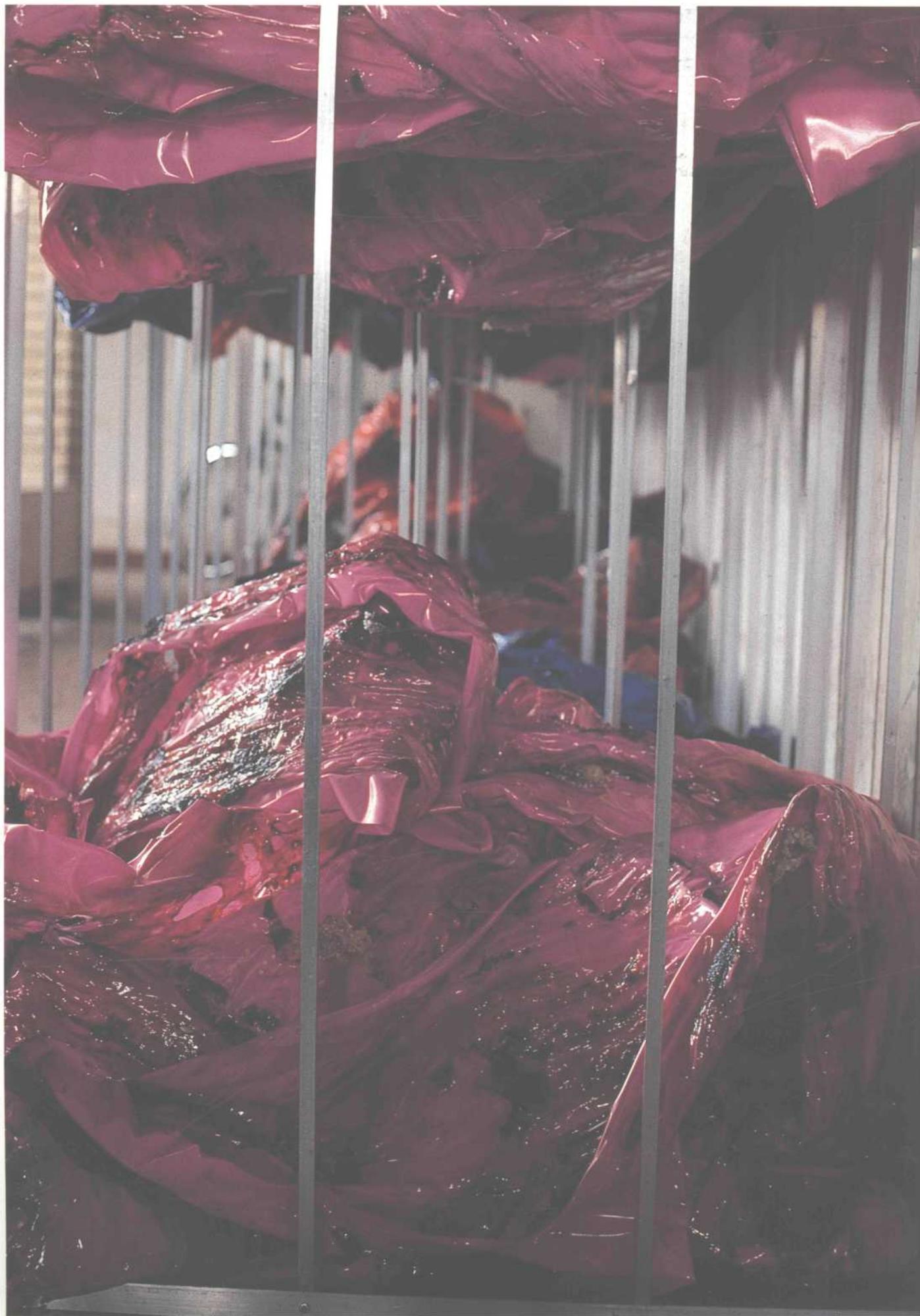
2
detail of illustration 1
插圖1 局部

3
detail
作品細部

4
detail from
Feb 1989 for 'China
Avant-garde' Exhibition,
Beijing
Installation in plastic
1989
〈一九八九年二月〉
為〈中國前衛〉大展作，
北京
(細部)

5
detail from
Summer 1989, for
'Magician of the Earth'
Exhibition, Pompidou
Centre, Paris
Installation in plastic
1989
〈一九八九夏〉
為法國〈大地魔師〉
大展作，巴黎
(細部)

6
4 August 1990, for 'Next
Phase' Exhibition,
Wapping, London
Installation in plastic
1990
〈一九九〇年八月四日〉
為〈下一步〉大展作，
倫敦





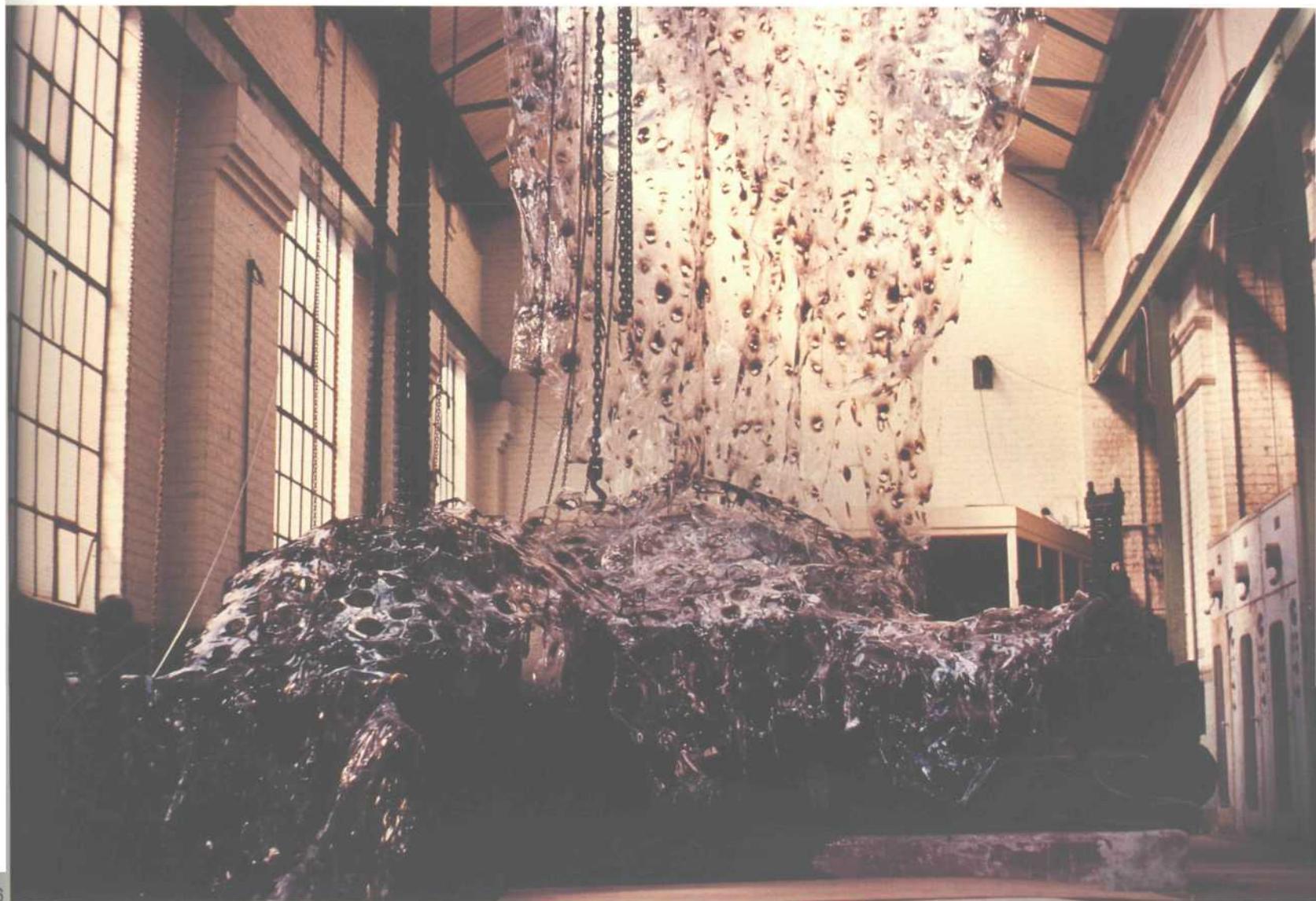
3



4



5



6

ZHANG YONGJIAN

(b. 1958, Shandong Province)

張永見

Zhang Yongjian graduated in 1980 from the Art Department of Shandong Jining Normal College. He presently works in the Sculpture Division of the Jining Municipal Public Works Department.

Zhang Yongjian's sculptures contain a sensuous quality of manipulation that bring to mind Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, or the works of Francis Bacon. In Zhang's work *Stein Hat*, red rubber material is burned into soft, amorphous shapes. Its pliable surface is then pierced and cut by metal bolts, forcing it to twist and turn into irregular forms; or is fixed onto metal brackets reminiscent of the rack and screw. Through this sense of torture visited on the material object, one feels the fragility of life and the cruelty of existence, where cold and ruthless oppression is visited so often on the weak and helpless. Zhang Yongjian's work goes beyond preconceived notions of aesthetics, seeking inspiration from a direct communication with the material itself.

"In that split second when concept and long-accumulated material come together, something new comes into being.

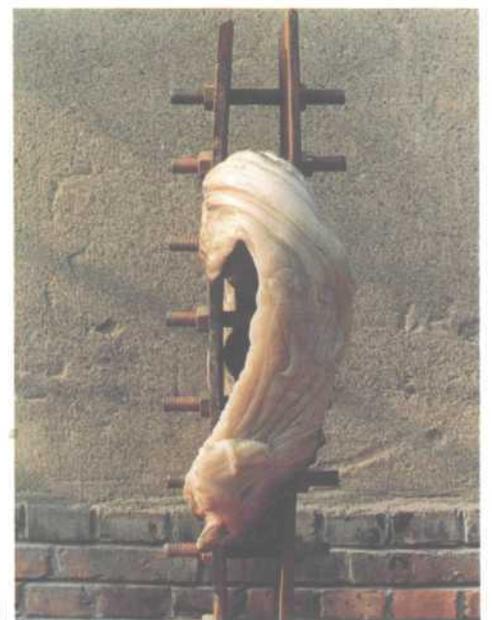
The material world exists simultaneously with human culture. It is the job of the artist to give them new vitality, and use them to mobilise his or her own inner experience and happiness.

There is nothing more startling than degeneracy and decay, and nothing more able to keep history on the path of evolution; for these transcend time and space. Convulsions, oppression, comas, degeneracy and the sublime are the overriding themes in my works right now."

— Zhang Yongjian



1



1

2

High Noon

Soft rubber

1992

46 × 52 × 67 cm

正午

3

Crimson Red Case

Burnt plastic, lacquered

box with mirror

1986

70 × 43 × 20 cm

猩紅匣子

4

Red Gate

Plastic, iron

1992

50 × 52 × 36 cm

赤色大門

5

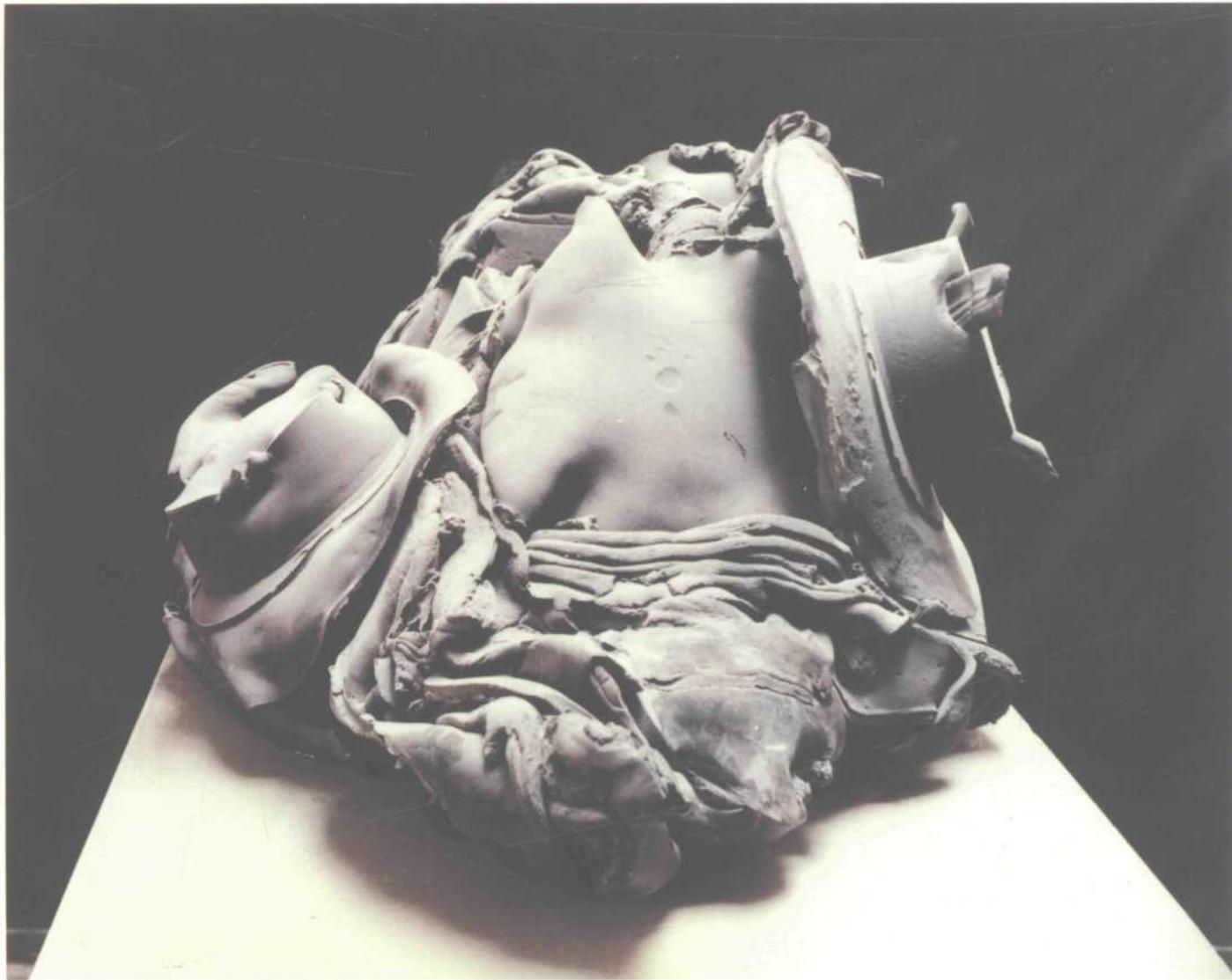
Meat Clamps (I)

Plastic, iron, wood

1992

38 × 50 × 46 cm

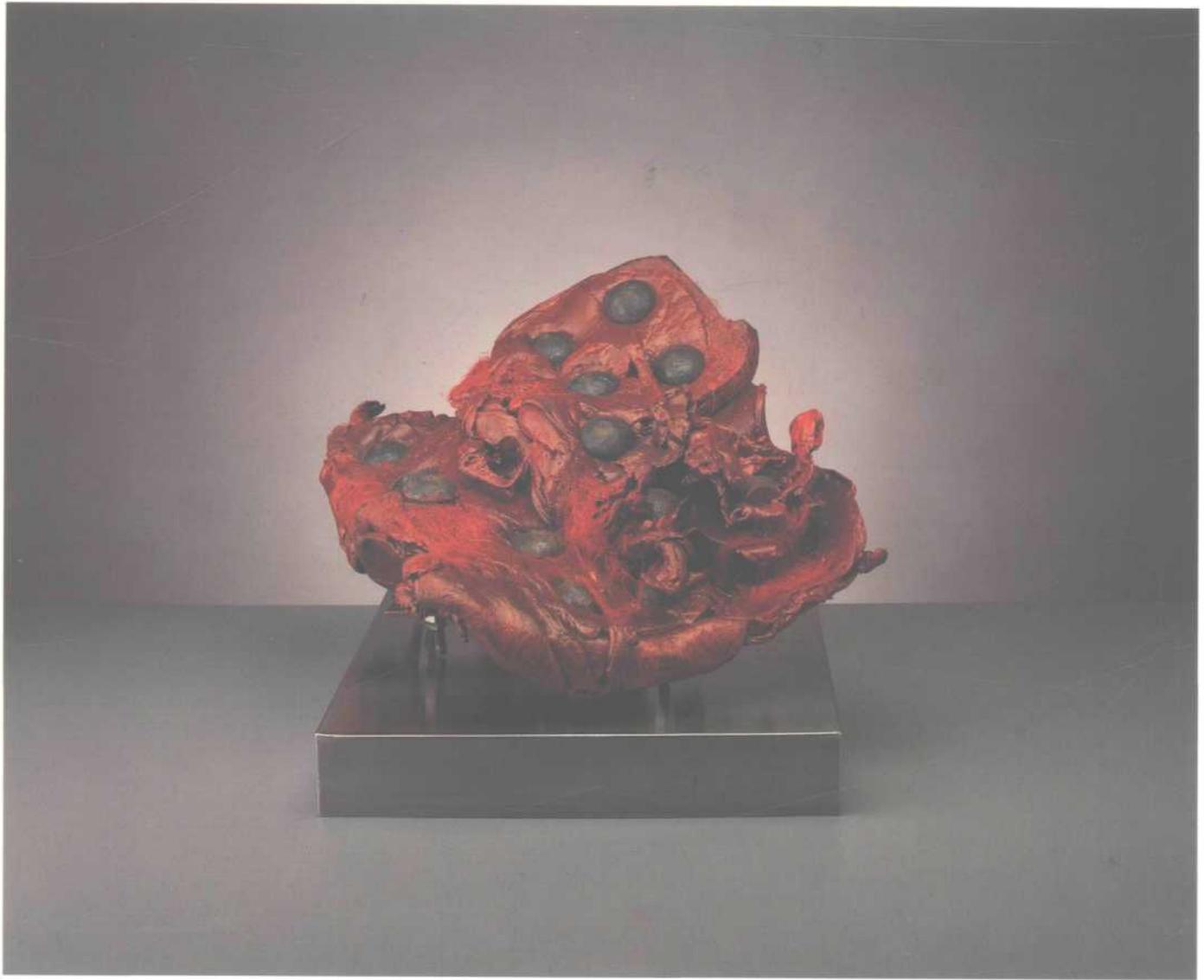
肉夾之一



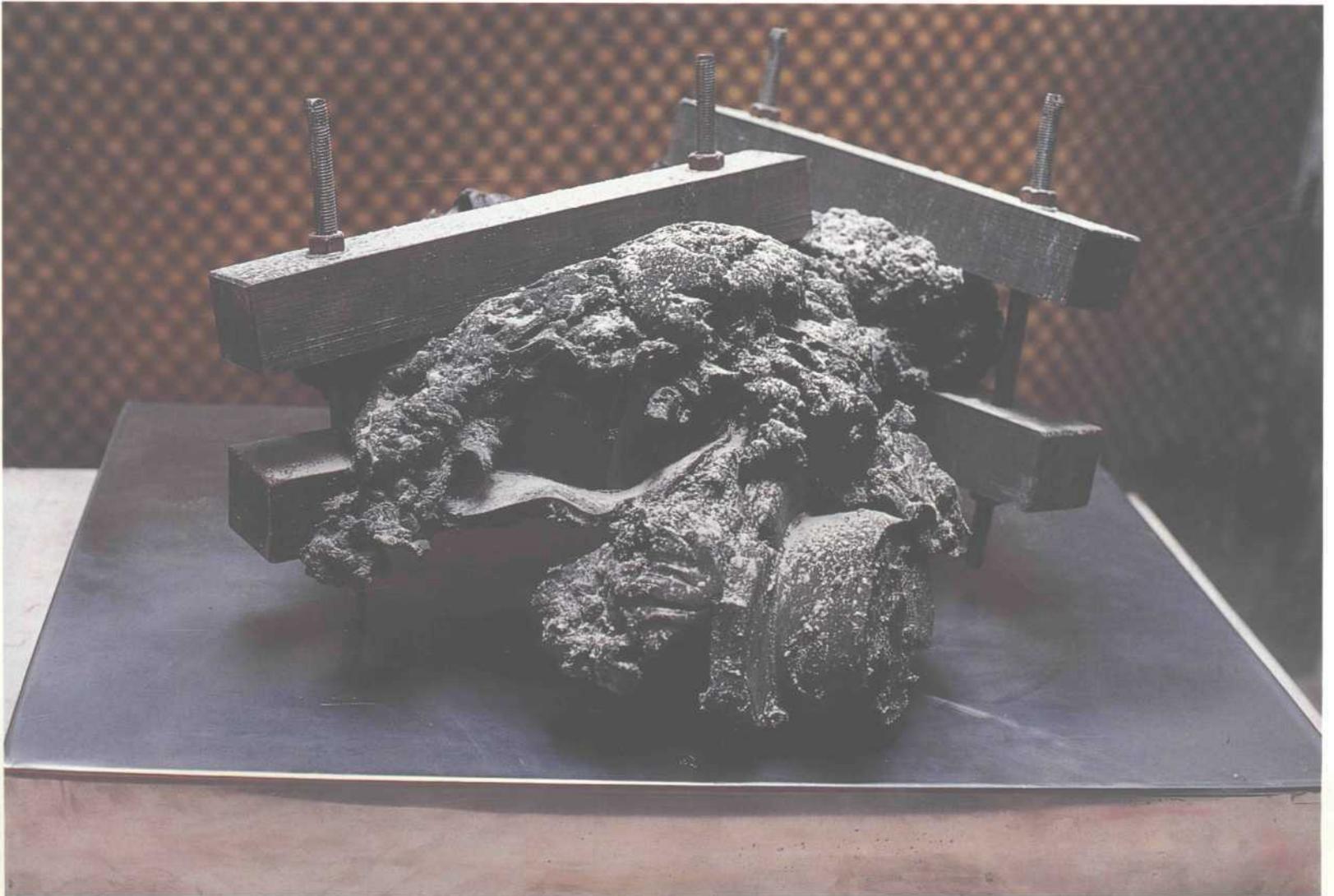
2



3



4



5

SHEN XIAOTONG
沈曉彤

1
People Flooded in Red,
No. 1
Oil on canvas
1992
200 x 150 cm
朱紅下的一些人 (一)

2-3
Train Carriage: Darkness
Outside (Set of six)
Oil on canvas
1992
200 x 70 cm (6)
列車：窗外黑乎乎
(六幅一組)

SHEN XIAOTONG

(b. 1968, Chengdu, Sichuan Province)

沈曉彤

Shen Xiaotong graduated from the Painting Department of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts in 1989. He makes his living as a professional artist.

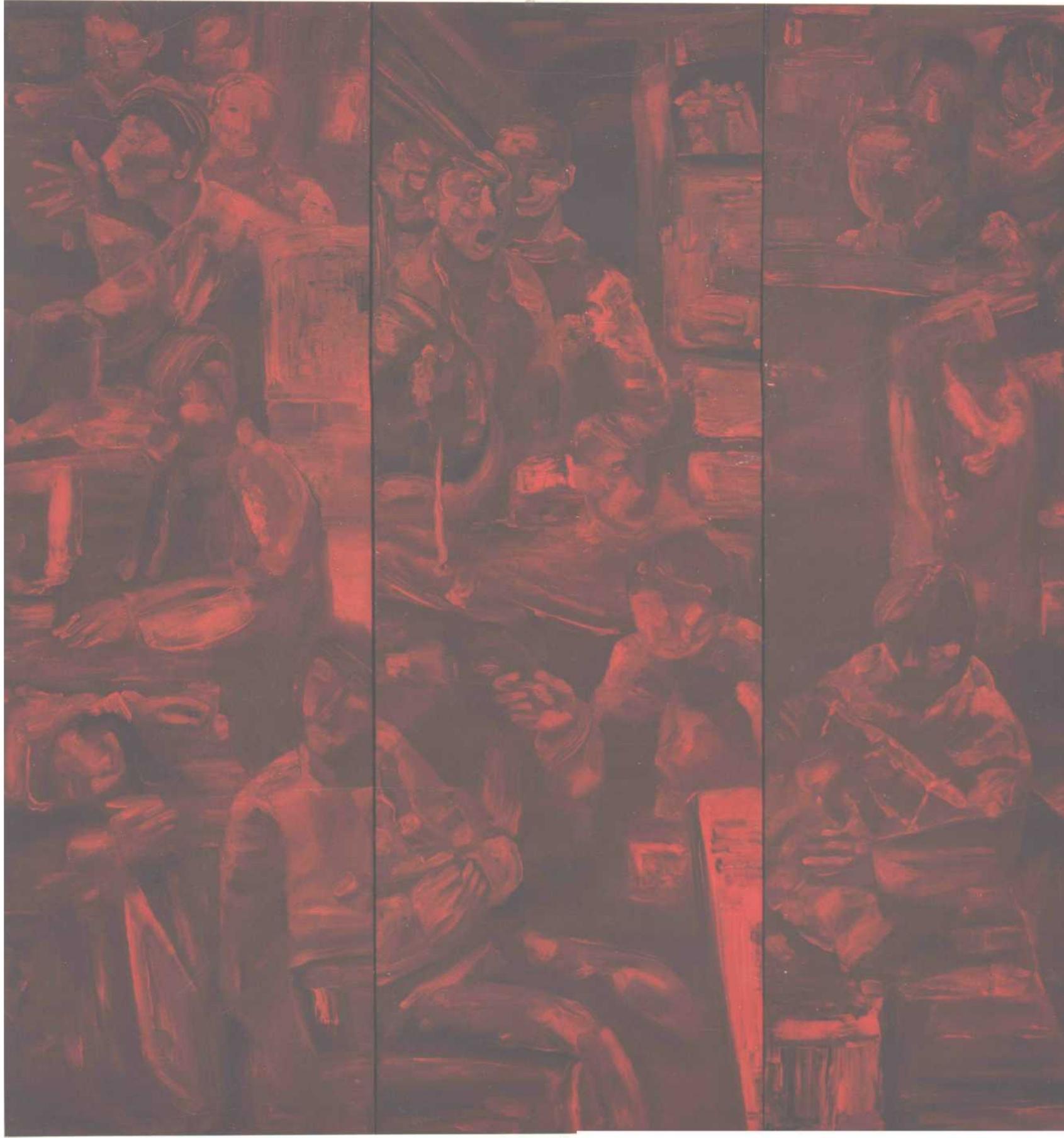
In his creative work, Shen's point of departure is self-reflection. His early works reflect his sense of contradiction in the face of "nightmarish" reality: a contradiction of, on the one hand, his powerlessness, confusion and helpless acceptance of the absurdity of reality, and on the other his skepticism, restlessness, and self-alienation in the face of his own cowardice.

In his recent works the artist has departed from his earlier symbolic tendencies and instead uses more emotionally direct imagery, painting disturbing portraits of people in crowds: their faces are blurred, their expressions vague. For Shen, these portraits act as a provocative means of "awakening the love and hatred sleeping deep inside each one's soul." Red is now the dominant colour of Shen's palette because, to him, red symbolises Chinese culture — not the vibrant red of politics but the "dark blood red at the heart of our culture."

"Perhaps because I have read too many martial arts novels, I have become a little bit like the characters in those books. Or maybe because of my nostalgia for history, I like to paint a broad spectrum of human types and capture the deep feelings they generate on the canvas.

I sometimes wonder if this is a sort of responsibility that results from my observations of the life around me. Actually, I fervently hope that my paintings will help me to recover my lost sense of honour and self-respect. Yet painting is no fun, it's too academic. Even though painting comes easily to me, I find it to be something terribly solemn."

