

4 contemporary Chinese artists show their reflective side

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By Mary Thomas / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Quietude welcomes the visitor to "Mind Space: Maximalism in Contrasts," an exceptional exhibition of works by four contemporary Chinese artists that gently yet thoughtfully engage.

From Lei Hong's "Sordid Air No. 1" -- ethereal ink markings floating in an infinity of irregularly edged whiteness -- to He Xiangyu's life-sized human skeleton beautifully crafted of jade, the works have reserved yet commanding presence that initiates dialogue with the viewer.

The exhibition debuted last year at the cosmopolitan Contrasts Gallery in Shanghai, the venue name adding a playful layer to the exhibition title. Now at the University of Pittsburgh's University Art Gallery through March 17, it will travel to New York, Dallas and Los Angeles.

Pittsburgh has the privilege of being included on the exhibition itinerary because its curator, Gao Minglu, is a research professor in Pitt's department of the history of art and architecture.

Mr. Gao is an internationally recognized authority on contemporary Chinese art who has organized a number of groundbreaking exhibitions, including "The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art" in 2005, and "Inside out: New Chinese Art" in 1998.

Born in 1949, he was 12 when separated from his family and sent to Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution for "re-education." He holds master's and doctoral degrees in art history from Harvard University; a master's in Chinese art history from the Chinese Academy of Arts, Beijing; and a bachelor's in fine art from Tianjin Academy of Art, Tianjin, China.

The artists Mr. Gao chose for "Mind Space" epitomize expression he has dubbed "maximalism," lying somewhere between formalism and concept. Characteristic of each artist's approach are "repetition, process, laboriousness and consumption of time involved," he wrote in an exhibition essay.

Also significant is the element of the spiritual, embodied in meditative routine but also in the artists' philosophical regard of the artworks as being unfinished, even fragmentary.

The ultimate goal is not object, nor even process, but the mystical, if ephemeral, experience of the intangible. The core element of the works is the realization of a more complex, if undefined, metaphysical and sensory reality.

Still, the "objects" are seductive.

Mr. Lei's ink and graphite drawings on tactile Xuan rice paper are poetic, blending traditional sensibilities with suggestive titles that border on the existential or psychological, such as "Under Control" and "Distance Between Washington D.C. and Los Angeles." His paintings, such as "To Die Content," a black rectangle set above a white rectangle, are equally spare and reflective. "Basic Exercise -- Broadness," four large stones that he gathered, are placed in the center of the gallery, a reference to the four directions.

"Soaking," an intriguing work by Zhu Jinshi, who was a member of the well-known post-Cultural Revolution avant-garde group Stars, pays homage to and raises questions about traditional ink painting. A stack of hundreds of sheets of Xuan paper was placed in a stainless-steel container holding a layer of black ink. During the exhibition run in Shanghai, the ink seeped upward through the paper layers, creating hundreds of paintings without the help of a human hand, exhibited here as a stack sans container. Mr. Gao said they are each different and "very beautiful."

Zhang Yu begins with the form of a traditional Chinese scroll, but his "brush" is his finger, which he uses to place thousands of random marks upon the paper. His medium may be ink or more exotic -- and contemporary -- materials such as plant pigments or nail polish. The paper is covered with impressions both individual and universal.

All of the artists are very well known in China, Mr. Gao said, and some have had international exposure.

Mr. He, the youngest artist exhibiting, has made a recent splash on the international scene with "The Coca-Cola Project," for which he boiled down massive amounts of Coca-Cola to make a room full of a black, coke-like substance that he reconstitutes to paint with. An industrial product loses its mass identity and is placed at the service of an artist.

Here, the Coke distillate co-exists with ink in paintings on silk that take a traditional fan form. The tan lines stand out from the rest, but Mr. Gao cautioned that the reading is not necessarily that simple. Historically artists would sometimes introduce color. More subtle is the format of the landscape itself. In "Circular Fan 3," a tan palace is tucked into the side of a pine-dotted mountain. Mr. Gao pointed out that in traditional landscape, a temple may be so sited, but not a palace.

Mr. He's "Skeleton No. 1" blends the aspects of a memento mori with jade's symbolism of eternity and longevity for a piece that is universally accessible.

Other works in the exhibition are equally fascinating, whether in the ways they relate to Chinese cultural history or to globally shared observations and concerns.

Mr. Gao said artists with a like aesthetic to those exhibited are one of the larger groups working in China today, but lesser known in the West. He hopes to rectify that through exhibitions such as "Mind Space."

The art forms of "Maximalism" function "as what is often called a 'running account' (liushui zhang) in Chinese, literally 'an account book of running water,' suggesting an everyday record of something in daily life that is extremely unimportant, trivial, insignificant and fragmented," Mr. Gao wrote.

The ledger is that of mortality, whether personal or societal; the flow of moments continual and inevitable, each of the greatest importance and of the least.

"Mind Space" continues through March 17 at the Frick Fine Arts Building, Oakland, across Schenley Drive from Carnegie Library. Admission is free. The hardback exhibition catalog is \$50. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Information:
www.haa.pitt.edu/frick/artgallery.html.