

lost in a bamboo forest

text by Melissa E. Goldberg

Wang Shugang's work has an optimistic cleverness that typifies his entire eager outlook on life. His e-mails are liberally punctuated with exclamation points as he explains the artist culture in China: It's "MAFIA!!" Wang's enthusiasm shouts at me over the Internet. I imagine a mafia of artists, the underbelly of Beijing, as stoic and fierce as Las Vegas pit bosses. But this clever artist got me. He's pulled my chain, yoked my coke, because after an interview of legit, trustworthy answers, Wang has to infuse his response to my very last question with this open-ended, almost sarcastic and exclamation-ridden "MAFIA!!"

And I return to the beginning of all my assumptions about China and the contemporary art scene of Beijing and Shanghai and wonder: What the hell is really going on over there?

This question is on a lot of people's minds – at least, for collectors, art aficionados, and the semi-attentive Chinese audience. China's undergoing a transformation, and Wang lays it all out: "In China, contemporary art is a relatively new phenomena. During the last decades we had official art and so-called underground art." The official art refers to the government-sponsored or propaganda art extolling the virtues of China and Communist doctrine, like the painted mural "Mao is the red sun of our hearts," which remains on the wall of the industrial site-cum-gallery Factory 798 in Beijing. Underground art, on the other hand, was the problematic art for the authorities. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Chinese government strongly discouraged artistic expression that deviated from the Communist party ideology, essentially eliminating all philosophical teachings, music and art grounded in the classics, both Western and Eastern. It wasn't until the 80s that artists could begin experimenting with different art forms, and the scene finally began to flourish in the 90s. Now, there are generational strata of artists from the veterans of contemporary art like Li Shan, Yu Youhan, sexagenarians whose work deals with the broad themes of politics, Chinese history, and human kind to the 40-somethings whose formative years are rooted in China's tumultuous recent history. And then there are the green-shoot artists, reared in China's new teeming metropolises, who work mostly with new media, photo and video.

Wang Shugang falls into the category of 40-year-olds, with his work incorporating autobiographical Chinese content with contemporary aesthetics. His crowd-pleasing piece *SWEEPERS* (2001), which depicts a fleet of eight floor-sweeping bronze Buddhist monks, portrays the generous traditions of Buddhism with a clever tone apparent in the cloning of these saintly creatures. Wang explains that repetition, symbolism and humor – especially humor because "through humor you can get to know life even better, deeper" – are the foundation of his work. Wang's *PAGODAS* (2001) are a series of sculptures of bald fiberglass heads, painted white. Each truncated skull, rotated in different directions, features one protruding wood, red-painted pagoda. Again, Wang creates a comical sculpture by redefining a traditional Chinese structure. He uses the pagoda, historically built for religious or memorial purposes, as an awkward physical bulge that draws attention to its own dysfunction.

Fellow 40-something Hong Hao is known for his punchy one-liners that combine artistic skills grounded in classic Chinese schooling with an ironic yet poignant tone. Between 1995 and 2000, he worked on a series of delicate silk screens on paper that comment on the global landscape. In these works, Hong redrafted boundaries of the world's countries based on political factors represented in titles such as *THE DIVISION OF NUCLEAR ARMS* and *THE STRATEGIC DEFENSE ORDER*. Hong has found success all over the world, most recently as part of the group show, *ZOOMING INTO FOCUS: CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO FROM THE HAUDENSCHILD COLLECTION*. Included in this exhibition was Hong's work, *MR. HONG USUALLY WAITS UNDER THE ARCH ROOF FOR SUNSHINE* (2001), a photograph that captures the artist appropriating a rich, intellectual – a self-titled Mr. Hong – who lounges in his modern beachside back yard with a book in hand, a woman swimming in the clear blue pool below, and a white-jacketed waiter poised beside while holding a fruity cocktail. Lorenz Helbing, owner of Shanghai Art Gallery in Shanghai (which presented *ZOOMING INTO FOCUS* at the Shanghai Art Museum), offered his analysis: "Perhaps it's just an artists dream." But with the repetition of politics in Hong's works, I am more convinced that the artist has created another one of his satirical and biting versions of reality.

