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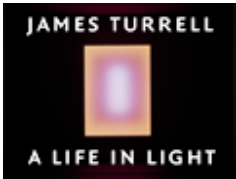
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NEWS & FEATURES

April 28, 2007



"Fighting the Flood - Red Flag Canal" (1994)
Wang Jin

AI Reviews: Wang Jin at Friedman Benda

by William Hanley

NEW YORK, April 18, 2007—One of the first of his contemporaries to throw his hat into the international art world, **Wang Jin** is in the strange position of making art in an environment where prices often get more attention than aesthetic maneuvering. But as an artist who consistently addresses Chinese history and society in his work, that nation's ever-growing market—and the increasingly international audience that has come with it—has inevitably influenced his practice.

The first career-spanning survey of Wang's work is on view at Manhattan's **Friedman Benda** gallery (formerly Barry Friedman Ltd.) through April 22. Large-scale photographs of Wang's performances in Beijing from the 1990s form the foundation of the exhibition and are shown throughout it.

"I'm not even sure that I was thinking in terms of artistic expression at the time," said Wang of his performance work. "You had a generation of young people in China who hadn't really thought about what to do with their lives, and it was more of a way to express how one feels in the face of societal pressures. "For me, these performances were really a way to face Chinese society."

If his initial audience was a small group of similarly minded members of his generation, the international art world took notice of him in 1995, when Wang produced his most famous affront to Chinese social traditions.

He staged the performance *To Marry a Mule* after his first wife emigrated to America without him, and like many of his contemporaries, he was left aimless and frustrated in Beijing. In now-famous



"To Marry a Mule" (1995)
Wang Jin



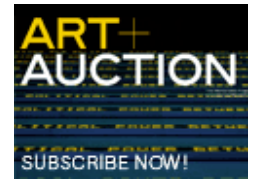
"A Chinese Dream" (2006)
Wang Jin



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photographs of the performance, on view in this exhibition, Wang stands wearing a black tuxedo next to a white mule, which he has dressed in sheer stockings, a pink wedding veil and brightly rouged cheeks.

The artist's serious, almost forlorn expression evokes a personal sense of powerlessness that can easily be extrapolated to represent Chinese society at large—although he insists that his own interpretation of the event has changed over time.

When the images were shown at the Chinese pavilion at the 1999 **Venice Biennale**, they captivated Western audiences, and the market for Chinese contemporary art exploded. With the new collectors came a much larger and almost entirely American and European audience that forced Wang to reconsider the social criticism in his work.

"A lot of the work in the 1990s came out of people's inner struggles and conflicts with what was happening [in China]," Wang said. "Now, it's more about a relationship to the external world. The issues that I'm dealing with are much more universal issues, rather than issues of personal pressure and frustration."

Speaking about one of the show's highlights, his *Chinese Dream* series—Chinese opera robes crafted from diaphanous PVC using traditional methods—he said, "I was attracted to the idea of transparency, and the transparent wall between you and the thing you would like to grasp. ... That is a way for me of describing China."

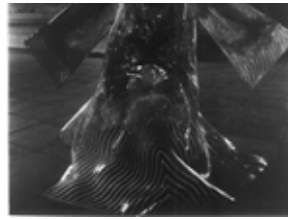
China imagined as an elusive and seductive entity runs throughout his recent work, and as Western collectors' continue to be smitten by it, Wang has reservations about how the market will ultimately impact contemporary art in China. "The idea of what the impact will be on the next generation of Chinese artists, whether they will be overly distracted by the lure of the marketplace, it's really hard to say what the result will be," he said.

But as the Chinese economy continues to grow, another shift is taking place.

Interest in Chinese contemporary art on the part of mainland collectors has also risen in the last year or two, and that may cause Wang to reconsider his strategies once again. "The question of larger interest from mainland collectors and collecting institutions—and the wider mainland audience that comes with it—is very interesting," he said. "I may have to change my visual language as that audience grows."

William Hanley is a journalist and critic based in Brooklyn, N.Y.

All images courtesy of Friedman Benda



"Dream of China No. 2"
(1998)
Wang Jin



"Beijing - Kowloon" (1994)
Wang Jin



"Bank Note (100 US Dollars)" (2005)
Wang Jin