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Milwaukee, WI 53211

Vogel Hall, 3253 N. Downer Ave.

Inova Gallery One

ZHANG WEI!
ZHANG DAI!
XING DANWEN
SHENG QI!
NG Fong Chao
MA Yongfeng
LIU WEI!
LIU JIN
LI WEI!
LI Luming
HUANG Yan
GAO Brothers
CHEN QIulin
CHEN Qingqing

PECK SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
Institute of Visual Arts
RUINS
March 10 -
May 14, 2006
An exhibition of new
video and photography
from China



BRIDGING THE GAPS

I first met curator Zhang Zhaohui and many of the artists included in this exhibition during an artist residency in Beijing in the summer of 2004. Although I had been traveling back and forth between Asia and the United States since 1994, I had only recently become aware of the burgeoning art scene in China, flowering after decades of censorship and repression. I was welcomed into an idyllic art community where internationally recognized artists, curators and critics mingled freely with the just-emerging. The rigid boundaries separating artistic media did not seem to exist, a dramatic difference from the art scene in the United States: artists trained in social realist painting were making experimental video and artists already well known for their avant-garde performance work were trying their hand at sculpture, painting and photography. Everyone seemed to encourage each other's experimentation and the fraternal and optimistic energy was intoxicating.

Immediately upon my arrival, I was struck by the drastic metamorphosis underway in China as skyscrapers erased traditional architecture and cell phones replaced Mao's *Little Red Book* as the essential personal accessory. I was also struck by the complex ways these changes were reflected in the work of Chinese artists. With the rapid economic ascendancy of China in recent years has come a new confidence, ambition and inventiveness; at the same time, a shift in world attention has brought recognition to emerging Chinese artists who are, I feel, creating some of the freshest, most engaging and challenging artwork anywhere.

A desire to share my excitement and my new-found connection to this vital art scene coincided with an increase in interest in China among Americans. In the last decade, our relationship to China and our need to understand the Chinese have altered dramatically. In October, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Chancellor Carlos Santiago undertook a trade mission to China that highlighted the sense of urgency that our city, a once-vibrant manufacturing center, now feels as jobs are outsourced and local companies are bought up by China-based firms. If Milwaukee wants to remain competitive globally, it needs to broaden its connection to China beyond the economic. Artistic exchange is essential to bridging the gaps between our countries and cultures.

No one that I met during my time in China was better connected with the quickly evolving contemporary art scene in Beijing than Zhang Zhaohui. Since that time, we have worked together on activities that link UWM with the arts and culture of China. Last summer, Mr. Zhang played a central role in the study abroad course for undergraduate and graduate students and professors from UWM and other universities that I led to China, and we are currently collaborating on a trip for the summer of 2006. It was a pleasure to extend our collaboration by inviting Mr. Zhang to curate an exhibition of contemporary Chinese art here at the Institute of Visual Arts.

Zhang Zhaohui's exhibition introduces us to a generation of self-assured and globally conscious Chinese artists who have grown up in the midst of remarkable social transitions and a drastic transformation of their country's urban environment. While several of these artists were included in recent touring exhibitions of new Chinese art, particularly *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video in China*, an exhibition that stopped at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art and David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art in 2005, and *Over One Billion Served: Conceptual Photography from the People's Republic of China*, organized by the Asian Art Coordinating Council in Denver, Colorado, in 2004, for others this is their first exhibition in the United States.

William J. Andersen
Exhibition Liaison

RUINS: CHINESE ART AT THE CROSSROADS

...*Ruin and fragmentation are also important concepts in twentieth-century Chinese art, but their implications, and hence the notion of the modern and the postmodern, must be understood in relation to China's cultural tradition and political experience.*¹

– Wu Hung

After nearly three decades of development, Chinese contemporary art has reached a new stage at the dawn of the 21st century. Recent Chinese art is winning international recognition and gifted artists are emerging in a steady stream. These younger artists have grown up in the midst of remarkable social transitions and a remaking of the urban environment; they are also making work in a country that now, because of its rapid and extensive economic development, is at the center of the global gaze. China's attitude towards its past—historical, spiritual, and material—is also under construction, and the tension between past and present suffuses the work of the artists whose work is included in *Ruins*.

