

New Photography and Video from China at the MCA

Chicago Beat

By Mira Kim, Published on Wednesday, October 6, 2004

In the recent past, the People's Republic of China has undergone a dizzying array of cultural revolutions and political upheavals, resulting in ever-changing physical and social landscape. The incongruity between the success of the transition into a capitalistic economy and the antiquated mode of government keeps China and its people living in the uncertainties of a transitional phase.

Chinese contemporary art, now thriving among mainstream contemporary art society, presents a glimpse of the effects of this awkward, in-between culture.

And now, Chicagoans have a chance to experience this cultural byproduct of capitalism present in a faraway exotic place.

Opening October 2, the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago jointly presents "Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China".

Organized by the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art and the International Center for the Photography, New York, this exhibit showcases 130 pieces from 60 artists, divided into four themes. "History and Memory" and "Reimagining the Body" are presented at the Smart Museum of Art, while "People and Place" and "Performing the Self" are at the MCA.

Many of the works, like Wang Jinsong's, compare the diminution of rich and historical tradition of the past with the rising consumer society that imitates the West. Valuable historical buildings are demolished and replaced by drab looking high-rises. The urban generation, called "dushi yidai", pursues empty happiness dictated by the pop culture with no real beliefs.

Other works contemplate the fixed roles and boundaries given to an individual within the Chinese culture.

Chen Lingyang's "25:00 (No. 2)" shows an impressive view of a metropolitan area with her nude body covering over a few buildings. The artist yearns for an imaginary hour past 24:00 (midnight), where she can be "as large as I like, and do whatever I want."

Zhang Huan's "Family Tree" shows a series of nine self-portraits that are gradually covered in Chinese symbols that describe relations and roles that a person is bound to. By the last photo, the artist's face is covered in black ink, yet his facial expression is defiantly undaunted by the weight of these pressure that's marked on his face.

Lastly, in the "Night Revels of Lao Li" by Wang Qingsong, the celebrated scroll The Night Revels of Han Xizai is reenacted. One of the stories that explain the scroll painting from the 10th century goes like this:

Back then, in the imperial China, an imperative court official named Han Xizai tried to reform imperial policies, yet failed. Discouraged and despaired, he left behind the court to immerse himself in provocative parties. A court artist was ordered to crash these parties and depict it for the emperor's records,

In the modern version, Wang himself acts the court artist's role, as he is seen observing in every segment of the photo. Interestingly, the official in the picture is Li Xianting, a contemporary art critic who was removed from the official art magazine in the 1980's for supporting experimental art.

In his work, Wang laments the "destinies of intellectuals in China". He describes that, "there's

no way for intellectuals to do something for the government-except to have fun and enjoy themselves in private. Yet after the feast is over and the guests are gone, the intellectual is very sad."

"Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China", presented with Fiona Tan's video installation "Correction", will continue until January 16. "Correction" will be presented until January 23.

Students can check out a museum pass at any Chicago Public Library branches with a valid library card. Each pass grants access to four people and can be checked out for a week.