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Shanghai's skyline, seen from Pearl Lam's penthouse in the French Concession



Shanghai freeway at night



A Starbucks in the French Concession



Art lovers on the scene at a show by Yang Jiechang at the Shanghai Duolun Museum of Art

SCENES FROM SHANGHAI

by Ben Davis

The immense metropolis of Shanghai has a sci-fi tinge, thick with smog and traffic, its skyline dotted with random bits of showpiece architecture. With vast stretches of department stores, boutiques and Starbucks, Shanghai can seem, at times, as familiar as any European capital. At the same time, the place still bears the marks of its recent history as a peasant society. Shanties languish in the shadows of massive skyscrapers. Walk into a public toilet, and one is likely to find just a hole in the ground.

On the whole, however, the shock of familiarity overwhelms the shock of difference. Despite the fact that vast regions of the country remain rural and destitute -- hidden to the foreign visitor -- in Shanghai one can find on the streets young people who seem, more or less, like those one might meet in New York or Berlin. With all the "New China" hype and hysteria that gets thrown about, this is humanizing, and reassuring.

Though it is China's financial capital, Shanghai is far from the center of the Chinese art scene. Shanghai is the place where styles are consolidated rather than hatched, supposedly less wild than Beijing, which has a sprawling underground scene and thousands of galleries. But we are now in a time of consolidation. After what Barbara Pollock has called the "wild, wild East" atmosphere of the last ten years, when manic Western attention and a free-for-all atmosphere led Chinese art to rise to insane heights, the interesting question to ask is, how does the art we associate with "Chinese contemporary" look from China itself?

For the art critic, however, the sensible idea of ditching Western fantasies to see Chinese contemporary art simply as it is has one problem. Very often, the Chinese art world seems to be living a fantasy of itself.

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I went to Shanghai, along with my colleagues Sarah Douglas from *Art + Auction* and David Velasco from *Artforum*, as a guest of the dealer Pearl Lam, who was promoting both herself and the city's art scene on the occasion of the opening of the ShContemporary art fair [see "*The China Price*," Sept. 19, 2008] and the Shanghai Biennale, Sept. 5-Nov. 5, 2008. Lam certainly can claim to be the queen of fantasy-China. She owns a fast-expanding chain of Contrasts Gallery spaces, uses her deep pockets to bankroll racy hipster art experiments and stands at the center of a scene of self-conscious cool. Lam herself is a celebrity -- in fact, she seems to manage to get her own face in more publications than any of her artists, including in the *New York Times*, which recently dubbed her "Shanghai's Auntie Mame."

Lam, who comes from a Hong Kong real estate fortune, personally owns a 23-floor gated luxury living tower in Shanghai's French Concession neighborhood (kitty-corner from a TGIFridays), where she holds court in her penthouse apartment. There, amidst high-design décor that resembles the prop closet from *A Clockwork*



Pearl Lam on the cover of *Shanghai Tatler*, which dubs her "Art's Party Girl"



Dinner at Pearl Lam's penthouse



Greeters for a party at Pearl Lam's



Dancers entertain the crowd at a Pearl Lam party

Orange, she nightly crowds in art-world celebrities for lavish soirees. On my first evening off the plane from New York, I sat at her table eating off of pomo-rococo Peter Ting porcelain, literally rubbing elbows on my right with Philip Dodd, former ICA London director, now focusing on UK-China cultural exchange. On my other side was Mian Mian, a voluble Chinese writer famous for *Candy*, a novel about disaffection and depravity in the Chinese underground, which has the distinction of having been banned by the authorities.

Throughout my time in Shanghai, people kept telling me that it was *the* place to be. They said it to me as if they were trying to sell something. Here you had the fast-and-loose cosmopolitan ferment equivalent to New York before it got too commercial, I was repeatedly told -- though the very comparison seems to indicate how self-conscious it is. The scene around Lam certainly doesn't seem terribly bohemian, and it feels like it's more organized top-down as a collection of stars than bottom-up as a community of interests. And yet, Pearl Lam's decadent parties, thick with interchange between bigwigs and oddballs, do seem like some kind of caffeinated, amped-up version of someone's image of what a classic New York salon might have been like.

