

breakout

chinese art outside china

Melissa Chiu



CHARTA

The first book to focus on China's artistic diaspora—and to differentiate it from the artistic community inside China—*Breakout* assembles the work of 14 artists who left China around the time of the 1989 June Fourth Movement at Tiananmen Square. Now settled in New York, Paris and Sydney, over the past decade these artists—including Cai Guo-Qiang, Xu Bing, Wenda Gu, Zhang Huan, Huang Yong Ping and Chen Zhen—have become leading international figures, showing at major museums such as Tate Modern in London and The Museum of Modern Art in New York. *Breakout* features in-depth analyses of exhibitions and artwork, along with detailed biographical studies based on extensive interviews with the artists. The book's author, Melissa Chiu, is a leading authority on Asian art.

244 pages • 174 illustrations including 166 in color

ISBN 8881586398



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Printed in Italy - 37,00 € 45.00 \$



ip. 197) Fan Dong Wang, *Descendant Bodies #1 (Blue)* (1996), Acrylic on canvas, 178 x 254 cm, Courtesy the artist, Photo: Fan Dong Wang



with its elements of garish sexuality and gross comedy, has stimulated him to a degree of release that would have been impossible in China" (2000b, p. 6).

Chinese Relief: Fan Dong Wang

Over the past decade, Fan Dong Wang's work has focused on the differences between the representation of spatial depth in Chinese and European paintings. Fan considers perspective the major difference between Chinese and European painting: in particular, the shallow and compartmentalized spaces of Chinese paintings as opposed to the linear, deep perspective found in European paintings. This interest has become apparent in his work only since his migration to Sydney from Shanghai in 1990. Although Fan's initial rea-

son for wanting to migrate was to study English, June Fourth changed that: he left, in the end, for political reasons:

It was about freedom of speech. Because of the Tiananmen movement, lots of people were open to Western ideas and wanted a contemporary society. Encouraging things were happening at that time: people had been radical already in other countries and we were looking for ways to be radical too, to work with Western ideas to achieve our goal. Strangely, everything Western was considered good. (Fan, 2001)

Fan did study English after migrating to Australia and completed two postgraduate

Fan Dong Wang, *Descendant Bodies #2 (Green)* (1996), Acrylic on canvas, 170 x 280 cm, Courtesy the artist, Photo: Fan Dong Wang

degrees at the University of Wollongong and the University of New South Wales. This university study gave him a more theoretical approach to his art work and to thinking about the differences between Chinese and Australian culture.

Fan developed a theoretical model for comparing the differences between Chinese and European art. His theory of "shifting perspective," elaborated in his Ph.D. thesis for the University of Wollongong, crystallizes these ideas. But before discussing Fan's theories, it is useful to consider his perception of the cultural differences between Australia and China. In China, he remembers:

[Chen Zhen, my teacher] taught us drawing, we called it "academic drawing," and Yu Youhan taught us about color. This was normal because we were learning traditional Chinese-style artwork. But we were conflicted between the Chinese traditions that the school wanted us to adopt and Western techniques and styles that interested us.

And in Australia:

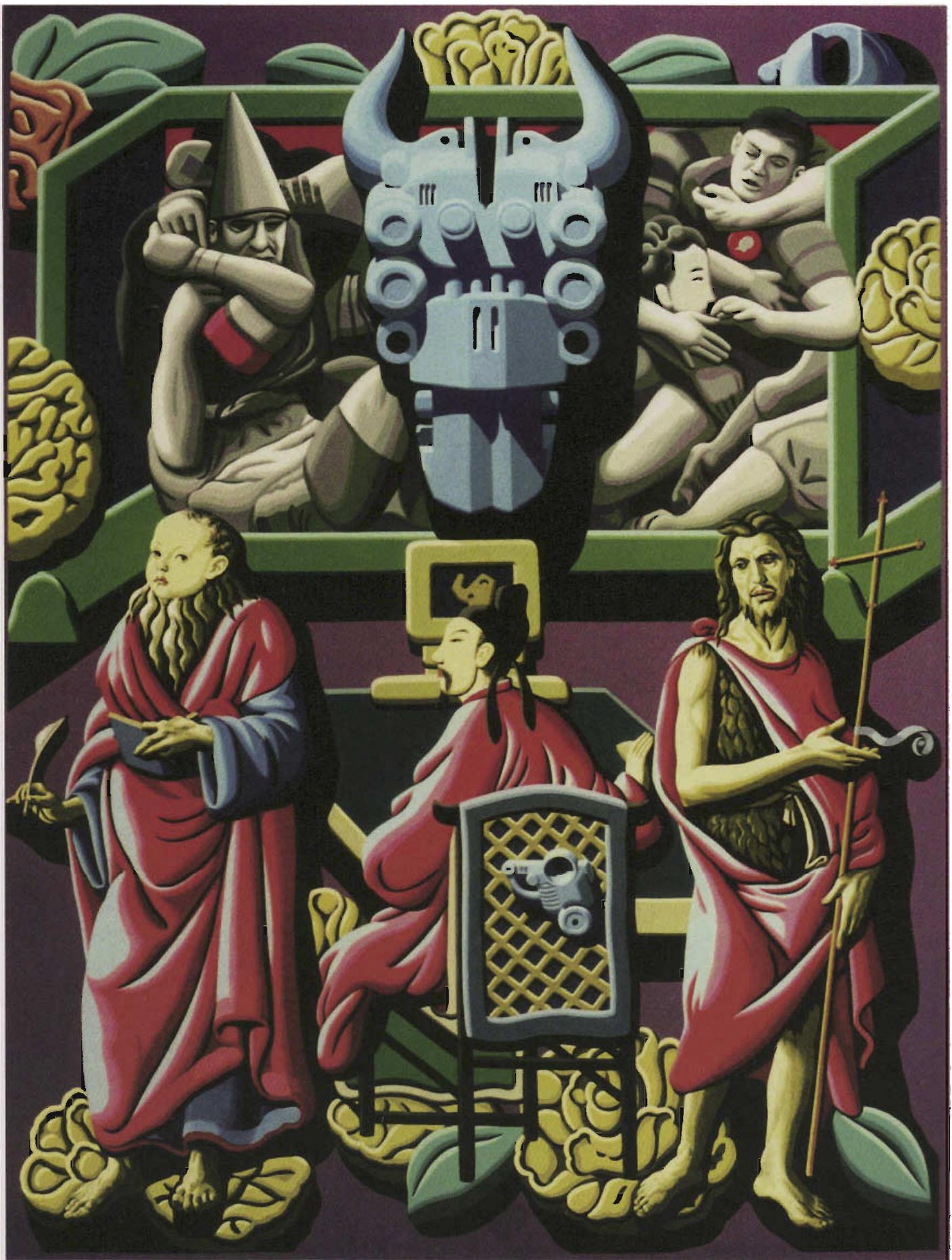
When I came here... I went to the University of New South Wales and was told that I should look into my own background as a source for my art work. But I thought, why should I? I came here for Western ideas; that is why I'm painting and I came to the University here. When I went to

Wollongong University, I was also shocked that people also thought I should do Asian Art.... I had already been dealing with Chinese art for so many years. But later, I understood that approach. It is a kind of a post-modernism; when you look into your own mind you are able to connect with other identities. So, this is new and exciting. It's a Western way of thinking. On the surface it looks like traditional Chinese art, but it is sort of exciting for Western audiences because it is not. (Fan, 2001)

Fan's experience of art schools in China and Australia reveals the different expectations of artistic training in these respective countries. But it also crystallizes, for him, the process of transexperience. In particular, the notion of "shifting perspective" that he developed (to describe his new Australian work) through experimentation with Western artistic conventions (along with his ability to adjust his work to a new context) provides a perfect metaphor for his sense of transexperience.