Hong is represented by Courtyard Gallery in Beijing, one of the many contemporary art galleries that have sprung up in the last 15 years throughout China. Red Gate Gallery is another. Located in the historic Dongbianmen Tower, a watchtower that overlooks the Central Railway Station of Beijing and is a remnant of the 15th century Ming dynasty, Red Gate was founded by Aussie expat Brian Wallace. Wallace came to Beijing to study art history at the People's University. In 1988, he started organizing exhibitions, found success and never left. Red Gate proves to be more than a privately-owned retail gallery that only displays the likes of landscape artist Zhou Jirong and peephole painter Wang Yuping to foreign collectors. It is an institution interested promoting public arts and offering some basic infrastructure. Wallace hosts one of the first programs of artists in residency in the country, which according to the gallery owner, provides general assistance to set up camp in a foreign locale along with "a great opportunity to live and work among some of the leading artists in China and artists from overseas [that are] here in Beijing." Wallace continues, "The center of contemporary Chinese art is definitely Beijing. Apart from being the center of Chinese culture, politics, money, and power, Beijing is home to a huge art community." Along with Red Gate and the Courtyard Gallery, stand White Cube, Tokyo Gallery, and the one-year-old Dashanzi Arts District.

A community of 10 art galleries, 35 artists' studios, 20 designers and publishers, and many retail stores, Dashanzi (which includes Factory 798) is a transformed 1954 Bauhaus industrial site. Artist Wang Shugang explains that "the concept itself is absolutely new – there has been some so-called artist's villages in [the] countryside around Beijing for some years already, but not [one] that combines galleries and other forms of commerce... it is a window!" Dashanzi has become a trendy domain attracting the new-age bohemians, or as the Chinese



HONEY by Yang Fudong.
Photographs, 2003.





say, the Bo Pu Tribe. The district hosted their first arts festival this spring RADIANCE AND RESONANCE/SIGNAL OF TIME, presented in association with the Beijing Cultural Development Foundation. This event constitutes a significant effort by the community to create infrastructure for contemporary art. But despite its popularity and support, Wang Shugang doubts that the district will be able to renew the lease come its expiration in December 2005. The landlord is already rumored to want to build apartments in Dashanzi. Though, if the community does remain, this mall of culture will be a very popular draw for the Olympic-going crowd in 2008.

But the scene in Beijing is not for everyone. San Diego-based collector Eloisa Haudenschild prefers Shanghai to Beijing. "People get to Beijing and they really want to succeed. It is more fast-paced, desperate," Haudenschild says. "I like the more slow-paced Shanghai, [the] independent, individual thinking of these artists in the South." Haudenschild, along with her husband, Chris, started collecting two years ago after repeatedly visiting China for business. Haudenschild's passion is to find emerging artists and "to be with them at the time when [she] can make a difference." In China, this took Haudenschild a great deal of time due to the lack of conventional gallery spaces. "Artists just kind of gather and do their own shows," Haudenschild said. ZOOMING INTO FOCUS is the result of her art scavenger hunt. The collection features photographs and videos from artists Zhao Bandi, Yang Fudong, and Cao Fei, among others. With the help of Laura Zhou and Lorenz Helbing from Shanghai, Haudenschild convinced the Shanghai Art Museum to take the show, which debuted at the University Art Gallery at San Diego State University (SDSU) in Fall 2003. Haudenschild bubbled, "The art exhibition at the Shanghai Art Museum was unprecedented. First of all, they were very courageous to take the show, because ...the authorities, the controls have a lot of problems with a majority of these [artists]." Also, this feat marked the first time a private collection from the West has been on view in China. And, of course, this spurred record numbers of visitors. Eager to educate the Chinese, the Americans, and next, the Mexicans (the collection is on display May through July at the Centro Cultural, Tijuana), Haudenschild has created symposia and conversation in Beijing, Shanghai and San Diego. She offers support and infrastructure that China's "MAFIA!!" lacks.


