

ART & DESIGN

Where the Wild Things Are: China's Art Dreamers at the Guggenheim

By JANE PERLEZ SEPT. 20, 2017

BEIJING — The signature work at “Art and China After 1989,” a highly anticipated show that takes over the Guggenheim on Oct. 6, is a simple table with a see-through dome shaped like the back of a tortoise. On the tabletop hundreds of insects and reptiles — gekkos, locusts, crickets, centipedes and cockroaches — mill about under the glow of an overhead lamp.

During the three-month exhibition some creatures will be devoured; others may die of fatigue. The big ones will survive. From time to time, a New York City pet shop will replenish the menagerie with new bugs.

In its strange way, the piece, called “Theater of the World,” created in 1993 by the conceptual artist Huang Yong Ping, perfectly captures the theme of the exhibition: China as a universe unto itself, forever evolving and changing into a new order. It also sums up a sense of oppression the artists felt from 1989 to 2008, as they were making these works.

Many of the more than 70 creators were born in China, yet like Mr. Huang — who fled the country in dismay after the 1989 crackdown on pro-democracy protesters on Tiananmen Square — they reject the label “Chinese.” One paradox: The artists appreciate the big splash on Fifth Avenue but express mixed feelings about a nation-themed show. Most consider themselves international artists who have contributed mightily to the global avant-garde art movement.

“Whether artists are Chinese or French is not important,” said Mr. Huang, who lives and works outside Paris. “I think the duty of the artist is to deconstruct the concept of nationality. There is going to be a day when there is no concept of nationality.”

The curators have selected nearly 150 pieces of sometimes shocking, often scruffy experimental art — video, installation, photography, performance — that questions authority, and uses animals (on screen) to highlight the violence of humankind. (“Theater of the World” caused a stir in Vancouver in 2007 when Mr. Huang included scorpions and tarantulas; he withdrew the piece from the show there rather than comply with requests to remove those particular creatures.)

The emphasis at the Guggenheim is on conceptual art. There are few oil paintings, and none of the flashy visages of big faces of the political pop school of the 1990s and early 2000s that fetched skyhigh prices at auction.

“We felt the whole concept of contemporary Chinese art needed to be exploded,” said Alexandra Munroe, the lead curator.

The chronology covers two distinct periods: the political repression after Tiananmen and the economic boom in the 2000s. In the aftermath of the protests, the government banned installation art. That provoked conceptual artists to stage furtive shows in anonymous apartments. Artists struggled.

Many escaped abroad, came back, went out again. There were almost no galleries and little money to be made.

By 2001, when China joined the World Trade Organization, opening its doors to the global economy, the government understood that art could be China's calling card. Money poured into places like the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. Commercial galleries popped up in Beijing and Shanghai.

The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games were staged as China's coming out party. Many artists dismissed the celebration, preferring to concentrate on government corruption and the demolition of charming old Beijing. But the Games did help to open the eyes of outsiders to China and its art scene.

Soon after the opening at the Guggenheim, the Communist Party will hold its national congress in Beijing, a conclave set to anoint the current president, Xi Jinping, for a second term. The uninhibited avant-garde art at the Guggenheim will offer a jagged contrast to Mr. Xi's stiff internet censorship, and repression of human rights that keeps some of China's artists — including perhaps the best known, Ai Weiwei — from living and working in their homeland.

Only nine female artists appear in the show, a poor representation that the curators say they are acutely aware of. One of the nine, though, is Xiao Lu, who achieved notoriety when she fired a pellet gun at a sculpture at a Beijing exhibition in 1989.

The few works by women is a reflection of the male-dominated government-run art academies of the period, Ms. Munroe said. The teachers were mostly men who wielded disproportionate influence with their power to dole out studio spaces, video equipment and paints. Most of the students were men. Now some classes are evenly split between men and women.

“That source of livelihood was closed to a privileged few, and the few were men exclusively,” Ms. Munroe said. “The good news is that it has changed.”

Some of the artists in Beijing and Hangzhou looked back at their work in the show, the atmosphere during those two decades and how they and the country have changed.

Peng Yu and Sun Yuan

They are known as the bad couple of China's art. Peng Yu, 43, and Sun Yuan, 45, her husband, work in adjacent studios in Beijing's thriving 798 Art District. Three heavy-duty motorcycles are parked outside Mr. Sun's door. Inside, skeletons of a lion, a boar, a griffin and a few other animals decorate the shelves. Ms. Peng's space is smaller, more spartan and contains a bare-bones kitchen.

In 2000, they attracted attention with a performance piece, “Body Link,” at a show in Shanghai. Both artists took part in a transfusion of their own blood into the corpse of Siamese twins. The piece was created just after they decided to get married and was “a special kind of coming together,” Ms. Peng said.

