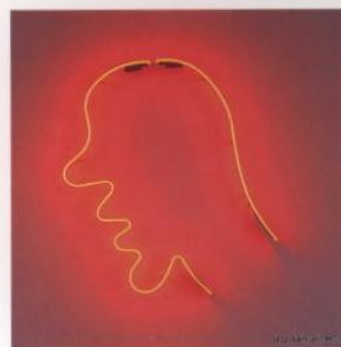
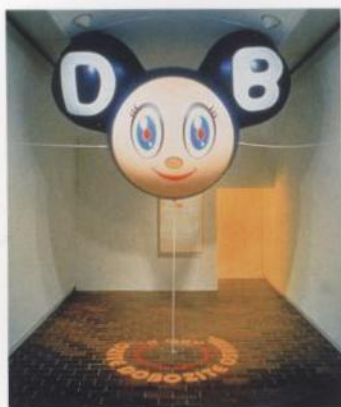


A full-body photograph of a mannequin dressed in a vibrant red suit, including a jacket, trousers, shirt, and tie. The mannequin is positioned centrally against a plain, light-colored background. Overlaid on the mannequin's torso is the text "POST MODERN PORTRAITURE FROM THE LOGAN COLLECTION" in a white, outlined, sans-serif font, arranged in four lines.

POST MODERN
PORTRAITURE
FROM THE LOGAN
COLLECTION



The fourth and last mode of self-imaging is that of self-portraiture, which constitutes an important genre in 1990s experimental art. A common tendency among experimental artists, however, is a deliberate ambiguity in portraying their likeness—as if they felt that the best way to realize their individuality was through self-distortion and self-denial. A particular strategy for this was self-mockery, which became popular in the early 1990s and was epitomized by Fang Lijun's skinhead youth with an enormous yawn on his face. As a trademark of Cynical Realism, this image encapsulated a dilemma faced by Chinese youth in the post-1989 period and introduced what may be called an "iconography of self-mockery."

Fang Lijun (who himself has a shaved head) has described himself as a rogue and a "painter of loss, ennui and crisis." Li Xianting in his essay in the catalog *Fang Lijun—Human Images in an Uncertain Age* (1996), quotes Lin Yutang in referring to the rogue in post-Maoist China: "Today when liberal freedoms and individual freedoms are threatened, perhaps only the rogue or the spirit of the rogue can liberate us, so that we do not all end up as disciplined, obedient, and regimented soldiers in the same uniform and with the same rank and number in one big army. The rogue is the last and staunchest enemy of authoritarianism."

Even Fang's use of individual figures isolated in vast expanses of water and sky convey a desire to escape from the mundane existence of everyday life, and to return to either the security of the womb or the dreamlike permanence of death. In any case, Fang Lijun has taken very personal "Chinese" memories and experiences and through his art touched on a very universal theme in contemporary life—the feeling of individual insignificance, and the difficulty of defining personal identity in an impersonal post-modern world dominated by an unrelenting torrent of computer-generated, digitally distorted images of a reality most of us have trouble accepting.

Interestingly, the search for identity was also at the heart of the art of one of the most important Japanese artists to emerge in the past decade, Takashi Murakami. Murakami himself describes his evolution in the early 1990s in the catalog accompanying his 2002 exhibition at the Fondation Cartier:

TAKASHI MURAKAMI
Mr. DOB
1995

DETAIL (1 OF 7 HEADS): YOSHITOMO NARA
Heads
1998

ZHANG DALI
Dialogue 11/11/99
1999

In those days, I was looking for a form that would express my originality... But what was my identity? The answer is that I didn't really have one. So I felt that the only thing I could do, to explain that absence of identity, was to pile up all the formative layers that had contributed to my background; for example, my work in the field of nihon-ga, the soldiers that I used, my very marked taste for manga [comics] and anime [animation]... It was during the process of transformation, going from nihon-ga to contemporary art that I came up against this problem: gradually, as I made more and more works, I realized that I didn't really have an identity...Mr. Dob has now become a kind of self-portrait... Through him, one of the aims was to show Japanese artists and critics that we had to find another means of expression.

While Murakami is clearly referring to his own identity in contemporary Japanese society, he is also alluding to Japan's search for an "original" cultural identity in the postwar period. In fact, his artistic focus on the manga and anime aspects of the "otaku" subculture reflect what he feels is the current bankruptcy of Japanese high culture because of its bastardization by imported Western influences during the past fifty years. In fact, Murakami argues that this once marginalized computer geek culture which he has dubbed "PO+KU" (pop + otaku) may represent the path forward. At the same time, he is reaching "backward" to Edo period (1615-1868) culture with its traditions of cuteness and decoration, and incorporating those traits in the iconography of his artistic images (Mr. Dob, flowers, mushrooms, balloons, jellyfish eyes) thereby linking the past with the present.

