

BEYOND CHINA
Campbelltown City
Bicentennial Art Gallery
Until tomorrow

ACCORDING to Nicholas Jose, the novelist and former cultural attaché in Beijing, "the Chinese world-view creates a chasm between Chinese and others. The concepts of insider and outsider are fundamental at so many levels of life. The language, script and culture are expressions of this separateness, the manifestations of a society that is self-enclosed, hermetic and centred on itself."

Imagine the feelings of those raised in such a society when they migrate to Australia, the land of exaggerated democracy, where separateness has always been viewed with suspicion, if not downright hostility. Among the emigrés, exiles and refugees who have made Australia their home over the past two decades, there are many artists who have struggled to establish a local reputation. Most of them had received a rigorous, academic training in art, and arrived with a long list of honours and credentials. Yet such achievements have counted for little in their new country, and they have found themselves working as cleaners, factory hands and house-painters, making art in their spare time.

Only very gradually have these artists gathered a little recognition — chiefly through the medium of art prizes, which are superabundant in Australia. Looking through the CVs of the artists included in the Campbelltown City Gallery's *Beyond China*, it is noticeable how diligently they have entered competitions such as the Archibald Prize, the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize and the Mary MacKillop Art Award. Indeed, Jaiwei Shen, the outstanding portraitist in this show, took out the MacKillop award, receiving a medal from Pope John Paul II. As I recall this painting, it was rather too sentimental for comfort; too eager to please — as were the works of other Chinese finalists. It was partly the subject, which generated such a tidal wave of kitsch and hype, and partly the fact that artists such as Shen had been raised under an ideological regime that made it almost second nature to "heroise" the peasant and the worker.

Socialist realism, the doctrine that China borrowed from Stalinist Russia, turned every peasant into a saint and every worker into a hero of the revolution. It was the most radically dishonest artform of the 20th century, being concerned exclusively with the denial of reality and the glorification of a totalitarian state that held itself up as a beacon of moral purity. To succeed as social realists, and perhaps survive as artists at all, a lot of intelligent painters produced utterly cynical work. It was, perhaps, the commonsense response to a mendacious but all-powerful system.

An extract from a Chinese literary monthly of 1973, quoted by Simon Leys (Pierre Ryckmans), in his book *Chinese Shadows*, gives the general flavour of state culture: "Our publication welcomes all manuscripts which fulfil the following conditions: A. All novels,



Courtesan in the act . . .
Guo Jian's *Big Screen*, the most talked-about piece in the exhibition.

this survey are also the most traditional, namely the large calligraphic pictures of Nan Zhou, which demonstrate the almost visceral impact of a swathe of black ink on white paper.

By far the most engaging modern paintings are those of Jaiwei Shen and Guo Jian, who show a high degree of verve and pictorial inventiveness. Guo Jian's paintings, which are oddly reminiscent of the figurative painting made by Glasgow artists in the 1980s, are fiercely satirical comments on contemporary China, making use of historical motifs to mock the pretensions and hypocrisy of the present. His *Big Screen*, which has been the most talked-about piece in the exhibition, puts the courtesans and courtesans borrowed from the erotic art of the past alongside their modern counterparts, a sleazy businessman and a glamorous call girl. The title is obviously a double entendre, referring at once to an elaborately painted black lacquer screen that forms a backdrop to the figures, and to the screen of respectability that conceals illicit activities.

There may also be a double meaning to be drawn from two large paintings of tree roots by Jaiwei Shen, since he probably feels increasingly estranged from his roots and is still finding his feet in Australia. This was also the message to be taken from his humorous *Seven Self-Portraits*, in the 1997 Archibald Prize, where he metamorphosed into a kangaroo.

Shen appears in Nick Jose's memoirs of China as an academic realist who made "suavely, painfully sceptical art". A large figure composition, painted in an orthodox manner, included portraits of dissident scholars that encouraged an ironic and subversive reading. Since migrating to Australia in 1989, that side of Shen's work has been slowly bubbling to the surface. Although he is usually seen as a conservative painter, he is not very distant from Russian emigré artists such as Komar and Melamid, who made a splash in America by putting their painfully acquired social realist skills at the service of political satire. One thinks of the portrait of Ronald Reagan as a centaur, or the muse whispering softly in Stalin's ear.

