

REVIEW

Revolution simmers below China's sleek evolution

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With China at the heart of shifting political and economic realities worldwide, Chinese artists steadily have emerged as cultural critics.

What many of these artists see in the rapid development that is transforming the Chinese landscape and national identity is a sense of ruin.

The buildings knocked down for new skyscrapers. The passing traditions. The people from whom the economic boom has exacted a price.

With implications the world over, the art emerging from China has captured international, art-world recognition in the last decade or so. That interest is spiking again, with the art fetching higher and higher prices at auction, appearing on the covers of major art magazines and increasingly the subject of exhibitions.

And yet, as international as these artists may have become and as universal and current as the issues may be, there are few places as appropriate for an exhibit of Chinese art as Milwaukee.

The "Ruins" exhibit at Inova, at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, was conceived by local artist William Anderson, who has traveled to China extensively in the last decade.

Anderson's interest, in part, stems from the local impact of losing manufacturing jobs to Asia.

He was the third generation in his family to work for Milwaukee Electric Tool, a company that sent jobs to China before being taken over by a China-based firm.

Anderson lobbied Inova to stage a contemporary Chinese art show and put UWM in touch with friend and curator Zhang Zhaohui.

Torment of Tiananmen

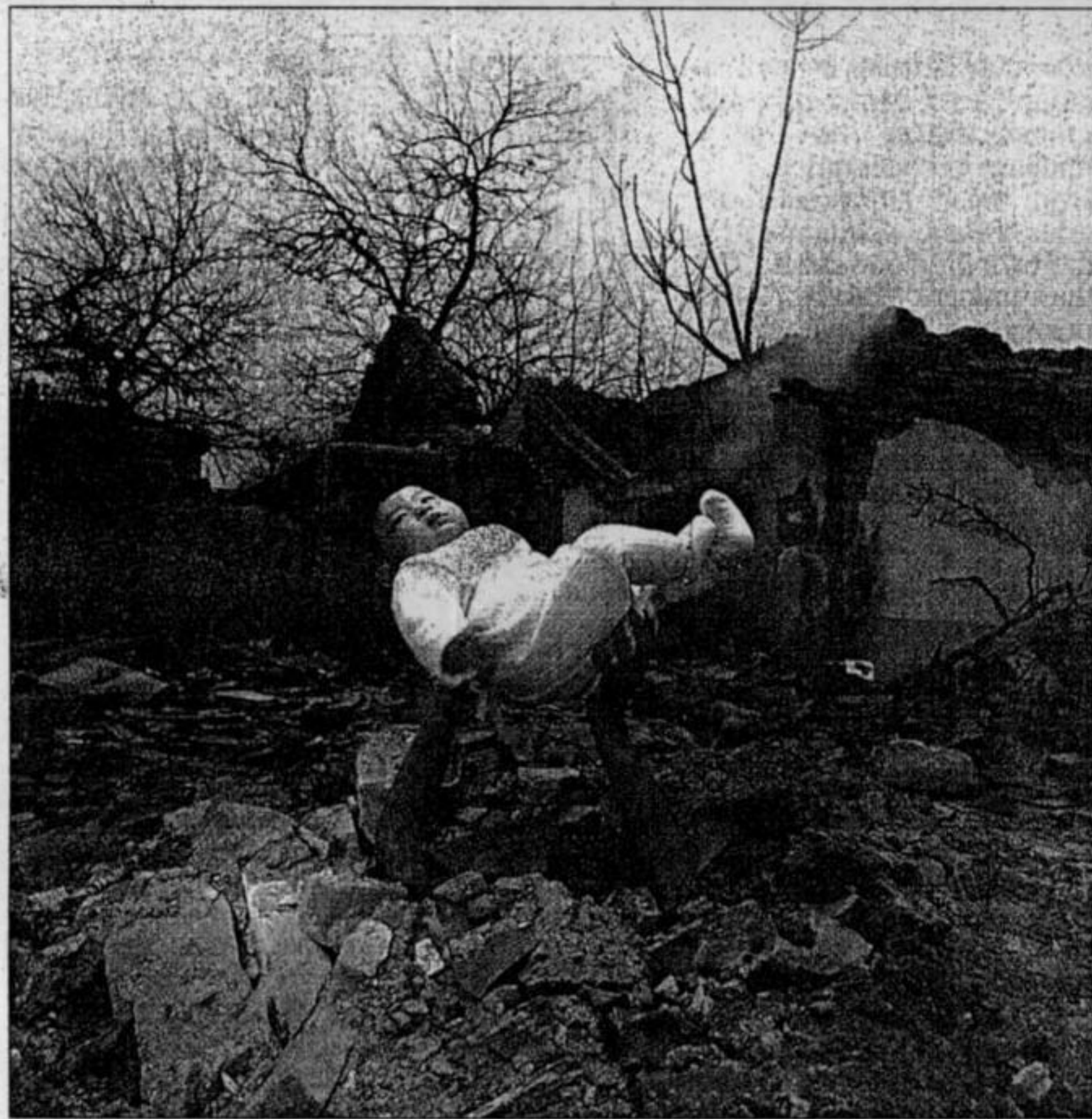
In keeping with the pace and technology of the world they seek to capture and comment on, many contemporary Chinese artists have turned to the quick and accessible mediums of photography and video.

