

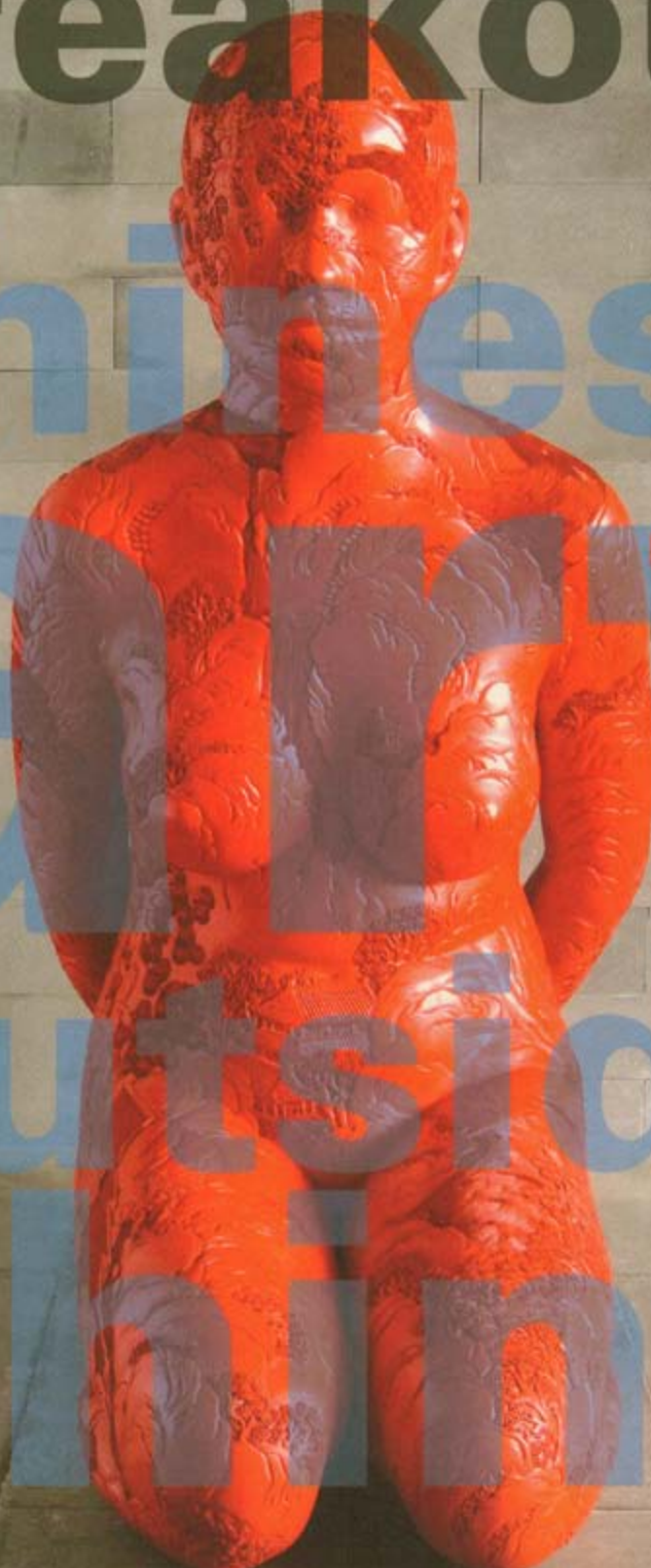
breakout

chinese

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CHARTA



frame of reference for his work at the time. Yet the presence of Chineseness in his art has changed over the course of the past ten years. Indeed, one can identify a shift in Ah Xian's work away from the politics of individual expression evident in the "Heavy Wounds" series to an exploration of more overt Chinese forms, seen in his use of calligraphy books and porcelain. He does, however, make a distinction between his use of Chinese references:

Let me clarify something about my attitude toward Chineseness or to the issue of being Eastern or Western. There are two types of ways to create artworks. The first is to use Chinese symbols directly from China. The second type is to take Chinese culture as the source of inspiration for new cultural forms. I use this second technique. (Ah Xian, 2001)

Ah Xian's assertion that his work draws upon Chineseness as a source of inspiration, rather than the appropriation of Chinese symbols, is a difference rarely raised by overseas Chinese artists. But it does relate to the idea of trans-experience insofar as it recognizes that his notion of China and, in fact, his very sense of Chineseness, has been altered because of his migration to Australia. He has begun to forge new cultural values in a foreign environment.

