

## East of Tomorrow: Old Values, New Art

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What could be harder than merging Chinese tradition with the demands of contemporary art? On the one hand lie 5,000 years of complex esthetic development, largely predicated on the distinctness of a cultural ethos, a "spirit"—semireligious, semiethnic, seminationalistic—that is indented with Chineseness itself. On the other hand, challenging this putative essence, is the globalizing impulse of today's secular consumerism, which quickly reduces all questions of meaning and worth to majority purchasing decisions. Tempting as it might be for artists and intellectuals to reject this new dispensation, it will not go away. And, in fact, literati-style withdrawal is not really an option: we have come to expect from our creative cultural leaders something braver and shrewder than disdainful retreat. In an age when the media reaches constantly—via TV, films, CDs, DVDs, iPods, computers, the Internet, etc.—into every home and public space, into every ear and eye, the wider world and the lives of our fellows simply cannot be ignored. One flees into the bamboo forest these days only to find the grottos overcrowded and the boughs withered from acid rain.

Which is not to say that activist art is a desirable alternative. For 30 years in the mid-twentieth century, China experienced the artistic debilitation that results from subordinating esthetics to social utility, however well intentioned. Not only was the so-called Socialist Realism of the period actually false in nearly every conceivable way, presenting political wishes as facts and **uncomfortable** truths as nonexistent, but the practice **was** substituted for a traditional art of infinitely greater refinement and subtlety. Because that finer art was at the time critically denounced and physically destroyed in great quantities, Chinese artists today face a dual challenge. They must reconcile their own heritage with that of the West, and they must do so by reaching back across a mental abyss caused, some 40 years ago, by an internal policy of cultural obliteration.

Recently, a number of individuals have found ways to sell icons of Chineseness, old and new, at high prices on the international market. Whether they have satisfactorily solved the **cultural** legacy problem remains for critics and art historians to determine. In the meanwhile, the exhibition "New Spirit of the

East" enables us to examine the strategies employed by a cross section of current practitioners, remembering always just how hard their artistic lot can be. For, beneath the froth of commerce, the fundamental task remains to engage the realities of the present—not ideologically but humanly, not cynically but clear-sightedly—while maintaining a living link with the honored past. Only then can artists convey the perceptual and emotion **fabric** of our moment without resorting to historical pastiche or visual stunts.

The etherealized landscapes of ancient Chinese scroll painting find their echo in numerous works by contemporary artists. Following the model of many indigenous photographers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Lang Jingshan produced images that replicate the look and sensibility of ink-wash panoramas. Like examples of Western Pictorialism, these shots tended to comfort their first viewers, implying that the "real" China was indeed just as the old masters had depicted it, unchanged in outward appearance as in its intangible essence. Today, in the light of postmodernism, we regard the same pictures quite differently—as clear evidence of the largely artificial constructedness of all photographic images. We see in Lang's work not a proof of the way the world really looks but a confirmation of the sheer malleability of all visual elements when arrayed in service to a photographer's sovereign concept.

The painter Qiu Shihua goes even farther in demonstrating that visual reality is as much in the mind as it is in the eye. His mottled monochrome canvases contain, he says, obscure and faintly rendered landscapes that carry Impressionist subjectivity to an ultimate degree. Viewing them, one inevitably thinks not only of the extreme atmospheric effects of Turner, Monet, and Bonnard but also of Eastern air-and-water scenes and those large passages of Chinese paintings **deliberately** left untouched, creating a sense of timeless suspension for the scenes portrayed. While for Westerner critics Qiu's "blankness" may evoke a Duchampian mind game or the history of high modernist monochrome painting, the artist himself prefers to relate this dissolution of matter to a more distant source: the mind's inner perceptions of the outer world, offering intimations of a spiritual dimension beyond the material—a view not totally dissimilar to the Kantian notion of mental categories through which all external reality is necessarily apprehended

Ye Yongqing's work seems less to blend cultural influences than to oscillate dynamically between them. His pictures hark back to centuries, indeed millennia, of Chinese painting in which birds are standard motifs, embodying in various contexts a myriad of meanings and emotional states. His collage paintings and his grids of color scribbles allude unmistakably to Western modernism. Yet the tension thus generated also exists within individual works: Ye's fragmentary compositions contain occasional references to traditional imagery and Asian screens, while his birds—sometimes closely observed, sometimes endowed with the pseudo-childishness of **many** Picasso sketches—are rendered in a skittish

hand that individualizes and enlivens the creatures yet simultaneously emphasizes their artifice, and thus the artist's hovering presence, in a distinctly contemporary manner.

A similar ambivalence, not to say schizophrenia, pervades the work of Huang Gang, torn as it is between a cosmopolitan, up-to-date painting style, marked by the ironic distance that such timeliness implies, and a seemingly heartfelt preoccupation with Tibetan imagery. Yet this is just one among several means by which the "new spirit of the East" reveals itself.