Ms. Peng revels in her brazen politically incorrect attitudes. The fuss about too few female artists in the Guggenheim show was unjustified. “Personally I think female artists in China are not as hard-working as male artists and their art is not as good as male artists,” she said.

The couple's work at the Guggenheim is one of their less radical pieces. The seven-minute video shows four pairs of American pit bulls tethered to eight wooden treadmills. The camera closes in on the animals as they face each other, running at high speed. The dogs are prevented from touching one

another, a frustrating experience for animals trained to fight. The dogs get wearier and wearier, their muscles more and more prominent, and their mouths increasingly salivate.

The piece was first shown with the actual dogs appearing before an audience at the Today Museum in Beijing in 2003.

“The piece was so special, it stood out,” Ms. Peng said. “The art critics didn’t know what to say.”

Xu Bing

Xu Bing, 62, a small wiry figure with long black tangled hair and rimless glasses, is a veteran of China’s conceptual art movement. Early on, he showed that Chinese artists could be at least as provocative as their Western compatriots.

His work, “A Case Study of Transference,” from 1994 illustrates his fascination with the ugly and the primitive versus the beautiful and the classical.

The original version of the work featured two live pigs — a boar and a sow — having sex in front of audiences at one of the early informal art spaces in Beijing. The backs of the pigs were stamped with gibberish composed from the Roman alphabet and invented Chinese characters.

The Guggenheim drew the line on live pigs in the museum, and settled for a video of the Beijing performance, said Philip Tinari, a guest curator, from the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing.

Mr. Xu, who has lived in New York for nearly 20 years, spent time on pig farms during the Cultural Revolution. Why pigs and calligraphy? “Animals are

completely uncivilized and Chinese characters are the expression of supreme civilization,” he said.

His second work in the show deals with 9/11. Mr. Xu lives in a townhouse in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and when the planes hit the World Trade Center, he watched from across the river. A few days later, he went to City Hall and scooped up dust and packed it into a plastic bag.

On the eve of the Guggenheim show he plans to blow the dust from a leaf-catching machine into a small sealed room. The dust will fall on a stencil of a Zen Buddhist stanza.

Of all the artists in the show, Mr. Xu perhaps best straddles China and the West. He was a young teacher at the Art Academy in Beijing during the protests at Tiananmen. His students created the green foam and gypsum “Goddess of Democracy” that became the protest’s symbol for freedom.

“After June 1989, the cultural world became silent, everything became muted, my pieces were not allowed to be shown,” he said over Italian espresso brewed in his studio kitchen in Beijing. He fled in 1990. In the United States, the art schools welcomed him. He moved to New York in 1992 and in 1999 he won a MacArthur Fellowship.

“The relationship between China and the world has changed,” he said. “After 1989, artists stepped out into the world and they worshiped Western culture. Now younger artists want to stay more in China. They get more inspiration from China, there are more problems to explore.”

Yu Hong

When Yu Hong joined the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1984, she was 18 and the only woman among the dozen students in the

entering class. It was after the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution, and the art schools were coming to life after years in the wilderness.

Ms. Yu, now one of China's most esteemed realist painters, was an instant star. One of the first assignments for her class was to draw Michelangelo's David. Ms. Yu's rendition won first prize. It is still shown to students more than 20 years later.

Her oil painting in the Guggenheim show is entirely different. A self-portrait, the canvas shows Ms. Yu, a few years out of art school in the early 1990s, scissors in hand, snipping her own hair.

The back story is intriguing. Ms. Yu, and her husband, Liu Xiaodong, also an artist, were acting in a low budget movie, called "The Days," about the couple's true-life story as impoverished art teachers in a backwater province in northeast China. One of the scenes included Ms. Yu cutting her own hair. The movie was too bleak for the government censors and has never been officially released in China.

The self-portrait is part of a historical series she began in 1999 called "Witness to Growth," in which she paints herself at the various stages of China's economic growth, juxtaposed against a photograph of the period.

The curators could have chosen a more dramatic work from Ms. Yu. A black and white self-portrait on the wall of her studio in Beijing shows Ms. Yu among the protesters near Tiananmen Square before the tanks rolled in. Adjacent to the canvas is a photograph of the crackdown's aftermath. Dark smoke hangs over the square. The demonstrators' tent city is demolished. Soldiers are on watch.

But such photographs are banned in China. A display of the photo overseas would almost certainly draw protests from the Chinese government.

Zhang Peili

A standout work by Zhang Peili, China's first video artist, shows a female newscaster on China's state television, CCTV, repeating a meaningless screed about water. The woman, Xing Zhibin, with bouffant hair, and an expressionless middle-aged face from the 1980s and 1990s, was China's Walter Cronkite.

