

Inside Out—new Chinese art and the political conditions that produced it

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Inside Out: New Chinese Art is an extraordinary collection of ink paintings, sculptures, photographs, videos, installations and performance art by contemporary Chinese artists from the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, Hong Kong and in the West.

Assembled by the Asia Society Galleries in New York and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the exhibition toured the United States and Asia for three years before going on show last year at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. The work from Mainland China, on which this review will focus, was produced between 1985 and 1998 and supplemented by performance pieces staged at the various galleries hosting the exhibition.

It is impossible to fully appreciate this multi-faceted exhibition without some understanding of the difficulties facing contemporary artists in China—their isolation, censorship and constant repression under the ruling Stalinist Communist Party of China, which views any innovative artistic work as a political threat.

The first exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art took place in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and following the introduction of market reforms and large-scale investment by foreign corporations in 1979. Some artists were allowed to study art history in Europe, serious art journals began to appear, such as the influential *Review of Foreign Art*, and exhibitions were held of European and US art in Beijing, something not seen for more than 40 years.

Many younger artists began to experiment and two main trends emerged: the Stars, a group of artists influenced by post-impressionist and abstract expressionist techniques; and the Scar group, which attempted to examine the psychological scars inflicted during the Cultural Revolution. Lengthy polemics were conducted in art journals about the role and function of art and many hoped some measure of artistic freedom could be attained.

But in 1982, as discussion on these issues began to widen, the government responded with an “Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign”. Contemporary art was defined as “bourgeois” and several exhibitions banned. *Art Monthly* was publicly denounced and its entire editorial board removed and replaced with government supporters after it published an article on abstract art in January 1983. The *Five-Person Exhibition of Modern Artists*, a collection of conceptual art to be held in Xiamen, Fujian province, was banned before it could open and the *Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983* was shut down after being criticised by the *Shanghai Liberation Daily*.

In an attempt to maintain some support amongst artists the government organised a national exhibition of new art in Beijing in 1984. But the officially endorsed and largely unimaginative works did not impress artists and critics and a new more radical movement surfaced and spread throughout the country. Known as the '85 Movement, this trend, which was influenced by Dadaism, particularly Marcel Duchamp, American Pop Art styles and contemporary performance works, was not limited to the fine arts but extended to literature, dance, music and film.

'85 Movement bypassed government-controlled galleries and staged exhibitions in public lecture halls, village factories and city streets. The *Shenzhen Zero Exhibition*, whose name is derived from its lack of funds or institutional backing, was typical. It was held in the streets of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone.

Described by one critic as “deliberately confronting to the public and the powers that be”, the '85 Movement reflected the growing anti-government sentiment which erupted four years later in the Tiananmen Square student protests.

While the official government art circles attacked this movement and forced the closure of the *Last Exhibition'86, No.1* in January 1986, three hours before it was due to open, a groundbreaking *Festival of Youth Art in Hubei* was held seven months later.

The *Festival of Youth Art*, the largest ever exhibition of contemporary Chinese art, presented almost 2,000 works and included those by artists from five cities and 50 different art groups. Inspired by its success, a convention of artists, critics and writers began planning another exhibition under the title of *Nationwide Exhibition of Research and Communication of Young Art Groups*. But art funding cuts and a government decree on April 4, 1987 banning all organised scholarly communications between young people blocked the show.

Two years later in February 1989, an extensive collection of contemporary work—the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition—was staged at Beijing's National Gallery. The collection of 293 paintings, sculptures, videos and installations by 186 artists was closed by the authorities soon after opening when two artists fired gunshots as part of a performance work. The exhibition, which included work by Wang Guangyi, Xu Bing, Wu Shan Zhuan, Huang Yong Ping and Wenda Gu who are represented in *Inside Out*, was reopened and then shut down completely two weeks later after reports that the gallery, the municipal government and the Beijing Public Security Bureau had received bomb threats.

Government sensitivity to the *China/Avant Garde* exhibition was well founded. Two months after the show was shut down, students, with increasing support from sections of the working class, began anti-government protests at Tiananmen Square demanding democratic rights and other basic freedoms. While it is not possible in this review to explain these events in detail, this movement, which had the support of many artists, was brutally crushed by the army and police. Hundreds were killed and thousands jailed in the crackdown.