Red Guard Theatrics: Guo Jian

Guo Jian was educated at the China Central Minorities Institute in Beijing, where he was awarded a Bachelor of Arts in Chinese painting and literature. He attended this college instead of the Central Academy, where most other artists in Beijing studied, because his father belonged to the local Chinese "minority culture" from Guizhou. After art school, Guo had a studio at Yuanmingyuan artists' village in Beijing from 1989 until 1992, when he migrated to Australia.

Guo served as squad leader in the army for four years, and the political posters he painted during this time have had a lasting influence on his paintings. One example is his frequent depiction of soldiers, featured as central figures in each of his works. The depiction of soldiers has personal and political symbolism for Guo; not only was he a People's Liberation Army soldier, but, as he has said:

My grandmother told me that the People's Liberation Army had executed my grandfather.... I was shocked.... My father was a soldier. He had to denounce his own father, knowing he'd be killed too if he tried to defend him. And then in 1989, there I was, a former soldier, nearly killed by the P.L.A. myself on Tiananmen Square. (Guo, 2000, p. 10)

In some ways, Guo's representation of China is static, or fixed at a time when the People's Liberation Army (P.L.A.) had full control over the public sphere; no doubt this was the case when Guo served in the P.L.A. Since arriving in Sydney, Guo has held two solo exhibitions at public galleries: "Double Happiness is a Warm Gun" at the Tin Sheds Gallery in 1998 and "Mamma's Tripping" at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space in 2000, along with other exhibitions at Ray Hughes Gallery. The paintings in these exhibitions contain strong references to China, exclusively featuring Chinese people, mostly soldiers, in strange dreamlike scenes with an undercurrent of violence. References to Australia are minimal in these works.

Guo's continual references in his paintings to his time in the P.L.A. derive from the traumatic nature of the experience. Guo recalls:

I used to have nightmares all the time.... Then in the library, I was looking at some pictures of China during the Cultural Revolution and I realized

what was triggering these nightmares. Since coming to Australia ten years ago, I'd pushed memories of my years in the Chinese army, and of Tiananmen, out of my mind. But seeing these images triggered memories, and once I started to use them in my paintings, I stopped having bad dreams. (Guo, 2000, p. 10)

Guo's paintings frequently represent his experiences of army life and memories of China as dream-like narratives. In short, his works reveal a subconscious sense of Chineseness that can be related to trans-experience, insofar



Ah Xian, *China China—Bust 2* (1998), Underglaze copper red and cobalt blue glaze on porcelain, 41 x 31 x 24 cm, Courtesy the artist, Photo: Ah Xian

p. 184 Ah Xian, *China China—Bust 36* (1999), Overglaze iron-red and cobalt-blue on porcelain, 44 x 35 x 25 cm, Courtesy the artist, Photo: Ah Xian

as while his works reflect little of his new environment in Australia, it is also evident that he could not have produced these works in China, since they voice his memories and experiences of the violence, corruption and greed of the Chinese Communist Party.

