



Notes from China

An Art Project
by Robert Priseman and Marco Cali

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A visitor studies the work of Julian Brown
Contemporary Drawings From Britain at XAFA, 2015

An Introduction

By Marco Cali

Chinese Contemporary Drawing

The 19th and 20th Centuries have been times of great change for China and its people. A terminal decline in the empire during the 19th Century was followed by invasion from Japan in the 1920s, then civil war in the 1940s, and the tumultuous times of Communist rule. Even the 21st Century has been a time of incredible change. In little over one generation, China has gone from a poor largely agrarian society to the industrial and economic power of today.

How differing generations of living artists have responded to this is the subject of this exhibition. Prior to opening to the West, fine art in China was influenced by classical European art via the traditions of Russian art academies. In parallel to this, traditional Chinese art has continued to exist, largely unchanged, in a separate world of academic teaching and practice.

Today there is great interest in contemporary art from the west. But most Chinese artists are in the same situation as artists in medieval Britain were with respect to European art. They just don't see much of it in the flesh.

Although far more nuanced than I set out here, the artists in this exhibition can be understood to represent three major shifts in Chinese life: Those shaped by the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, those who grew up in its immediate aftermath, and those who were born under the one child policy.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-76) was a time of suppression, of erasing the past and with it, the individual. Children were actively encouraged to spy on their parents and report them for activities that went against the Maoist doctrine. Teachers and the educated were sent back to the land, to work on collectivised farms or employed as heavy labour in massive construction projects. How some artists managed to continue their practice is a large part of the story when seeing their works.

The subsequent generation was heavily influenced by this social trauma. There was an invisible barrier of silence between parents and children where certain areas of life were not spoken of. This, of course, was the intention of the Communist project. To abolish the family and make individuals subservient to the state. The arts had also been co-opted into this process, so that taking the lead from the more established Soviet model, existing and new art academies (Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts est 1949, Yunnan Arts University est 1959) taught the communist realism model as the norm. Again, this art form serves to suppress the individual and hold up a collective, and even specifically state level, ideal. For the visual arts this meant heroic figures as model citizens and all creative forms sending out the same message of group, not individual, aspiration. In addition, this generation has seen the falling away of the command economy and the introduction of market forces. However, they have been brought up through an education system that was still in thrall to the

traditions of the Communist period. This system although excellent in many respects, is centred on a rote-learning style and continues with a mix of traditional and Communist era Chinese cultural forms, such as regimented dancing routines, stylized singing and lyrics and slogans in praise of this or that subject matter.

The youngest artists whose work is in this collection, are of a generation for whom, of course, modern technology is ubiquitous. This is a feature of everyone of this age alive today, and not just in China. However, the one child policy, introduced in between 1978/80 and phased out in 2015, gives them a uniquely Chinese experience. This is broadly significant on two fronts. First, these individuals grew up under the biggest shift to a market economy seen in our times. Their personal life experience is completely at odds with that of their parents.

On the one hand they have also gone through an education system that is still heavily influenced by the traditions of old. On the other hand, this generation has been fully immersed in the dynamic energy of market forces. Cities that for the previous generations were relatively stable environments are now changing at a rapid rate. Massive buildings, 40 stories high apartment blocks or gigantic commercial centres spring up right across the urban landscape. The low rise, often quite poor quality rows of three or four floor flats with their narrow streets filled with small business vendors and market stalls have and continue to be, incredibly quickly, swept away, block-by-block.

The second notable significance to this generation's experience, is that they are emotionally and economically tied to the traditions of the historic Chinese family, with its multiple generations and many off-spring. These children were expected to honour and look after the parents and grandparents in their dotage. However, where this burden would be shared amongst many such sons and to a lesser extent daughters, now this situation has been turned on its head over the space of essentially one generation, so that now a single person finds him or herself with two parents and four grandparents. For a married couple, this means up to twelve elderly people to be looked after with at most a joint wage, as well as the expectation of bringing up their own family.

This generation has been, more than any other, inundated with the tsunami of Capitalist, and particularly Western, market culture. This spans all the forms, from films, fashion, music and, of course, art. What they have lived through is more at odds with what their formative years have equipped them with than for any previous generation.

We are at a very exciting time in the development of Chinese culture, and the visual arts in particular. All the drawings included in this collection speak of a very personal response to one of the most extravagant experiments in shaping a nation. The 19th Century was the time of Franco-British cultural hegemony, and the 20th Century was the so-called American Century. During both these periods the common language of the world could be understood as being led by these

political, economic and military powers. It is very hard not to conclude that the coming time is one when we will see an increasing influence of Chinese culture throughout the world.

