

Macquarie University Art Collection

50 HIGHLIGHTS



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Fan Dongwang (b.1958)

DRAGON, 2005

We are left in no doubt about Fan Dongwang's heritage or his unerring attachment to the profound traditions of his motherland. The image and the medium of his art are electric, contemporary and urbane, reflecting in many ways the very pulse of the city of his birth, Shanghai. And yet in content his art and especially his most effective and emphatic subject, the fearsome and flamboyant dragon, is powerfully indebted to deeply inscribed and definitive Chinese history and culture.

There is no more ubiquitous and potent symbol of ancient China than the dragon — the emblem of imperial authority, paternalistic and all powerful. In the Western tradition this mythological scaly reptile of a beast is recognised as a harbinger of evil, a notion fully in keeping with its grotesque and medieval appearance; whereas in the Chinese tradition the dragon is a benevolent rain-bearing beast, a genius of strength and goodness, the spirit of change and thus of life itself. From the time of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) the dragon in China has been the ultimate symbol of imperial power and authority; the emperor's robes, thrones, and ritual, ceremonial and household paraphernalia were henceforth adorned with the omnipresent five-clawed dragon.

Fan transforms that ancient and elemental image into one of twenty-first century colour and flourish with all the panache of the contemporary and the vernacular of technology. He is confronting the diverse sensibilities of his own experience, a life that has brought him from China to Australia, in his art which is the meeting of east and west, of ancient and modern and achieving it all in the most engaging and contemporary visual language, a billboard style with a hint of humour.

Fan has another fascination that alludes to his continuing intrigue with differing cultural sensibilities between Chinese and Western traditions. In the Western pursuit of realism, the representation of mass and volume in figurative painting achieved through the manipulation of paint to modulate texture and shadow is a prime requisite; a contrast to the essentially linear and calligraphic character of Chinese painting. His paintings at first glance have a three-dimensional impression as though carved — a reference to his own studies and experiences as a student learning the long-established stone and ivory carving techniques. He has evolved a unique style of "sculptural painting" which echoes in both content and form his inherent historical and artistic instincts and values, and the opportunities and sheer excitement of the new world of twenty-first century universality and technology; a world full of contradictions and challenges which Fan thoughtfully, almost gently, confronts and distils into these images of contemporary flavour and humour.

EDMUND CAPON