In spite of the inclusion of European and, later, Australian references in his work, Fan's paintings continue to show China as a primary influence. This is clearly apparent in his choice of imagery and is further clarified in a recent comment on the differences between his own work now and that of mainland artists:

Chinese artists in China are aiming at the Western market, so whatever you ask of



Fan Dong Wang, *Shifting Perspectives and the Body #1 Double Screens* (1999), Acrylic on canvas, 244 x 180 cm, Courtesy the artist, Photo: Fan Dong Wang

them, they will make it; traditional, political, or whatever. But Chinese artists here in Australia belong to two different categories; one group is trying to do mainstream artwork with portraits and work like that; and the second group, which I am in, is trying to find themselves in Chinese art, using Chinese imagery. (Fan, 2001)

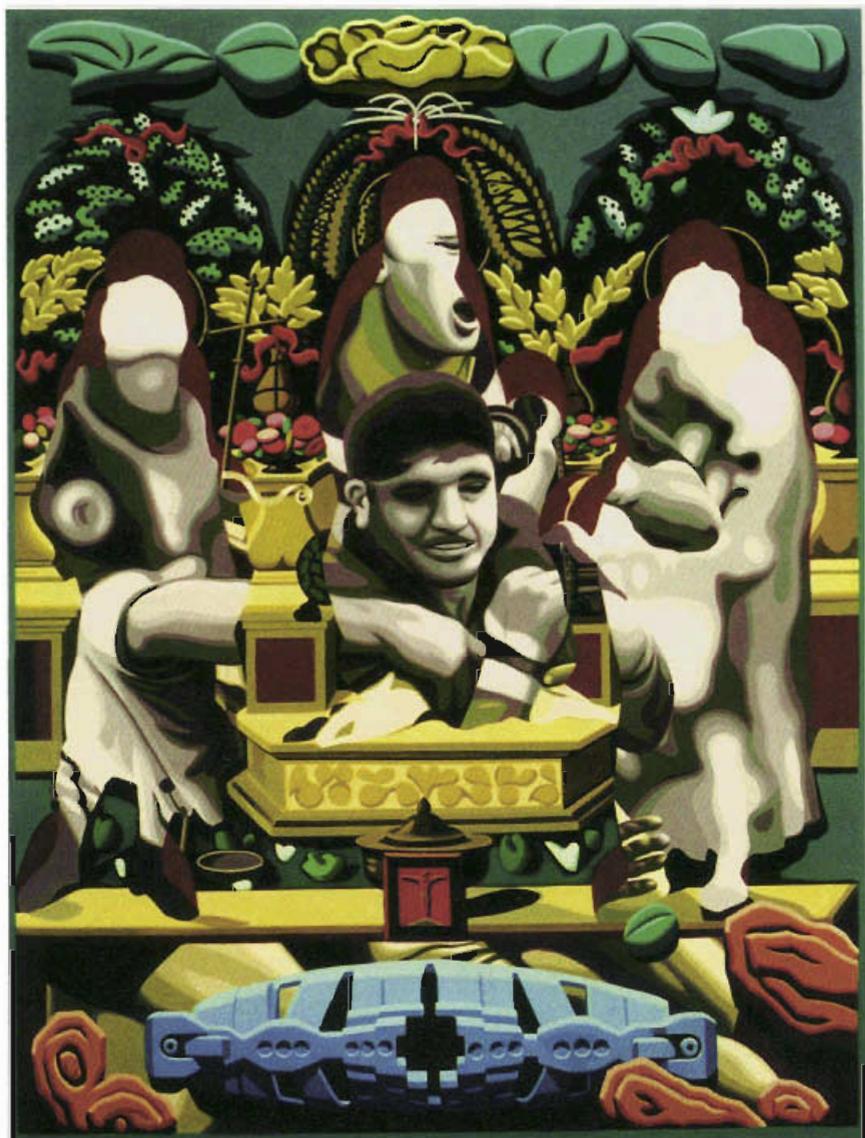
In all of Fan's paintings during the nineties, Chinese and European references reside within the same picture plane. Fan employs different artistic techniques from different cultures to convey depth. One of his first experiments in this area, the "Descendant Bodies" series (1996–1998), used shadow perspective. *Descendant Bodies #1 (Blue)* (1996), for instance, comprises three sets of imagery rendered in different techniques. The first set of imagery includes truncated and headless bodies (resembling ancient Greco-Roman statues) painted in black and white using chiaroscuro to define their musculature; in the second set of imagery, strange floating green machines are rendered in shallow relief with some black shadows beneath them; and in the third set of imagery, flowers and leaves, painted in dots and lines to resemble the stitches of delicate Chinese embroidery, form the relatively flat background. Although the different techniques used to portray the three sets of imagery reflect different approaches to the idea of pictorial depth, Fan complicated the work further by blurring their application in areas: the shadows from the figures are neither consistent in color nor shape.

