

## Bright relief achieved in Dongwang Fan's sculptural paintings

BRONWYN WATSON THE AUSTRALIAN AUGUST 04, 2012 12:00AM



Dongwang Fan's Descendants #1 - Red Environment. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 118cm x 173cm Source: Supplied

### PUBLIC WORKS

**IN 1990 Shanghai-born Dongwang Fan migrated to Australia under the "distinguished talent" visa scheme that recognises international artists with exceptional achievements.**

Born in 1958, Fan had studied traditional Chinese art in Shanghai and worked as a sculptor specialising in intricate low-relief carving in ivory and jade. As an established artist, he had exhibited widely throughout China.

After his arrival in Sydney, he was eager to enrol at art college but he said his language skills were so poor he mistakenly ended up in a painting course, rather than sculpture, and so he started to paint.

This initial glitch, however, proved no impediment to his career. He completed a masters of art at the University of NSW in 1995 and was awarded a doctorate of creative arts at Wollongong University four years later. He is among a group of Chinese artists lauded by the West since the 1990s and many of his works are held in public collections in China and Australia.

One of his paintings in NSW's Wollongong City Gallery is Descendants No 1 - Red Environment, where Fan has fused symbols of Eastern and Western culture by placing robotic, machine-like characters on a richly patterned Chinese background. His training as a sculptor is evident as the painting has a dynamic three-dimensional quality, inspired by his experience as a carver and his interest in traditional Chinese brocade.

"The background represents Chinese culture and the three-dimensional pieces represent contemporary culture," says Wollongong gallery's program director John Monteleone, as we examine the painting. "Sometimes there is a cultural clash where the 3-D pieces don't quite fit together and sometimes the forms are assimilated into the background so there is a melding of cultures.

"In some ways it symbolises the artist's own life of having to go from a culture which is Chinese and very traditional, and then coming here to Australia and this being the other layer of culture. It tells a story of his personal sense of identity at that time. It is certainly a terrific work for our collection. It tempts you in. If you see it across the room you want to come and have a look at it because it gets you thinking and questioning."

Fan has said he uses a method of painting which he describes as "painting as relief sculpture". He paints in a similar way to traditional ivory carving - that is, he uses the paint brush to "carve out" the painting surface, as if carving an ivory relief or low-relief sculpture. This brings a sense of volume to the two-dimensional surface, a visual illusionism expressed in traditional Chinese painting.

Gallery director Janet Clayton, who has represented Fan for nearly five years, says she did not know his work when he first walked into her Sydney gallery. But, she says, there was an instant appeal because of the distilled clarity of his drawings and paintings.

"You can grasp meaning viscerally, in an instant," Clayton says. "Not because the image is lifelike but because he uses symbols of universal significance - the disembodied limb, the dragon, the manufactured part. And he places these within a rich palette of colour and pattern which speaks lyrically of his Chinese heritage. I am fascinated by the fact that he trained as a jade carver. So many of his works feel as if they have been wrought from stone - the edges smooth, the surfaces almost appear raised.

"Fan is a proud, dignified man. While his early work in Australia was influenced by the painful transition of China from a centralised to a market economy, there is a proud respect even in his toughest work, a respect born of loyalty to his heritage, his family and the achievements of his country."

Dongwang Fan, Descendants #1 - Red Environment, 1995. Collection Wollongong City Gallery. Gift of the Friends of Wollongong City Gallery, 2000. On display Wollongong City Gallery, NSW.

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