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New work by  
**Dong Wang Fan - Li Shan - Yu Youhan**

Residency at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre 27 August - 29 September

Masterclass 15 & 16 September

Exhibition 29 September - 4 November 2001

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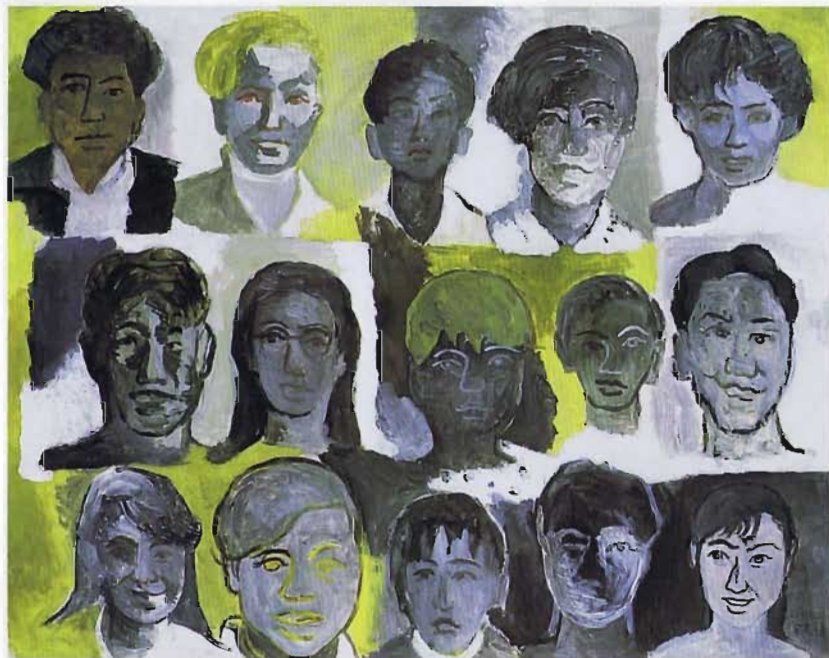
Image detail: Li Shan, *Rouge: Young Mao with Lotus*, oil on canvas, 1993.

# Shanghai star

## Li Shan, Yu Youhan and Fan Dongwang

The mega-city of Shanghai – that brash and cosmopolitan engine driving the new China – was not the focus of ‘Shanghai Star’, as might at first be suggested by the exhibition’s title. Nor did one find, on entering the cavernous and imposing space of the Casula Powerhouse, the lurid and acerbic canvases that might have been expected from the three artists involved in the exhibition. Li Shan and Yu Youhan, renowned for their involvement in the political pop movement and for their ‘gaudy’ paintings, and Fan Dongwang, whose high-relief montages of eastern and western icons have earned him quite a following in Australia, had a few surprises in store. Despite the use of Li Shan’s painting of a louche, lotus-eating Mao as the promotional image for the exhibition, Mao was nowhere to be found among the works in the show. In his place was a more introspective and oblique use of imagery, turning away from the overt political symbolism of the past. Each artist demonstrated an understated, searching quality, indicating a new mood of

YU YOUHAN,  
*Classmates*, 2001, acrylic  
on linen, 183 x 227.5 cm.  
Photograph Ian Hobbs.



uncertainty that differs markedly from that triggered by the cataclysmic events of 1989.

This intimacy was heightened by the exhibition’s focus on just three artists who have shared histories in Shanghai. ‘Shanghai Star’ offered an opportunity for audiences to engage in some depth with the concerns of and relationships between individuals, rather than experiencing the works as part of a larger exhibition based around regional or national identity. There have of course been numerous major survey shows of contemporary Chinese art in the last ten years, and two seen in Australia: ‘Mao Goes Pop: China Post 1989’ at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in 1993, and ‘Inside Out: New Chinese Art’ at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra in 2000 (not to mention the appearance of Chinese art in other large exhibitions in Australia, such as the Asia-Pacific Triennial). ‘Mao Goes Pop’ in particular – which included both Yu Youhan and Li Shan – was seminal, providing for the first time in Australia an extensive showing of Chinese avant-garde art. By inviting Bernice Murphy – the assistant director and chief curator of the MCA at the time of ‘Mao Goes Pop’ – to write the catalogue essay for ‘Shanghai Star’, Casula Powerhouse has enabled a strong link to be made to that exhibition, as well as tracking the subsequent changes in the practices of these artists.