— Shen Xiaotong







CAI JIN
蔡錦

CAI JIN

(b. 1965, Anhui Province)

蔡錦

1
Large Banana Plant, No. 15
Oil on canvas
1992
160 × 150 cm
大美人蕉 (之十五)

2
Large Banana Plant, No. 14
Oil on canvas
1992
160 × 150 cm
大美人蕉 (之十四)

3
Banana Plant, No. 8
Oil on canvas
1992
120 × 110 cm
美人蕉 (之八)

4
Banana Plant, No. 9
Oil on canvas
1992
120 × 110 cm
美人蕉 (之九)

5
Banana Plant, No. 10
Oil on canvas
1992
120 × 110 cm
美人蕉 (之十)

6
Banana Plant, No. 11
Oil on canvas
1992
120 × 110 cm
美人蕉 (之十一)

Cai Jin graduated from the Fine Arts Department of Anhui University in 1986. In 1991 she received her Master's degree from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. She took part in several national exhibitions, and in 1991 held a solo exhibition in the gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Her works were displayed in the 1987 *International Oil Painting Exhibition* in Paris.

Though Cai Jin has not been directly influenced by Western Surrealism, her paintings make use of certain surrealistic modes of expression, such as automatic painting. Although she paints people and objects, the images in her paintings defy any attempt to give them a clearly defined significance. In visual terms, her paintings are realistic; in conceptual terms, they are symbolic. Her works have recently found a strong personal idiom in the *Banana Plant* series, in which sensuality and decay merge in an almost fetish-like obsession with wilting banana plants.

"The colour red drives me insane. Whenever I use it, I wield my brush with extraordinary sensitivity. This is a matter that dominates my experience. . . . The red on my paintings gives off a gamey odour which pervades my mind and my senses. The odour flows from my brush, and even more so from my mind, and congeals in my paintings."

— Cai Jin

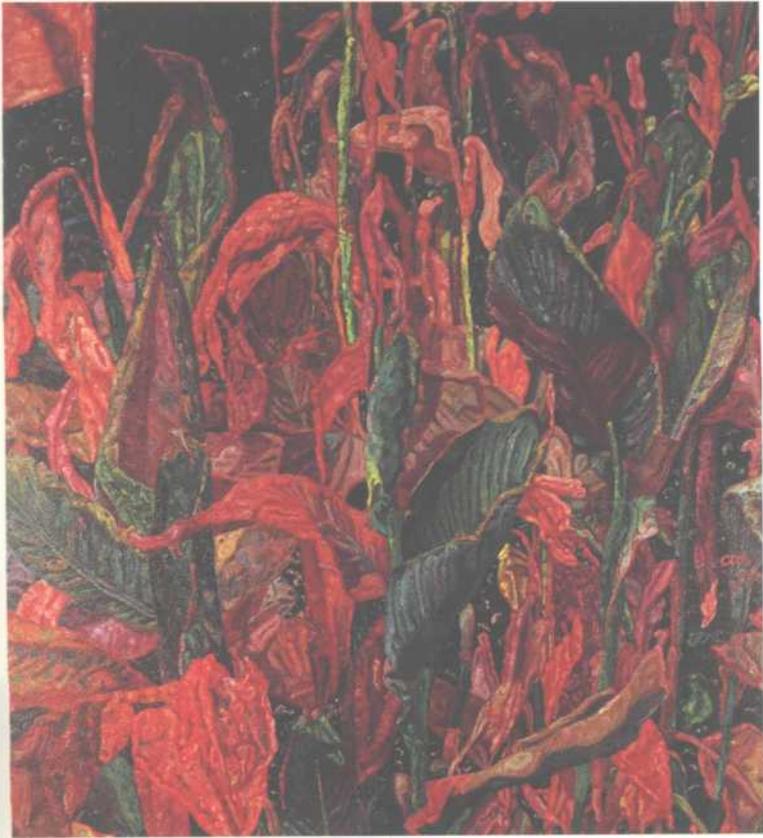




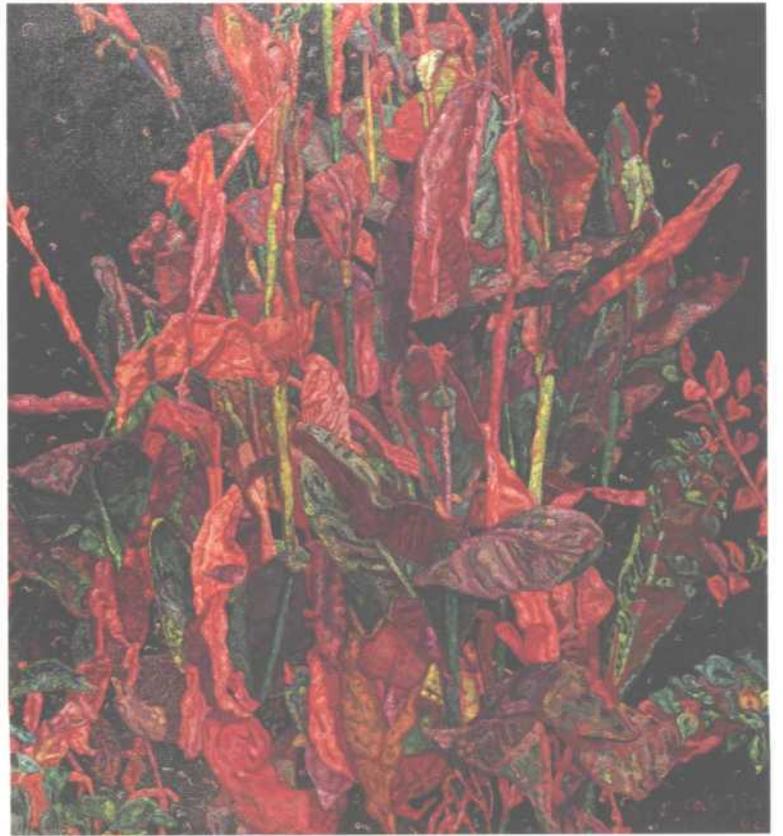
Cai Jien
1992



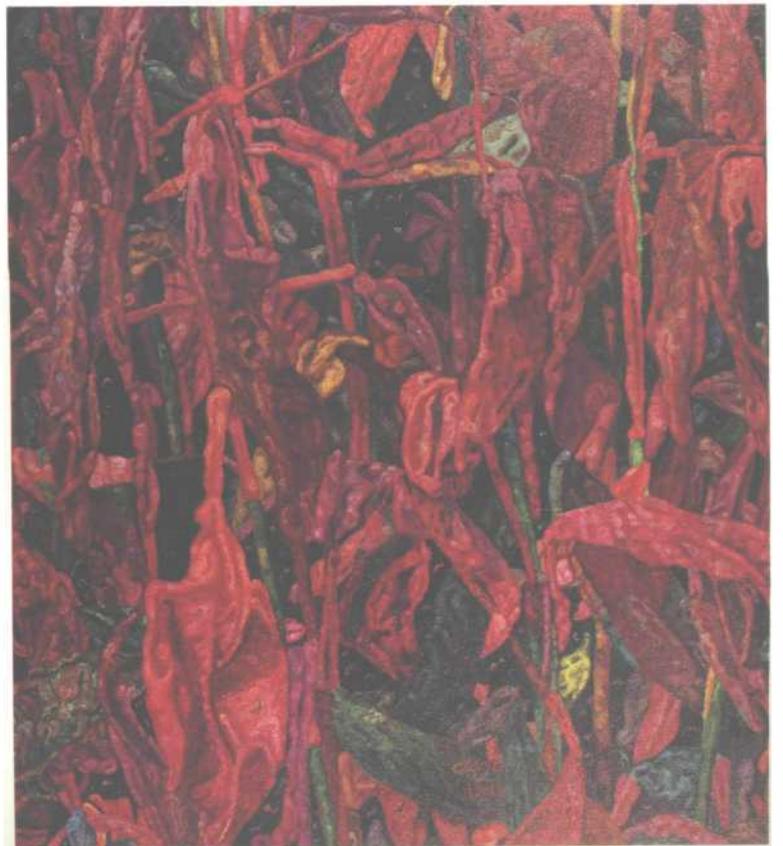
3



4



5



6

SONG YONGHONG

宋永紅

Real Illusions

Oil on canvas

1992

81 × 100 cm

真實的幻覺

2

Sleeping Berth

Oil on canvas

1992

81 × 100 cm

臥鋪車廂

SONG YONGHONG

(b. 1966, Hebei Province)

宋永紅

Song Yonghong graduated from the Printmaking Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. He currently teaches at the Beijing Institute of Technology.

Song Yonghong's work created a strong impact when it was exhibited at the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in Beijing. His response to the developing trend toward conceptual art in the New Wave movement of the Eighties was to introduce into his painting the concept of "many burning realities" to signal his own sense of "unmentionable" malaise, sexual anxiety, and repression in the face of present-day social conditions in China. This sense of "not being able to speak out" gives his works a quality of voyeuristic insight into life's strange and absurd tableaux. In Song's haunting paintings inner restlessness and anxiety are transfixed or frozen by this inarticulateness, and so are made even more frightening.

"My art reflects my absolute interest in my own environment. To transcend the rational and the power of habit and custom is most exhilarating. The world I live in provides me with my basic creative material. The elements of my creative intention blend with this world and distill its most suggestive and moving aspects into my painting. I don't believe that concrete concepts can solve the problem of inspiration for artists. I only believe in the realm of intuition and its many burning realities."

— Song Yonghong



3

Professional Smile

Oil on canvas

1992

180 x 300 cm

職業微笑

4

(Hammer) Hindrance

Oil on canvas

1992

81 x 100 cm

(鏈子) 障礙





3



4

5

Riding in a Bus
Oil on canvas
1991
100 × 100 cm
乘公共汽車

6

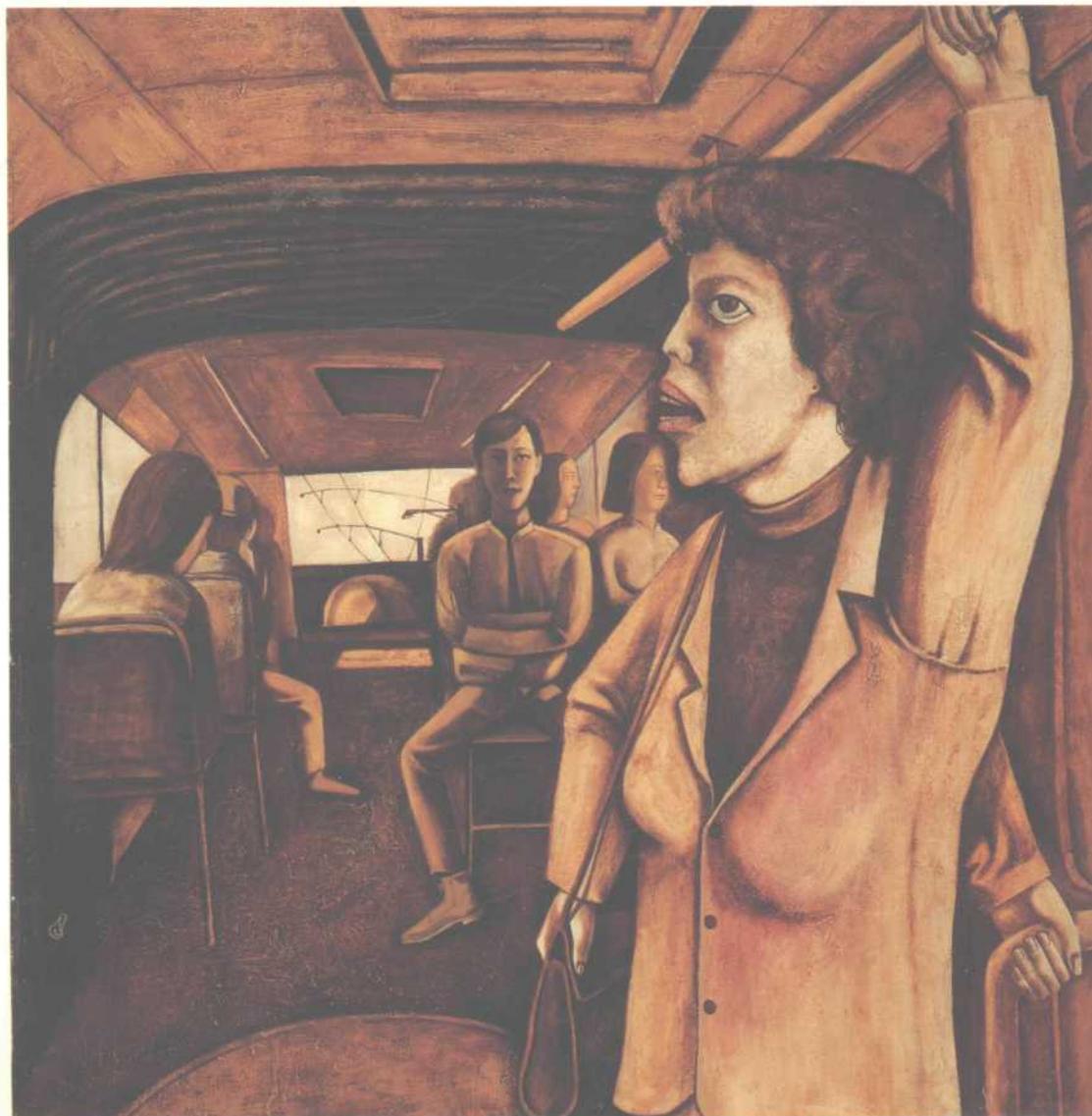
*A Man and Woman
Manipulated by Fate*
Oil on canvas
100 × 100 cm
被命運左右的一個
男人和一個女人

7

Conversation
Oil on canvas
1991
40 × 50 cm
談話

8

Today
Oil on canvas
1991
100 × 100 cm
今天



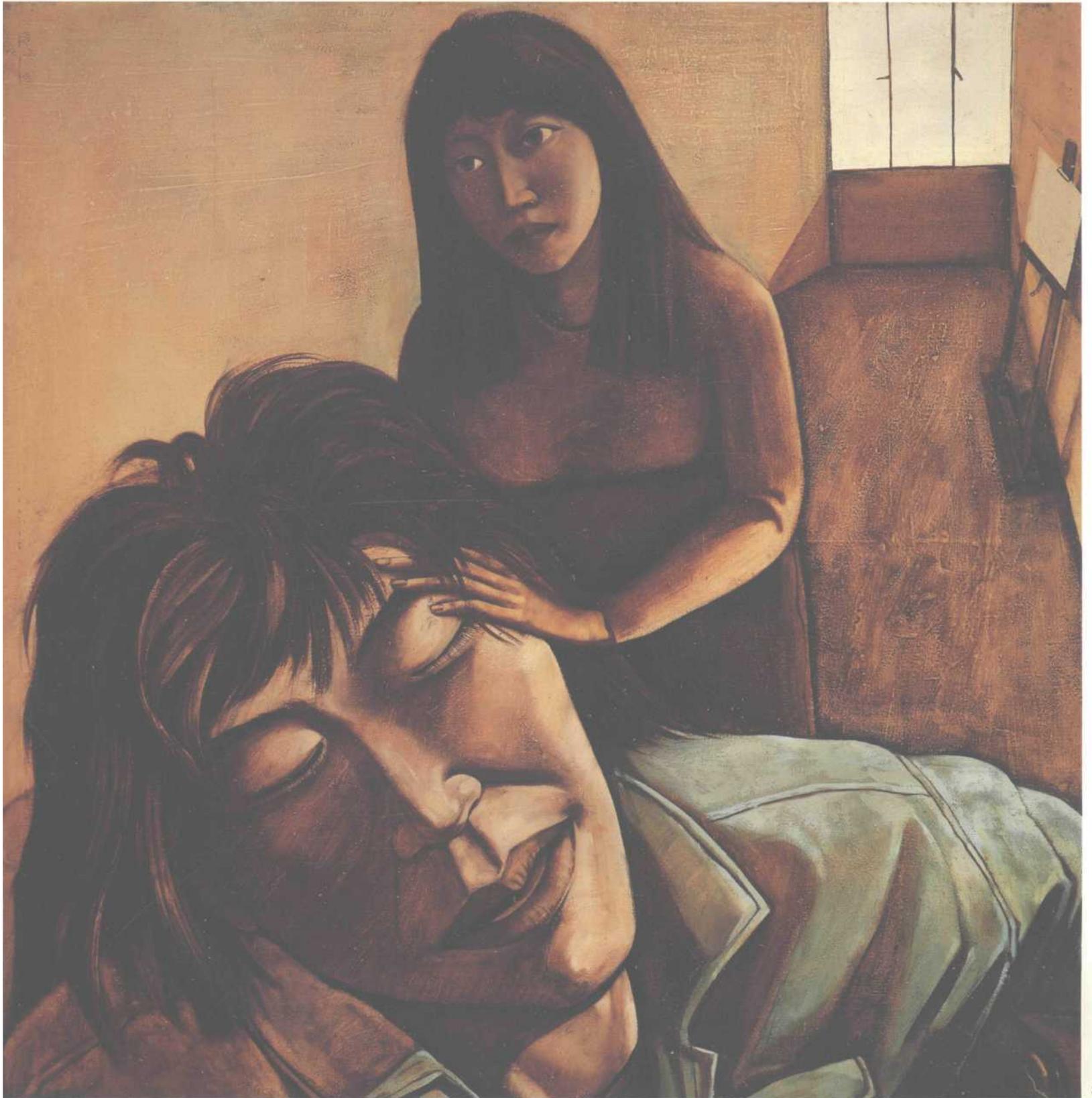
5



6



7



8

WANG JIANWEI

(b. 1958, Sichuan Province)

汪建偉

Wang Jianwei received his Master's degree from the Oil Painting Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. He makes his living as a professional artist.

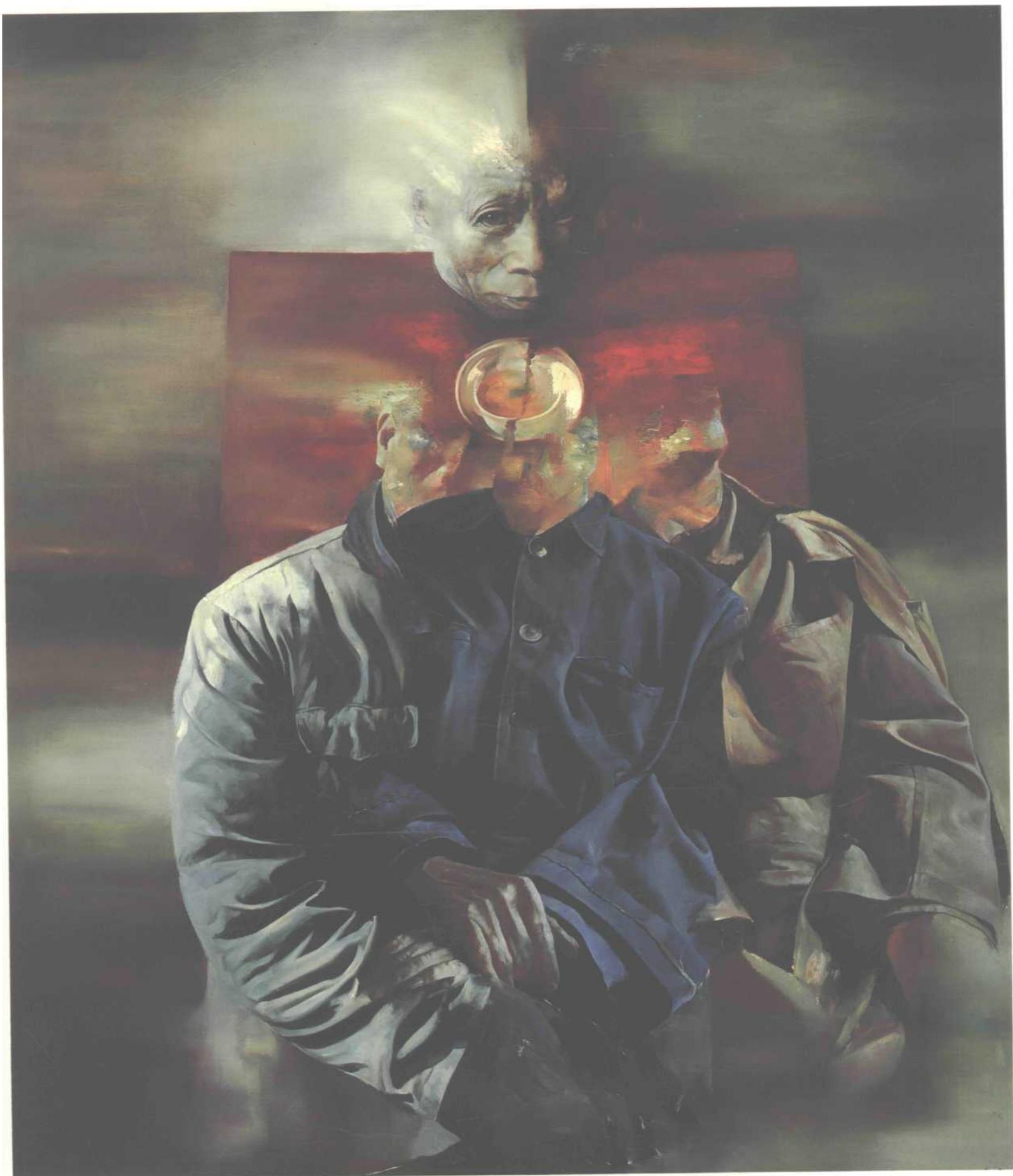
Wang Jianwei's acclaimed *Tea* series of paintings, showing villagers drinking in the local teahouse, conveys a quality almost unique to Wang's painting: while obviously inspired by the culture of the rural villages of Sichuan, it stills conveys a strong cosmopolitan feel. Normally, traditional depictions of peasants are rendered in an elaborate and romanticised manner, even to the extent of glorification à la popular religion. Wang Jianwei's portraits have none of these characteristics. Instead, the crisp, white Chinese tunic suit worn by the figures in the paintings is the only direct reference to contemporary rural culture. And yet this reference is carefully chosen, giving special significance to the pensive peasant portrayed on the canvas — a significance which seems to surpass the stereotypical ideas of a class system and model of behaviour.

Wang also injects this element of transformation into the compositional structure of his paintings. The artist first captures the preliminary impression of a Sichuan teahouse, then projects it repeatedly, seeking a particular and unique compositional relationship. The picture plane creates an illusory sensation as a result of spatial irregularities and compartmentalised disorder. In the end, the relationship between the teahouse and the rural village is not clear. What is evident is the artist's own personal experience of the region and his individual interpretation of culture.

"In reality, we are living in a world where we still have the right to judge and determine our own actions. At the same time, history offers us a public and secret lie in the kind of 'knowledge' found in history books. Yet it is the characteristic of social structures to delineate the cultural experience of our everyday lives: it is not possible to break away and build a separate space and existence.

Artistic creation reflects our basic attitude towards fate and knowledge of values, and a true understanding of the meaning of loneliness. I choose an internally complex yet overtly simple compositional structure that is my response to the conditions of existence and the needs of the inner spirit: an orderly outer structure and a vital content are necessary in order to uncover the real meaning of life. A sense of integration and an innate control of the subject, media and technique are also essential in the search for a language of expression and a more objective perspective."

— Wang Jianwei



2

Hollow Brick
Oil on canvas
1990
161 × 141 cm
空心磚

3

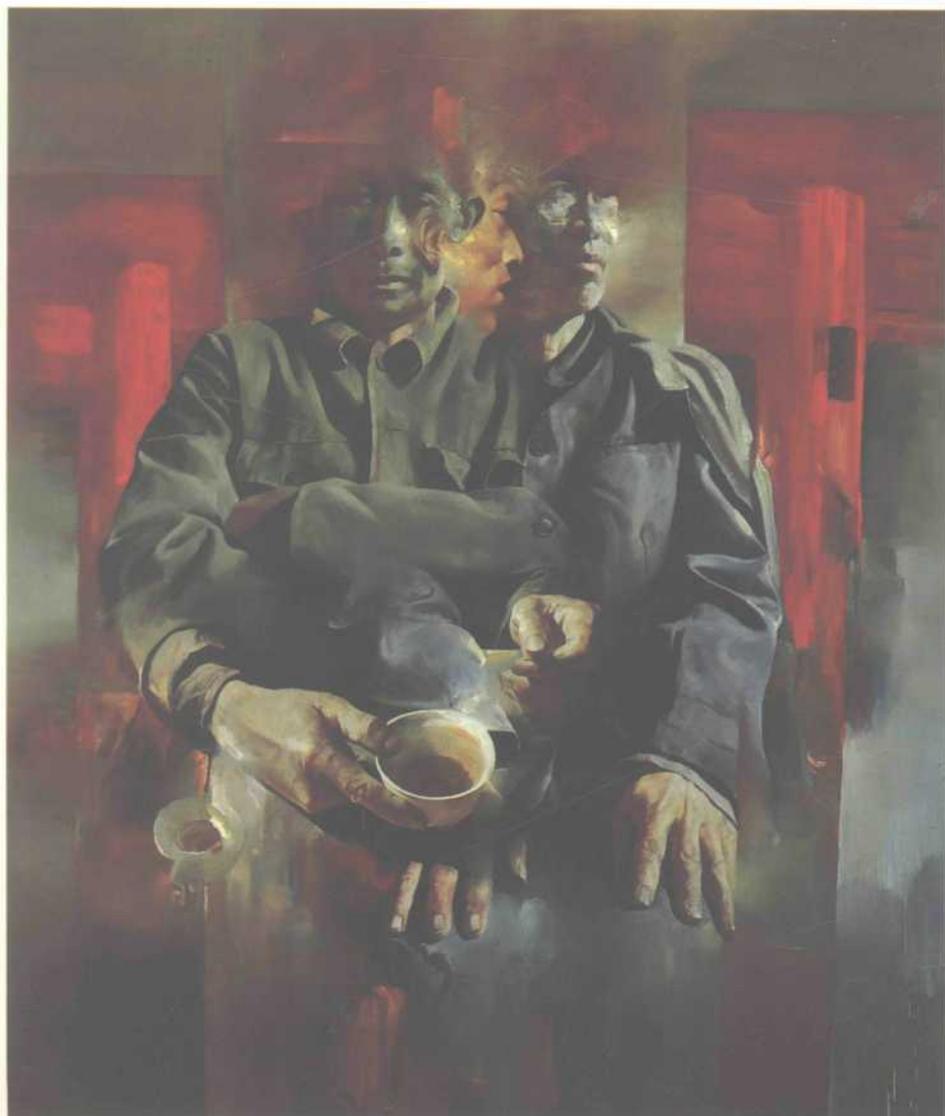
Gate of Ultimate, I
Oil on canvas
1990
161 × 141 cm
極門 (I)

