

On your bike, Chairman Mao

China's social turbulence has inspired a new generation of artists, who have turned their backs on political correctness, writes JOHN McDONALD.

There is nothing like the thought of China to make one appreciate life in Australia. Our so-called "great population debate" seems laughable when we put our 22.3 million inhabitants alongside China's 1.33 billion. We may be duly concerned about the strain that overpopulation puts on the environment, water resources and infrastructure but China's problems are proportionately bigger. In China, the gap between rich and poor is much more dramatic, as are the differences between urban and rural areas. No matter what problems lie ahead of us, the Chinese have incalculably greater challenges.

The extreme pace of change in China today is partly a reaction to the stagnation and isolation of the Maoist era. It was 1978 when Deng Xiaoping allegedly announced that it was glorious to get rich, and the nation has been making up for lost time ever since. Thirty years later - its progress impeded only by the Tiananmen Square events of June 1989 - the People's Republic now has the second-highest number of billionaires in the world.

Some of those who have profited are artists. For the past few years the lists of the world's best-selling contemporary artists have been dominated by the Chinese. Although art has its fads and fashions, it is no longer possible to follow some wealthy American collectors and dismiss China in this way.

Sydney can be proud that it is home to one of the world's biggest collections of contemporary Chinese art, made available to the public at the White Rabbit Gallery in Chippendale. This private museum, financed and run by the Neilson family, opened in August last year with a selection of about 60 works from a collection of more than 400. At the end of January, the entire gallery was rehung under the title *The Tao of Now*. This show features 40 more artists and will continue until later this year.

One of the advantages of a private

THE TAO OF NOW

White Rabbit Gallery,
until August 1

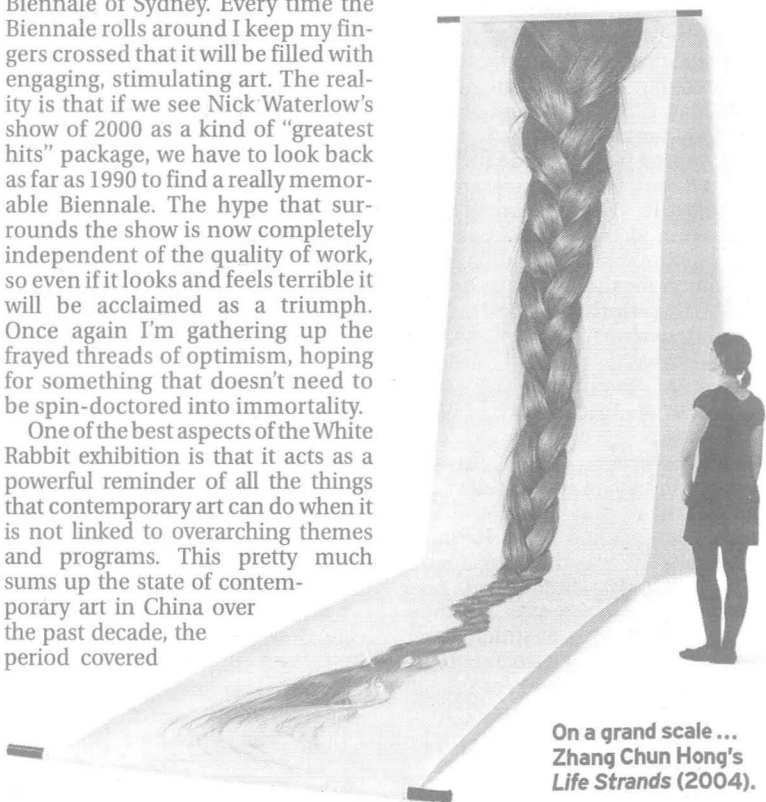
museum is that there is no pressure to keep turning over exhibitions for commercial purposes. White Rabbit is a not-for-profit affair and admittance is free. The money invested in this enterprise would most probably go to the taxman in the unlikely event that the Neilsons decided to keep it in the bank. It makes one acutely conscious of all the things Australia's wealthiest people could do for the arts, if only they had the slightest interest.

This is an opportune time to draw attention to the second White Rabbit show, as we are only four days away from the opening of the 17th Biennale of Sydney. Every time the Biennale rolls around I keep my fingers crossed that it will be filled with engaging, stimulating art. The reality is that if we see Nick Waterlow's show of 2000 as a kind of "greatest hits" package, we have to look back as far as 1990 to find a really memorable Biennale. The hype that surrounds the show is now completely independent of the quality of work, so even if it looks and feels terrible it will be acclaimed as a triumph. Once again I'm gathering up the frayed threads of optimism, hoping for something that doesn't need to be spin-doctored into immortality.

