

## New York Magazine: Art Review

# The Great Mall?

**Examining the old iconography of Communism and the consumerist images that are replacing it, artists from an evolving China find some common ground.**

**By Mark Stevens**

Contemporary China is a culture of broken pieces. Colonialism, world war, and Marxism upended the traditional Confucian foundations of the society. Then a visionary Communist ideology, which sought to fill the vacuum and recast the Chinese mind, crumbled and rotted away. Now money rules in a betwixt-and-between society at loose spiritual ends. Of course, many people hold great hopes for the new China, believing that the shiny allure of a consumer economy will lead its authoritarian regime toward democratic capitalism. That is the essential bet of the Western democracies, which are prepared to sacrifice Tibet and the stray writer in the belief that a world that makes money together stays together.

Chinese artists, however, are not paid optimists: They have been examining the broken pieces of their culture, turning them this way and that, to catch the complex and elusive glint of what it means today to be Chinese. Anyone interested in China's evolving character -- certain to be one of the great themes of the twenty-first century -- will want to see their work in "Inside Out: New Chinese Art," now at the Asia Society on Park Avenue and the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City (an easy two-stop subway ride from Manhattan). Organized by Gao Minglu, in association with Colin Mackenzie of the Asia Society and Gary Garrels of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the exhibition includes more than 80 pieces by 58 Chinese artists. Most of the work is from the mainland, but artists from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and around the world are also represented. The authorities in Beijing did not participate in the selection. Although some serious artists are struggling to revive the classical arts of China -- a radical effort in a country that has tried to eradicate its past -- they are not the focus of this show. The curators instead concentrate upon social and politically inspired art. Artists emerging from totalitarian systems often seem particularly attracted to a Dadaesque social critique -- to gestures, installations, performance. In Germany, Russia, and now China, they have taken up this style in part because traditional painting and sculpture cannot give adequate form to the psychic and historical traumas undergone by their societies. As a rule, most political art -- in China no less than in the West -- simply illustrates platitudes about, for example, consumer culture. But there is work in this exhibit that has the unforgettable force of necessity. The possibility of jail can concentrate the mind.

The principal subject for Chinese artists raised under Communism is the collapse of the metaphysical billboard -- the failure of the great signs of history, whether classical, Maoist, or capitalist, to sustain the dreams they arouse. Soon after the government relaxed some of its control over art in the middle eighties, a number of artists made a point of using the color gray; in Mao Zedong No. 1, for example, Wang Guangyi painted a gray version of a famous image of Mao, which the artist set within a grid of imprisoning lines. The color not only shocked eyes accustomed to years of reddish hosannas to the father of the revolution -- that gray can shock at all is wittily revealing -- but seemed to bleed the meaning from the ideology itself. Wu Shan Zhuan's installation Red Humor,

1986 is a room peeling with hundreds of corroding posters that blare out innumerable contradictory slogans -- a Chinese Babel.

Still, many artists were ardently idealistic about a new world in the early years of political relaxation, as the democratic movement grew and students put up a great array of hopeful posters in Beijing. The killings in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the subsequent crackdown ensured that Chinese artists would not be easily fooled again. As Western consumer goods began to pour into the country -- attended by widespread corruption -- artists were quick to treat pop advertising as a cousin to political sloganeering. A way to control and usurp the mind of the population: Money became the new Mao. Wang Guangyi's Great Castigation Series: Coca-Cola does not make a strong distinction between the reds of Coke and the reds of the Cultural Revolution. The implied equivalence between ideological systems is not persuasive, but the picture tellingly conveys the shocking shifts of perspective undergone by China. In Wang Jin's Ice: Central China 1996 -- a truly mordant piece of satire -- the artist froze a collection of fancy consumer items in a great wall of ice in the middle of a city. The people tore apart the ice with their fingers to get the goods.

Classical Chinese culture, no less than capitalism and socialism, is viewed as a hollowed-out message. Traditionally, the art of calligraphy conveys powerful meanings on many different levels; the handling of the brush, for example, adds inflection to words of poetry and the copying of works embodies the continuity of the culture. In Book From the Sky, Xu Bing created whole volumes written in what appeared to be Chinese characters. But he himself made up all the characters: They were just unintelligible abstract shapes. (John Cage might have approached Beethoven in a similar manner). Qiu Zhijie took one of the most copied works of calligraphy in Chinese, Orchid Pavilion Preface, and wrote it out 1,000 times on the same piece of paper until it became an opaque black. The gesture was not disrespectful. On the contrary, it displayed a kind of crazed respect that revealed how impenetrable the repeated meanings of traditional Chinese culture have become. It buried them in a blackened field of ink -- upon which one might yet hope to rebuild classical culture.

Contemporary Chinese artists often gather in small communities, trying to create a mental space free of confining ideologies. In particular, performance art, both in these communities and among Chinese artists generally, has become an important form of speech in a culture crisscrossed by materialistic messages. The art with an unexpectedly spiritual or even Buddhist tone (never obviously announced) is often the strongest. Zhang Huan's performances are particularly powerful, for example, because they are not merely comments on politics or society. Instead, they convey with visceral brilliance the deeper spiritual passions of Chinese culture. In To Add One Meter to an Unknown Mountain, for example, the artist joined living flesh to a mountaintop. The small, gathered pile of naked bodies makes a beautiful rhyme with some distant and misty mountains that evoke traditional Chinese painting. Body and spirit, past and present, become one.