Perhaps because of the pervasive influence of calligraphy, and the developmental history of the ideogram from pictograph to sign, contemporary Chinese painting manifests a strong impulse toward stylization and, ultimately, a fully abstract language of forms. Pan Gongkai, having mastered traditional iconography and technique, has progressively expanded (in several senses) his treatment of such staples as lilies on water—loosening his running lines into a boldly emotive gestures, making the subjects more notational than representational, creating a drama of massed forms on the picture plane, sometimes literally increasing the picture's scale to such an extent that the composition process becomes a full-body endeavor. It is not by accident that this method recalls certain types of abstract Western painting, itself once largely spurred by response to Eastern models, for Pan has long advocated a bipolar, synergistic interaction between the two visual cultures.

That hybrid tendency plays out in the lusciously abstract works of painters such as Zao Wou-Ki, Chu Teh-Chun, Wang Huaqing, and Chuang Che. Here the three basic components of all art—line, form, and color—are combined and recombined in pictorial structures whose irregularity engenders persuasive emotional force. These opposing blocks of hue, these out-of-kilter shapes, this indeterminate space, these dry-and-quick or slowly oozing strokes, these drips and blobs are all nonsystematic correlatives to the way meaningful experiences feel. Taking in the multiple painterly incidents somehow mutually balanced in an overall pattern, a gestalt that is the work seen whole, we sense that the turmoil of living, too, can have an order that transcends passion without depriving it of genuine pungency and strength.

The human figure, no doubt because we so readily associate it with feelings and thoughts like our own, predictably introduces multiple complications. In Western art, especially from the **time of the** 4<sup>th</sup>- and 5<sup>th</sup>-century B.C. "Greek miracle" onward, there has always been a major vein of representation that strives for absolutely lifelike simulation of human appearance, a depiction of the body as a haptic volume in deep space, concretizing the nuances of individual character. Except at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and first part of the 20<sup>th</sup>, however, such devices as modeling and chiaroscuro have not been widely employed in Chinese art. Traditional figures seldom seem in danger of breaking free from their context and dominating

or "running away" with a composition in the manner of **Velázquez's *Pope Innocent X***. Personages, even those of exalted rank, seem to know their place in classic Chinese painting and the social and spiritual universe it reflects. They do not protrude into our space and our consciousness like Caravaggio's insolent models, or draws us into personal psychological depths like Rembrandt's aged face. Rather, the figure is a pictorial element like any other, to be read like a word properly placed in a poem. This may be why figurative art in China once adapted so readily to the demands of Soviet-style propaganda, and struggles today to distinguish itself from the rhetorical conventions of advertising.

J.C Kuo addresses both those meaning systems and others in his work heavily influenced by illustrated folk tales and pop culture. His paintings, drawings, and collages examine how persons, real or fictional, are integrated into a cultural narrative. In an amalgam of Eastern and Western sources, mythological figures are treated in a heavily outlined, block-color fashion that recalls traditional prints as well as contemporary comic-book graphics. (At the same time, hints of Beckmann, Lichtenstein, and even Northwest Coast American Indian art are not far to seek.) Here, the faces of ordinary individuals are sometimes painted with bright, jagged, mask-like patterns that once signified power and villainy. Halos are placed behind the heads of a wide variety of figures—some anonymous, some revered, some morally suspect—as if to demonstrate the arbitrariness of historical reputations. The "truth" of one's being, Kuo seems to suggest, lies in the stories that are told of one's life.

Hou Chu-Ming takes that insight to its logical extreme, creating flat, cartoonish figures positioned one-by-one in grids reminiscent of sequential comic-book cels. **The drawings** are deliberately crude and the distortions semiotic. Bodies are splayed—arms and legs extended as the figure faces the viewer—to resemble primitive emblems for humanness: man as a species of fauna, less like Leonardo's dignified Vitruvian Man than like a wall-mounted animal hide or an entomological specimen. Sexual organs can take over a face, as an erect penis substitutes for an outsized nose. Text accompanying each image reiterates the artist's brutal judgment on human nature and the misadventures it unleashes.

In Chen Chieh -Jen's work, the human figure is again reduced to a cipher. His digitally altered photographs of China's colonial and civil war atrocities put a modern face on distant suffering, while his slow-paced videos force viewers to enter into the drawn-out anguish of displaced workers and other **present-day** victims of capitalistic indifference. His single most memorable work, a glacially paced reenactment of a "death by a thousand cuts," suggests that spiritual release comes on the far side of physical agony, as the drugged and progressively sliced prisoner turns his eyes upward in a Christ-like transcendence of his fleshly mortification. The artists uses the body, in effect, to deny the primacy of the body, asserting its subordination to historical forces or the powers of the mind.

Materiality announces itself much more distinctly, of course, in sculpture. To evoke the human form in three dimensions is to come to terms directly with its volumes and substance, to know the body as the contrary of space. Ju Ming, in his "Tai chi" series, strikes a balance between stylized representation and pure abstraction. Caught in dynamic but stable poses, the figures tend toward pure abstract form, while even the most geometrized form harkens back to its origins in organic movement. The works, like the exercises they reference, seek grace in a double sense, confirming a correlation between mindful bodily control and spiritual progress.

