

# ART STAGE SINGAPORE

## REPORT CHINA

### Who's who in Contemporary Chinese Art

By HUANG DU\*



Wang Zhiyuan  
Thrown to the wind 2010  
400(Dia)x1150cm  
Plastics, steel  
Image courtesy of the artist

What is Chinese Contemporary Art? It's an often asked question, yet so difficult to define primarily to the growing richness and diversity evident in Chinese contemporary art today. This has evolved from three-decade-long reforms and the extraordinary boom of the Chinese economy after 2000, launching China onto the world stage both culturally and economically. The 'collective unconsciousness' of this formative era gave rise to the 'post-revolution' period and the birth of diversity of style, concept and expression along with the dilution of ideology. Chinese contemporary art has no discernible group identity, rather there are distinctive characteristics stemming from political and authoritative styles, to more personal expression - centralisation has capitulated towards diversity and emphasis on the individual.

It is undeniable however, that there is a certain pedigree to Chinese contemporary art. Arising from the complexity of China's history, society, politics and culture, the long-term intellectual focus and contribution to Chinese contemporary art has propelled it towards phenomenal success in today's global art market. This strength combined with the support of investors and collectors gleaned from the newly rich class, has led to dominance of leading auction of houses in Hong Kong, Beijing and Shanghai by the work of some of the following globally-recognized 'blue-chip' artists.

#### Zhang Xiaogang

Zhang Xiaogang is undoubtedly the most represented artist of Chinese contemporary art, connecting painting with history in the search for meaning and implication in memory and amnesia. Old photos evoke a sad and melancholic tone yet simultaneously attempting to express a nostalgic sense of dream, solitude and loneliness. The work stimulates contemplation upon psychological analysis of people's dreams and the point of their existence. His work has been under the spotlight at Sotheby and Christie's auction since 2006.

#### Zeng Fanzhi

There is a unique visual expression in Zeng Fanzhi's work that produces unforgettable images and lasting impressions. In the 1990s, Zeng built up his painting style through his mask series, emphasizing the implication of painting itself. His expression in painting is both humorous and serious as he attempts to express his cold perception of the external world.

#### Zhou Chunya

Zhou Chunya is well known by his painting series of subject matters such as "green dog" and "peach flower". He has skilfully combined 'free idea' techniques in the traditional Chinese ink and wash painting with an expressive language, applying an almost single tone on canvas to create an "erotic" style of implication and metonymy.

#### Fang Lijun

Fang Lijun is a leading representative artist of China's "cynical realism". In recent years, he has replaced the pursuit of creation as content with cynicism, analysing and expressing microscopic life forms, depicting the existence of life into space and creating a painting language broadly associated with super-realism. His retrospective show titled "Living as a Wild Dog" toured to the Museum of Art Taipei, Guang Dong Museum of Art Guang Zhou, Today Art Museum Beijing and Xi'an Museum of Art and attracted wide attention and acclaim.

#### Yue Minjun

Yue Minjun is regarded as a highly skilled painter with an outstanding mastery of painting a visual language. His paintings depict his own image in a humorous and exaggerated style of self-portraiture, themselves becoming a social and cultural symbol. The viewer must decide if they are either staring at a viewpoint on reality or staring and laughing at reality. Engaged in a dialogue between history and daily life, his kind of self-mockery reflects upon our contemplation on today's social issues.

#### Wang Guangyi

Wang Guangyi is a representative artist of China's "Political Pop". The meaning of his work is in his combination of posters made during the so-called "Great Proletarian Revolution" with Pop Art, drawing a connection between both Chinese and Western context. His unique style of pop art engages graphic design techniques on canvas, addressing political imagery and consumer culture.

#### Cai Guoqiang

Cai Guoqiang is renowned both in mainland China and internationally; his recent retrospective show at the Guggenheim Museum of Art in 2008 was a first for a Chinese artist. His series of works based on explosions are his original signature creations, and the remnants of explosives on rice paper the primary work of Cai Guoqiang in international collections.

#### Huang Yongping

Huang Yongping is perhaps the most renowned overseas Chinese contemporary artist in the art world. In the "post-colonial" context of the 1990s, his work dealt with the cultural relationship between the East and West by using a visual expression in a critical and dynamic way. With the disappearance of "post-colonialism", his concept has developed with sharp criticism, while reflecting upon new issues relating to life, space, and physics. The work by other overseas Chinese artists such as Chen Zhen, Wang Du, Yan Peiming and Yang Jiechang, have a similar subject matter to Huang Yongping, though each are distinct in their unique and uncompromising styles.

#### Liu Wei

A distinctly personal and gifted painter, Liu Wei (together with artist Fang Lijun) was instrumental in constructing the painting style known as "cynical realism". His paintings studiously avoid 'mannerism', while he persists with his technique of making so-called "bad" paintings - an emphasis on painting of the screen to express the mood or psychology of truth and nature of the common man. In recent years his work has become a popular and highly sought-after addition to international collections.

#### Wang Zhiyuan

Wang's work is concerned with everyday issues such as nature, desire, violence and confusion; an exploration of the essence of art and confrontation of the "originality" of art making. His work emphasises the aesthetic and compositional qualities of objects often considered as 'non-art' such as bottles inducing a sense of a visual "displacement" in the viewer. Approachable yet critical, Wang's work implies the hidden contradictions imbedded in the process of China's social development. With an independent will and a spirit of criticism, he is one of the few Chinese contemporary artists who have never bowed to the secular.

#### Gu Dexin

Gu Dexin came to international attention in the late 1980s with colorful portraits of alien beings and provocative experiments in altering and reshaping plastics and other materials. In 1987 he formed the "Tactile Sensation Group" who worked primarily with perishable materials such as fruits, meat and animal intestines, which were left to decay in exhibition spaces. His conceptual approach to art making is often cited by the younger generation as a key influence.