Marco Cali, January 2016



To:

Robert
Priseman

焦野

2015.1.25

Jiao Ye

To Robert Priseman

29 x 21 cm, Wax Crayon on Paper

2015

Notes from China

by Robert Priseman

Notes from China

The first time I met Marco Cali and Zhang Xing was with Matthew Krishanu and Alex Hanna on the 14th August 2015 at the Arts Centre, Rich Mix, in Bethnal Green, London. Marco was an old college friend of Matthew's from the time they had studied Fine Art at St Martin's together and they had both known Xing there too.

Marco and Xing were interested in exploring the idea of putting on an exhibition of Contemporary British Paintings at the Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, where Xing held the position of Director of Drawing. Being a painter myself and having founded the group 'Contemporary British Painting' I was naturally intrigued. As we chatted over tea, it quickly became clear that Xing was a person of great vision, drive and determination, and I came to understand as we talked that he was considering a large scale survey exhibition. He spoke of forging international links between artists from the UK and China and creating some kind of 'Contemporary Chinese' exhibition in Britain as well.

It was a lot to take in, but the atmosphere was enjoyable and meeting both Xing and Marco was inspiring. Xing mentioned that while he was in London he would like to look at some actual paintings by a number of the artists he was interested in showing, several of whom were in our group. We talked about the ease of getting to their studios, which are often quite a way apart, when it suddenly occurred to me that my wife Ally and I held paintings by many of the artists he was interested in at our home in Wivenhoe. The collection we own had just returned from Huddersfield Art Gallery where it had been on public display for the previous five months. Huddersfield have a beautiful collection including one of Britain's top 10 paintings - Francis Bacon's *Figure Study II*, as well as *Evening Scene by the Docks* and *Moonlight Scene near Leeds* by Atkinson Grimshaw, *JYM Seated* by Frank Auerbach, *View of Margate* by Walter Sickert and the sublime *Day Painting* by Ian McKeever.

And so it was that Xing and Marco turned up to our house two days later, and what I thought would be a visit of an hour or two to see a dozen paintings ended up being a long afternoon taking in some 50 works of art. It was one of the most enjoyable afternoons I can remember in a long time, and after showing the paintings we took Xing and Marco on a tour of the village, taking in the boats on the quayside, The Garrison House and a small cottage at 68, Queen's Road which had once belonged to Francis Bacon, being the studio he had used to produce his portraits of the French philosopher Michel Leris.

A couple of weeks later I heard from Xing, who was by now back in China. He was talking about doing a British Painting show the following year. Great I thought - plenty of time to prepare, and I remember mentioning something about September or October being good. Xing then said he was thinking more April 2016. Stunned by the speed I was even more astonished a few weeks later when Marco and Xing got in touch to say they were now thinking of planning an



Top: Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts Gallery Building
Bottom: Marco Cali opens Contemporary Drawings From Britain, 2015

even earlier combined show of 'Contemporary British and Chinese Drawings' for December 2015.

Over the next four months I got to know Marco and Xing quite well through their emails and the occasional phone call. Xing was consistently strong and uncompromising in his decision making process, whilst Marco displayed a zen-like calm which complimented him beautifully. In working out the British side of the exhibition Xing and Marco selected over 100 works by 35 artists from the UK including Cathy Lomax, Rose Wylie, David Hockney, Lucien Freud, Marianne Walker, Mary Yacoob, Julian Brown, Phoebe Boswell, Geraint Evans, Simon Burton and Thomas Gosebruch. The process was interesting because of how rapid everything was and it led me to see that in China, as in New York, things can happen very quickly, whereas in Britain we tend to plan much more slowly.

At the end of September, following a symposium on British Painting at UCS where a number of us had been exploring the movement of painting away from the heart of the art establishment and towards the non-conformist position it takes today, Xing and Marco invited me out to Xi'an give a paper on the history of British painting and drawing whilst the 'Contemporary Drawings from Britain' exhibition was on. Having never been before I was both excited and somewhat apprehensive. The first thing I discovered was that being invited to China has to be made formal in order to gain a visa to enter the country. So I spent two weeks writing a talk, not quite knowing if I would be able to make the trip. The official invitation didn't arrive until a couple of weeks before I was due to leave, which meant getting the visa was tight. Then news arrived that Xing had fallen ill and would no longer be able to work on the show with us.

