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Changing Cultures

The Recent Immigration of Chinese Artists to the U.S.

Tiananmen Square and the ensuing crackdown brought a fresh wave of foreign artists to the U.S. They are creating art that draws from the China they have left and the America in which they now live and work.

by Gail Levin

On August 18, 1991, while at work by night making portrait sketches of tourists near New York's Times Square, the Chinese artist Lin Lin was shot to death. When this thirty-four-year-old left his native Shanghai, he joined the most significant migration to America of artists trained abroad since the flight of Europeans from the Nazis during the late 1930s and 1940s. Lin's death is particularly ironic because he was succeeding in his new home. Exuberant in his newfound freedom, he made colorful constructions out of discarded automobile tires, reflecting the influence of the spatial complexities of his American hero Frank Stella.

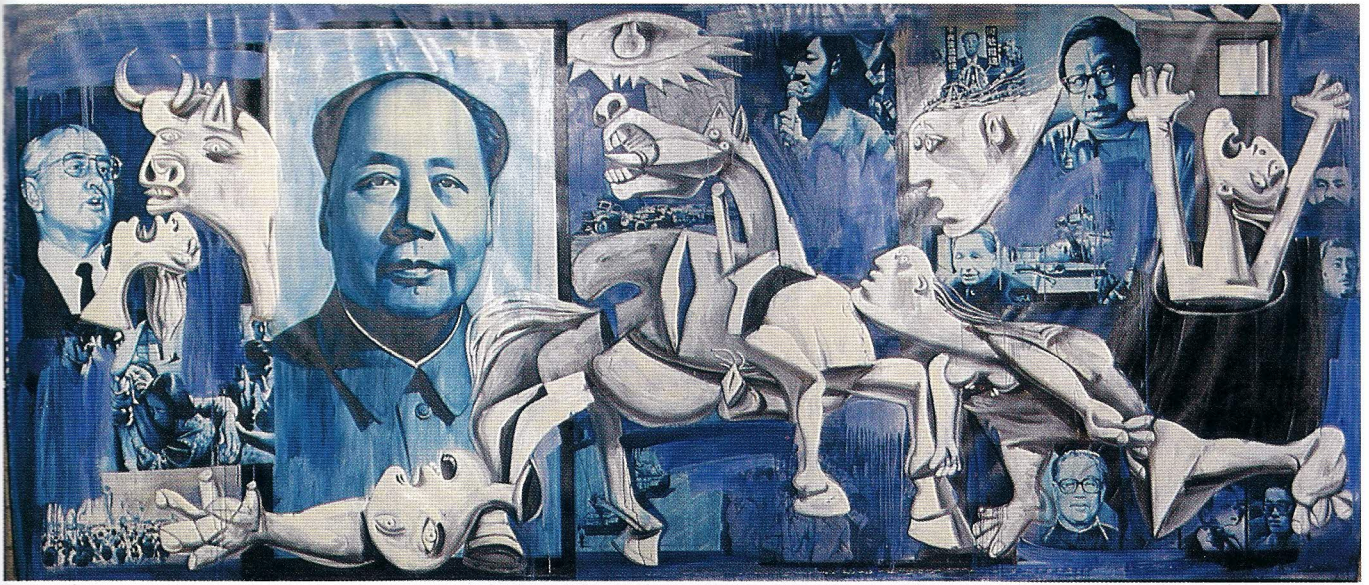
Lin left China in 1985 after being expelled from the Zhejiang College of Fine Art in Hangzhou just two weeks before graduation because he refused to conform to the required aesthetic formula. In



Xu Jianguo, *East-West II*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 54 in.

New York, however, he won the academic credentials denied him at home when he received an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in 1988. He went on to win a grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and in 1990 had a one-man show at the Frank Bernaducci Gallery in Soho. He embraced American life and celebrated the working-class New York neighborhood in which he lived and worked, renaming himself Billy Harlem.

In China, Lin was already aware of 20th-century innovators from the West — Picasso, Leger, Pollock, Rauschenberg. An early New York picture depicts a street-side restaurant, such a familiar sight in China, in Picasso-esque style. In the monumental painting *Guernica/Beijing*, he incorporated the faces of Chinese leaders and Gorbachev into Picasso's memorable image of the Spanish Civil War. This use of a Western icon to ex-



Lin Lin (Billy Harlem), *Guernica/Beijing*, 1989, oil on canvas

press outrage exemplifies the transcultural response of many Chinese immigrant artists. They appropriate Western masterpieces in order to communicate in terms intelligible to their adopted culture.

