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China's Young Postmodern, Post-Mao Artists



Chi Peng, "Sprinting Forward 4" (2004), C-print, 55 x 81 x 2 1/2 in. (framed) (Collection of Andrew and Heather Rayburn, all images courtesy the Orange County Museum of Art)

LOS ANGELES — Jin Shan was 12 when the student-led Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 rocked China, eliciting a brutal and unprecedented military response. Although Jin didn't fully understand what was happening at the time, he was struck by the way his parents rushed to Beijing to bring his older sister home and out of harm's way. Jin's father, an artist who began his career painting scenic backdrops for Chinese opera, but who was later obligated to paint official portraits of Mao during the Cultural Revolution, had no illusions about who would win when power and idealism clashed.

Now in his late thirties, Jin Shan is one of a group of artists and artist collectives featured in the exhibition *My Generation: Young Chinese Artists* on view at the Orange County Museum of Art. All of the artists were born after 1976 — the year of Mao Zedong's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution — and they have been shaped by a liberalized education, globalization, and the dizzying growth of China's economy. "The big difference between my generation and my father's," Jin Shan asserts, "is that I can freely choose what subject I want to do or what kind of idea I want to show people. My father's generation could take only inspiration from society or the government."

A majority of the *My Generation* artists are products of the one-child policy, enacted in 1980. They are the Post-Mao generation, and their sense of difference is profound. According to Barbara Pollack, the show's curator, "The generation gap in China is so extreme, that between the parents of these artists and these young artists, it is as if they were born in two different countries in two different centuries."

The varied works of *My Generation* not only reflect the depth of China's generational divide, but also the younger generation's embrace of Western Postmodernism's aesthetic tropes and methodologies. The exhibition's numerous videos and photographs — including many altered in Photoshop — speak to an interest in Conceptualism and also to a tendency to contextualize culture in personal experience. Postmodern themes of individuality and personal identity are certainly present as are collective attempts to reach backwards and reclaim aspects of China's deeply rooted culture that are worth sustaining and carrying forward. Remaining "Chinese" in the face of globalization is a major concern.

China's Post-Mao artists understand that for the first time there is some money to be made in showing and selling their work both in Asia and abroad. Ai Weiwei has shown that art world stardom may even be possible. Artists also realize that China is having a "moment" and hope to leverage it to their advantage while it lasts.

A distinct edge of tension and fearfulness runs through the exhibition, as the artists of My Generation are deeply aware that overt and specific political statements remain risky. Rather than making "in your face" political work, some artists use metaphorical imagery transmits nuanced criticisms within the relative safety net of China's burgeoning contemporary art scene. For that reason, many of the works in *My Generation* are quietly and thoughtfully disruptive. A suite of four photo-collages by Liu Di (b. 1985), which depict bizarre, mammoth animals in the courtyards of Beijing housing developments, exemplify this measured approach to commentary. They suggest, among other things, that nature — even in mutant forms — may eventually overcome China's shambling urban expanses.

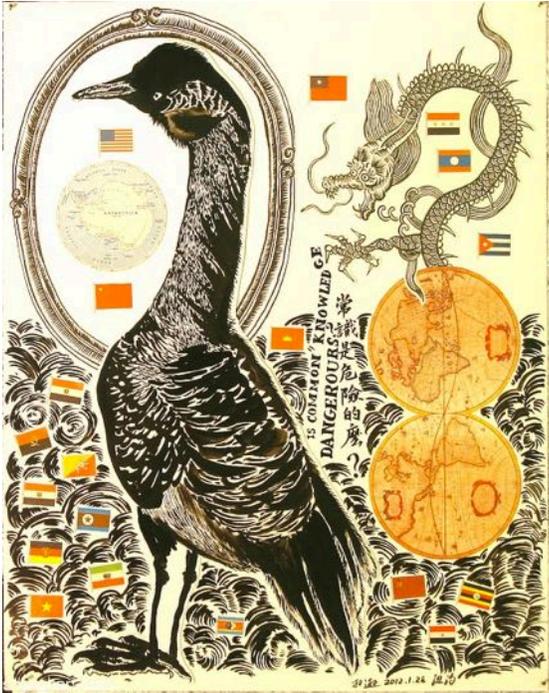
A more confrontational posture is apparent in the works of Zhao Zhao (b. 1982), whose "Constellations II No. 5" consists of a mirror pockmarked with bullet holes. Zhao, who once created a monumental statue of a fallen police officer, has been fined and detained by Chinese police and has also had his works confiscated. The energetic, varied, and satirical paintings of Zhou Yilun (b. 1983) indicate the artist's rebellious rejection of what Barbara Pollack characterizes in her catalog essay as China's "rampant materialism and banal conformity."

