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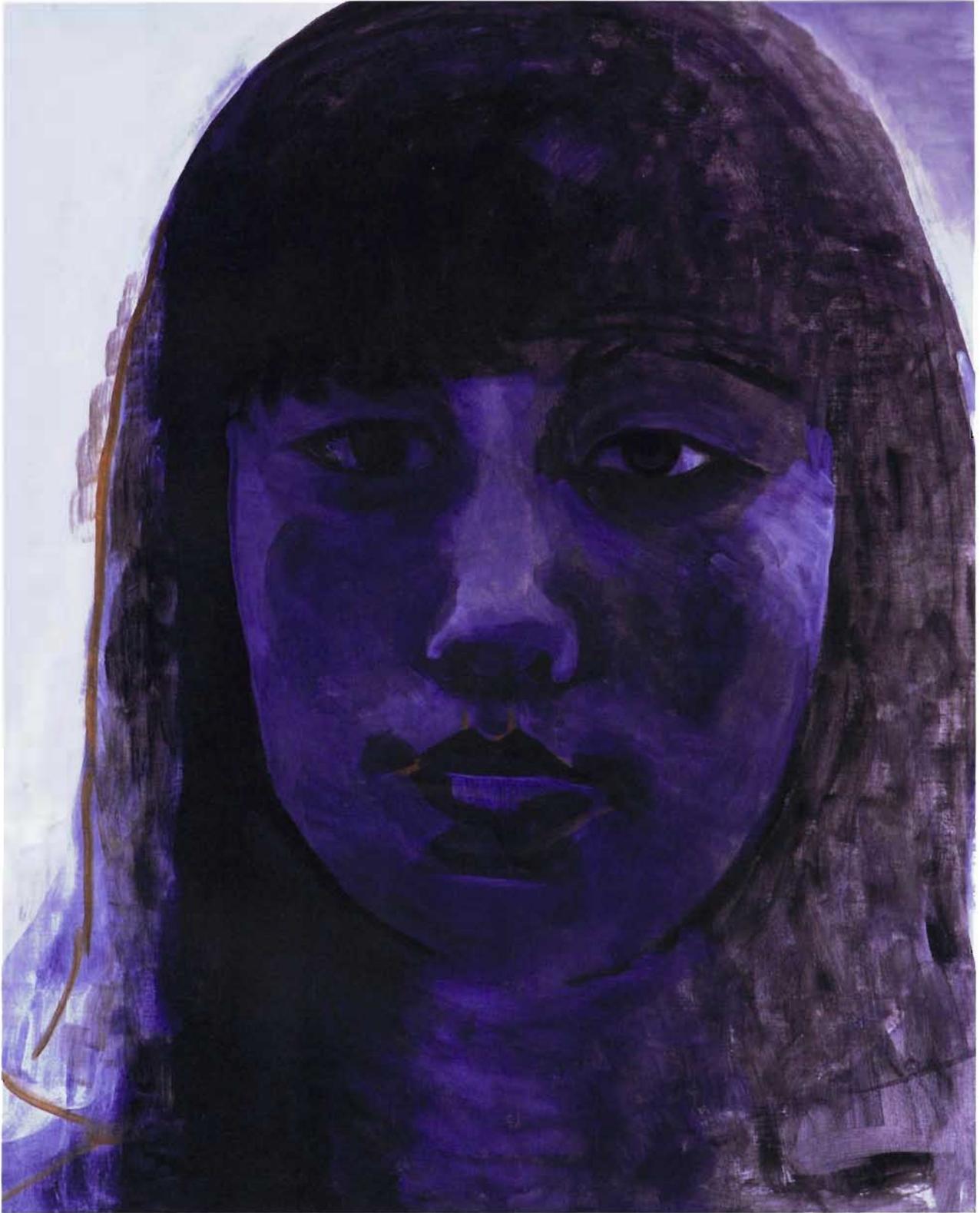
the china phenomenon

