



Exorcising Chinese demons from an artist's soul

BY ANNE SARZIN

GUO JIAN'S MANY-LAYERED lives surface in his paintings that seethe with vitality and pain.

His vibrant works are an ironic social commentary on an important segment of the human condition, life in a totalitarian society.

Firstly, Jian's perspective is that of a soldier who served for three years in the People's Liberation Army of the People's Republic of China. Those were years in which he fervently believed that "Double Happiness is a Warm Gun", the title of his current exhibition at the Tin Sheds Gallery.

Jian grew up in a Chinese village where no-one rebelled against the established order. Indoctrinated by the military authorities, he accepted unquestioningly an ideology that justified suppression in the name of law and order.

On leaving the army, however, an unofficial process of education began, leading to a new and profound understanding of the need and struggle for the reform of an oppressive political system. As an art student at Beijing University, he interacted with dissidents whose agenda for change opened his eyes to an iniquitous range of human rights violations.

For Jian, the terrible massacre on 4 June 1989 in Tiananmen Square marked the apotheosis of student activism as he knew it. He witnessed the clash of two cultures, the world of the military confronting student idealism.

As a former soldier and subsequently as a student, Jian's insight into both mindsets was acute. He understood only too well the

unthinking acceptance of authoritarianism that was the hallmark and strength of the Chinese army. He grasped, too, the integrity and courage of those searching for freedom.

His art – in its volcanic eruption of figures cavorting across technicolour canvases – chronicles his own spiritual odyssey from wide-eyed innocent and smiling army apologist to student activist and perceptive artist. His work displays all the elements he has encountered on that journey, with a special emphasis on the conjunction between the excesses of violence and sexuality.

After graduating from Beijing University, Jian discovered that his involvement in the protest movement had blighted any career prospects. Rather than accept the government's offer of a factory job in a remote rural area, which would have exiled and silenced him effectively, he chose to remain illegally in Beijing, going underground in Yuanmingyuan, the artists' colony on the outskirts of the city.

"Because I had foreign friends and had taken part in the Tiananmen demonstrations, I was suspected of espionage," Jian told the *News*. "Someone who had seen my police record told me I had serious black marks against me. Despite an earlier rejection of my application for a passport, with the help of my friends,



Guo Jian with his artworks

I emigrated to Australia in 1992."

Whereas the repressive atmosphere in China had arrested his artistic development, his arrival in Australia led to the free, satirical expression of ideas and emotions in a range of autobiographical artworks. "I still have to deal with the pressures of Chinese society, their strong nationalistic pride that can lead to acts of violence," he said.

While Jian is obsessed with past traumas, he doesn't rule out the possibility of Australian themes and landscapes entering his work at some stage in the future. He recognises, too, that while his own life and outlook have changed, China has also transformed into a new entity, comprising both good and bad elements.

On a return visit in 1994 to see his parents, he noted the new materialism that has swamped Chinese life, as well as the prevalence of drugs and prostitution, and the

undiminished police surveillance. "I knew then that I wanted to live and work in Australia," he said.

The exhibition at the Tin Sheds Gallery comprises 20 works, oil on canvas, which Jian commenced in 1995. The artist has used a flat, poster-like perspective in mock imitation of "official art". Instead of revolutionary heroes, however, there are circus performers, soldiers and prostitutes. The works suggest a darker side of China that outsiders never see.

There is also one installation piece, a traditional shrine that the artist has embellished satirically. "Although the imagery is Chinese, the message applies to all cultures," he said.

"Double Happiness is a Warm Gun", an exhibition of paintings by Guo Jian, is on view at the Tin Sheds Gallery until 17 October, Monday – Saturday, 11am–5pm.