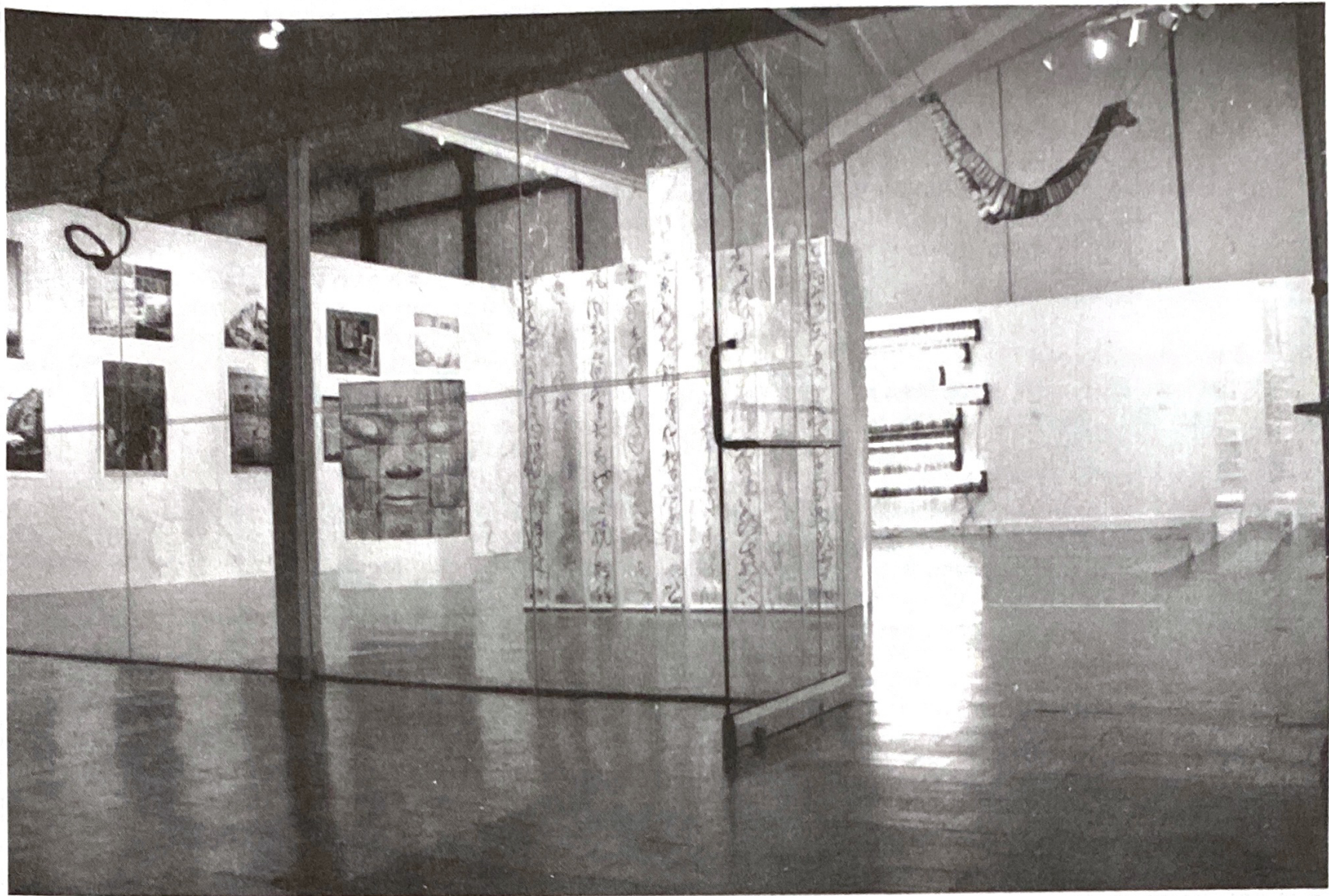


LEHMAN COLLEGE ART GALLERY



Contemporary Chinese Art and the Literary Culture of China

Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, Guest Curator

Part One: Chinese Artists Living in the West—Xing Fei, Xu Bing, Longbin Chen, and Zhao Suikang