Lam's many admirers love her for her anything-goes spirit, and the function she serves in bringing together China's power players with their international counterparts, as well as for her manic ambition (she was opening at least two new Contrasts spaces while we were there, and also runs a design firm). Her detractors suggest that she is more of a collector than a dealer, interested in associating herself with celebrities rather than having any real art specialty or interest.

But in fact, it is precisely Lam's collector sensibility that makes her emblematic in today's China. If there is one thing the maturing Chinese contemporary art stars have in common, it is their work's eclecticism, its infatuation with its own character as spectacle. Walking into these flashy, everything-at-once exhibitions -- the preferred mode of many hot artists -- is often like walking into the burble of a cocktail party, and finding yourself a few drinks behind.

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One such star is Wang Tiande, a man who is, moreover, the respected dean of the art and design department at Shanghai's Fudan University. The centerpiece of "One Meter Seventy-Three," Sept. 8-Oct. 9, 2008, Wang's polished exhibition at Contrasts' space at 181 Middle Jiangxi Road (his first in China for 10 years), was a massive pile of actual coal heaped in the gallery, a dark mass meant to resemble the hills rising from the mist in Chinese ink paintings. Nearby on the walls hung a series of misty photos with the long, horizontal dimension of scrolls. These also ape classical landscapes, only here piles of burned and flaking paper are photographed, miming the waves of terrain. Still other works feature rows of Chinese characters -- nonsensical, I am told -- traced onto layers of delicate paper with a hot instrument, so that the glyphs are composed of ragged holes in the surface.

These evocative works have a sober, even spiritual, feel. But then, in the very next gallery, one finds *Tiende Investments: Art Index*, a project for which Wang sold shares in himself and then tracked how they were traded over several months on an animated stock-market display. Elsewhere, the work from which the whole show derives its title involved rebuilding the entry to the main gallery so that the ceiling was lowered to match the artist's own height exactly, sort of like Michael Asher without any critical pretensions. Taken as a complete statement, "One Meter Seventy-Three" has basically two competing themes: one (the coal; the photos) is the reduction of Chinese tradition to a simulation of itself; the other (the stock market graph; the entryway installation), the artist's own self as the



Outside Contrasts gallery for the opening of Wang Tiande's "One Meter Seventy-Three"



Wang Tiande
Coal Mountain
2008
Contrasts



Observing photos by Wang Tiande at Contrasts

catalyzing center of interest. The latter is the subject matter that gets poured into the hollow left by the former.

This kind of art is about neither form (an exploration of formal properties), nor content (some kind of statement). What it is about is impact, effect. And again, there's the shock of the familiar: In this mode, Chinese contemporary art evinces a spirit very similar to the cocky, scattershot post-conceptualism that Jerry Saltz, for one, has diagnosed in the MFA-generation of art stars in the U.S. [see "*Wasted Youth*," Apr. 28, 2008]. Its origin is the same -- the unprecedented explosion of market demand, the real possibility of immediate success, the careerist sense that grabbing attention is the most important thing. The point of difference between the two is that what has drawn attention to Chinese artists is not their youth but their nationality, so that installations tend to contain de rigueur ironic references to stereotyped "Chineseness" rather than de rigueur references to punk or goth culture.

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Yet this formula is changing as China's development barrels ahead. Everywhere talk turns to the idea that if it is foreign collectors who have nurtured China's contemporary artists heretofore, the emergence of branded stars is slowly attracting native attention (this newly rich country, after all, is brand obsessed). Moreover, the Chinese scene has now passed the point where its stars, once mainly expats living in New York or Paris, are moving back home to take advantage of the amenities afforded by their native country's new-found prominence and affluence. Even someone like Wenda Gu (aka Gu Wenda) -- an artist known for his tapestries of human hair and carved stone tablets, whose Shanghai office we visited -- regularly commutes to China to be near the production centers where his works are manufactured, though he is essentially a New Yorker.