The title of this show, *Ruins*, was inspired by Professor Wu Hung's famous essay on Chinese art, "Ruins, Fragmentation, and the Chinese Modern/Postmodern." Ruins as a metaphor in this context carries three layers of meaning. First, it refers to the demolition sites of old buildings in urban or rural areas. Second, it encompasses social phenomena or spectacles that mix different cultural icons without integration and judgment. And third, it signifies the fragmentation and collapse of a social order: the pervasive sense of ruin reflects people's desperation, helplessness, and frustration in a decaying society. For today's Chinese, there is nothing poetic or nostalgic about ruins. As a daily physical reality and reminder of the uncharted territory ahead they elicit a palpable psychological response.

The sense of ruin in contemporary Chinese art practice can be traced back to the mid-1980s. During that period, symbols of the Cultural Revolution were used extensively by avant-garde artists as part of an ironic critique of a stagnant system. In recent years, the sense of destruction has intensified in the face of rapid urbanization, and as a response to the fact that "*reality is full of conflicts and incidents, while chaos, entropy and permanent precariousness are the real 'rules.'*"² The asynchronous development of China's economy and its political system has made the sense of loss more vivid and dramatic. The collision between modern material civilization, fueled by globalization and the internet, and China's weighty past defines a complicated reality in which fragments of different cultures are entwined, creating, from time to time, absurd or incomprehensible phenomena. The ruins that are the most visible product of this collision have become ubiquitous in contemporary Chinese art.

This exhibition brings together the work of fourteen artists from Mainland China and Macau. Created with readily accessible new media, their photographic and video works document and comment upon bewildering changes, each telling a truth about contemporary China. These works illustrate the complicated sense of ruin that defines Chinese society and explore the tension between this sense of loss and the global perception of China as a potential superpower.

Many works in the exhibition reflect the artists' deep concern with the uncertainty of a fast-changing society, their anxiety about deteriorating environmental conditions, their implicit criticism of the corrupt political system, and their aspirations for a freer and brighter world. Their work reflects a world defined by physical, cultural and spiritual destruction; in it we see not only demolished buildings but the ruins of traditional culture, patriotism, and revolutionary ideals. As the artists pick through the debris of China's recent and distant past, they consider the possibility of building a new cultural identity on these ruins. And while this is a pressing question for China today, it is sure to become a question for the wider world tomorrow.

Zhang Zhaohui
Curator

¹ Wu Hung, "Ruins, Fragmentation, and the Chinese Modern/Postmodern" in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), p. 59.

² Hou Hanru, *Towards an Un-Official Art: De-ideologicalization of China's Contemporary Art in the 1990s*, Third Text 34 (Spring 1996): 37-52; p.50.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Zhang Zhaohui grew up in Beijing and received his B.A. from Nankai University Tianjing (1988), an M.A. in modern art history from the China Art Academy (1995), and an M.A. in curatorial studies from Bard College, New York (1998). He is the recipient of fellowships from the Asian Cultural Council and the Luce Foundation and a visiting scholarship from Asialink. From 1988 to 1992 he served on the curatorial staff of the National Museum of Art, Beijing. From 1999 to 2000 he was the director of the curatorial section at He Xiangning Art Museum, Shenzhen. In 2002, he became the founding director of Beijing X-Ray Art Center. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Central Academy of Art, Beijing, and a research fellow of the Hong Kong-based Asia Art Archive. Curated exhibitions include *Where Heaven and Earth Meet: Xu Bing and Cai GuoQiang* (1998, New York), *Departure from China* (1999, Beijing), *Food as Art* (2000, Beijing), *Gravity of the Garden* (2000, Shenzhen), *Zero Degrees Project* (2001, Beijing), *Mask vs Face* (2002, Beijing), *New Urbanism* (2002, Guangzhou and 2004, Sydney), *Manufactured Happiness* (2003, Beijing), and *Bare Androgyny* (2003, Beijing). He has been published in *Art China*, *Contemporary Art*, *Jiangsu Art Journal*, *Today's Avant-garde*, *Art Asia Pacific* and *Yishu: Contemporary Chinese Art*. He has also written catalogue essays for international exhibition projects, such as *Food as Thought* (Netherlands 1999), *Past in Reverse: Contemporary Art from Asia* (San Diego Museum of Art, 2004), and *Concrete Horizon* (Wellington, 2004). Zhang has participated in international arts forums and symposia including *Digifest 2003* (Toronto) and *Another Modernity* (Singapore, 2004), as well as international forums on alternative art space and exhibitions in Hong Kong (2001), Seoul (2002), and Macau (2003).

