

ART

Warning: Art May Appear More Complex at Short Distances

LORRAINE
WHITE
GALLEREASE

I am embarrassed to admit that I frequently skip museum wings housing traditional Asian art. I understood intellectually that those artists responsible for the calligraphic scrolls and nature-escapes hanging in these galleries were revered in China for their ability to translate something profound and spiritual through their art. To my culturally-insular eye, however, these prints and paintings seemed perplexingly simplistic, and for that, inscrutable as (though I regret the comparison) some pseudo-Confucian cookie fortune.

While I would like to dismiss former Columbia professor Edward Said's idea that this disconnect stemmed from the fact that I had been conditioned by an "imperial conceit" to view the Chinese as some "Other" useful only insofar as their difference from me and mine helped in my cementing my own cultural identity, something gives me pause.

Our media crafts stereotypes designed to contrast unfavorably with the romantic image America holds of itself as a land of independence, checked government, and progress. China is invariably painted as a nation of mass culture, with an invasive, thought-policing government fond of jingoistic spectacle, and an entrenched respect for authority and tradition that is as rigorous as it is unquestioning.

Skimming the press release for the joint show of 14 Chinese Contemporary Artists hosted by the Eli Klein Fine Art gallery (462 West Broadway) in SoHo, I had no idea what to expect. To my pleasant surprise, far from a homogeneous showcase of tradition, I encountered a diverse and innovative collection of art.

The show itself presents somewhat of a visual assault, with every piece striving to divert attention from the rest. Despite their divergent backgrounds and opinions, every artist featured remains clearly tapped into the rich Chinese cultural patrimony. That said, all also manage to bravely take up a modern visual rhetoric—all the better to translate that culture to the modern age and to foreign audiences, but also to soundly interrogate it.

Liu Bolin's black and white painted "news clippings" of blurred, milling crowds subsumed by their surroundings ask just how well individuality can fare in a China still striving to recover

from the Cultural Revolution. A neon lacquered hamburger relief carving by the Luo Brothers screams to denounce the danger of supplanting spirituality with modern consumerism.

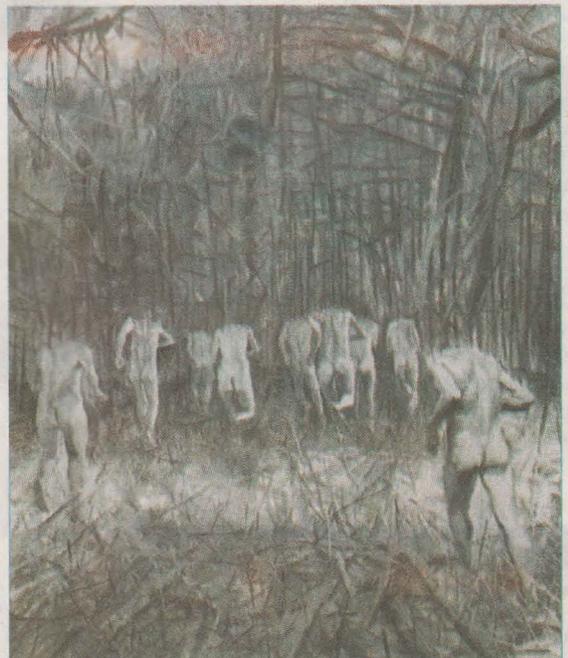
At the other end of the spectrum, He Jian celebrates the harmony between the old and new in China by recreating the traditional print techniques of ancient cave murals featuring colorful scenes from modern Chinese youth culture, complete with ipods and Coke.

But the entire show is by no means strictly devoted to such large scale cultural currents. Some of the work is exquisitely intimate, as Yan Yineng's striking "Fire Series" of paintings which, according to the artist, explore 'the type of radiance which exists at different phases of life.' This notion complements pieces like Wu Gaozhong's bizarre, furred 'Hand Bag' sculpture—a re-creation of some charged token from his childhood.

What makes the accomplishments of these artists all the more remarkable is that while the Chinese government has repeatedly promised institutional support for the arts, virtually none has manifested. In fact, official attitudes toward professional artists in China can be exceedingly repressive, with government censors routinely hunting down works deemed politically subversive, sexually explicit or culturally sensitive. Chinese exhibits have been canceled and artists have been imprisoned.

Still, in this age of globalization, local censorship has thankfully not prevented such voices from being heard in the West at wonderful galleries like Eli Klein.

The group show 14 Chinese Contemporary Artists runs through March 2. Lorraine White is a Columbia College junior majoring in economics and French and romance philology. Gallerease runs alternate Wednesdays.



Courtesy of Eli Klein Fine Art

CHINESE RENAISSANCE | Eli Klein Fine Art's new group show is a testament to the artistic diversity of China, despite its government censorship.