

BEYOND

CHINA

20 March - 3 May 1998

Campbelltown City Bicentennial Art Gallery

Foreword

The idea for the *Beyond China* exhibition at Campbelltown grew out of discussions between our previous curator Suellen Lockett, artist George Gittoes, Jiawei Shen, and his fellow Chinese artists, and art historian Gabrielle Dalton. Campbelltown Gallery's exhibition program is recognised for its innovative profile and cultural diversity which is due in part to the contributions of artists' initiated projects.

I would especially like to thank our curator Greta North for her careful preparation of the exhibition and catalogue. I would also like to thank Gabrielle Dalton for her insightful essay that reflects her friendships and associations with the artists since 1990.

All of the participating artists have shown regularly in Sydney since arriving from China, but this is the first time that they have exhibited together. The innovation and diversity of their art demonstrates that they have successfully remade and renewed their lives as artists in Australia. *Beyond China* is compelling viewing and I congratulate all of the exhibiting artists.

Sioux Garside
Director



The Chinese-Australian artists in *Beyond China* have arrived in Australia over the last two decades and currently reside and practice in Sydney. While this diverse exhibition allows us an insight into work created in recent years, it is notable that all of these artists were either nationally and officially recognised in China or were working underground before they looked to Australia as a place of resettlement, or exile.

Emigration to Australia on one hand allowed the artists to develop their work without the constant political surveillance and intervention experienced in China, but on the other, a new language, learning to deal with a very different art establishment and audience, and financial survival in a capitalist system posed another kind of restraint on their artistic development.

Initially many of these artists had to survive on student allowances, or work as cleaners, kitchen hands and house painters to establish themselves and realise their art. Testament to their strength as artists is their persistence and the development of their artistic output despite these difficulties, with a number now showing internationally.

To have emerged as artists at all in China, each one has undergone a personal long march with experiences of tumultuous political and social upheaval.

During and immediately after the Cultural Revolution Jiawei Shen, Lan Wang, Huang He, Guan Wei and Guo Jian were sent in their mid teens to become farm labourers or soldiers. Removed from family and sent to remote areas, they worked in harsh conditions for 4-8 years before they were able to gain entry to any formal art training. As a child of seven Lin Li was separated from her mother, "blacklisted", and sent away to the country with her father, a doctor, who was 'reeducated' as a peasant farmer.

All of the artists in *Beyond China* arrived in Australia with impressive tertiary qualifications from Chinese art academies which offered thorough technical training. Through links with the academies in the Soviet Union, East Germany and artists who had studied in the earlier

years of the 20th century in France and Italy, students had direct sources to the traditional techniques of 19th and early 20th Century Western Art.

By the 1970's a variety of styles had developed in China, underground and officially. The use of oil painting and classical sculpture techniques of western art can be seen in the work of Shen, Gennady, Huang, Li Boa Hua, and Lan Wang. Concurrently the classic techniques of Asian art in printmaking and calligraphy persisted. These are evident in the work of Wang Xu, Li Liang and, in their purest form, Nan Zhou's scrolls and screen.

Jiawei Shen's social realist portraits deal with their subjects' place in history and time. Each sitter's surroundings are composed with great care to convey symbolic clues about their lives. The central figures stare out of the canvas confronting the viewer.


Li Boa Hua's sitters, however, appear to be disturbed in a private moment, rather than looking defiantly at us. Huihai Xie's portraits have adapted American photo realist technique and capture "a moment", as if in a snapshot, where the personal is magnified and revealed.

Gennady Liu's work is small and intimate, reminiscent of early 20th Century French salon painting; while Huang He reveals his sculptor's eye, in historical landscape paintings which focus on imposing structures around Pymont Bay.

Recognising the power of art to communicate, the Chinese art academies stressed political correctness. The cultural thesis of art in China since the establishment of The People's Republic in 1949 was to express both the vision of the Chinese people and, more particularly, the vision of those in power at any given time. During the Cultural Revolution art was seen as essential propaganda and throughout the Cold War it was spoken of as "a weapon".

Lan Wang says that she had deliberately broken away from "art as a weapon", and that she "now wants art to be for itself". Some of her





works in this exhibition revolve around pastoral landscapes, which reflect her desire for harmony. Her paintings of the Chinese Opera, which are based on well known scenes from traditional Jing-ju opera, reflect the noisy, busy performances which have larger than life characters and ritualised power struggles. In all her works one can see the strong influences of the European modernists, particularly Klee and Chagall.

When the "bamboo curtain" was raised in the 1980s artists were able to practice their art in a more relaxed atmosphere. China's "open door" policy allowed increased interaction with the contemporary Western world. In Beijing these "New Wave" artists, who were born after 1959, reacted against both traditional and "official" art and began to explore and debate art as a means of finding individual expression.

Guo Jian, Liu Xiao Xian and Nan Zhou became labelled as dissident artists because of their participation in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in April-May 1989. Liu Xiao Xian, Nan Zhou and Wang Xu became exiles in Australia at this time.

Xiao Xian's haunting series of photographs seen in *Beyond China* were created at the end of a four year period of uncertainty and alienation in Sydney whilst awaiting the Australian Government's decision on whether to grant Chinese students permanent resident status. Xiao describes this period as "the hardest years of my life". In works such as *Paradise, Illusion and Reality* we see the immigrant stripped bare, reduced to babyhood, speechless and unable to communicate in a gigantic and desolate landscape.

In the official crack down after Tiananmen Square in mid 1989, Guo Jian moved into the underground artists' colony of Yuanmingyuan in outer Beijing. Here many artists, poets and musicians resided illegally in what was to be the first independent, bohemian community of artists since the establishment of The People's Republic. It was a time of danger, but also one of highly charged creative interaction, with much of their art reflecting disenchantment with the cultural restriction and regime in China.

Guan Wei evolved a humorous, graphic pop style, full of symbolic iconography which has taken its place in the Australian avant garde since his arrival as an artist-in-residence in 1988.

Guo Jian emigrated to Australia in 1992. Here he developed his Excitement series, which, he "had been thinking about for some time in China, but had not felt free to do". These paintings deliberately employ a flat poster-like perspective in mock imitation of "official art". Instead of revolutionary heroes they are peopled by street circus performers. These works are full of satire, double entendre, political and sexual tensions, suggesting a darker side of China that few outsiders see.

Li Liang arrived in 1987. He typically layers his images of the two countries. His favoured medium is paper and the works always incorporate rice paper, as "It is so Chinese...I layer this over mass produced images and over both I make my personal mark". He mounted *Good Weekend* using an Australian mass media publication in the manner of an old Chinese scroll. Like Liang, Lin Li came freely to Australia "to see more of what was happening in the world". Since arriving in 1990 Lin Li's sculpture evolved from figurative social realist to large scale contemporary works. All her works have an intense poetic quality. *Red Dress Woman* marks a mid point in Li's transition from sculptor to her current status as one of Sydney's leading performance and video artists. Nan Zhou's work reminds us of the tradition in Chinese art of the artist-poet, and the inseparability of the poem from its expression as art in calligraphy; it reinforces the link calligraphy makes between the artists of today with those who lived centuries ago. In the Chinese tradition of copying from masters *The Crane Cries* is a poem which appears in a Han dynasty book and was authored some 2,500 years ago.

The works in *Beyond China* - be they realist, calligraphic, or avant garde, allow us an invaluable window to both the traditions and contemporary developments of Chinese art and a rich understanding of the contributions of these artists to Australia.

Gabrielle Dalton