

We Chat

A Dialogue in Contemporary Chinese Art

Curated by Barbara Pollack

WeChat is a mobile messaging app, developed in China, with more than 600 million users world-wide. Combining the functions of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram in a country that bars all three, WeChat has become the primary means of communication for members of China's younger generation. Interestingly, this communication is not solely taking place in China but across borders, bringing together young people in mainland China with their contemporaries living in the Chinese diaspora. As such, it is a technological advance that both reflects and encourages a new Chinese identity, one less rooted in nationalism and cultural restrictions, one more open to global influences and transcultural participation.

In the thirty years since Chinese contemporary art first gained recognition in the west, much has changed about the identity of Chinese artists and their consideration of their role in society. The pioneers in this field who emerged in the 1990s had been directly influenced by the Communist era, the period from the revolution in 1949 through the Cultural Revolution ending in 1976 when China was isolated from the rest of the world and art-making was strictly state-controlled. In response to these conditions, they created works that often appropriated the iconography of propaganda or alternatively reached back

to the earlier era of Imperial China, directly exploring their Chinese identity at a time when their home country was just beginning to open its doors to western influences.

In contrast, the artists in this exhibition are products of an entirely different China. They are all born in China after 1976—the year of Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution—growing up with much more freedom than Chinese artists of a previous generation. They are all products of the Open Door Policy and the rapidly expanding economy in mainland China over the past thirty years, providing them with far more information about global art movements and far more career opportunities. Most have chosen to live in China, though several of them were educated in the west. A few have made the United States their new home, looking back on China with a fresh perspective.

The dividing line between these two groups is as fluid as their individualistic identities. Any attempt to frame them within a single cultural category is destined to be an exercise in futility. If anything, this is a generation most characterized by its diversity: diversity in style, in choice of mediums, in perspectives on China, and on their role as artists.



ABOVE (from left): Pixy Yijun Liao, *The King Under Me*, 2011, digital c-print, 34 x 44 x 2 inches, courtesy of the artist
Liu Chuang, *Love Story* (detail), 2006-14, found books, artist-colored rocks, wooden platform and handwritten text on wall, dimensions variable, platform with books: 12 x 94 x 44 inches, courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York



Sun Xun, *The Time Vivarium—06*, 2014, acrylic and ink on paper mounted to aluminum, 59 7/8 x 99 1/4 x 1 1/8 inches (framed), courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York

As products of the One Child Policy—being the first generation to grow up without siblings to compete with for their parents' and grandparents' attention—this sense of individuality may be presumed to come naturally. But in some ways, this state of uniqueness is counterbalanced by the need to conform in order to compete in the new market economy which privatized basic needs such as housing, education, and health care. The young artists in this exhibition are struggling with the contradictions in this situation and attempting to develop identities that can come to terms with this struggle. Individual works, such as Ma Quisha's searing video confession, directly comment on this situation. Other works, such as Jin Shan's *No Man City*, are a reflection of the severe generation gap between parent and child, as if he and his father grew up in two different countries due to the impact of transformational growth in China in recent years.

But, by and large, these artists move beyond details of biography to the more central issue of considering the extent to which Chinese identity still bears meaning in an age of globalization. As opposed to their predecessors who often defined themselves in the context of an East-West dichotomy, these artists situate themselves in a stream of influences as diverse as Japanese anime, Anselm Kiefer, relational aesthetics and even traditional ink-and-brush painting. The burden of history—even one as glorious as the 5,000-year-old legacy of Chinese art—is carried

lightly when referenced at all. Instead, the notion of Chinese art is dealt with as a cultural fiction, one created as much for marketing as for self-identification. From this perspective, Chinese identity is only as accurate as a passport photograph, not a truthful and dimensional portrait of the artist.

In this case, it would seem that Chinese artists would run the risk of homogenization, creating artworks as ubiquitous and fungible as McDonald's and Starbucks, corporate entities as omnipresent in China as they are in the United States. Yet these artists don't relinquish the title of "Chinese artist" only to trade it in for the more banal category of "global artist." Their artworks retain an authenticity that comes from growing up in a specific set of conditions that can only be found in China. So for example, Guo Xi invents the identity of a Chinese artist, going so far as to make works for this fictional character, only to tell the story of his travails with shipping and customs officials, a situation specific to China. Or Sun Xun transforms animals, rendered in ink-and-brush work, into allegories worthy of Aesop's Fables to comment on Chinese government officials. Even Bo Wang, who lives in Brooklyn, looks back on his hometown of Chongqing with a series of photographs that documents this city's chaotic transformation and looks forward to the future of Chinese contemporary art with a sardonic video that captures Art Basel Hong Kong, linking this global art fair to the historic handover ceremonies of 1997.