#### Yang Fudong

Yang Fudong uses film with supreme style. He first learned about cinema, not from movies - which were restricted in China in the 1970s and 1980s - but from books. What his black/white film installations forsake in narrative, they make up for in perfectly composed imagery and a heady atmosphere of yearning young people attempting to navigate changing urban and rural worlds. In 2011 and 2007 he exhibited at the Venice Biennale, in 2010 and 2004 at the Shanghai Biennale and in 2002 at Documenta 11.

#### Zhan Wang

Zhan Wang views his polished and lustrous sculptures as a metaphor for the fast changing face of China. Concentrating on abstract forms, which he calls floating stones his inspiration comes from the public sculpture often found outside Beijing's new office development buildings, as well as the feng shui of traditional landscape gardening. The shiny sculptures with reflexive surfaces are large, highly textured rock-like pieces rendered in chrome.

#### OTHER NAMES TO KNOW

##### Established artists

CAO Fei	WANG Guofeng
CHEN Wenbo	WANG Jianwei
CHEN Wenling	WANG Luyan
DING Yi	WANG Yin
FENG Zhengjie	WU Mingzhong
JIANG Dahai	XIA Xiaowan
KAN Xuan	XIANG Jing
LI Hui	XIAO Yu
LIU Jianhua	XU Zhen
LIU Wei	XU Zhongmin
LIU Xiaodong	YANG Qian
MIAO Xuhui	YANG Zhenzhong
MIAO Xiaochun	YE Yongqing
QIU Zhijie	YIN Xiuzhen
SHI Yong	ZHANG Peili
SONG Dong	ZHENG Guogu
SUI Jianguo	ZHONG Biao
WANG Guangle	ZHOU Teihai

##### Up-and-coming artists

BAI Yiluo	SUN Xun
FENG Zhengquan	WU Daxin
GAO Xiaowu	WU Di
HU Xiaoyuan	WU Junyong
LI Qing	YAN Heng
LIANG Yuanwei	YANG Liming
LU Yuanzheng	YANG Xingguang
MA Qusha	ZHANG Xuerui
PAN Jian	ZHAO Yao
QIU Xiaofei	

#### Private art institutions in China

Since Mainland China opened its doors in 1978, institutions for exhibiting, collecting and education in contemporary art have trod a rocky path. Professionalism at times non-existent, the practicalities involved in establishing non-profit art spaces have been inevitably complicated by legal, funding and personal issues. Rapid economic growth however has consequently boosted an increasing number of privately funded contemporary art museums, with a resultant rapid development of professionalism and success. As an added incentive, non-profit status qualifies institutions for public subsidies and they can issue tax deductible receipts for donations.

However, many of these institutions have started-out as showcase architecture and vanity projects, funded and opened by property developers to provide a varnish of high culture, and justify high prices in the property sector. Others have been founded by enthusiastic members of the newly-rich aiming to showcase and share their art collections such as the Rockbund in Shanghai and the True Color museum in Suzhou. To confuse the issue further, many commercial galleries use the name meishu guan [museum] instead of yi lang [gallery] for self-aggrandisement.

Some of the more significant examples of private art institutions in China include:

• **Today Art Museum** in Beijing was the first not-for-profit art museum established in 2006 through private funding. It actively promotes the development of contemporary art in mainland China, highlighting the importance of academic research through the introduction of "Today's Documents" and case studies, as well as solo exhibitions for artists such as Sui Jianguo, Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun. The museum has also published a series of books to advocate, update and demystify the mechanism of Chinese contemporary art.

• **The Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA)** was established in the 798 Art District of Beijing, opening to the public in 2007 and financed by Belgian art collectors and entrepreneurs, Guy and Myriam Ullens. Consolidating and expanding their collection, they have become important observers and contributors of the development and changes of contemporary Chinese art. The founding of such a centre has provided a significant platform for contemporary Chinese artists to showcase their work and stimulate interest and discussion in the global market.

• Shanghai's **Minsheng Art Museum** was the first institution funded by a private bank in mainland China, opening in 2008 with Zhou Tiehai, a practising artist, appointed as its director. The choice of an artist as director was a deliberate way to create a more favourable public perception and profile of art museums in China. Minsheng Bank plans to establish a large-scale museum of contemporary art next to 798 Art District in Beijing in 2012.

• **Square Museum of Contemporary Art** in Nanjing is a non-profit private multi-functional institution dedicated to the exhibition, preservation, research and education of contemporary art and architecture. It is designed by Steven Holl commissioned by Nanjing Foshou Lake Architecture and Art Developments Ltd. Due to open in December 2012, Zhu Tong, head of the 2010 Nanjing Biennale, has been appointed the museum director.

Private foundations established for institutions or collecting have influenced and moulded the 'ecology', growth and development of contemporary Chinese art, and have become the vehicle to enhance the profile and development of contemporary art in mainland China.

Top international galleries such as Continua, Pace but also Gagosian and White Cube have recently bought into the art scene in China, setting up satellite spaces in Beijing or Hong Kong seeking to represent the big-name contemporary Chinese artists. This has proven irresistible to artists aware of the opportunities the big name galleries offer to showcase the artists' work in important museums, art museums and in particular to introduce their work into top collections in the world. This competition has led many Asian galleries into a state of distress with the only solution for Asian galleries leaning towards fostering and supporting emerging artists.

*\*Born in Xi'an and based in Beijing, the author graduated with a Ph. D. from School of Art History and Theory, The Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. He has worked as an independent curator since 1994.*

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