new perspectives
on chinese
contemporary art

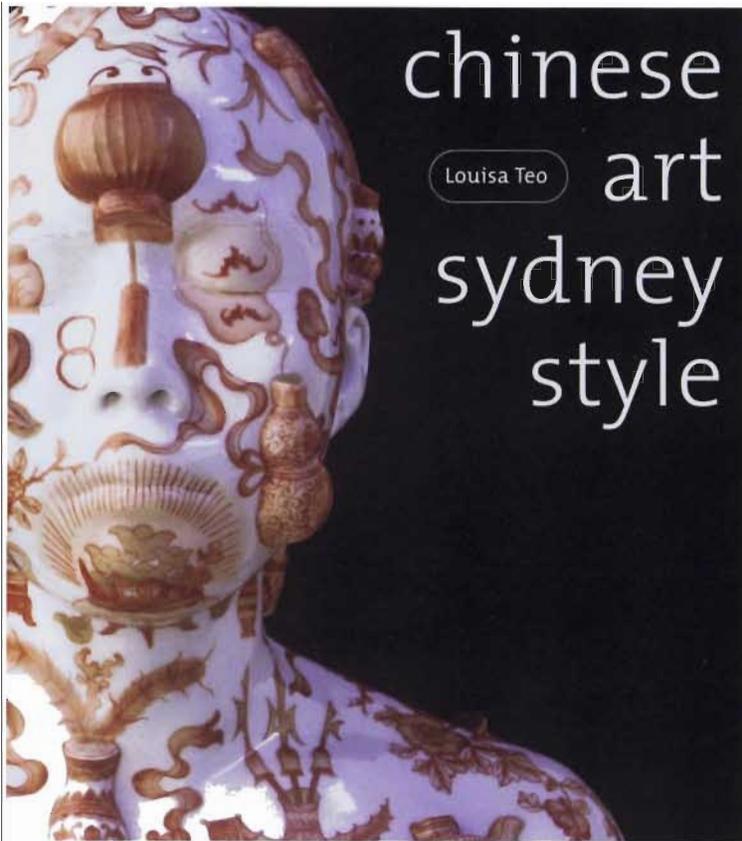
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Shanghai Star - Fan Dongwang, Li Shan, Yu Youhan **National Tour 2001/03** Gippsland Art Gallery, Tuggeranong Community Arts Centre, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Broken Hill City Art Gallery, Wollongong City Gallery, Manning Regional Art Gallery, Dubbo Regional Art Gallery, Shepparton Art Gallery, Bundaberg Arts Centre **Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre** 1 Casula Rd Casula NSW Australia Ph +61 2 9824 1121 admin@casulapowerhouse.com Image detail: Yu Youhan, *Five Women*, (detail), acrylic on linen, 156 x 130cm, 2001



chinese art sydney style

Louisa Teo

It seems timely to revisit the situation of Chinese artists working in Australia for two reasons. Firstly, over a decade has now passed since many of the artists who have the highest profiles here migrated to Australia. These artists include Guan Wei, Ah Xian, Liu Xiao Xian, Shen Shaomin, Guo Jian and Fan Dongwang. Several of these artists are currently at a crossroads with respect to their careers and what their next steps will be.

Secondly, two institutions which have committed themselves to exploring the situation of overseas artists and their communities, Gallery 4A and Casula Powerhouse, are each planning to reinvigorate their programs with a strong focus on international projects. Casula Powerhouse, in particular, will stage a major group exhibition of the new generation of Chinese artists curated by Mainland critic/curator Li Xianting. This exhibition will serve as an update for Australian audiences, who last saw Li Xianting's work ten years ago, when he co-curated *Mao Goes Pop* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney.

Guan Wei and Ah Xian are probably the best-known Mainland Chinese artists working in Sydney. They followed a similar path to Sydney. Born in Beijing, they first came to Australia as artists-in-residence in Tasmania. Guan Wei quotes Chairman Mao in describing the move from Tasmania to Sydney. *Nongcun baowei chengshi* means moving from the country to the city, and refers to Mao's strategy for the communist party to take over China. It's an accurate analogy to describe both of their careers in Australia. They first showed their work together in

Sydney in 1991 at Irving Galleries, since renamed Sherman Galleries, in *Echoes of China - From Behind the Bamboo Curtain - Three Contemporary Chinese Artists*.

Since this exhibition in 1991, Guan Wei has continued to be represented by Sherman Galleries, which has leveraged its strong connections in the region to ensure Guan Wei's work has been exposed to the widest possible audience. Initiatives include solo shows at Tokyo Gallery in 1997, Hanart Gallery in Hong Kong in 1995 and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 1999. Guan Wei was one of the artists in *The Rose Crossing*, a group show of work by thirteen Asian and Australian artists which toured venues in Brisbane, Perth, Hong Kong, Singapore and Sydney in 1999 and 2000, which was conceived, managed and promoted by Sherman Galleries.