Important in relation to these developments was Qiu Anxiong's "We Are the World," Sept. 9-Dec. 9, 2008, staged in a huge, 1,400-meter space Contrasts was debuting in a converted factory in Xian Feng Industrial Park. Qiu, who rocketed to celebrity with his "memory train" installation at this year's Art Basel, had filled this vast project space with armies of identical clay replicas of a Spuds McKenzie-esque dog figurine. Massive versions hulked around the space, including two giant dogs flanking the entrance to a stage, bubble machines churning out a wall of floating suds behind them. Meanwhile, the floor was covered with hundreds of small versions of the dog, organized in tight, martial phalanxes, or harnessed to a sled. Interspersed throughout the space were sheds where you could glimpse the tools used to construct the statues. And toiling away live for partygoers, a team of artisans was hunched over a table to one side of the space, their labor part of the display.

The obvious reference here would seem to be the famous Imperial terracotta army of warriors. Yet outside the warehouse, as workmen installed a giant neon sign with the show's title above, Qiu insisted that these works were unimportant to him. Rather, the show was inspired by an incident that had happened to friends of his -- several young men stood next to him, looking humble and aggrieved -- when they were commissioned to create a version of the dog sculpture for the Cannes Film Festival by a French artist. The artist, Qiu told the assembled press, had tried to stiff them for their work, claiming that the craftsmanship wasn't good enough, though he went on to use it anyway. The installation's dog hoards, then, are a symbol of suppressed Chinese grievances coming back to haunt the West. "You think about Chinese stealing jobs," Qiu explained. "Here, people think of Westerners exploiting Chinese people."

None of this really reads in the chaotic installation itself, and this is the kind of quickly digested, self-flagellating stuff that critics too



Wang Tiande
No. 08-CR16
 2008
 Contrasts



Installation view of Wang Tiande's
Tiande Investments: Art Index (2008)
 at Contrasts



Wang Tiande with his work *One Meter Seventy-Three* (2008)

often eat up as thoughtful cultural commentary. Still, it seems to be a decisive new note, appropriate to a moment where the Chinese art scene is just getting out from under its total reliance on Western attention. At the very least, Qiu's gesture of critiquing French exploitation of Chinese labor by himself hiring a crew of Chinese laborers and putting them on display seems to represent some kind of perverse self-assertion.

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Because the Chinese art scene has grown up in such a hothouse capitalist atmosphere, it does seem to have a special relation to commerce, more freely interpenetrated with the idea of itself as a commercial product. At the posh Bund18 boutique-and-restaurant complex located on Shanghai's famous Bund promenade, a sculpture by Chinese art heavy Ai Weiwei greets people as they enter. Ai's wooden pillar crafted in the form of China -- the country reduced to a sleek trophy, essentially -- gleams in the center of the lobby surrounded by Cartier and Patek Philippe shops. In situ, the sculpture does not feel like a high-minded touch added to give the complex an edifying edge, as such commissions tend to seem in the States, but rather a seamlessly integrated part of the branding of Bund18.

Still, I kept coming back to an observation I had heard from Philip Dodd. "What they don't understand yet," he told me over dinner at Lam's, "is the difference between a logo and a brand." He was speaking specifically about the mascot for Expo 2010, the World's Fair that is scheduled in two years for Shanghai, advertised everywhere in the city with an utterly inexplicable creature who looks like a refugee from a toothpaste commercial. Dodd's observation, however, applies equally to the art scene.

The Shanghai Biennale offered a case study in this regard. People said that the show, held at the Shanghai Museum, was better installed than the last time around, reflecting an increased professionalism. I also heard that it was installed on basically the same plan as the last one, reflecting a certain lingering stock character. Disorientingly stuffed with work, the Biennale was a bit difficult to navigate, though it did have some lovely moments -- the intimate, nine-screen installation by the Big Dipper Group on the fourth floor, cutting quietly between historical and contemporary footage of Shanghai, comes to mind -- as well as plenty of stuff that reflects the local taste for artworks that could well be amusement park rides, like Huang Hsinchien's *Shanghai, Shall We Dance*, which allowed viewers to stand in front of a screen projected with an image of the city's skyline that responded to their movements, so that you could make the buildings dance.

