

In Focus: Chinese Contemporary Art

Monday 12th November 2018 – Friday 1st February 2019

Ma Qiusha, Tian Taiquan, Lu Xinjian, Wang Ningde, Liang Yue, Yan Xing, Han Feng

The University of Salford has been collecting art since the late 1960s, beginning with a focus on work with a connection to Salford or Greater Manchester. Over the years, the collection has evolved in scope and ambition, and since 2013 the aim of the collecting policy has been to tell a '*story of now*'. Through collaborations with contemporary artists and arts organisations regionally, nationally and internationally, our three interconnected collecting strands now focus on: *About the Digital*, *From the North*, and *Chinese Contemporary Art*.

The collection of Chinese contemporary art has been developed largely in partnership with the **Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art (CFCCA)** in Manchester, the national lead in bringing Chinese art and visual culture to UK audiences. Despite the Chinese art market being the fastest growing in the world, few institutions in the UK are currently committed to collecting contemporary art from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the diaspora. The collection now includes works by 23 artists in painting, photography, sculpture, video and installation. It was first displayed in its entirety at St George's Hall, Liverpool in early 2018, as part of the *China Dream* season with Liverpool City Council.

This exhibition presents some highlights from the collection, with a focus on works in photography, printmaking and painting.

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Ma Qiusha, b. 1982, Beijing, China

From a distance, the 3 panels of *Fog Series* appear to be monochromatic, however, on closer inspection, the dark surfaces are seen to be patterned and translucent, and rather than being inscribed onto the surface, the lines are in fact gaps between the areas of paint, revealing the underlying surface of the paper. Although better known as a multimedia artist, Ma's *Fog Series* demonstrates her sensitivity to ordinary objects and the ways in which everyday materials may be emotionally charged. Ma used a lace curtain as a stencil, applying layers of paint to the fabric so that its pattern would be present but hidden on the paper. This painting explores the suppressed emotions experienced by many of her generation, as they seek to balance familial duties with a wish for personal freedom. The harsh white lines at once suggest a violent rupture and a fragile gesture of individuality.

Tian Taiquan, b. 1960, Chongqing, China

Tian Taiquan's colour C-print, *Totem Recollection 3*, 2007, presents a near-lifesize female figure partially dressed in the green uniform of the Chinese Communist Party. The figure is shown lying in a sea of red and silver badges (or buttons) depicting Chairman Mao. The image evokes the suffering of those who experienced the Cultural Revolution, and the ways in which individual identity was drowned in a sea of propaganda. In the contrast between the erotic pale flesh of the figure and the incessant, overwhelming figure of Mao, Tian evokes the experiences of a generation of people, whose youth and energy was curtailed according to the demands of the Party. Although her chest is exposed, the woman covers her face with her hand, conveying, perhaps, a desire to lay bare her identity while ever conscious of the need for self-censorship.

Lu Xinjian, b. 1977, Jiangsu province, China

City DNA / Salford and Manchester presents a graphic view of the topography from the University of Salford campus to Manchester city centre, where CFCCA is located. Working from aerial views from Google Earth, the painting began as a series of sketches, which were then made into a stencil using Adobe Illustrator. Lines were straightened, curves rounded and made uniform; the final design of lines, curves, squares and circles was hand-painted. What is given in lieu of an accurate cartography, is a sense of place - the vibe, rhythm or tempo of the area

where Salford and Manchester meet. *City DNA / Salford and Manchester* is part of a larger body of work, which includes views of Beijing, Amsterdam, Groningen, New York, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Paris. This work is unique in its presentation of two city spaces. It was also made into a wallpaper for CFCCA.

Wang Ningde, b.1972, Liaoning province, China

A man dressed in a collared jacket stands with his arms folded across his chest. His head tilts gently to one side, while a long cigarette is held gently between his lips. His eyes are closed, and it would seem that he is asleep. Behind him, the sky is filled with billowing clouds, creating a dream-like setting. The man, although physically present, is also elsewhere, lost in his own private thoughts, dreams, or memories. The photograph, *Some Days No. 03* gestures toward unfulfilled yearnings, longings and desires and suggests that outward appearances can only ever give a partial glimpse of the person within. *Some Days No. 03* is one of Wang Ningde's on-going series of photographs that address the construction of memory and reality, and how the recent past in China is often shrouded in mystery.

Liang Yue, b.1979, Shanghai

The 'everyday' is a focus in Liang Yue's photographic and video practice. Invited to undertake a residency Liverpool in April 2018, as part of the *This Is Shanghai* chapter of the China Dream festival, Yue found unexpected familiarities in a city she was visiting for the first time. The Pier Head and River Mersey reminded her of The Bund back in her home city of Shanghai: *'the noise of traffic, running up and down near the dock, and the smells...are redolent of Huangpu River'*. In particular, the fine ripples and reflections in the waters' surface drew a current that linked the twin cities.

Liang Yue graduated from Shanghai Art Academy in 2001, and is represented by ShangART Gallery. Her work at *This is Shanghai* (14 July - 7 September 2018) was commissioned by Liverpool City Council in partnership with the University of Salford and Open Eye Gallery.

Yan Xing, b. 1986, Chongqing, China

Yan Xing is most well-known for his performance, video, and installation works that are often underpinned by elaborate, eccentric, and fictional, back-stories. This limited edition print represents a thank-you letter from the artist to an Asia-based curator, Robin Peckham. Although Peckham is a real person, and the statement is signed by the artist, it is unclear whether the circumstances described in the artwork are a true reflection of Yan Xing's situation in 2012. However, in addition to having his first UK solo show at CFCCA, that year, he won the Chinese Contemporary Art Award for Best Young Artist Beijing; received a nomination for the Future Generation Art Prize from the Pinchuk Art Centre, Kiev; and was a finalist in the Focus on Talents Project from Today Art Museum, Beijing.

Han Feng, b. 1972, Harbin, China

If birds wore shoes what type of shoes would they wear? On the one hand, Han Feng's *Shoe for Bird* may be understood as a quirky and lighthearted investigation into this 'what if...' question. A white leather, lace-up boot is the answer given. But this surreal object should not be taken at face-value, and like much of his work in painting and installation, addresses broader issues including the opposition between the organic or natural, and the man-made; and the nature of freedom and constraint. The artist explained:

These shoes and clothes for birds are a metaphor. They reflect the human world, I would like to raise the question that if we were all birds whether we would chose to fly or sacrifice our natural ability to fly, in order to put on a glamorous outfit.

Catalogue texts by Alice Correia, Research Fellow, University of Salford.