This extended dialogue was given further layers by the conception of ‘Shanghai Star’ as a studio residency as well as an exhibition, bringing the China-based artists Li Shan and Yu Youhan to Australia to work alongside Sydney-based Fan Dongwang at the Powerhouse studios for six weeks. Fan Dongwang, who has been living in Australia since 1990, was instrumental in the project’s organisation, having studied with Yu Youhan in the 1980s and been a long-time admirer of Li Shan. The residency had an open-door policy, enabling students to meet the artists, who also conducted a series of workshops, masterclasses and talks. In addition, a day was organised for the local Chinese community (the bulk of whom are Shanghaiese) to meet the artists and view the work in progress. Casula Powerhouse, as one of the few contemporary art institutions based in Sydney’s outer western

suburbs, services a large and culturally diverse populace. It has for several years developed exhibitions and residencies that bring artists from a range of communities to work with locals. In 1999 '9 Lives' brought together three North Vietnamese and six Australian artists, while for 'Ngayulu-latju Palyantja' (We Made These Things) in 1999, seventeen Ngaanyatjarra artists travelled from Warburton in Western Australia to undertake workshops in Sydney.

While Yu Youhan and Li Shan brought paintings with them from China, the bulk of the work in 'Shanghai Star' was produced during the residency in Sydney, with the three artists sharing a large studio. This working process had the most marked effect on Fan Dongwang's work. Fan, the youngest artist of the three, who has not shown widely outside Australia and only resumed travelling and exhibiting in China in 1998, has spoken of his movement between cultures as an 'ambivalence'. His recent re-engagement with the Shanghai of his youth, and with his mentors, has shifted the emphasis in his new work from a complex bicultural collision to simpler, bolder statements. While his previous paintings contained an array of figures from western art history (Botticelli, Bronzino, Michelangelo) and popular culture (particularly sport) enmeshed with Chinese imagery, decoration and ivory and jade carving, Fan's current work is pared back, almost meditative. Still using bright colours and high-contrast relief, Fan has zoomed in on details of traditional Chinese carvings of dragons and tigers, setting them against his signature background of painted floral fabric designs. Elegant and powerful, these paintings utilise the boldness of post-pop and the slickness of commercial illustration to somehow produce a sense of contemplation. They look back to a traditional past, with its iconography providing a sense of identity and cultural cohesion that, for an artist living in Australia at least, can be transformed into powerful hybrid symbols for the present and the future.

Yu Youhan also collapses history in his paintings. First known for his stark minimalist paintings, Yu Youhan subsequently became involved in the political pop movement, painting tableaux of Mao and Deng Xiaoping in various scenarios. One of the artist's trademarks is a strong use of patterning; in his earlier works he used simple marks such as dots and dashes to fill areas, while in his pop works he uses the bright floral motifs of folk art to bring a populist, consumer-culture slant to his appropriated realist imagery. In the artist's new works the flattened surface and use of repetition has been retained but is now looser, with a return to the muted colours of his early abstracts. Greys, blacks and muddy greens, with rougher brushwork and often undefined or half-finished figures, give these paintings a ghostly, elegiac air.

Using figures and faces from magazines, photographs of friends, even school albums (one painting, consisting of rows of portrait heads, is titled *Classmates*, 2001), Yu Youhan attempts to create an image of contemporary China free of the airbrushed perfection of socialist realism and its Han-heavy representation of its people. Instead, he paints people of a range of ages, classes and ethnic minorities, floating in and out of a gloomy ground. These people are heroic in their ordinariness, their place in the economic



powerhouse of the new, globalising China still indeterminate and in constant flux. Symbols of the past, such as terracotta warriors or imperial buildings, appear amid the mix, but seem disengaged; the focus is on the people, bringing to mind essayist Simon Leys's hypothesis that 'the past which continues to animate Chinese life ... seems to inhabit the people rather than the bricks and stones'.<sup>1</sup>

Li Shan's series of large paintings, titled 'Reading', lined one wall of the upstairs gallery at Casula Powerhouse. In these works, an odd menagerie of hybrid creatures march

FAN DONGWANG,  
*Dragon Head #3*, 2001.  
acrylic on canvas, 180 x  
180 cm. Photograph  
Ian Hobbs.