One of the more established artists in the show is Sheng Qi. He creates haunting, matter-of-fact photographs that place the optimism of China's Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and '70s in juxtaposition with a post-Tiananmen Square despair.

After the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, Sheng, then a performance artist, cut off a finger from his left hand and buried it in a flowerpot in Beijing.

After several years of self exile, Sheng has returned to Beijing, making the inexplicable act of self-mutilation a part of his work. In his photographic triptych in the Inova show, Sheng presents petite portraits of friends from the Cultural Revolution, smiling and hopeful, in the palm of his marred hand. Despite the absence of Sheng's face, the work is a penetrating portrait of who he is now. The conceit is simple, but the effect is potent. It is part memorial, deeply personal, but also a sober excavation of the past.

Ubiquitous in many of the artworks are mounds of bricks, remnants of the torn down buildings and homes giving



COURTESY OF INOVA

"The Baby That Left From," by artist Li Wei is included in "Ruins: Chinese Art at the Crossroads," a new exhibit at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

way to "progress."

With spray painted, graffiti-like scrawl, Zhang Dali puts a face on the marginalized people who've been displaced with such demolitions. He puts the shape of a man's profile onto buildings scheduled to be pulled down. In some cases, he knocks out part of the walls in the shape of his signature profile.

The profiles stand like witnesses to the change and its human costs. From soon-to-be-gone, rejected structures, Zhang resurrects a sense of nobility of those lives that are also crumbling and cast aside.

As visually rich as they are conceptually moving, Zhang's photographs of his street art betray a sensitive eye for composition as well. Inside the silhouette of his profile shape, he visually layers old and new architecture, shadow and light, flatness and depth, the newly built and newly deconstructed.