Apart from the international liaison officer Jasmine Zhao, Xing was the only contact in Xi'an Marco and I had at the Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, which left us unsure whether to continue with the trip or not. We decided to take the risk and go out anyway. I flew from Heathrow on the 28th November and arrived in Xi'an via Beijing two days later. At the airport I was met by He Yating who was one of XAFA's junior lecturers. An incredibly interesting person, Yating was both an excellent interpreter and very considerate. During the course of the next two weeks I got to know her well and came to greatly appreciate her sensitivities both to the subject of art and to artists themselves. The day after I arrived in Xi'an I hooked up with Marco again, who had already been there for a week teaching - it was really nice to see him.

The 'Drawings from Britain' show and its twin 'Coming in Chinese Academic Drawings' opened on the morning of Tuesday 1st December. Covering four floors, the exhibition was full of people. Even knowing a lot about the subject of British Contemporary art I still found real gems in the show which Xing had sourced and brought over from the UK, works which I had never encountered before. It was a real treat to see so much exciting and vibrant work from Britain all together in Xi'an. Added to that was the revelation of significant Chinese drawing rooted on the academic teaching traditions which Europe has long seemed to have forgotten.

A couple of days later and I gave my talk, which was titled 'From Holbein to Hockney' after which Marco, Yating and I went out sightseeing. It was fascinating to see the 2,200 year old Terracotta Army in Lintong, which is only an hour's drive from Xi'an. We also took in the less well known Xuzhou Museum of Miniature Terracotta Warriors from the Han Dynasty and the 7th century Buddhist Giant Wild Goose Pagoda which had previously housed sacred scriptures (now housed in the British Library). The real high-light of our trip though came after this when Marco and I began to meet up with a number of artists living and working in Xi'an.

It was the day following our trip to Lintong when Marco and I were introduced to the curator Mengmeng Wang at the OCAT Gallery in Xi'an. Whilst there we saw an exhibition of beautiful paintings by Liang Yuanwei, who is considered one of China's most respected female artists and a second striking show titled 'Zodiac Project' by the artist Gong Xu which consisted of twelve large scale paintings exploring a world of counter-mythology and fantasized prophecy. Then, later that evening we were driven out to the countryside, where we met the artist Jiao Ye at his private dining club. There, Marco and I met a number of Xi'an's leading artists and had the rare experience of seeing Jiao Ye's studio and a number of his works in progress. It was here that we first began to really understand a little of the cultural experiences which both shape and unite us as artists. Jiao Ye is in his 70's and he explained to me through Mengmeng that he had felt isolated from his artistic peers over many years. Yet his work had a power, vibrancy and authenticity which was hard to ignore and I wanted to know why he felt this way.

Jiao Ye explained that growing up he had been one of eight children and his father had owned the major share in Xi'an's city cinema. He went on to tell us how watching films in the family cinema as a child had nurtured his love of the visual arts which had planted the seed for his becoming an artist. Yet when the Cultural Revolution swept across China his father's business was taken from them. Under the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976, artists were expected to produce works sympathetic to the communist cause and adhere strictly to a Social Realist style of painting. As a consequence Jiao Ye's early works were realist in manner, but as he grew in confidence he realised he wanted to reject the teachings of the Cultural Revolution through his artistic practice and he gradually evolved a style which embraced the free flowing forms of abstract expressionist painting. The gestural nature of his mark making both embraced individuality and referenced the traditional brush work of Chinese calligraphy whilst resonating strongly with American painters such as Cy Twombly, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Sam Francis and Helen Frankenthaler. For his subject matter Jiao Ye began to see beauty in flowers, especially lotus and corn plants. By combining an idiosyncratic technique and the abstract beauty of natural forms, Jiao Ye aimed to create paintings which celebrated fertility, freedom and non-conformity in an attempt to move as far away as possible from the teaching and practices of the Cultural Revolution.

The idea of social conditions holding a strong influence over the way artists in

China choose to approach their work was something Marco and I came to see much more clearly as our trip went on. The day after visiting the studio of Jiao Ye we were taken by Mengmeng and the painter Wang Fenghua to meet some of the most interesting artists working in Xi'an at the start of the 21st century. Wang Fenghua is himself an exceptional artist who seems to carry the confidence of all the painters around him. Born during the heart of the cultural revolution in 1971, his work is photorealist in style and notable for its poetic portrayal of the lost, neglected and abandoned places of his native Xi'an. I loved it instantly and found the people-less environments he depicts to be deeply moving. They have a strong emotional resonance with the work of western painters like Casper David Friedrich and Atkinson Grimshaw combined with the modern sensibilities of Richard Estes, John Salt and George Shaw. By depicting the forgotten landscapes of his native city, Wang Fenghua has managed to fuse ideas around the rapid social expansion his generation has experienced with a historical continuity.