Guo's paintings executed in Australia between 1995 and 1997 explore the sideshow theater as a site of latent violence. The main characters are soldiers being entertained by circus performers such as acrobats, knife throwers and fire-eaters. *Excitement: Sideshow—Qi Gong* (1995) is a good example of the cacophony of activity depicted in this series of work. P.L.A. soldiers, dressed in full uniform, including soft hats, are seated on both sides of the painting, providing a framing device for the performance: a woman lies on her back with her face grimac-



Guo Jian, *Excitement: Sideshow—Qi Gong* (1995), Oil on canvas, 106 x 89 cm, Courtesy the artist. Photo: Guo Jian

© 1997 by Guo Jian, *Excitement: Sideshow—Knife Thrower* (1996), Oil on canvas, 106 x 89 cm, Courtesy the artist. Photo: Guo Jian

© 1997 by Guo Jian, *Excitement: Sideshow—Qi Gong* (1997), Oil on canvas, 112 x 96 cm, Courtesy the artist. Photo: Guo Jian

ing at them while a man poised to cut her in half with a chopping knife stands by her side. This chaotic scene is full of contrasts. The tension created by the performance involving knives, for example, is offset by the soldiers' casual behavior of passing a cigarette between them during the performance. Other contrasts are found, for example, between the backdrop for the performance, which is a calming scene of mountains and a waterfall, and the image of a man attacked by a monkey whose paw had taken hold of the man's head. A 1997 painting, bearing the same title, portrays a similar scene with soldiers wearing only their green army trousers. One soldier holds a mallet, and is poised to strike a stone slab resting on the chest of another soldier, who wears red and white face makeup like that of the monkey character in Chinese performances of the novel *The Monkey King* or *Journey to the West*. Another man seated close-by plays the *erhu* (a two-stringed fiddle) while a Chinese opera singer stands in the background. Again, a monkey is shown in the background near the backdrop of a pagoda pavilion. The different layers in these paintings are metaphors for the social stratification of Chinese society, for example, between peasants, soldiers and performers.

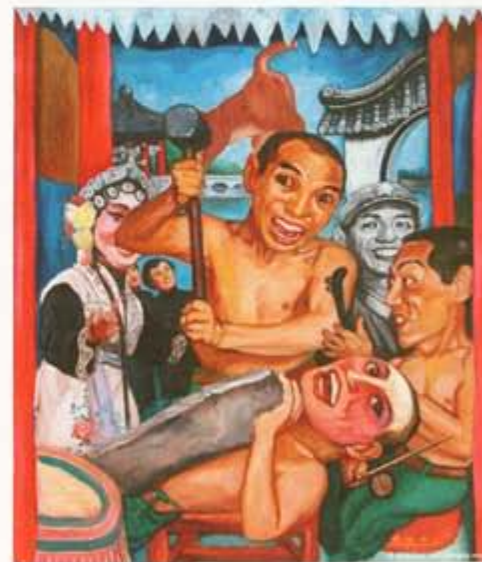
Excitement: Sideshow—Knife Thrower (1996) was another painting from the series. Two soldiers dressed only in their green army trousers hold small knives in their hands while a woman in a red *qipao* stands, naively smiling, in front of a wooden board embedded



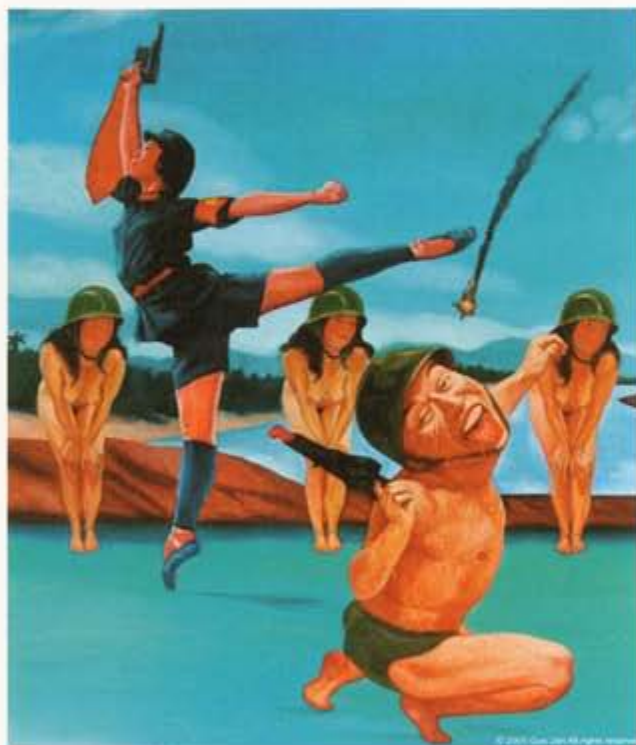
with knives. One of the soldier's faces is painted in the signature red, white and black pattern of the monkey character (perhaps a reference to the monkey in the background, leaping through the air toward a boy wearing a mask). The painted face of the central figure is common in other works in the series, such as *Excitement: Sideshow—Ring of Fire* (1997) and *Excitement: Sideshow—Balancing Act* (1996). In *Excitement: Sideshow—Ring of Fire*, a group of entertainers is crowded onto a small stage in front of a painted backdrop of a traditional Chinese pavilion with a pagoda roof. The performers include an opera singer, musician and a soldier diving through a ring of fire. Mimicking the soldier, a monkey glides through the air in the same direction. Similarly, *Excitement: Sideshow—Balancing Act* depicts four soldiers and a woman in

