

Uncertain pleasure

'Uncertain Pleasure: Chinese Artists in the 1990s' was exhibited in April 1997 at Art Beatus, in Vancouver. Paris-based guest curator Hou Hanru selected eight artists originally from Mainland China whose work touches upon the diversity of media and strategies of contemporary Chinese artists working in China and abroad.

Vancouver is a young city with strong historical and cultural relationships with China in particular and Asia in general. In the early twentieth century it was the birthplace of racist legislation that excluded and limited the rights of Asians who, like the Europeans and others, came to North America in search of better opportunities. However, recent influences have resulted in Vancouver's attempt to re-orient itself: an ethnic Chinese population of over a quarter of a million, and the Expo '86 World's Fair, which opened up global avenues for trade and subsequent recognition of the economic boom in East Asia. In its attempt to become a Pacific Rim player, the former 'Gateway to the Rockies' is now the 'Gateway to the Far East', and the promotion of non-stop flights to Heathrow has been superseded by the fiercely competitive Hong Kong route, along with those to Taipei, Beijing and Shanghai.

Over the past decade there has been a phenomenal growth of Asian-Canadian artistic activity in Vancouver, with many mainstream and alternative artists, writers, filmmakers and performers, gaining local and international prominence. One of the most recent and highly visible players in the visual arts scene today is the sleek commercial gallery Art Beatus, which opened in 1996.

What makes Art Beatus unique is its focus on contemporary Chinese art from a global perspective. This is a broad

and at times overwhelming agenda. For instance, the 1997 program sandwiched the adventurous 'Uncertain Pleasure' show between photojournalistic work from Hong Kong (Peter Yung) and staid traditionalist brush scrolls from Taiwan (Li Chi-Mao, Au Ho-nien, Yang Yu-yu and Wu A-sung). The autumn schedule opened with a collection of paintings by the late Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose 'western' work will arguably help contextualise the idea of contemporary Chinese art.



SHEN YUAN, *Three Chairs*, 1994, (detail), mixed media.

left: ZHANG PEILI, *Uncertain Pleasure*, 1996, mixed media.

The purpose of 'Uncertain Pleasure' was to introduce mainstream audiences to contemporary art practices employed by Chinese artists (who live, in this case, in China, France and Canada). While the 'New Art in China' exhibition, which toured to the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1995, did just that, what made this exhibition unique in Vancouver was that installation art and, in particular, video installation, was presented in a commercial setting, as opposed to alternative or institutional spaces.

The title of the exhibition was taken from Zhang Peili's video installation, *Uncertain Pleasure*, which provided the focal point for the exhibition. Curator Hou Hanru's strategy in assembling the eight artists was to examine the 'reality of 1990s China ... a moment in which cultural life in the country is full of contradictions and chaos'. The result was a



SHEN YUAN, *Balance*,
1994, found objects,
38.1 x 50.8 cm.

below: SHEN YUAN,
Untitled, 1994, found
objects, 50.8 x 25.4 cm.



mini-survey show where a myriad of techniques, formal and conceptual concerns, and relationships to traditions, be they western or Chinese, were explored. Does 'uncertain' mean the shifting of identities, the ongoing process of hybridisation, or the multiplicities of traditions and traditional allegiances gone awry? Has transculturation resulted in 'uncertainty'? And where does 'pleasure' – the sense of physical self – fit within this framework? If there were any coherent threads in the show, perhaps the most obvious one was the way in which most of the artworks referred to the body as a site of cultural identification and exchange.

Zhang Peili's six-channel video installation *Uncertain Pleasure* offered close-ups of incessant scraping of fingernails on skin. This work incited discomfort in the viewer, with the promise of pleasurable relief embodied in the act of scratching. What is at the root of such hyper-activity? Can a social irritant be made to go away, or would it just swell up and become a bigger sore? Or is the artist just breaking with social convention by exposing unrestrained, obsessive personal behaviour? Perhaps the video refers to the pleasures of recent capitalisation and the free-market spirit in China, in the wholehearted yet repressed embracing of consumerist desires that can be obtained but not attained. The possibilities of metaphoric free-association abound!