In the aftermath of the bloody suppression of the protests, the government castigated the *China/Avant-Garde* show as an example of bourgeois liberalism and denounced all those associated with it.

With few opportunities for public exhibitions and publications such as *Art Monthly* and *Fine Arts in China*, which had played an important role in the new art movement, either shut down or their editorial staff replaced by government stooges, contemporary avant-garde work declined for a period.

Some artists responded by leaving the country and exhibiting abroad in

Europe, America or Asia. Those that remained led an almost underground existence, forced to show their work in private apartments or at foreign embassies. Others began installing their work in demolished housing or industrial estates.

One of the dominant trends to emerge in China at this time was called Political Pop, a combination of socialist realism and American Pop Art styles that lampooned the government's introduction of capitalist market relations and its promotion of Western consumer goods and advertising icons. These themes preoccupied the New History Group and the Long-tailed Elephant Group, two factions that emerged in 1990.

Government censorship and interference continued throughout the 1990s. *Mass Consumption*, the first major exhibition planned by the New History Group on April 28, 1993 was a multi-media event. As well as paintings and other works of art, it involved a fashion show, rock music and was to be held at the McDonald's restaurant in Beijing. But the exhibition, which aimed to shift viewers' focus from art objects to the production process itself, was banned by the Beijing Public Security Bureau at midnight April 27, only hours before it was due to open. Three years later, in December 1996, the government shut down the *Invitation Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Art* on its opening day. No reasons were given for the closure.

Inside Out includes a good cross-section of work from this difficult and complex period. The exhibition has a number of thoughtful and unsettling pieces and an honesty and enthusiasm sadly lacking in most of the artistic work produced in the West over the last 20 years. Obviously much of the work contains an elemental hostility to the ruling regime, with serious attempts to explore some of the tensions and contradictions of political and social life in contemporary China.

One example is the performance work of Zhang Huan, one of the better-known Chinese artists of this genre. *Inside Out* has photographs of his *To Add One Meter to an Unknown Mountain*, which took place at Miaofeng Mountain, Beijing in 1995. The performance consisted of a number of naked people lying on top of each other on a mountain-top, their aim being to increase the mountain height by a metre. Huan seems to be provoking viewers into asking themselves whether humanity can change anything or whether our actions make a difference.

Another performance—*To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond*—was staged in 1997 by 40 workers and fishermen at Beijing's Nanmofan fishpond. The men stand in a large pond with water lapping up to their chests. In the late 1980s Communist Party head Zhao Ziyang declared that the Chinese people had to “learn to swim in the sea of the commodity economy”. Perhaps Huan is satirising this comment and highlighting the mass migration of rural workers in search of work. Or maybe he is pointing to the fate of the one million people soon to be displaced by the Three Gorges dam—the largest in the world—across the Yangtze River. Although Huan gives no clear answers, his cryptic work nonetheless draws attention to the uncertain situation facing masses of people in China today.

Inside Out also features several Political Pop paintings. Wang Guangyi's *Great Castigation Series: Coca-Cola* (1993) is one of the more typical examples of this genre. Combining American Pop art styles with socialist realist themes the oil painting has a poster-like quality with three figures delineated in thick black lines against a background of flat warm yellows and reds. The three figures, two men and a woman standing behind each other, clench a giant pen in their oversized hands. The three figures stand not as individuals but as types—an industrial worker with a book, a peasant woman and a soldier. The painting is covered with what appears to be identification numbers.

The heroic posturing of the characters and the red flag fluttering from the pen is contradicted by the Coca-Cola logo in the bottom right hand corner. Guangyi's comment is clear: the old propaganda images and the same faces are being used to glorify capitalist consumer items.

Bound and Unbound (1995-97) by Lin Tian-miao (born 1961) is an installation involving video and household objects—cooking utensils, plates, chopsticks, bottles, kettles, vases, and an old sewing machine. The lack of detail and warm white colour and texture gives them a clay-like appearance. Closer examination of the 300-odd items, however, reveals that these objects have been wrapped in cotton thread, reducing them to their basic shapes. A large video screen displaying a pair of scissors constantly cutting thread on a loom accompanies the display. The cutting sound dulls the senses and underlines the drudgery of household work and the monotony of daily life for millions.