4

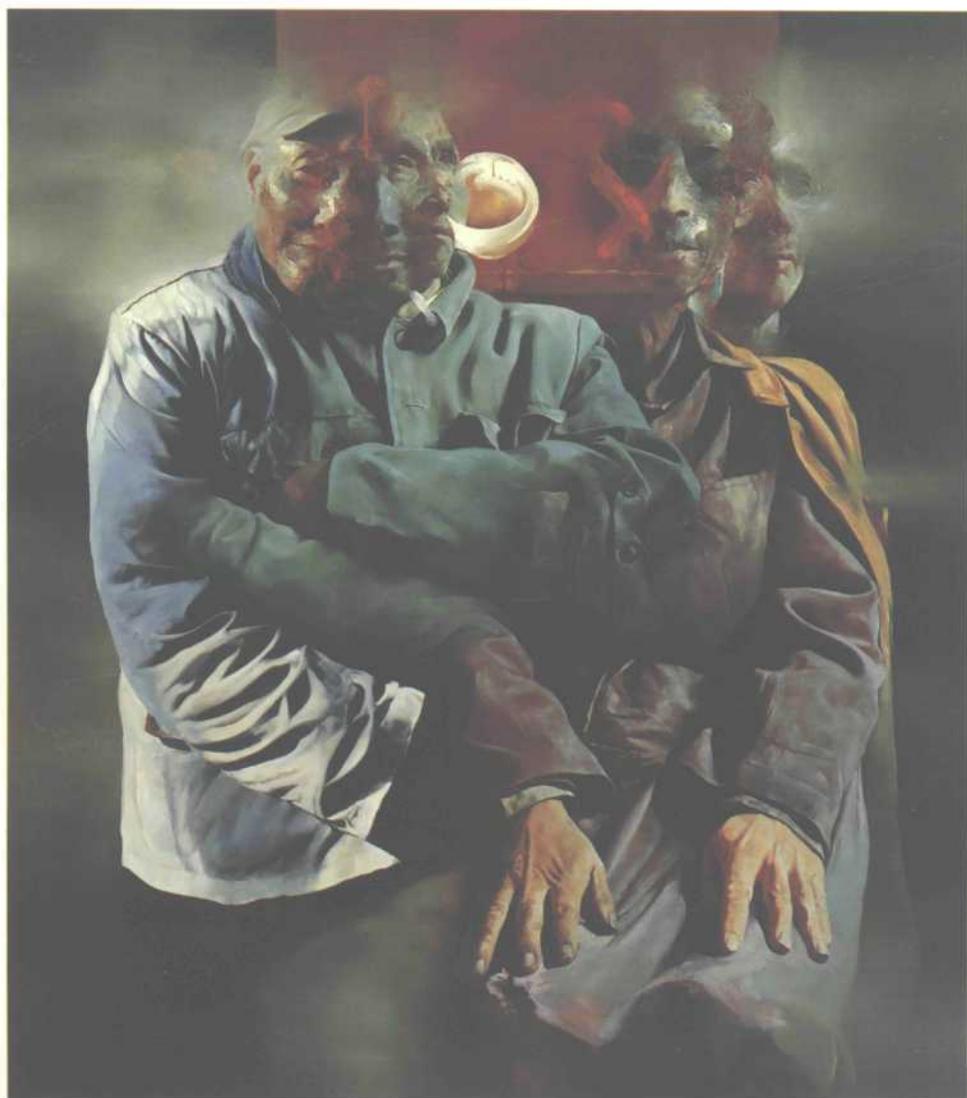
Gate of Ultimate, III
Oil on canvas
1990
161 × 141 cm
極門 (III)



2



3



4

GUO WEI
郭偉

1
Chamber Games, I
Oil on canvas
1991
199.5 x 140 cm
室內遊戲之一

GUO WEI

(b. 1960, Chengdu, Sichuan Province)

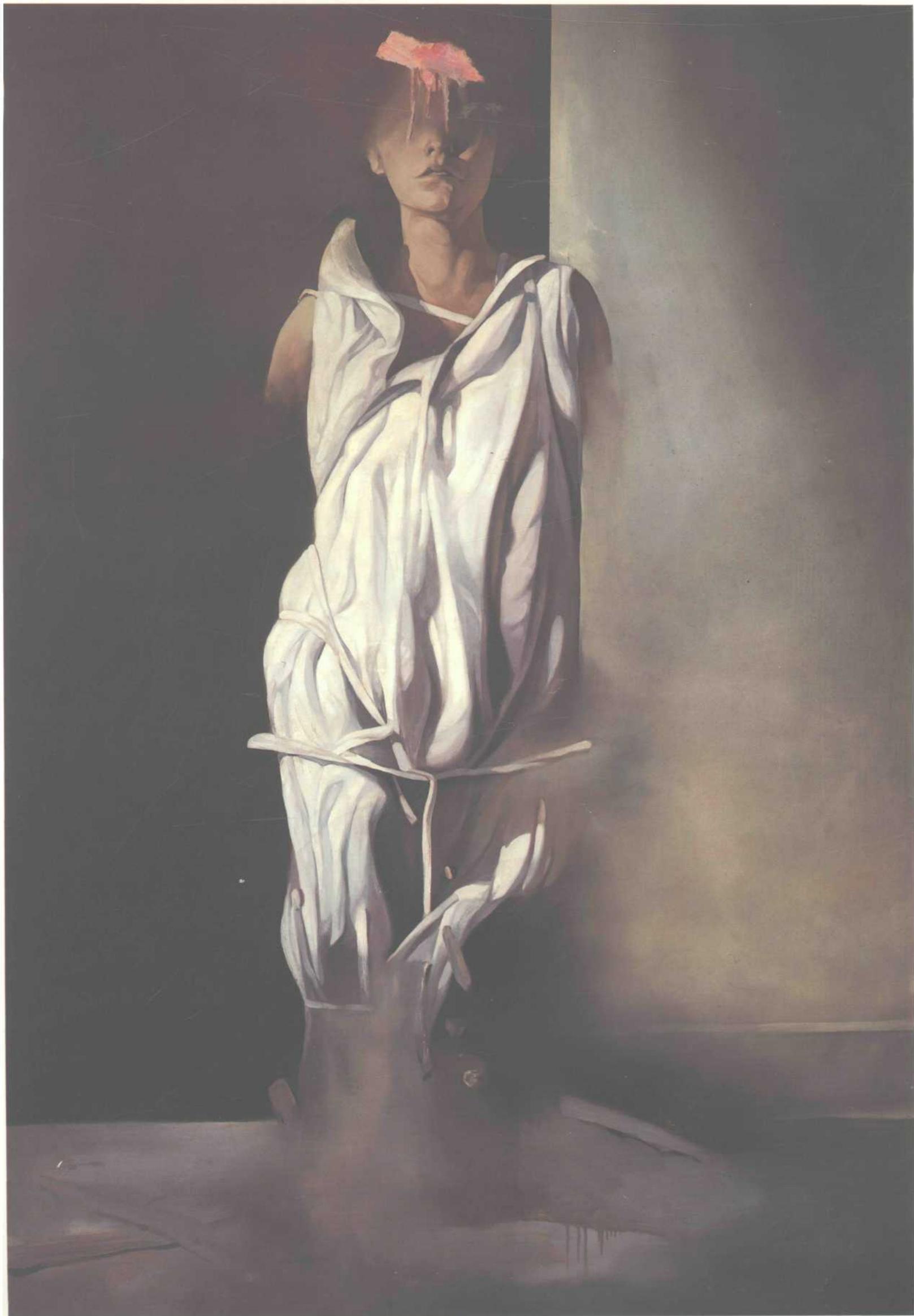
郭偉

Guo Wei graduated in 1989 from the Printmaking Department of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. He makes his living as a professional artist.

Guo Wei's paintings are like silent screams: they are introspective and lonely, clear yet desolate, morbid yet beautiful to look at. There is no roar of the madding crowd, no shouting and screaming. With perfect control, the artist draws upon the sadness and loneliness in his heart and bring out its self-indulgent and even masochistic aspects through images of bondage. Guo's almost classical brushwork and cool palette contrast strangely with these psychologically disturbing images.

"I search for the themes of my paintings in real experience, but I also keep reality at arm's length. My works have obvious surrealistic qualities though I am not a Surrealist. I firmly believe that there are elements of the human soul that still have not been alienated by contemporary material culture. I believe I am like a thirsty well-digger searching for a source of fresh water, not a grave digger. I agree with the concept: Fashions can excite people for a time, but art and artists will always be lonely. I deplore the idea of pandering to vulgar tastes."

— Guo Wei



2

Chamber Games, II

Oil on canvas

1991

199.5 × 140 cm

室內遊戲之二

3

Chamber Bondage Room

No. 1

Oil on canvas

1991

199.5 × 139 cm

室內包裝系列一號房

4

Chamber Bondage Room

No. 2

Oil on canvas

1991

199.2 × 139.5 cm

室內包裝系列二號房

5

Chamber Bondage Room

No. 3

Oil on canvas

1991

198.5 × 139 cm

室內包裝系列三號房

6

Chamber Bondage Room

No. 4

Oil on canvas

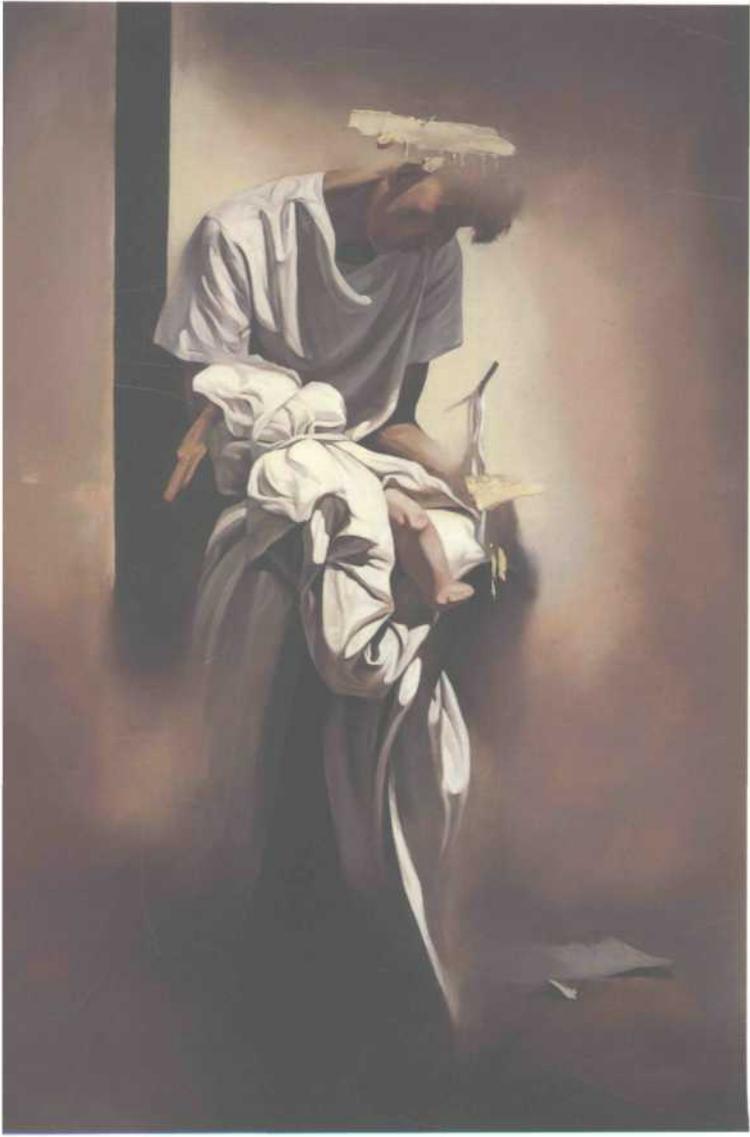
1991

199.5 × 139 cm

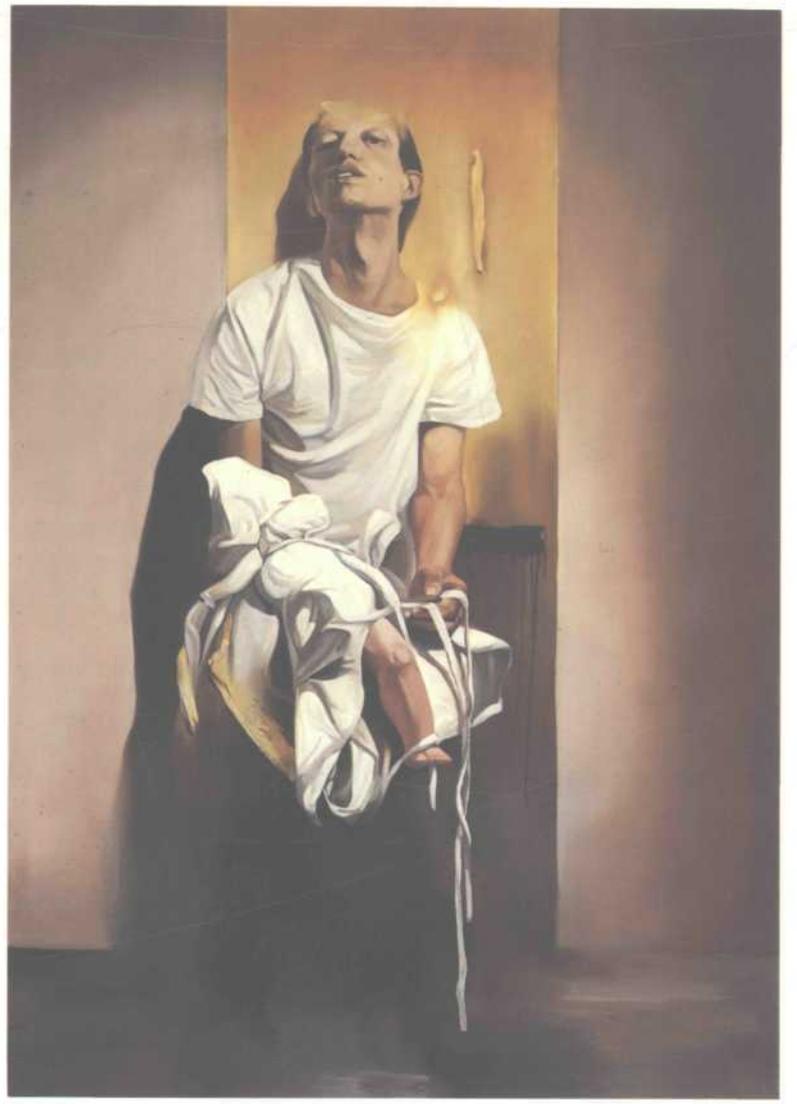
室內包裝系列四號房



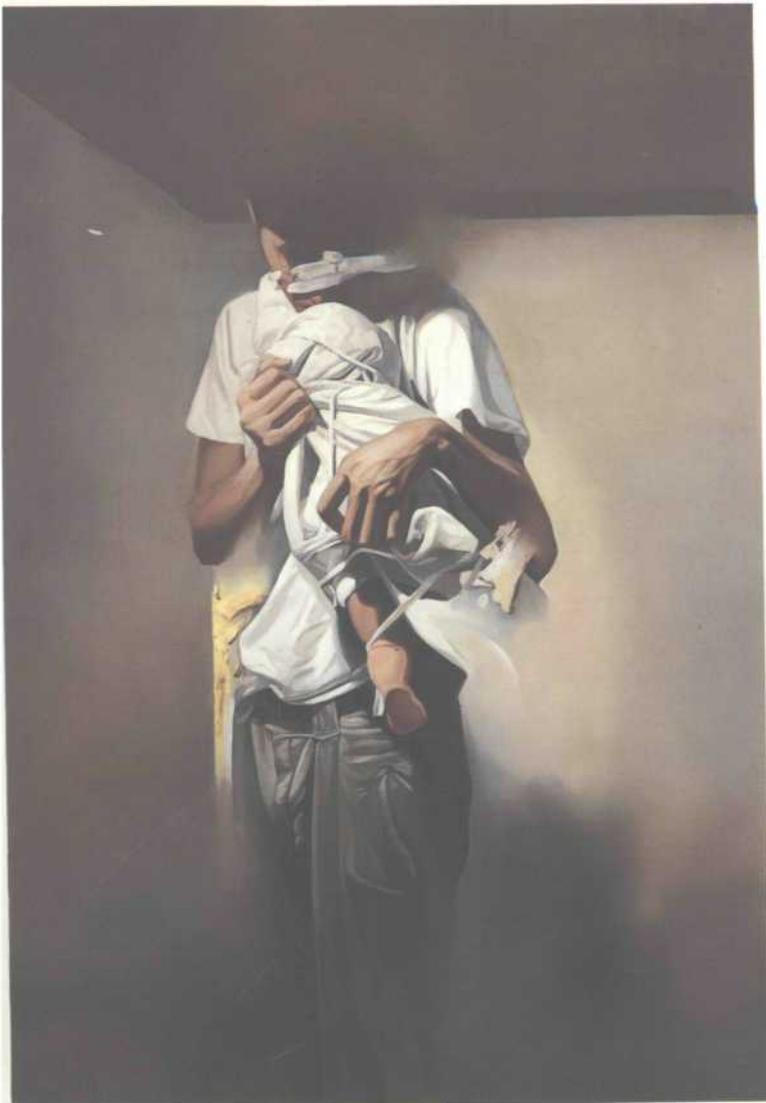
2



3



4



5



6

AH XIAN

阿仙

1
Heavy Wounds Series, No. 2

Oil on canvas

1991

110 × 90 cm

重創系列 (之二)

2
Heavy Wounds Series, No. 6

Oil on canvas

1991

110 × 90 cm

重創系列 (之六)

3
Heavy Wounds Series, No. 3

Oil on canvas

1991

110 × 90 cm

重創系列 (之三)

4
Heavy Wounds Series, No. 7

Oil on canvas

1991

110 × 90 cm

重創系列 (之七)

AH XIAN

(b. 1960, Beijing)

阿仙

Self-taught in art, Ah Xian has been a professional painter since 1980. In 1986 he began to exhibit abroad and in 1990 he moved to Australia where he currently makes his home.

When still in China, being unattached to an academy or work unit, Ah Xian belonged to the class of “vagrant” artists which until recently represented a force of creative art on the fringe. The feeling of being on the periphery is strong in his work: alienation, pain, and puzzlement are his characteristic moods, aptly articulated in a favourite subject of the female nude juxtaposed against a brick wall. A sense of drama appears in his *Heavy Wounds* series, in which wounded figures, painted in the style of first-aid manual illustrations, are caught in situations of surreal bewilderment.

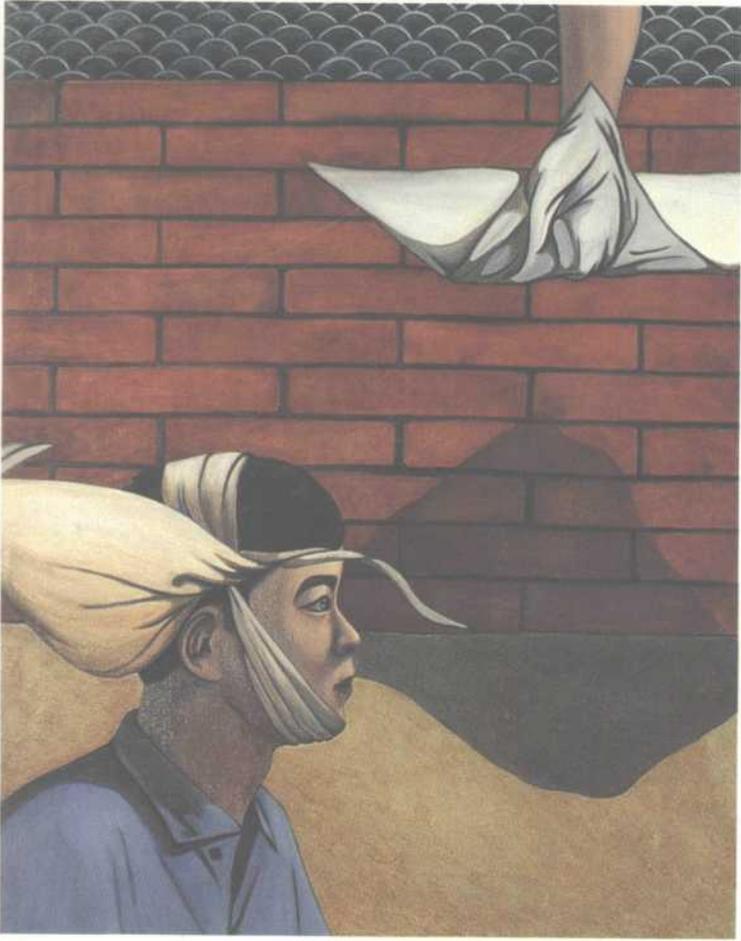
“Recently someone asked me, ‘What is art?’ I was stumped, but came up with the following answer.

‘Art means a few useless people honestly and sincerely contemplating and creating a few useless things.’

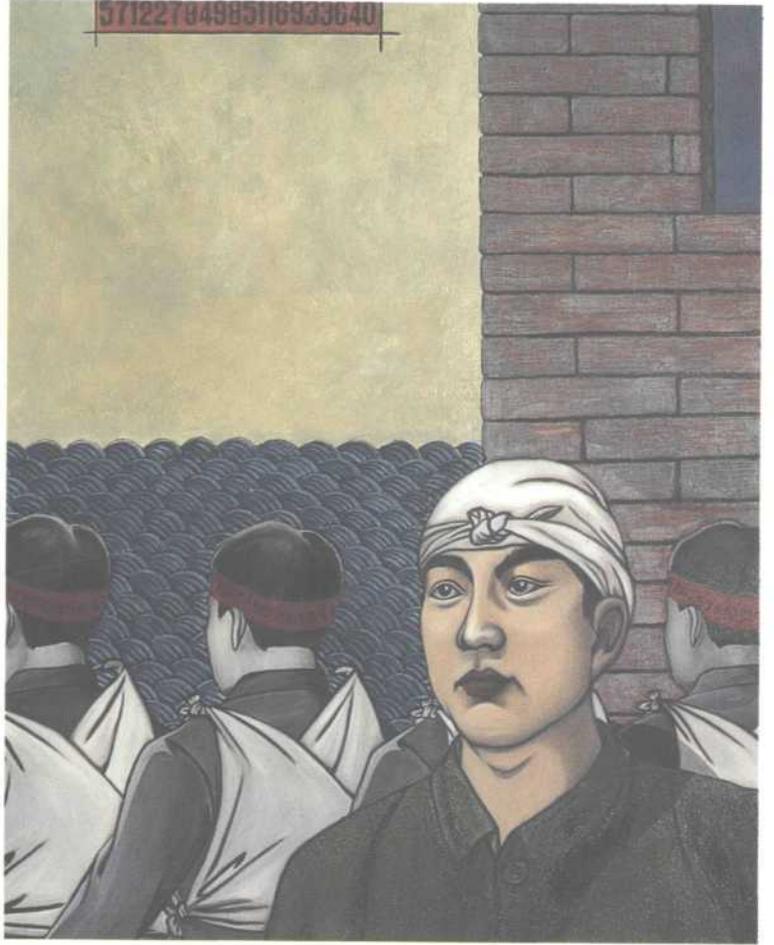
Though I have immersed myself entirely in this sort of activity for the last ten years, I have never been able to put it into words. Although the dictionary and my brain both supply certain standards for such a definition, what the dictionary has to say is too general, too dogmatic and too unfeeling, while my brain is too confused, too vague and too precarious. Being deeply involved in it makes it impossible to know what it is all about. It is the same as believing in the Buddha.

When it suddenly occurred to me that I had started out as a child and now I was a father, I realised that I was *not* an entirely useless person. That made me think that trying to come up with a definition of art was not such a good idea, and might confuse and deceive people. So I decided to say that all I want to do is go on making my meaningless creations and live a simple life.”

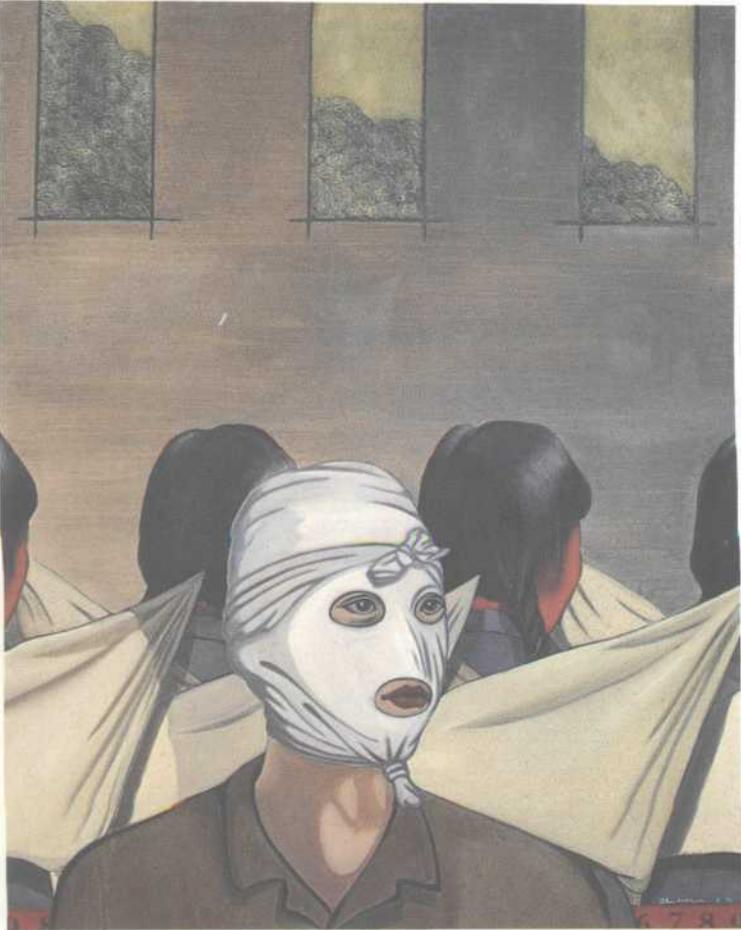
— Ah Xian



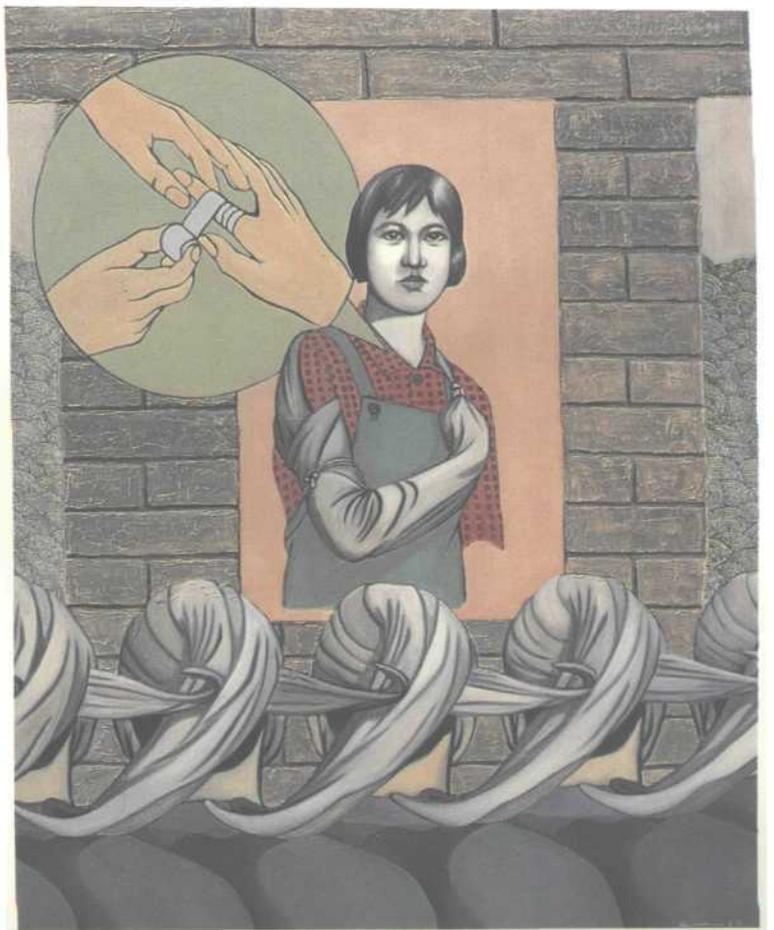
1



3



2



4

TANG SONG and
XIAO LU

唐宋與肖魯

1-3

Burning Flag

Installation: Matches

1992

250 · 150 cm

燃燒的旗

TANG SONG

唐宋

4-5

The Wasteland

Mixed media

1989-92

170 · 120 · 300 cm

荒原

XIAO LU

肖魯

6-7

The Sky, the Sea, the

Winds

Mixed media

1992

5 · 207 · 207 cm

天、海、風

TANG SONG and XIAO LU

(both b. 1962, Hangzhou)

唐宋與肖魯

Tang Song and Xiao Lu both graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, in 1989 and 1988 respectively. They currently reside in Australia where they make their living as professional artists.