A sculptural work by the sole female artist in the exhibition, Shen Yuan, struck a more contemplative note. *Three Chairs* was a beautiful, evocative installation consisting of hemp fibres bursting or escaping from the backing of three chairs, to intertwine and commingle in a braided knot at the

centre. Shen refers to a Chinese idiom, *San wu chen qun*, or 'Three or five does a group make', alluding to how our lives are linked and bound by others. This theme recurs in her two smaller works, which utilise fingernails. In *Balance* a measuring scale with a pile of artificial fingernails on one pan, is weighed inequitably against an empty pan strapped down by a leather belt. In *Untitled*, 1994, real finger- and toenails were scattered on a straw slipper sitting in a shoe box that bore the trendy label 'Pacific Co'. These pieces poignantly presented issues of femininity and identity through these bodily

extensions and remnants, alluding to the industries of fashion, desire, and the construction of feminine beauty.

Also memorable was Feng Mengbo's *My Private Album*, a personal, playful excavation of family history which surprisingly echoed some identity-based work produced in North America and England over the past decade, primarily by artists of non-European descent, but without the cultural difference twist. This interactive CD-ROM is chock-full of QuickTime video clips, audio bites, manipulated images and text containing family photographs – an extensive snapshot exposing some of the cultural iconography of China in recent eras. Visually layered and evocative, it was loaded down with family history that at times seemed banal to non-relatives. When the family's internal events of relationships and births were woven through social and political events, along with strings of artifacts from the Cultural Revolution, such



as films, operas, music, posters and slogans, the work became more captivating.

Considerably less high-tech and personal were Wang Du's painted plaster casts, which acted as homage to the insignificance of memory and the media. A bust of John Wayne Bobbitt, a model promoting a facial technique, Gina Lollobrigida serving cake to a horse were accompanied by the newspaper articles in which they appear. Somehow, the immortalisation of these celebrities in these awkward and garishly painted sculptures seemed appropriate, functioning as kitschy tributes to non-events.

Three painters were included to show the diversity of approaches to the medium. Yan Pei Ming's wild yet controlled gesticulations result in monochromatic portraits that seem automatic in execution, leaving almost a violent imprint of someone the artist had paused to consider for a brief moment. Theirs are visages stripped of character and nuance, and even gradations of colour and hue, emphatically left on the canvas in an almost anonymous manner. Vancouver-based Sam Lam's airbrushed paintings of cropped bodies embracing or touching are sometimes juxtaposed with sheets of thick, polished aluminium. They derive from classical European statuary and speak perhaps of a discreet yearning for a romantic past where beauty and desire seemed so representable. In a more traditionally 'Chinese' light there were the black paintings of Yang Jiechang. His obsessive layering of paper and ink are formalist explorations of what makes a painting a painting, without concern for representation. By applying these materials onto non-traditional cheesecloth on canvas, they operate as a synthetic device wherein different histories have collided.

Finally, there was Zhu Jian's video, *Forever*, shot by strapping a camera onto a rear wheel of a flatbed bicycle cart and pedalling it through the avenues and *hutongs* of Beijing. The resulting spinning, swirling travelogue comments on urban congestion and other effects of modernisation, but could also be seen as a metaphor for the present state of Chinese life and, by extension, contemporary art.

Although the premise of uncertainty pervades the rhetoric



WANG DU,
Les Travaux du
Corps, 1997, installation
view, mixed media.

of the exhibition, it can be found in greater and lesser doses with each artwork. Nevertheless, uncertainty operates as an apt metaphor for the past, present and future of Mainland China and its artists, who now more than ever can draw upon a lazy Susan of traditions and strategies in their work. For Art Beatus, 'Uncertain Pleasure' was certainly a risk, but a courageous one that confirmed its desire to be a serious gallery with an inclusive and ambitious mandate.

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