Other interesting artist we met were Dong Jian who was working on a series of paintings which combined digital interference with traditional landscape painting which rooted his work firmly in the traditional practices of painting, whilst placing it firmly after the arrival of the internet and Hu Zuhao whose powerful abstract works utilise traditional Chinese watercolour techniques with an aesthetic which resonates strongly with American colour field painters like Gene Davis and Ellsworth Kelly from the 1960's and British abstract painters like Susan Gunn and Bryan Lavelle

What became interesting in the light of this visit is how it appears that there are two core groups of artists, two parallel creative worlds in China. One is very traditional and rooted in the practices of the past while the other is keen to embrace the ideologies of global contemporary art practice. Many of the artists we met belong to this second group and had a fascination with western art and media. Yating explained how she had herself a love of American films and the glamour of the movie stars they showcase. She was born in 1980 and told us how all those born in China after 1980 were subject to the One-Child policy and are therefore almost always 'only' children. The mother of a young child herself, Yating went on to explain how many like her feel under a significant burden as they get older, with the twin pressures of raising their own children and simultaneously looking after aging parents coming to bare on them. The One-Child policy was phased out in 2015, marking another new chapter in Chinese social history.

When we returned to Britain I was keen to see if we could nurture and develop our fledgling new relationships and thought it would be nice to put together a small exhibition of works on paper as a way to experiment a little with both the practicalities of working with Chinese artists as well as using it as a foundation upon which to build something larger. I had a small exhibition booked at the Minorities Art Gallery in Colchester, where I was set to display a series of my own drawings on the theme of 'Freaks'. As they were already on display at the Gibberd Gallery in Harlow and then off to the Denison Museum in Ohio I figured they'd got plenty of attention, so I asked Kaavous Clayton the curator, if at the



Top: Marco and Robert visit Jiao Ye's Dining Club with Mengmeng and Wang Fenghua
Bottom: Robert at the Backstreet Café with artists from Xi'an

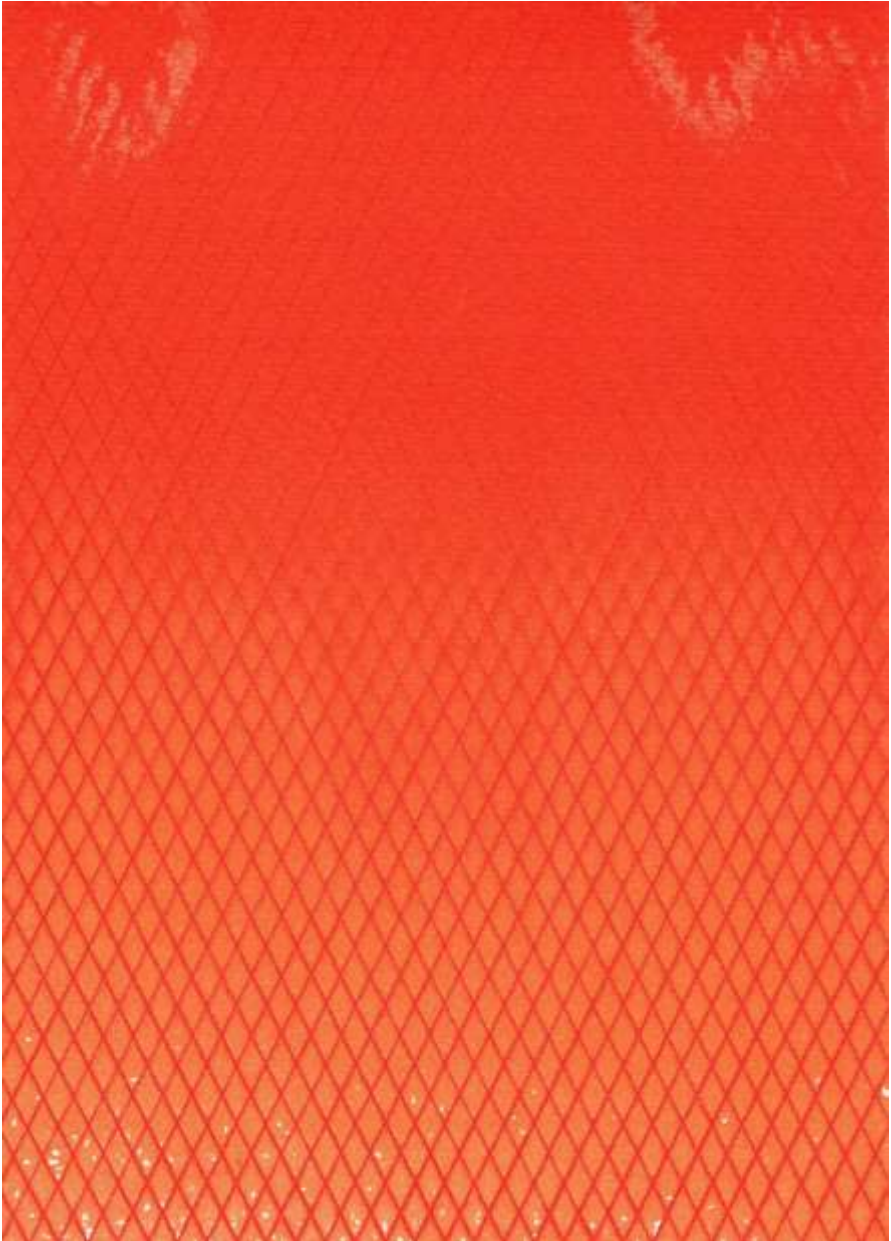
last minute he wouldn't mind swapping this planned show for a small display of Contemporary drawings from China. Kaavous couldn't have been more generous or accommodating, and so with the help of Mengmeng, Marco and Yating I set about making an initial selection for a modest show.