It would not take a radical change of direction for Shen to enter similar territory. If he remains a less spectacular performer than Komar and Melamid, this may be because he is, at heart, a more serious-minded artist. His portraits of the art historian John Clark and Claire Roberts, the curator of Asian art at the Powerhouse Museum, are tremendously subtle. Clark, standing in a hallway, dressed in a black kimono, is reminiscent of those tall, ascetic saints painted by Zurbaran and his contemporaries. The play of light and shadow is skilfully orchestrated, with illumination coming from a window at the left and a glass-panned door in the distance.

In *Hedda's Camera*, Claire Roberts is shown holding the camera used by Hedda Morrison in Beijing during the 1930s and '40s. Once again, every detail conspires to allude to traditions of Western religious art — not just Roberts's features and gaze, which might have appealed to Bellini; but the way the camera becomes

an object of veneration, like a relic of the saints. The barrel vault of a Powerhouse ceiling echoes the vaults in innumerable Renaissance conversation pieces; in the background, Lawrence Hargrave's kites stand in for angels and putti.

Like portraitists from time immemorial, Shen probably means to flatter his influential sitters, but he is a flatterer of quite remarkable sophistication.

Perhaps he should now turn his attention to Robert Hughes, who was compared with the Messiah by the National Trust boss, Barry O'Keefe, after Tuesday night's heritage lecture. The religious references are already in place; all an artist need do is move the Sermon on the Mount into the Sydney Town Hall. Through a convenient window, the East Circular Quay development and the Sydney Tower could be shown tumbling like the walls of Jericho.

Two weeks ago I visited the new gallery at Curtin University in Perth and saw another show of contemporary Chinese art, *In & Out*, which enjoys the joint support of the Sydney College of the Arts (where the work was shown last year) and the NSW College of Fine Arts. Curated by Binghui Huangfu — who has studied at both colleges — for the LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts in Singapore, the exhibition included Chinese artists living in China and Australia. The only artists also featured in the Campbelltown show were Guan Wei and Xiao Xian Liu.

IT WAS fascinating to see the Perth and Campbelltown exhibitions consecutively, because they showed two contrasting aspects of contemporary Chinese art. The former was more rigorously avant-garde in demeanour, with a very professional catalogue filled with colour reproductions, statements and essays. By contrast, Campbelltown, working within the usual tight budget, produced a pamphlet containing a small overview by Gabrielle Dalton. Yet it was hard not to feel that *Beyond China* was the more engaging of the two exhibitions, if only because it captured the experi-

The moral may be that exile and expatriation produce a stronger subject than so many of the conceptual, intellectual projects that artists dream up while still living in their native environment. So-called "cutting edge" art can be immeasurably slicker, more cosmopolitan and professional than conventional painting, but its appeal may be superficial. The old-fashioned painters express themselves within a chosen medium, which they are compelled to keep exploring.

The avant-garde artists seem to choose their message, then look for a means of expression. It may be a romantic prejudice, but I'm still convinced that the most affecting art is made by those artists who are responding honestly, if naively, to their self and surroundings.

Incidentally, I was amazed to read in the *In & Out* catalogue that Sue Rowley, among other distinctions, is "Professor of Contemporary Australian Art History" at the College of Fine Arts. Nothing could be more indicative of the hollowness of professorships in tertiary art education, which are now handed out like lollies, in all sorts of ill-defined categories. "Modern Art History" has a vaguely respectable ring, but "Contemporary" is crassly modish. How can one have a historical perspective on art that is in the process of being made? At best, one is doomed to make well-intentioned forays in the dark; at worst, one becomes a promoter of temporary fads and fashions, a taste-maker rather than a scholar. Either way, it is hardly more credible than being a professor of Hamburgerology — or Cultural Studies. I must stress that this is a general, not a personal reflection. For all I know, Sue Rowley may be an ornament of academe. If so, she deserves a better title.