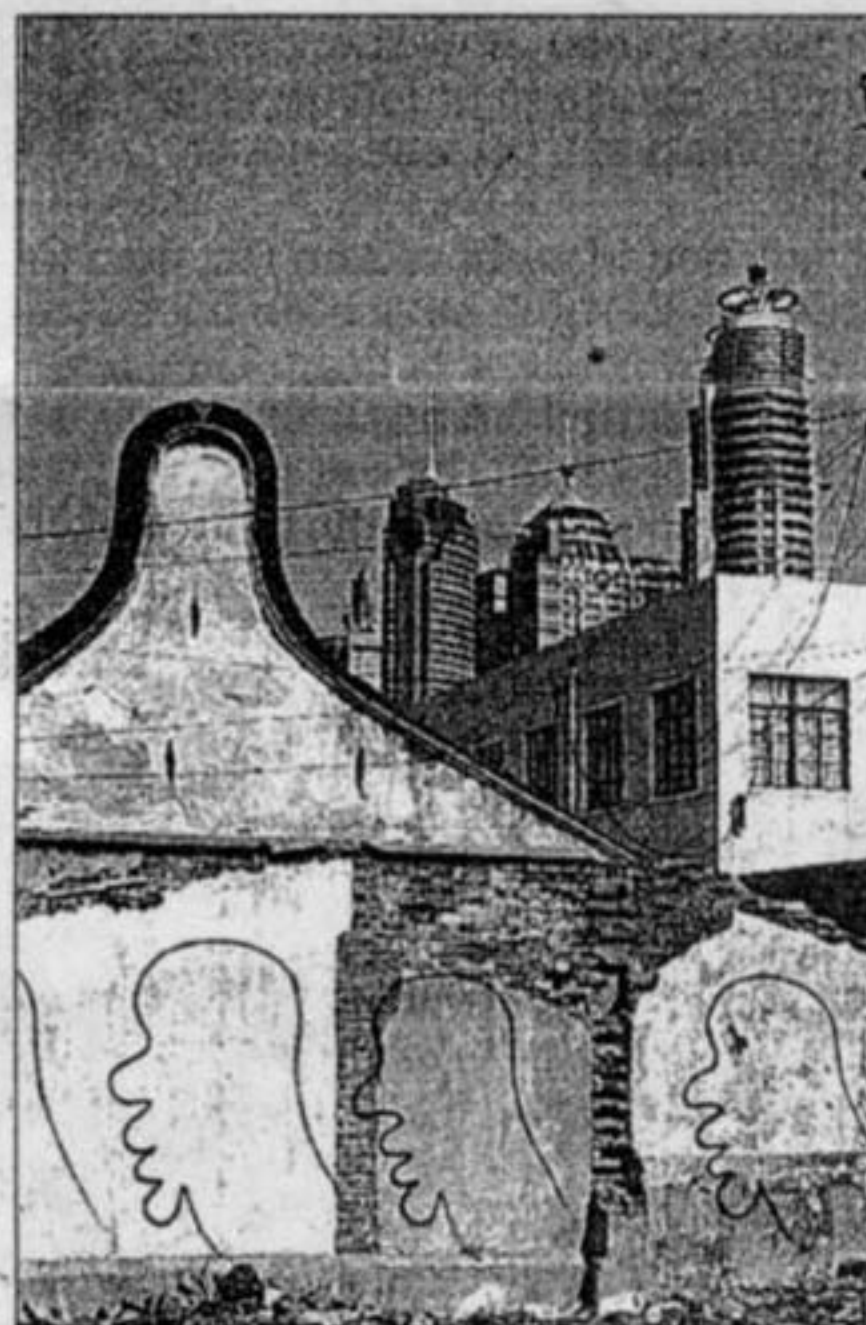
Chalky, dirty air

Amid mounds of bricks that reach into the distance, a woman sits at a vanity dabbing make up on in the video work of Chen Qiulin, one of a few female artists in the show.

A tower from a nuclear plant stands at the horizon and wild dogs scrap with each other at the woman's feet.

The chalky, dirty air — presumably from the constant demolition — is not unlike the powder the young woman pats onto her cheeks. She blots her imperfections and China does the same, altering the face of its landscape.

A man hurls heavily frosted cake at



Profiles created by artist Zhang Dali, like those above in his work "Demolition and Dial," appear to observe and judge the difficult transformation occurring in China.

the woman as she does this, constant in her attention to her lips and eyes. Is this an impending marriage? Could it be Chen's metaphor for the awkward disconnect in the merging of West and East, new and old, past and future and — still — male and female roles?

All fourteen artists in the "Ruins" show live in China, in both urban and rural areas. Many of them have not been allowed to leave the country and some have never shown work in the U.S. before this show.

Despite the sobering and critical tone of much of the work, the art in the "Ruins" show is on the whole glossy



Sheng Qi cut off a finger after Tiananmen Square. A series, including "My Left Hand . . .," evolved from that act.

The theme of transformation runs through many of the works at the new "Ruins" show, including "1974 vs. 2004" by artist Li Luming.

ONLINE

To see a slideshow of the show, go to www.jsonline.com/links/ruins

and seductive, almost willfully suited to the international art market, which is enamored of eye-catching, accessible art that relates to things such as globalism and shifting cultures.

The work in the Inova show, like a great deal of contemporary Chinese art, betrays a degree of ambition and an intention for success.

I am left with questions and mixed

feelings about this, since a form of the very commercialism that the artists appear to be critiquing is, at least in part, the vehicle to that success.

Has the naivete that laced the Cultural Revolution and protests of 1989 been traded in for savvy? What is more forceful — the image of a man defying a regime by standing down a tank in front of the world or the unprecedented visual critiques of today's Chinese artists?

What does remain, regardless, is the role of the artists as agitators.

"Ruins" is on view at Inova, 3253 N. Downer Ave. . Call (414) 229-5070.