

## TOO MUCH FLAVOR AT CHAMBERS FINE ART, NEW YORK

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Juxtaposed against a pristinely simple, almost ascetic exhibition arrangement of antique Chinese furniture, Chambers Fine Art (a New York Chelsea gallery) displayed over twenty works by seven contemporary Chinese artists. The show was based on the namesake exhibition *Too Much Flavor* curated by Gu Zhenqing that was previously on view in Shanghai and Singapore. The condensed selection transmitted the original exhibition's theme of extreme artificialization in an increasingly consumer-frantic contemporary Chinese society. Although the selection made by the gallery director Christophe Mao mirrored the various approaches to this over-arching topic, the works on display fell short of projecting the internal dynamic of the original exhibition.

To a New York audience, the theoretical underpinning of this show might seem outdated. Most people in Europe and North America will have developed a certain protective "deadening of the senses" despite an awareness of the immense saturation and synthesization of their consumerist societies. To them, increasing commercialization has been gradual yet relentless. In the cities of Mainland China, however, it has hit society with extreme and merciless speed. Just thirty years ago, the country emerged from the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. In the coastal cities of today, the one must-have accessory is not longer the Little Red Book but the latest Nokia cellular phone. The multitude of material and sensual inputs emanating from the displayed works by Hong Hao, Jin Feng, Qiu Zhijie, Shi Jinsong, Weng Fen, Zhou Xiaohu and Zhu Fadong emphatically reflects contemporary Chinese urban life and addresses the conflicts this rapid change has brought about. Some of the works are visually, some of them intellectually blunt. Some are up-front while others project their ideas through a screen of romantic melancholy.

A romantic melancholy is most apparent in the two color photographs by placing a person either "inside" or "outside." By sitting on or peering over the wall, the young girls inhabit the "space in between" physically as well as psychologically, leaving behind the sphere of childhood and entering that of adulthood. The subliminal identification with the young girls evokes a romantic yearning towards the new and at the same time infuses the viewer with a sense of melancholy for the passing of the old. The strongly transitory and consumerist nature of present-day society evokes placing a person either "inside" or "outside." By sitting on or peering over the wall, the young girls inhabit the "space in between" physically as well as psychologically, leaving behind the sphere of childhood and entering that of adulthood. The subliminal identification with the young girls evokes a romantic yearning towards the new and at the same time infuses the viewer with a sense of melancholy for the passing of the old. The strongly transitory and consumerist nature of present-day society evokes similar emotions in the urban resident. As such, these photographs represent a powerful yet subtle approach to the topic, one that transcends its inherent physicality.

Alternatively, Hong Hao's three displayed photographs represent a more overt criticism (fig. 1). The densely packed labyrinth of assembled goods, arranged so as to create visual patterns through both shapes and colors, deflects and refuses passage as the viewer's gaze tries to penetrate it. At the same time, these tightly crammed surfaces evoke a feeling of claustrophobia. Ranging from pots of color to soft-drink cans, from empty toothpaste tubes to a measuring tape, the photographed assemblage of goods does not differentiate between daily household and luxury goods. It is their multitude in general and the wasteland they create that is the object of criticism. But does his critique go beyond the obvious? Being entitled *My Things*, Hong Hao seems to not simply denounce society but also his own active participation, therefore not putting himself above the behavior he criticizes. This personal and self-reflective approach makes the criticism more effective and more real. Through this, the artist is able to evoke an introspective thought process in the viewer.



Figure 1. Hong Hao, *My Things* No. 3, colour photograph



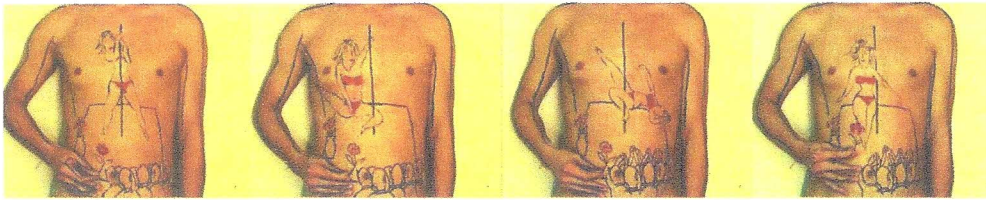


Figure 2. Zhao Xiaohu, *The Goopy Gentleman*, video stills

While Hong Hao focuses on the multitude of consumer items, the four sculptures by Shi Jinsong scorn the excessive importance of branding in consumerist society. All four sculptures are displayed on antique tables. Logos of *Nike*, *Motorola*, *Mercedes Benz*, and *Citroen*, cast in steel, are lying on leathered skin that is marked with drawings, writing and other schemas. The set-up aims at imitating the display accorded to archaic artifacts. In this way, Shi Jinsong comments on the paradoxical development of notions of value triggered by the fixation on Western consumer goods. The almost deifying reverence with which the urban *nouveau-riche* entrepreneurial class treats these items seems frightening and—as intimidated by these works—absurd; a whole value system gone awry. *Cool Weapon*, the series title of these works, evokes notions of aggression, violence and death. These lethal attributes can equally be accorded to the global marketing and distribution strategy of these name-brand products. Shi Jinsong's critique is both poignant and direct.

