

Uncertain future

White Rabbit: Contemporary Chinese Art Collection

Samstag Museum of Art
July 15 – September 30

Long live the Young Pioneer Girl. Eyes ablaze with patriotic favour, fresh from denouncing family and friends. But hang on. Someone's graffitied knickers onto her skirt. Chairman Mao would not have approved. But he's gone. So knickers are OK. Even great big ones like Wang Zhiyuan's truck-sized briefs with pink flashing lights and front panel design of a pig-headed businessman drinking with a whore. Listen to the strains of music from old Shanghai. But hang on again. This is New China not the good old pre-Revolutionary days. So new that Shen Liang can show a Pioneer Girl's knickers or Bu Hua can depict the same little heroine sucking on a fag or looking on sardonically as Colonel Sanders becomes the new Mao and Bambi tramples on an imperial dragon.

Since the stirrings of the 'Opening-Up' period in China following Mao's death in 1976 and the gradual transition of China from a political revolution into a capitalist economy, contemporary artists have emerged from the shadows of repression. A keynote of emerging art expression across the period of the 1980s to 1990s was parody. Much of this was directed at Maoism and took the form of mocking aspects of Mao-worship (particularly iconic representations of the leader), Mao's *Little Red Book* and the Chairman's fashion sense. The counter-culture spirit is evident in a number of

works in the *White Rabbit* exhibition including Chen Zhuo and Huang Keyi's *China Carnival* series which portrays China as a Truman World fun park with Chairman Mao giving his blessing to merry-makers all under a too-blue sky. It's an even-way take on a brave new future that celebrates material prosperity but hints at a frenzied glee verging on hysteria. Anxiety strikes a more personal note in Sun Furong's *Nibbling Up Series – Tomb Figures* which consists of hanging rows of brand new Mao-style suits which have been shredded by the artist. The artist leaves no doubt about intentions and inner turmoil. "When I cut clothes into rags, I want to weep. In the process I do cry and feel as if I am cutting myself, until finally, I find myself cutting somebody else and I feel indifferent." What makes this installation and others in this exhibition particularly interesting is the subtle referencing to the past – in this instance the serried ranks of "Entombed Warriors" – and the association of these effigies with absolute power and oppression.

By 2000 this spirit of parody (and of 'settling scores with a repressive political system) had begun to lose its energy and has been impacted to varying degrees by a Gen Y (*ziwo* – 'I myself') mindset of expression free from political or social constraints. This spirit is evident for example in Dong Yuan's remarkable *Home of Paintings* and *Sketch of Family Belongings* series of paintings which catalogue a year in the life of the artist in terms of spaces lived in and objects owned. But as with a number of works in *White Rabbit* there are layers of meaning, some of which



Object of Desire, Wang Zhiyuan 2008. Images courtesy White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney.

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hint at anxieties about change at a personal, domestic level and within broader society. Thus Bai Yiluo's *Recycling*, an installation featuring a tradesman's bike with an outsized, very realistic human heart in the baggage tray takes us into familiar territory – that of the anxious, perhaps cynical, artist pondering the reality of no-one really caring about the emotional investment involved in making art.

Into the 2000s, much contemporary Chinese art has resembled what Arthur Danto has described as "post-historical art". This means that over the past decade, artists have explored and copied styles associated with Western European art styles and philosophies from the later 19th century to the present day. In this

process, the central idea of the avant-garde or avant-gardism has been exposed as something too closely resembling the corporate world's obsession with "product differentiation".

Perhaps Chinese contemporary art is providing the "mirror of truth" for the Western European art community to gaze into and see things as they truly are. Something to think about when assailed in *White Rabbit* by the flashes of razzle-dazzle, technical gymnastics, mordant humour and moments of deep passion which hint at dark journeys of the soul and of a people relaxing a grip on the past and staring down an uncertain future.

– John Neylon

the melbourne girls

8 – 31 July 2011



Tarli Glover
Serenade, (detail)
acrylic & charcoal on canvas, 96cm x 137cm



Nevin Hirik
When I Met Rumi, (detail)
acrylic on linen, 112cm x 92cm



Sally Joubert
Fleurieu, (detail)
oil on canvas, 61cm x 72cm



Jill Noble
The Farm, (detail)
acrylic on linen, 138cm x 199cm



Rosetta Santucci
I Turn My Back And The Day Is Gone, (detail)
acrylic on canvas, 87cm x 137cm

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