This high exposure has led to a certain predictability in Guan Wei's work. This is also due, in part, to the system of grants, commissions, residencies and prizes, which reward and reinforce a particular style which is accessible to audiences and addresses the criteria of promoting the agenda of multiculturalism and the arts. Further, the body of work Guan Wei has produced since arriving in Australia has been so extensively written about that it is increasingly difficult to offer fresh perspectives on his work.

Guan Wei is addressing this directly by increasing the time he spends overseas. A string of residencies in 2003, including a period spent in New York, where he met up with old friends and peers, including New York-based Chinese artists Cai Guo-Qiang, Xu Bing and Wenda Gu, will provide new inspiration and direction.

In contrast with the systematic approach Sherman Galleries has taken to promoting Guan Wei, another Sydney dealer, Ray Hughes, who can most diplomatically be described as 'colourful', has been more focused on bringing work of Chinese artists into Australia than taking the work of his Chinese artists overseas.

Ray Hughes approached artist Guo Jian after seeing his work at Tin Sheds Gallery at Sydney University in 1998. Since then, it has been a fruitful relationship for both artist and dealer, as Guo Jian's Chinese-pop-meets-soft-porn canvases have met a market and Ray Hughes has had a minder to facilitate introductions to other Chinese artists when in China to source new work.

Ray Hughes has provided support and freedom to Guo Jian to paint in his own style, however, an artist's development and confidence can be limited when their work is shown continuously to the same private, commercial gallery audience. Guo Jian has recently approached Casula Powerhouse about pursuing an independent project, which will offer the opportunity to experiment with different media and a change in style, and more importantly, broaden the audience for his work.

阿仙, 中国中国 - 陶瓷头像 34号 1999.



Fan Dongwang is another Chinese artist who has shown with Ray Hughes since 2000. And while this relationship has also been commercially successful, it is the artist's projects and residencies with public institutions such as Casula Powerhouse and Gallery 4A which seem to bring him greater satisfaction.

Ah Xian and his brother, Liu Xiao Xian, the third artist in *Echoes of China*, have remained independent. From 1999 onwards solo shows at RMIT Gallery, the Powerhouse Museum, Brisbane City Gallery, the Asia Society in New York, MAK in Frankfurt and his winning of the Macquarie Bank National Sculpture Prize led Ah Xian to a conscious decision to remain unrepresented.

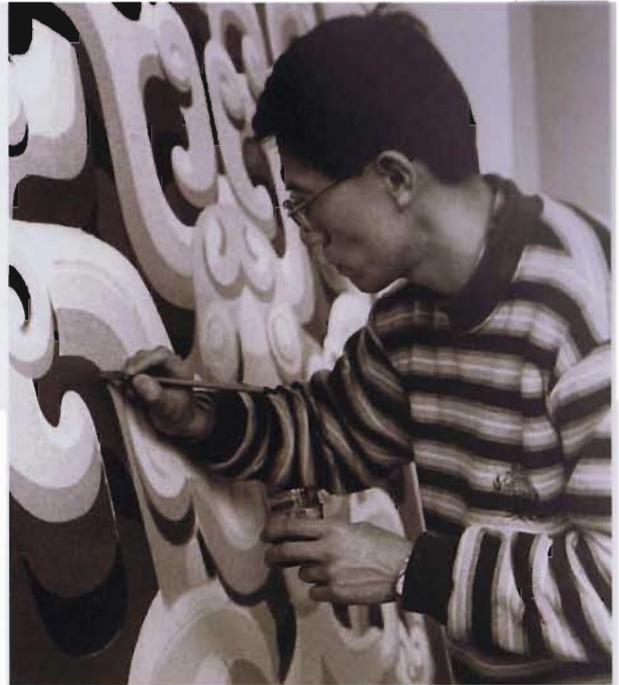
Ah Xian's work graces the 2003 cover of the Australia Council for the Arts Support for the Arts handbook. As in Guan Wei's case, the juxtaposition of Chinese and Western motifs and references greatly increases the popularity of Ah Xian's work with Australian audiences. Ah Xian is based in Sydney, but travels to China to cast his porcelain busts in Jingdezhen, the home of traditional Chinese ceramics. It is likely that international travel will facilitate exposure to new ideas, movements and practices, thereby providing greater opportunities to stay fresh. Liu Xiao Xian is intending to return to China for this reason. Basing himself in Beijing, he will embark on a year-long project in which he will create new work.