Tang and Xiao gained notoriety during the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in Beijing when Xiao unexpectedly fired gunshots into their first collaborative work, an installation of two telephone booths, creating a controversial happening with far-reaching repercussions.

Tang is known as an artist more interested in the intellectual aspect of art. Long a devotee of Sunzi's treatise *The Art of War*, Tang's work tends to focus on the theme of danger latent in apparently calm and peaceful situations: for example, in his installation *The Nest*, Tang used 10,000 match sticks to create a feeling of "warmth."

Xiao Lu creates installations consisting of lyrical groups of objects made of natural materials which appear like private statements, and are the means by which she "communicates with the world."

"It is inevitable that art today still retains its basic form. For this reason, action art, with all of its ambiguities and dangerous activities gives the artist a useful role to play.

Perhaps crises and dangerous situations are the breeding ground for civilisation and the ultimate source of wisdom. Artists and adventurers experience them differently from other people, and gain a different kind of understanding from them. Does anyone doubt that human life is not a great event? Isn't the human condition, with its thorough ignorance about the true meaning of life, in itself a crisis?

Two major factors define my thought: the pessimism of wisdom, and the optimism of the human will. Art has always drawn its inspiration from these two forces."

— Tang Song and Xiao Lu



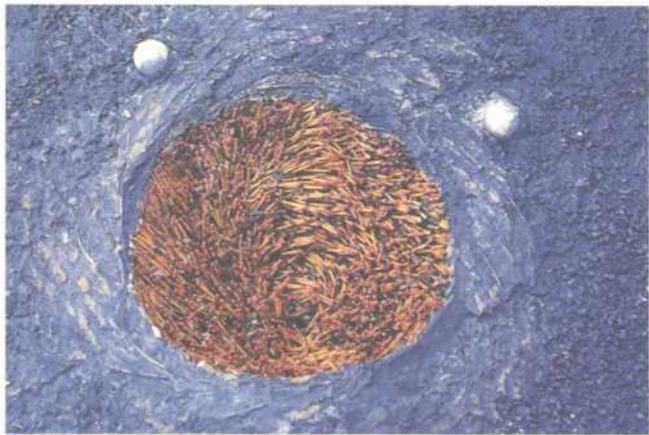
1



2



4



5



3



6



7

RITUAL

AND

PURGATION:

ENDGAME ART

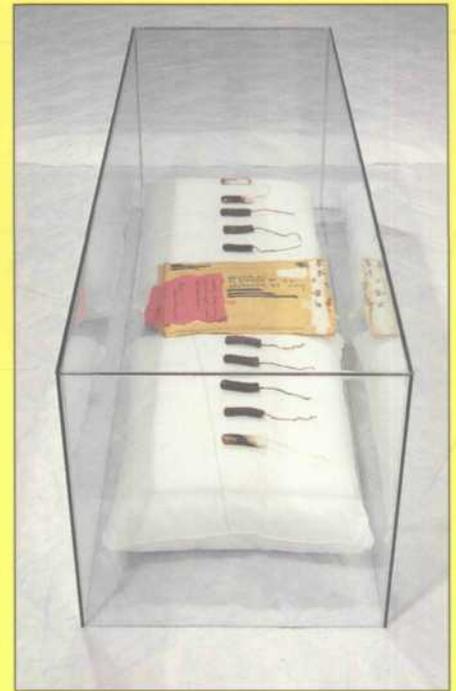
GU WENDA 谷文達

XU BING 徐冰

LÜ SHENGZHONG 呂勝中

THE NEW 新刻度
ANALYSTS
GROUP

新道場



Size of each glass box: L 150 × H 50 × D 50 cm

Materials: 500 used menstrual tampons, napkins with personal statements

向提供兩千個自然死亡的諸君鳴謝

**SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
TO THE CONTRIBUTORS OF
TWO THOUSAND NATURAL DEATHS
OEDIPUS REFOUND #1**

Peter Selz (Berkeley, USA), Monique Sartor (Milan, Italy), Katherine Cook (Oakland, USA), Maureen (San Francisco, USA), Mary Falcon (Washington D.C., USA), Els Boertje (Netherlands), Christina Schlesinger (New York City, USA), Angie Dixon (Seattle, USA), Ann Mohler (Minneapolis, USA), Kazuko Nakane (Seattle, USA), Wendy Tiefenbacher (New York City, USA), Linda Jaivin (Australia), D. Elmansoumi (Seattle, USA), Nancy Fride (New York City, USA), Annie Baggenstoss (Minneapolis, USA), Rui-ling King (New York City, USA), Holly Hughes (New York City, USA), Brenda Prager (Berkeley, USA), Lydie Mepham (Paris, France), Susan Price (San Jose, USA), Nicole Darcy (Minneapolis, USA), Patrico (Seattle, USA), Lowell Downey (San Francisco, USA), Valerie Soe (San Francisco, USA), Jesse Hamlin (San Francisco, USA), Glen Helfand (San Francisco, USA), Elinor Gadon (Oakland, USA), Jo Hanson (San Francisco, USA), Mark Levy (Hayward, USA), David Wright (Berkeley, USA), Bill Berkson (San Francisco, USA), Mark Van Proyen (San Francisco, USA), Dorothy Burckhart (California, USA), Hal Fisher (California, USA), Alfred Jan (California, USA), Jim Jordan (California, USA), Andre Marechal-Workman (California, USA), Fred Martin (San Francisco, USA), Cecile McCann (San Francisco, USA), Robert McDonald (California, USA), Maria Porges (California, USA) . . . to continue

— Gu Wenda

(The first of this series of exhibition was made in San Francisco in 1990, curators were Peter Selz and Katherine Cook.)

GU WENDA

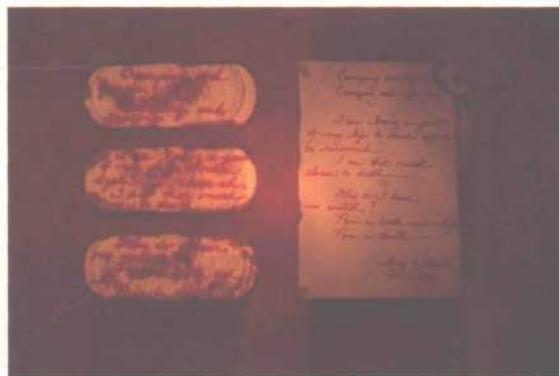
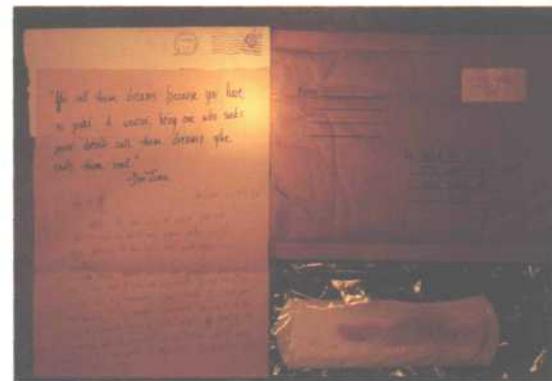
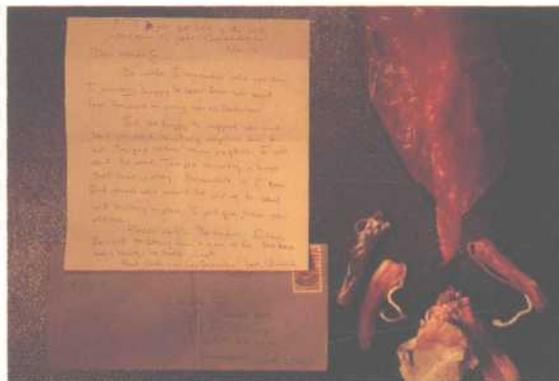
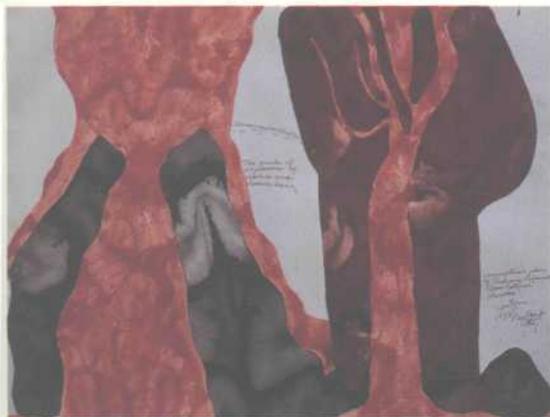
(b. 1955, Shanghai)

谷文達

Gu Wenda graduated from the School of Arts and Crafts in Shanghai and received his Master's degree from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1981. He currently resides in the United States.

Gu Wenda is one of the most important figures of the Eighties New Wave movement. Gu has been characterised as the "Red Guard" of the art world: his work is done with a spirit of adventure and challenge which has brought him into collision with cultural values both East and West. His creative provocation of culture takes the form of deconstructing accepted norms and language in an attempt to alter conventional perceptions of things-as-they-are. Although Gu has frequently employed images and materials associated with traditional Chinese art, he always gives them a new interpretation.

From his paintings done in the mid-Eighties in Shanghai to his recent installations in North America, Gu has worked hard to irk his audiences on their own turf. His fame rests on controversial works such as his monumental ink paintings, error-word calligraphy, and pseudo-religious installations of mock-Parthenon mousetraps and stained sanitary towels. Gu's avant-garde rebelliousness has earned him the description of being "one of the few vanguards of Modernism in a Post-modern world."



1

OEDIPUS REFOUND TWO THOUSAND NATURAL DEATHS

"This work has been dedicating to her, him, us and our times since the death of one of the most representative ancient origins of our being, nature and knowledge: Oedipus.

This work has been defining us: we are the modern Oedipus, we are caught in the chaotic modern enigma.

This work has been indicating that from our delightful research of the universe, from our inventive knowledge of dividing universe and human beings, from our blind indulgence since ancient "Oedipal Times" to our self-disturbance, the most ever since. We are still researching, our knowledge is still extending, and the chaotic enigma of the modern Oedipus is still continuing. . .

GU WENDA

谷文達

1
*Oedipus Refound: 2000
Natural Deaths*
1989-1992, New York
Women participants' used
sanitary napkins,
Tampons and their
statements, stories, poems
from worldwide,
glass coffins

重尋伊迪巴斯情結：
兩千個自然死亡

2
*Equality From Paradise
(Refound Oedipus
Complex #7)*
Installation, 1992, New
York City
Counterpart 1:
contraceptive pill powder
Counterpart 2: women's
placenta powder
Pedestal: gate of paradise
15" x 120" x 192"
重尋伊迪巴斯情結：
天堂的平等



2

3
*Removed & Removed
(Refound Oedipus
Complex #8)*
Installation, 1992, New
York City
Counterpart 1: sheepskin
with hair
Counterpart 2: sheepskin
with removed hair
Pedestal: gate of hell
15" x 120" x 192"
重尋伊迪巴斯情結：
脫除又脫除

4
*Yellow & White
Metaphysics (Refound
Oedipus Complex #9)*
Installation, 1992, Milan,
Italy
Counterpart 1: terramycin
pill powder
Counterpart 2: aspirin pill
powder
Pedestal: pigskin, wood
30 x 750 x 400 cm
重尋伊迪巴斯情結：
黃與白的形而上學

5
*Brown & Black
Metaphysics (Refound
Oedipus Complex #10)*
Installation, 1992, Milan,
Italy
Counterpart 1: women's
placenta powder
Counterpart 2: charcoal
pill powder
Pedestal: pigskin, wood
25 x 250 x 650 cm
重尋伊迪巴斯情結：
緒與黑的形而上學

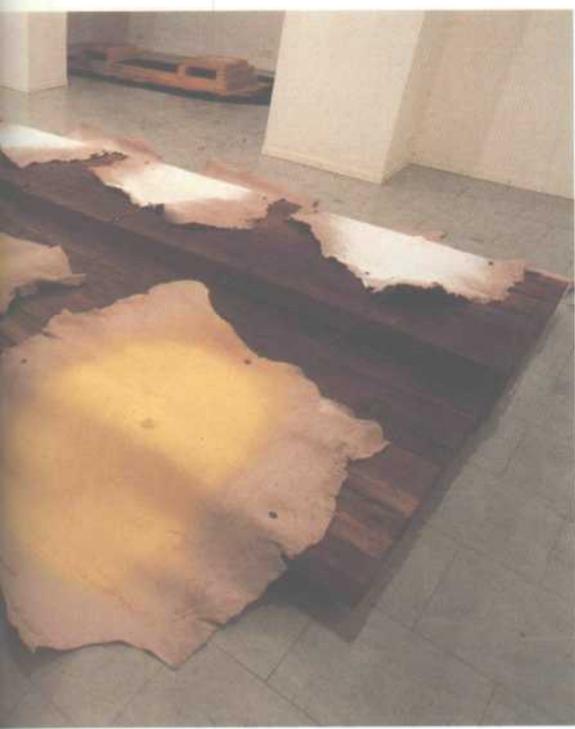
6
*White & Removed White
(Refound Oedipus
Complex #11)*
Installation, 1992, Milan
Italy
Counterpart 1: sheepskin
with hair
Counterpart 2: sheepskin
with removed hair
Pedestal: Beeswax,
charcoal pill powder
350 x 130 x 30 cm
重尋伊迪巴斯情結：
白與脫除的白



5



3



4



6

7-11
*Vanishing 36 Pigment
Golden Sections*
Fukuoka City, Japan
1991, Summer
Water dissolved red
pigment
150 x 7 x 2.5 m
36個消失的
「黃金比律」顏料塊

7
Earth Ditch
150 x 8 x 2 m

8
*Painting process: 36
Golden Sections*
2 x 3.32 m @

9
View of Painted Ditch

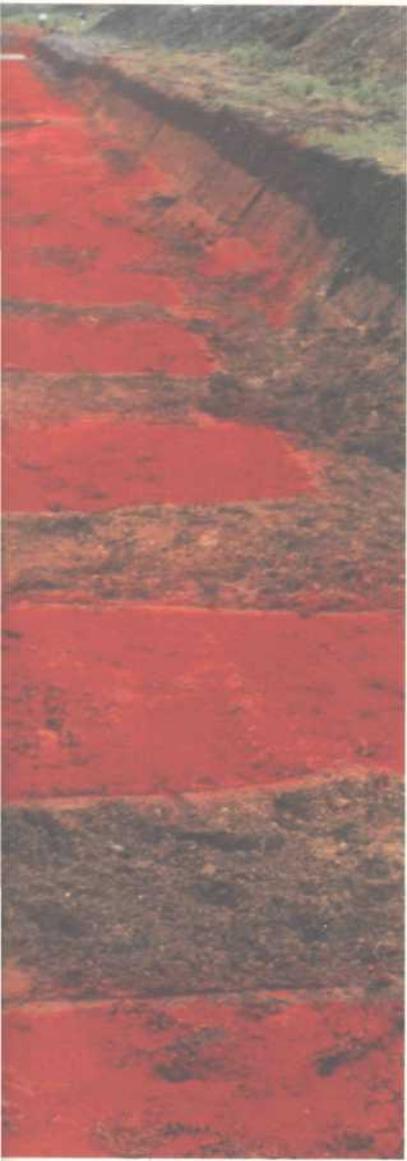
10
*Bury: 6:30 p.m. Sept 15,
1991*

11
After Burial





8



9



11

XU BING

徐冰

1

Brailiterate

Installation: bound books
for the blind

1992

14 × 11 cm (book)

文盲文

XU BING

(b. 1955, Chongqing, Sichuan Province)

徐冰

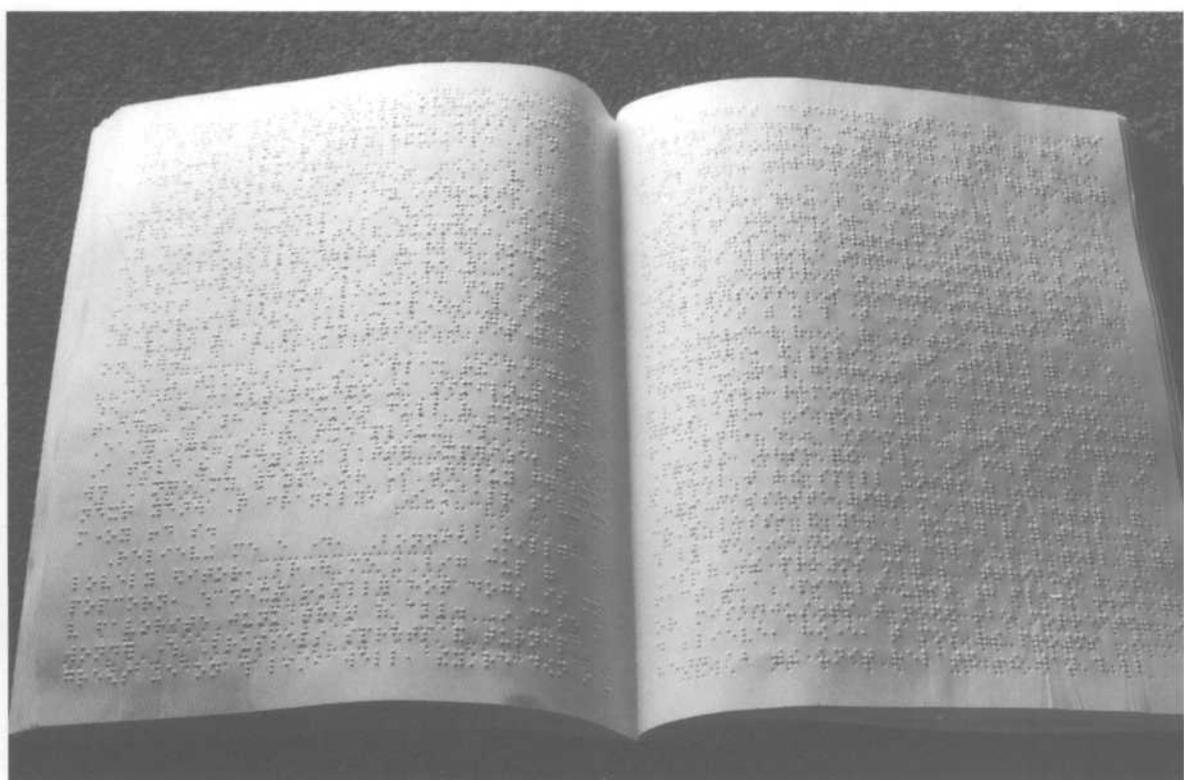
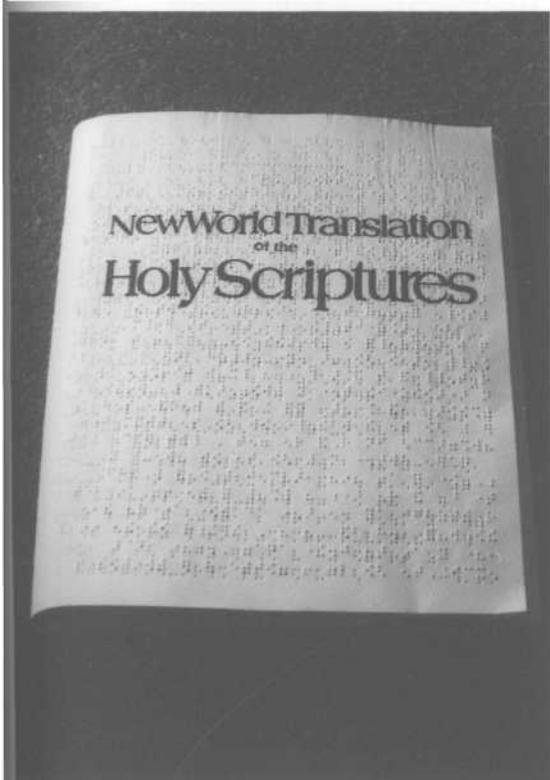
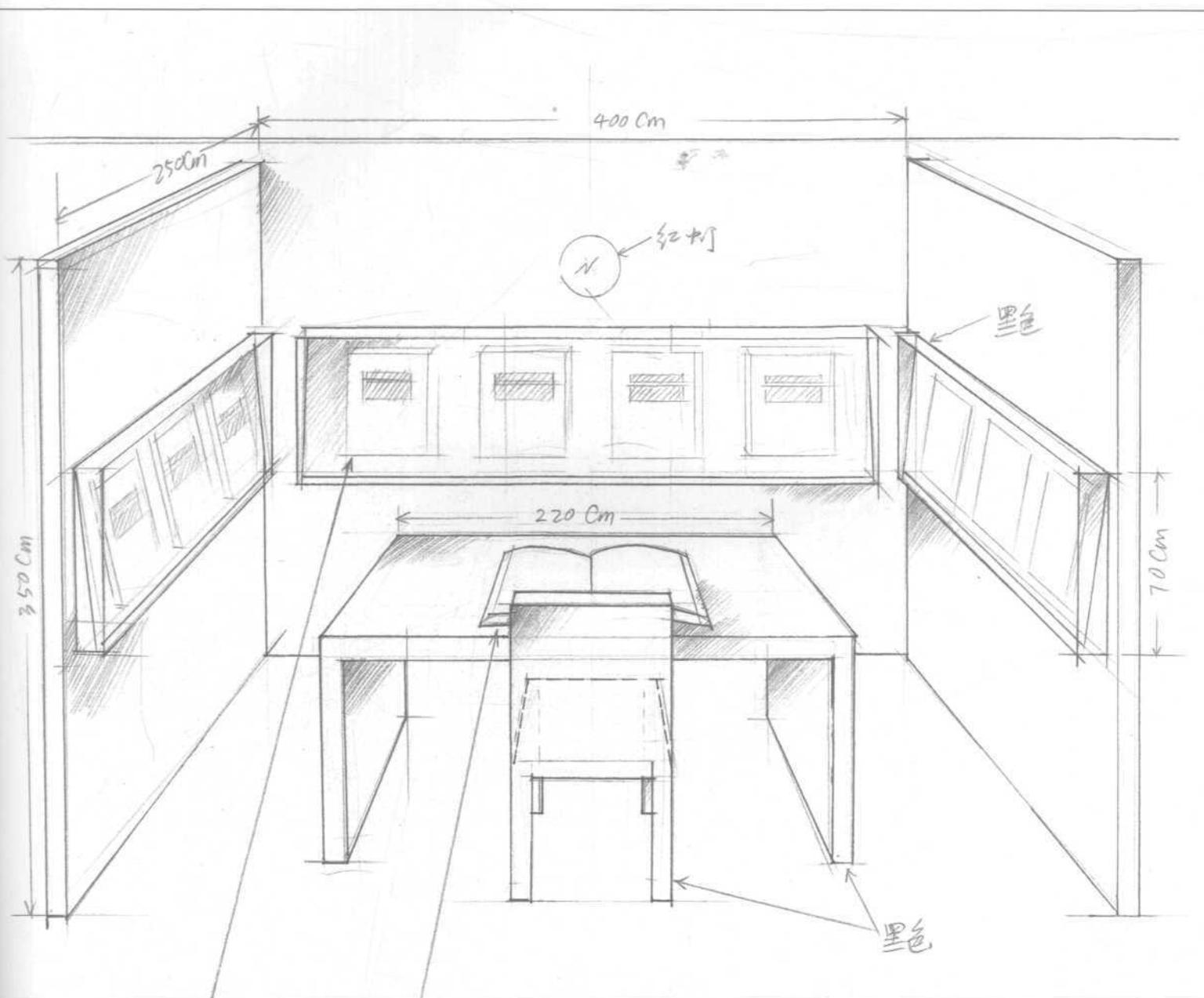
Xu Bing graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing in 1981. He received his Master's degree from the same institution in 1987.

Xu Bing's works include copperplate engravings, "reinvented" Chinese characters printed with woodblocks, rubbings (including rubbings of the Great Wall), and prints made from the treads of huge truck tires.

Xu Bing is equally skilled as an engraver, woodblock carver and printmaker. His early woodblocks were lyrical Jiangsu waterscapes or village scenes, finely detailed and charming. In the mid-Eighties Xu Bing's work showed a dramatic thematic change with his massive installation piece *A Mirror to Analyse the World* (also known as *A Book from the Sky*), a work which immediately established the artist in the vanguard of the New Wave and New Academic Art movements. For *A Mirror to Analyse the World*, Xu Bing spent three years painstakingly carving woodblock type for thousands of Chinese ideographs. All these seemingly recognisable characters, however, once examined carefully, were all senseless pseudo-characters. This work evoked a powerful sense of absurdity and made a quiet mockery of history, falling in form and content somewhere between a classical tome and the artful labours of a madman.

"Culture is nothing but a game, a game that people have been playing for thousands of years. The game has left the human race in a state of exhaustion. In general, people need little more than a simple pattern or a set of concrete results to fulfill their conception of civilisation. Culture is certainly a good thing, but it is deceptive."

— Xu Bing



2

Ghosts Pounding the Wall

Installation: mixed media

1990

鬼打牆

3-5

A Mirror to Analyse the World

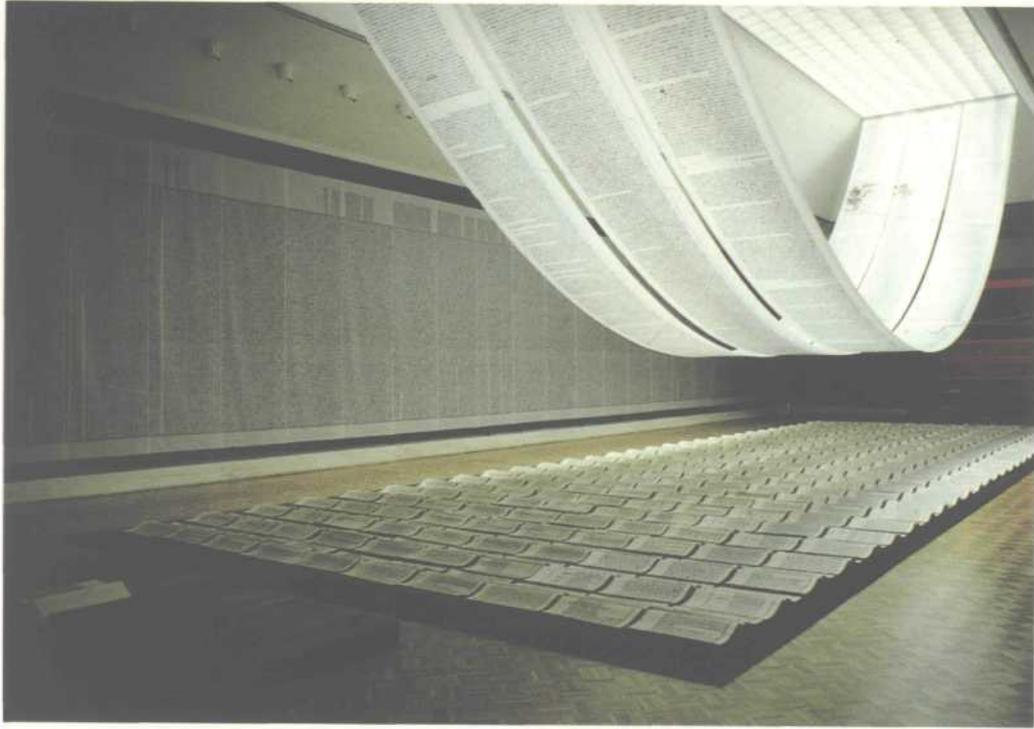
Installation: mixed media

1989

閱世鑒



2



3



4



5

LÜ SHENGZHONG
呂勝中

1
Summoning the Spirits
Cut paper installation in situ
1992
招魂

2, 3
Maze Walk
Installations *China/Avant-*
garde, Beijing
1989
行

4
Drawing of 'Post-1989'
Installation site at the Hong
Kong Arts Centre by Oscar
Ho
〈後八九〉展覽裝置場
地圖
何慶基繪

LÜ SHENGZHONG

(b. 1952, Shandong Province)

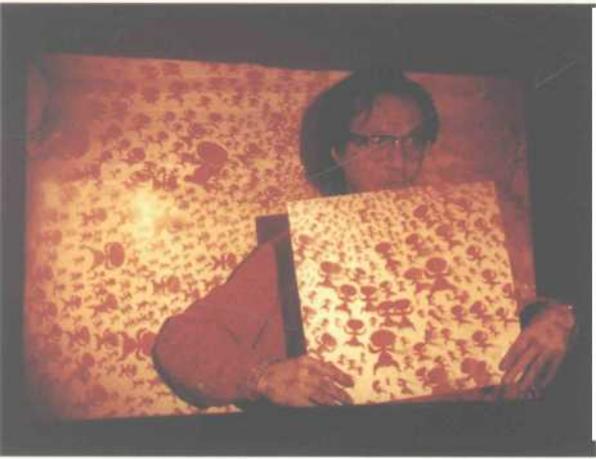
呂勝中

Lü Shengzhong graduated in 1978 from the Art Department of Shandong Normal University, and in 1987 received his Master's degree from the Folk Arts Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, where he currently teaches.

