

# Guo Jian quit Chinese Army,

**braved Tiananmen Square and finally reached exile in Australia. The surreal and dislocated art that he has produced here has put him at the forefront of a new international art movement.**

**the** "I can still see the faces of the soldiers now. They were shouting, laughing, they were really excited. If I was in the army I would have been the same. I would have been a murderer..." More than a decade on, Tiananmen Square haunts Guo Jian. Indeed, for the Sydney-based artist, recalling the horrific events of June 4, 1989 and their consequences has become a vocation. Guo Jian's riotous paintings depict a kitsch dreamworld populated to bursting

Text Ruth Skilbeck

# From Mao To Now

point by a leering cast of soldiers, strippers, synchronised swimmers, officials, gymnasts and performing animals. Mixing influences of Maoist propaganda art and Western pop art, the engaging, fiercely satirical works

ridicule the hypocrisies and pretensions of ideologically-fuelled cultural violence. The work is based on his experiences on both sides of the gun: firstly as a soldier in the Chinese People's Liberation Army and later as a demonstrator and hunger-striker in the Tiananmen Square protest. Although the imagery in his narrative paintings is predominantly Chinese, the satire speaks a universal language. "The main theme of my work is



Guo Jian 'The Idea' 1998

Hughes Gallery, Sydney, December 1999), contains soldiers with huge fixed smiles (in the world of his paintings, everyone is always smiling). Each soldier - and there are over a dozen in some canvases - has the artist's own face. "All my works are self-portraits," he says. "All the soldiers are me."

In National Anthem, a surreal, crowded pool scene, fountains ejaculate skywards from turquoise waters crowded with coveting bathers. No less than six manic Guo Jians can be detected: Guo Jian holding a red toy gun, his enduring symbol of "men's business"; Guo Jian holding a toy

violence," he says. "In my work, sex and violence are always linked." Every painting from his last solo show, Trigger Happy (Ray

party officials and Mao himself, waving in a pink bathrobe. In Guo Jian's work, Eastern icons such as Mao, red flags and cherry trees in blossom are juxtaposed with Western pop icons such as Marilyn Monroe and Ken and Barbie. His vibrant palette and flat unreal style - not to mention the relentless mask-like smiles of his characters - critiques Socialist Realism, expressing the bitterness of the Tiananmen Square generation.

Born in 1962 in Duyun, a small city in China's southwest, Guo Jian grew up in the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution. At his school, veterans of the Long March regaled pupils with tales of heroic battles. As a 16 year old dreaming of military glory, Guo Jian lied about his age and joined the army. Quickly disillusioned, it was three years before he was allowed to leave. He was made a Square leader, in charge of propaganda art, where he honed his artistic skills decorating official party orders. "That's why my work is so beautiful," he says. Later he worked as a truck driver and union official before winning a place to study Fine Art at the Beijing Central

helicopter, another symbol of virility; Guo Jian with his arm around a naked female soldier. Mingling with the doppelgängers are a beauty queen,



Guo Jian 'Trigger Happy' 1998



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Academy. He graduated in 1989, the year of the Tiananmen Square student protests. Blacklisted for his involvement, he was banned from employment in China. He lived for three years in the illegal artists' village of Yuanmingyuan, until the settlement was broken up by the police. Effectively exiled, he emigrated to Australia in 1992.

Since he began showing his work in 1998, Guo Jian has received increasing critical acclaim and international attention. His first solo show, Double Happiness Is A Warm Gun, was held at the Tin Sheds Gallery, Sydney in 1998. Buyers of work from his second solo show Trigger Happy included the National Gallery Of Australia. Concert promoter Ken West selected his work to be projected on stage at February's Big Day Out festivals in Australia and New Zealand.

Guo Jian is one of a new wave of avant-garde artists who have left China over the past decade to settle in urban centres such as New York, Paris and Sydney. From this diaspora a new genre of non-Eurocentric visual art has emerged. "The Third Space" is the term frequently used to describe the virtual moment between cultures in which these artists operate. The phrase was

coined by New York curator Gao Minglu, who curated the influential China/Avant Garde in Beijing, 1989 - an exhibition which was closed down by the authorities.

Art from The Third Space dreams in both East and West. It is art with a unique perspective, defined by the experience of exile and cultural dislocation coupled with increased freedom of expression (in China, political and erotic themes remain banned). As John McDonald, head of Australian Art at the National Gallery Of Australia, wrote in a review of Guo Jian's work: "It 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."

Most tellingly, Guo Jian's work demonstrates the impact between the sexuality of communist China - sexuality repressed and channelled into militancy - and the liberal West. For instance, Trigger Happy III portrays ballet dancers, dressed as rifle-toting girl soldiers in the pre-communist uniform of shorts, sailing through the air while in front of them, bare-chested Guo Jians point phallic red toy guns.

"In China, after the start of communism women were not allowed to wear shorts," explains Guo Jian. "In the '70s the Revolution Ballet toured all over China, depicting aspects of revolutionary life. The Red Women's Detachment ballet was about pre-communist women soldiers. This was the ballet that everyone flocked to see. Men loved to go to the ballet to see the women of the Red Detachment in shorts. I paint myself doing the same ballet, in a soldier's pose, an attack pose. I learnt that in the army, I was part of the ballet."

He continues: "You go to the army, you become a hero so you can get a girlfriend. You don't really care about going to war, killing people. People think that it's really beautiful to join the army."

At Tiananmen Square, Guo Jian was an unsung hero, returning several times with his friends into the gunfire, waving white handkerchiefs,

to carry the wounded to a nearby hospital. But the thought troubles him deeply that, had he not left the army, he could have been carrying out the killings.

"That made me think about how I was a soldier. [If I still had been] I would shoot myself. I would have [had] to follow orders to shoot people in the streets, I found it really horrible. This really affected my life. That's a major influence in my painting. Anyone can get involved. People don't realise they are in the role."

"Once, in 1991, I met a soldier in a hospital. He was a soldier in the Tiananmen Square massacre. He told me about how he killed people there. He got excited. I said that it's not good to kill people. But he never felt regret about that. He never [thought] about that, that it's a really bad thing to kill people. That made me think about how

people get excited by violence." It's a theme which continues to preoccupy Guo Jian. The series of paintings he is currently working on (to be shown in Canberra and Sydney later this year) depicts his multiple soldier-self smoking opium. The message? Violence is the opiate of the masses.



Guo Jian's next show, Mama's Tripping, sponsored by the Australia Council, will be exhibited at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space, September 9 to October 21, 2000.