Appropriation occurs, too, in a group of recent paintings by Qian Yang where nude models appear unexpectedly in Western masterpieces such as Rousseau's *The Sleeping Gypsy* which Yang renames *Lion Walking Out of Dream*. While not overtly political, this insertion of nudes into Western paintings brings to mind the political problems created in the late 1970s, when art students in China such as Yang were permitted to paint from live models at the art academy but nudes could not be publicly exhibited. Yang now flaunts what was once forbidden by placing his nudes where his Western audiences least expect them. The Chinese émigré stands with one foot in the East and one in the West, engaging in constant repartee with Western art and culture.

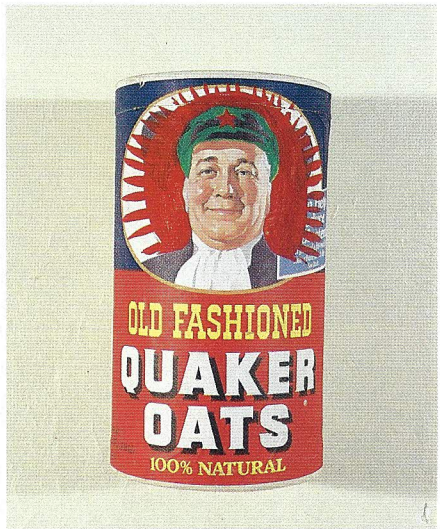
The events at Tiananmen Square prompted another appropriation of a Western masterpiece, Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*. The French master's figures appear powerfully superimposed upon the architecture of the square and the intruding army tanks in *Les Misérables* painted by Chen Danqing. Chen left art school after the academies were shut down during the Cultural Revolution. While exiled in the countryside, he taught

himself to paint by producing more than a hundred large images of Mao. His talent and theme won him entry to the prestigious Central Academy of Art in Beijing, where he studied Soviet Socialist Realism. Curious to see firsthand the Western art that he knew only from books, he arrived in San Francisco in 1982, just in time to see the last stop of the traveling retrospective of Edward Hopper. The show confirmed his appreciation of a different kind of realism. In his latest work, Chen has appropriated images from Baroque masters and Hollywood films.

Rather than realism, neo-Dada inspires the appropriation of Zhang Hongtu, who also arrived a decade ago. He responded to Tiananmen

Square by transforming Leonardo's *Last Supper*, replacing the beneficent Christ and his disciples with a menacing Mao and his gang. Ironically, Zhang's *The Last Banquet* was excluded from the Tiananmen Memorial Art Exhibition organized in Washington in June 1990 by the Congressional Human Rights Foundation because it was deemed "offensive on religious grounds." The artist responded: "Eight years ago, I moved to the United States from China in order to have freedom to paint. Should I now move from the United States to . . . the moon for the same reason?"

Cognizant of Pop Art, Zhang also seized upon a resemblance between the Quaker trademark of Quaker Oats breakfast cereal and Chairman Mao to produce a further satire on the Chinese leader. He has continued to grapple with the image of Mao. In his twelve-part *Chairmen Mao* of 1989, he alluded to Duchamp's transformation of the *Mona Lisa* by giving the Chinese leader a moustache and calling the work *H.I.A.C.S.* for "He is a Chinese Stalin." Zhang included both a cubist Mao and Mao gaping at the Goddess of Freedom produced by the students in Tiananmen Square. He recently completed a series he calls *Material Mao* in which Mao is made visible only in his absence, as a negative space defined by a variety of media including brick, concrete, wood, and fur. Thus, this innovative artist both acknowledges Warhol's appropriation of the power-



Zhang Hongtu, *Long Live Chairmen Mao*, 1988, acrylic on Quaker Oat box, height 9 3/4, diameter 5 1/2 in.



Qian Yang, *Lion Walking out of Dream*, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in.

ful Chinese icon and repossesses it for his own use, as did his friend, Lin in *East is Red 1 and 2* of 1989, which presented Mao framed by discarded tires.

Hung Liu, who arrived in California from Beijing in 1984, responded to Tiananmen Square with her 1989 canvas *Trauma* and the 1992 triptych *Pulse*, which includes details such as the lone protester facing the military tanks. In *Trauma*, Liu refers to the illness of China's body politic by depicting the pressure points on an acupuncture chart overlaid upon the architecture of Tiananmen Square. These images are juxtaposed with her own passport photo and a figure of a Red Guard dancer from the Beijing Opera, suggesting what happens when governments intrude into culture.