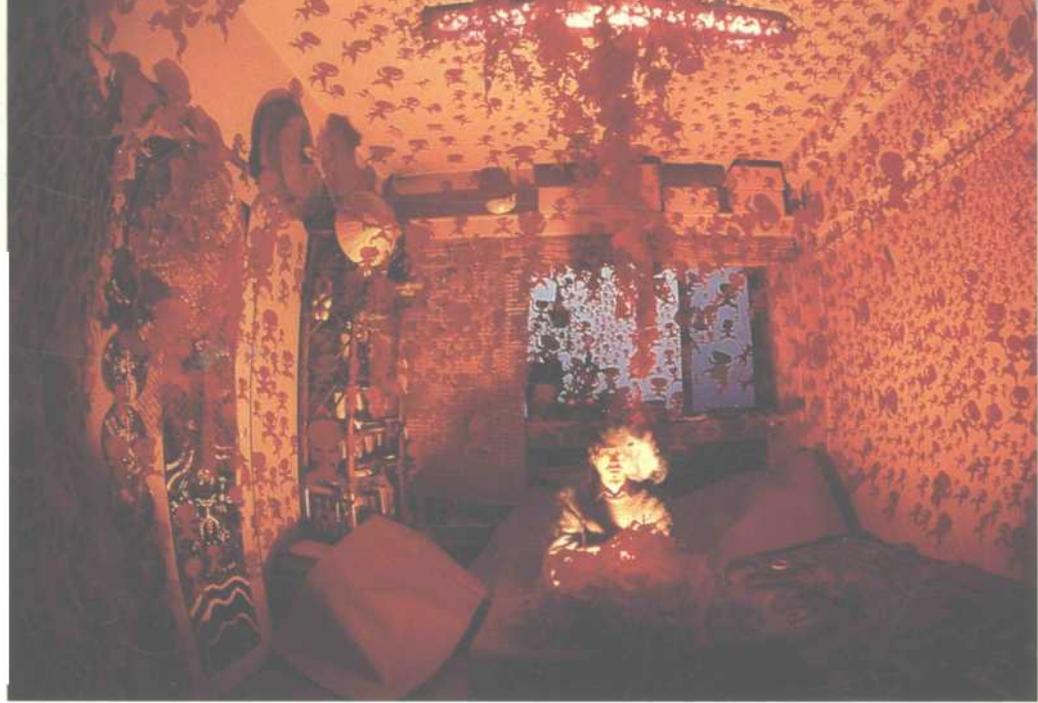
Lü is a representative artist of the "Purified Language" and "Folk Art" movements of the Eighties. Since 1988, he has created a number of installations of giant-sized paper cuts. In these works the artist adopts the metaphorical language of the prayers for fertility found in folk culture, but extrapolates from the original connotations of this kind of "auspicious" ritual to show that if the purpose of procreation is to direct life, then it inexorably also touches on death — a taboo subject in folk art. Lü takes the mundane meanings of folk prayers for blessings and pushes them to a higher metaphysical plane, creating a new mystical symbolism and iconography for the modern age that breaks through ordinary concepts of procreation to touch on a vision of the great primal power of life.

"I squeeze my way out of the querulous crowd in search of an abandoned path. I follow this difficult yet charming path in search of the part of human nature that has been filtered out by civilisation. I want to take the pure blood of ancient civilisation and use it to nourish the vacuous core of contemporary culture."

— Lü Shengzhong



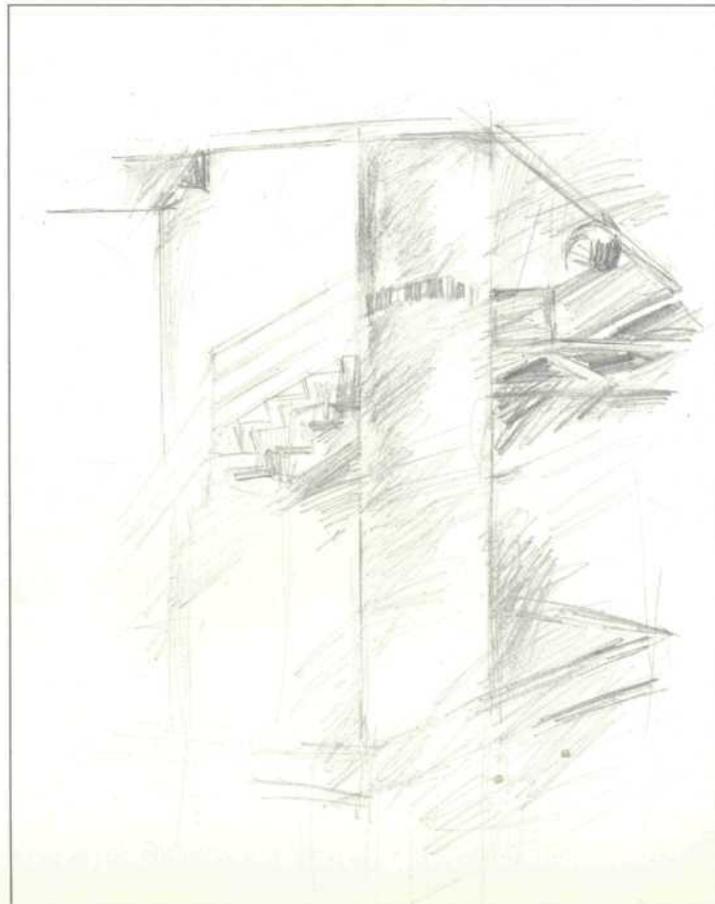
1



2



3



4

NEW ANALYSTS GROUP

新刻度

WANG LUYAN

(b. 1956, Beijing)

王魯炎

Wang Luyan is currently on the staff of the newspaper, *China Transportation*.

GU DEXIN

(b. 1962, Beijing)

顧德鑫

Gu Dexin makes his living as a professional artist.

CHEN SHAOPING

(b. 1947, Beijing)

陳少平

Chen Shaoping is currently an art editor at the newspaper *China Coal*.

The New Analysts Group seeks to extinguish individuality, do away with all factors unrelated to form, and work together directly within the limitations and dictates of "rules."

The artists philosophy embraces the two levels of culture and art. "We don't reject returning to a search for human nature that lies behind the development of contemporary material culture, but at the same time we accept the present material basis of human nature, and raise the question of the possibility of reforming human nature and evolving the human spirit within these existing conditions."

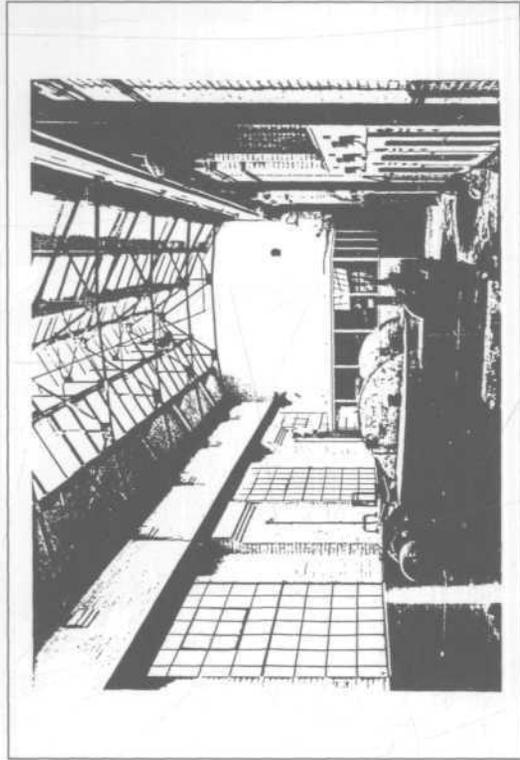
The group is particularly concerned with how to escape from the conventional creative act of the individual artist and enter into the realm of depersonalised, regulated creativity. This is reflected in the fact that their work is conceptual in nature, taking the form of printed tracts that are both graphic and contextual expressions of a logical, formatted process.

"The process of analysis can be expressed in the following formula: the individuals who perform analysis (designated as a1, a2, a3, etc.) follow a set of rules of behaviour and measurement that they create together and agree to obey together, and thus enter a state of cooperation (designated as 'A' condition). This 'A' condition runs throughout the entire process. As the 'A' condition develops and expands, a1, a2, a3, etc. turn into 'A' and lose their own individuality. The graphic means for carrying out the process of analysis is called measurement. The process of measurement can be put in order in a book and in such form can be read."

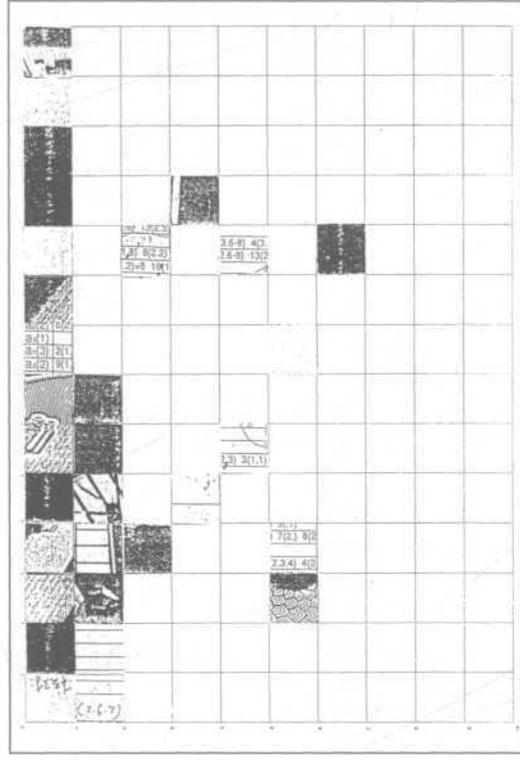
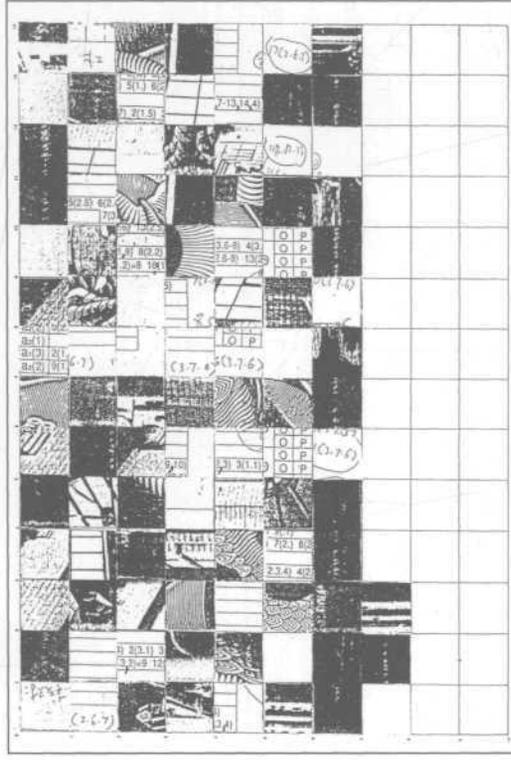
(2)の測量記録

測点	Op	Pa
1.3	Op(1) 4(3) 5(2) 6(2) 7(1) 8(3)	
1.3	Op(2) 1(1) 2(2) 3(2)	
1.3	Op(1) 9(1)	
1.3	Op(2) 1(1) 2(3) 3(3) 4(1)	
1.3	Op(2) 4(1) 5(1) 6(2) 7(2) 8(2)	
1.3	Op(1) 1(1)	
2.3	Op(1) 1(1) 2(1) 3(1) 4(2) 5(1) 6(2) 7(1) 8(2)	
2.3	Op(2) 1(2) 2(2) 3(2) 4(2) 5(2) 6(2) 7(2) 8(2)	
2.3	Op(1) 1(1) 2(1) 3(1) 4(1) 5(1) 6(1) 7(1) 8(1)	
2.3	Op(2) 1(2) 2(2) 3(2) 4(2) 5(2) 6(2) 7(2) 8(2)	
3.3	Op(1) 1(1) 2(1) 3(1) 4(1) 5(1) 6(1) 7(1) 8(1)	
3.3	Op(2) 1(2) 2(2) 3(2) 4(2) 5(2) 6(2) 7(2) 8(2)	
4.3	Op(1) 1(1) 2(1) 3(1) 4(1) 5(1) 6(1) 7(1) 8(1)	
4.3	Op(2) 1(2) 2(2) 3(2) 4(2) 5(2) 6(2) 7(2) 8(2)	
5.3	Op(1) 1(1) 2(1) 3(1) 4(1) 5(1) 6(1) 7(1) 8(1)	
5.3	Op(2) 1(2) 2(2) 3(2) 4(2) 5(2) 6(2) 7(2) 8(2)	
6.3	Op(1) 1(1) 2(1) 3(1) 4(1) 5(1) 6(1) 7(1) 8(1)	
6.3	Op(2) 1(2) 2(2) 3(2) 4(2) 5(2) 6(2) 7(2) 8(2)	
7.3	Op(1) 1(1) 2(1) 3(1) 4(1) 5(1) 6(1) 7(1) 8(1)	
7.3	Op(2) 1(2) 2(2) 3(2) 4(2) 5(2) 6(2) 7(2) 8(2)	
8.3	Op(1) 1(1) 2(1) 3(1) 4(1) 5(1) 6(1) 7(1) 8(1)	
8.3	Op(2) 1(2) 2(2) 3(2) 4(2) 5(2) 6(2) 7(2) 8(2)	

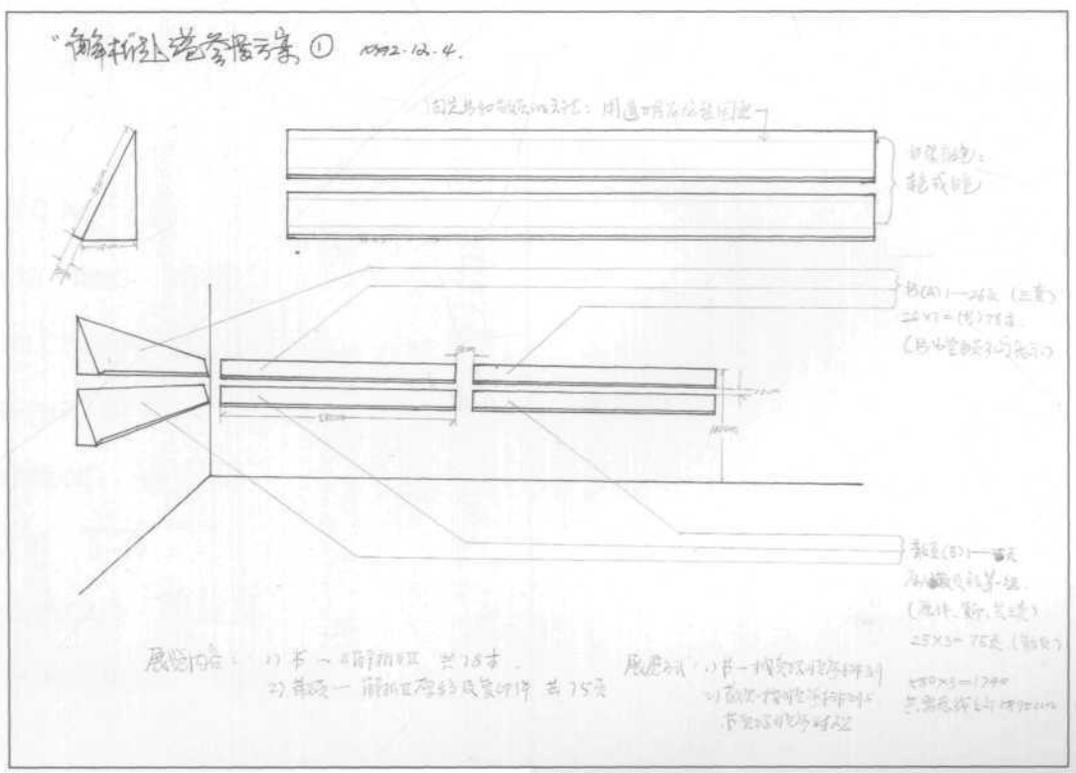
校正: #2 6(7.76) 12(2.67) 11(3.7.4) ↓ 17(2.67)
#3 11(2.12.13) 45 X7.5 X8.97



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1.2	2.2	3.2	4.2	5.2	6.2	7.2	8.2	9.2	10.2	11.2	12.2	13.2	14.2	15.2
1.3	2.3	3.3	4.3	5.3	6.3	7.3	8.3	9.3	10.3	11.3	12.3	13.3	14.3	15.3
1.4	2.4	3.4	4.4	5.4	6.4	7.4	8.4	9.4	10.4	11.4	12.4	13.4	14.4	15.4
1.5	2.5	3.5	4.5	5.5	6.5	7.5	8.5	9.5	10.5	11.5	12.5	13.5	14.5	15.5
1.6	2.6	3.6	4.6	5.6	6.6	7.6	8.6	9.6	10.6	11.6	12.6	13.6	14.6	15.6
1.7	2.7	3.7	4.7	5.7	6.7	7.7	8.7	9.7	10.7	11.7	12.7	13.7	14.7	15.7
1.8	2.8	3.8	4.8	5.8	6.8	7.8	8.8	9.8	10.8	11.8	12.8	13.8	14.8	15.8
1.9	2.9	3.9	4.9	5.9	6.9	7.9	8.9	9.9	10.9	11.9	12.9	13.9	14.9	15.9
1.10	2.10	3.10	4.10	5.10	6.10	7.10	8.10	9.10	10.10	11.10	12.10	13.10	14.10	15.10



1



2

INTROSPECTION

AND RETREAT

INTO FORMALISM:

NEW ABSTRACT ART

內觀與抽象

SHEN QIN 沈勤

SHANG YANG 尚揚

WANG CHUAN 王川

LIU MING 劉鳴

XU ANMING 徐安明

DING YI 丁乙

SUI JIANGUO 隋建國

FU ZHONGWANG 傅中望

SHEN QIN

(b. 1958, Jiangsu Province)

沈勤

Shen Qin graduated from the Jiangsu Academy of Chinese Painting Academy in 1982. He is currently artist-in-residence in the same institution.

Shen Qin is a representative artist in the field of contemporary Chinese ink painting. His early works integrate an Eastern view of the universe with elements of Surrealism. The artist experimented with isolating the lines and colors of concrete objects and reconstructing them into independent compositions. In his later works, Shen emphasised minimalism in both composition and execution, an approach which resulted in a complete dismissal of color and concrete form from his ink paintings. Technique in his art is now reduced to pure emotional expression: his only connection with traditional ink painting is in the material he uses. His works have kept to this principle of minimisation in both in the treatment of the picture plane and the method of depiction: they distill the executional variations down to solely emotional expressions. The use of this artistic language breaks down the barrier imposed by traditional paintings, and seeks harmony and balance between Eastern and Western aesthetics.

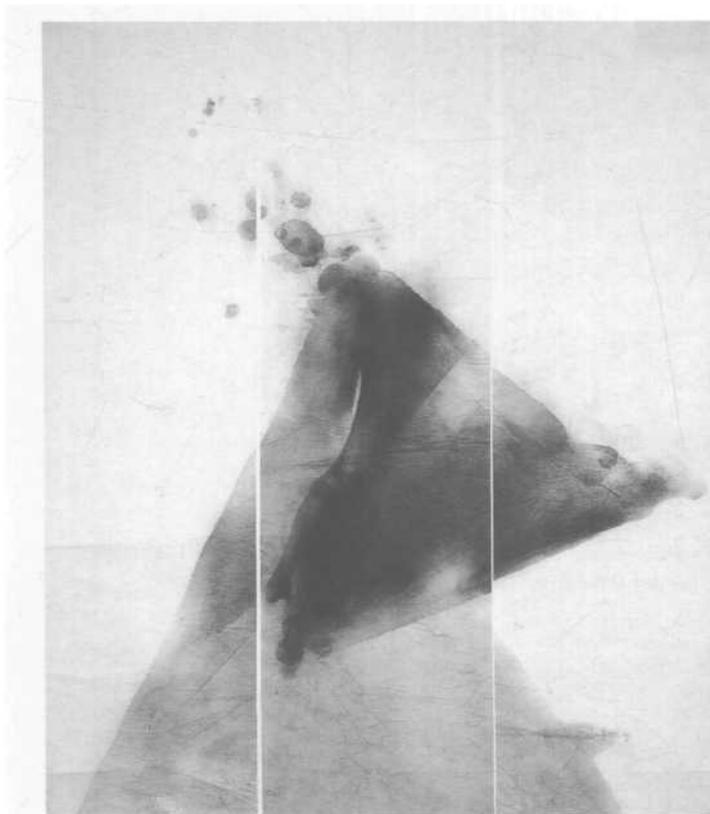
“In my art, I have always followed the principle of ‘minimalisation’ in the pictorial treatment and in the act of painting itself. This is the best mode for me to express my interest in spatial relationships and simplified form. All the technicalities of expression have been minimalised to pure communication of emotions. My language has basically broken away from the constraints of traditional painting. Naturally, that fatal knot is still tied to traditional culture, and unwittingly betrays Eastern characteristics.”

— Shen Qin

SHEN QIN
沈勤

1

Ink Mountains
Ink on paper
1991
140 × 119.5 cm
水墨·山



2

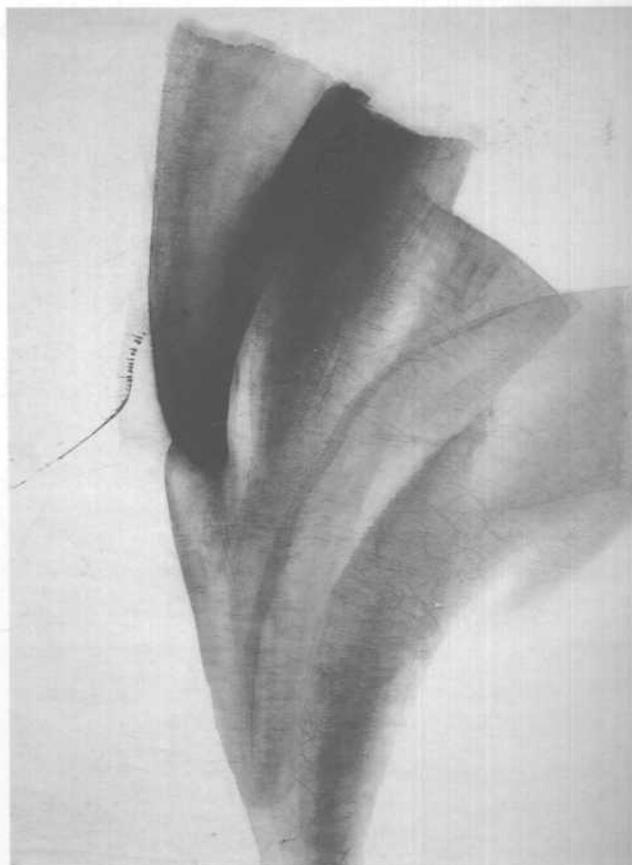
Ink Mountains
Ink on paper
1991
137 × 94 cm
水墨·山



2

3

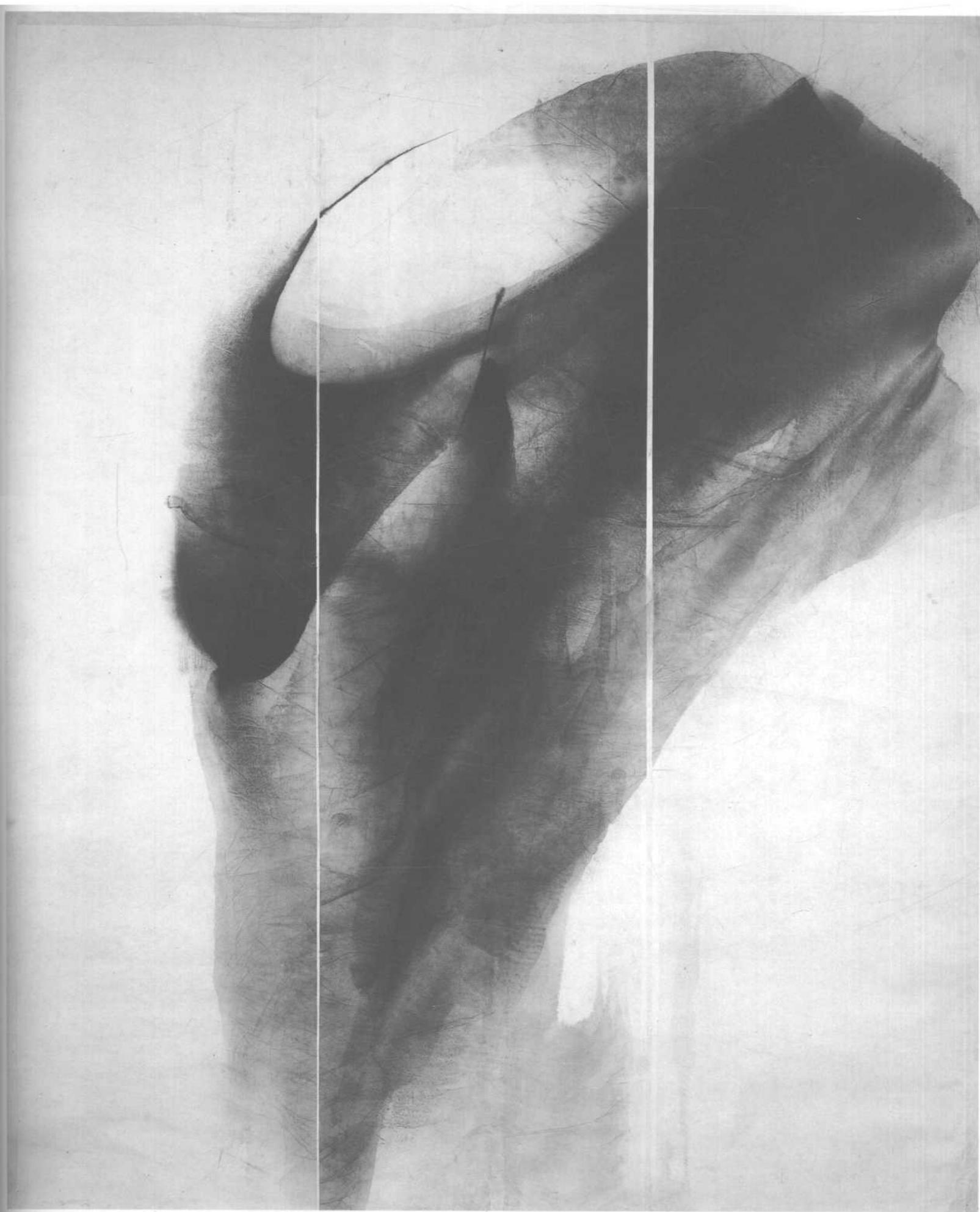
Ink Mountains
Ink on paper
1991
150 × 117 cm
水墨·山



