




A steamy sampling of Chinese

art

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By Kelly Chung Dawson in New York (China Daily)

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Visitors discuss the exhibition Hot Pot: A Taste of Contemporary Chinese Art in Vermont. Jeff Woodward / For China Daily

Once categorized as a "melting pot," the US has in recent years seen the rise of a competing analogy: "the salad bowl," a mix of ingredients and toppings that don't so much as melt together as mix for a blend of distinct flavors. A new



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ELI KLEIN
PROPRIETOR OF ELI KLEIN FINE ART
GALLERY IN NEW YORK

exhibition in Vermont attempts to demonstrate the same principle, as applied to a particularly Chinese parallel: the communal hotpot. For more than a millennia, Chinese have gathered around the broth stew of meat, vegetables and other ingredients- no dish exactly the same.

"Hot Pot: A Taste of Contemporary Chinese Art," open through June 23 at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center (BMAC), showcases 20 notable contemporary artists including Zhang Dali, Cui Xiuwen, Li Hongbo, Lin Tianmiao, Hai Bo and Huang Yan, among others. Like the traditional dish, the exhibition attempts to showcase a range of elements that in this case includes painting, photography, video, metalwork and sculpture from across China's contemporary art scene.

"In a hotpot you might throw in chicken and snow peas and a little bit of everything, but you will still get the crunch of this vegetable and the tenderness of that meat - with a beautifully melded broth," said the museum's chief curator Mara Williams.

"A hot pot in Chongqing will vary from a hot pot in Beijing, and this is only one hot pot, with a multitudinous gathering of spices and herbs."

BMAC has always tried to produce shows and programs that explore the biggest ideas and art of our time - and China is a huge idea, one that impacts many people as a country and as individuals in interesting ways, she said.

"Artists in China have an awful lot to say about our world, their world and the global world," she said.

The variety of Chinese artists included in the exhibition makes it particularly noteworthy, said Eli Klein, proprietor of Eli Klein Fine Art Gallery in New York, which specializes in Chinese contemporary art. Klein assisted in coordinating logistics with many of the artists on display.

"There aren't too many places in America where you can walk into a museum or gallery and get such a wide-ranging idea or feeling of the contemporary Chinese art scene, and [BMAC] has been able to achieve that with this exhibition," Klein said. "This particular collection of artists as a whole encompasses a large part of what Chinese contemporary art is about today, with a wide range of very high-quality artwork."

The exhibition addresses three central themes, Cunningham said: image and identity, the environment and politics, and the reinterpretation of traditional Chinese art forms.

The methods with which any community or country identifies and represents itself are vital to understanding that particular culture, she said. She cited Han Yajuan's "Super Starlet" sculpture of a Japanese anime-inspired woman.

"How and why is this young female artist choosing to represent herself with this work that reflects a 'culture of cute,' when Chinese suffered greatly at the hands of the Japanese only decades ago? It's very mixed up in certain ways, and it's an endlessly fascinating conversation. Hopefully our visitors end up standing next to someone at the museum and they have that very discussion."

Other artists like Liu Bolin, whose work appears in a companion exhibition at the museum titled "The Invisible Man," explore political and environmental issues in oblique and subtle ways, she said. Liu previously painted himself in a backdrop of the Yellow River, which has in recent years been deeply polluted by industrialization.

Fourteen of his works are on display at BMAC; Klein also assisted in coordinating that exhibition. BMAC's interactive Ticket Gallery

will feature a hands-on installation in which visitors will be able to camouflage themselves into various backgrounds.

"Hot Pot" also showcases various artists who reinterpret and reference work that has come before, in a tradition that is integral to Chinese culture. For thousands of years, artists devoted themselves to the painting and re-painting of classic masterworks. Today, some artists will reference court paintings of another century, or the scrollwork of another era; the recent resurgence of Chinese ink painting among contemporary artists is a prime example of a return to tradition, she said.

Although many of the artists currently at BMAC are household names in China, they are virtually unknown in the Western market.

"In the US audiences are definitely under-educated," Klein said. "I think most people don't have any conception of Chinese art, which is understandable. China's far away, and it's a relatively new scene. But I think it's inevitable that the understanding of Chinese contemporary art will continue to proliferate through America."

Taliesin Thomas, director of AW Asia, an exhibition space and art publisher that also helped BMAC coordinate the show, said that

"Hot Pot" would likely connect the dots for audiences who have a more traditional view of Chinese art.

"These are the modern reverberations," she said. "The exhibition is an interesting assemblage of work with a great mix of artists, many of them representing the first wave of successful Chinese artists leading the field."

Presenting Chinese artwork for a US audience provides an opportunity to create dialogue, Williams said.

"The creator of the work and the viewer of the work inevitably engage in a dialogue, whether across time or culture," she said.

"There is a craving in the US for information separate from the political rhetoric of China being good or bad, or the idea that they have us by the economic shorthairs. Most of us will never have the money to travel there, but for people who are alert and alive and interested in the world, this is a way of getting closer to the mystery of China."

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