

Behind the red curtain

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'Serve the people' was the theme of a speech given by Mao Zedong in September 1944, while the Red Army was still engaged in combat with the Japanese. One year later the invader was defeated and the Communist forces were renamed "the People's Liberation Army". In the years that followed, the PLA would battle the Kuomintang for control of China, emerging victorious in 1949.

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By the late 1960s "Serve the people!" - now always translated with an exclamation mark - became a popular slogan during the Cultural Revolution. This nationwide campaign, launched by Mao as a way of reasserting his supreme power within the party, would plunge China into chaos, as gangs of youthful Red Guards engaged in brutality and vandalism on a scale which can scarcely be imagined today.

The Cultural Revolution lasted from 1966 until Mao's death in 1976, although the worst of it was over by 1971.

It is ironic that when Edmund Capon was invited to make a personal selection from the White Rabbit collection of contemporary Chinese art, he should title the show *Serve the People* (without exclamation mark). Having completed a record 32 years as director of the Art Gallery of NSW, Capon could claim an impressive record of public service.

Yet like so many of Mao's catchphrases, one can hardly read this sentence without wanting to reverse it and find the truth.

The Great Leap Forward, for instance, sent the Chinese economy hurtling backwards. Likewise, "Serve the people" could just as easily be interpreted as "Exploit the people". Even the art of the latter part of the Cultural Revolution was a study in organised hypocrisy, with its cast of smiling peasants, heroic workers and soldiers, all looking like they had been slipping steroids into their rice bowls.

This was the time the party peddled stories of the dead soldier Lei Feng, a Communist saint whose life was one long tale of self-sacrifice on behalf of his comrades and fellow citizens.

I wouldn't dream of comparing Capon to Lei Feng, although three decades at the AGNSW counts as a substantial commitment. If there is a double edge to his exhibition title it may be a way of admitting that a gallery director does not so much "serve the people", but guides and directs public taste. When it comes to art most people don't even know what they like until it's put it front of their eyes.

Now, having the leisure to work on other projects, Capon has obviously enjoyed his stint as a guest curator. He has structured this show around three themes - fear, anarchy and hope - which roughly correspond to the stages of Chinese history from the Cultural Revolution to the present.

Fear was ever-present during the Red Guard rampages. Anarchy loomed during Deng Xiaoping's era of reforms, although some might have seen it as a burgeoning spirit of democracy. Hope is the engine that drives China's progress

today, as poor people dream of the "glorious" state of being rich.

The only problem with this schema is that there has probably never been a time when all three states did not co-exist. The anarchistic tendencies of the mid-1980s were snuffed out by the Tiananmen Square incidents of June 1989. Even today, those who criticise the government are putting their lives and livelihoods at risk. Yet China continues to flourish, both economically and culturally.

There is an indomitable spirit in the Chinese that has sustained them through a thousand years of ordeals and privations. It's hardly surprising that when new opportunities arise they are quick to cash in.

Many of the works in *Serve the People* have been shown on previous occasions at White Rabbit but this shouldn't discourage viewers. The "fear" component on the third floor features a reprise of Sun Furong's *Nibbling Up - Tomb Figures* (2008).

A hundred drab, empty Mao suits in blue, green or grey stand like a group of prisoners in a courtyard. The suits have been snipped and punctured until they are a ragged mess, as if the occupants had been sprayed with bullets. This eerie work acts as a metaphor for the hollow, threadbare nature of the ideology forced on people by the state, but it has a poignancy that transcends any message.

Elsewhere in this room we find Shen Shaomin's *Laboratory - Three-Headed, Six-Armed Superman* (2005) - an imposing title for a tiny, monstrous skeleton preserved in a specimen jar. This time it is the dreams of science that are being satirised, along with the politics that call for ordinary citizens to act like supermen.