3

4

Ink Mountains
Ink on paper
1991
153 × 126 cm
水墨·山



SHANG YANG

尚揚

1

Condition 5

Oil on canvas

1989

97 · 136 cm

狀態：五

SHANG YANG

(b. 1942, Hubei Province)

尚揚

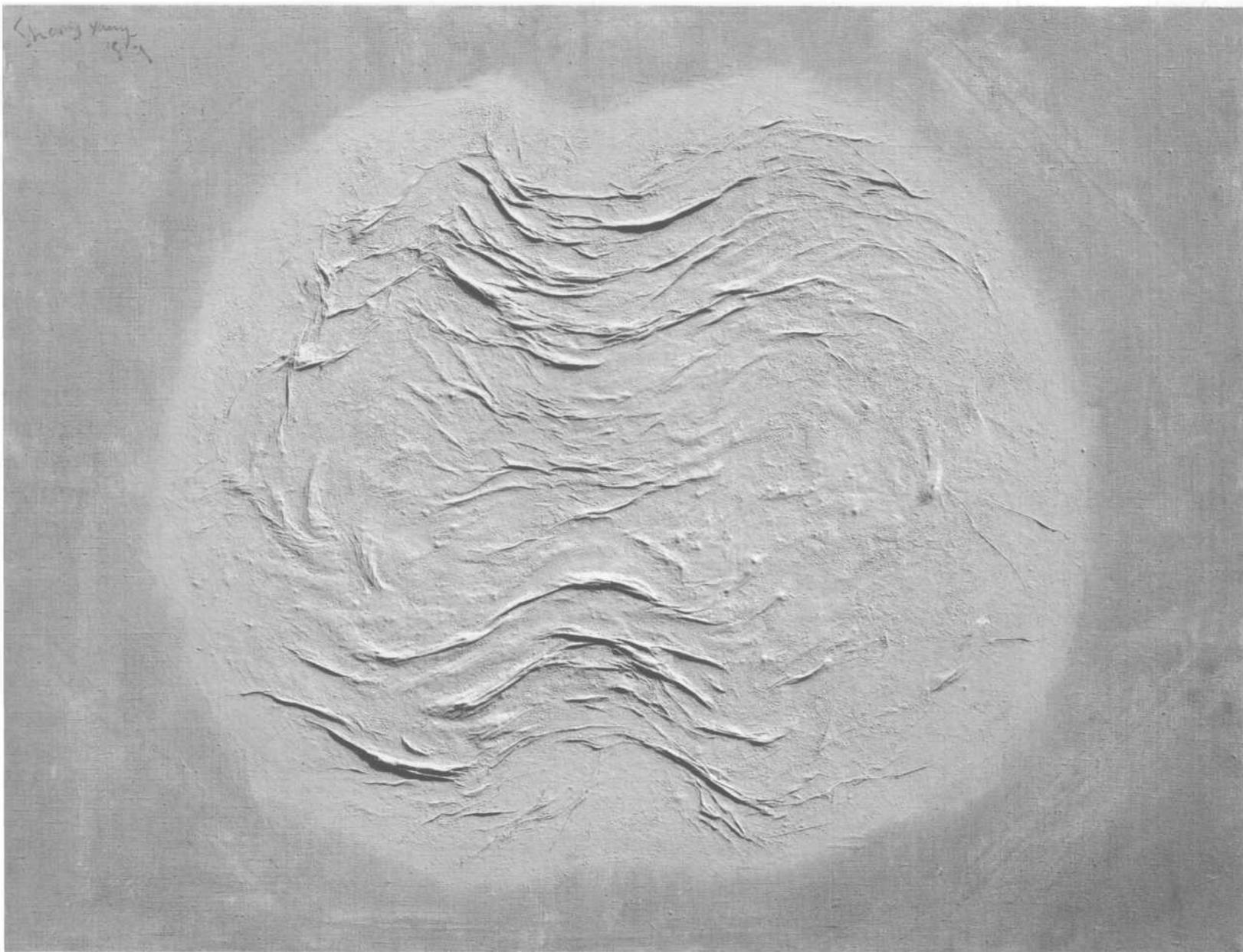
Shang Yang graduated from the Oil Painting Department of the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts, and in 1981 received his Master's degree in oil painting from the same institution. He is currently Associate Professor at the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts.

Shang Yang is a major figure in the field of Chinese contemporary oil painting. At the same time, he is one of a handful of artists of his generation whose work has undergone major stylistic changes. His early works take as their theme the loess plateaus of China's Yellow River valley. In these paintings human figures and the natural landscape take on the significance of abstract symbols and are conceptually and imagistically merged. In the mid-to-late Eighties, Shang Yang's painting style became progressively more abstract. In his *Heavenly Bodies* series and *Situation* series painted in 1988, the artist's masterful and sensitive use of technique shows that in his case technique is intricately bound up with his inner life.

After 1988, Shang Yang's work took another dramatic turn when he began using found materials in a more intense exploration of pure abstract language. His recent works display a new, more subtly integrated quality of spiritual content and artistic vocabulary — a quality that at once demonstrates the artists's deep attachment to Eastern philosophy and his mastery of abstract painting language.

"All these years, I have tried very hard to create my own style without repeating myself. This process has given me endless energy, so that I never feel tired or bored. Apart from the goals I have set for myself in recent works, I really don't know how or to what extent my style will change in the future. All I know is that this is how I express my emotions. One grows wiser in the face of new challenges. Therefore I have always felt that a breakthrough in the language of expression is particularly important. In Aesop's fables, the travellers are told to go forward. It isn't until they have reached their destination that they realise how much time was required for the journey. It is by experimenting with new expressions that one finds out how far one has to travel."

— Shang Yang



Shang Yang
2014

2

Condition 3

Oil on canvas

1989

123 × 123 cm

狀態：三

3, 4

Morning Tea

Installation: panel and
fibreglass sculptures

1992

早茶

5

To Lyotard: I & II

Oil on canvas

1991

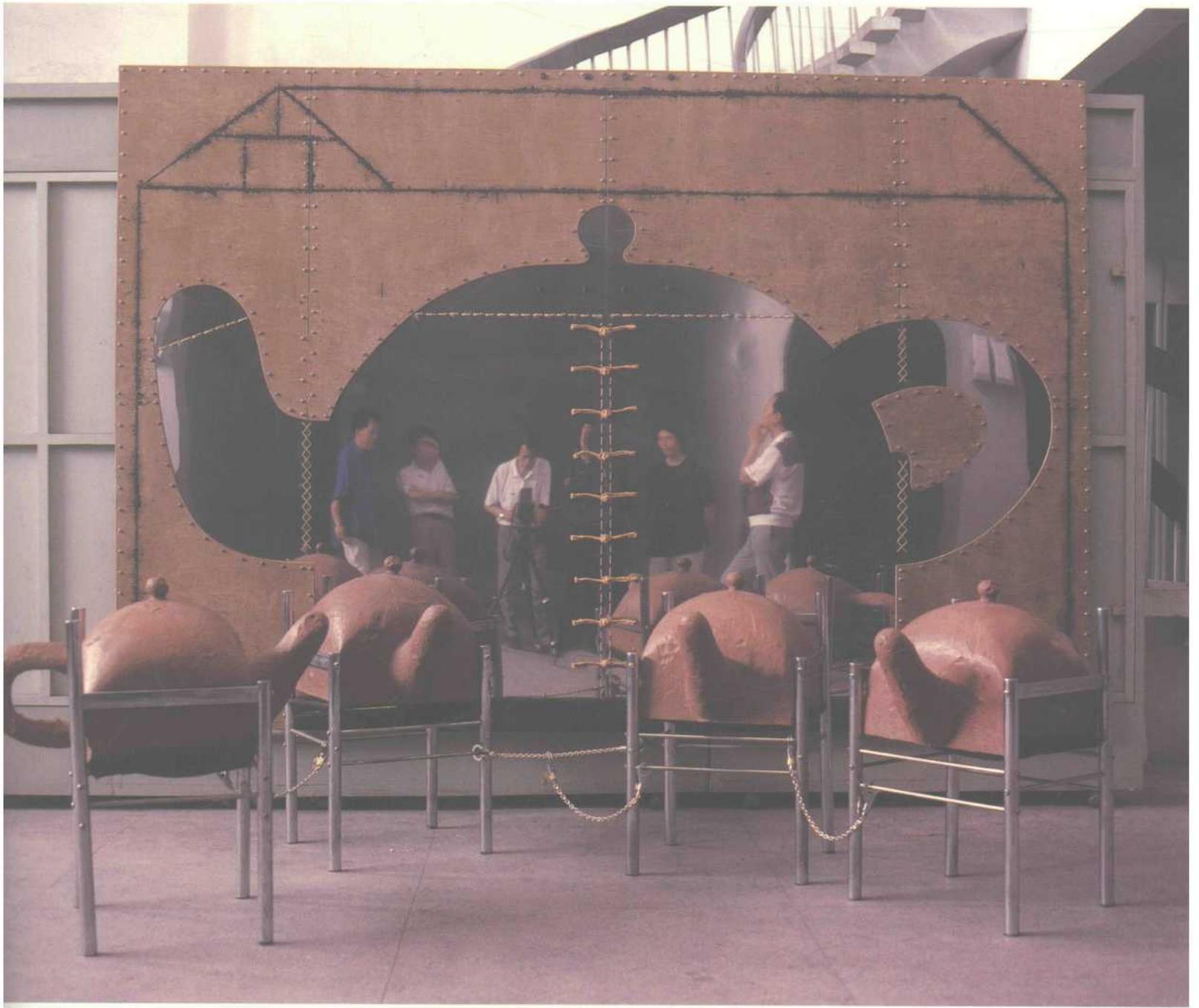
I: 95 × 78 cm

II: 65 × 92 cm

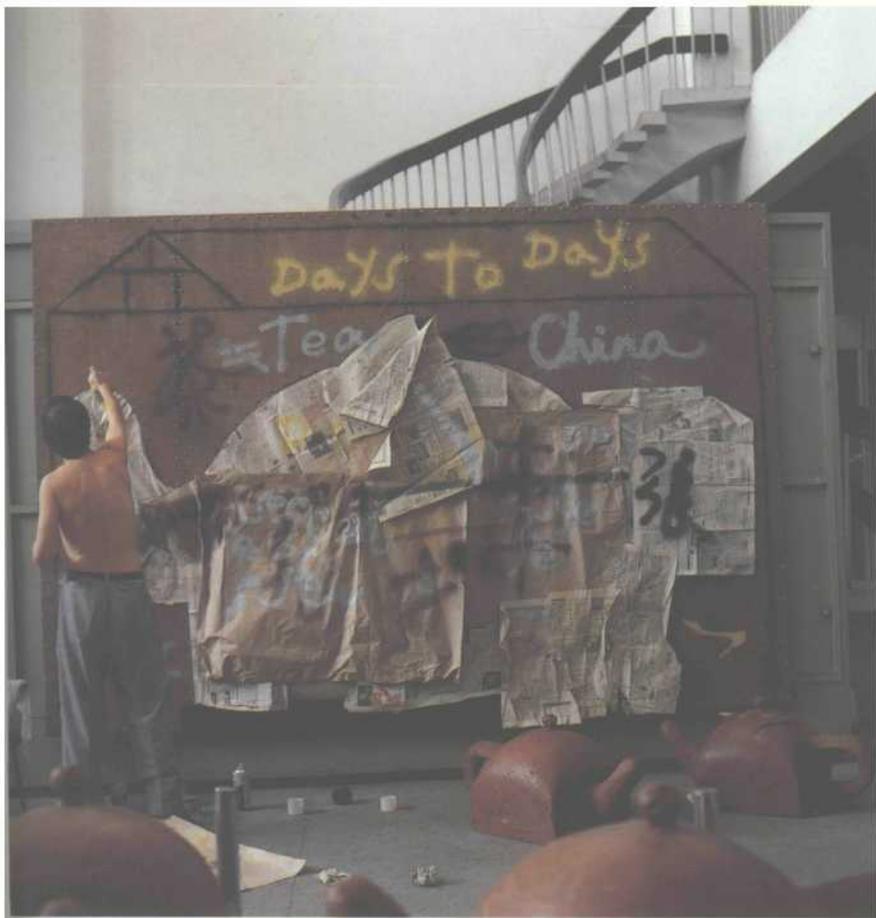
致利奧塔：一和二



2



3



4



5

WANG CHUAN

王川

1
Vault of Time, No. 3

Oil on canvas

1992

100 × 80 cm

時間的倉庫三號

2

Vault of Time, No. 16

Oil on canvas

1992

100 × 80 cm

時間的倉庫十六號

3

Vault of Time, No. 17

Oil on canvas

1992

100 × 80 cm

時間的倉庫十七號

4

Vault of Time, No. 4

Oil on canvas

1992

100 × 80 cm

時間的倉庫四號

WANG CHUAN

(b. 1953, Chengdu, Sichuan Province)

王川

Wang Chuan graduated from the Chinese Painting Department of the Sichuan Art Academy in 1982, and makes his living as a professional artist.

Wang made his name in the early 1980s in the “Scar Art” movement. His early work, *Farewell, Little Road*, depicted in a realistic manner the contradictory feelings of urban youth when they left the rural villages to which they had been assigned during the Cultural Revolution.

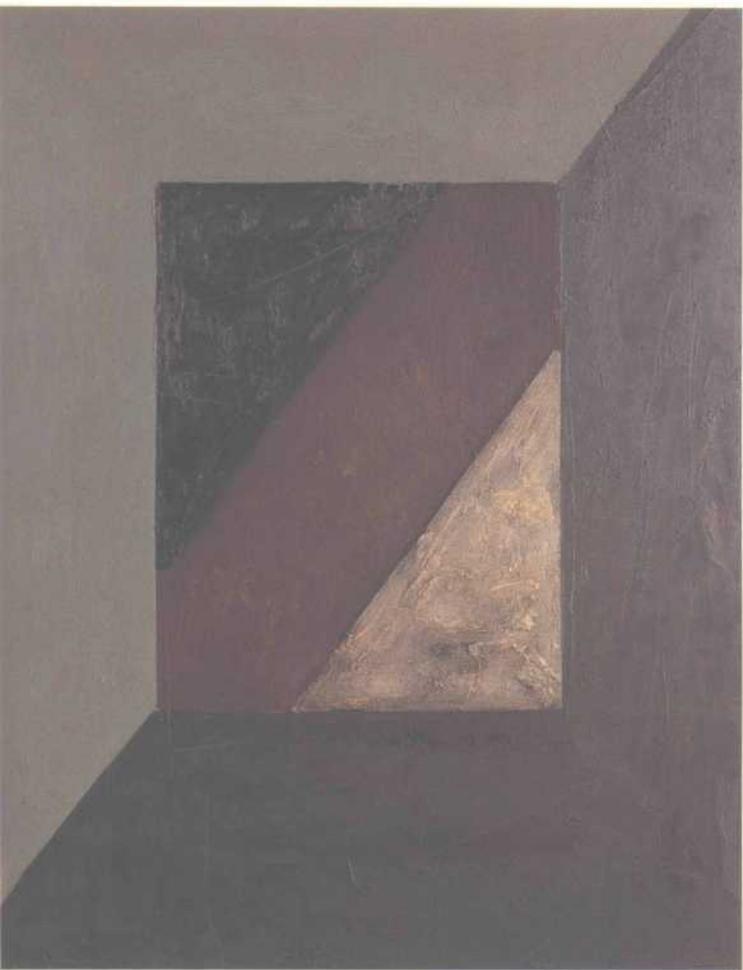
In 1984, he began working in Chinese ink and produced a large number of abstract scrolls. His personal emotions fade in and out of his paintings, sometimes consciously, sometimes as if by accident. In his *Structures* series of 1989, Wang’s brush seems to have been subject to restraint and an almost autonomous external pressure. Sections of his paintings are “crossed out” with powerful, even mechanical, heavily-inked brush strokes, as if indicating a refusal to go on. In his later *Form* series, Wang exhibits greater simplification of his brush strokes, a simplification that was brought to an extreme in his 1990 *Ink and Dots* exhibition, in which Wang’s paintings were reduced to pure ink dots.

In his recent *Vault of Time* series and other works, Wang entered into “an extended search for an elementary structure on which to build spiritual fulfillment and a freer approach to my own unconscious,” as he described it. These paintings make use of abstract structural language and symbols and draw upon the artist’s own life and experience to convey metaphor and meaning.

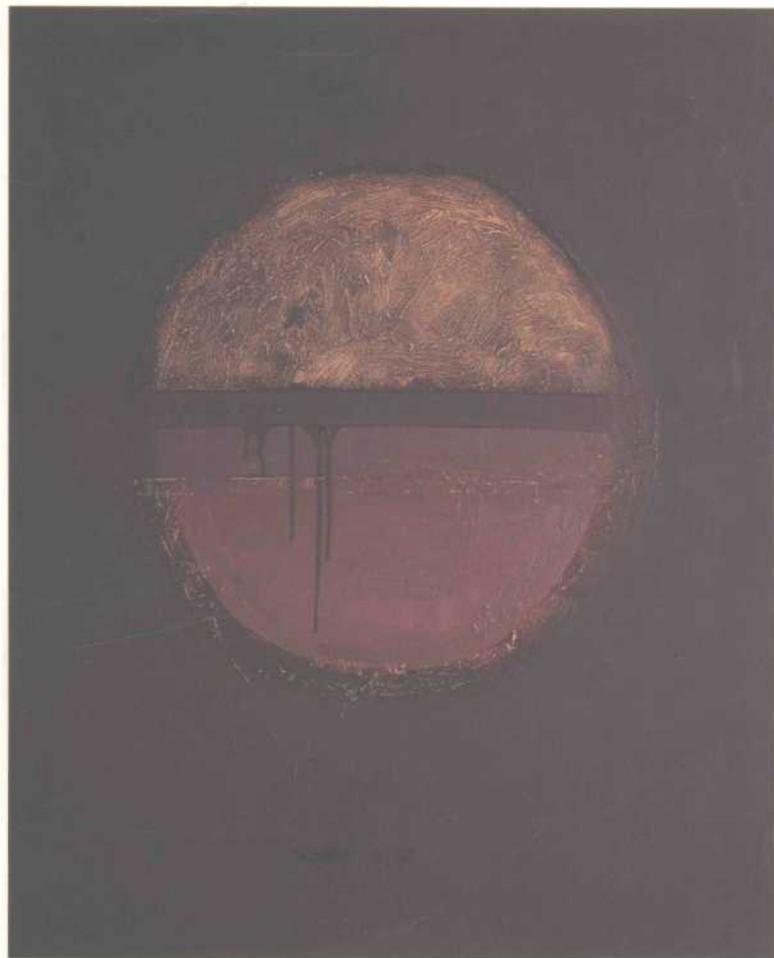
“My personal standpoint is to live in this world but remain aloof. Yet I have chosen the most ‘essential’ and at the same time the most risky and dangerous career; that of an artist.

This gives me a sense of spiritual absurdity. These unresolvable contradictions are the substance of the most exquisite aspects of art, and the reason for our undying quest. For what we are seeking is precisely what is unobtainable.”

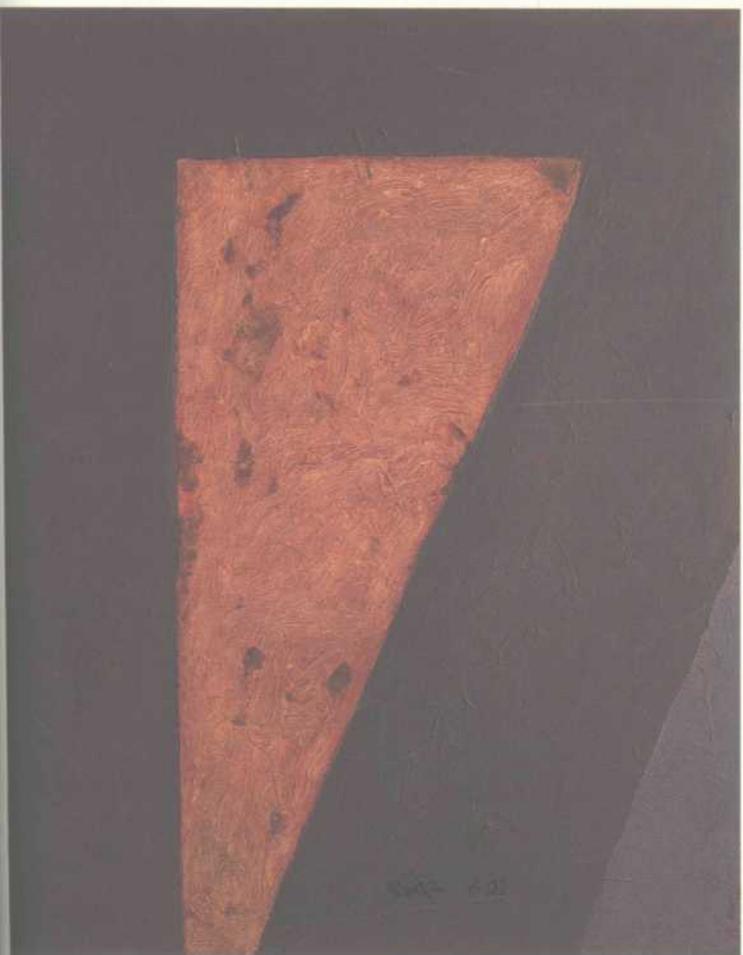
— Wang Chuan



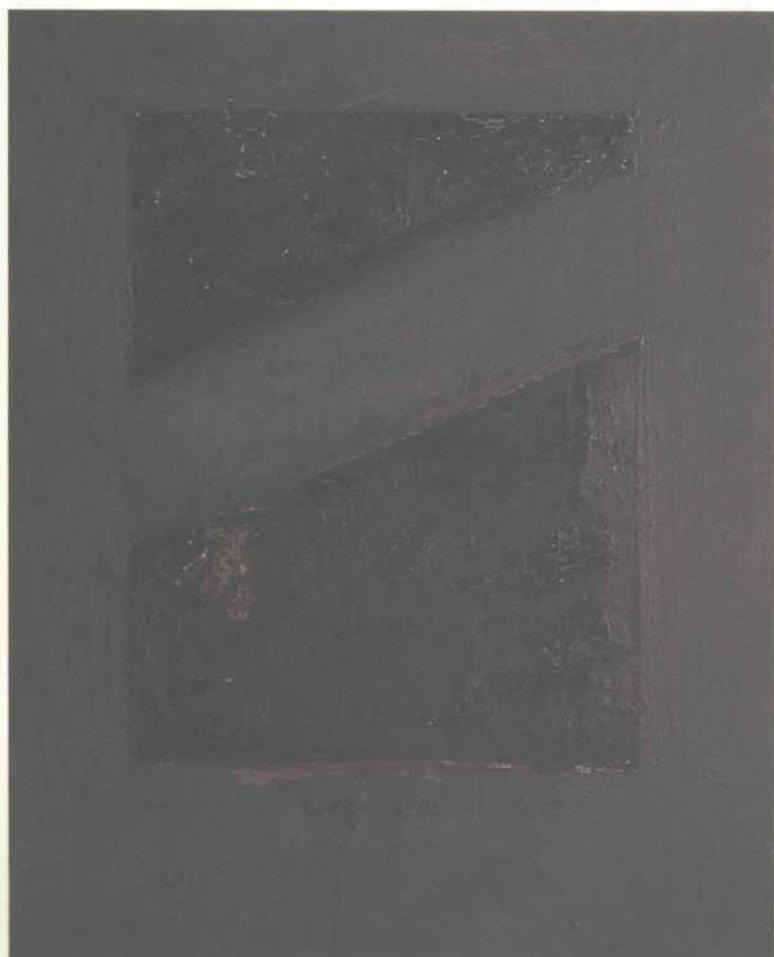
1



3



2



4

5-9

Vault of Time, August 1992 (Triptych)

Work in progress from March to October, 1992

Oil on canvas

1992

200 x 300 cm

時間的倉庫，
一九九二年八月
(三聯)



5



6

10

Vault of Time, March 1992 (Triptych)

Oil on canvas

1992

200 x 300 cm

時間的倉庫，
一九九二年三月
(三聯)



7



8



9



LIU MING

劉鳴

1

Rust Transformation,

No. 2

Paper and mixed media

1991

180 × 120 cm

銹變系列之二

2

Rust Transformation,

No. 1

Paper and mixed media

1991

180 × 120 cm

銹變系列之一

LIU MING

(b. 1957, Nanjing, Jiangsu Province)

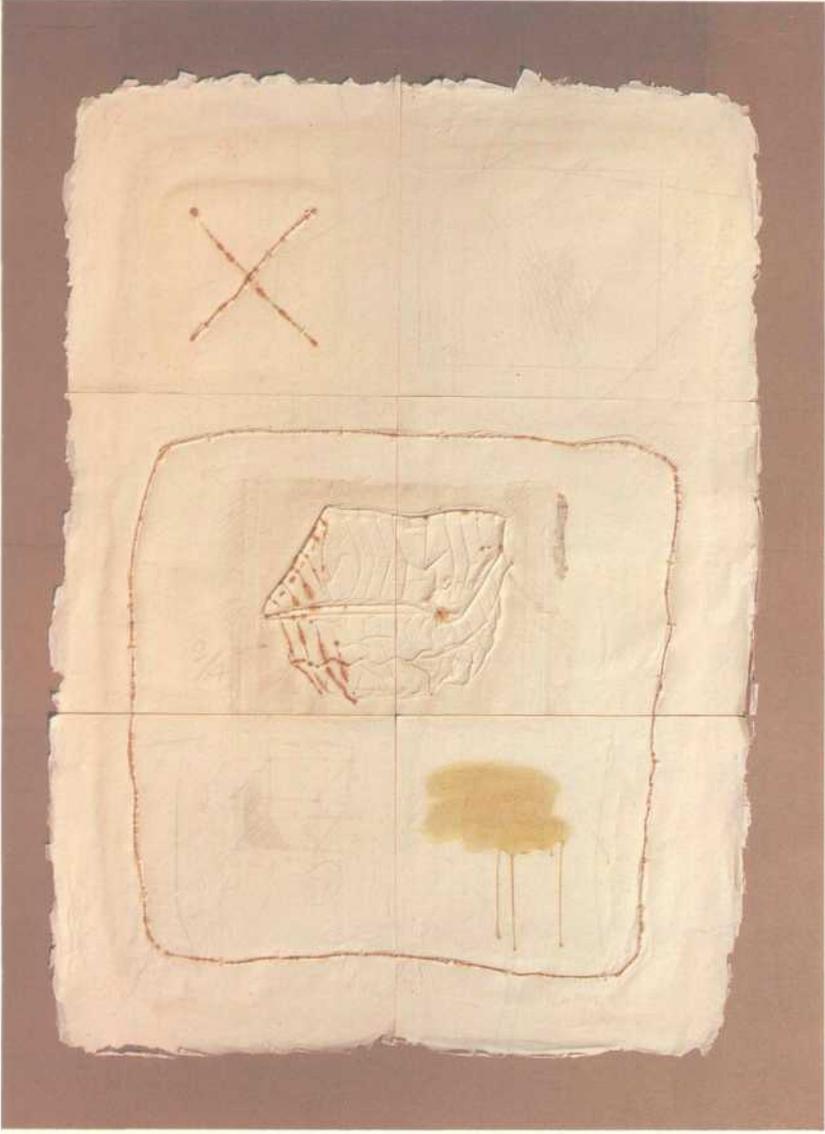
劉鳴

Liu Ming graduated from the Oil Painting Department of Nanjing Art Academy. He was editor of the influential *Jiangsu Pictorial Art Monthly* until he emigrated to Paris in 1991.

