

EXHIBITION REVIEW

“New Art in China, Post-1989”

San Jose Museum of Art September 6 - November 2, 1997

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A Chinese friend just handed me a news release hot off the Internet: "China could be tightening artistic freedom, according to a Xinhua News Agency report. Ding Guangen, head of the Communist Party's propaganda department told an art circle forum on Thursday that artists 'need to create works of art that serve people and socialism.' As 'engineers of the human soul' artists should 'study hard, read more, and improve themselves' while implementing the politics of the 15th National Party Congress, thereby glorifying the theories of Deng Xiaoping. Ding quoted Mao Zedong's Hundred Flowers Campaign slogan saying that artists should follow the principle of 'letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend' in reflecting the culture of the masses, recent economic reform, and modernization."

Such a statement is fraught with as much ambiguity, contradiction, irony, and unpredictable political tactics as "New Art in China, Post 1989." Ding isn't necessarily saying what we, as Westerners, are hearing. The Marxist slogans may imply new repression or they may be new permission for the artists to operate freely in the current Chinese mixture of capitalism and Communism.

The same dilemma confronts any Western trained writer in looking at contemporary Chinese art. It is easy (too easy!) for us to read it as an amalgamation of contemporary art styles, Chinese cultural references, and politics. But is the work that has been exported for "New Art in China," with the epithets "post 1989" and "unofficial" actually a protest against the government or is it as the conceptual artist Xu Bing puts it, "nothing but a game,." a game that the Chinese artists are playing for a place in the international art world, the same game that all artists play.

In the San Jose exhibition there is a large oil painting by the artist Li Shan of Mao Zedong, in a category labeled "Political Pop." Mao is painted in grey and holds the stem of a huge pink flower in his teeth. The flower looks as though it could eat anybody that comes near. The palette of gray and a weird pinkish red is distinctly different from Western Pop, but the palette is common to several of these artists' works. Gray, according to my friend Liu Xin, formerly a philosophy professor and free lance art critic in Beijing, was the prevailing color of Chinese art in the early nineties. Perhaps it is a reaction to red, the red of the Cultural Revolution, when it washed over everything, both literally as blood and figuratively as paint.

The artists in this exhibition who were born in the mid forties to the mid sixties were all deeply affected by the Cultural Revolution (1966- 1976) as young people and children. Li Shan's reference to the huge flower that eats people can easily be read as a metaphor of the Cultural Revolution as well as the Hundred Flowers Campaign (so coolly invoked by the Communist Party official quoted above). That Campaign, which took place in 1957, encouraged criticism of the Communist Party, only to follow it up with

violent reprisals against those who spoke up. It enticed people to come forward much like the flower, and then ate them. But who is seeing this painting by Li Shan, and why? The artist has made a work that cannot be shown in China., and that is not of interest to Chinese émigrés in the United States because it is critical of China. So, the main audience is the Western art collector and the Western art critic. Thus the painting, as with all of the works in the show, becomes a strategy to communicate with us very directly, not necessarily a complicated subterfuge for attacking the government in China.

"New Art in China" was first organized in late 1992 by Tsong-zung Chang, director of the Hanart T Z Gallery in Hong Kong and Li Xianting, an art critic based in Beijing. Li Xianting was editor of the magazine *Fine Arts in China* that was closed down right after the Tiananmen Square crackdown. It is accompanied by a weighty book that provides a discussion of twentieth century art in China. Geremie Barmé comments that Tiananmen actually relegitimized angst among the avant-garde, but at the same time it also led to a "shallow and callous wish to manipulate and exploit."

Thus the painting by Wang JingSong "Taking a Picture in Front of Tiananmen Square" uses a Socialist Realism/Pop technique for a photo op group in front of the entrance to the Forbidden City (calling it that would obviously not have had the same impact), a typical place for tourists to pose. Amidst the smiling, happy people (the old formula from Mao) some of the "tourists" are only white heads, no faces. Is it cynical, is it grieving friends who were killed, is it playing directly to our familiarity with the icon and the subject? Like Jiang Zemin posing in front of the Liberty Bell in order to have photographs to send back home, Wang Jing Song has sent us an image that connects him to the events of 1989 without clarifying his feelings.