black lace underwear, who nonchalantly plays a bamboo flute and holds a packet of cigarettes while watching one of the soldiers, with a knife in his mouth, balancing another knife on its tip to form an angle of ninety degrees. In the foreground of this scene, a bowl filled with two goldfish and water is on a small table covered with a red tablecloth. Fish are a Chinese symbol of longevity, a contrast to the strange, anxious and dangerous events taking place on the stage.

The paintings in this series possess a number of similarities such as the inclusion of a monkey and P.L.A. soldiers as well as opera singers, acrobats and musicians. The monkey is shown in each painting as a fleeting figure, always in motion and with its back to the viewer. It holds cultural symbolism as well as personal symbolism for the artist. For example,



the monkey is worshipped as “the greatest equal to heaven” (*Qi-tian da-sheng*) in Southern China, while Guo’s memories of his childhood are filled with the mythical tales of “Monkey,” a character from the Chinese theater. In addition to the repetition of figures, Guo’s paintings are also redolent with a sense of threat and danger. The atmosphere is always crowded and claustrophobic, creating a sense of expectation that something bad is about to happen. It derives partly from Guo’s use of P.L.A. soldiers, which we associate with war and violence, and partly from the strong intimation of debauchery and sexual deviancy.



Guo Jian, *Trigger Happy XI* (2000), Oil on canvas, 165 x 125 cm, Courtesy the artist, Photo: Guo Jian
 © 1991 Guo Jian, *Trigger Happy* (2000), Oil on canvas, 145 x 198 cm, Courtesy the artist, Photo: Guo Jian

Guo’s paintings from 1998 to 1999 are much more ambitious in scale and content. They include images of soldiers and generals from the P.L.A., again, but this time in front of various recognizable Chinese scenes. *Excitement: Great Landscape No. 1* (1998), for example, is dense with nearly twenty different figures of soldiers, generals, women (some naked and some wearing underwear) and men in everyday clothes populating a landscape of mountains and a bathing pool. If we focus on the right hand side of the painting alone, we see a woman in red underwear eating chocolate ice cream, a soldier on a rocking horse (painted in black and white), a

woman bathing naked in the pool with her breasts exposed above the water, and a man in green shorts poised to dive off a mountain peak into the water. These figures don’t engage with one another at all, and their scale in the landscape is not pictorially correct, at least according to the principles of linear perspective, since some are oversized while others appear miniaturized by comparison. The layering of imagery is reminiscent of collage techniques, with the foreground figures sitting uneasily against the background landscape. This is intentional, used by the artist to convey the utter artificiality of the scene—a world controlled by corrupt and debauched P.L.A. officers and Party officials. By showing the army soldiers



without their uniforms, Guo further disrupts the authority invested in them.