The theme of the Biennale was the baffling "Trans Local Motion," something to do with immigration and globalization. But the curators also weren't forgetting who their stars were. Dominating one long hallway on the second floor was a gargantuan new installation by Yue Minjun. Yue, of course, is famous for his "cynical realist" paintings featuring endless iterations of his own maniacally grinning self-portrait. Not long ago, with respect to his show at the Queens Museum, I argued that this work owed its success mainly to the fact that his visage self-consciously served the purpose of a logo [see "*Guy Smiley*," Nov. 12, 2007]. Yet throughout the 2000s, Yue has also seemed to recognize that he was stuck in a deadly formula, and has been trying to generate new signature series -- paintings recreating Western masterpieces minus their central figures, or bright acrylics dedicated to the theme of "Hunting for Terrorists" -- even as he churned out more of the same for his collectors. None of this new work came close to being as crowd-pleasing as his self-portraits.



Wenda Gu in his Shanghai office



Installation view of Qiu Anxiong's "We Are the World" at Contrasts space in Xian Feng Industrial Park



Installation view of Qiu Anxiong's "We Are the World"



Installation view of Qiu Anxiong's "We Are the World"

The artist's biennale installation neatly resolves this dilemma. Occupying the entire length of one darkened hallway is a stampeding hoard of dinosaur sculptures, fabricated in shiny cartoon colors. The demented dinos range from giant-sized T-rexes to miniature triceratopses and raptors. Each has Yue's trademarked, grinning visage. This playground of an installation returns to Yue's most marketable theme while taking it to a maniacal new level, thus giving the semblance of artistic development. In Yue's seamless transformation from painter to installation artist, the work in turn illustrates how the "logo" mindset undergirds the eclecticism of the scene in general. And finally, its utter brainlessness reconfirms that it is the image's recognizability itself that is the main content of Yue's art, empty of any substantial underlying interest. "Cynical realism," indeed.

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If there is a figure who supposedly represents the more soulful, less commercial side of the scene, it is Zhang Huan. The mega-successful Chinese artist, who had a much-reviewed retrospective at the Asia Society last year, became known in the '90s in Beijing, where he performed spare, Zen-like feats such as sitting in a public toilet covered in honey and letting flies land on him, or having his bohemian friends climb to the top of a mountain and lay naked, one on top of the other, to "add 1 meter" to its height. (Just how iconic the images of these gonzo performances have become was proved at ShContemporary, where one gallery was showing a photo by Zuo Xiao Zu Zhou recreating Zhang's famous mountain-top photo using pig carcasses. It was titled *I Also Love Contemporary Art*).

It is all the more telling, then, to visit Zhang today in the massive factory complex where he works outside Shanghai. Here, multitudinous assistants churn out his newer series: paintings recreating black-and-white photos using Buddhist incense ash as pigment; reliefs of historical photos carved into salvaged wooden doors; enormous sculptures of weathered human forms made from stapled-together cowhides, dubbed "Giants" or "Heroes" (recently exhibited at PaceWildenstein's two gallery spaces in New York's Chelsea art district). All of these, on the surface, gesture towards some kind of nebulous spiritual idea. And yet, ask Zhang who the artists he admires are and the list starts with Francois Millet and Giorgio Morandi, but ends with the uber-materialistic duo of Damien Hirst and Takashi Murakami. This says a lot about the trajectory of the Chinese art scene, which parallels the trajectory of China itself in its rise from privation to excess.