LI SHAN, *Reading #01* –  
11 Sep 2001, 2001, oil on  
canvas, 143 x 215 cm.  
Photograph Ian Hobbs.

against a pale blue sky: a double-ended pig, human and horse heads with butterfly ears, a horse covered with a shoal of fish. Li Shan is an artist concerned with surfaces. The appearance of things, and how these can be masked by make-up, clothing or personae, was explored in his earlier paintings, such as the 'Rouge' images featuring Mao, and the 'Mona Lisa' series which used popular iconography with folk symbols and slick technique. While still brightly coloured, Li Shan's new work is muddier and more gestural, his subjects stranger and more opaque. Announcing his disgust for humankind, Li Shan presents horror-comic collisions of species, suggesting how aspects of one might impact

on another, reaching an apotheosis with the final image in the series, a representation of the terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. Here a giant fish, its looming presence suggesting the ability of seemingly innocuous or powerless objects or animals to create the greatest damage, dwarfs the smoking towers. Humankind, as fallible and vulnerable as it is, is for Li Shan capable of the greatest destruction and needs to be re-invented.

Despite their lack of obvious politics, these new works by two of China's most renowned dissident artists and one of Australia's more interesting painters still sting. The West's experience of contemporary Chinese art is often either as shiny, easily digestible critique or as heroic installations, filling huge halls at biennales or in large theme exhibitions, where individual voices tend to be lost. 'Shanghai Star' is more about humble connections – between artist and artist, artist and community – and with that a greater sense of engagement is enabled, from which other understandings and relationships may flow.

<sup>1</sup> Simon Leys, 'The Chinese attitude toward the past', in *The Angel and the Octopus: Collected Essays 1983–1998*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney, 1999, p. 6.

Shanghai Star, Casula Powerhouse, Sydney, 29 September – 4 November 2001.

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#### Russell Storer

Russell Storer is a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

#### COMMENTARY UNITED KINGDOM

# Facts of life

## Contemporary Japanese art

What image do you have of contemporary Japan? If it still conjures up *manga* (comics) and hi-tech gadgets, the exhibition 'Facts of Life: Contemporary Japanese Art' at London's Hayward Gallery in 2001 may provide some refreshing perspectives. The show was the largest ever exposure of contemporary Japanese art in Britain, featuring twenty-six artists from different generations working in a variety of media. Curated by Jonathan Watkins, artistic director of the 11th Biennale of Sydney in 1998 and currently

director of Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, the show was co-organised by the Japan Foundation as part of 'Japan 2001', a nationwide celebration of Japanese culture with some 2000 programs held across Britain throughout 2001.

Watkins was keen to continue working with the context he created for the Biennale of Sydney where he presented current artistic trends in 'unforced artistic gestures' under the curatorial theme of the 'everyday'. That experience formed the basis for the investigation behind 'Facts of Life'.

SHANGHAI STAR - National Touring Program 2002 - 2004. Developed by Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre. New work by YU Youhan, LI Shan and FAN Dongwang Produced during the Shanghai residency at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, 2001. Touring to Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts WA, Tuggeranong Community Arts Centre ACT, Broken Hill City Art Gallery NSW, Wollongong City Gallery NSW, Brisbane Powerhouse QLD, Salamanca Arts Centre TAS, Manning Regional Art Gallery NSW, Shepparton Art Gallery VIC, Bundaberg Arts Centre QLD [www.casulapowerhouse.com/shanghaistar](http://www.casulapowerhouse.com/shanghaistar) Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre 1 Casula Rd Casula NSW 2170 Ph +612 9824 1121 Image detail: Li Shan, Reading No 01, Recognising, Sydney 2001