Some of Zhu Fadong's works in this show also addressed issues of branding. In two large-scale photo-prints, the artist is dressed in a red lace bra and briefs, sits on an antique Chinese chair and holds a jar of Nescafé in the one and a Mercedes Benz star in the other image. His body is glistening as if it had been rubbed in oil or covered in sweat. It seems that the artist aims at criticizing the prostitution-like behavior of the Chinese urban population to acquire the much sought-after Western goods. His attire leaves one wondering if a gender-specific undertone is intended. In the three woodcuts on display, Zhu Fadong addresses more general and global issues such as human rights, environment and wildlife protection. Though less glossy, the visual statements of these works are equally unequivocal and explicit. The brash bluntness of Zhu's works displayed at Chambers Fine Art differs from his usually more creative and refined modes of expression.

The Shanghai born artist Jin Feng showed four photographs in Chambers Fine Art's *Too Much Flavor*. All of them are entitled *My Figure is Disappearing* and distinguished only by their numerical codes. The series extends over a number of years; the earliest work in this show was created in 1998 and the latest in 2001. As such, it attests to the artist's continuous interest in the problematic of identity in present-day China. The Chinese title of the series—*Wode xingxiang de qingshi guocheng* or *The Process of My Forms' Eradication*—is very descriptive of the process depicted in these photographs. The artist's face, reproduced sixteen times, is consecutively obliterated by objects or by writing.<sup>1</sup> In *My Figure Disappearing II*, for example, Jin Feng is standing behind a clear screen facing the picture plain. The initial photograph is reminiscent of a mug shot, the artist's identification details written on the screen. During the subsequent fifteen stages, Jin Feng proceeds by writing his personal information on the screen repeatedly, line by line and then row over row until his face is totally obliterated. The artist's official identity designation overwhelms his individuality and

physicality. As such, these works are a strong evocation of the individual's insignificance *vis-à-vis* the official drive for modernization.

Qiu Zhijie and Zhao Xiaohu both contributed video pieces to the show, entitled *Syndrome* and *The Goopy Gentleman* respectively.<sup>2</sup> While Qiu Zhijie's work focuses on mental images, Zhou Xiaohu's animated video pays attention to the corporeal. In *Syndrome*, Qiu Zhijie inundates the viewer with an ungraspable multitude of images from daily life, historical and contemporary events as well as a disarray of words—such as evolution, God, danger, nation, ductile—and sounds. Some of these images race by, others linger on. A rapid, ceaseless yet reflective flow of thought is emulated. At the same time, one immediately associates this inundation to the visual over-saturation presented by mass media. In *The Goopy Gentlemen*, the tone and pace are very different (fig. 2). Accompanied by a crackling tune of a children's song, a male torso becomes the image plane as well as an active character and prop in a cartoon story. The story is literally projected onto the artist's body. A female character is willed into existence by the artist step by step and is dramatically obliterated at the end. The story told is seemingly that of a courtesan, prostitute or stripper. Sexuality and the "social evils" that accompany it—many of the driven by increasing commercialization—are hot topics in the urban centers of the People's Republic of China.

All of the works displayed in the Chambers Fine Art *Too Much Flavor* show addressed issues that may be coined as "hot topics" in the urban reality of contemporary Mainland China. The increasing conditioning of their society by artificial systems concerns numerous Chinese artists and therefore finds its way into many of their works. As Gu Zhenqing puts it in his exhibition's catalog: "*Too Much Flavor* has already become a daily experience we can hardly avoid."<sup>3</sup> The calm and spacious setting gave breathing space to the displayed works and allowed for them to be viewed individually. Concurrently, their respective messages were able to unfold without interference. But the thus accorded visual independence also made the lack of an internal dynamic more apparent and thereby exposed the show's nature as a selection. Nevertheless, the show did provide an interesting, informative, and challenging array of works by a number of Mainland China's leading artists.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The arrangement is in a four by four format.

<sup>2</sup> The author is using the English title presented in the video as opposed to the gallery title, which was *The Honey Gentleman*. The disparaging connotations of the word "goopy" seem important to the author in the context of this work.

<sup>3</sup> Gu Zhenqing, *Too Much Flavor: An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Art* (Hong Kong: New Art Media Ltd. 2002): 24.