Guo’s *Excitement: Great Tiananmen* (1998) from the same series is an even more potent caricature of the P.L.A., portraying soldiers and generals as immoral and ineffectual. Against the backdrop of the gate of Tiananmen, Guo fills the painting with a mass of figures. To the right hand side, groups of soldiers congregate together with cigarettes in their hands, as if posing for a photograph, a common site at Tiananmen Square. Their image is painted in black and white, like an

old photograph, perhaps a reference to the past. The seeming innocence of these young soldiers is contrasted against the violent acts of other soldiers around them. In the upper right-hand corner, for example, three soldiers hold a man’s arms and neck, restraining him so that he can’t move, while in the center of the work another soldier pins a naked man to the ground. A black official car with Deng Xiaoping standing up and through its sunroof runs over a naked man. Although the men in this painting are mostly soldiers, the women are shown to be temptresses who are either naked or wearing red lace underwear and

remnants of army uniforms, cavorting recklessly with the soldiers. A fighter plane flies low across the Square amid small air explosions that resemble anti-aircraft fire. Guo's *Excitement: Great Tiananmen* is a strange assemblage of erotic and violent acts, united only by the themes of disorder and conflict. This painting is a statement on the decay and corruption of the P.L.A., made all the more pointed by the inclusion of poppy flowers blooming in the foreground—a reference to the drug industry in China.

Guo's selection of Tiananmen Square as the backdrop for *Excitement: Great Tiananmen* (1998) is notable for a number of reasons, including its political and historical importance. Tiananmen Square was where the People's Republic of China was proclaimed in 1949 and also the site of the June Fourth uprising in 1989. Tiananmen has also been the subject of a number of significant historical art works. Dong Xiwen's *The Founding of the Nation* (1952–53) shows Mao announcing the founding of the People's Republic of China from Tiananmen Gate to the people in the square below. Not long after being completed, this work was reproduced fifty-six thousand times within a three-month period, bearing testament to its historical value, not to mention the potency of Tiananmen Square as a national monument.⁹

Guo's more recent works are based on the *Red Detachment of Women*, a Cultural Revolution ballet of a battle between evil landowners and good Communist soldiers. The composition of this series of paintings,

titled "Trigger Happy," is more formal and structural than in previous works. *Trigger Happy XI* (2000), for instance, features a line of almost identical women leaning forward with their hands on their knees, gazing directly at the viewer. They wear nothing but army helmets as a kind of superficial protection against an airplane on fire, nose-diving toward the ground in the distance. In front of them, a ballerina from the *Red Detachment of Women*, wearing an army uniform of blue shirt and shorts, performs an arabesque on ballet point-shoes with her arms outstretched, holding a red kerchief and a gun in her right hand. The contrast between the naked women and the ballerina suggests a tension between two stereotypes of women (the seductress and the dutiful woman) as well as past and present perceptions of the P.L.A. In the original production of the *Red Detachment of Women* first produced in the sixties, the Communist army frees the people from the tyranny of feudalism. Today, however, they are more of a police force. In a further comment upon the current status of the P.L.A., Guo included in the painting a male soldier crouched on the ground clutching a gun. He wears only green underpants and a metal helmet, yet his body is covered in perspiration. His mouth is open and smiling and his eyes are half-closed, as if aroused.

Although *Trigger Happy XI* and other paintings in this series contain unequivocal references to the decadence and corruption of officials and the P.L.A. in China, there is a noticeable shift in his palette (the use of lighter colors)

and the landscape that serves as the backdrop (from mountain scenes to beaches), in contrast to his earlier paintings. This relates in part to his migration to Australia, where he was captivated by the beauty of the continent's beaches. As Guo has stated:

The paintings with water and the beach are influenced by Australia. I was knocked out by my first sight of the Australian coast, of the beach. We don't have any ocean in Guizhou. I love the sea. I still feel I've been here for too short a time, and I haven't digested my Australian experience. Besides, I have to finish one stage in my life

before I can start on the next. But you can see how bright the blues are in these paintings—that's all from Australia. (Guo, 2000, p. 12)

