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Sinophilia: a gang of five

Profiles, galleries
and reviews

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Sinophíliá:

Since the Tiananmen Square uprising, Australia has become home to a diverse group of Chinese-born artists. Sinophilia, or the China art phenomenon, though diverse in content, method, motivation and conceptual constructs, is gaining momentum in the Australian art world. PRUE GIBSON reports.



The day you went away: the day before I went away, 2003, Guo Jian, oil on canvas, 152cm x 213cm. Courtesy the artist.

The Peking Treaty 1901, 2005, Shen Jiawei, oil on canvas, 183cm x 465cm. Courtesy the artist.



a gang of five



China, China-Bust 34,
1999, Ah Xian,
porcelain with over
glaze iron-red many
antique objects design,
42cm x 40cm x 22cm.
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the artist 2000.

Australian Galleries
15 Royston St
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15 November–
3 December 2005

AS CHINA'S DOOR OPENS, THE FINANCIAL, SOCIAL and political ramifications are felt around the world. Australia, the biggest western nation in the Asian region, is reaping the benefits of dealing with Chinese manufacturing corporations. However, seen through the eyes of our Chinese Australian artists, the story is not all about the joys of speedily accumulated wealth. Instead it is an artistic perspective that draws on vulgar commercial desire and the subsequent disintegration of local Chinese culture and social structures. And it is a vision which holds up a looking-glass to the social culture of Australia.

Five artists, who now call Australia home, have witnessed from a distance the changes in China over the last 15 years. As migrants who arrived in Australia after the Tiananmen Square uprising on 4 June, 1989 (aka '6.4'), their existence is one of cultural hybridity; a tug-of-war between the culture in which they grew up and the new country that has given them political and social freedom.

Guo Jian, Shen Jiawei, Fan Dong Wang, Ah Xian and Guan Wei migrated to Australia in the early 1990s to escape repression. On arrival, they experienced culture shock and economic hardship and their work could best be described as politically potent and socially conscious. They still painted with a Chinese audience in mind. However, over the years their collective intent has broadened and matured, perhaps because of the distance and space that living in Australia has allowed.

This group differs from the broad range of second and third-generation Australian artists of Chinese heritage. Respected artists such as Lindy Lee (who has recently made use of old family portraits in her work and who is a founding member of Gallery 4A of the Asia Australia Arts Centre) or John Young (whose monograph by Dr Carolyn Barnes was launched in November) are preoccupied with their Chinese heritage and dual identities, but their work is

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removed from the intense and raw pain which Guo Jian and his peers experienced and are able to convey.

The five artists lived through the Cultural Revolution and were made to work in isolated rural areas, factories or the army. They felt the sting of artistic and social regulations and the horror of '6.4'. To top it off, they have all endured the difficulties of migration and integration into a foreign, western society. All this has fed directly into their work but over time, things have changed.

Guo Jian, born in 1963 in Guizhou, is known for his satirical paintings such as leering soldiers holding a pig. The pig is a sardonic reminder of the lack of access to

Self Portrait: Suddenly back to 1900, 2000, Shen Jiawei, oil on canvas, 165cm x 122cm. Courtesy the artist.



The Third World, 2002, Shen Jiawei, oil on canvas, 259cm x 356cm. Courtesy the artist.

women for soldiers in the People's Liberation Army. He re-contextualises propagandist Mao-style images into subversive social commentaries. It is hard to believe that, at one time, he was one of Madame Mao's protégés before she lost favour. He graduated in traditional Chinese art and was involved in hunger strikes in 1989 before migrating here in 1992. Art dealer Michael Reid, who held a private exhibition of his work last year, says Guo's art comes across as "sexually explicit and politically charged to Australian audiences".

Binghui Huangfu, director of the Asia Australia Arts Centre, feels that Guo Jian has become "more mature in the way he is looking at issues now. His family background and serving in the army was a strong influence on his production. In the past he had a cynical attitude to the Chinese government but now his horizons seem wider".

Guo Jian has been happy with his move to Australia and says, "There is a saying that if you move a tree around, that tree will die. But if you move yourself around you will receive opportunities". His work has wide appeal here and the commissioning of huge banners by Ken West of the Big Day Out rock music event in 2000 was evidence of this. According to Leah Haynes of the S H Ervin Gallery, who formerly represented Guo Jian at the Ray Hughes Gallery, "the artist's ability to cross from art to popular culture reflects an ability to engage with a broad audience".