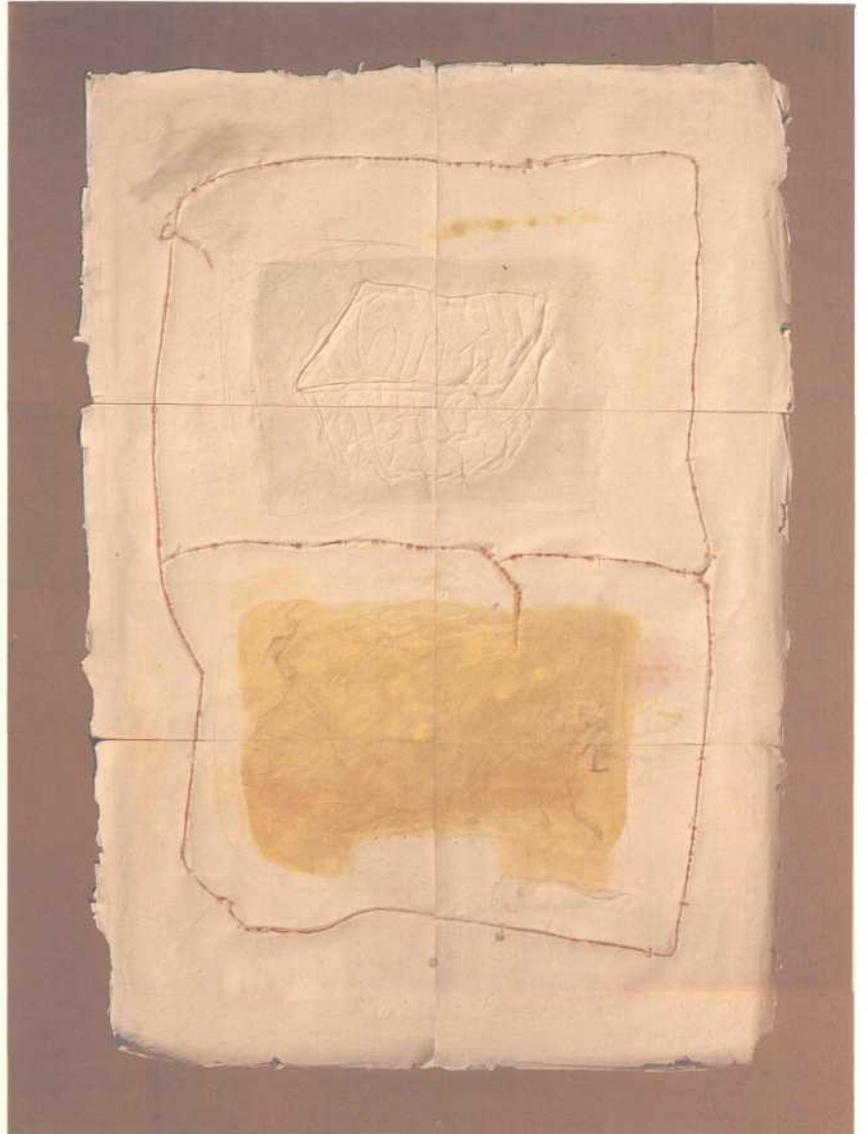
Liu Ming's works of handmade paper are representative of the movement in abstract art in the late Eighties toward a consuming concern with the material characteristics of the art medium. This absorption in the physical material is seen as a turning away from the insubstantial, spiritual concerns that characterised most of Chinese abstract art at the time. In Liu's art, the artist's sensitivity is subtly articulated by the precious frailty of the paper and the nuances of incompatibility and intrusion created by the wire and other incongruous materials embedded in it.

"When the astronauts first stepped on the moon, God died! By this achievement, the human race realised its ability to transcend time and space. From that time on, people no longer used the adjective 'great' when talking of the universe, but only the adjective 'mysterious.' Nature is also 'great,' but now we speak of 'natural energy sources' and 'natural resources,' and only when speaking of death do we refer to a 'natural process.' I wonder what the astronauts think: Did they conquer the heavens, or did the heavens conquer them? Having travelled so far, do they think the human race is great, or insignificant? Insignificant but cute, for sure, dancing up and down on the moon."

— Liu Ming



1



2

XU ANMING

(b. 1960, Beijing)

徐安明

Xu Anming is a self-taught painter and makes his living as a professional artist.

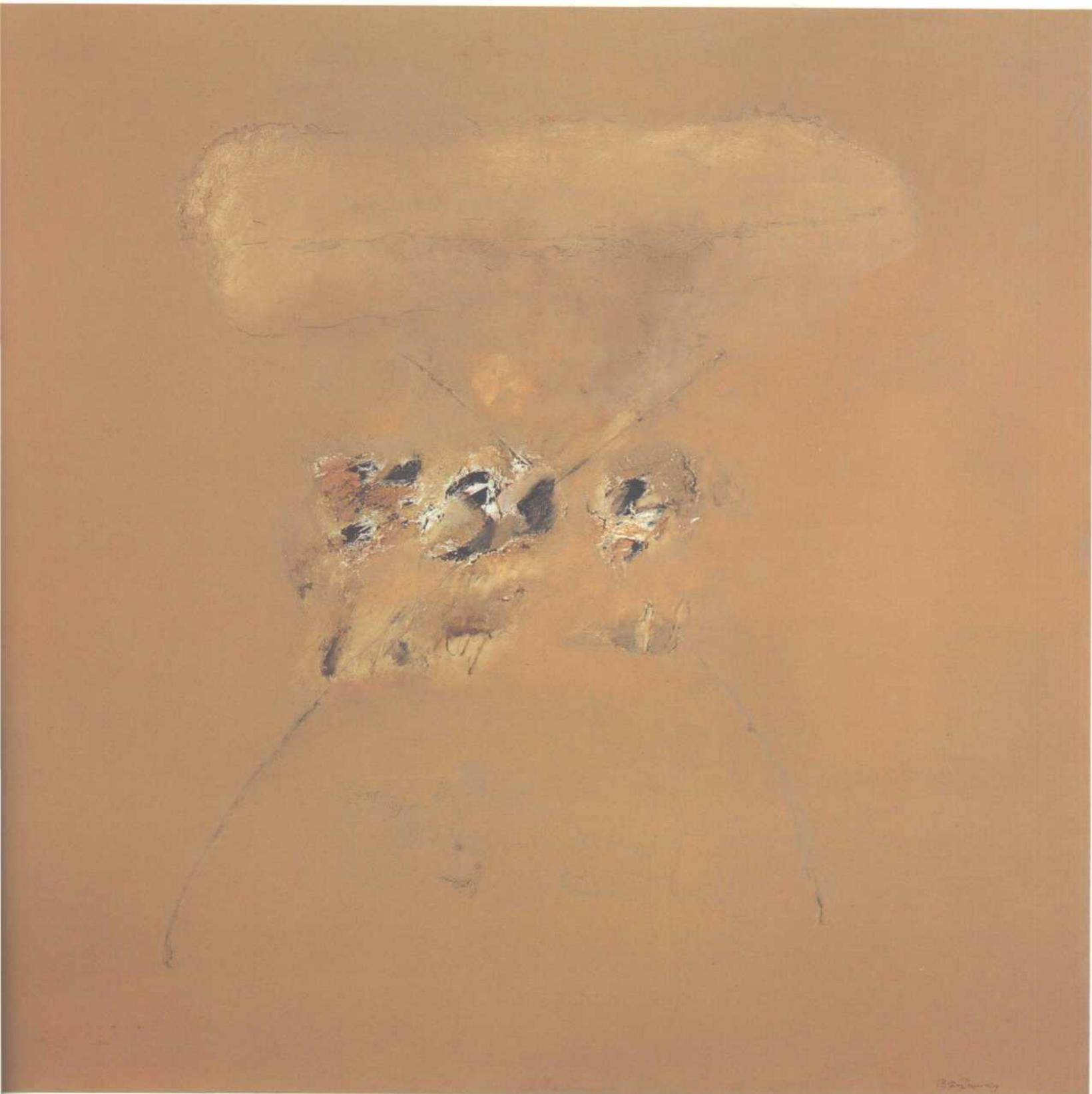
Xu Anming first began experimenting with abstract paintings around 1978. The fact that he has never received any formal academy training, coupled with his temperamental personality, combined to render these early attempts vague and directionless. He later emerged from this period of stylistic confusion to paint a series of representational portraits, which convey a dream-like and somewhat tense atmosphere. Xu describes these portraits as “an emotional tribute to his friends with a past.”

In 1991, Xu began to create a new series of abstract works that demonstrate an emerging personal style. He uses materials which are finely textured and translucent, and which, through his skillful handling, give his works a subtle sense of change in the interplay of light and shade. The higher tones in these paintings consist of earthy yellow colours, imparting a warm, grainy feeling. The lower tones are mostly black and grey, concealing a sense of unease beyond the calmness. This contrast reflects Xu's paradoxical approach to reality — to face it and then to escape from it.

“In my painting I always try to use the nature of the material to reflect the “musculature” of my compositions, and at the same time to reinforce the conceptualised, idealised content.

I tend to use warm, sepia tones because I want to express the quality of something that still exists in life even though the thing itself has been erased — like memories of old photographs. I use fragments of material, and fragments of technique, that when taken together create a soft, integrated sense of quietude. I am always pursuing the paradoxical idea of the ‘expression of emptiness.’”

— Xu Anming



2

Work, S1
Oil on canvas
1991
140 × 110 cm
作品 S1

3

Work, S14
Oil on canvas
1991
140 × 110 cm
作品 S14

4

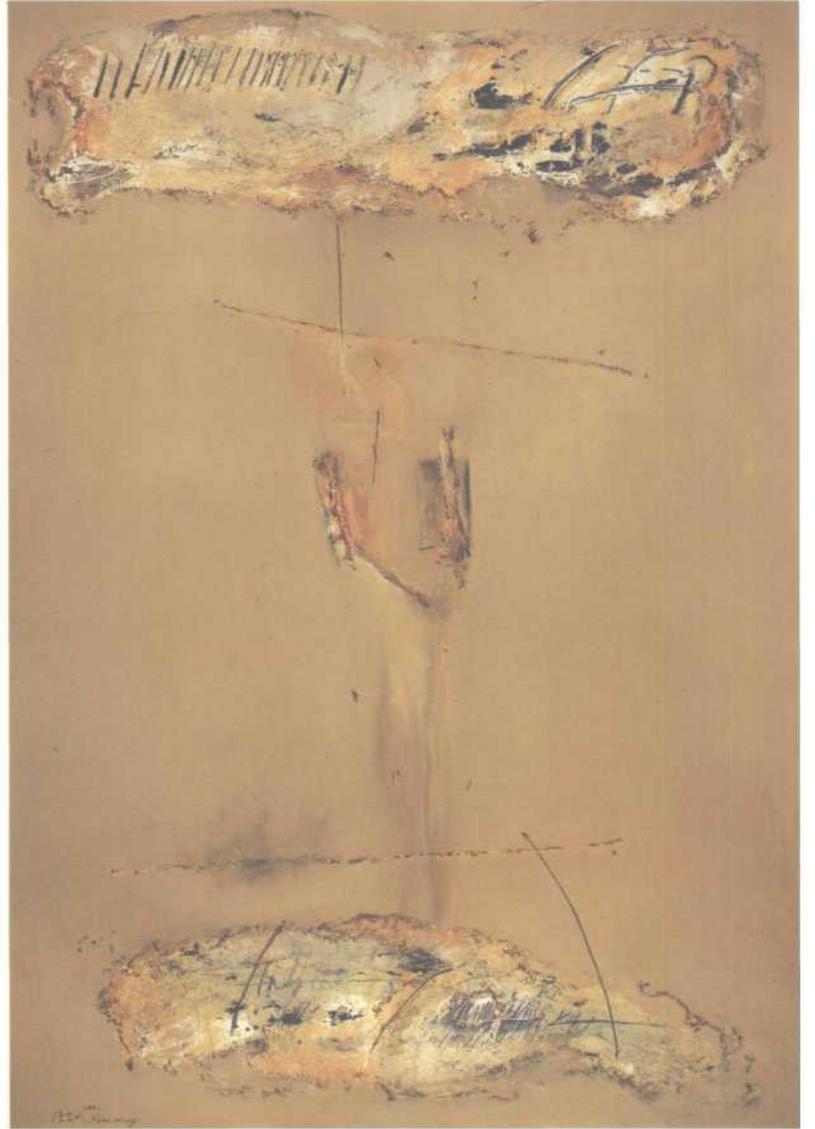
Work, S2
Oil on canvas
1991
140 × 140 cm
作品 S2

5

Work, S3
Oil on canvas
1991
140 × 140 cm
作品 S3

6

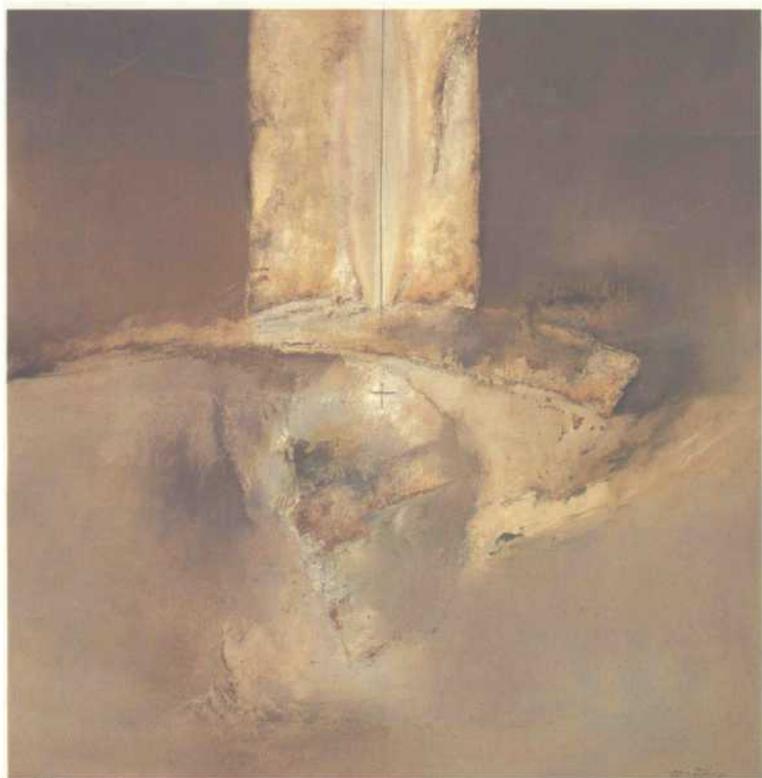
Work, S4
Oil on canvas
1991
140 × 140 cm
作品 S4



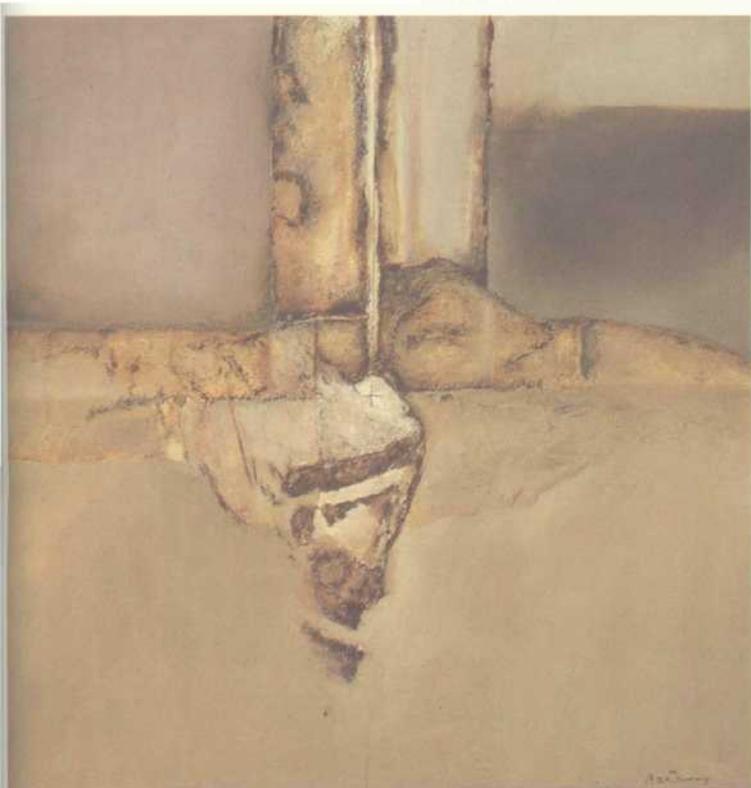
2



3



4



5



6

DING YI
丁乙

1
Manifestation of Crosses,
92-1
Oil on canvas
1992
140 x 160 cm
十示 92-1

2
Manifestation of Crosses,
92-2
Oil on canvas
1992
140 x 160 cm
十示 92-2

DING YI

(b. 1963)

丁乙

Ding Yi's major series of paintings, *Manifestation of Crosses* [translator's note: in Chinese the title is actually *Manifestation of Tens*, as the character "ten" in Chinese resembles a cross: +], is a meticulous, formalist rendering which makes use of nothing but the character "ten" in the primary colors red, blue and yellow.

In his early works, Ding rejected any reliance on formal content as part of his search for a visual language. He has never given a title to any of his works that could be construed as reflecting a sense of cultural values, often only writing the date of the painting on the back of the canvas as a way of numbering his opus. Although the *Manifestation of Crosses* bears a resemblance to Op Art, Ding's point of departure is quite different, as it is from that of the Italian Futurists with their celebration of modern technology. In effect, Ding takes a more painterly approach: his paintings bear a closer resemblance to 1950s hard-edged abstractionism.

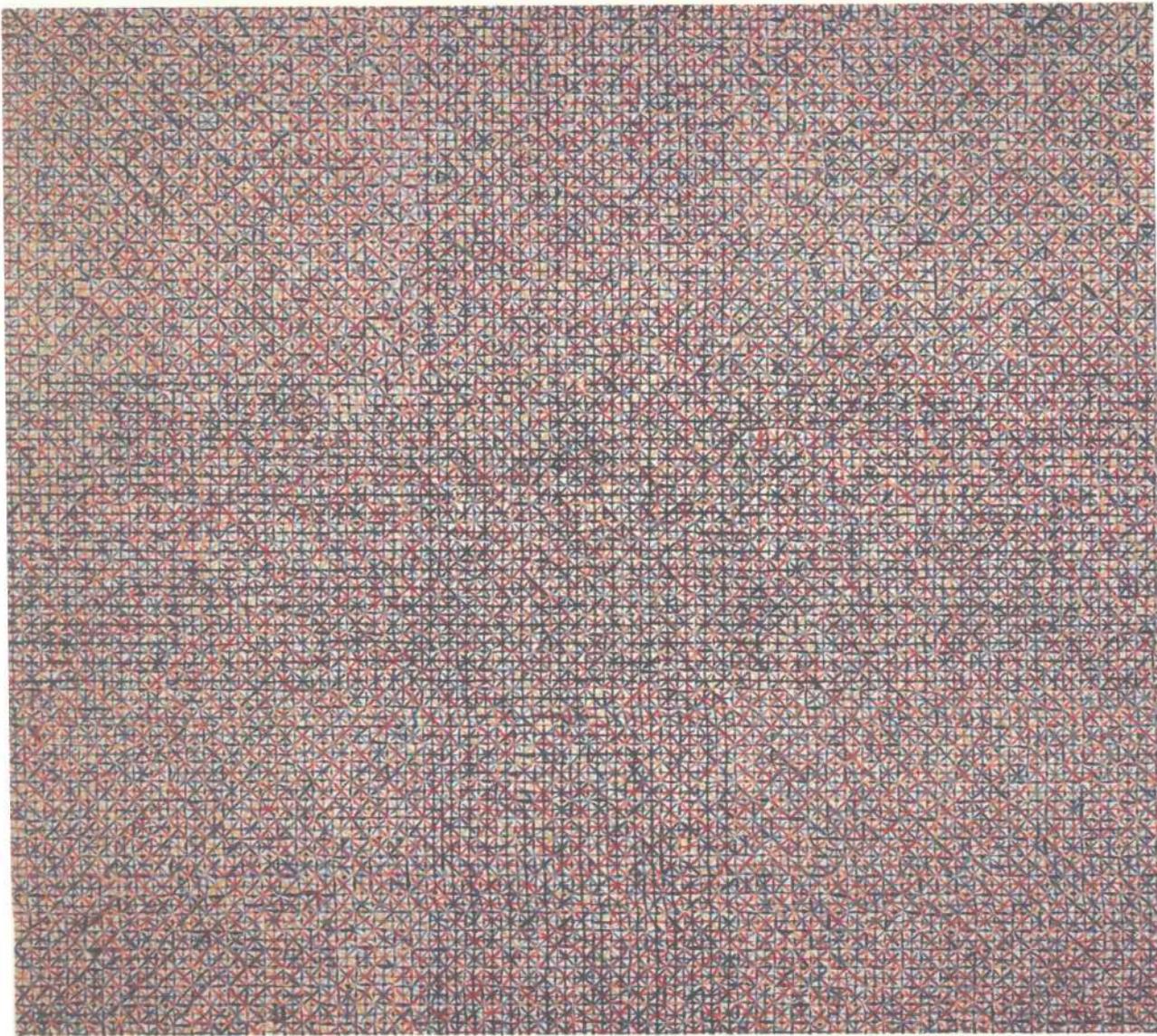
In 1991, Ding's paintings showed a stylistic change, with freer brushstrokes, a more relaxed palette, and a less rigid sense of form. The almost rococo formalist grammar of his paintings took on a new tendency towards fragmentation, signalling the beginning of a break away from the constraints of the Western Modernist tradition, just as Ding made a clear break with traditional Asian aesthetics and the Chinese academy emphasis on realism.

"In my view of things, the history of art is a history of belief in the history of culture.

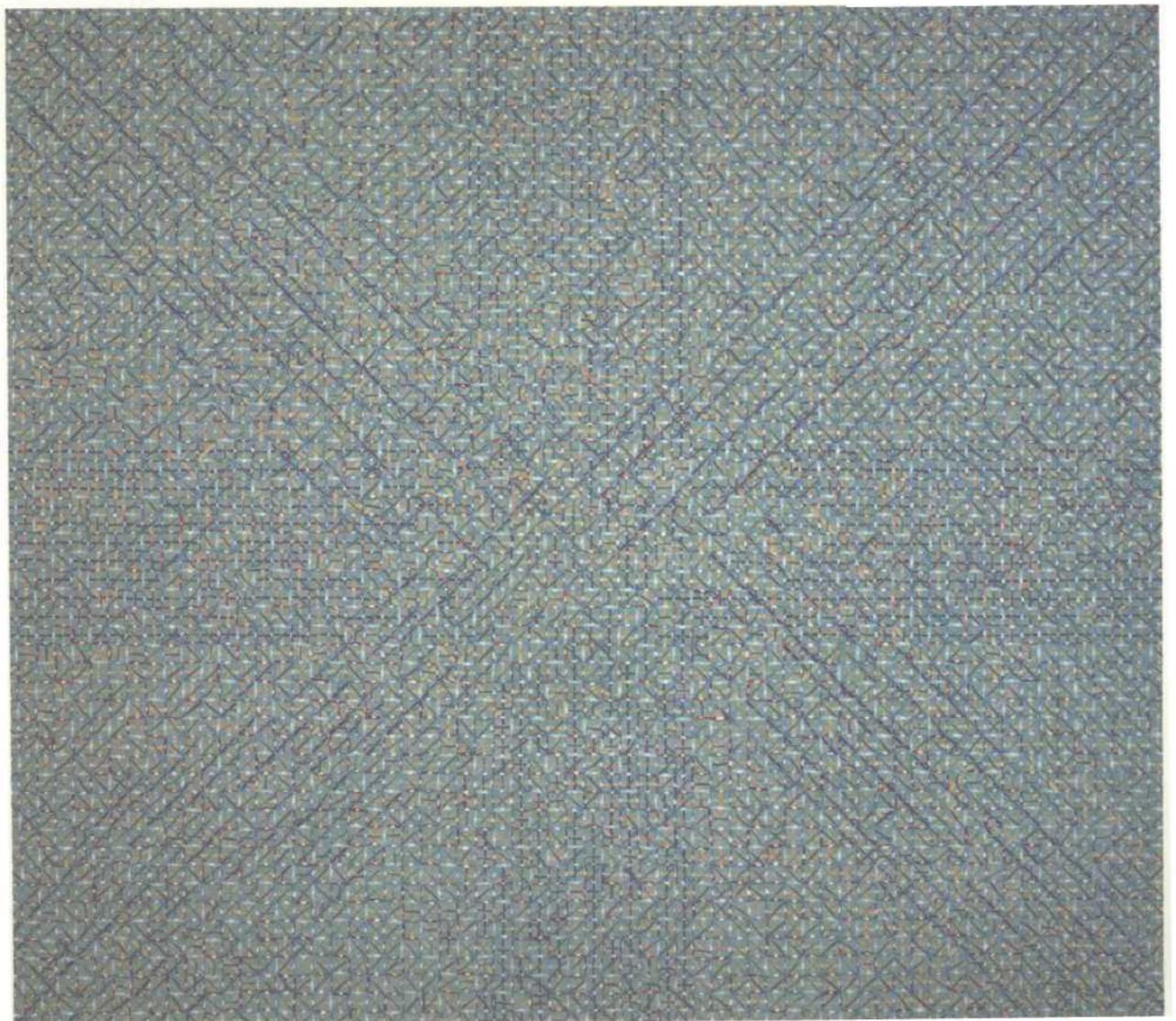
I want to use my brush to explicate the spiritual content of painting. I want to explain this problem in the simplest, most direct language, word by word and sentence by sentence.

I have created a painting in flaming red that I would like to entitle *The Red Revolution of Aesthetic Appreciation*. I hope that there will be nothing political seen in this red colour, but rather that it will be seen as a beautiful red colour, a red that belongs solely to the world of vision."

