# Space City Looks Eastward: Contemporary Asian Art in Houston

by Victoria Ludwin





D using the past fifteen years, contemporary Asian art has received unprecedented attention in the United States and worldwide. The growing popularity stems from exposure to the Western art market. Asia's radical growth industrially and economically, and the unusually fresh aesthetic and perspective the work itself offers. Because the influences for many of these artists do not forcibly stem from Western culture and society, and because Asian cultures can be somewhat closed to the West, the art stands apart from other work on an international scale.

Recent history in China shows how censure and revolution have played a part in contemporary Asian art, When Chinese dictator Mao Zedong died in 1976, the culturally stifling rules of his Cultural Revolution loosened, giving air to the tight suppression of Western influences and creative expression. Artists responded immediately to the influx of Western art, culture and media. During the 1980s, much of Chinese art reflected these influences with exuberance. However, when a national art show in 1989 was shut down by authorities after a few weeks of exhibiting, the artists' former. enthusiasm started to wane. Soon after, the riots of Tiananmen Square began, leaving many artists embittered. The work shifted toward cynical realism and political pop, both of which were unpopular in China but gamered acclaim in Europe.

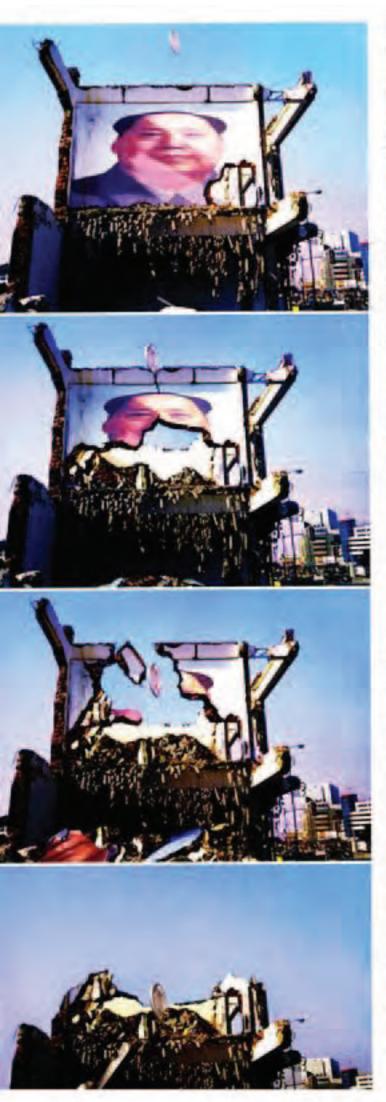
Chinese artists began exhibiting at the Venice

Biennale in 1995, and with that exposure interest has grown tremendously. For the first time, contemporary Asian art shows toured the US. As younger artists began exhibiting, the work moved away from political pop and cynical realism of the 80s and early 90s. An artistic dialogue opened about Asia's rapid social and economic transformation. ArtBeijing, a large-scale contemporary art fair, reports that deals valued at over 200 million yuan (or US\$26 million) were signed during last year's fair, and this year is expected to be even bigget.

In conjunction with the upcoming opening of the MFAH's Asian art show, RED HOT — Asian Art Today from the Chaney Family Collection, several galleries in Houston have mounted concurrent exhibitions. The MFAH alone will show over 120 works by 66 artists; the galleries are exhibiting some of the same artists as well as many others. Altogether. Houston may be showing one of the largest collections of contemporary Asian art in the United States.

Of the gallery shows open at the time of writing. Deborah Colton Gallery's China Under Construction is by far the strongest. The museum-like exhibition, curated by Beijing-based art critic Maya Kövskaya, focuses on Chinese photography and video but is wide in scope. The show is divided into five conceptual arenas, aptly reflecting contemporary China: Deconstructing Landscape, Reconstructing Selves and Lives, Contesting Power/Constituting

Page 14: Do-Ho Sub, Karma, 2003; Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Page 15: LI Wei: Lost Gravity; Courtesy Barbara Davis Gallery Below: Gan Brothers, Runsi, 1998; Courtesy Debmath Colton Gallery Right: Han Bing, Love in the Age of Big Construction II, 2006: Courtesy Deborah Colton Gallery



Enowledge, Destruction of an Old Order, and Constructing a Tenuous Modernity.

The show's energy bounces across the gallery rooms, fuelled by the social, political and economic rebellion within the art as artists try to work against the growing globalization, modernization and history churning in China. With these sentiments comes a reverence for nature amid China's industrial development. Many of the pieces are performance photography, subversive in nature. Particularly strong in the show are photographs by Wu Gaozhong, Han Bing, Cang Xin, Hei Yue – Ji Shengli, and Rongrong & inti: however, the show is so strong altogether it seems slighting to the rest of the exhibition to mention these as standouts. These artists are not on show anywhere else in Houston, and it's an aesthetic treat to see them.