The works in this small collection can only ever offer a 'snap shot' of what is going on in Chinese art at the beginning of the 21st century, and they aim to represent a brief cross-section of some of the themes and ideas we have begun to encounter. It includes young like Cai Longfei, who at 24 is a product of the One-Child era, to Wang Fenghua who was born during the heat of the Cultural Revolution and Jiao Ye who was born before the arrival of the Cultural Revolution, saw it through, responded to it and then lived to see the One-Child policy come and go as well.

For helping bring this intriguing display together I wish to sincerely thank Mengmeng for her time, patience and good will in helping us to select some of the most interesting artists we see here. Yating for being so helpful with her interpretations and explanations of Chinese history. Marco for being such an inspiring and calm companion and collaborator, Kaavous for being so accommodating and most importantly of all to Zhang Xing for having the drive and vision to set this interesting adventure in motion.

Robert Priseman 2016

A Selection of Contemporary Chinese Works on Paper



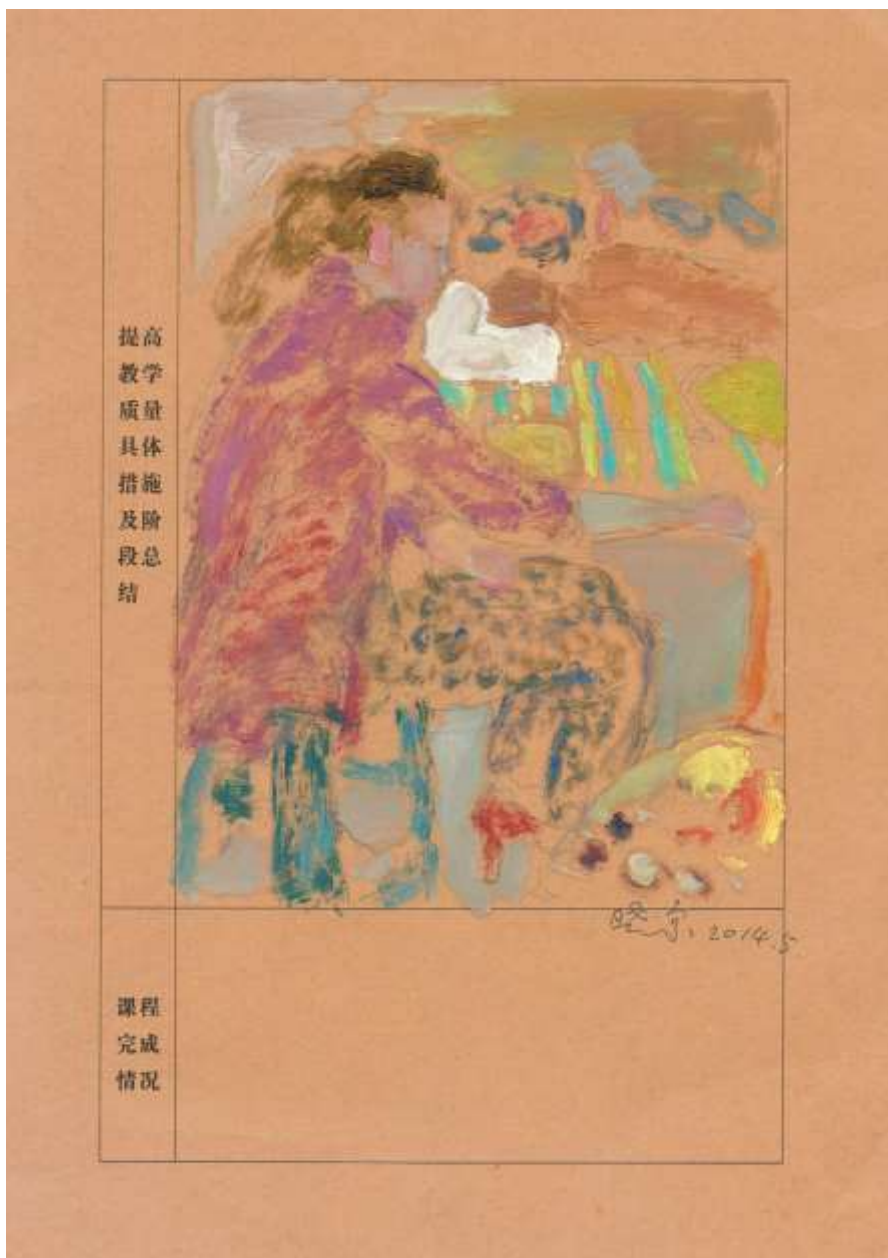
Hu Zuhao
Deep Orange
21 x 15 cm, Watercolour on Paper
2013