THE INSTITUTE OF VISUAL ARTS

Since 1996, the Institute of Visual Arts (Inova) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee has established an international reputation as a contemporary art research center. The mission of the Institute of Visual Arts is to engage the general and university publics with contemporary art from around the world through exhibitions and programs. The Institute is recognized for the high quality of its programs and for the opportunity it offers artists to experiment in the creation of new work.

Wm. Robert Bucker, Dean of the Peck School of the Arts
Bruce Knackert, Interim Director of the Institute of Visual Arts

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Embracing the hopes and aspirations of Asian Pacific Americans in the United States

PECK SCHOOL OF
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RUINS

**March 10-
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An exhibition of new
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CHEN QINGQING was born in Beijing in 1953 and studied traditional Chinese medicine. She began exhibiting in 1995, and her installations have been seen in solo and group exhibitions throughout Asia and Europe and in New York. Her work is in collections in England, France, Austria, Germany, Africa, Australia, Brazil, Mexico and China.

CHECKLIST

Wawa's Dream
digital photograph
100 cm x 60 cm
2005

At the Dawn of Civilization
digital photograph
60 cm x 280 cm
2005

Believe the Future
digital photograph
60 cm x 155 cm
2005

Heaven Eyes
digital photograph
60 cm x 120 cm
2005



CHEN QIULIN graduated from the Graphic Program of the Sichuan Academy of Art in 2000 and has been exhibiting in China since 2002. She lives and works in Chengdu. This is her first exhibition in the United States.

CHECKLIST

Verse of Nunc Dimittis (2005)
video
28 min.

One Day (2001)
video
7 min.



THE GAO BROTHERS (Gao Zhen, born 1956, and Gao Qiang, born 1962, in Jinan, China) are artist-brothers based in Beijing who have been collaborating on installation, performance, photography and written works since the mid-1980s. They are the authors of several published works, including *How Far Can You Walk in One Day in Beijing*, *The Current State of Chinese Avant-Garde Art* and *The Report of Art Environment*. Their work has been published in *A History of Chinese Modern Art*, *Chinese Avant-Garde Photography*, and *The Best Photography of China*, collected by individuals and museums in China and abroad, and exhibited internationally.

CHECKLIST

Never Finished Construction Site
digital photograph
80 cm x 283 cm
2002

Lapsing Time
digital photograph
110 cm x 184 cm
2005



HUANG YAN was born in 1966 in Jilin Province and graduated from the Changchun Normal Academy in 1987. He has had solo exhibitions in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenyang, Hong Kong, London and Como and has participated in group exhibitions throughout the world.

CHECKLIST

Copy
two photographs
80 cm x 60 cm
2005



Born in Hunan in 1956, **LI LUMING** received his Master's degree in art from the China Institute of Art Researches and now lives in Beijing. His work is in the collections of museums in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Italy, Germany, and the United States. This is his first exhibition in the United States since 1991.

CHECKLIST

1973 vs 2003
digital photograph
100 cm x 200 cm
2004-2005

1974 vs 2004
digital photograph
120 cm x 200 cm
2004-2005



LI WEI was born in Hubei in 1970 and studied in Beijing, where he lives and works. He has had solo exhibitions in Beijing and Italy, and participated in group exhibitions in Europe, Asia, and the United States.

