

Window on China 2010: Big Draft - Shanghai Chinese Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection

19 November 2010 to 6 February 2011

The exhibition *Mahjong. Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, which was shown at the Kunstmuseum in 2005, evoked widespread media response both at home and abroad. It was also a great success with the public; more than 40,000 people visited the exhibition. The panorama-style show was an ideal introduction to contemporary Chinese art, which was scarcely known in Switzerland at the time. The exhibition catalogue is meantime even regarded by experts on the theme as a standard work.

The exhibition series *Window on China*, which was initiated in 2006, enables further collaboration with Uli and Rita Sigg and ensures that at regular intervals insight can be gained into their extensive collection. So far, works have been shown by artists from Canton, as well as by Liu Ye and Ji Dachun.

After an interval of two years, artistic positions from Shanghai are now exhibited within the framework of the China-Fenster series under the title *Big Draft - Shanghai. Contemporary art from the Sigg Collection*. This presentation includes works by thirteen Chinese artists who live and work in that metropolis, as well as works by two Beijing artist who make explicit reference to Shanghai.

Shanghai is a metropolis of superlatives. The 'city above the sea' - which is how the Chinese characters translate - is one of the world's ten largest cities, and has more than 18 million inhabitants. Thanks to its location on the delta of the river Yangtze, China's longest and busiest watercourse, the, today, largest Chinese industrial and port city was already of international importance in the early 20th century. Between 1949 and 1976, the so-called phase of isolation, not only artistic freedom but also all cultural exchange with foreign countries was suspended in Shanghai. Now, a good thirty years after the death of Mao, scarcely any other Chinese city expresses the radical changes that have taken place in that country as well as Shanghai. The enormous pressure to innovate elicited by China's growing economic importance worldwide is expressed in the constant, lightning-speed changes evident in that metropolis. Shanghai is constantly reinventing itself, thereby creating a field of tension between old and modern China, western and Chinese concepts. This forward propulsion, which is characterised by contradictions and tensions, is also evident in the extremely heterogeneous art landscape of Shanghai. A platform for young Chinese art is provided there, among other things, by the numerous galleries and by events such as the Shanghai Biennial and the Shanghai Art Fair.

It is not possible to identify artistic issues, themes or pictorial idioms that might be described as typical of Shanghai - the art scene in the metropolis is too heterogeneous for that. The fifteen artists selected for the exhibition however provide concrete evidence of the enormously creative potential that currently exists in Shanghai.

One of the artists in the exhibition is **Jin Feng** (*1962), whose politically critical works repeatedly cause a stir in Shanghai. His installation *Flying Angels*, 2002, is being shown here in Europe for the first time. He produced it after the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, and its half-man-half-bricks clay figures, hovering above mirrors, are reminiscent of so-called 'human bombs', who are both victims and weapons of their political or religious convictions. The artist explained that he reflected on the relationship between life and ideological conviction while working on this installation and that he wondered who has the right to determine the value of human life.

Chi Peng (*1981) creates fascinating pictorial works by blending reality and fiction. He does so by means of digital image processing. The large format photograph called *I'm a Little Scared, the Sky Is Getting Gloomy*, hangs in a niche like a huge window-opening and provides a view of Shanghai. On closer inspection, behind the sheer endless sea of houses one does in fact recognize schematic giant figures whose presence is somehow unsettling, even threatening. During an interview the artist said that his aim with this photograph was to express the feeling of anxiety that might overcome a person in view of the constantly progressing urbanization.

The works of **Zhang Jian-Jun** (*1955), who spends six months of the year in New York and six months in Shanghai, address the theme of the continuation of tradition in the present by combining traditional with contemporary forms, often using novel materials. For more than 2000 years, so-called scholar's rocks have been gathered in China and arranged in gardens for the purposes of contemplation. Zhang Jian-Jun, himself the owner of a collection of such rocks, makes casts of particular examples in brightly colored silicon and thus transposes these objects and their strong tradition into the present.

Ni Youyu (born 1984) also juxtaposes the traditional and the contemporary. In his paintings and objects he transfers traditional genre of Chinese landscape painting into contemporary art by translating traditional motifs into a contemporary pictorial idiom. In his large

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paintings, he inscribes stuffed stags, stumps of trees and cliff formations into geometric spaces, while in his *Landscape Cases*, formerly containers for Chinese scroll paintings, he includes miniature landscapes. The shrunken dead landscape is the only thing that recalls the traditional paintings, whose popularity is constantly waning in today's consumer society in China.

With his 20-part photo-series *The Great Economic Retreat: The Dongguan Scene*, four horizontal samples of which are on show at the Kunstmuseum Bern, multi-media artist **Jin Jiangbo** (*1972) documents the sudden closure of numerous factories in the huge city of Dongguan which, as the centre of the export-oriented production of cheap commodities, acts as a magnet for millions of Chinese migrant workers. The artist has deliberately avoided showing the workers, angry because of their sudden dismissal and unpaid wages, as the extent of the sudden change is rendered strikingly visible by the very absence of people in the otherwise packed production halls and workers' accommodation.