Part Two: Six Artists From China—Shang Yang, Zhang Dali, Liu Yan, Huang Yan, Zhu Jingshi, and Wang Huaxiong

September 29, 1998 - January 15, 1999

All of the artists included in this exhibition are bound by the common theme of engaging some aspect of the literary culture of China. Each artist individually incorporates one or more characteristics of the millennia old-written language. This literary cult which they uniquely address has many levels of appreciation. First and foremost is the importance of writing for both personal expression and social functions—historical/ scientific/and practical matters. Second is the role that literature has in traditional Chinese society—no social advancement was possible without an education and mastery of literature. No council or organ of government functioned without a consummate knowledge of historical precedent. As a result education was the highest priority. Thirdly, aesthetic appreciation was not only limited to perfection of writing style, but also encompassed the manner in which it is written—calligraphy.

These artists are distinguished by their desire to make their work, first and foremost, a response to the current international art movement. In this shrinking world united by jet travel and electronic communication at the brink of the twenty-first century, a true internationalism, a world art (not unlike world music) has been achieved. The international avant-garde take on subjects of a political and personal nature in a number of

media and formats. Inherent in their artistic production are issues of communication and cultural exchange framed in a new language spoken across the language boundaries. These artists from China, like their international counterparts and compatriots who chose to remain in China, travel extensively throughout the world, showing their art and interacting with each other. One can appreciate their uniform concern for technology and communication in their appropriation of the computer for artistic expression. None of them create work that is a commodity, but rather create an environment—whether in the form of earthwork, installation or web page. These formats, by definition, are nearly impossible to be commoditized.

Being educated in two cultures—two different writing systems and artistic traditions, they cannot pursue new directions in internationalism by completely rejecting their own collective past. So taking the cumbersome Chinese written language as a theme in their art, they seek to introduce it to the west. They are revitalizing a tradition many thousands of years old, by adapting it to the modern world.

Longbin Chen

Using books for his sculpture, Longbin Chen recycles objects of the literary and popular culture revealing the fickle fashions in knowledge and style. Chen affirms that books are becoming artifacts of a dying literate culture: as a result of high speed electronic communication and the growing lack of space for the paper-based libraries, books are being discarded in favor of cybernetic facsimiles, the aesthetic appreciation once evoked by books—carefully bound and beautifully typeset—is becoming a distant memory in the wake of the disposable tomes of cheap paper and poorly printed books that flood the supermarkets, airports, and national book chains. Looking at Chen's work is looking both at the past and considering the consequences of the forces in modern life.

Big Face, 1995

wooden cases and telephone books
Looking like a Buddhist icon, *Big Face* is made from recycled New York City telephone directories. The undulating surfaces of the physiognomy are shaped from used books; the mysterious spiritual expression of the paper idol's features is conveyed by subtle fluctuations of color, the result of the ink patterns of the commercial advertisements printed on the pages. From the back the structure of the piece is revealed—it is a wooden bookcase whose shelves are lined with thick, dated telephone directories. The content of the interior world of *Big Face* is suggested by the kinds of books of which it is constructed, as intellectual life is shaped by the type of reading matter digested.

Endless, 1996

computer printer paper
For *Endless*, computer paper is used—continuously issuing from opposing piles, the forms coalesce at the center into three reclining figures. The mass of computer paper, looking as if it were spewing from printers, has a sci-fi mood that suggests the antiseptic world of conformity and uniformity of computer dominated life.

Twist Angel, 1995

books and wire
Twist Angel is suspended from the ceiling. The air-bound 220 cm long celestial female form stretches overhead, her spine a row of dozens of brightly colored joined text books.

New Stone Age, 1995-97

wood and magazines
The New Stone Age recalls the passing of pre-literate Neolithic culture. In imitation of archaeological artifacts, axes, mallets and hammers, measuring up to 20 centimeters in height, are fashioned from fashion magazines and attached with string to wooden handles. The ancient weapons and tools once composed of durable stone are ironically recreated from the ephemera of daily life; these are munitions of contemporary civilization-information. Now this data, like the stone weapons, is also obsolete.

