

Pop Art

*at the Time of
China's Cultural
Revolution*

by *Lihua Zhao*
利花

Pop Art was born in Britain in the 1960s, then developed in the United States. It became the contemporary art form at art schools in the USA. It was a movement which praised ordinary things in every day life. When the younger generation of artists were experimenting with Dadaism to replace Abstract Expressionism, they discovered that the consumer culture provided a wealth of visual resources: advertising, trademarks, video images, Playboy cover girls, pop stars, fast food, cartoons, etc. and they incorporated these images directly in the paintings, to create a unique, new art form.

POP ART ARRIVES IN CHINA

Pop Art was originally introduced into China as a modern Western art form in the 1980s. In China the concept of modern Western art is that it went

from Impressionism to Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art.

In 1985, Rauschenberg held an exhibition at the China Art Gallery, which was the first Pop Art ever to come into China. At that time, the Chinese did not understand the concept of Pop Art. We did and do

not have the same cultural conditions as in the West in which to create Pop Art.

In the 1980s, Chinese avant-garde art was criticized mainly on the basis that it was simply copying Western art trends and was of little significance to the Chinese from a historical or cultural perspective. It is hard to completely erase the traces of such accusations, just as it is impossible to change history. This factor caused Chinese art to regress in the early 90s, returning to the realism of the 1980s. In the 90s, the main art form was Pop Art. Art in China,



Wang Guangyi

“When Pop Art came back into the scene, it was with relevance to China’s history and culture, rather than a mere imitation of the Western version of the art form.”

then, went backwards to some degree as a result of the copying and imitation but when Pop Art came back into the scene, it was with relevance to China’s history and culture, rather than a mere imitation of the Western version of the art form. Pop Art in China became a historical commentary, social and political, and in this it thrived.



the Chinese people in the 1960s and 1970s: family portraits; traditional Chinese tunics. He tried to capture the unique appearance of the Chinese people: the single eyelid; the oval face. His paintings depict the Chinese people’s psychological journey. Posters advertising Zhang Yang’s film, *Sunflower*, used Zhang Xiaogang’s well known images from the 1960s and 1970s.

The Chinese political Pop Art represents a memory for the older generation. For the young it holds a mystery that cannot be explained

MORE RECENT SHOWS

Zhang Xiaogang

In 2002, Shen Zhen Hexiangning Art Museum held a special exhibition called “The Image is Power.” Wang Guangyi, Zhang Xiaogang and Fang Lijun exhibited their works together. Wang Guangyi, an extremely sensitive contemporary artist, was perhaps the first Chinese painter to really understand the essence of Pop Art. He created images of the worker, the farmer, the soldier during the Cultural Revolution, along with images of Coca Cola, cosmetics and so on. He did not paint common images. He was very careful about the meaning of what he painted and the message was, for him, much more important than the technique of painting itself. He wanted his pieces to directly reflect contemporary life.

Zhang Xiaogang was not quite so clearly involved in Pop Art. His series on the “big family” showed



in words. And for the Western collector, perhaps it simply represents enormous collectible value. In contemporary China, the political significance of the Pop Art is most easily

accepted by the West. On March 31st, 2006, the Sufubi auction house in New York held an auction of Asian contemporary art, organized by the Asian Art Week. Zhang Xiaogang’s *The Blood: Comrade No. 120* from his “Big Family” series of portraits fetched a stellar \$979,200. The price was so high that it probably helped to promote political Pop Art in China. Inevitably, some artists decided to follow suit and produce works as crude as that of Zhang Xiaogang’s political pieces.

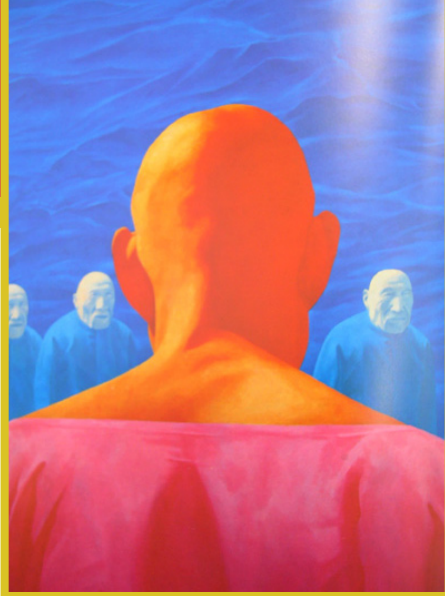
Fang Lijun, as a representative of one of the most important new artistic trends, joined with other artists to try to create a unique discourse. In particular, since 1988, he has created works in a series of “skinhead hooligan” images. These images became an icon, portraying the contemporary mood of the Chinese culture, showing that survival was uncertain and the people were insecure. Fang Lijun expresses humor, ridicule or sarcasm through the characters in his works, yawning, gaping or silly expressions, showing the backs of their heads, trying to convey the mindset of people at the time.

Moreover, he created the skinhead images using himself or his own friends as models, making this a self-mocking satire.

CAUSES FOR POP ART'S ACCEPTANCE IN CHINA

Since the 1990s, art has indeed undergone unimaginable changes. Looking into the cause of this change, several factors can be listed:

1. The effects of Chinese economic development and political stagnation.
2. Artists were upset because they couldn't sell their work and were not making an income. Society is driven by money.
3. Lack of morality generally and art conscience dying.
4. The influence of foreign art dealers guiding the trends.
5. The globalization process and the impact of international mainstream culture.



Fang Lijun



6. A key point is the impact of mainstream Western culture.

CHINESE ARTISTS GO GLOBAL

Sufubi Auction Company's European and Asian president---Hu Kai said in an exclusive interview with Xinhua (prominent Chinese media), "The surprise today is the follow-on from the successful New York auction which shows that Chinese contemporary art has been redefined in the world market. We have reason to believe that Chinese contemporary art has begun to make its way into the world market and the market will continue to grow. At the auction in New York, 52% of the works were bought by private collectors in the United States and collectors came from all over the world. This shows the world is interested in contemporary Chinese art." He said that in addition to the new look of contemporary Chinese art, when Chinese artists

“When Pop Art came back into the scene, it was with relevance to China’s history and culture, rather than a mere imitation of the Western version of the art form.”



Wang Guangyi

matter to create a new type of contemporary Chinese art, an art form which enables the Chinese to better understand the artist’s spiritual world and, at the same time, allows the modern Chinese artist to enter the world art marketplace with a much better chance of success. 📌

created new works they followed internationally popular trends because they wanted their work to sell better.

Hu Kai continues, “Today the world is paying close attention to China’s strong economic growth. Chinese artists have experienced a great increase in self-confidence and their artistic quality has greatly improved. This has naturally aroused the enthusiasm and interest of the collectors. China’s strong economy has helped China enter the international art world. Business at Sotheby’s in Hong Kong grew by over 40% last year. The prices and size of the recent Hong Kong auction is unprecedented. Our company’s focus has shifted to the mainland Chinese market.”

A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

Actually Pop Art was an inspiration and a benefit for Chinese artists. It has made it possible for contemporary artists in China to use Pop Art’s subject