CHECKLIST

Li Wei Falls to Earth, **Baby Leaves the Earth**,
Hands Stretching Towards the Light
three photographs
120 cm x 120 cm
2003-2004



LIU JIN, born in Jiangsu Province in 1971, graduated from the Department of Arts and Crafts of Jiangsu Xuzhou Engineering Institute in 1995. He has had several solo exhibitions in China and has participated in group exhibitions and performance festivals in Asia, Europe and the United States.

CHECKLIST

Angel Wounded Series
two photographs
150 cm x 120 cm
2003

Moldy Landscape Series
two photographs
180 cm x 120 cm
2004



LIU WEI was born in 1965 and graduated with a bachelor's degree in literature from the Department of Fine Arts of China's Central Academy of Drama in 1992. He went on to complete his studies at the Symposium on the Relationship between Religion and Culture, hosted by the Philosophy Department of Beijing University (1995). He lives and works in Beijing. His work has screened at festivals in Europe, Asia, Australia and North America and his photographs have been exhibited internationally.

CHECKLIST

Chang-an Avenue Series
50 cm x 70 cm (1 of 10 video stills)
2001



Born in Shanxi, China, in 1971, media artist **MA YONG-FENG** lives and works in Beijing. His work has been exhibited throughout China and in France, Greece, Germany, Thailand, Brazil and Israel as well as in the United States at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and, currently, at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York City as part of *The Thirteen: Chinese Video Now*.

CHECKLIST

Beijing Zoological Garden (2005)
video
20 minutes

Immaterialism Garden
three photographs
120 cm x 120 cm
2005



NG FONG CHAO studied painting, stone engraving and photography in the Academy of Visual Arts at the Polytechnic Institute of Macau. Since 1990 he has participated in more than 50 exhibitions in China and internationally, creating installations and performances as well as photography. He currently works in the Macau Art Museum as an exhibition planner.

CHECKLIST

Turns a Blind Eye (I)
Performance/photography
200 cm x 294 cm (diptych)
2006

Turns a Blind Eye (II)
Performance/photography
200 cm x 294 cm (diptych)
2006

Returns to a Place Where It Belongs
Performance/photography (triptych)
200 cm x 440 cm
2006



SHENG QI was born in Hefei in 1965 and graduated from Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design in London. He has had solo and group exhibitions in Asia, Europe, Australia, and the United States. He lives and works in Beijing.

CHECKLIST

Hand Series
three photographs
120 cm x 80 cm
2003



XING DANWEN is a native of Xi'an and studied at the Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts (1982-86) and the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where she received a B.F.A. in Fine Art in 1992. She received an M.F.A. in photography and related media from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 2000. Her work has been exhibited in the United States, Australia, Europe and Asia and is in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the International Center for Photography, the Smart Museum of Art, and the Centre George Pompidou, among others.

CHECKLIST

disCONNEXION
four photographs
28 cm x 36 cm
2001-2005



ZHANG DALI was born in Harbin, China, in 1963 and graduated from National Academy of Fine Arts and Design in 1987. He has had solo exhibitions in China and Japan and throughout Europe and his work has been seen in group exhibitions in the United States since 1998. He now lives in Beijing.

CHECKLIST

Demolition
eight photographs
100 cm x 150 cm
1996-2002



ZHANG WEI was born in 1956 in Changsha, Hunan Province. He studied oil painting at the Guangzhou Academy of Art, graduating in 1982. His work has been exhibited in Guangzhou, Changsa, and Shenzhen. Zhang Wei divides his time between Beijing and Changsha; this is his first exhibition in the United States.

CHECKLIST

East vs. West
four digital photographs
80 cm x 120 cm
2003-2004

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Chen Qingqing is one of the few Chinese artists to have developed a methodology for creating installations combining natural and industrial materials. Over the past ten years, she has created a large body of work by assembling a wide variety of gadgets into enchanting surrealist spectacles. In these landscapes, she anticipates the consequences of the deterioration of the natural environment and expresses her fear for the world's future in light of its actual helplessness. Chen's landscapes draw on recognizable emblems of contemporary life and popular culture—scenes from *Jurassic Park* and *Hackers*, the miniature replicas of identical tourist landscapes embedded in everyone's mind—suggesting that modern civilization and its spiritual landscape are no more than a mishmash of familiar cultural fragments.