— Ding Yi



1



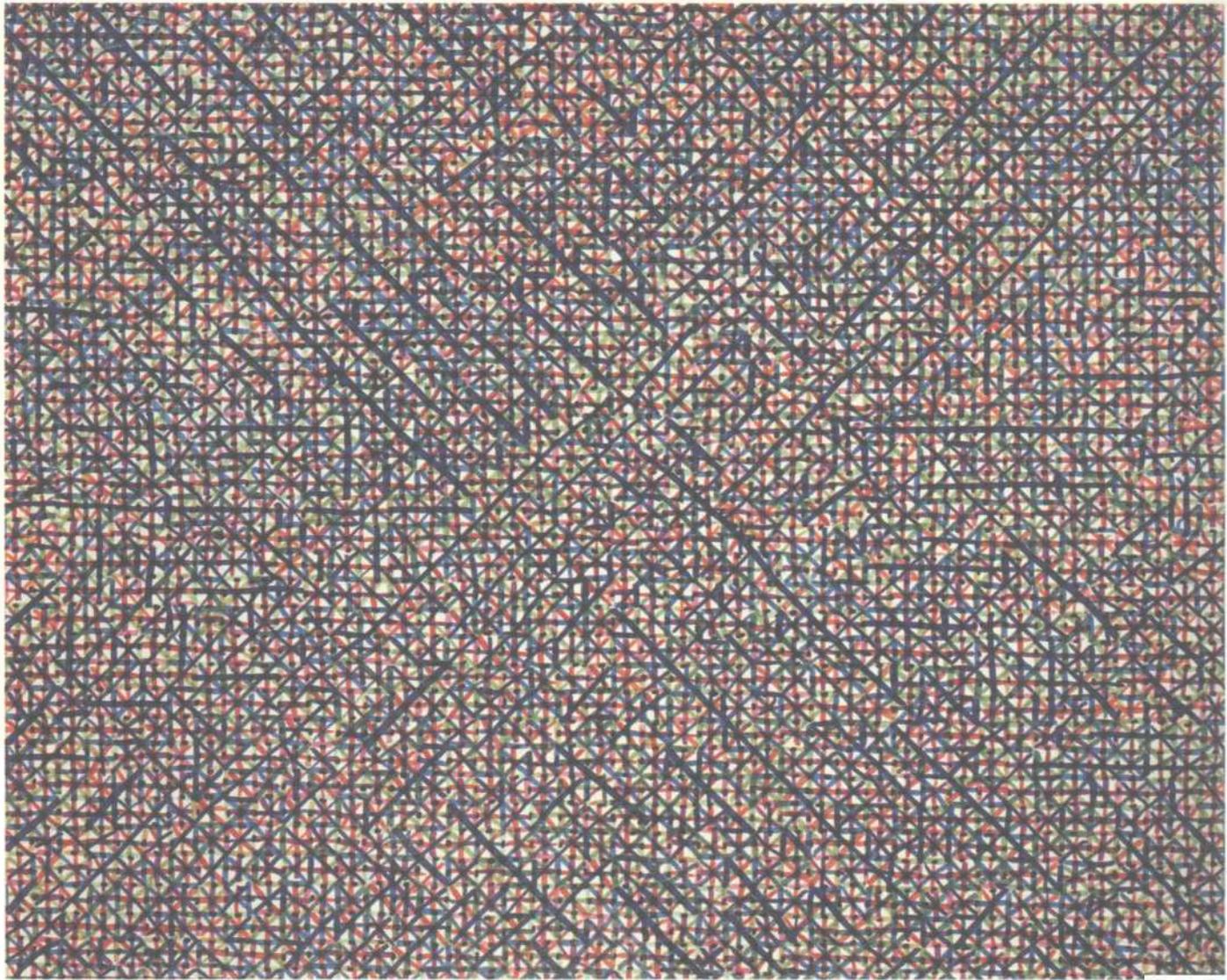
2

3
Manifestation of Crosses,
91-12
Oil on canvas
1991
90 × 110 cm
十示 91-12

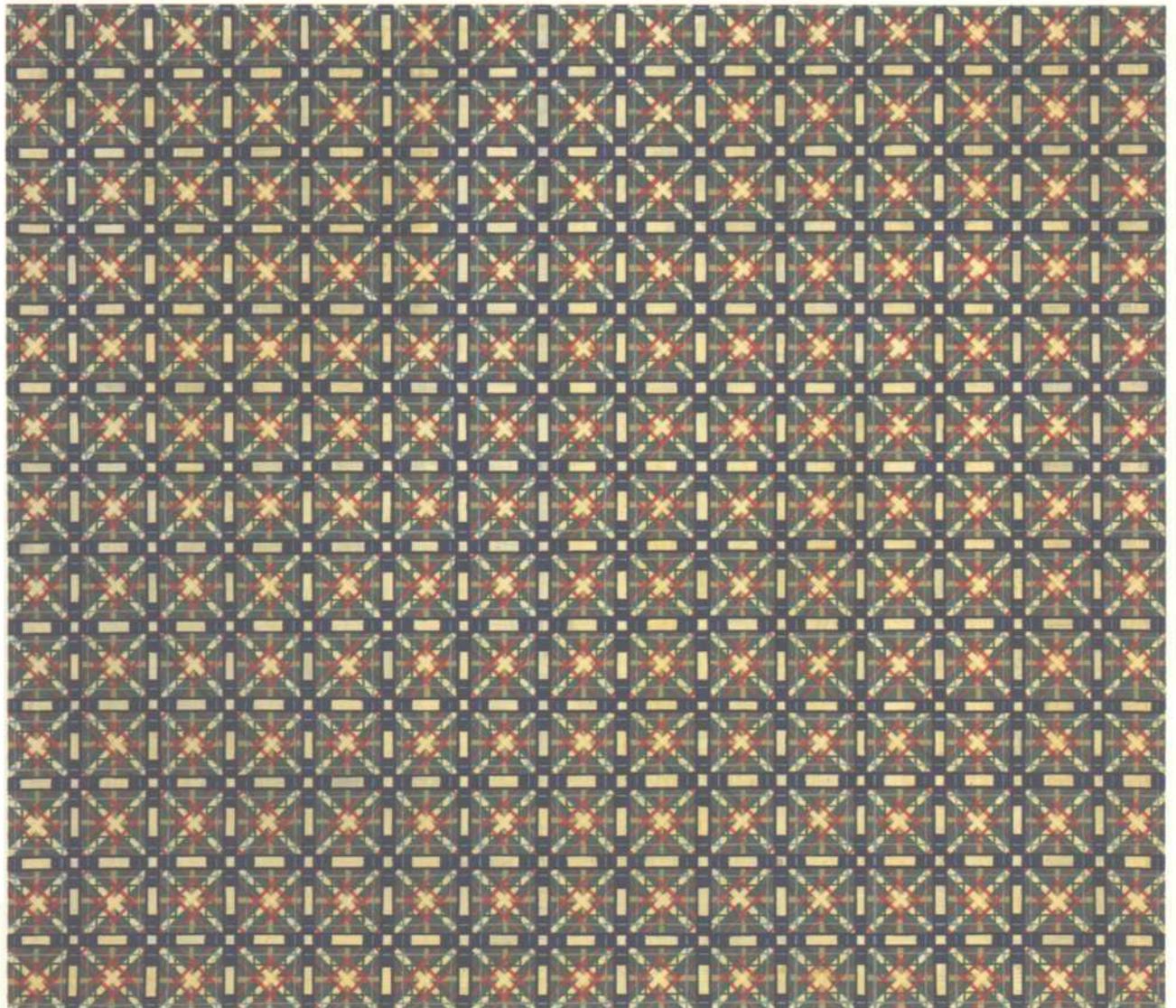
4
Manifestation of Crosses,
90-4
Oil on canvas
1990
64 × 73.5 cm
十示 90-4

5
Manifestation of Crosses,
91-2
Oil on canvas
1991
80 × 100 cm
十示 91-2

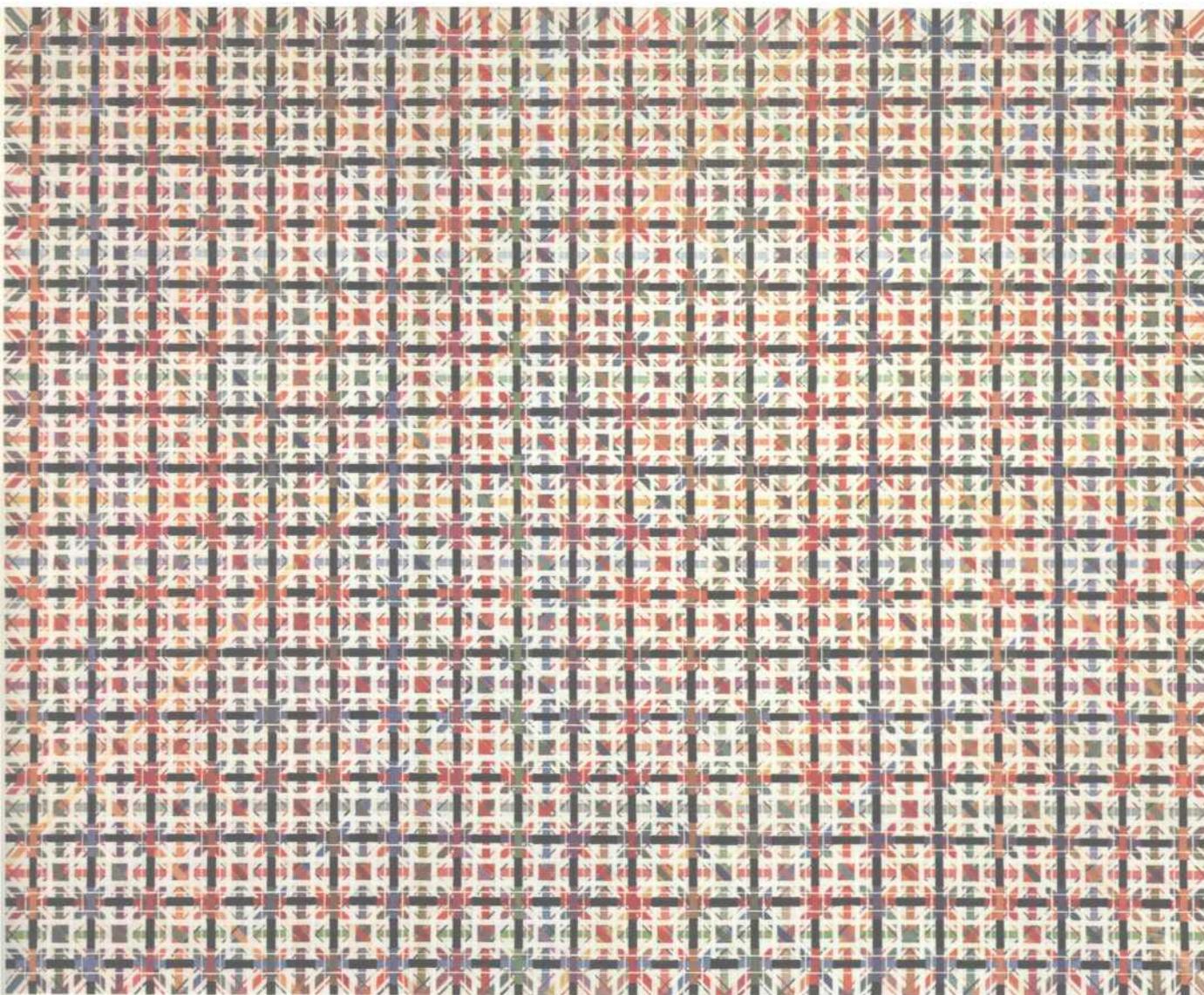
6
Manifestation of Crosses,
90-6
Oil on canvas
1990
89 × 120 cm
十示 90-6



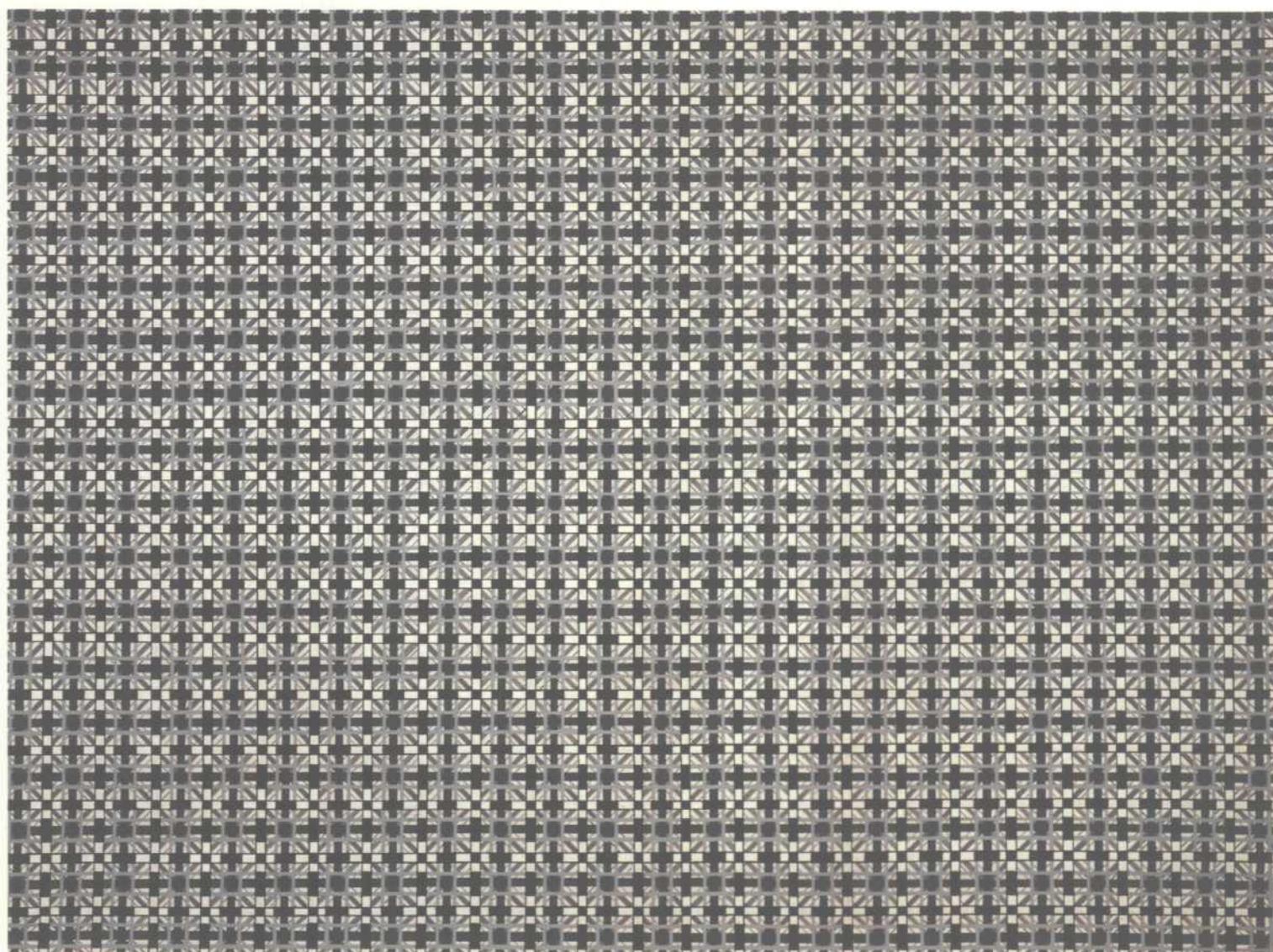
3



4



5



6

SUI JIANGUO

(b. 1956, Shandong Province)

隋建國

Sui Jianguo graduated from the Sculpture Department of the Shandong Art Academy in 1984. In 1989 he received his Masters degree from the Sculpture Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, where he presently teaches.

Sui Jianguo's abstract sculptures began to capture the attention of the art world in the post-'89 period, and have had a significant impact on both abstract sculpture and painting. His works have drawn their inspiration from the ancient Chinese techniques of gold inlay on bronze vessels, silver-making and the folk technique of "staple repair" for broken ceramics.

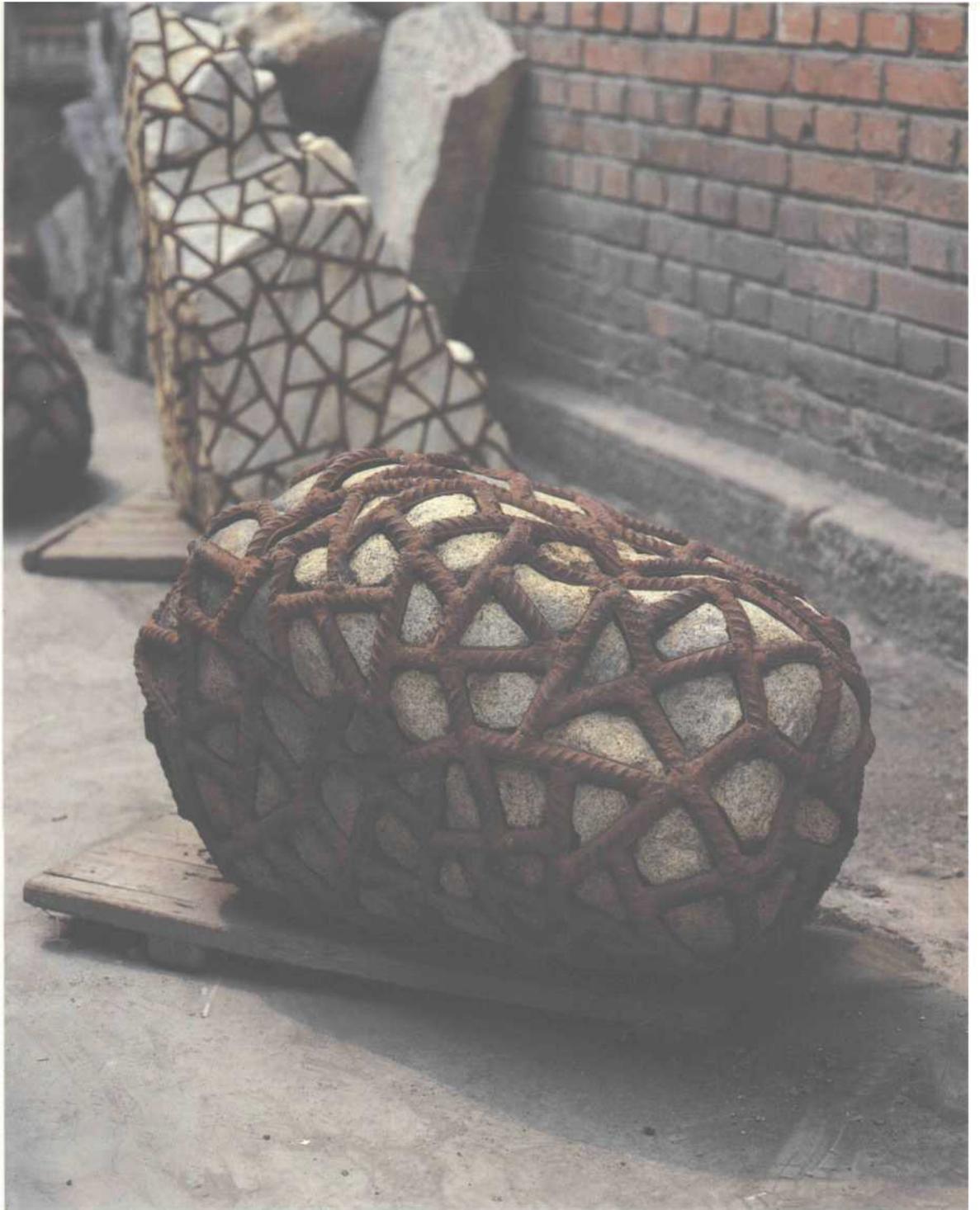
His works demonstrate a concern with the pureness of the material, an idea prevalent in Western sculpture, reaching a level unsurpassed by other Chinese artists. Sui's works represent the possibility of integrating traditional Chinese sculptural language with the language of contemporary abstract art. In Sui's aesthetic language, the craft techniques of inlay and staple repair are combined to achieve a symbiotic relationship of opposition and association. His recent works suggest psychological metaphors of bondage and an attempt to make whole something which has been broken, and hint at the idea of a powerful force which is being restrained and oppressed.

By making a sculptural language of craft, which is traditionally outside the realm of fine art, Sui elevates the aspect of direct physical work involved in the creation of art. In his formal considerations Sui is representative of the late Eighties movement among artists to take their inspiration from and allow their sensitivity to be guided by the physical qualities and formal language of the material.

"Art is an exploration of the self by the individual and, on another level, by society; and it is the way we confirm our existence. The individual's experience with the predicaments of life is the ultimate inspiration for art. Someone who considers himself an artist creates works that act as a dialogue between himself and the world. With this understanding in mind, art ideally should be wide open: it should embrace the world. But culture has become too 'sophisticated' for this, and art is no exception. Whether it's aesthetics or anti-aesthetics, art or anti-art, they are all heavily shrouded in self-consciousness.

When I carve into stone to seek a means of communicating with the world, all I manage to find is a face I have carved for myself. I am still not sure if I will ever find meaning for myself or for the world in this process."

— Sui Jianguo



1



3



2

4, 5

Structure No. 3

Marble, iron

1991

Height: 94 cm

結構三

6

Similar work to **Structure**
No. 3

1991

與結構三同系列作品

7, 8

Structure No. 5

Granite, iron

1992

Height: 99 cm

結構五

9

Structure No. 9

Pink granite, cast bronze

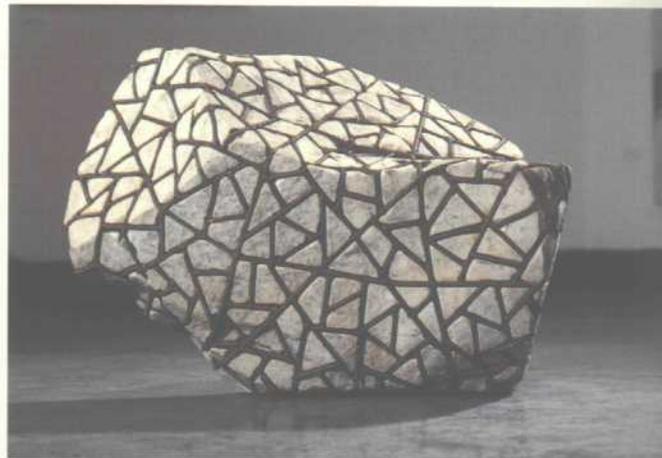
1990

Height: 70 cm

結構九



4



6



5



7



8



9

FU ZHONGWANG

傅中望

FU ZHONGWANG

(b. 1956, Hubei Province)

傅中望

1

Mortise and Tenon,

No. 16

Wood

1991

212 × 100 × 60 cm

榫卯 · 16號

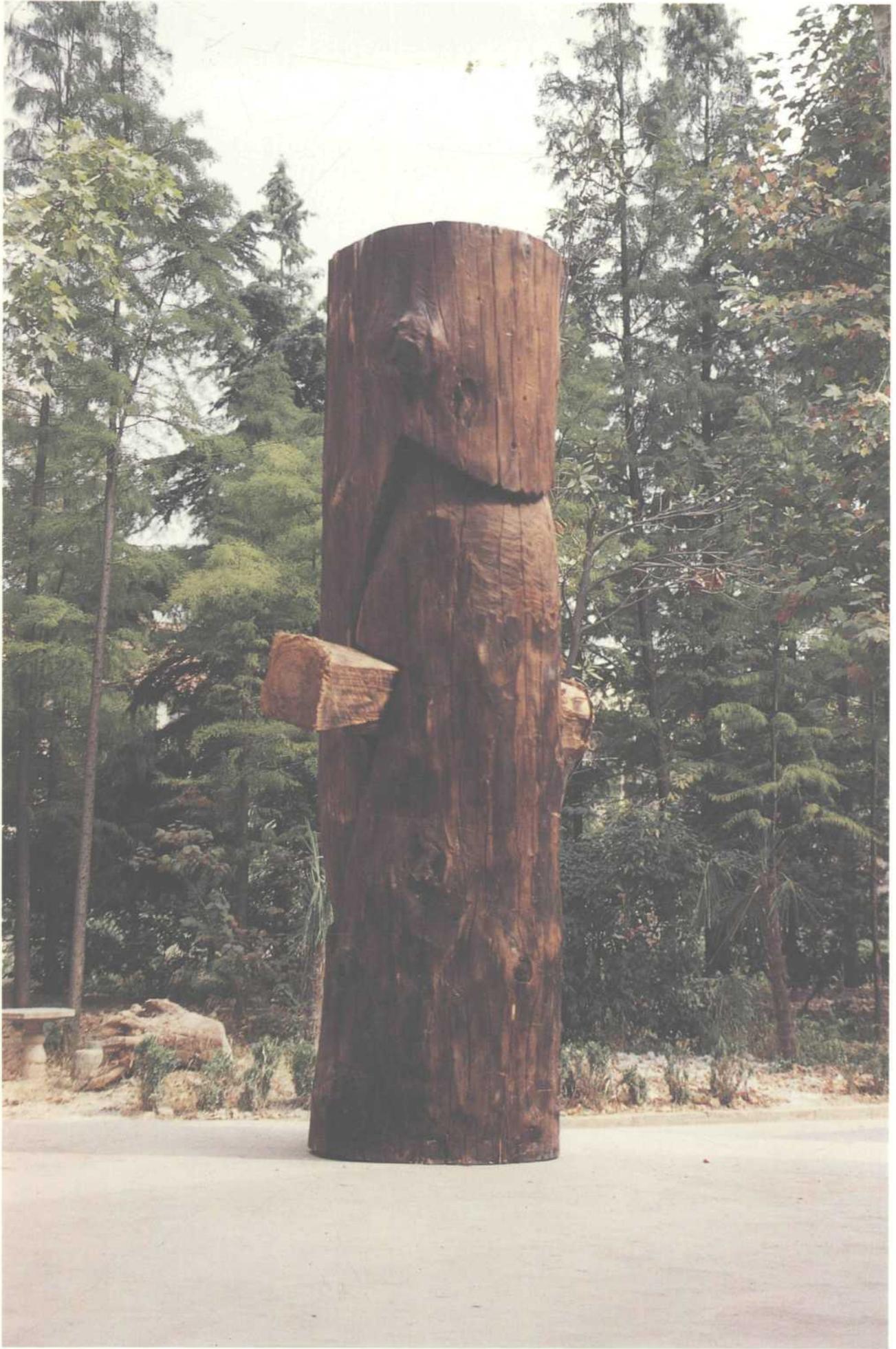
Fu Zhongwang graduated from the Special Arts Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1982. He teaches in the Sculpture Studio of the Hubei Art Academy.

Fu's wood sculptures make one aware of the inner bonding strength in the structure of wood, and of the strong individuality of symbolic forms. He makes a personal sculptural language out of traditional Chinese wood construction, in particular the mortise and tenon joint. The joints linking mortise and tenon come about as a result of a powerful force that takes place during the split second of contact, leading to permanent bonding.

Fu pays close attention to his choice of wood and to the grain of the wood. He burns away the wood's outer layer with a welding torch, and after sanding and filling, restores the wood's original texture, grain and tension. As a result, his sculptures appear stark, powerful and enduring.

"If we see every artistic form as a language with a basic vocabulary, then what we find is not an alternation among a vast corpus of vocabularies, but rather the gradual fragmentation of all language. In this situation of fragmentation, traditional categories of artistic language reassemble themselves into a new logic; under these circumstances, painting is no longer painting in the conventional sense, and sculpture is no longer sculpture in the conventional sense. The outcome is the expression of the language of nontraditional art and nontraditional materials."

— Fu Zhongwang



2

Mortise and Tenon: Ware

Wood

1991

45 × 93 × 45 cm

榫卯·器

3

Mortise and Tenon:

Contract

Wood

1991

60 × 40 × 13.5 cm

榫卯·契

4

Mortise and Tenon with

Pegs

Wood

1991

90 × 55 × 28 cm

榫卯·楔子



2



3



4

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