By eschewing common stereotypes about China, these artists are developing more original ways of addressing issues in their home country and in doing so, complicating the notion of Chinese identity. Knowing full well that they may confuse western viewers who have come to anticipate a certain look or style to Chinese contemporary art, these artists initiate a dialogue in which they participate as individual art makers. WeChat is thus transformed from a messaging app to We Chat, a conversation about Chinese identity. This dialogue is possible because these artists are no longer burdened with presenting their culture to an uninformed western audience as the flow of information between China and the west has gone in both directions, bringing Chinese artists greater knowledge of contemporary art movements while providing us with a greater appreciation for China. In this global environment, Chinese identity is not so much erased or rendered obsolete. It can be presented, perhaps for the first time, with all its complexity and nuances, with as much diversity as can be expected from a country with 1.3 billion people.

—Barbara Pollack

THE ARTISTS

Bo Wang

b. 1982, Chongqing;
lives and works in Brooklyn, New York
2011 MFA School of Visual Arts, New York
2007 MS Physics, Tsinghua University, Beijing
2004 BS Physics and Mathematics,
Tsinghua University, Beijing

In photographs and films, Bo Wang explores the economic and political dynamics of China from the perspective of a Chinese artist, now living in the U.S. *Heteroscapes*, a photographic series inspired by Michel Foucault's writings on heterotopias, looks at the surrealistic nightmare of his hometown Chongqing, which has undergone radical transformation, obliterating aspects of the past to make way for an



ABOVE (from left): Ma Quisha, *Rainbow*, 2013, single channel video, 3:34 mins, courtesy of Beijing Commune

Jin Shan, *No Man City*, 2014, Tyvek on acrylic, aluminum frame, spotlight, motor, 83.5 x 256 x 114 inches, Tampa Museum of Art, Gift of the artist 2013.004. Photo by Bob Hellier, courtesy of the Tampa Museum of Art

ambivalent future. Wang also has made a film specifically for this exhibition looking at Art Basel Hong Kong, a major art fair that has contributed to the globalization of the Chinese art world.

Guo Xi

b. 1988, Yan Cheng, Jiangsu Province;
lives and works in Shanghai
2015 MFA New York University
2010 BFA China Academy of Art

In his installation titled *There never should have been an artist named Jia Siwen*, 2012–2014, Guo Xi invents a Chinese artist named Jia Siwen whose work was lost when shipped to the United States. In his absence, Guo Xi himself takes on the task of recreating these fictional artworks. With a variety of elements, including paintings and wall text, this installation investigates what it means to be a Chinese artist and how this identity itself can be a fabrication. Recognized as an emerging talent in China, Guo Xi was most recently honored with a solo installation at the West Bund Art Fair in Shanghai.

Jin Shan

b. 1977, Jiangsu Province;
lives and works in Shanghai
2000 BFA East China Normal University, Shanghai

A consummate sculptor who has worked in a wide variety of mediums, Jin Shan often plays the bad boy with works that tweak viewers' expectations. For example, earlier in his career he installed a life-size replica of himself, standing and peeing, like a fountain, into the canal for the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007. With *No Man City* (2014) he takes a more reflective look on his relationship with his father, who is also an artist. Jin Shan created a utopian structure, stretching 25 feet long, representing China's future. Onto this element, he projects shadows of images from classical paintings—a crane, a sunrise and a chrysanthemum—all taken from his father's more traditional paintings.

Continues on back panel



Bo Wang

Guo Xi

Jin Shan

Liu Chuang

Lu Yang

Ma Qiusha

Pixy Yijun Liao

Shi Zhiying

Sun Xun

Yan Xing

ON COVER

Bo Wang, *Heteroscapes #2* (detail), 2009, fine art inkjet print, 42 x 52 x 2 inches, courtesy of the artist

ON RIGHT (from top to bottom)

Shi Zhiying, *Cambodian Relief*, 2013, oil on canvas, 78.25 x 118 inches, courtesy of James Cohan, New York/Shanghai

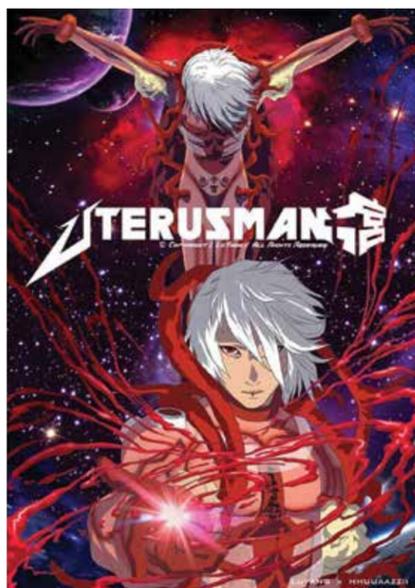
Lu Yang, *UterusMan*, 2013, game console, single channel video, 11:20 mins, courtesy of Beijing Commune

Guo Xi, *Unnamed Portrait by Jia Siwen*, 2013, painting on wooden plate, 23.6 x 15.75 inches, courtesy of Red Brick Art Museum

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This exhibition is sponsored by Wesleyan's College of East Asian Studies and Office of Academic Affairs with additional support from Sha Ye MA '96, Andrew and Heather Rayburn, and Amy Gao.