It is precisely the dilemma of what it means to be "contemporary" that poses so many problems for those Chinese artists who have made their homes in Australia.

Although the word suggests a merely temporal category — art that is being made today — in

AFTER THE PARTY

For some artists, leaving China has seen their work blossom in the benign, if often indifferent, Australian sun. Others are still trying to shed the shackles of a mindset imposed by a totalitarian system.

essays, articles, works of art which present in a healthy way a revolutionary content. They must: (1) exalt with deep and warm proletarian feelings the great Chairman Mao; exalt the great, glorious and infallible Chinese Communist Party; exalt the great victory of the proletarian revolutionary line of Chairman Mao; (2) following the examples of the Revolutionary Model operas, strive with zeal to create peasant and worker heroes . . ." and so on.

It is shocking to think how many Western intellectuals embraced Maoism in the 1960s and '70s, praising the Cultural Revolution that Mao initiated in 1966 to restore revolutionary fervour among the young and bring down his enemies in the party. The toll of damage and desecration was horrifying, both for China's cultural heritage and for the lives of those who were victimised by the Red Guards. All of the artists in *Beyond China* lived through the Cultural Revolution and the family upheavals it caused.

It is against this background that one must see the works in this exhibition, which are the results of another form of dislocation. The drama played out by all



JOHN McDONALD

these artists is one of adaptation, as they strive to insert their work into an unfamiliar mainstream. This is not, as it may have appeared at first, simply a matter of producing skilful pictures for a ready market. These Chinese artists have been forced to look hard at their own work in an effort to distill those elements that are important, if not essential, to their temperament, while discarding what is superfluous. It is a continuing process and some artists have obviously made better progress than others.

The artist who has been welcomed most readily into Australian art circles is Guan Wei, who was included in the Museum of Contemporary Art's 1993 survey, *Mao Goes Pop*, and since then has hardly taken a backward step. He

has had three solo exhibitions with Sydney's prestigious Sherman Galleries, and his work has been bought by public collections and included in numerous group shows. His bibliography is impressive.

Guan Wei's paintings have a clear, precise graphic style, and are often composed in narrative sequences. Nevertheless, they are extremely difficult to interpret, like an elaborate joke told in a foreign language. This may be a literal description of these works, because there is an unmistakable sense of parody and whimsy in his cartoon-like panels, even if the action remains cryptic. His multi-panelled piece in this show, *Night and Day*, is no exception.

The artist seems to be enjoying himself immensely, multiplying allusions and erudite references, but his wit springs from such a different tradition that it can be merely puzzling to Western eyes. There is, apparently, a strong reference to Chinese folk art, along with a more modern desire to tell a story obliquely, not directly. This is a familiar strategy for artists living under repressive regimes, who seek to pass a coded message to those in the know, while avoiding the attentions of

the state. Somehow, Guan Wei has struck a chord with an Australian avant-garde that is enchanted by all forms of wilful obscurity, but in his case the mysteries are probably a matter of translation, not intent.

Other artists in *Beyond China* are more anchored in academic, realist or quasi-realist styles. Huang He contributes a series of unusually dark streetscapes and views of Pyrmont Wharf, which make Sydney look as grey as Beijing. Huihai Xie shows an accomplished but coldly precise portrait of Sir John Cramer; while Li Bao Hua's portraits are only slightly looser in technique and strangely washed-out in colour.

Gennady H. Liu paints modest, lyrical pictures, in a rather staid impressionist manner; Lan Wang employs a decorative, fractured approach to familiar Chinese subject matter; Wang Xu combines social realist content with a style much influenced by traditional ink drawing and calligraphy. The radical fringe, represented by the photos of Xiao Xian Liu, or the mixed media works of Lin Li or Li Liang, shows a degree of wit and innovation, without ever threatening to steal the show. Some of the most striking pieces in