Of all the overseas Chinese artists discussed in this chapter, Guo's paintings appear the least visibly altered by his migration to Australia. Yet Guo has repeatedly stressed that his relocation to Australia has meant the freedom to paint morally suspect officials and licentious soldiers, subjects that he could not paint in China. As Nicholas Jose has written, "The socialist paradise is parodied in Guo Jian's work as an Australian paradise, as if the visual environment he has experienced here,



9. 1971 Fan Dong Wang, *Descendant Bodies #1 (Blue)* (1996), Acrylic on canvas, 178 x 254 cm, Courtesy the artist. Photo: Fan Dong Wang

9. See Andrews, 1994, p. 86.



with its elements of garish sexuality and gross comedy, has stimulated him to a degree of release that would have been impossible in China" (2000b, p. 6).

Chinese Relief: Fan Dong Wang

Over the past decade, Fan Dong Wang's work has focused on the differences between the representation of spatial depth in Chinese and European paintings. Fan considers perspective the major difference between Chinese and European painting: in particular, the shallow and compartmentalized spaces of Chinese paintings as opposed to the linear, deep perspective found in European paintings. This interest has become apparent in his work only since his migration to Sydney from Shanghai in 1990. Although Fan's initial rea-

son for wanting to migrate was to study English, June Fourth changed that: he left, in the end, for political reasons:

It was about freedom of speech. Because of the Tiananmen movement, lots of people were open to Western ideas and wanted a contemporary society. Encouraging things were happening at that time: people had been radical already in other countries and we were looking for ways to be radical too, to work with Western ideas to achieve our goal. Strangely, everything Western was considered good. (Fan, 2001)

Fan did study English after migrating to Australia and completed two postgraduate

degrees at the University of Wollongong and the University of New South Wales. This university study gave him a more theoretical approach to his art work and to thinking about the differences between Chinese and Australian culture.

Fan developed a theoretical model for comparing the differences between Chinese and European art. His theory of "shifting perspective," elaborated in his Ph.D. thesis for the University of Wollongong, crystallizes these ideas. But before discussing Fan's theories, it is useful to consider his perception of the cultural differences between Australia and China. In China, he remembers:

[Chen Zhen, my teacher] taught us drawing, we called it "academic drawing," and Yu Youhan taught us about color. This was normal because we were learning traditional Chinese-style artwork. But we were conflicted between the Chinese traditions that the school wanted us to adopt and Western techniques and styles that interested us.

And in Australia:

When I came here... I went to the University of New South Wales and was told that I should look into my own background as a source for my art work. But I thought, why should I? I came here for Western ideas; that is why I'm painting and I came to the University here. When I went to

Wollongong University, I was also shocked that people also thought I should do Asian Art.... I had already been dealing with Chinese art for so many years. But later, I understood that approach. It is a kind of a post-modernism; when you look into your own mind you are able to connect with other identities. So, this is new and exciting. It's a Western way of thinking. On the surface it looks like traditional Chinese art, but it is sort of exciting for Western audiences because it is not. (Fan, 2001)

Fan's experience of art schools in China and Australia reveals the different expectations of artistic training in these respective countries. But it also crystallizes, for him, the process of transexperience. In particular, the notion of "shifting perspective" that he developed (to describe his new Australian work) through experimentation with Western artistic conventions (along with his ability to adjust his work to a new context) provides a perfect metaphor for his sense of transexperience.

In spite of the inclusion of European and, later, Australian references in his work, Fan's paintings continue to show China as a primary influence. This is clearly apparent in his choice of imagery and is further clarified in a recent comment on the differences between his own work now and that of mainland artists:

Chinese artists in China are aiming at the Western market, so whatever you ask of

Fan Dong Wang, *Descendant Bodies #2 (Green)* (1996), Acrylic on canvas, 170 x 230 cm, Courtesy the artist. Photo: Fan Dong Wang