In fact, Guo Jian is working temporarily in China on three-dimensional ceramic and fibreglass works because it is more economically efficient to do so. Ah Xian also finds it more financially viable to produce work in China, although he calls Australia home. He says

spending some time in China "helps me avoid being drunk numb by the absolute free and open air, the bright and warm sunshine of Australia".

Some curators believe Ah Xian hasn't moved forward conceptually over the last 10 years because he is still producing his ceramic busts which are commercially successful around the world. But Ah Xian says, "In Chinese it is called "taking ten thousand changes by having no

Jade Dragon, 2003, Fan Dong Wang, acrylic on canvas, 90cm x 123cm. Courtesy Dubbo Regional Gallery.





Looking For Enemies No.1, 2004, Guan Wei, acrylic on canvas, diptych, 140cm x 126cm (140cm x 60cm each panel). Courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

change'. I've been working on new figure works in cinnabar lacquer, cloisonné and jade inlay."

Fan Dong Wang (2AR issue 08) is another artist who arrived post '6.4' and whose work has matured during his time in Australia. Fan studied traditional ivory carving and calligraphy techniques at Shanghai School of Art and Crafts before migrating in 1990. He completed further study at the College of Fine Arts (UNSW) and Wollongong University. He says he was shocked at university because of the "overwhelming number of female students and the out-in-the-open gay and lesbian lectures". This has slowly influenced his work; sexual ambiguity is now one of the themes of his paintings. He uses stylised dragon motifs, a powerful symbol of Chinese nationhood, but they are not overtly politicised.

Guan Wei, whose lyrical and whimsical humour has attracted audiences since his arrival in Australia in 1989,

has become more globally focused in recent years. His mural-like panelled paintings draw on world issues of war, displacement and cultural diaspora. His compositions remind us of the traditional perspectives of scroll landscape paintings. But like the others, there is a new-found subtlety to his work. There is also an overt Australian content: kangaroos, emus and Ned Kelly figures rage across his mapped terrains alongside battleships and silhouetted soldiers.

Guan Wei integrates Australian culture into his aesthetic with ironic humour. Sherman Galleries curator Simeon Kronenberg says "as the climate opens up in China, it is closing down here in Australia. Wei is commenting on this and he is not supportive of the current (Australian) government". For instance, in a recent work he refers to the Howard Government's foreign policy and the children overboard issue.



Target, 2004, Guan Wei, acrylic on canvas, 267cm x 563cm (20 panels). Photography Paul Green. Courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

Shen Jiawei lives and works in Bundeena, in Sydney's south, and his realistic portraits and history paintings have been well received. Even his more facile portrait of Princess Mary of Denmark, with its hazy Opera House in the background, continues his predilection for social comment. (Shen enjoys the fact that the Opera House architect is Danish.) He is disinterested in many contemporary artists' preoccupation with expressing themselves. He says, "When this happens, there are a smaller number of people that can understand the work. I hope that a larger number of people will get into my work."

A new space, Gallery HM, has opened in Sydney and exhibits Chinese contemporary art; the Casula Powerhouse regularly exhibits work of Chinese artists from the local

Liverpool community; Melbourne's Sutton Gallery represents the animated Li Ji paintings of Kate Beynon; and Ray Hughes, who travels to China twice a year with an

Participants in the wave of cross-cultural artists in Australia, continue to absorb their personal experiences and develop them into wider contexts.

interpreter to meet artists, will hold an exhibition entitled *Yum Cha* during Chinese New Year 2006.

Gallery 4A, Asia Australia Arts Centre, continues to exhibit work by new and younger Chinese Australian artists such as Megan Keating and Lin Chunyun while also staging exhibitions of video and film installation artists such as Wang Jian Wei. In 2004 the centre's curator, Binghui Huangfu, curated *Asian traffic*, which charted the flow of artists between Asian countries, including Australia. It is touring China, Hong Kong and the Philippines and Huangfu believes it will increase intellectual artistic dialogue around the region.

While all this is happening, Shen Jiawei, Guo Jian, Ah Xian, Guan Wei and Fan Dong Wang, participants in the wave of cross-cultural artists in Australia, continue to absorb their personal experiences and develop them into wider contexts. ■

China, China — Bust 33, 1999, Ah Xian, porcelain with low temperature polychrome glazes with low relief dragon, cloud and ocean design, 40cm x 38cm x 20cm. © copyright and courtesy the artist 2000.

