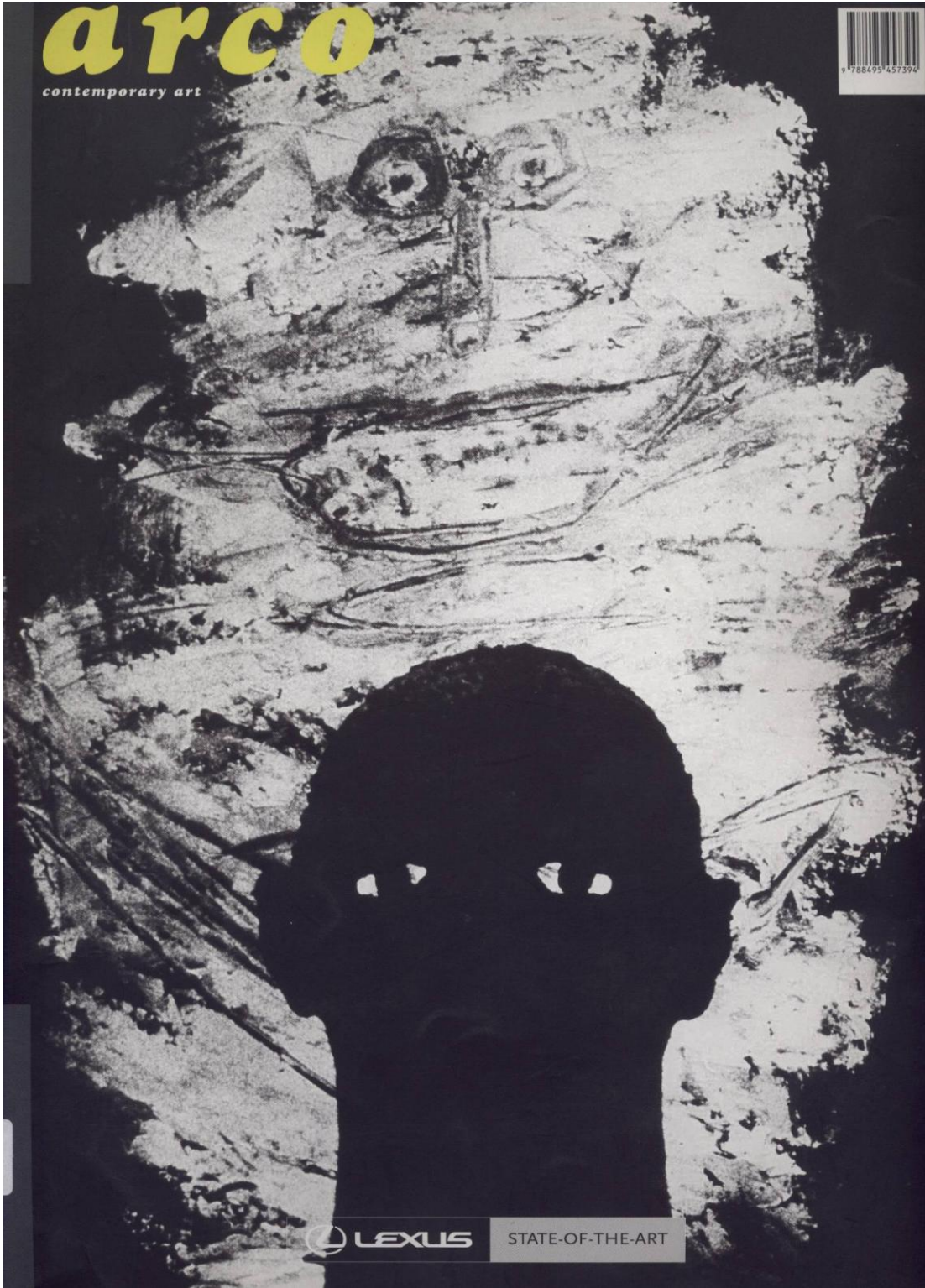


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contemporary art



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STATE-OF-THE-ART

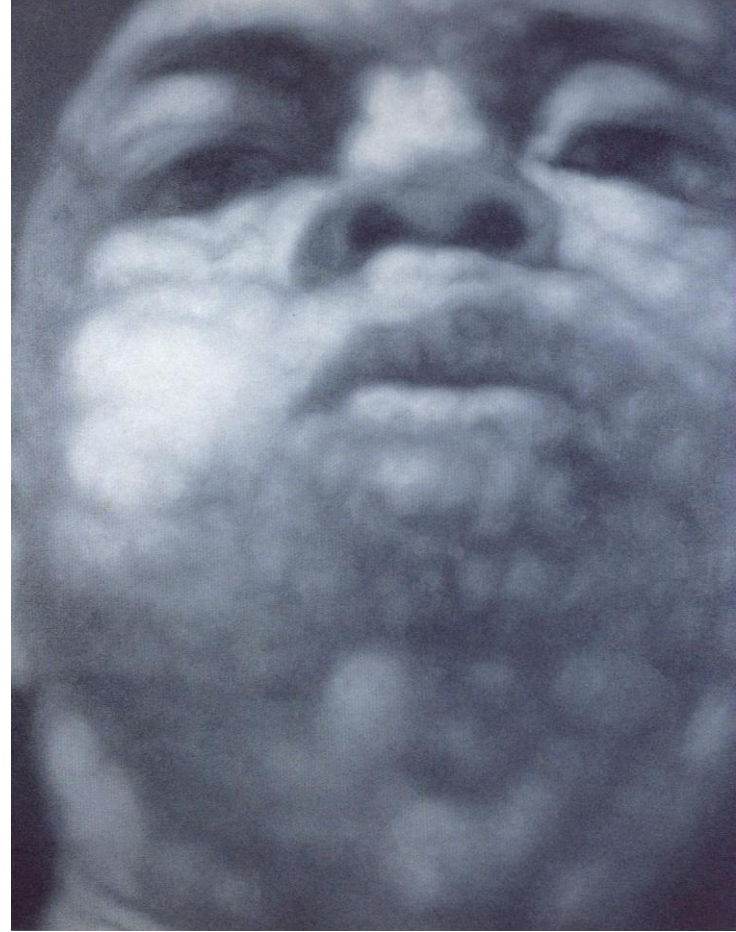
summarise the Chinese avant-garde art scene. Like Weng Fen's images, these artists, engulfed by a feeling of helplessness, are confronting yet another transition in the chain of one historic event after another which has been China's destiny for the past two centuries. And, like them, they live immersed in a hybrid culture, in which how one sees the world is colored by a combination of Chinese thought and the foreign elements that permeate everyday life.

One of the most manifest concerns of Chinese avant-garde artists seems to be, precisely, time, its fleetingness, the ephemerality of existence, of reality, of perceptions... as seems to be illustrated by the flaming photographs of Song Dong (Beijing, China, 1966) and the performances of Zhu Ming (Changsha, Hunan, China, 1972). Chinese artists, as always, are still contemplating the world as an eternal equilibrium of opposing and complementary forces. This time, they are rising up against the constant mutability of things with a certain sense of anxiety, as critical interpreters of the nation's uncertain historical direction.

The last 175 years of history have brought with them dramatic changes for the Chinese people. After hundreds of years of hegemony on the Asian continent the Middle Kingdom, as China is still known today, finds itself sunk into confusion. The Opium Wars marked the beginning of what would be a dramatic opening up to the outside world, and a painful experience of modernisation not exempt from the loss, as in many other cultures, of signs of local identity. The Communist regime, and very particularly the Cultural Revolution, has not left the slightest mark on the hearts of the Chinese people. Today, the nation expectantly waits to see the results of what is only the latest

episode in a series of major historical events: the Communist regime's shift towards a market economy, and with it, opening up to globalisation.