Xing Fei

Xing Fei has recreated the distinguished "grass script" type of calligraphy of Huai Su (725-75) whose style and movement are defined as free and powerful. Xing Fei explains that the calligraphy installation tries to combine a classical Chinese art form with contemporary aesthetic sensibilities to find a new way to appreciate the ancient tradition. An intimate engagement with words and writing is presented.

Red Book, 1996

ink and gouache on paper
Xing Fei recreated a traditional Chinese ceye, an accordion shaped book used by the literati to document their artistic activities and personal feelings. The ink and gouache horizontal composition comprise calligraphic renditions of ancient Tang dynasty (8th c.) poems celebrating the Yangtze River. The poems range from sad to romantic and passionate, and it is through the selection of these writings that the artist's own moods are suggested. Living far from China, such evocations of home are poignant. The emotional tone of the pieces is inherent in the sentiments associated with the poets and the works chosen, as well

as the manner of representation. The red wash is a color the artist finds reminiscent of a vision of sunset on the Yangtze River celebrated by famous poets. In this way the use of red enhances the content of the piece. The application of the wash—whether thick and dark, thin and translucent, splotchy or fluid, calm or hurried—is in concert with the mood of the various poems. The wash simultaneously interacts with the calligraphic writing to pictorially represent the text of the poems. Like musical notation, these images unfold along the horizontal surface of the paper. The kinetic effects of the wash and ink read like tempo marks, changes in keys and patterns of musical notes.

The Grass Script I, 1998

yarn, wire, and computer generated wallpaper and wire
Famous lines of Chinese poetry are written in elegant calligraphic style with ink on rice paper. These are scanned into the computer, visually enhanced and modified, printed in sheets that are pasted on the wall in a random fashion. Familiar phrases appear on the same ribbon of paper, their meaning preserved; but within the context of the piece, the content is lost in the helter-skelter reconstitution of the sections. Lit by spot lights, they cast shifting shadows on the strips of script and gently sway with the passage of viewers through the gallery.

The Grass Script II, 1989-1996

ink, rice paper, silk, and wire
Executed in the "Huai Su" style of calligraphy, these nine long scrolls are written in typical Chinese tradition and format. Moving in front of them 25 foot long coils of wire are bent into calligraphic shapes that are linked. Made of light-weight gauge, they are easily sent to swaying and contrast with the written words behind them, illustrating the kinetic movement shared by both materials—calligraphy and wire sculpture.

Zhao Suikang

Zhao works in an extraordinary range of media. He has made large-scale wooden and metal sculptures and installations employing neon, incandescent and florescent light with transparent materials like plastic, glass and water, and computer-generated or slide-projected images in concert with musical performances. An important theme is communication and the interaction of cultural identities represented by language and art. Communication is taken in its broadest sense to include interpersonal relationships as a metaphor for intercultural connections. Often the texts are drawn from religious or poetic traditions.

Red Fish Tank, 1996

fish tank, text
Red Fish Tank is a tall glass box, filled with water and fish. Written on the glass are Chinese, English, French, Japanese and Arabic writing respectively transcribed on either side of the glass. As the fish move about the tank, the calligraphy is projected on them creating a moving and changing pattern. Through the complicated multi-layered transparency of texts, glass and water is an image of harmony and counter movement. The water in which the fish constantly move about is the arena of interaction; it is the only dynamic part of the piece.

Polyphonic Realities, 1998

computer, string, LDC projector/sound installation
A computer is placed at the center of a 13 foot square space. Hanging from the ceiling, hundreds of strings reach almost to the floor. The program in the computer is hooked up to LCD projectors which project the same images onto the strings as the one emanating from the computer. A globe of the world occupies the screen. Viewers, whose movements enliven the strings can click on a place on the globe and a screen comes up with three different texts, written in layers over one another in contrasting vivid colors. These scripts drawn from a variety of languages—Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, English, French, Sanskrit, Hebrew—are animated and appear to be continuously written by an invisible hand. In synch with the texts, music of the same cultures is interwoven.