Like a loving fairy godmother, Haudenschild has even helped artists Yang Zhenzhong and Shi Yong travel to SDSU as artists in residence. She supported Yang's completion of his ongoing work I WILL DIE (2000), in which the artist records people saying "I will die" in different languages. Haudenschild also helped Shi Yong realize her Internet project, SUPERANGEL (www.shanghart.com/shiyong/index.htm). This three-stage new media piece animates a Zoloff-like bouncing ball (complete with facial expressions) learning in segmented chapters about global politics, conflict, even Saddam. While Super Angel reads the written rants on globalization that are pasted at the top of each lesson's Web page, the soundtrack plays the high-pitched and minimal tune of FISH HEADS which is interspersed with intoxicating giggles from Super Angel. Entertaining and engaging, this project spurs a dialogue on globalization within a light-hearted setting. Site visitors are asked for feedback on Super Angel's ideas after viewing animated machine guns morphing into doves and back again. Also included in the

traveling collection ZOOMING INTO FOCUS is Shi's photograph YOU CAN'T CLONE IT, BUT YOU CAN BUY IT (2000), a panoramic of an androgynous army all wearing the same MATRIX-like black, form-fitting jump suit, black sunglasses, and red bag. This work, again, addresses the fears associated with the global landscape and self-identity.

Shi Yong and Yang Zhenzhong represent the latter generation of Chinese artists busy with new media, video and photography. Born in 1971, Yang Fudong also fits into this crew. ZOOMING INTO FOCUS features two films by Yang Fudong: HONEY (2003) and CITY LIGHTS (2000). These works leave behind the historical comparisons present in Wang's and Hong's works. Instead, Yang's videos are cinematic vignettes grounded in contemporary China. He uses quick cuts and jazz soundtracks to expose the hidden desires of the narrative's main characters through unconventional story structure. Yang has had recent shows in New York, Miami and was even a part of the Mori Art Museum's inaugural exhibition, HAPPINESS.

Like Shi Yong, Yang Zhenzhong and Yang Fudong, Chinese artists are finding critical success in the foreign contemporary art world. Even the Chinese government has begun to recognize art as a small industry by supporting the new trend of festivals in Beijing and Shanghai that have slowly developed since the first China Art Expo in 1994. The Expo, which lasted for three consecutive years, created a model for the Shanghai Art Fair in 2000 and the Beijing Biennial in October 2003. Despite this support, there is still concern over censorship. When asked if Shanghai has any problems with government censorship, Helbing is quick to answer, "No. But I guess I would hesitate to hang certain works by Robert Mapplethorpe." In an interview from the Beijing Biennial, Wallace commented that artists can paint whatever they want. But they must pick their exhibition pieces carefully. Eloisa Haudenschild has her take: "In China, in the past five years, you make sure you get a really good catalogue because most times the authorities close [the exhibition on] the first day."

The mafia of artists works on. Even with the scattered government censorship and a society that, in Wang Shugang's opinion, finds artists rather strange, Chinese artists are a busy lot. They have an abundance of material to work with as they digest years of political change, adopt renewed global perspectives, and experiment with technology and freedom. But, in terms of infrastructure and complete reign over creativity, China has years to grow before contemporary art completely blooms from the underground. In the country's defense, the festivals are in place, the galleries are popular among foreigners, the artists are attracting international attention, and general change is at the forefront of Chinese society. Now, the Chinese people need to take note of their own culture of contemporary art and celebrate it. Wallace, Helbing, and Haudenschild all admit that foreigners are the majority of collectors. And though this follows a historical trend - French didn't collect (French) Cubism; New York's Guggenheim Museum didn't collect (American) Minimalism - the Chinese are missing the astounding creativity and freshness of their contemporary scene. Until this changes, the contemporary artists of China will be regarded like the characters in Yang Fudong's black and white photograph of SEVEN INTELLECTUALS IN A BAMBOO FOREST (2003): groomed with skills, but entirely out of place. □



我知道你喜欢草坪，
但要懂得爱护它。
I know you love lawn,
but it needs care.

没看到人家正往外爬吗？
Don't you see I am leaving it?