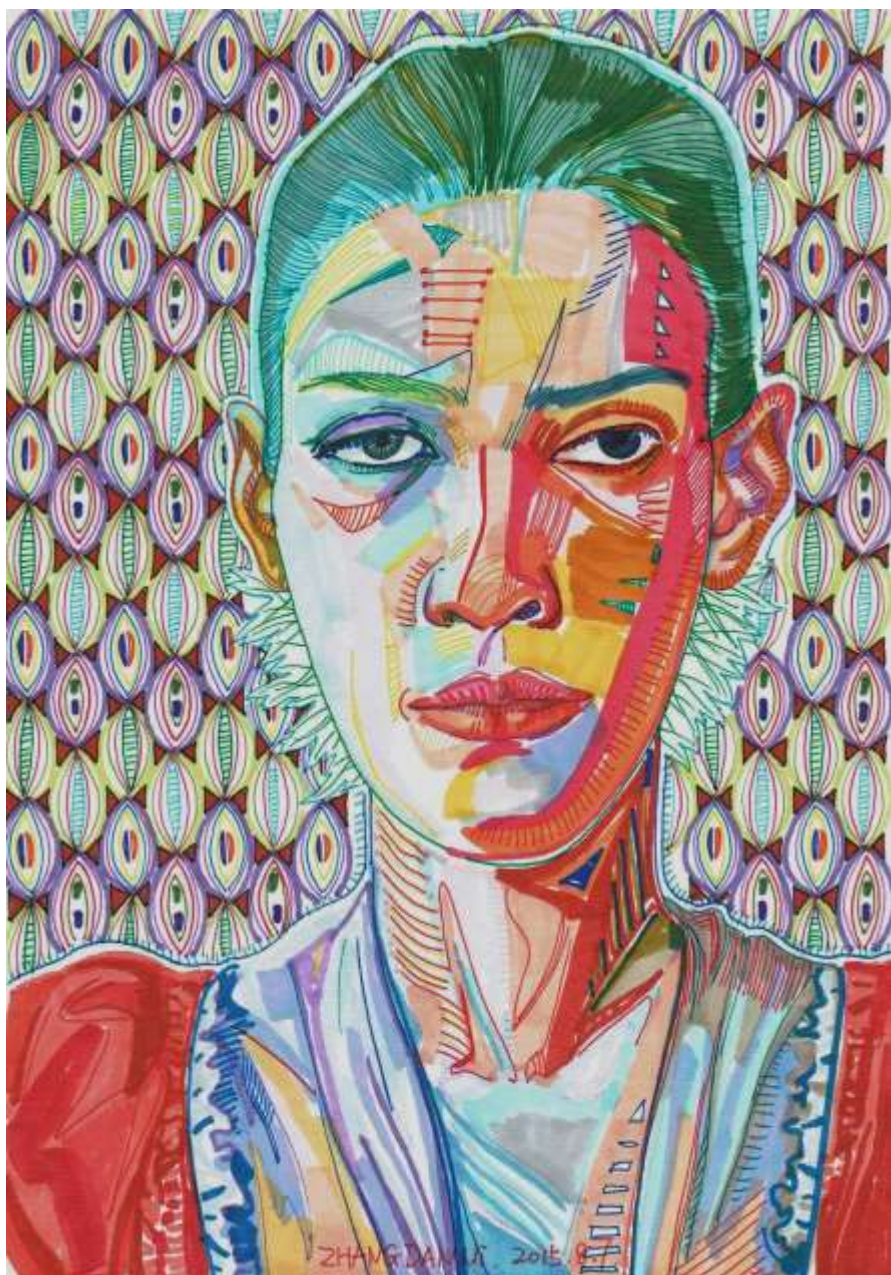
Gao Hao
Work 124, Automatic Controlled Anarchy 1
21.2 x 29.6 cm, Wine, Tar, Dark Soy Sauce by Eel on Paperboard
2011