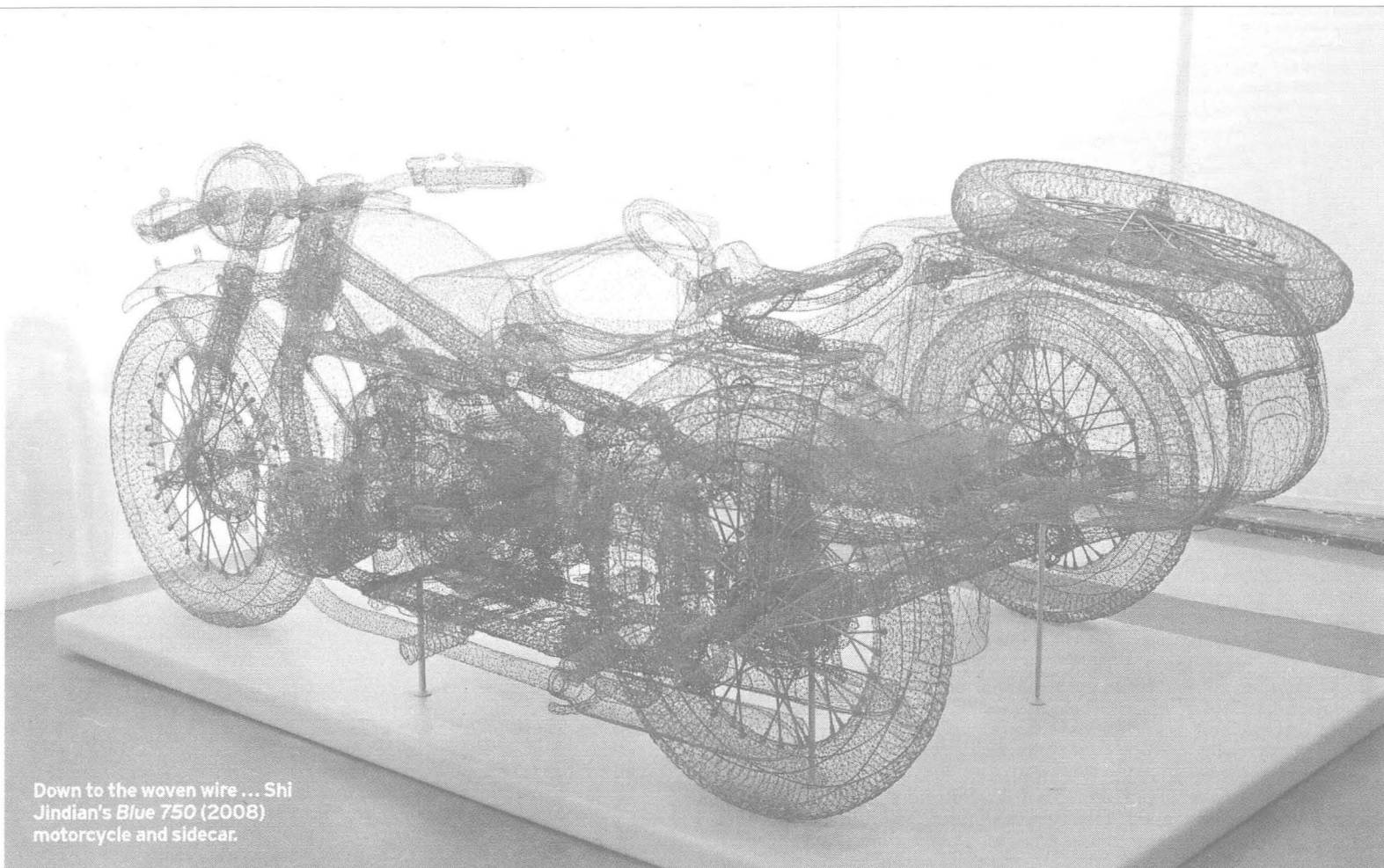
One of the best aspects of the White Rabbit exhibition is that it acts as a powerful reminder of all the things that contemporary art can do when it is not linked to overarching themes and programs. This pretty much sums up the state of contemporary art in China over the past decade, the period covered

by the White Rabbit collection. During this time the obsession with images of Chairman Mao and the Cultural Revolution was dissipated by a new generation of artists who have grown up with no ideological fixations other than consumerism.