Another artist working between China and Australia is Shen Shaomin, who was friends with Ah Xian in Beijing before moving to Australia in 1989. Shen Shaomin's last show in Sydney was at Gallery 4A in 2001, where even he seemed lacklustre about the paintings he had produced. For the past eighteen months, Shen Shaomin has been based in Daching in Northern China, where his work has taken on a completely new energy. His current work is the construction of creatures, some more than seven metres in length, using human and animal bones.

亚洲-澳洲艺术中心, Hay街, 悉尼的中国城。

范东旺, 在Casula Powerhouse博物馆2001, 摄影: Tom Dion

艺术家工作室项目(从左至右), 李山, 范东旺和余友涵
在Casula Powerhouse博物馆2001年准备上海之星展览的图片,
摄影: Tom Dion



FACING PAGE: Ah Xian *China China - Bust 34* 1999, porcelain, overglaze paint, courtesy the artist, photo: Liu Xiao Xian. THIS PAGE, ABOVE LEFT: Gallery 4A - Asia Australia Art Centre, Hay St, in Sydney's Chinatown. ABOVE RIGHT: Fan Dongwang at Casula Powerhouse 2001, photo: Tom Dion. BOTTOM RIGHT: Artists in residence (left to right) Li Shan, Fan Dongwan and Yu Youhan at Casula Powerhouse preparing for *Shanghai Star* exhibition in 2001, photo: Tom Dion.

Personally and professionally, this group of artists has reached a new juncture. With the exception of Guo Jian, for the first time, they must balance career objectives with family commitments in Australia. They have been living in Australia for long enough to have established profiles and to have become accustomed to the lifestyle here, however China is the world's focus at the moment. Ongoing international travel is the only means by which these artists will be able to participate in the global art scene and truly develop.

The two institutions in Sydney which have been outstanding in their commitment to providing opportunities for Chinese artists to maintain linkages with their communities in Australia are Gallery 4A and Casula Powerhouse. All of the artists mentioned above have received support from these institutions.

Gallery 4A in Sydney's Chinatown has, since its inception in 1996, dedicated itself almost exclusively to diasporic communities in Australia. All of the artists mentioned above have exhibited with Gallery 4A. Founded and directed by Melissa Chiu until 2001, the gallery began in an office building in Sussex Street, with floor space no bigger than a postage stamp. Almost immediately, Gallery 4A found a place in Sydney's consciousness as a cultural magnet for artists, writers, playwrights, patrons and audiences who had any connection or interest in Asia. With its strong programming and community support, Gallery 4A evolved into a high-traffic project space for emerging and established artists and moved to its present location, a heritage building in the heart of Sydney's Chinatown, in October 2000.

Gallery 4A has faced serious challenges since Melissa Chiu's departure to take up a post at the Asia Society Museum in New York in 2002 and is now seeing its third director in twelve months. The complexity of the decision-making structure, originally intended to serve as a consultative facility, consists of a Management Committee, Visual Arts Committee and Advisory Committee, which could easily impede potential funders and collaborators. However, there's an optimism now that the new leadership of Binghui Huangfu, a well-connected and experienced curator, will reinvigorate Gallery 4A's program.

Casula Powerhouse, in Sydney's west, about 50 minutes' drive from the CBD, is another institution which is dedicated to overseas artists and their communities in Australia. Western Sydney is one of the most ethnically diverse areas of Sydney and is home to large communities of Arabic, Vietnamese and Chinese populations. Following a multi-million dollar refurbishment, Casula Powerhouse is due to re-open in November 2004 with an exhibition of work by twenty young contemporary Chinese artists curated by Li Xianting.

Like Gallery 4A, Casula Powerhouse faces challenges. What will see Li Xianting's exhibition through to fruition is meeting the challenge of raising the capital required to mount a large-scale international show. A report on Western Sydney by one of Australia's visual arts foundations summarises the problems faced by Western Sydney institutions as including clashes with

the stakeholders which manage them, inadequate staff training and lack of marketing expertise.' Unfortunately most of the recommendations revolve around 'lobbying', 'workshops' and 'seminars'. By the time committees have been formed, priorities have been assessed and new acronyms agreed upon, another decade will have passed and it will be time for Li Xianting to propose a new show. This report may not accurately reflect the situation at Casula Powerhouse, where the directors' strategy has been to focus on selling the benefits of their shows: consistently providing Australian artists and audiences with the opportunity to engage internationally and to gain insights and knowledge which can be applied to their local situation.