Mr. Zhang, 60, was shattered, he said, by the end of the democratic movement at Tiananmen Square. "That left a heavy influence on every Chinese person, and it lasts until today," he said in his small apartment in Hangzhou.

He wanted to find a way to depict the absurdity of the state broadcaster never reporting the monumental event on the square.

A friend of the artist contacted Ms. Xing and suggested that she read the definition of water many times over.

"I lied and let my friend pass on the message that I was doing an education project about water," he said. "I still don't know if she knew that this video of her was actually used for a contemporary art piece."

Mr. Zhang is one of the most influential art teachers in China. He detects less political restlessness among the new generation of students, who are impressed by the new consumer-driven economy.

Still, the huge gap between the rich and the not-so-rich in China is a recipe for future unrest, he said. But for the moment, he went on: "I procrastinate. Society is procrastinating. There is a lot to be done to change society but mostly we just skip it and wait."

Kan Xuan

Visitors climb six flights of stairs to reach Kan Xuan's studio overlooking the red tiled roof of Beijing's ancient Confucius Temple. On a wooden table rests her laptop and a monitor. There is little art on the walls and no signs of her video works. "I like video because it disappears," she said. "It doesn't hang around."

Ms. Kan's two videos in the show are from 1999, and more personal in style than that of her mentor, Zhang Peili. The first, "Kan Xuan! Ai!" catches glimpses of her as she runs through a subway tunnel, weaving in and out among the commuters.

In the second piece, "Post-Sense Sensibility," Ms. Kan surveys an underground art exhibition held in a basement on the outskirts of Beijing. The show was an exuberant, anything-goes outburst of installation art that surfaced after the sullen post-Tiananmen period.

Ms. Kan's hand-held camera captures the outrageous art — pig intestines strung from the ceiling, a stillborn fetus lying next to a human face poking through a bed of ice. Art lovers crowd around the installations, hungry for a new era of unfettered expression.

The documentary is important for the sake of history, Ms. Kan, 45, said. But she long ago moved on.

Her more recent video work focuses on the tombs of Chinese emperors and their courtiers. She has traveled to the far reaches of China, often trekking up mountains to capture the emperors' remains. "When I was traveling I told myself: 'See what you see and feel what you feel.' I have used simple techniques."

Ms. Kan was one of four female artists for the 2007 Venice Biennale but she doesn't care, she said, about gender politics. What's more important, she

pointed out, was to remain independent of the commercial galleries. Unable to survive on her creative videos, she has often taken jobs in high-end commercial film production, including filming luxury sports cars on treks from Beijing to northern Italy.

Even though her themes dwell on China, she considers herself an international artist and lives between Beijing and Amsterdam. “I only choose to be in shows where the curators and the artists work hard,” she said, “whether it’s Chinese artists or not.”

Qiu Zhijie

A vast multipaneled ink on paper map by Qiu Zhijie, one of the pioneers of China’s contemporary art world, is the only new work in the exhibition.

Over the years, Mr. Qiu has drawn outsized maps that combine fantasy with politics. The Guggenheim commissioned a map that juxtaposed Chinese and global events with the unfolding contemporary art scene in Beijing and Shanghai.

A master calligrapher, Mr. Qiu, 48, learned the discipline of painting characters as a child. His spidery writings, in English and Chinese characters, scrawl across the map that traces the torturous path from Mao to Xi Jinping. Some may see the work’s style as resembling Saul Steinberg’s maps for *The New Yorker*.

A figure who straddles the establishment and the fringes, Mr. Qiu works in a cavernous studio outside Beijing. He was still putting finishing touches to the map just weeks before the show’s opening. “Coca-Cola back to China, Star Wars, Ronald Reagan,” he said, reading out some of the early references.

The map seems politically safe: The Tiananmen Square crackdown is referred to as an “incident,” buried in small print. One milestone seems unintentionally pointed in its misspelling. “Reunifiction of HK” reads a phrase, a reference to the Chinese government’s plans for reunification of Hong Kong with the mainland. The banner “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” is strung across the top of the map, a motif that should please the government.

Mr. Qiu has been criticized in China’s social media for leading a government-run academy. “A lot of infuriated netizens say I am bribed by the government,” he said. “But if we didn’t teach in the art institutions how are the younger artists going to be trained?”

The variety and rebelliousness of the works from the ’90s and the early 2000s were long overdue for exposure at a mainstream Western museum, he said.

“The art I see here in Beijing is totally different to what I see in New York,” he said. “The big face school of painting gave a fake image of what Chinese art is. The Guggenheim will correct the image.”

Zoe Mou contributed reporting.

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