It is interesting to consider not only what the show has plenty of — seriousness of purpose and intensity — but also what it entirely lacks: sensuality and hedonism. The video "Disruptive Desires, Tranquility and the Loss of Lucidity" by Huang Ran (b.1982) underscores this deficiency by depicting a shy and apparently repressed young couple who share details of their lives in an innocent, dream-like atmosphere while gradually revealing hints of disturbing, sexually charged events in their pasts.

Many of the political and social complexities faced by China's Post-Mao generation are referenced in Chi Peng's "Sprinting Forward 4," a digitally altered photograph. It presents the artist, chased by a flock of tiny red jets, standing naked on the steps of a reflective Beijing skyscraper. The image plays the monumental and domineering urban architecture off of the vulnerable, solitary figure, suggesting a Confucian meditation on the relationship of humankind to heaven. Does the building represent a temple to China's future, a prison for the soul, or perhaps both? Is China's "progress" a collective mirage that in truth is the stuff of individual nightmares? The image presents and opens up those questions — and many others — beautifully and elusively.

In blunt contrast, Qiu Xiaofei's massive oil painting "Utopia" evokes a rugged and desecrated urban landscape punctuated by a clunky, damaged statue — very likely a headless Mao. The canvas stands as an accusation: China's planned super-cities have displaced and disrupted the lives of former country-dwellers and moved them into concrete block purgatories. Qui's "Utopia" is a dystopian emblem for a nation that poured more concrete between 2010 and 2014 than the United States did in the entire 20th century.

Some of *My Generation's* standout artists are ambitiously intellectual in the ways they search for connections between China's past and present cultures. The oil paintings of Liang Yuanwei (b. 1977), which reach backwards in time to reference and resemble richly patterned silk brocade fabrics, are miracles of patience and aesthetic concentration. Liang's paintings raise questions about the intersections of art, craft, and production while also presenting a subtle feminist lead for other Chinese women artists to follow.



Sun Xun, “A Footnote to Time” (2012), ink on paper, 30 x 20 7/8 in. (courtesy Sun Xun and ShanghART Gallery)

The works of Sun Xun (b.1980) reflect the influence of his mentor, Chen Haiyan, a pioneering printmaker known for injecting personal imagery into her work. Sun is represented in *My Generation* by a multi-channel animated film, a large mixed-media poster, and a suite of ink on paper pieces. The works on view at OCMA represent the tip of the iceberg of Sun Xun’s rapidly growing and multi-various oeuvre of paintings, drawings, animations, and installations. One engaging ink drawing — it includes a duck, a dragon, and flags of the world — appears to be aesthetically inspired by Chinese moderns woodcuts of the early 20th century. It asks an intentionally misspelled and disconcerting question that references a problem of globalization: “IS COMMON KNOWLEDGE DANGEROUS?”

In the exhibition’s final gallery space, Jin Shan’s “No Man City,” constructed of Tyvek (a synthetic fiber product) and paper, looms against a black background that accentuates the structure’s white purity. Constructed for the first presentation of *My Generation* at the Tampa Museum of Art in 2014, it is a work that moves from left to right, morphing from a series of abstract, multi-faceted forms into a kind of futuristic classicism. The façade is lit from above by a single track light which casts the rotating shadows of three silhouettes: a peony, a crane, and a sunburst. These are the images the artist’s father often worked with: traditional symbols of Chinese art of the past. “No Man City” is an austere and guardedly hopeful work. By referencing China’s past and the work of his father, Jin Shan also allows a hint of nostalgia — an indulgence — to add a filial homage and personal context to his installation.

Jin Shan’s generation has been accused by some Chinese critics as being narcissistic and self-indulgent — a “Me Generation,” as the exhibition catalog points out —but their work doesn’t read that way. *My Generation* is a show of tense and wary artists who are very aware that China is unique in the world. Yes, there are strong individual sensibilities emerging, but a collective sense of China’s looming power structure and social problems — and an extreme wariness about the future — adds flickering shadows of doubt across a show that is already fairly dark.

My Generation: Young Chinese Artists continues at the Orange County Museum of Art (850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach, California) through October 11.