

An exuberant vision of China

[Print](#)

By Constance Wyndham

Published: April 4 2007 03:00 | Last updated: April 4 2007 03:00

The art world is constantly on the lookout for new idols. In the late 1980s it came across Chinese contemporary art and was soon seduced by the strong, unapologetic imagery created by artists from a country in transition. The work had a political motivation that felt both authentic and exotic to international buyers; western artistic expression seemed sluggish by comparison. Helped by the media attention that has been focused on China in recent years, the market for Chinese contemporary art has surged ahead, with works by some artists fetching more than \$2m apiece at auction last year.

Wang Jin, whose work is currently on show at Friedman Benda gallery in New York, explains that "every generation wants to create its own image of a new China". Wang and his artist peers have, he says, found contemporary art a useful language for exploring "China's problems and their possible solutions".

He is one of a group of performance artists whose work came to prominence in the 1990s and on show here is a selection of sculpture and photography that spans his career from then until the present.

Wang was born in 1962 in the northern province of Shanxi, but has made his home in Beijing. He studied at the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts and taught art at the Beijing Institute of Fashion Design until 1992. He is known for his piece "To Marry a Mule", which he performed in Beijing in 1995. Vivid photographs of the performance, in which the suit-clad artist poses next to his mule-bride, attracted considerable attention at the Venice Biennale in 1999.

"To Marry a Mule" was inspired by Wang's eight futile attempts to join his wife, who was studying in the US. He was refused a visa each time and the fiasco ended in the couple's divorce. In the performance, a mule, lavishly decked out in hat and stockings, and with rouged cheeks, represents the stubborn absurdity of American bureaucracy. His bride sports a pink veil while Wang clutches a bouquet of roses: he chose pink as the dominant colour for the performance because, he says, "no one understands red any more".

Until then, Wang had used a lot of red in his performances. The colour has many layers of meaning in Chinese tradition, apart from its political associations; it is a celebratory colour, used widely during Chinese New Year and weddings.

In a photograph of "Beijing - Kowloon" - a 1994 performance that anticipated the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China - the artist painted 200 metres of the railway track linking Beijing and Hong Kong a startling red. It was a comment on both the growth of "red" China and on the country's reacquisition of territory governed by the west. Similarly, a striking photograph documents a performance in which a long-haired Wang zealously flings armfuls of red pigment into the Red Flag Canal, an icon of communist China's development in the 1960s. The dyed canal looks like a red vein pulsing through the landscape.

Wang has also engaged with the rise of consumerism in his country. In 1996, he was invited to make a work for the opening of a department store. His response was a 30m-long wall of ice erected between the shop and the shoppers, with jewellery, watches and consumer goods embedded in each frozen block. After the opening ceremony, the crowd charged towards the wall and set upon it with ice picks. The performance lives on in a series of black-and-white close-ups of the faces of eager shoppers as they hack at the wall in pursuit of consumer collectibles.

The effect of being able to "see through these transparent materials to an object that remains out of reach" is one that intrigues Wang.

The stars of the show are three exquisite replicas of Beijing opera robes, fashioned from transparent PVC and embroidered with fishing thread. Entitled "Dream of China", they are intended as a comment on the

consequences of rapidly advancing technology - industries such as plastics are booming at the expense of high culture. The robes are accompanied by dramatic, back-lit photographs of the artist wearing the outfits: it is the artist himself who has become the unreachable object.

Lately Wang has decided that he "belongs behind the art" and has eschewed performance. Instead he has been making large-scale porcelain replicas of various body parts. Two huge teeth and a mould of his jaw occupy the gallery floor; according to Wang, teeth are the source of our determination to succeed.

With lots of pieces from the 1990s on display here, one wishes that Wang's more recent work was better represented, but the gallery space - an Upper East Side town house - simply does not have room for his latest sculpture, a huge replica of his vertebrae.

As key players in the art market, galleries can't afford not to accommodate these larger works by sought-after artists such as Wang. The gallery must satisfy the market; Friedman Benda will soon be moving to a larger Chelsea space.

'Wang Jin' is at the Friedman Benda gallery, New York, until April 22. Tel +1 212 794 8950

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2008

"FT" and "Financial Times" are trademarks of the Financial Times. [Privacy policy](#) | [Terms](#)
© Copyright The Financial Times Ltd 2008.