

Grotesque ire

Every work in Guo Jian's excellent show of paintings at Tin Sheds Gallery is called *Excitement*. They're differentiated by subtitles like *Wanking Circle*, *Great Landscape No 2* and *The Joke*. They are all populated by characters who – almost without exception – have demented, lascivious grins pasted across their faces – as if they're still in the first hour of a four-day orgy they've been looking forward to for months.

And that's not so far from what's actually going on. The show is called *Double Happiness Is A Warm Gun*, and it features more than 20 reasonably large paintings in a clunky but carefully plotted figurative style. Each picture is crowded with gun-toting Chinese generals and scantily-clad strippers in a hectic, disjointed, but ultimately resolved manner not far from the pop surrealism of artists like Richard Hamilton or Robert Colescott.

It's painting as satire and it's very sharp. The cast is made up of real people – soldiers, predominantly, as well as circus performers, tycoons and babes, movie types and popular icons.

But you come away stripped of



EXCITEMENT – BOWL BALANCER BY GUO JIAN

the ability to distinguish between fake and real. So debauched, so limitlessly venal are Guo Jian's hilarious set-pieces that moral structure – even the idea of authentic individuality – goes into meltdown. What

makes this cast of crazies despicable is not so much that they are debauchees, it's that they're nothing more than that. The mechanical repetition of *Excitement* as the title of every work rams this home, as

do the set-in-cement, ghoulish grins.

Guo Jian presumably knows what he's talking about. The biographical blurb about the artist makes for fairly amazing reading: born in a violent city in south-west China; long-distance truck driver; enlisted in army; in charge of "propaganda art" at tail end of Vietnam War on Vietnam border; taught himself to draw and paint; blacklisted by authorities after involvement in Tiananmen protests; emigrated to Australia in 1995.

There is an outraged, seething contempt underscoring Guo Jian's choice of subject matter. But there's also an abundance of wacky humour.

The exhibition's centre-piece, *Excitement: Sideshow: Big Screen*, is a triumph of barbed satire, and his wicked take on Manet's *Le Dejeuner*

Sur L'Herbe is worth more than a cheesy chortle.

■ SEBASTIAN SMEE

Double Happiness Is A Warm Gun – paintings by Guo Jian, until tomorrow, Tin Sheds Gallery.