Gallery 4A and Casula Powerhouse have worked together on a number of occasions. *Shanghai Star* in 2001 was one such collaboration and also illustrates the close working relationship Casula Powerhouse has with artists who initiate projects. The exhibition was the result of an eight-week residency at Casula Powerhouse by three Chinese artists: Fan Dongwang, Yu Youhan and Li Shan. Fan Dongwang had been a student of Yu Youhan's in the late 1980s in China. Yu Youhan and Li Shan were major figures in China's avantgarde scene post-1989. Their work was first seen in Australia in *Mao Goes Pop* in 1994. Fan Dongwang approached Con Gouriotis and Lisa Havilah, Director and Assistant Director of Casula Powerhouse and together, they conceived the idea of a residency and an exhibition, which, two years later, is still touring venues around Australia. Gallery 4A worked with Casula Powerhouse to run a program of workshops with the *Shanghai Star* artists.

Li Xianting's upcoming exhibition is another example of artists informing an institution's program. Guan Wei, who lives and works in Glenfield, close to Casula, approached Con Gouriotis and Lisa Havilah with the idea of developing an exhibition. He put forward the name of Li Xianting, who was invited for a two-week residency at Casula Powerhouse and since then has been contracted to research and develop a full exhibition proposal.

Introductions go both ways. Staff from Casula Powerhouse have assisted Guan Wei in finding studio space for his projects. Other artists working in Western Sydney such as Shen Shaomin have similarly benefited from a close working relationship with the institutions in the area. Gouriotis quips that in Western Sydney the bureaucrats support artists rather than the artists supporting bureaucrats. Certainly, there's an apparent openness to ideas and flexibility of operations which gives Western Sydney institutions the aura of being a healthy environment for fostering creativity.

Gallery 4A and Casula Powerhouse worked together again in 2002. During his residency at Casula Powerhouse, Gallery 4A invited Li Xianting to present a slide-show. The work shown by Li Xianting included work by artist Zhu Yu, who photographed himself eating dead babies. The exhibition Li Xianting is proposing for Casula Powerhouse in 2004, with a working title of *Ultraworld*, may be seen as an extension of the work which



was presented at the Gallery 4A talk. In his concept statement, Li Xianting describes the state of rampant consumerism in China which he says has affected both the physical and mental states of the nation.

Physically, Li Xianting observes how modernisation has impacted on the urban landscape in that Chinese cities lose their identity and become generic models of urban planning as skyscrapers and freeways replace traditional architecture. Artist Yang Maoyuan's work explores the extremes of growth. He takes horse, goat and sheep hides and inflates them, signalling the potential destruction that can come with rapid expansion.

Psychologically, Li Xianting suggests that underneath the prosperous facade is a society whose value system is in decay. Li Xianting is interested in artists working with human and animal parts, who work to challenge conventional, often Western, ideas about taste. Xiao Yu's work *Ruan*, shown at the 2001 *Venice Biennale*, was composed of parts of a rat, rabbit, cat and dove and the head of a five-month old human foetus.

ABOVE: Guo Jian *The Day Before I Went Away* 2003, oil on canvas, 213 x 152 cm courtesy the artist and Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney.

郭健，我出走的前一天2003，布面油画，213x152厘米，艺术家和悉尼Ray Hughes画廊所有。

It's fitting that this exhibition should take place in Western Sydney, which itself is undergoing growth and transformation. The City of Liverpool, of which Casula is a suburb, is the fastest growing region in Australia. Con Gouriotis and Lisa Havilah saw how the theme and concept for Li Xianting's show resonated with their own area. '*Ultraworld* forecasts a real problem', says Gouriotis, 'these artists are producing work which stretches the concept of growth. The building of wealth comes at a cost to both communities and us as individuals. The impact of growth is multi-faceted and is not always evident.' The consultative approach Casula Powerhouse takes in relation to developing community projects will ensure *Ultraworld* will be of maximum relevance to artists and audiences here, facilitating opportunities to exchange ideas and knowledge. The real achievement, though, has come from institutions such as Gallery 4A and Casula Powerhouse committing to show uncompromising art which is rarely seen here or in China and providing artists with prospects to experiment and develop. ☺

1 *Assessing the Needs of Museums and Galleries in Western Sydney*, Museums and Galleries Foundation of NSW, December 2001

Louisa Teo is the Marketing Manager of the *Sydney Biennale 2004* and has previously worked in art galleries in Sydney and Hong Kong.