Over the last five years, Chengdu-based **Chen Qiulin** has created several performance pieces in outdoor settings surrounded by demolished towns and cities that explore the impact of urban development on individuals. Her newest video work documents the displacement of people whose houses were demolished and will be submerged upon completion of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, the largest reservoir and hydropower station project in the world. From Chen's perspective, the government's utilitarian pursuit of modernization is a disaster for individuals and their environment. In *One Day*, a performance from 2002, the artist, dressed as a bride, applies makeup in front of a dressing table placed atop a ruin. The chimneys of a power station emit smoke in the background. A young man wearing a suit throws cake at her, and though he covers her body and face, he fails to disturb her. For Chen, who correlates social change with individual psychological response, the inner hurt created by a sweet life encapsulates the experience of the One-Child generation. These lonely survivors are fragile, weak, and vulnerable to a ruinous social environment masked by a shallow, foppish society.

The **Gao Brothers**, who began making work in the mid-1980s, are among the first generation of China's avant-garde artists to create works together. They examine the perplexed spiritual state of the generations that grew up with a Communist education but came to embrace pro-democracy sentiments. Their contribution to this exhibition, the *Never Finished Construction Site*, is a digitally manipulated photograph. A group of young people stands silent and aloof in the vast, deserted concrete framework of an unfinished building—a sight familiar in many Chinese cities. The image exposes the alienation engendered by never-ending demolition and reconstruction. Confronted by this profound confusion, and reluctant to accept the current system, China's young people are awaiting a better society.

Huang Yan is an internationally renowned artist whose works have been widely exhibited. In the past five years he has developed a body of work based on traditional Chinese landscape painting and tattoo. His landmark work, *Body Landscape*, reproduces these images on the human body. The transposition of Chinese cultural icons on the living masculine body simultaneously suggests a rebirth of an ancient culture and the superficiality of cultural identity. Huang's contribution to this exhibition, a new work entitled *Copy*, shows a naked, Rubenesque Chinese woman in a studio. She is posed in front of a large-scale reproduction of a 19th-century European landscape painting surrounded by architectural debris. Huang evokes present and past in the tattooed flesh of the model, whose skin is covered with a traditional Chinese painting; he simultaneously contrasts East, as represented by the woman, and West, symbolized by the Western backdrop. Ultimately, the work condemns China's loss of direction as epitomized by its misuse or abuse of Western icons in modernization projects.

One of the older artists participating in this exhibition, **Li Luming** juxtaposes the images of a young female revolutionary and a contemporary woman of the same age. The generation gap between those born in the 1950s and those who came of age in the new millennium has been widened by China's vast social transitions. Li's work conveys a sense of historical nihilism and the absurdity of reality. It uses the metaphor of a mother-daughter relationship to explore the ambiguous logic between yesterday and today: as the space between the two increases, China's imagination becomes a collage made up of segments of its complicated history and present-day reality.

Li Wei's works have drawn wide attention on the world art stage, and have been featured on the covers of many international art magazines including *Flash Art*, *Work*, and *Contemporary*. As one of the many migrant workers who sought a better life in an urban area, Li Wei was subjected to unfair treatment by a government that cannot guarantee people's freedom and equality. Consequently, his performance-based work and computer-manipulated pictures are concerned with individual courage and the wisdom of expressing one's voice in a hectic and dynamic society in transition. *Baby Leaves the Earth* considers the possibility of sustaining life in the ruins of a traditional courtyard and the implications of nurturing new life in rootless ground.

Liu Jin's work is a metaphor for the potential crisis of economic development. In the *Moldy Landscape* series, broken toys and utensils covered in mold are arranged as a multicolored traditional Chinese landscape painting, charming but ultimately poisonous. The *Angel Wounded* series documents a performance in which the artist disguised himself as an angel with a pair of bloody wings on his back. The wounded angel appears in an urban setting, amidst the ruins of aged and demolished houses and the newly finished high rises that dominate Chinese cityscapes. For Liu Jin, the angel is wounded and the dream is over.

