

Works From China, Many Political but Conveyed With Wit

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

THE BRONX Lehman College Art Gallery here has a history of mounting shows of the art of different cultures. The current exhibition, "Contemporary Chinese Art and the Literary Culture of China," is focused and lively. Little of the writing is on the usual surfaces: it is embedded in all sorts of sculpture installations, many of which use communications technology.

Four of the artists whose works are in the show now live in the United States, at least part time, and are represented by large, elaborate pieces. Six others have remained in China and are represented through photographs and computer-generated images of recent endeavors. The audience here thus has only a partial view of their endeavors. It was expected that art from contemporary China would be political, and much of the art made in China is. But it is covert politics, often conveyed with wit or paradox.

"Heaven Is on a Flying Dragon" by Wang Huaxiang, for example, is a simple juxtaposition of a European Renaissance prince, who was no doubt steeped in Machiavelli, and of the Chinese leader Hua Guofeng, a like-minded ruler, who is applauding the prince. Another artist, Liu Yan, has sent photographs of his "Amber Series." Yellowing newspapers reporting extraordinary events in China's history since the establishment of the Communist Party in 1949 are cast in yellow plastic, but not before dumplings filled with Chinese soil are scattered over them, giving the newspapers a lasting dimension.

Zhang Dali has been called the Keith Haring of China for his furtive spray painting of heads in profile. Some of the profiles have been his own and are meant to be witnesses to the myriad abuses and crimes committed on the streets of Beijing. By contrast, Zhu Jingshi extols monumentality. He once covered every inch of a huge column with small pieces of rice paper, a tribute to the staple of Chinese life. Shang Yang's paintings, rooted in collage technique, are a personal diary that does not spare events, which are not usually depicted, like his recovery from heart surgery.

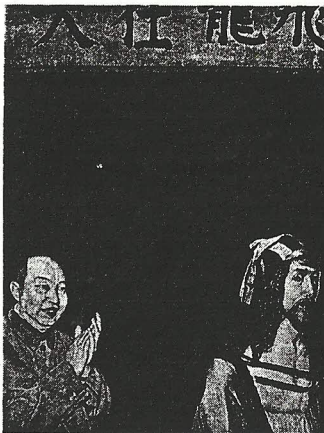
If his technique is somewhat old-fashioned, so is part of Huang Yan's process: he makes rubbings. But he has put these ghostly images into futuristic computer-generated compositions. He once made rubbings of a wooden chair; a new rubbing was

made every time he pared down the chair with a knife, and at the end he had rubbings of wood chips.

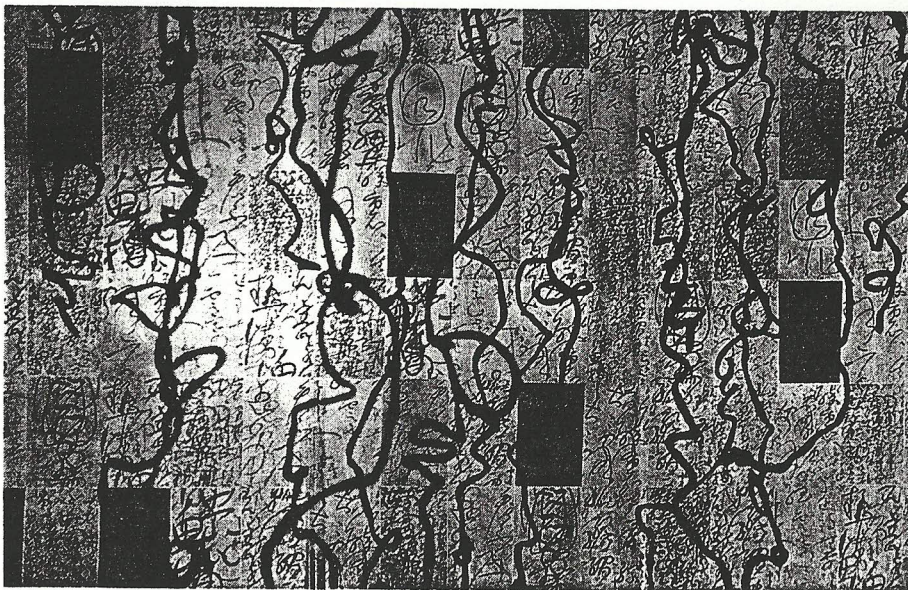
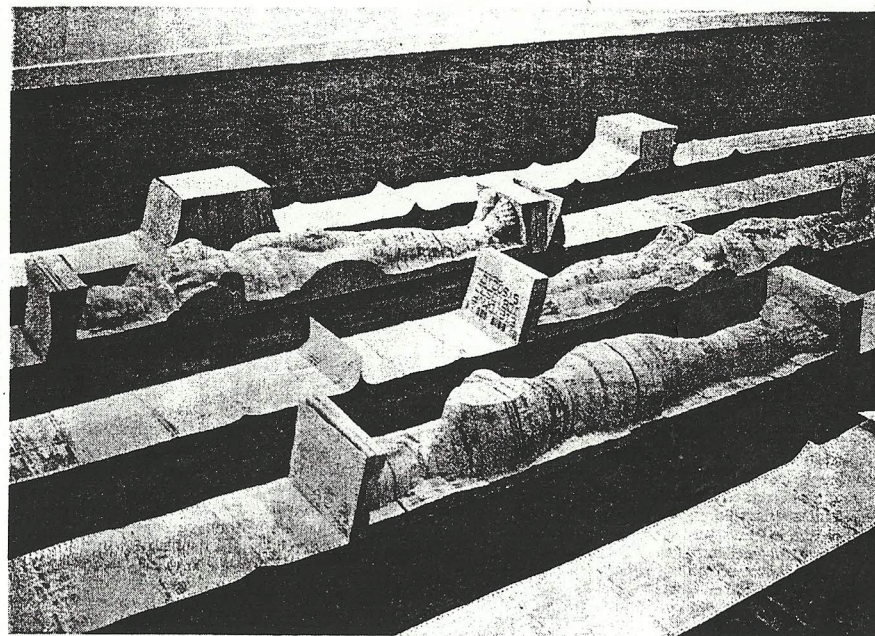
The four artists living in America get the most out of being present. In two installations, Xing Fei celebrates a style of writing, dating from the eighth century, known as "grass script" because the elongated characters resemble individual stalks in a field. In "The Grass Script I," Ms. Xing hangs a bevy of yarn-covered characters from the ceiling, creating a forest. A nearby wall is plastered with computer-generated wallpaper bearing this wiggly script.