Liu De
Unknown
36 x 36 cm, Acrylic on Paper
2015



Zhong Xiaojing
The Profile
28 x 21 cm, Oil on Paper
2015



Zhang Danni
Dangerous Liaisons II
29 x 21 cm, Marker Pen on Paper
2014



Gu Xiang

Boy

36.5 x 26 cm, Pencil on Paper

2003



Zhao Jia
Self Portrait
30 x 21 cm, Marker Pen on Paper
2016



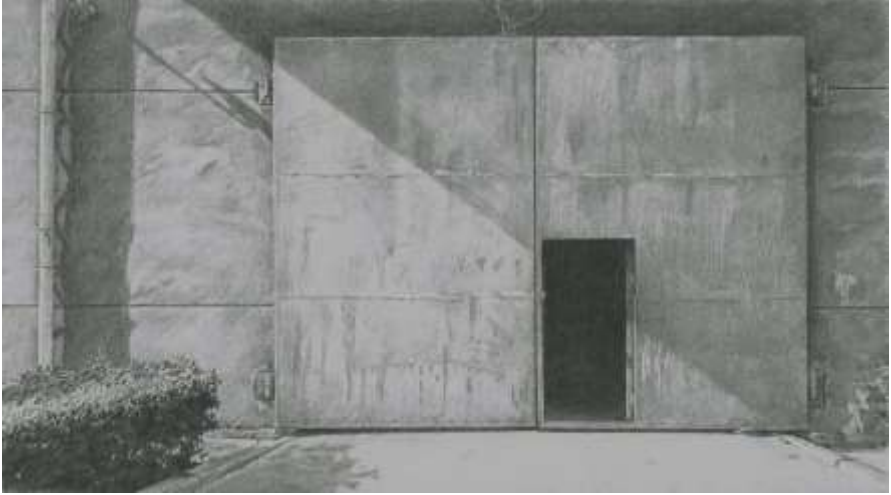
Su Jie
Peony Pavillion
23 x 31 cm, Oil on Paper
2016



Liao Zongrong
Where Are You Going Little Cricket?
23 x 30 cm, Watercolour on Paper
2015



Cai Longfei
Specimen
28 x 33 cm, Watercolour on Paper
2015



Wang Fenghua
11.00 AM
13.3 x 23.6 cm, Pencil on Paper
2015



Jiao Ye
Lotus Sketch
23 x 30 cm, Pastel on Paper
2015



Li Ma
Hazy Sight Outside the Window
19.5 x 26 cm, Pencil and Watercolour on Paper
2015



Wang Chao

Multitude

33 x 33 cm, Chinese Watercolour on Rice Paper

2013



Sunlei
Untitled
24.9 x 27.3 cm, Ink on Paper
2014



He Tianqi
Altman Vs Lil Monster
26 x 21 cm, Acrylic on Paper
2016



Top: Looking at Matthew Krishanu's drawing installation
Bottom: Visitors photograph six drawings by Rose Wylie

Afterword

By Mengmeng Wang

Contemporary Art in Xi'an: An Overview

Xi'an has a history stretching back a thousand years and is known as the most ancient city in China. Located in the middle of the country it is where our ancestors believed fengshui was born and where the land itself originated. Thirteen dynasties founded their capitals here, each leaving behind world class historic relics such as the Terra-Cotta Army, Giant Wild Goose Pagoda and Forest of Stone. And like every ancient civilization which has gone through a process of rapid modernization, Xi'an has experienced immense cultural stress in emerging from the shadows of its past.

From a contemporary art perspective, Xi'an shares a developmental similarity with many of the other large cities in China, all of whom are experiencing a near instant immersion into the digital era.