More than most people, the Chinese are entitled to say they have had enough of politics. This is broadly what Wang Zhiyuan seems to imply in the small catalogue, when he claims that art in China is no longer to be judged by standards of "political correctness". What he means is that artists are less likely to be solemn and sanctimonious about the problems of their society. In a nation where the government does not expect its edicts to be questioned, artists have had to find ways of making social comment-



On a grand scale ...
Zhang Chun Hong's
Life Strands (2004).



Down to the woven wire ... Shi Jindian's *Blue 750* (2008) motorcycle and sidecar.

ary that does not bring them into direct conflict with authorities.

There are exceptions, notably Ai Weiwei, who has been a fearless, outspoken critic of the breakneck speed of China's urban development, corruption, profiteering, and the lack of political freedoms. For the most part, artists couch their critiques in oblique terms, as if the subjects of their satire were natural phenomena, only incidentally related to politics.

According to Judith Neilson, the works included in *The Tao of Now* are more connected to "the oldest parts of Chinese culture: Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, martial arts and ancient legends". This applies to some artists more than others. The most obvious examples are Cang Xin's large, wooden sculptures of creatures such as cockroaches and scorpions with plants sprouting luxuriantly from their backs. These are based on the shamanistic beliefs of Mongolia, which posit an unbroken continuum between humans, animals and plants. Another candidate is Du Jie, who paints tiny abstract pictures consisting of a single line that she drags around a canvas for three weeks until the entire surface is covered. The artist sees these mind-boggling works as aids to meditation and encourages the viewer to approach them in the same way.

It may be more difficult to see the spiritual dimensions of a work such as Wang Yuyang's *Breathe: Manager Zhao's Black Cab* (2008). This is a dilapidated, life-sized minivan made out of painted silicon, and not the least bit black. When a motor strikes up inside, the van shudders and begins to inhale and exhale, while one headlight blinks on. The idea is to instill a universal life force in inanimate objects, as if the whole world were breathing together.

Two of the most impressive works are deceptively ordinary in their subject matter. Dong Yuan (b. 1984) has reproduced the contents of her

Dong Yuan, who seems to be honouring these humble things.

These are remarkable works for artists still in their 20s but they are not unusual in this collection, which makes no distinctions between old and young, veteran and novice. I can't do justice to all the pieces in this show, which really demand to be seen rather than described. It's virtually impossible to conjure up Shi Jindian's motorcycle and sidecar woven from blue steel wire or Zhang Chun Hong's 11-metre drawing of her plaited hair, which tumbles down the wall and along the gallery floor.

As van Elzen demonstrates, social, political and cultural issues are so interwoven that it is impossible to draw boundaries. The fact that so many old neighbourhoods have been demolished and replaced with undistinguished new building projects is largely a function of the furious pace of economic growth. Most of the inhabitants are happy to move from their old slums, while the authorities see poor-quality new buildings as only a temporary measure. Migrant workers who appear to be shamelessly exploited still see themselves as better off than relatives who remain in impoverished rural areas. Every issue is more complex than it first appears, and this is reflected in the kind of art that is being made.

The shadow that looms in the background is democracy. China today is a capitalist country that clings to the rhetoric of communism but economic change always has political consequences. The miracle is that China's rulers have been able to keep the genie in the bottle for so long while standards of living have been steadily rising. Van Elzen suggests that China may be looking at another 15 years of capitalist-communism, more or less. This may also mean another 15 years of extraordinary creativity, although we have every reason to hope that art will outlast ideology.

The exhibition acts as a powerful reminder of all the things that contemporary art can do.

old rented apartments as a series of small, realistic canvases, placed in the same positions in two rooms that the objects themselves once occupied. The similarly youthful Cong Lingqi (b. 1982) contributes an installation called *Dust* (2008), which consists of hundreds of tiny hand-made models of everyday objects floating in space, illuminated by a strong beam of light. In equating these objects with dust motes, she suggests the insignificance and transience of our lives – which is roughly the antithesis of

The vitality of contemporary Chinese art is intimately connected with the turbulence of the social scene, the sense that things are in a constant state of flux. Nobody quite knows, from day to day, where it is all tending. Economic prosperity is also breeding ecological disaster, while urban renewal is destroying the country's cultural heritage. These dilemmas are neatly summarised in *The Dragon and the Rose Garden*, by the Belgian journalist Sus van Elzen – the latest book to attempt to make sense of the Chinese whirlwind.