Sculptures and flat characters interact, illustrating how Chinese characters are created through intersection and overlapping. "The Grass Script II" has roughly the same format, but the hanging pieces are made of wire and, complementing the length of the wire elements, the writing on the wall is on scrolls.

There is hidden political content in these works, which superficially show reverence for the past. The writing is unintelligible, and the pieces are ultimately about a lack of faith in communication. Ms. Xing has remarked that the words on the wallpaper and scrolls are reminis-



"Heaven Is on a Flying Dragon" by Wang Huaxiang, above. A detail of "Endless" by Longbin Chen, right. "The Grass Script I" by Xing Fei, below, in which the elongated characters resemble individual stalks in a field. All the works are in a show at Lehman College Art Gallery in the Bronx.



cent of leaflets plastered on walls during the Cultural Revolution. Their sternness is the opposite of the playfulness of the hanging characters.

Masses of information-laden paper

are Longbin Chen's primary material. A viewer can see the back of his large sculptured head and its shelves packed with New York City telephone books. To carve the features of

"Big Face," Mr. Chen took a chain saw to the dense surface made by the exposed pages of the books. The face seems to be awakening from a long slumber and is beginning to move its



Xu Bing's work, taken from the title of the exhibition.

lips. Similarly, the recumbent figures in Mr. Chen's "Endless" look asleep, but they are not cast in alabaster. They are cut with a chain saw from reams of computer printouts, sometimes extended and often compacted into blocks. A wish to put life or the human touch back into the increasingly depersonalized workplace would seem to be Mr. Chen's message. Meanwhile a flying figure, named "Twist Angel" and made of musty old books, is oblivious to the issues articulated beneath him.

The work of Xu Bing is the most portable. He can make it on the spot, as he did for the placard announcing this exhibition. Superficially, the long

looks like a grid of six characters or ideograms, but closer inspection will reveal to the viewer that he can decipher them. In each character Mr. Xu has artfully woven the letters of the Western alphabet to make each of the English words in the exhibition's title. Likewise the Western alphabet is the basis for "ABC," another of his works. Projecting from a wall are terra cotta bricks bearing the Chinese characters that most closely match the English pronunciation of each letter.

Zhao Suikang appears to be the most idealistic of the artists, in his wish to bring out the commonality of the people of the world. Two of his works here are attempts to unite texts from the major religions of the world: "Color Fluorescent Pamphlets" has the exotic allure that fluorescence can impart, while "Polyphonic Realities" involves computer-generated spiritual writing in several alphabets being projected and woven together before our eyes. Mr. Zhao loses his pious image with a "Red Fish Tank," stocked with goldfish that dart around red script in several writing systems. Red is the appropriate color, for these are linguistic juxtapositions of erotic prose.

The closing date is Jan. 15, and the information number is (718) 960-4731.