**Yuyu Yang, whose sculptures manifest equal formal mastery in both figurative and abstract modes, could turn virtually any material to his expressive ends. In a career that spanned five decades of training and exhibition in Taiwan, Mainland China, and Europe, he made paintings, drawing, prints, and—most notably—sculptures that sought to harmonize mankind with the natural environment. His early works referred directly to both country life and to ancient Buddhist iconography, while his later works tended toward pure interplays of form, some reminiscent of birds in flight, some purely nonobjective. In keeping with his conviction that art should engage the viewer in a public milieu, his signature "lifescapes"—large, abstract assemblages of highly polished stainless steel—reflect both their setting and the individuals who approach them. (This device has been used to great effect more recently by Zhan Wang—discussed below—and by Anish Kapoor in his immensely popular *Cloud Gate*, 2006, in Chicago's Millennium Park.) For Yuyu Yang, spirit resides within matter artfully arranged, not beyond it.**

The sheer "stuff" of life is paramount in the works of Li Chen, whose rotund human figures present the same paradox as those of Colombian artist Fernando Botero. Comically corpulent, with swollen limbs protruding from globular torsos, they must stand—logic tells us—heavily upon the ground, mired in the here and now. Yet their balloon-like contours simultaneously convey buoyancy and a bemused detachment from the mundane. One can scarcely avoid thoughts of the pot-bellied Laughing Buddha, at once so enamored of plenty and so beyond worldly care. Fullness of being can be one with a lightness of spirit, in the secular domain as well as the religious—or so Li's sculptural tubbies, like Shakespeare's Falstaff, seek to make vividly clear.

At the opposite extreme of materiality are the cutout figures of Lu Shengzhong. Though obviously indebted to traditional paper-cutting iconography and techniques, the little red figures also converse visually with the contemporary world. Androgynous, they play with the notion of simultaneous presence and absence, as each silhouette is echoed by a twin-shaped void that seems equally personable and alive. Positive and negative space thus perfectly complement each other, suggesting that our reality is made up

of both direct perception and memory, things present in matter and things present only in mind—each making the other whole. In their identical forms and great numbers, they evoke the mass of humanity, today and in history. Individually charming, they can also be assemble into abstract collective forms—room -filling cubes, globes, and ledgers —just as people are customarily ordered into social structures. The labor-intensive cutting and joining of these human surrogates recalls the hands-on, intimate process of integrating a single living being into a community.

There is a visual consonance between Lu Shengzhong's paper dolls and Xu Bing's cutout text that rises, character by character, until the words turn into the birds they denote. That link reminds us that certain contemporary Chinese artists, Xu Bing being a prime example, have managed to maintain a connection to tradition while simultaneously creating works that speak to a international audience. His experiments with language—words that are formed to resemble the landscape they describe, Square Word Calligraphy fusing English and Chinese systems of writing, fake characters revealing the deceptiveness of speech purporting to convey a reality that constantly outstrips it, new age pictographs based on a belief in the universality of basic human experiences and perceptions—all relate to the literati heritage, modified for the globalist era.

Li Shan, who made his reputation with flower-in-the-teeth portraits of a vaguely effeminate Mao, now offers hyper-realistic studies of primal nature that are also glowing icons of the era of plastics, atomic power, and the Internet. Drawing on sources that long predate the Cultural Revolution, he depicts birds, plants, and animals, **endowing them with a scale and chromatic intensity of almost sci-fi quality.**

Zhan Wang—author of previous works that include hand-cleaning the ruins of a demolished building, and burying a score of stiffened Mao suits behind the Guangdong Museum—is best known today for his stainless-steel boulders and scholar's rocks. Unlike their intricately fissured predecessors, so conducive to contemplation of "worlds within worlds," these highly polished forms, like gleaming skyscrapers gone askew, are impervious to visual penetration and deep thought, presenting instead slick, distorted reflections of the rapidly changing environment around them. **The very material that Yuyu Yang used as an integrative element between viewer, environs, and artwork, Zhan has made into a metaphor for contemporary isolation and anomie.**

In Cai Guo-Qiang's gunpowder drawings, explosion events, and installations, the dialogue between East and West, past and present, is constant. He evokes both ink painting and industrial dynamiting, Chinese fireworks and military bombardment (including atomic blasts), ancient fears of invasion and modern concerns about economic takeovers. Even his multiple remakes of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* balance social utility with critical sophistication, deftly illuminating culturally determined interpretations, as one viewer's sincere parable becomes another's ironic exercise.

It would be presumptuous for an outsider to attempt to define the true nature of emerging Chinese art. But this much is certain. For centuries now, the West has relied heavily on empiricism—the conviction that, although we cannot ultimately say what reality *is*, we can nevertheless test, measure, and predict what it *does*. In all likelihood, to judge from the work of these twenty thoughtful artists, China **in the 21<sup>st</sup> century** will embrace that pragmatism while bringing to it something more—**something** venerable, adaptive, and nearly ineffable that can legitimately be called a new spirit of the East.