As Beijing prepared to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China in 1999, the better part of a year was devoted to renovating and reconstructing the landmark buildings alongside the city's Chang-an Avenue, the "First Avenue of China" (Zhonghu Diyi Jie). Artist **Liu Wei** was alienated by the giant wrapped edifices—buildings that had witnessed the social and political fluctuations of the past half-century, from the Cultural Revolution to the June 4th Massacre. For Liu Wei's generation, the wrapping of the buildings constituted a form of mourning for historical events, despite the fact that the government was using the renovation project to gloss over a political scar. In his video work, *In the Depth of One Hundred Flowers*, Liu Wei expresses his deep concern about the two extremes of China's ongoing urbanization program by overlapping images of central Beijing's polished skyscrapers with dirty trash piles on the city's outskirts.

Ma Yongfeng is a video artist whose work *Swirling* has been exhibited internationally. His new video work, *Beijing Zoological Garden*, documents domestic animals and their man-made nests and shelters. The zoo is comprised of artificial mini-ecosystems designed to ensure the survival of animal species; each unit is drawn from an imagining of the natural environment as well as traditional Chinese bird-and-flower scroll paintings. As China's fiercely rapid development destroys the natural environment, and animals are increasingly confined to the screen and the page, this garden becomes a nostalgic living picture.

Ng Fong Chao was educated in Mainland China and has been working in Macau for the past ten years. His subtly nostalgic work explores personal and cultural metamorphosis, and particularly the interaction between swift and overwhelming westernization and inborn cultural identity. In a photograph documenting a performance, *Turns a Blind Eye (III)*, Ng fuses mirror images—one color, one black and white—of himself in a wedding dress, Macau's traditional architecture in the background.

Sheng Qi is one of China's most influential performance artists. He was a key member of the 1985 New Wave Art Movement inspired by rationalism and liberalism. In 1989, driven by despair and agony after the June 4th Tiananmen Square incident, Sheng cut off a finger from his left hand and buried it in a flowerpot in Beijing. After more than ten years of self-exile, Sheng returned to Beijing and began to photograph his mutilated hand. *Memories* is the signature image of Sheng's excavation of the past, both personal and historical. In the picture, Sheng's left hand holds a picture of his friend. It is one of the artist's most ambitious performances in its extraordinarily disturbing power of representation, its extension of meanings, and its search for a historical past.

Xing Danwen studied at New York's School of Visual Art before returning to Beijing in 2002. Her works have been featured in many international exhibitions, including the Whitney Biennale 2002. In the *disCONNEXION* series she photographs piles of discarded computer chips and obsolete hardware in the deserted outskirts of Guangdong province, one of the most developed areas in China. Electronic waste is shipped illegally from countries such as Japan and the United States and dumped along Guangdong's coast, where more than 100,000 people make their living by recycling these piles of e-trash, operating in poor conditions and with simple tools. Over the years, the land has been destroyed and people have been severely injured by the poisonous material. Xing's work explores the interaction between global and local economies and questions the rhetoric of Chinese development by documenting the cost of environmental pollution.

Zhang Dali, a Beijing-based graffiti artist who resided in Italy for five years in the early 1990s, makes his own mark on the streets of an increasingly incoherent and unrecognizable city. Over the last ten years, he has airbrushed a man's profile on Beijing's traditional courtyard houses as they underwent demolition. He then photographs these ruins using the surrounding new buildings as a backdrop. The *Demolition* series documents a one-man war against the government's overwhelming desire to overlay China's past with a veneer of modernization through the construction of a modern-looking city. These works expose decision-makers whose readiness to ignore cultural traditions may be innocent, but whose neglect of the interests of local residents is intentional. By making ephemeral work on the man-made ruins of aged courtyard houses, Zhang Dali links the past with the future and the individual with society.

Changsha-based artist **Zhang Wei** has produced a series of computer-manipulated works that insert contemporary Western commercial icons into scenes from classical Chinese paintings: Marilyn Monroe in a Taihushi stone garden, semi-naked cover girls in front of a traditional bird-and-flower setting. This pictorial integration of East and West recasts the conventional binary concept in light of China's new cultural experiences.