Color Florescent Pamphlets, 1992

plastic sheets, florescent tubing
Texts from the major religions are written on the see-through plastic

sheets that like a Chinese folded book are extended across the wall. Behind the written surfaces are horizontal florescent tubing that enlightens the religious script.

Xu Bing

Nearly all of Xu's works address some aspect of the literary culture—whether it be the written character, book form, or silk writing surfaces. One of Xu Bing's major concerns is literary communication.

Case Study for New English Words:

Part I, Spanish Names, 1994-96

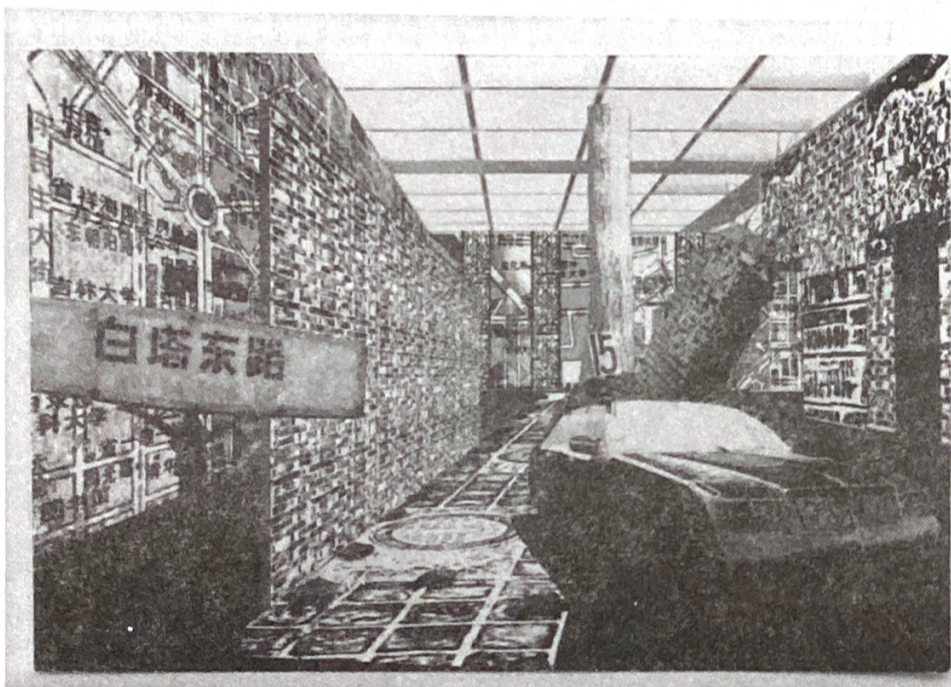
ink on paper

Experimentation with the forms of *Study for a New English Calligraphy: Part I, Spanish Names* is preserved on dozens of long pieces of rice paper scrolls measuring 19" in length and about 11" high. A traditional format, the paper horizontal scroll has been used for scholarly, literary and pictorial arts throughout China's long history. Also resembling Chinese scholarly texts, the black writing is accompanied by critical comments inscribed in red, like footnotes. These sheets are part of an interactive piece exhibited in Spain where Xu created a language of Spanish names using the new script. Viewers could sit at a computer and use Xu's program containing the new scripts to type their names; the computer translated their names into the new script and printed it out.

ABC, 1991-94

ceramic

In *ABC* the relationship between Western language and Chinese pictographs is explored. The square pillar like ceramic pieces, similar to Chinese name chops, are modeled with Chinese pictographs. On the side of the pillar their Western alphabetic equivalents are inscribed. Sometimes one, other times several characters are necessary to recreate the phonetic script: for example the sound W = "double u."



Part Two: Six Artists From China—Shang Yang, Zhang Dali, Liu Yan, Huang Yan, Zhu Jingshi, and Wang Huaxiang

Shang Yang

Shang Yang, an artist in his middle fifties, lives in Beijing. Long a teacher of art in the Academy, his involvement in the Tiananmen movement led to his dismissal and being observed for a number of years. Shang Yang's painting can be read like a personal diary. Some works comment on the commercialism in China's art education system and others chronicle his physical illness and social issues like corruption and pollution and the lack of freedom of expression.

