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Zhang Jian Hua's
exhibit of laborers
and peasants.



CHINA

China's New Guard

A is for Art. B is for Banned. C is for China. LILI TAN highlights Chinese artists making brilliant scenes—literally—on the international stage. *Photographed by* DARREN SOH



Above, from left: Read what you will into Zhang O's work; Wang Zhong's spooky look at underground churches. Opposite, from left: A bare prison cell by Jiang Chong Wu; Wu Xiao Jun, who is inspired by the Gobi Desert, in front of his installation.

THIS STORY ABOUT CHINESE ARTISTS DOES NOT begin in Beijing. Or even China for that matter. It starts on a sunny August morning, just days before the inaugural 798 Beijing Biennale, in an industrial section of Brooklyn turned hipster wasteland. Around the corner from a quaint kitchen supply shop, just off a stop on the L train, metal fences and cracked sidewalks line the avenue. Newly erected glass-and-concrete condos stand awkwardly next to old brownstones and modest houses clad from gutter to ground in unflattering horizontal siding.

In a two-story, fir-striped version of the latter lives Zhang O, the lone female artist in this selected group. She and her husband Peter Garfield, a teacher at The New School and School of Visual Arts in New York City and an artist as well, occupy the back portion. Upstairs, Zhang shows me one of her photographs entitled “Poverty is Not Socialism,” after a quote from Deng Xiaoping, the late Chinese leader whose reforms in the 1980’s led to China’s opening up and economic revival.

“EVER THING IS SHIT” reads the Chinglish T-shirt in the

photo. A pre-adolescent girl who hails from Henan province, in eastern China, wears the shirt and holds onto the strap of an “I ♥ China” satchel. Zhang found her in Guangzhou when the girl was in town visiting her mother, who works as a trash picker, and asked her to stand—irony intended—in front of a luxury building constructed by a development firm rumored to have made its fortune by selling weapons.

“We have money now but everything else is lost, our souls and basic values of being Chinese,” Zhang says. “Nobody cares about life; they care about their way of living—rich and convenient.” She goes on to explain that the phrase “EVER THING IS SHIT” refers to marginalized people, like the girl’s trash-picker mother. However disappointed Zhang seems about her home country’s shifting ideals, there are still elements of optimism in her work. “I asked the girl to smile in order to show that there is a positive future,” she says.

In Beijing, Zhang’s photography appeared in an international exhibition entitled “Transitional Aesthetics,” which was part of the inaugural 798 Beijing Biennale 2009 held this past August and September in the 798 Art Zone.



Each artist is notable for his or her combination of social *awareness* and artistic INNOVATION

Formerly an East German–designed factory that produced electronics in the northeast of Beijing, it was abandoned by the late 1990’s, allowing artists and galleries to fill the cavernous, industrial spaces. Now, it’s a main tourist attraction in the capital city. The biennale brought together the works of more than 100 artists to China’s capital. It was organized without funding from the government or backing of a major museum, and two-thirds of the participating artists were international. The show proved a success, with Zhang among the artists who managed to stand out.

Marc Hungerbühler, the biennale’s curatorial director says: “O is an interesting blend of intelligence and visual wit.

She comes across as playful and pleasing, warm and funny, but her statements are critical and sometimes razor sharp.” Hungerbühler and Zhu Qi, the biennale’s artistic director and also a prominent critic for *Art Map* magazine, also speak about five other artists from the biennale who are likely to emerge or, for more mid-career artists, create an opportunity to be included in other international exhibitions. Each is notable for his or her combination of social awareness and artistic innovation. “These artists managed to reflect the spiritual status of certain groups of people in China and tried new things in terms of language and technique of expression,” Zhu says. Hungerbühler describes this group of young and mid-career Chinese artists as “confident,” citing their uninhibited approach in their mediums and ability to embed controversial content shallow enough to avoid opposition but deep enough to get across their artistic imperative. “They understand and test the political impact of their art,” he says.

For the past decade Chinese contemporary art has exploded in popularity, thrusting the likes of Zhang »



Clockwise from top left: Outside the 789 Biennale in Beijing; Wang Zhong blending into his creepy-looking mannequin church goers; Wu Xiajun's exhibition in a very stark building; Zhang Jianhua says he draws inspiration from the fringes of society.

Xiaogang, Yue Menjin and others who are considered “Cynical Realists,” artists who concentrate on socio-political issues since the Cultural Revolution, into the spotlight. In 2007, Zhang Xiaogang’s auction sales totaled US\$56 million, according to Artprice.com, placing him among the top 10 best-selling living artists at auction, behind only Gerhard Richter and Damien Hirst. Since the cooling of the Chinese art market, thanks to the global recession, a new variety of artists have had the opportunity to surface.

One of these is Sun Ping who, Hungerbühler explains, is a previously overlooked veteran artist. Sun’s biennale pieces, which show his range, from calligraphy to photography to stone carving, were provocative. The two sanctioned mixed media pieces from his series entitled “I Don’t Know” (the entire series was not exhibited for fear of censorship) feature a masked prostitute squatting and painting Taoist proverbs with a brush clenched with her privates. “I was thinking more and more about the Taoist wisdom of Nothing, so I was amazed, shocked and delighted when I saw this demimonde and her extraordinary ‘body calligraphy’ in an

erotic show. I met her and we became best friends,” Sun recounts. “I thought that if I played with this—the fact that people usually consider eroticism ribaldry and associate calligraphy with elegance—I could create a work of art that could blast away all that crap about what is considered lowly or superior, vulgar or refined, ugly or beautiful.” Not surprisingly, Sun’s earlier works include a series called “Wet Dream,” featuring semen-stained bed sheets.