This sense of anxiety and drift is also captured in the aloof, apparently angry, disgruntled images of children in Yoshitomo Nara's work. While his characters are certainly not "cute" in contrast to Murakami's, Nara's characters bear a strong psychological similarity to the figures of Fang Lijun, Guo Wei, Zeng Fanzhi, Shen Xiaotong, and Zhang Xiaogang. Nara's children appear to be nostalgic for the childhood they have "lost," in much the same way that the post-Tianamen artists reflect the disillusionment and detachment of the individual in contemporary Chinese society, resulting from the loss of idealism in the 1980s.

It is also interesting to note that all these figures are essentially "surreal," rather than being true representational portraits. Earlier in this essay, I referenced the movement toward conceptual portraiture on the part of 1990s Western artists including a number exploring surrealist versions. It seems more than coincidental that both Chinese and Japanese artists have concurrently pursued this "neo-surrealism."

It is no accident that “surrealism” seems to have resurfaced in the work of the current generation of Chinese artists. The disillusionment and alienation appears to have been inevitable in light of the combined weight of the authoritarian rule of Mao, followed by a brief period of liberalization and freedom, only to revert to a different form of socialist political doctrine heavily diluted by the disorienting influence of Western capitalism and materialism.

Perhaps the most powerful example of the “neo-surrealism” is the work of Yue Min Jun. Li Xianting, a contemporary Chinese art critic, has said that Yue’s work is a “self-ironic response to the spiritual vacuum and folly of modern-day China.” The heart of his work involves repetitive self-portraits, always laughing and always with his eyes closed. The overall impression is one of cynicism with respect to the unfulfilled utopian ideals of the Cultural Revolution, as well as the shallowness of his current existence. In effect, he is rejecting the reality (past and present) of Chinese society in favor of a more ethereal place suggested by the deep blue sky and clouds in the background of many of his paintings (reminiscent of the frequent use of deep blue waters by Fang Lijun). Yue Min Jun sums up his philosophy best: “Laughter is the source of everything. Everything is nonsense, you are the lunatic. Ha, ha, ha.”

Further aggravating the current psychological malaise is China’s headlong rush to urbanize itself through dramatic transformation of the environment (such as the Three Gorges Dam project or the even more ambitious plan to divert the water from the Yangtze River Valley to Beijing and Tianjin), resulting in mass displacement and migration of the population from the countryside to the city. And yet ironically at the same time, vast blocks of traditional housing are being demolished in many large cities to make way for new impersonal apartment blocks and shopping malls, all of which fosters a growing alienation between the “new city” and its “new residents.” No artist has captured this more viscerally than the graffiti artist Zhang Dali, who has covertly spray-painted the profile of a head on numerous walls, buildings and bridges earmarked for destruction thereby generating a dialogue concerning the ultimate fate of displaced individuals being “herded” about by an indifferent administration (once again highlighting the issue of the self versus the collective whole in Chinese society). He has taken this concept a step further in a recent body of work “100 Chinese;” Zhang Dali has cast the heads of 100 migrant workers in plaster in the form of death masks. While these workers have flocked to Beijing in search of work, they have no official status and thus are truly adrift in contemporary Chinese society—the new “forgotten face” of a society undergoing dramatic urbanization.

But perhaps the most powerful, and daring, conceptual portrait of contemporary China is embodied in a sculpture entitled *Sleeping Mao* (2002) done by the artist Sui Jianquo. The sculpture depicts Mao sleeping (apparently peacefully) on his side covered by a simple peasant's blanket. Its significance derives from the fact that in all the paintings, posters or sculptures done of Mao, none show him lying down; virtually all of them capture the vertical, bigger than life embodiment of Mao the soldier, Mao the leader, Mao the "god." As Jeff Kelly states in his essay *Sui Jianquo: The Sleep of Reason* accompanying the exhibition of the same name at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco in 2005:

By representing Mao as the Sleeping Buddha of modern China, Sui again raises the question—as he does with the empty jackets and restless dinosaurs—of whether the Chairman (and the revolution he embodied) has truly passed into history, or if he remains in a state of ideological nirvana from which he might yet arise in some transmogrified form (which as cultism, kitsch, and—in the vanguard arts—Pop, he already has)...Sui has done nothing less than intervene in the history of Mao's image, perhaps to change it forever. By laying him down like the Sleeping Buddha...he has returned Mao's spirit, if not his body, to the countryside, whence it came, and where it might finally come to rest.

CONCLUSION

In the past few decades, portraiture has undergone a dramatic evolution, from representational realism to complex, psychologically charged conceptual portraits reflecting the issues of contemporary society—in particular the widespread self-obsession with identity so characteristic of the last half of the 20th century.

Kent Logan