Indeed, reviewing Zhang's ash paintings in his warehouse studio, going from one gray *vanitas*-style image of a skull, to an image of a Cultural Revolution-era construction site, to a tondo portrait of a Chinese soldier, to a large painting of a pig rescued from the rubble of the recent Sichuan earthquake (the pig became something of a celebrity in China, and Zhang has brought it to live at his studios, he told us), it is striking how little connection there is between form and content ("He's interested in content not form," is how his assistant puts it, meaning Zhang's contribution to the works consists of his selection of photos to be copied.) These are simply random images, each of which has some kind of impact, recreated using ash. They are cool to look at, but they have very little individual significance. In effect, Zhang has done in 10 years what it took Vito Acconci 30 years to do: go from a nihilist bohemian with only his body as his medium, to the head of a hip design concern.

With his factory cranking out the ash paintings, I asked Zhang if he ever felt he was in danger of making too much work and flooding his market. Through the translator, the artist replied that, on the contrary, he thought he was making *too little* work, and that he wanted his art to be "something people could have in any house."



Installation view of Qiu Anxiong's "We Are the World"



Installation view of Qiu Anxiong's "We Are the World"



Laborers working as part of Qiu Anxiong's "We Are the World"



Neon sign outside Qiu Anxiong's "We Are the World"

This is a beautiful sentiment; it shows the sense of unfettered potential that surrounds the highest echelons of the contemporary art world in China, where literally anything seems to be possible. It is also the classic mentality of a bubble, illustrating how far this world has diverged from basic material realities. (Of course, Zhang also told us that he didn't send everything his studio made to market. It's "just like having a baby," his translator relayed to us. "If the doctor tells you it is not healthy, you just have to get rid of it." Does Sarah Palin know about this guy?)

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If this is true of the established figures, what of the newer crop of Chinese artists growing up in their wake? At the private Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai, located in "People's Park," we visited "Butterfly Dream," Sept. 10-Nov. 9, 2008, a show meant to serve as a sort of roundup of new talent and styles (though it also had works by pioneers like Xu Bing, here featured with his *Book from the Ground*, a computer program that translates statements into a "universal" pictographic language). If "Butterfly Dream" is any indication, what is being produced today is a lot of pretty terrible, kitschy painting, alongside some fitfully interesting object-making and photo-based work, like Tian Wei's floor piece consisting of marble hands arranged in concentric rings, gesturing phrases about art in sign language, or Ye Funa's photos and videos in which she restages images of the weirdly cheery people in folk costumes from old Chinese magazines.

Still, there is an awful lot of stuff being made like Jeff Dah-Yue Shi's enormous grenade covered in giant cut-glass diamonds, a floating cherub about to pull the pin -- Koonsian meta-kitsch that is really just kitsch. And there are an awful lot of paintings like Wang Mingxian's, which simply insert contemporary icons -- the Rem Koolhaas CCTV building and the Bird's Nest Stadium in Beijing, for instance -- into a pastiche of classical Chinese painting. Almost all the art, good and bad, tends towards illustrating one of two phrases: "Old China meets New China" or "East meets West."

This is a huge generalization, of course. In the dusty Moganshan Lu gallery district, at Lorenz Helbling's pioneering ShanghART gallery, Yang Fudong's spare multichannel film installation "East of Que Village," Sept. 7-Oct. 12, 2008, reflects a totally different sensibility. Reminiscent in spirit to the bleak abstractions of the "Northern Painters" of an earlier generation of Chinese artists, the film focuses on the desolate, frigid landscape of northern China from the artist's remembered youth. Its protagonists are emaciated stray dogs wandering directionlessly across the desolate landscape. Yang's disciplined, almost metaphysically bleak video in fact seems in dialectical counterpoint with the airy excess of the contemporary scene, adumbrating the literally dog-eat-dog reality at the margins of China's phenomenal success.

Having worked in China for more than 10 years, Helbling is a figure who commands palpable respect here because of his commitment to artists. Weirdly low-key for someone who is at the center of so much heat, he stands at an opposite pole to Pearl Lam -- though he is no less capable than she of plugging into the crazy vibe of it all (Helbling debuted Chinese prodigy Xu Zhen's *ShanghART Supermarket* installation at Art Basel Miami Beach last year, an installation that staged in full a sort of Potemkin Chinese supermarket, recently recreated at James Cohen's space in New York).