When Liu examines the role of women in Chinese and Western culture, political issues of another sort emerge. She attempts to analyze what she sees as "cultural collision," such as photographs of Chinese prostitutes made by Chinese male photographers who have internalized the "Western male gaze." Since their studio settings and poses were adapted from Western art, Liu has appropriated such icons as Delacroix's *Odalisque* and Manet's *Olympia*. Caught between two cultures, Liu exposes sexism in both the East and West.

Most of these Chinese artists initially gained permission to travel to the

United States to study in American art schools. Yet, after the massacre and repression of those supporting the democracy movement in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, even those artists planning to return have elected to stay on for reasons of artistic and political freedom. The threatened reversion to ideological regimentation, to the rigidity of the dominant Socialist Realism and Soviet-style academicism, and continued political repression were compelling reasons to remain in the U.S..

The artists who enrolled in American art schools were not always young

and had often completed their artistic education in China. Some had achieved impressive professional reputations there, exhibiting in important shows and teaching in major art academies, while others were unhappily assigned to undesired jobs, working as designers for jewelry factories, theaters, or in other industries. The imposition of an American art education as the price of immigration has enriched the complex aesthetic dialogue between East and West.

These new immigrants have endured separation from family members, culture shock, and economic hardship in order to remain artists and to make a new life in America. Even as these artists have brought over members of their immediate families and obtained their "Green Cards" for permanent residency, they continue to face economic and aesthetic struggles. Liu commented on the experience in her canvas, *Resident Alien* (1989) [see AAN, p.20, USA East Coast Supplement, vol.4, no.1]. By giving her name as "Fortune Cookie," she also addresses the exploitation of women, for this confection invented in San Francisco is also sexual slang for a Chinese woman.

Chinese artists in the United States who wish to pursue traditional Chinese painting styles and to work in non-Western media are having more



Chen Danding, *Les Miserables*, 1989, oil on canvas, 58 x 44 in.

difficulty finding a market. Others trained in Socialist Realism are so far unwilling or unable to move beyond their inflexible academic training. Some, like Gao Xiaohua, who as a young man during the Cultural Revolution was forced to produce propaganda pictures for the army, now reject the political. Working in a meticulous realist style, Gao Xiaohua continues to paint the same Chinese subject matter that established his reputation in his native country. The extraordinary skills of such artists are too often exploited in the West by slick commercial galleries and by those who sell commissioned paintings by fictive artists to interior decorators.

As these few cases suggest, some Chinese immigrant artists have celebrated their new freedom with daring aesthetic experimentation, finding moral, if not economic, support. To make ends meet, they hold a variety of jobs, working, for example, as stone carvers, art restorers, textile designers, artists' assistants, print-making technicians, and portrait painters.

References to the traditional arts of China, which were discouraged during the Cultural Revolution in favor of Socialist Realism, have inspired the contemporary work of a number of other artists, among them Xu Jianguo,



Hung Liu, *Odalisque*, 1992, oil on canvas, lacquered wood, antique architectural pieces, mixed media, 52 1/2 x 95 x 89 in. Courtesy of Bernice Steinbaum Gallery.

who arrived in 1984. In his *East-West II* (1991), the "T" shape derives from a celebrated Daoist painting which depicted the journey of the spirit of the deceased through the realm of the underworld, earthly mortals, and the heavens. Although the Daoist work was painted on silk, Xu now works in acrylic on canvas. In a related vein, actual Chinese art objects like the celadon vase with jade flowers and ornate shoes for bound feet appear as

accessories in Hung Liu's constructed compositions.

Chinese folk art, including traditional New Year painting, influenced the emphatic linearity, colorful detail, and mythic subject matter of Huang Suning who painted for four years in Tibet. Her *Cowberd and the Weaving Maiden* uses ancient folk tales to symbolize the six-year separation imposed when her husband, artist Chen Danqing, went to study in America, leaving her behind with their daughter. Her most recent work depicts their reunion in New York, retaining the flattened space and pattern of Chinese folk art as well as reflecting her experience working in America as a textile designer to support her family. As these Chinese émigrés become new Americans, their work often comments upon their experiences.

It is too soon to assess the full impact of these new immigrants on American art. As their spoken English improves, no doubt more will find employment teaching art in an educational system that now emphasizes multi-culturalism. As their art begins to interact with their surroundings, their ways of looking and thinking will undoubtedly affect American artists. We are already seeing the beginnings of this influence. Δ

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Zhang Hongtu, *Chairmen Mao*, 1989, mixed media, 39 1/2 x 46 1/2 in.