There were six elaborately titled categories in the exhibitions. Simplified they were "Political Pop," "Cynical Realism," "The Wounded Romantic Spirit", "Emotional Bondage," "Endgame Art" and "New Abstract Art". The artists adopting variations of realism are the most seemingly readable, but a large number use an eclectic selection of avant-garde styles from the West. They speak an international art language, but with an entirely different frame of reference. Ding Yi, for example, was trained in traditional brush painting. He started doing abstract art in order to eliminate all identifiable characteristics of any sort, but gradually his works, like *Manifestation of Crosses* have become increasingly Zen.

The "Romantic" category stretched from Expressionism to Surrealism and included both landscape and figurative painting. Zhang Xiaogang series' *Personal Notes: Three* have elliptical references to cards, knives, heads, and books, with a bold red scarf or hand, in an empty brown room. They seem to contain the death of Communism and the betrayals of politics. Ding Fang's huge landscapes of heavy hills like *A Glimpse of Reality and Eternity* also were predominately brown. They sometimes oddly metamorphosed into bodies. The prevalence of brown is probably in part a product of economics: the oil paints available in China are quite different in range and hue than the huge choices that American artists enjoy, but it might also be the result of looking at reproductions of European Romantic painting. That source certainly comes to mind in

looking at the very brown, dark works by Xia Xiaowan such as Sea of Life, in which strange figures are struggling against odd demonic aliens.

The last two categories of "New Art" were the most expanded in terms of the range of work, media and ideas. "Emotional Bondage" included washing a chicken by Zhang Peili (which obviously is inspired by Joseph Beuys, but has an entirely different significance in the context of Chinese culture); Zeng Fanzi's cold and bizarre, but expressionist, hospital scenes; Gu Dexin's melted plastic mounds in cages, a huge installation piece made specially for the exhibition; Zhang Yongjian's Meat Clamps, a hunk of indiscriminate material pressed between iron bars that for me invoked torture; Shen Xiao Tong's red figurative paintings with titles like People Flooded in Red and Cai Jin's Large Banana Plant paintings, also very red, but with succulent surfaces that become oozing and organic. Oddly, Cai Jin was the only woman included in this large exhibition, although there are other women who could have been part of the show in the contemporary art scene in China. An artist like Yu Hong makes eerie images of Young Pioneers following gray faceless leaders that would have fit seamlessly into "Cynical Realism"

The works in "Endgame Art" are the most conceptual, but there was a distinct difference in stated ideology between Gu Wenda and Xu Bing both of whom now live in the United States and that of the group that calls themselves The New Analysts, who are in Beijing. Gu Wenda has executed large scale projects in Europe, but his piece used 500 used menstrual tampons, obviously co-opting 70s feminist moves for simple shock value.

Xu Bing is the best known Chinese conceptual artist of the China Avant-Garde show held just before the Tiananmen events. In 1989, he showed books and sheets printed with thousands of invented Chinese ideographs. In the current show he continues to play with language and communication, by constructing a reading alcove with famous texts for the blind in Braille, something which we who see cannot read. The New Analysts declare, in true Marxist fashion, that they want to "extinguish individuality." They present works based on mathematical formula.

Contemporary Chinese artists are mostly tired of politics. A fair number of them are living in Australia, Europe, and the United States. In that context it is jarring to hear the Minister of Propaganda re-invoke, in 1997, the Hundred Flowers slogan. On the other hand, even the threat of government oppression is now a marketing device in Beijing, according to Jianying Zha, author of China Pop. After all, many of the former Red Guards are now carrying beepers and cutting big deals, and their younger brothers and sisters are only interested in their lifestyles. Who can blame them. Enough is enough.