Over dumplings and beer, Helbling was disarmingly candid. He spoke about the market, which he believed to have been definitively manipulated by "a small group from New York." He spoke about politics, and problems with censorship -- "politics and pornography," he said, "these are the two things you have to watch out for," though



Pearl Lam and Qiu Anxiong



Ai Weiwei's *China* at Bund18



"Haibao," the mascot for Expo 2010, on the street in Shanghai

he added that serious censorship issues usually had less to do with actual subject matter and more to do with fights between different figures within the Party, looking for ways to get at each other. He spoke about who was buying this stuff: Chinese collectors "more and more," he said, though he confirmed that it was foreigners who had kept him going all these years in Shanghai.

His most interesting note, however, had to do with the distortions on the scene as he had watched it grow under the sun of intensive foreign interest. "Everyone wants Mao paintings," he said (ironic, since Mao's image is the one sure way to get in trouble with the authorities). "I have some of the ones who were the first 'political pop' painters," Helbling added, referring to his stable of artists. "You've never heard of them. They didn't want to keep painting images of Mao. They moved on. The other ones, they kept at it, and they got famous."

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None of this is terribly shocking. It's not qualitatively different than the kind of self-branding in the product-hungry art world in general. But finally, when I got to speak to people a little further down the food chain, the sense you get is very different.

Whenever I actually got to talk to young Chinese artists at any depth, I was struck by how deep was their sense of disconnect. "All people care about today is yuan," one young woman told me mournfully, referring to the Chinese currency. "This is not art. There is no passion." What are your own ambitions, I asked another, trained in art history. "Ah, that is a problem," was his response, as if there were no answer.

These are people who work in the art world in Shanghai, educated at good Chinese universities. Beneath the surface -- and not too far beneath -- I think there is a sense that all this extravagance does not quite compute, that it connects only tangentially to human concerns. This, again, is not too different from the angst of earnest young artists in New York or Berlin, looking in from the outside at the gallery scene.

It is colored by the specific characteristics of China's explosive development, however. And yet, the more I thought about these, the more I thought that they, too, were not completely alien. The best comparison seems to me not the U.S. of today, but the U.S. of the '50s. Then too, the U.S. was emerging as a center of attention after having been a cultural backwater, during the unprecedented post-war boom, bringing with it its own explosion of consumerism and materialism.

The point of such a comparison is this: Against the tendency to dismiss the Chinese scene as simply anesthetized by money and brands, it should be remembered that it was the generation of students who experienced America's own dramatic expansion, often the first to go to college in their family, who rebelled so radically against consumerism and state policy in the '60s, at the height of the U.S. boom, with dramatic cultural effects.

History doesn't repeat itself the same way twice. On the cusp of what looks to be a coordinated global economic slump -- and with China heavily dependent on export to its ailing trade partner, the U.S. -- who knows what will happen to the still-fragile Chinese art scene. But as Shanghai became a ghost of itself behind me in the smog as I left, the thought that beneath that image might lurk a different world straining to find expression gave me hope.



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Outside the opening of the Shanghai Biennale at the Shanghai Museum of Art



Big Dipper Group
Extending Travelers
2008



Visitor interacting with Huang Hsinchien's *Shanghai, Shall We Dance* (2008)



Yue Minjun
Colorful Running Dinosaurs
2008



Zuo Xiao Zu Zhou
I Also Love Contemporary Art
2007
Xindong Cheng



Zhang Huan
Giant No.1
2008



Painting from Zhang Huan's "Skull Series"



Zhang Huan in his studio



Shanghai Museum of Contemporary Art
creative director Victoria Lu, in front of
Xu Bing's *Book from the Ground* (2003-
ongoing)



Victoria Lu and artist Tian Wei, with
Tian's *Art is Everywhere but Where is
Art?* (2008)



Ye Funa
See National Pictorial Again
2008



Jeff Dah-Yue Shi
Grenade
2008



Outside ShanghART in the Moganshan Lu gallery district



Lorenz Helbling



Installation view of Yang Fudong's *East of Que Village* at ShanghART



Shanghai, glimpsed through the smog