

# Chinese Voice 1 December 1998 issue

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Sunday, 22 July 2007

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- Studying little yellow men (and women)

Reckoning with the past - Contemporary Chinese Painting

Curated by Chang Tsong-zung, this is the first exhibition of New Art from China to be shown in New Zealand, straight from its success at the Edinburgh Arts Festival.

See 66 works by 15 leading contemporary painters from China Taiwan and Hong Kong at the Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North from 9 October to Sunday 6 December.

(Although the itinerary of the exhibition includes Invercargill, Dunedin, Christchurch, Nelson, Palmerston North, New Plymouth Hamilton, and Auckland, inexplicably, it will not be exhibited at any venue in Wellington, an example of the local art establishment's one-eyed mono-cultural (or bicultural) bias, and "one in the eye" for local Chinese arts and cultural groups too engrossed in bamboo or whatever.)

Contemporary art in China entered a new phase of creativity after 1989. The enthusiasm for avant-gardism as inspired by the West, which opened new vistas for Chinese intellectuals, was significantly dampened by the depressed social and political climate following the repression of Tiananmen in 1989.

The most striking visual images of the post 1989 period are brightly coloured but listless and irreverent figures created by the disillusioned youth, and pop style paintings which echo the sudden resurgence of Mao-fever in China.

The tendency to look back, with the intention of understanding the present, and of filling the emotional and psychological vacuum that had accompanied the break from the past, has grown stronger in recent years. The common thread which ties these artists together is an urgent need to "reckon with the past" both from a cultural and personal/psychological perspective.

Reckoning with the past also relates to the search for identity, less apparent in artists from the mainland but deeply disturbing to artists in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Photographs follow.

Studying little yellow men (and women)

Steven Young

If the UFO hovering over the Otago Museum had beamed up the attendees at the conference held there last week, the little green men would now be a lot wiser about the little yellow men (and women) in Australasia and the Pacific Islands. Fifty extra humanoids would be lot to cram into a flying saucer however, but even after jettisoning a bunch of Australian academics, they would have learnt a lot about the local Chinese - their history, their changing demographic make-up and employment potential, their identity crises, the success of their language maintenance programmes and their intergenerational relationships. They would have been interested in the history of the Chinese Association, the success of the Chinese Medical Association, the war service of Chinese New Zealanders, the design of Chinese graves and the archeology of Chinese miners at McRaes Flat. After intensive interrogation of Mike (One Tree Hill) Smith and Annette Sykes on "Maori perceptions of Chinese" the aliens would have been none the wiser, since Smith and Sykes would still have trundled out their standard laptop-driven Powerpoint multi-media presentation of a Maori utopia guaranteed by the Treaty of Waitangi. The little green men would have been impressed by Steven Young's plans for the Chinese to deal the Treaty of Waitangi and still move forward. Pansy Wong would have mediated with the aliens using her experience as the first Chinese MP in New Zealand. (After typing that lot into their database they might have thought it better to look it all up at <http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz>.)

The moral of this story, (if there is one) is that even if you think you are doing nothing special, someone is studying your paper trail, and someone else is studying them as they study you. Or so it seemed at the Conference on "Old and New Migrations and Cultural Change" organised by Otago University and James Ng for the Association for the Study of Chinese and their Descendents in Australasia and the Pacific Islands (ASCDAPI) November 20-22, Dunedin.