Landscape, 1996

newspaper and oil on canvas

In *landscape*, painterly techniques render crusty effects of the surface of the mountain, which is a metaphor of human activity. The X-ray of lungs in the lower right refers to his own illness, the rampant government-sponsored smoking, and the polluted air of China which forces its inhabitants to limit their movements in the early morning. Newspaper clippings refer the daily events that suggest the limited forms of free expression in China. Since ancient times the landscape was a vehicle for artists to express their politico-social agendas by showing it undergoing various changes—denuded, depopulated, irrationally organized. Shang's landscape with an interior view of the substructure of the mountain having turned bloody shows the corruption and pollution of modern society.

Zhang Dali

Zhang Dali is infamous for spray painting his profile on public buildings after the Tiananmen events. A gifted photographer, Zhang makes a record of his more ephemeral graffiti works which he sends to be processed in Italy. Important concerns for Zhang are the places where he has chosen to spray paint, the images over which he paints, and the context—both iconographical and artistic. The number of times he paints the profile varies from one to four or more in a horizontal series. Using cartoon images for political commentary in public space is most often associated with Keith Haring's work. For Zhang however, political commentary is inherent in the street scenes and the incongruous couplings of political slogans from the government's outdoor wall campaigns and new advertisements with his idiosyncratic profile.

Dialogues: Beijing, 1997

graffiti on wall

Here the representation of Chinese bicycle and an urban resident is juxtaposed with the graffiti image. The relationship between the everyday life of the city is contrasted with the defacing of monuments by advertisements and political slogans and those buildings slated for destruction for the rebuilding of modern China.

Liu Yan

Once a Professor of physics at a national university, Liu Yan rejected the academic world and engaged in artistic activities. Experimenting with a number of media, his work from the early '90s uses found objects secured to a rectangular composition. Many from 1992-1993 are actually books that are partially painted and/or covered with plaster, excavated and filled with found objects. One exhibits a gilt crucifix, another painted entirely white, displays an intact fish skeleton. Though Liu Yan does not directly address the issues of freedom of the press and censorship, his treatment of books and newspapers demonstrates his frustration with the lack of free expression in China.

Text Series, 1995, book and paint

Work from the early '90s uses found objects secured to a rectangular composition, many from 1992-1993 are actually books. Some, splattered with white are rent into pieces; the fringed threads of the paper form textured relief patterns that contrast with the disfigured text.

Amber China Series, 1997

newspaper, dumpling dough, Chinese earth, acrylic, red paint

In *Amber China Series*, important newspaper articles recording extraordinary events—the founding of the Communist party in 1949, the explosion of nuclear weapons, the death of Mao, the trial of the Gang of Four, the return of Hong Kong, etc.—are covered with scattered dumplings filled with Chinese earth. Sometimes a dumpling is splattered with red paint that bleeds on the page. The whole is cast in a thick coating of clear yellow plastic. Due to the problems of controlling the temperature of melted plastic, the casting process is quite difficult. Like a fossil preserved in natural amber, each event has solidified a moment of history. Liu Yan describes the problems and expense of collecting these old newspapers for his project. The reverence for history inherent in the Confucian culture is poignantly presented in this testimony to modern

events. What is more, the news is readable and reported in a style obsequiously venerating Mao and the party agenda. Liu has become a chronicler preserving moments of Chinese history in his art, while editorializing on its content both by his choice of articles and by the artistic context in which it is cast for posterity.

Huang Yan

Huang Yan who is in his thirties experiments with the rubbing technique in a series of works dating to the period 1988-1998. Like printing, rubbings are an impression of a flat surface by the application of ink to paper. Daubing the damp paper affixed to the object, the patterns on the surface of the object are transferred to the paper. In the past this art has been used to reproduce inscribed stone stele, but Huang Yan applies it to demolished buildings, cars, chairs and other everyday objects. Like an archaeologist documenting artifacts of lost civilizations, Huang preserves the outlines of the disappearing culture of China: walls, doors, window lattices, street signs, house numbers and even a car, each part individually printed and reassembled.