The course of recent history has had and continues to have a major impact on Chinese society. This is the case with the latest wave of emigration from the rural areas to the cities, which has occurred in recent years, and which has changed life in the great urban centres yet again. This has been reflected in the work of Shuo Liang (Tianjin, China, 1976) and Zhang Dali (Harbin, China, 1963). Cities like Beijing have, for years, been absorbing an enormous inflow of immigrants, mostly from the countryside. A reflection of the birth of this new urban class, Shuo Liang has developed an interesting kind of sculpture which analyses the adaptation processes that these individuals experience in their new life in the cities, and the changes that they produce in their identities. Through the series Eight Brothers, this young artist represents a hypothetical family, whose very common surname, Wang, transforms them into a metaphor for an entire collective, describing the possible social roles that these new city dwellers can adopt. The multifaceted Zhang Dali's work also revolves around this new urban population. Noteworthy among his works is a series of portraits of anonymous immigrants in different settings, particularly an expressive group of heads made of resin and several different acrylic paints on vinyl, in which the term AK.47 is used as a kind of background. This term, which refers to a well-known Russian assault rifle, has also been widely used by the artist in his graffiti, with which he has tried to draw attention to different condemned buildings, whose destruction is necessary for the birth of a modern capital. All of his work, therefore, revolves around the change from which, like a phoenix,



another new China will arise out of the ashes, a process not lacking a certain drama. We can also see how the use of portraiture turns out to be secondary in his oeuvre, whose objective is social commentary on the part of the artist and not an analysis of the nature of the model's individuality.

Moreover, the principle components of the Chinese society born out of the Communist regime are clearly disintegrating. This can be seen in the work of Bai Yiluo (Luoyang, Henan, China, 1968) which, like that of Zhuang Hui (Yumen, Gansu, China, 1963) in the 1990s tries to express this feeling of change from an ideological perspective. Thus the self-taught Bai Yiluo's People No.8 presents to the viewer a pantheon of iconic images of Communism, melded with dozens of photographs of anonymous people, among which is nestled the artist's own portrait. We could almost say

that the faces of Communist idols appear like latent images, victims of a process of disappearance. Thus, the people and the artist himself are represented as a collective in this process of doing away with the regime, or at least, of slowly dissolving the ideological pressure imposed until recent times. The apparent fragility of these idols, and along with them, the ideology that they represent, seems to permeate the work of most of these artists.

Sometimes, this experience of change is lived in private, and expressed by the artist with a strong dramatism. The work of Hal Bo (Changchun, Jilin, China, 1962), featuring his family and friends, evokes a painful feeling of nostalgia, and even loss. With the extensive academic training that seems to be a common trait of most avant-garde Chinese artists, Hal Bo's work combines found objects from his family photo album with their



Zhao Nengzhi
Expression no.31,2000
Oil on canvas.2200 x 1700 mm
Courtesy Chinese
Contemporary Limited,
London / Beijing,
United Kingdom / People's
Republic of China

reinterpretation over time. These pieces show the changes that time has wrought in people's lives. However, as in the case of Bai Yiluo, these images also express aspects of the political transition experienced by Chinese society. Thus, these images enable us to perceive the changes in Chinese society, but also, in general terms, the passing of time, the fragility of existence...

The new values that are slowly gaining ground in China are another element through which its artists express the fragility of existence and of values. As has become a trend in recent years, Bai Yiluo, Xue Song (Anhui, China, 1965) and Liu Ye (Beijing, China, 1964) make repeated use of the images of public personalities from around the world, such as Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, and Pope John Paul II. Xue Song's work is striking not only for its use of historical characters; his work is particularly well known for the artist's use of printed materials transformed through fire, which evokes the passing of time and the idea of regeneration. Liu Ye, for his part, stresses the plural nature of reality, and tries to manifest the falsehood of appearances and of the figure of the idol, in a society bombarded on all sides by cultic images.

Perhaps another of the latent concerns of avant-garde Chinese art is the slow disintegration of a model of human relations, and the emergence of another characterised by the isolation and alienation of the individual. The work of He Sen, Fen-Ma Liuming (Huangshi, Hubei, China, 1969) and, above all, that of Chen Liangyang (Zhejiang, China, 1975), make manifest their concern about gender issues. Just like the performances, mentioned above, by Zhu Ming, the images created by He Sen (Yunnan, China, 1968) evoke loneliness and isolation. However, in the specific case of He Sen, this young

artist questions the positive impact on women of opening up to the outside world. In his latest oil paintings, generated by projecting photographic images, he represents a world of youth and beauty, filled with women whose eyes have been gouged out. This 'castration' seems to deprive the modern women whom he represents of their own gaze, transforming them into objects with neither identity nor spirit, into prey of the new culture. As prey, they are presented as blind to what is essential, interested in only the most superficial aspects of economic progress. In this artist's culture, traditionally dominated by men, a young woman, Chen Liangyang, has come to the fore with a provocative approach. Her work, of exceptional beauty, centres on the very essence of woman, on her sex and on menstruation, as a metaphor of feminine identity. Thus, she photographs a naked woman's body over the course of her biological cycles in a style highly reminiscent of 19th-century erotic photography, but also of the Chinese tradition, with its complex structural symbolism. In the meantime, the majority of artists, always on a secondary plane, continues to create nice art that is amenable to the tastes of any audience.