A new addition to the collection is *America Likes Me* (2012), by the versatile Zhou Xiaohu, who is one of the rising stars of the contemporary Chinese art scene. It's a wry homage to a famous performance by Joseph Beuys, in which the artist wrapped himself in a blanket and shared a cage with a confused coyote. Given the farcical American debt crisis it may be time to seek a solution in shamanism.

On the next floor down, there is another chance to experience the installation, *Calm* (2009), by MadeIn Company. At first glance, all one sees is a square of rubble, resembling the ruins of a house. Watch closely and you will notice the surface rising and falling in a slow, deliberate respiration.

This simple gesture is tremendously effective, implying that life continues beneath the carnage. It conjures up thoughts of the last earthquake in Sichuan, but like so many Chinese works has oblique, metaphorical implications for society at large.

There is a more overt irony in another new acquisition, Jin Feng's *A History of China's Modernisation Volumes 1 and 2* (2011). This installation includes 7000 rice paper slips bearing characters that refer to different moments in modern Chinese history. The chops used to stamp the characters were carved from a marble statue of Chairman Mao and the rubber wheel covers of a T-34 tank. The elaborate, labour-intensive nature of the work echoes the monumental nature of the subject, every image marked with the domineering personality of the Great Helmsman and the implicit threat of violence.

Chen Shaoxiong's gripping video, *Ink History*, replays the entire history of modern China in three minutes, in a series of fluent images made in the traditional medium of brush and ink.

Ya Peng is no less effective with a set of facsimile Chinese postage stamps showing highly unlikely scenes such as a jaded, decrepit Mao or Communist leaders Leonid Brezhnev and Erich Honecker locked in a passionate embrace. Each image balances precariously on the brink of plausibility.

As usual with White Rabbit there is too much in this show to discuss in depth, so any review can only be a taster. Nothing is quite what it seems at first, as Chinese artists have become adept at presenting the most ferocious satire behind a deadpan facade or finding a pathos in trivial things.

Here one might cite Jin Shi's *Small Business - Karaoke* (2009) - a gaudy, shabby tricycle decked up as a mobile karaoke device. This fleeting dream of excitement seems both exaggerated and painfully modest.

Perhaps the most bleakly amusing works in a show steeped in black humour are Zhang Peili's videos *Last Words* (2003) and *Happiness* (2006). By editing extracts from old Chinese revolutionary films, Zhang has created a hilarious montage of "last words", as heroes and heroines expire while mouthing noble sentiments. In *Happiness*, all a figure has to do is say something banal for a crowd to burst into hysterical applause. With repetition it keeps getting funnier, as the same audiences keep reappearing, with no let up in their enthusiasm. It might be Capon's unrealised fantasy as a gallery director.

For another take on contemporary Chinese art one should go see the recent works of Li Jin at the Hughes Gallery. These brush-and-ink pictures are traditional in the artist's choice of medium but contemporary and idiosyncratic in subject matter.

Unlike so many of his peers, Li Jin doesn't try to make grand statements about Chinese society. His pictures are broadly auto-biographical, presented in a spirit of humorous self-deprecation.

We see the artist dressed in an absurd red jumpsuit celebrating St Patrick's Day in a picture called *We Are Brothers*. Two black women on either side are in green but look just as incongruous. The red is a cliché for all things Chinese in the same way that green is the signature of Ireland.

In *Duties*, Li Jin portrays himself dressed in a blue outfit with mouse ears and riding a horse with a naked woman clinging on behind. Don't ask me to explain. In other pictures he plays the Chinese scholar in a sober grey jacket. No matter what the role, food and sex are his abiding preoccupations.

Contemporary art is prone to moralising but Li Jin's work is a hymn to sensual pleasure and an epic comedy of human susceptibilities. These scenes are beautifully painted and tremendous fun, and that's a rare combination in any part of the world.

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SERVE THE PEOPLE

White Rabbit Gallery, until February 2

LI JIN - RECENT WORKS

The Hughes Gallery, until October 30

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/behind-the-red-curtain-20131017-2vnfi.html>