A deliberate confusion of techniques and imagery is continued in the second work in the series, *Descendant Bodies #2 (Green)* (1996). In the previous painting, the figures and machines were treated as separate, discrete units, yet in this work they are fused together to form hybrid bodies. The pink male figure at the center, for example, has a muscular body with a machine for a head. He kneels on one leg with the other outstretched, casting a black shadow. Other figures in the composition have mechanical heads and, in some cases, Fan has merged male and female bodies as well. The latter is evident in the gray figure to the left, which has a male torso with a female lower body. These composite mechanical/human figures are placed against a background pattern of leaves and flowers. The figure/ground relationship between the bodies and the background is also unusual and fluid. The background sometimes recedes and, at other times, meshes with the figures. By contrasting these techniques, Fan creates a provocative sense of visual instability that serves as a useful metaphor for his process of transexperience. The constantly shifting perspective in this series of paintings can be understood as a symbol of the uneven and at times unsettling nature of Fan's synthesis of different cultural influences—the push-and-pull tension between a self-conscious retention of Chineseness and a desire to identify with Australia.

Fan is also interested in the body as a site of exchange and dialogue between cultures. *Shifting Perspectives and the Body #1*

Double Screens (1999), the first work in the series, is based on Alessandro Botticelli's *Madonna Enthroned with St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist (Bardi Madonna)* (1484). The painting shows the Madonna and Child flanked by the two saints, St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. Fan's painting disrupts the symmetry of Botticelli's triangular composition in a number of ways: the figure of the Madonna, most notably, is completely absent and replaced by a Chinese mandarin or public

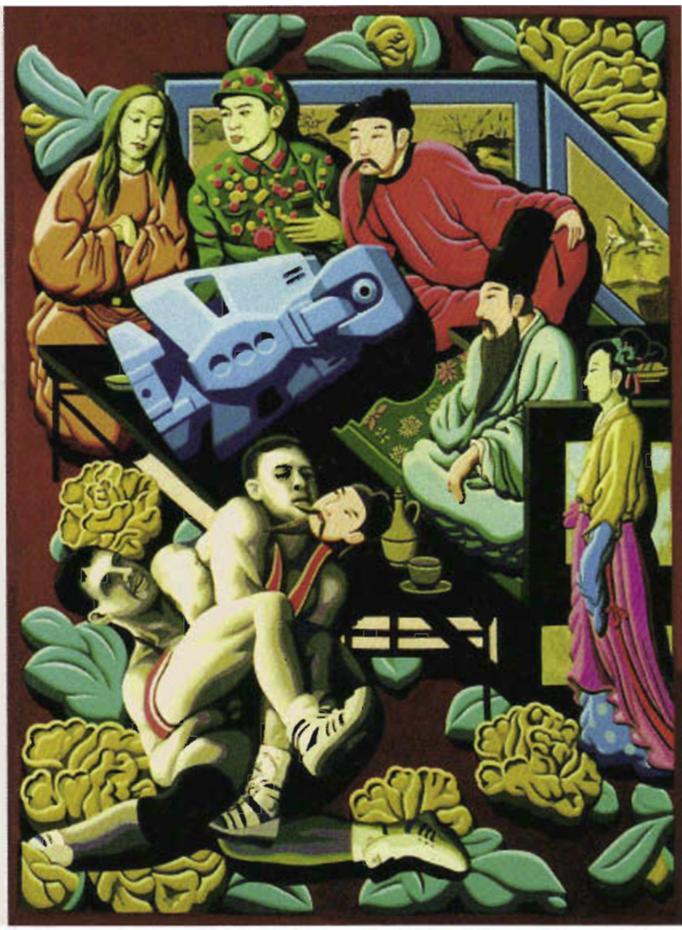
official seated at a table with a computer. In front of the mandarin is a large, mysterious, floating machine, while the background is filled with a screen—a visual device commonly used by Chinese painters to suggest depth within the picture plane as well as a division in domestic environments. In Fan's painting, however, the screen serves another purpose. The image on the screen is of a local rugby league football scrum painted in black and white. The players are a tangle of arms and legs protruding in all directions and sometimes beyond the screen itself. Although, at first appearance, the juxtaposition between the references to Botticelli and football seem unrelated, in the context of Fan's migration to Australia, we see here for the first time the artist contrasting European and Australian references. In particular, he is recognizing the importance of sport in Australian life.