Jiang Chongwu, an installation artist, also courts controversy, creating a piece that revolves around his friend Zhang Jiafeng, who was arrested in 1965 for a speech criticizing Mao. “Open, Smile” consists of two videos, one of a happy Zhang Jiafeng today and the other of a jovial prison guard, in a space designed after the single cell Zhang was confined to for 19 months. “I wanted to remind people that extremely limited space and human smiles can exist at the same time,” says Jiang. Hungerbühler and Zhu both chose Jiang as a Chinese artist to watch for his “precision in formal ingenuity and strong combination of new language and contextual undercurrents,” says Hungerbühler.

IN THEIR SHOES

Four Chinese artists tell T+L where they go to get inspired

■ **Jin Yangping:**
Jiuxi, Hangzhou
“One of my favorite places is the ancient post road here. It makes me feel as if I’m breathing in the same air from a few hundred years ago.”

■ **Jiang Chongwu:**
Green Island, Taiwan
“Green Island Prison, which was notorious for confining political prisoners, was my inspiration for ‘Open, Smile.’ It’s now a tourist attraction, and they’ve even built the Green Island Human Rights Culture Park outside the prison walls. It made me think about why the wonderful nature and the

injustice and ugly side of human nature were put together.”

■ **Wu Xiaojun:**
Taihu Lake, Jiangsu Province & the Gobi Desert
“For me, inspiration comes from the uncertainty which can’t be explicated. Both of these places are like dark clouds in my deepest memories. I could never wave them away.”

■ **Zhang O:**
Pearl River, Guangzhou
“I like to stand on the bank and look out onto the water. I grew up by the river – even my first date was there.”

Other Zhu picks include Zhang Jianhua, a sculptor who addresses the social issues of laborers and peasants living on the outskirts of China’s thriving cities; Jin Yangping, who describes his craft as “hand-drawn experimental animation,” or paintings made to look like video; and Wang Zhong, an installation artist who built a church.

Zhang Jianhua, who hails from Henan, the same province the young girl in Zhang O’s photo is from, draws inspiration from his experience living at the fringes of society. “I have been to many messy, dirty, seamy places where intellectuals are not willing to go,” he says. Zhang’s sculptures are life-size or larger, made from casting fiberglass in clay molds. The peasant statues stand staring blankly into space and coal miners’ faces are marked with agony and exhaustion.

Jin also seeks to uncover the spiritual alienation of marginalized people in China. His six-minute, hand-drawn animated film “features the inner changes underwent by a female laborer when she goes from working for a publicly owned to a privately owned toy factory,” Jin says. Different objects that feature throughout the film—including a 1970’s

panda-drum toy signifying the laborer’s reluctance to leave the socialist collective—are metaphors for conflicts arising from capitalist private ownership, Jin explains, adding that he hopes people would see the contradictions existing in today’s China. The film ends with the worker committing suicide because of the pressures from her new life.

The last artist, Wang, created the most dramatic piece: “House Church,” a 32-square-meter replica of residential living room turned religious worship ground. When he was a teacher at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in Beijing, one of Wang’s students, a devout Christian, invited him to her home, which she had turned into an underground church. Forty people were crowded into the living room, which only had room for four rows of chairs. “It was very crowded yet cozy—everyone’s eyes were full of kindness. Most of the people there were far away from their hometowns and stayed in the big city to make a living or to follow their dreams,” Wang says. “I thought about my friends and colleagues who didn’t have faith, and I came up with the idea that I wanted them to play the devout Christians in ‘House Church.’” Each mannequin in the scene is modeled after Wang’s classmates, students and friends, including poet Zhou Sese, writer Dan Yu, and even biennale artistic director and art critic Zhu Qi. Wang painted the mannequins’ skins stark white, suggesting his faithless friends are impressionable blank slates.

That’s something you could say about the artists themselves. They’ve traversed their vast country, the world even, absorbing the cultures around them and drawing inspiration from varied places. And at the biennale, visitors were able to focus their presentations, their various viewpoints and experiences, within a framework. The biennale also reaffirmed the country’s emergence as a contemporary art powerhouse. “When artists converge in specific locations, they co-direct a new strategy and new development crucial to the experience of shaping contemporary art,” Hungerbühler says. “I also believe that China is a critical place for Western artists to reconfigure, reinvent and redefine artistic language.”

Above all, the show revealed that Chinese contemporary art is on the verge of significant change. As the commercial side of Chinese art has slowed, the breathing room allows artists to pull social, political and environmental issues into their art-making process—hopefully leading to profound art. However, meaningful art does not necessarily constitute good art. Hungerbühler warns: “The challenge is not to exercise adaptive and additive methodology—I call this the ‘cut and paste’ generation because information technology and travel allows the rapid dissemination of ideas and artists to be inside each others’ heads—but to anchor the art in the specific culture it originated from. This is the enormous test for the evolving generation of Chinese artists.” ✦