

WANG QINGSONG

Britta Erickson, Ph.D. Stanford University 1999

Several years ago Beijing witnessed the emergence of a new art trend, which the critic Li Xianting has dubbed Gaudy Art. Gaudy Art appropriates motifs and media from popular culture, and assembles them to produce garishly gorgeous works of art. While visually these pieces may be on the same plane as over-the-top kitschy art from anywhere in the world, the act of producing them in China bears a profound significance. Ever since Mao Zedong gave his "Talks on Art and Literature" at Yan'an in 1942, the official policy has been that art should satisfy the needs of "the people." Since historically most of the people in China have been peasants, this means that for fifty years, art has in theory been created for the appreciation and edification of peasants. For several decades, Mao's theories on art had very serious consequences for artists. Art with a high intellectual content was considered "bourgeois" and therefore bad, because "the people" could not understand it. Painters were supposed to concentrate on creating scenes of heroic revolutionaries, and happy workers, peasant, and soldiers. Bright colors pervaded these works of art, both to appeal to the peasants and to support the notion of the bright and glorious revolution.

Now artists can look back on the time when colorful, smiling, overly optimistic posters adorned the homes and streets about them. They can appreciate and make fun of the colorful and saccharine peasant taste that dominated the arts for so long, but underlying the mocking humor lies the bitter knowledge of all the promising artists stifled under the dictates of Mao's pronouncements on art.

Last year, when his works appeared in the Taipei Biennial, Wang Qingsong became the most recent Gaudy Art proponent to gain international attention. Other Gaudy artists have employed traditional "crafts" media: Xu Yihui's Gaudy Art is in porcelain, Chang Xugong's is embroidered, and the Luo Brothers' is in lacquer. Wang Qingsong has melded the tacky with the high-tech, producing kitschy images on a computer and then transferring them to acrylic velvet with an ink-jet printer. The computer-generated "paintings" combine emblems of peasant life-notably the cabbage-with Cultural Revolution icons and sexually provocative imagery. *Pick Up Your Pen, and Fight Until the End* (1998), for example, sports a frequently reproduced portrait of Lu Xun, an early twentieth-century writer and activist who belongs to the pantheon of Chinese communist heroes. Cherubic children excerpted from popular Chinese New Year posters adorn *Our Life Is Sweeter Than Honey* (1998). The artist often pastes his own visage into his

computer montages: in the Three Sisters (1997), each figure wears his face spliced onto a voluptuous female body.

On the surface, the kitschy images on velvet are beautiful and entertaining, but if we look beyond the cute children, the cabbages, and the Cultural Revolution quotes, we find hints of society's dark side. Wang Qingsong's previous series of paintings, Speechless - oil on canvas-confirms that he senses contemporary Chinese society has gone drastically awry. Each Speechless painting depicts a naked body or head wrapped in plastic, able to see out but unable to escape or to breathe. Creating rebellious kitschy velvet "paintings" perhaps contrives a space in which the artist can move and breathe.