Rubbing Removed Buildings, 1996

paper, ink, computer generated image

In a computer generated image of a room entitled *Rubbing Removed Buildings*, Huang Yan displays a rubbing of a car, represented in three dimensions, in a room whose walls are filled with rubbings of brick walls and floor tiles with manhole cover. Harsh florescent light illuminates the space. In contrast to the black and white rubbings of the car and environment are the vivid polychrome street maps mounted on the walls. A tall, bright blue inked rubbing of a tree trunk stretches from ceiling to floor and a fallen column in a pile of bricks has been added to the background. In assembling the room exaggerated perspective has been applied, creating a cramped space that dramatically recedes from the viewer.

Chair, 1996

paper, ink, wood

This work presents several rubbings of an intact chair. As the chair was gradually cut up with a knife, the step by step process of destruction was recorded in successive rubbings. The final pile of chips assembled into different arrangements was printed in a number of variations and as positive and negative images. Additionally, each stage of the whole process was recorded in a novel like narration of the undertaking and carved onto wood blocks which were also printed. Daozi, a leading avant-garde art critic living in Beijing, explained that this methodical destruction of the chair is clearly a metaphor for the events of the Cultural Revolution during which gradually all the cultural monuments were ravaged.

Column of Chinese Words, 1996

computer generated image

Chinese Word Column is huge tower of characters, the large scale graphs adhere to a central pole as if by magnetism. The huge vertical structure is superimposed over a photo of a three-tiered, circular marble base from an imperial monument in Beijing crowded with tourists. Yan explains that the monument represents imperial power and the totemistic feeling the Chinese have for their language.

Zhu Jinshi

Zhu Jingshi, an artist in his early forties, lives part of the year in Beijing, the other part in Berlin. His recent signature works are made of rice paper - single sheets that measure four feet square. The very high quality paper which is relatively rare now is the second traditional material, in addition to silk, used for both calligraphy and painting. But her the pristine paper is untouched by the brush. Using the principle material of the literati culture, of which books, writing and painting are made, Zhu makes large scale architectural installation pieces. Like other artists who use texts and works in new ways, he takes the ancient material of the literati culture and updates it for the modern world.

Winter Melon, 1996

rice paper, installation piece at the

Art Museum of Capital Normal University in Beijing.

Winter Melon comprises piles of ruffled sheets of paper that entirely fills the area; there is no way to enter the room. Each of the identical one hundred neat piles of paper occupying the large square space is around 122 cm a side and 300 cm high.

The Tao of Rice Paper, 1997, rice paper

Suspended from the oculus of an ornate baroque-style gallery, *The Tao of Rice Paper* is a paper cylinder fabricated by closely woven pieces of crumpled rice paper. The monumentality of the piece derives from size, 45 feet high, and its architectural context: soaring through the two story interior of the gallery, the shape of the cylinder is echoed in the circular form of the second story gallery through which it passes to reach the round oculus from which it is suspended. The spiral stairs leading to the second floor allow for closer viewing of the mottled surface. Artificial lighting from the gallery is secondary to the illumination from the eye of the domed ceiling and the clerestory windows of the second level. Thus using the principle material of the literati culture, of which books, writing and painting are made, Zhu made large scale architectural installation pieces. Like other artists who use texts and words in new ways, he takes the ancient material of the literati culture and updates it for the modern world.

Wang Huaxiang

Wang Huaxiang's work is a jarring combination of Western old master oil painting techniques and famous images coupled with pop portraits of contemporary figures. Painted with jewel like intensity reminiscent of the Dutch masters, his works are canvas size. Brilliant colors are juxtaposed with the flat black background he currently favors. His art has been classified as the Post 1989 generation Neo Objectivism. Wang states: "My art is a true lie, an answerless riddle. I draw roads for my audience, myself as well, and then invite my audience to lose themselves along these roads."

Heaven is on a Flying Dragon, 1998

oil paint on canvas

Here a Renaissance prince stands against a black background. Once again the accuracy of the reproduction is startling. Separated by a large expanse of space is the Chinese leader, Hua Guofeng on the left. He turns to the prince, applauding. The reference to the Machiavellian politics practiced in China is clear. At top there is an inscription "Heaven is on a flying dragon".

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