Parents (1998), a set of 20 colour photographs by Wang Jinsong, contains portraits of middle aged and elderly couples from all walks of life who sit or stand in their favourite spot or room, surrounded by the things dearest to them. For one couple it is a set of books, for another it is a piano, while a set of outdated calendars are the prized possessions of another. These photographs capture the humanity and dignity of the sitters and the simple pleasures in their lives, a stark contrast to the Stalinist bureaucracy's promotion of the capitalist market and its proclamations that “to get rich is glorious”.

Bloodline: Family Portrait No. 2 (1994), a smooth textured oil painting by Zhang Xiaogang of a married couple and their only child, is a painful comment on the government's one-child birth control policy. The formally seated family is dressed in black and stare blankly at the viewer. While the parents are linked to the child by thin red lines there is no emotional bond between them. The child is simply a smaller version of the parents. A spot of light catches a section of each parent's face. Part of the child's face is bathed in pink light. The painting, one of a series on this theme by the artist, has a deeply tragic quality.

Another poignant image is two life size black-and-white photographs of a young and old Mr and Mrs Song, the parents of artist Song Yongping. As a proud young couple, Mr Song poses in his army uniform and his wife in official post-revolutionary attire. They look strong, ready for anything and hopeful for the future. Like studio photos, there is nothing identifiable in the background. In the recent photograph, Mr. and Mrs. Song stand in their underwear in their tiny bedroom. Their bodies are wrinkled and worn, etched from years of hard work and suffering. Their sense of purpose is gone, all that is left are the scars of their life experiences.

Inside Out also has Wu Shan Zhuan's *Red Humor* (1986), a large installation work made from wall posters. Wu, who was born in 1960 in Zhoushan, Shejiang Province and now lives in Germany, has constructed a room out of traditional Chinese wall posters. The room is covered in posters splashed with red and black political slogans, Buddhist scriptures, poetry and advertising. While most viewers will not understand the text, the construction's bold colours, furious jumble of Chinese characters and the somewhat claustrophobic construction creates a sense of anger, discontent and disorientation.

The most interesting pieces in the exhibition are by Wenda Gu and Xu Bing. Gu, who was born in Shanghai in 1955 and moved to the USA in 1987, experiments with traditional ink painting and calligraphy. A former pupil of distinguished landscape painter Lee Yanshao, Gu began to question traditional painting methods and calligraphy and in 1984 started to incorporate surrealist techniques with traditional ink and brush painting techniques, together with the use of invented Chinese language characters.

Pseudo-characters Series: Contemplation of the World (1984), a set of three large black ink paintings on scrolls, is representative of his work and the new trend he started in ink painting. Using traditional subjects—land, water, clouds and sky—Gu places a Chinese character in the centre of the large black ink paintings. But the Chinese character is meaningless and its

size disrupts the tranquil but dark landscape. Rather than producing a sense of rest and peace, as traditional Chinese pictures did, the picture is unsettling and agitating. Behind the familiar is the likelihood of menace. While something is wrong with the old world, moving to the new presents unknown dangers.

Another astonishing work by Gu in *Inside Out* is his *United Nations Series: The Temple of Heaven (China Monument)* (1998). A space the equivalent of a middle size room is enclosed by a series of panels made from human hair collected from around the world. The hair is used to create pseudo-Chinese characters, meaningless Roman letters and other invented script. The room has several wooden chairs with television monitors playing footage of moving clouds. Although Gu builds new versions of the *United Nations Series* for each exhibition, the installation, like his ink paintings, is strangely tranquil and unsettling—a room that emits a feeling of inner peace, as well as a dreamlike atmosphere of confused ideas and unresolved problems.

Many other Chinese artists have been inspired by Gu's experimentation with unintelligible Chinese characters. *Tianshu (Book from the Sky)* (1987-91), an installation by Xu Bing is a large display of hand-printed books and scrolls made with traditional Chinese printing techniques and using over two thousand hand-carved characters invented by the artist. Xu, who was born in Chongqing, Sichuan Province in 1955, moved to the United States in 1990. The contrast between the traditional forms and the sheer size of the installation is impressive and thought-provoking.

While the future direction of contemporary art in mainland China is not clear and the political and cultural climate is particularly difficult and debilitating, the *Inside Out* exhibition indicates that there are many who have maintained their artistic integrity and continue to produce intelligent and confronting work. Their efforts deserve a much wider audience.



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