Special thanks to the following museums and galleries for loaning us work: Tampa Museum of Art; Sean Kelly, New York; Beijing Commune; Red Brick Art Museum; Salon 94, New York; James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai; Inna Contemporary Art Space; and Vanguard Gallery, Shanghai.



Liu Chuang

b. 1978, Hubei Province; lives and works in Beijing
2001 BFA Hubei Institute of Fine Arts

Deeply influenced by conceptual art practices, Liu Chuang has created a series of installations that have been shown internationally, including in *The Generational: Younger Than Jesus* at the New Museum in 2009. In *Love Story* (2014), Liu assembled an installation from romance novels found at a street corner lending library frequented by migrant workers in Chenzhen. He discovered that the readers often wrote inscriptions in the margins, commenting on their own loneliness and longing to return to their families back home. Liu Chuang color-coded these comments and had them translated into English, which was then inscribed on the walls of the gallery for audiences to appreciate.

Lu Yang

b. 1984, Shanghai; lives and works in Beijing
2010 MFA China Academy of Fine Arts
2007 BFA China Academy of Fine Arts

Considered a rising star in China, Lu Yang is an expert animator and digital artist who designs both installations and video projects. In 2014, she invented *UterusMan*, inspired by a Japanese transgender artist in Tokyo. *UterusMan* is both a 3-D animation and a fully operational video game that visitors are encouraged to play. This fictional character plays with the idea of gender roles by equipping a male character with female reproductive organs capable of magical powers that must be used as weapons in order to win the game. Though Lu Yang, like most women artists in China, would not call herself a feminist, she is nonetheless creating works that challenge traditional roles ascribed to Chinese women.

Ma Qiusha

b. 1982, Beijing; lives and works in Beijing
2008 MFA Alfred University
2005 BFA Alfred University, New York

Ma Qiusha makes videos that evoke a violent, visceral quality, bordering on performative. In her early work *From No.4 Pingyuanli to No.4 Tianqiaobeili* (2007), she faces the audience and recounts her training as an artist, from elementary school through college, in harrowing detail. Plucked from her kindergarten class as having talent, Ma was then sent to drawing classes every day after school, which she describes as the "end of her childhood." At the end of the video, she gingerly removes a razor blade from her mouth, a symbol of the sharp pain of this remembrance. Her account echoes the experience of many young Chinese artists.

Pixy Yijun Liao

b. 1979, Shanghai; lives and works in Brooklyn, New York
BS Shanghai International Studies University
MFA University of Memphis

Pixy Liao has garnered awards and accolades for *Experimental Relationship*, an ongoing photography series begun in 2007. Collaborating with her Japanese boyfriend, Liao takes a skewered look at heterosexual relationships, often reversing the power dynamics between a man and a woman to humorous effect. Working in New York, her photographs contradict a recent trend in China in which traditional gender roles are being reinforced due to family pressure to marry and have a child by the age of 30 or else risk being considered a "leftover woman," the term applied to educated single women living in Chinese urban centers.

Shi Zhiying

b. 1979, Shanghai; lives and works in Shanghai
2005 MFA Shanghai University Fine Arts College

Heavily influenced by Buddhism, Anselm Kiefer and traditional Chinese ink painting, Shi Zhiying is best known for her monochromatic, meditative canvases. Often inspired by stele and reliefs of ancient artifacts found in Chinese art museums, she renders these subjects in almost three dimensional detail. For *Dong Ujimqin Qi Stone Iron Mesosiderite* (2013) she depicts a 195 lb. meteorite that landed in China in 1995.

Sun Xun

b. 1980, Fuxin; lives and works in Beijing
2005 MFA China Academy of Fine Arts

The three paintings in this exhibition comes from Sun Xun's 2015 exhibition at the Sean Kelly Gallery titled *The Time Vivarium*. Inspired by a trip to New York's American Museum of Natural History, Sun went about creating his own encyclopedic view of the world, including multiple paintings of anthropomorphic animals from which he made an animation. Acutely aware of China's history and political situation, Sun Xun uses these animals as allegories of Chinese political leaders, turning heads into megaphones and movie cameras as a commentary on government surveillance.

Yan Xing

b. 1986, Chongqing;
lives and works in Beijing and Los Angeles
2009 BFA Sichuan Fine Art Institute

The preeminent performance artist of his generation, Yan Xing has been greatly influenced by relational aesthetics, translating this strategy to a Chinese context. Working as well in video, photography, and installation, he has often examined his identity as a gay man, both in terms of Chinese society and western art history. For this exhibition, Yan Xing will develop a unique intervention, working closely with students to stage a happening on campus.

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Tuesday, January 26 – Sunday, February 28, 2016
Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery
Wesleyan University Middletown, Connecticut