Wide expanses and tranquillity are stylistic features of the work of **Lu Chunsheng** (*1968). Both in his photographs and in his films this artist conjures up surreal pictorial works, without the use of complex arrangements or later image processing. Incomprehensible actions take place in strongly deserted places. According to Lu Chunsheng, the works were intended to reproduce not reality but imagined scenes.

Pan Xiaorong (*1985) prefers tranquillity and slowness to everyday noisy hectic reality, and finds tangible forms of expression for these in his works. The artist incises regular lines into painted cardboard or paper using a needle and a knife. These precise patterns, that cover the whole pictorial plane, demand hours of meticulous work and intense concentration of the artist – a working process that can surely be described as meditative.

Liu Jianhua (*1962) worked for several years in the famous porcelain manufactories in Jingdezhen and repeatedly returns to porcelain as a material for his installations and sculptures. The artist has created astonishing illusions in his most recent works. In *Blank Paper*, 2009, he literally illustrated the famous feature of Jingdezhen porcelain, namely, that is as thin as paper. The typical features both of paper and of the vessels, which on closer observation actually turn out to be solid porcelain objects, reverberate only in the titles and the external shapes of the works.

Shi Yong (*1967) has been preoccupied with his public image since the 1990s. In view of the constantly changing image of the city of Shanghai, the artist decided to freshen up his own image as well. Through an internet survey he requested that his audience create a new look for him; this look was not only to underscore the artist's individuality, but also be suitable in the face of international competition. Since then, Shi Yong has appeared in photographs and sculptures, and also in performances, with a briefcase in his hand and wearing a dark suit, sunglasses and a striking Andy Warhol-style hair-cut.

Ji Wenyu (*1959) and **Zhu Weibing** (*1971) have been making textile-based sculptures and objects since 2003. The different abilities of the artist and the qualified fashion designer complement each other in the resulting works. Fascinated by the material features of fabric, the artist-couple create a visual idiom of their very own by means of which they address China's current consumer and profit-oriented society. With *The Space With a Fine Spring Day* Ji Wenyu and Zhu Weibing make an ironic commentary on China's controversial one-child policy.

Shi Gourui (*1964) has been working with a pin-hole camera for almost ten years. For his panorama of Shanghai, the artist turned a room on the 29th floor of a hotel into a huge walk-in *camera obscura*. The eight-hour exposure however, meant that movement could not be captured. And so free of moving life and developed as a negative, Shanghai, hovering fluorescent white in the dark, seems strangely timeless and aloof, more a ghost town than a booming metropolis.

Over the past ten years **Zhang Qing** (*1977) has been ranked as one of Shanghai's most up-and-coming video and performance artists. Whereas in his early works, for example in *Moo-Cow!*, 2002, he himself was often the main focus, in recent years he has become a choreographer and conductor, who now directs from outside. The three channel projection *Don't Be So Bad*, 2008, conveys to the viewer, who is enclosed by the three screens, an impression of the angry gazes of relatives and acquaintances to which the artist was exposed in his childhood. At the same time it also alluded in a playful way to the relativity of memory and truth.

Using video projections **Chen Yuyu** (*1987) transfers commonplace objects into the art context and thereby questions socially-established notions. In *May There Be Surpluses Every Year*, 2010, the artist projects a goldfish onto a white plate and also makes use of wordplay; the Chinese 'Yu' means both fish and surplus. What is more, the fish symbolises wealth and good prospects in China and is therefore a must on the table during the Chinese New Year's festival, Chen Yuyu explains.

Provocation is the trademark of **Xu Zhen** (*1977), making him an all-rounder and the 'enfant terrible' of the Shanghai art scene. His performances, videos, photographs and actions are designed to upset social standards. Xu Zhen gained international fame with the early video works *Rainbow* and *Shouting*, both 1998, which focus both on the human body, and on the anonymous mass of humans as a 'social body'. His photographs of 2003, consisting of superimposed lines of pornographic texts borrowed from the internet, subtly address the persistent Chinese taboo against raising the theme of sex in public.

Curator: Monika Schäfer

Catalogue



Big Draft - Shanghai. Chinesische Gegenwartskunst aus der Sammlung Sigg, ed. by Kunstmuseum Bern, with texts by Biljana Ciric, Isabel Fluri, Matthias Frehner, Monika Schäfer and Uli Sigg. German and English. Design: Gregoire Bossy, Printing: Jordi AG Belp, pp. 112, ISBN 978-3-033-02712-1, SFr 29.

We are very grateful for their support of the exhibition and the catalogue to:

Uli and Rita Sigg, collectors

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Credit Suisse presents: Uli Sigg in conversation with Hans-Ulrich Doerig, Chairman of the Board of Directors and the Chairman's and Governance Committee of Credit Suisse Group AG

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