

The Guangzhou Triennial: An Art 'Must-see' **by John Batten**

**The First Guangzhou Triennial
'Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-2000)'
Curators: Wu Hung with Wang Huangsheng and Feng Boyi
At the Guangdong Museum of Art: 18 November 2002 to 19 January 2003.**

The Guangzhou Triennial, which ends on 19 January, is a 'must-see' exhibition for anyone interested in the development of Chinese contemporary art over the last ten years. The exhibition is billed as a 'reinterpretation' of the decade (1990-2000) in which Chinese contemporary art matured, gained an international profile, developed an international collecting audience and generally gained acceptance in China's official exhibition spaces. It succeeds in engaging viewers and recreating one view of this productive era in which some of the world's most eye-catching (but not necessarily best) art developed – in addition, the curators have also commissioned new pieces for the Triennial that demonstrate a level of art-making sophistication ranking with the wider overseas art market that many of the same Chinese artists try to emulate.

The Guangdong Museum of Art and the Triennial curators have done a good job in pulling this diverse exhibition together. Indeed, one of the remarkable aspects of the Triennial is its willingness to mention (and in some instances, analyse) past controversies and previous government and exhibition censorship that many of these artists had previously encountered. The Triennial catalogue is a valuable historical document that generally discusses the art and the artistic trends of the period objectively. The selected art covers all media and includes most of the artists that were influential during the past decade – a small criticism would be the reliance on using a prominent Hong Kong commercial gallery as a source for many of the exhibits – high profile artist Zhang Xiaogang for example is thus poorly represented. This is disappointing as it is Zhang and his *Bloodline* series that epitomises for many the archetypal style of Chinese contemporary art – only one exhibited example really did not do justice to the stylistic influence that Zhang still commands.

Just when overseas museums readily accept, widely exhibit, and happily commodify Chinese contemporary art the Chinese critic Yi Ying reminds us (1) that the decade saw much theoretical discussion about the 'New Art' movement and its engagement with the West. Chinese art critics at the time argued that the new Chinese avant-garde artists were not so much making a pragmatic and self-interested/self-promotion approach by marketing their work to the (Western) Art World but were an example of a new (and destructive) type of cultural colonization emanating from the West on China. Yi argues that "in this (coming) decade we should usher in an age of real criticism" – in other words art criticism that should be more objective and be outside the wider needs of domestic Chinese politics. Yi's open-minded essay augurs well for the actual exhibition.

The Guangdong Museum of Art is huge with huge rooms and the Triennial exhibits are well displayed and make effective use of these open spaces: large installations and multi-media pieces look good in these large uncluttered rooms. The embracing feeling that the Triennial engenders begins at the entrance and

the use of the Museum's external architecture: the forecourt is spread with Wang Guangyi's monumental sized cultural revolutionary figures, *Materialist*, bearing the all powerful calligraphy brush, above these figures are the almost scandalous words: 'IN GOD WE TRUST' - prompting the questions: 'what God?'; 'Is it the same God depicted on a US\$ bill?'; or, are the words cryptically talking about the State? The Roman columns point to a US\$ connection – how appropriate for a museum. ...the artist, Gu Dexin, confirms it: "The words are taken from the motto on U.S. bills and coins: "In God We Trust". This installation is placed on top of the entrance of the museum, the logo and name of which are thereby temporarily obliterated."

But it is Ai Weiwei's incongruent *Chandelier* that is spellbinding. Set beside the Museum's outer wall with symmetrical scaffolding surrounding and holding up a huge chandelier – not crystal but New China's plastic. It seems to summarize the old and the new. Likewise, Ai's Ming morphed furniture: traditional designs re-jigged and re-engineered – they look so weird. Absurd, surreal. But again, that strange mixture of old contorted to look new.

A group of 5-year olds in their borrowed Guangdong Museum of Art smocks sit on the floor drawing. It is a reminder that this (again) is the New China – Guangzhou is pulling down the old, replacing it with the new. Even complacent museums need to cater to a changing society....it is good to see children, their parents and teachers sprawled on the floor – practical art education.

Upstairs the large video installations are well appointed: seats for sitters. Yang Zhenzhong's video of a series of people saying "I will die" is strangely disturbing. Some say it quickly, hesitantly laughing, others ponder, one person screams first and then blurts "I will die". A pregnant woman says: "I will die". Yes, she is pregnant. The viewers – oh yes, you can see them – thinking, are these people all tempting fate? I liked Feng Mengbo's interactive video tracing the history of his family – it was a good resting point; a reflective moment reminding us of the depth of China's history. Surrounded by all this new, exciting and almost-slick contemporary art....it was a special historical reminder.

Some of the art was so simple and down-to-earth that its simplicity made a big impression on viewers. Chen Shaofeng's *Dialogue with the Peasants of Tiangongsi Village* was fascinating. Chen travelled to a village (as he has done to many other locations) and asked to paint a portrait of each inhabitant; while he paints a portrait he asks that the sitter also paints a portrait of him. On display is a room of portraits – the formal portraits done by Chen alongside the variety of styles (mainly naïve) used by the villagers. Simple, engaging art – it worked and was a tonic. Likewise, albeit using more sophisticated video, multi-media and installation was the work by the Guangzhou based Big-tail Elephant Group. Their site-specific video and installations use locale as references and the work was both interactive and thought-provoking.

The Guangzhou Triennial was an impressive display of Chinese artistic talent. Future trends will be interesting and the slight suspicion that some of the work is in the 'one-trick' mould will be demonstrated or dismissed in the coming years. As said on billboards: 'Watch This Space' – those Chinese artists that are here for the long-term will be very willing to fill it.

Notes:

Yi Ying: 'Criticism on Chinese Experimental Art in the 1990s', in *The First Guangzhou Triennial* catalogue, 2002, pp 98-104.

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