Contemporary art in Xi'an can trace its roots back to 1981, when 'The First Modern Art Exhibition, Xi'an 1981' arrived in the city. This exhibition acted as a significant catalyst for many Chinese artists, a 'call to arms' which saw a keen rise of interest in post-modernism in the northwestern region. Yet despite the influence of this show, Xi'an did not successfully become one of the key art terminals which were established in China during the 1985 New Wave Art Movement. Instead it turned to a silence which unexpectedly lasted for more than 20 years.

Then, in 2007, a group of local artists under their own initiative established a studio complex in an abandoned former soviet textile factory at No.1 State Northwest Printing and Dyeing Mill. At its peak nearly 200 artists had a practice here and they rapidly attracted the attention of both domestic and international critics, curators and collectors. In the media it was often compared with Beijing's 798 art district, yet five years later this brief renaissance came to an end when property developers began imposing high rents on the artists, forcing them out of a building they had given so much life and energy to. Lacking affordable studio space and support from the government, Xi'an's contemporary art community subsequently fell apart and drifted into another long hibernation.

After 2010 things began to warm up considerably when Xi'an was nominated to become one of China's new international cities. This status has consequently seen a number of innovative art museums and commercial galleries open up which has reinvigorated the attention given to the contemporary art being produced in the city. This has offered a fresh new platform for the artists in Xi'an with which to engage with the outside world, stimulating their ambitions for international dialogue and debate. The help, support and co-operation of talented curators from the region through the organization of exhibitions, essays and international exchange projects has also helped play a vital role in pushing forward Xi'an's newly emerging culture of contemporary art in the 21st Century.



Top: Visitors on the fifth day to Contemporary Drawings From Britain
Bottom: A visitor studies five drawings by Simon Burton

Currently, creative professionals in Xi'an are still fairly few in number and the most active artists tend to hold permanent positions as academics which help subsidise their practices. Many of them were born in the 1960s and 70s, and their work can be seen to embrace the changes this period has seen. Typically it displays a desire to move away from the academic realism of the Cultural Revolution to the multi-concept, multi-perspective art of post-modernism. The younger generation who follow, those who were born in the 1980s and 90s, are now emerging as both conscious inheritors and powerful new wave re-invigorators of Xi'an's contemporary art scene. And under the background of globalization, there appears to be an evolving characteristic emerging in their work of both diversity and inclusiveness. This can be observed in the recognition and acceptance of local identity which we often witness in their work, which is in turn combined with broader cultural issues and blended with contemporary art concepts.

It is important to consider that many artists in Xi'an have received an education overseas, which has exposed them to western influences and liberal insights. This has fostered an unconstrained choice of media and the creation of fresh modes for their work, which now utilises a very international language. Before this there was an implied and very deliberate avoidance of the historic context of Xi'an. Now, however, they are actively engaged in the local social ecology, often considering the crisis of homogeneity that globalization has brought. This collective thinking embodies a fresh initiative and critical awareness embodied through constant self-examination and questioning, which in turn has become a valuable tool for the newly evolving diversity of contemporary art in Xi'an today.

Just like any other subject, Chinese contemporary art has never been experienced as a pure pursuit free from politics. Instead we should look at it in light of the struggling, gambling and even compromising positions China has encountered during the process of recent and major cultural transformations. Through the development of more than three decades, artists and scholars are now attempting to establish their own discourses with self-renewal and self-reference instead of simply imitating Western styles as they tended to do in the 1980s. Although this system is not yet perfect, they have now begun a process of searching for their lost cultural roots and are paying attention to their own position among the international mainstream of contemporary art. In doing so they are creating something diverse, complex and full of vitality.

Hereby I would like to thank Robert Priseman and for all the dedication he has made with this exhibition. It is his passion, solicitude and effective work that made this exhibition appear in front of us. Although it is a very slight profile of Chinese contemporary art, yet real and fresh. I would also like to thank Marco Cali's for his help and our mutual friend Zhang Xing, for without him, nothing could happen today.

Mengmeng Wang
Chinese Spring Festival, 2016



Top: Visitors photograph themselves next to a Lucian Freud
Bottom: Yating and Marco at the Terracotta Army Museum



He Yating
Bridget Bardot
12.5 x 12.5 cm, Oil on Paper Plate
2015

Special Thanks

Simon Burton

Marco Cali

Kaavous Clayton

Fr. Stephen Evans

Thomas Gosebruch

Matthew Krishanu

Jia Huiming

Mengmeng Wang

He Yating

Zhang Xing

The Minorities Art Gallery, Colchester

XAFA, Xi'an