There is also, on the Chinese art scene, a tension between traditional elements and those proceeding from the Western culture that, little by little, seem to be conquering the place held by the eternal values of this ancient civilisation. Hewing closely to the traditional Chinese aesthetic, Mao -San (Xiangtan, Hunan, China, 1968) and Zhao Nengzhi (Nanching, Sichuan, China 1968) create work revolving around the human face. Like the ancient scholars who, for generations, dominated Chinese art, they seek to express the spirit or the essence of the individual through form, which in this case, they try to achieve through expressing emotions. Far from being portraits, these images

Wang Qingsong
China Mansion, 2003
C-print
60 x 600 cm
Courtesy of the artist

refer only to a partial aspect of the face, and show a strong tendency towards abstraction. The opposite of this concept can be found in the work of Feng Mengbo (Beijing, 1966) who, with the help of a graphic artist, has made his own Everyman image into the main character of Q4U (Quake for You). Feng Mengbo thus stands out here as the artist who has best been able to adopt the language of modern times, a status he has achieved through a computer game with which he effectively denounces the violence-real or virtual-that inundates our world. From another perspective, but equally a part of this balance of forces between national and foreign elements, noteworthy work is being made by artists who seem immersed in a 'quotation discourse'. The brothers Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang (Shandong, China, 1956 and 1962, respectively), whose compositions seem soaked in an atmosphere of purity like that of the Italian Quattrocento painters, use their faces and bodies to transmit states and emotions like pain or sleepiness. Through their delicate aesthetic, their bodies, in different positions, try to fill a limited space, creating a sensation of horror vacui which seem to throw the viewer back to the European primitive painters. Their work is closely related to the tableau vivant format that the talented Wang Qingsong (Heilongjiang, Hubei, China 1966) uses to develop a solid and coherent discourse revolving around the changes experienced by Chinese society, from a perspective tinged with criticism and pessimism.

In this world of artistic expressions in which the human figure dominates in one way or another, it is worth asking whether there has been any development in the portrait as a genre in contemporary China. Perhaps one of the creators who can most accurately be called a portraitist is Yue Mingjun (Heilongjian, China, 1962), whose work is articulated through self-portraits, always dominated by laughter. This former employee of an electricity company, who later studied oil painting as an academic speciality, puts across the most corrosive critique of today's world, with a viewpoint soaked in the deepest cynicism, a sentiment typical

of the art produced in China over the last ten years. The reiterative presence of the human figure in Chinese avant-garde art, and even (the artist himself in his own work, suggests the appearance of an individual consciousness in today's China, as seems to be indicated by the show Me, Me, Me at Beijing's Courtyard Gallery this spring. This trend represents a real revolution with regard to the precepts of propaganda art from the Maoist era based on a collective traditional consciousness common to Asian civilisations. Moreover, it represents a break with the development of the portrait genre, related to the idea of the individual's image as the seat of the soul, or as the stereotyped reflection of an intellectual model, harking back hundreds of years. On the contrary, today's avant-garde artists make use of the human figure theirs or someone else's, to elaborate a personal and profoundly critical discourse about the situation their country is living through. Particularly, the use of the self-portrait, as the artist Wang Qingsong commented recently, enables artists to transmit the sincerity of their message, as well as contribute some humanity to an increasingly impersonal world. However, as observed by Julia Colman, of the London Gallery Chinese Contemporary Limited, the human figure in Chinese avant-garde art has its aim not the exploration of the personality of the person being portrayed, but rather of society and historic destiny. Therefore, this presence of the human figure is sometimes metaphorical, and it functions as a 'type', or representative of a collective. As in the past, the artist continues to be an intellectual, an integral part of his surroundings, and, as such, one more expression of the mutability that makes up the reality of today's Chinese world.