

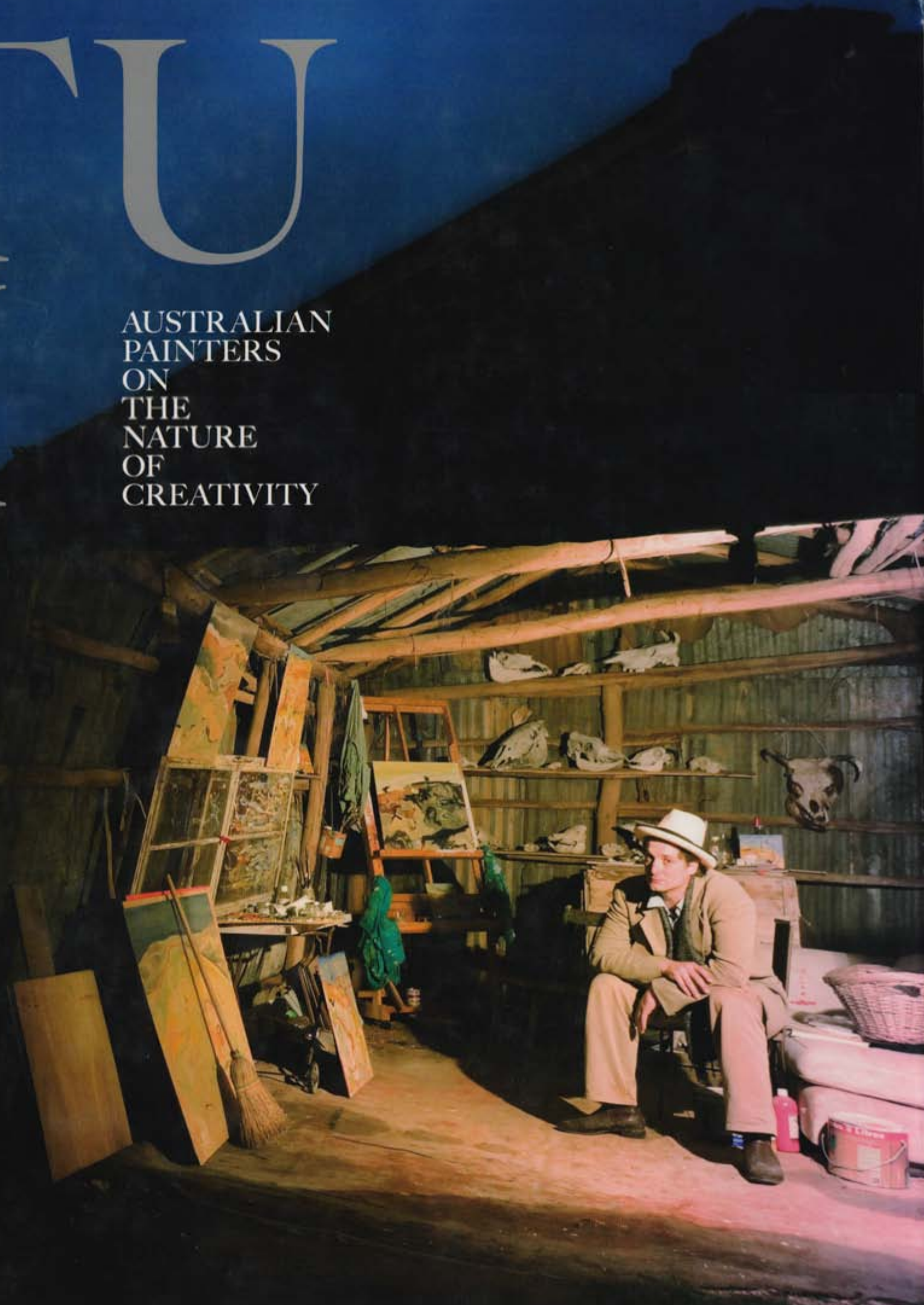
STUDIO

AUSTRALIAN
PAINTERS
ON
THE
NATURE
OF
CREATIVITY

O
Studio

Photography
R. Ian Lloyd

Text
John McDonald



**“GIRLS AND GUNS,” IT’S TABOO!
SOME PEOPLE THINK I’M JUST
A DIRTY MAN. BUT IT’S ALL
BASED ON MY MEMORIES,
ON MY LIFE.”**

Guo Jian served almost four years in the Peoples Liberation Army and has spent the rest of his life trying to exorcise that experience. He participated in the Tiananmen Square uprising in 1989, where he helped carry the wounded to hospital. Marked as a dissident with little hope of a career, he had the greatest difficulty getting an exit permit. He feels that he owes his emigration in 1992 to Bob Hawke, who initiated a new phase of diplomacy with the Communist old guard.

With the nation's embrace of a free market, the thaw has continued. Nowadays Guo Jian is able to travel to China and back with relative ease. For a decade, however, he has been an Aussie - one of the spearheads of an increasingly large Chinese presence in contemporary Australian art.

In his crammed, chaotic studio apartment, overlooking Sydney's Parramatta Road, Guo Jian is painting another picture of Chinese soldiers, teeth clenched in hysterical, leering expressions. Every soldier has the artist's own face - partly because he can't ask anyone else to adopt those poses.

"In China we have this military culture," he explains. "You see soldiers everywhere you go. That's why I keep painting these subjects. The army culture is still really huge."

Perhaps as a reaction to the austerity of army life, Guo Jian's studio is a cavern of kitsch. On all sides there are plastic toys, cupie dolls, masks, calendars, piles of books and magazines, postcards of Mao and Marilyn. His ghetto blaster is more encrusted with trinkets than a Hindu shrine. There are metallic models of a battleship and a frigate,



**Guo
Jian**



and 3D psychedelic visions of Jesus and the Madonna. His collection of pin-ups starts with vintage posters of Shanghai cigarette girls and ends with the soft porn of the present day. He is particularly proud of a series from Macao which features bikini-clad beauties astride motorbikes in front of local landmarks.

A poster of two girls in army uniform posed in front of the Great Wall shows how little Guo Jian actually makes up. His paintings may seem improbable but they are near reflections of Madam Mao's Model Revolutionary Operas, and the over-the-top style of army propaganda. The message, to boys from the provinces like Guo Jian, was that beautiful girls love a man in uniform. Under capitalism or communism, sex sells.

Although he is a satirist, some people find Guo Jian's work too confronting and offensive. "Girls and guns," he says. "It's taboo! Some people think I'm just a dirty man. But it's all based on my memories, on my life."

Guo Jian works long, disorderly hours, usually at night. "Some days I might work for fifteen hours, some days only two. I like to live with my paintings - go to sleep when I'm tired, then jump up in the morning and straight to work."

Yet there are days when he can't find a brush-stroke. "Lots of times I sit in front of a half-painted canvas, and I can't do anything. I'll spend the whole day just sitting there, but nothing comes. I'll listen to music and stare at my painting for a whole day.. and do nothing."

When the mood returns, he works hard and fast, usually on several pictures at once. He loves what he does, and is quietly ambitious. His dream, he says, is to have a really big studio. "I'd like to have lots of paintings on the go, and ride around on a bicycle looking at them."

>
Guo Jian
The Day Before I Went Away
2003
Oil on canvas
213 x 152 cm