Fan's combination of Chinese and Australian imagery is continued in *Shifting Perspectives and the Body #2 Bardi Madonna* (1999). For this work, he took the same Botticelli painting as a starting point, although this time the figures are represented only by their silhouettes. In addition, the work includes, within the outline of the main figures, a large black-and-white image of a footballer being

Fan Dong Wang, *Shifting Perspectives and the Body #2 Bardi Madonna* (1999), Acrylic on canvas, 244 x 180 cm, Courtesy the artist, Photo: Fan Dong Wang

© 2013 Fan Dong Wang, *Shifting Perspectives and the Body #5 Discourse* (1999), Acrylic on canvas, 244 x 180 cm, Courtesy the artist, Photo: Fan Dong Wang



tiatives (such as residencies in Asia) and exhibitions devised to foster engagement at all levels between galleries, museums, artists and curators in the region. These activities did not include overseas Chinese artists until the mid-nineties, but they perhaps indirectly created a climate that was conducive to the reception of Chinese artists, and in this way encouraged the retention of Chinese imagery in their art work. How that imagery was received in this new context, for a new audience, reflects the process of transexperience: Guan's paintings using Chinese and Australian flora and fauna, Guo's representations of P.L.A. soldiers, Ah Xian's porcelain busts produced in Jingdezhen, and Fan's exploration of pictorial depth.

tackled by another player. By creating this picture within a picture, Fan hints at the way that European art forms the basis of Australian culture and society, while also speculating on the emergence of a different, independent idea of Australian culture—albeit one based on sport. Having represented sport in many other works, it is an idea with which he increasingly seems to identify.

The migration of mainland Chinese artists to Australia in the late eighties and early nineties coincided with national debates about Australia's economic and cultural relations with the Asia-Pacific region. One result of this debate was the establishment of a broad range of organizations (such as Asialink), ini-

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Melissa Chiu is Director of the Asia Society Museum in New York. Before this she was the Museum's Curator of Contemporary Asian Art (2001–2004), the first person to hold such a position in an American art museum. She was Founding Director (1997–2001) of the Asia-Australia Arts Center in Sydney, Australia, the first non-profit, multi-disciplinary art center in that country to present an ongoing exhibition program of Asian contemporary art. In 2004 Chiu was a visiting professor at the Rhode Island School of Design and has lectured at numerous other American universities. She was a Getty Curatorial Research Fellow (2003–2004) and has been on grant committees for the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the Massachusetts Cultural Council. She currently sits on the Academic Advisory Board of the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong; the Advisory Board of *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*; and is a founding member of the Asian Contemporary Art Consortium in New York, a group specializing in the promotion of Asian contemporary art through annual events, publications and lectures. Chiu earned an M.A. in

Arts Administration (1994) and a Ph.D. (2005) in Art History, and has curated more than 40 exhibitions of international art. She is the author and editor of numerous books, artist monographs, articles and anthologies, and served as Editor for *The Grove Dictionary of Art* chapter on Asian contemporary art.