

## The Chinese Vanguard Is Blazing Its Trails With Cameras

By Holland Cotter



Above, courtesy of the artist and Lombard-Freid Projects; right, courtesy of the artist and F2 Gallery

"A Mirage," part of Cao Fei's "Cosplayers Series." The work is in the show at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center.

CHINESE contemporary art hit New York, en masse, eight years ago with a fireworks bang. The big news of this year's Asia Week is that, for the moment at least, the bang is back.

Taking place today is Sotheby's first-ever auction of contemporary Asian art. Its preview exhibitions amounted to the largest local survey of vanguard Chinese material since the "Inside Out: New Chinese Art" shows at the Asia Society and P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in 1998.

Two concurrent, longer-running shows in the city focus on types of work that Sotheby's slighted or ignored: the Max Protetch Gallery in Chelsea has a small, old-and-new selection of performance-based photography. More important, at P.S. 1 again, in Long Island City, there is a snappy roundup of recent video, a favored medium among young artists in a digitally savvy 21st-century China.

Video and photography assert their dominance over painting in two shows of new art from China.

Scenes from "Keynote Speech," a video by Li Songhua at P.S. 1.

Although post-Tiananmen work filtered into New York throughout the 1990's, "Inside Out" was like an explosion. Suddenly, we were bombarded with a highly varied art of far-out ideas and vaguely familiar forms: abstract paintings made with gunpowder, hanging scrolls woven from hair, printed books the size of tents, calligraphy repeated to the point of obliteration and performance pieces that combined endurance tests, Dada and 'Chinese opera.

In short, Chinese art history was being put through a postmodern blender, from which it emerged transformed but still oddly intact. The results were smart, funny, clunky and scary, greater in breadth than in depth. The startup energy was tremendous, a high. After a while, though, the high wound down. We heard reports of prodigious activity in China it-

Continued on Page 38

# The Chinese Vanguard Is Blazing Its Trails With Cameras

Continued From Weekend Page 29

self, but little fresh art seemed to travel, and we ended up recycling second-hand stuff in too many group shows.

The situation may be changing.

You would never guess it from the Sotheby's auction, but photography and video have long since replaced painting in the Chinese vanguard. We have been seeing a fair amount of both in New York, most recently in the impressive survey "Between Past and Future: New Photography

and Video From China" at the international Center of Photography in 2004.

In a sense, the Protetch show, "Great Performance: Contemporary Chinese Photography," is just a footnote to that survey. It adds a bit of history by updating the careers of Conceptualists Ma Liuming, Song Dong, Wang Jin, Zhao Bandi -- who gained notice in the 1990's. And it gives further exposure to a handful of bright artists from the show "Between Past and Future" who have yet to find galleries here. Liu Wei, with a "classical" mountains-in-mist landscape composed of bare legs and bent knees, is one. Zhang Dali, who has developed his own brand of urban graffiti in constantly demolished and rebuilt Beijing, is another.

The real find, though, is work by two women. Yin Xiuzhen, best known for her soft-sculpture cityscapes, has a beautiful photograph of an idyllic landscape strewn with pairs of empty shoes here. And the formidable young performance artist Chen Qiulin depicts herself sitting like a soot-besmirched moon goddess in a rubble-filled urban lot.

The increased visibility of women in China's art scene is confirmed by "The Thirteen: Chinese Video Now" at P.S. 1, where Cao Fei, born in 1975, has three pieces. In the most elaborate, "Cosplayers" (2004), teenagers dressed as Japanese anime characters turn the city of Guangzhou into a stage for epic dramas before sulkily returning home at dusk to have dinner with their parents.

Ms. Cao, with a growing reputation and a New York solo show -- a disappointing one -- at Lombard-Freid Projects in Chelsea, is one of a handful of P.S. 1 artists who were also in the International Center of Photography survey. Cui Xiuwen is another, and her exotic, wall-filling image of lanterns swaying in the dark opens

*"Great Performance: Contemporary Chinese Photography" runs through April 22 at the Max Protetch Gallery, 511 West 22nd Street, Chelsea; (212) 633-6999. "The Thirteen: Chinese Video Now" is at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, at 46th Avenue, Long Island City, Queens, through April 24; (718) 784-2084.*

"The Thirteen." The Shanghai-based Hu Jieming, with a rapid-fire video of architectural images cued to music, is a third.

And then there is the 20-something artist-curator Xu Zhen, who helps fill the current show's bad-boy quotient. In the video titled "Rainbow," the sound of flesh being slapped or whipped accompanies an image of a bare human back gradually reddening under assault from unseen hands.

Mostly, however, "The Thirteen" is a showcase for New York debuts. Some of the newcomers work with political commentary. In Li Song-

## Two exhibitions furnish a contrast to a major auction of art from Asia.

hua's "Keynote Speech," a child reads aloud from a government report on economics. The Beijing-based team called 8gg (Jiang Haiqing and Fu Yu) turns television newscasters into herky-jerky robots.

One of the show's older artists, Xu Tan, born in 1957, tours a part of Shanghai where the first Chinese Communist Party Congress met in 1921. The site is now a Western-style shopping strip of upscale cafes and boutiques. You could as easily be in Switzerland as in China.

Although other work feels light and slight, like one-line jokes or music videos, I was very glad to encounter two brooding, mysterious pieces by Meng Jin, and to reacquaint myself with Lu Chunsheng, a nondebutante who has shown at the Museum of Modern Art. In his work, and in that of the highly accomplished Dong Wensheng, an old and a new China meet.

Mr. Dong's seven-minute video "Excited Insects" is one of the best things here. It opens on a sunny spring day with a modishly dressed young man making his way through lush undergrowth to an old, almost

Max Protetch Gallery

"Am I Dreaming?," a Zhao Bandi photo at the Max Protetch Gallery.

bare tree. He climbs onto one of its branches and begins to adorn it with sprays of blossoms that he pulls from a satchel. He works slowly and to pretty effect. After he has completed the illusion of bringing the tree into flower, he drapes a sheer white scarf over the branch and abruptly hangs himself.

A strain of jumpy nihilism that runs through much new Chinese art -- you catch glimpses of it throughout the show -- is distilled here. It is a time-honored response of Chinese artists to the pressures of intense

cultural change, of the kind China is undergoing now. And the response is as evident in painting from centuries ago as in video today.

We may have been only dimly aware of such connections eight years ago, but we are beginning to see them now. And we are likely to see them even more clearly with time, as one of the world's oldest and newest art traditions -- China's-- continues to land in our midst and to remain with us and become part of our lives, as, sooner or later, it certainly will.



Max Protetch Gallery

"Demolition Time Plaza, Beijing," a photograph by Zhang Dali.