Also compelling is Barbara Davis Gallery's intimate exhibition of three Chinese artists: two from China and one from Houston. Photography-based as well, this exhibition has a softer edge relative to Deborah Colton Gallery's show. Performance artist Li Wei's work involves use of his own body in extreme positions, be it head-first through a car windshield or seemingly flung out a window. While a description of Wei's work might sound violent. there's an unusual spiritual undertone to it, perhaps because the symbolism of China's rushing transformation on a societal and personal level is so clearly at the crux of his art. Huang Yan's work. shown throughout Houston and in the MFAH exhibition, depicts flowers and women painted with traditional Chinese landscapes, to striking effect, Weihong's tea ceremony and the portrait photographs that accompany it make a global village and an opportunity to share out of a seemingly formal tradition. The collective effect of the exhibition is a quiet, spiritual beauty,

Those interested in the possibility of purchasing art created by artists in the MFAH exhibition should head to New Gallery/Thom Andriola and Mc-Clain Gallery. Seemingly sibling exhibitions, both shows give equal space to painting and sculpture as well as to photography. These galleries worked with other US galleries specializing in contemporary Chinese art to bring in pieces by artists of international renown. The Luo brothers' sculptures merge international Western brands with traditional Chinese iconography to whimsical effect. Zhao



Bo's florid paintings also play with consumerism in a former Communist arena. Liu Bolin's *Hiding in* the City self-portrait series (at New Gallery) exemplifies the impact of the city and its growing industrialization on the individual with a startlingly accurate eye for color and light: he blends himself into the background. The shows bring a Fop-like lightheartedness to the city's overall exhibition.

In addition to the galleries mentioned above, several others are opening shows after this time of writing. Poissant Gallery's *Ryomei: Resonance*, was curated by Houston artist Mari Omori, and is a group show of acclaimed Japanese-American artists capitalizing on the multi-sensory nature of organic materials. CTRL Gallery presents To the Left, which poses the question whether similari-



ties in artistic practices can be drawn based on gender and identity: the five artists in the show are all Asian-American women. *Dreaming, Faraway* at Inman Gallery, also a group show, exhibits the work of several Japanese artists working outside the hyped Pop and anime movements: the show's title certainly reflects the aesthetic of the artists included.

What an opportunity for art lovers and collectors alike to view such a sweep of contemporary Asian art. While there could be no unifying sensibility among so many cultures and artistic movements, Asian art offers a different sort of energy from the rest of the contemporary world, and it's a pleasure to take it in.



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### ARTS ENTERTAINMENT

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SYNTHETIC SKYLINE: Urban Landscape, Beijing, a 2003 photograph by Zhan Wang

# **Asian invasion**

Galleries spanning the city explore the changing environment of a giant country in *China Under Construction*, whose exhibits complement the *Red Hot: Asian Art Today From the Chaney Family Collection* show now on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

#### By PATRICIA C. JOHNSON

HE exhibition at Deborah Colton Gallery is titled China Under Construction - which is precisely what's going on in that huge nation. Physically, it's constructing a new environment to meet the demands of increasing urbanization-especially in Beijing as it prepares for the 2008 Olympics with the corollary paving. damming and slicing up of the natural world.

And culture is also being reconstructed as artists respond to the massive changes, interpreting and redefining what China is and is becoming, especially for an artist on a global stage.

The exhibit consists of photographs and a few video works addressing these vast changes. While the work may miss in terms of visual power at times, it often makes up for it in the metaphoric and allegorical descriptions of this new world. Bridging the divide between

tradition and contemporary concerns is an arresting work, the only threedimensional piece in the show. Tao Aimin collected wooden washboards used by Chinese women for generations. Tao strung dozens of them together with rope, like a bridge over a gorge. These slatted planks reflect life stories, portions of which Tao recorded in black ink. The edges are rough, splintered and torn; the middles have been rubbed smooth and patinaed by countless working hands to speak of harsh labor and of love. The climb of three flights of stairs in the

gallery is worthwhile just to consider this humble and gripping object loaded with visual and human interest.

But there are other works here to study and perhaps be moved by.

Zhan Wang constructs visionary landscapes from common utensils. He fashions mountains from crumpled Koil, skyscrapers with piles of pots and pans, smaller edifices from salt-and-pepper shakers; round boxes, kettles, sieves and strainers fill in the urban-scape. He photographs the apocalyptic scenes in gold to bronze tones, shrouded in misty air. One, Urban Landwape, Beying, is as persuasive as a Rene Magritte painting. Beijing-based critic and the



FRESH FACE: Untilled (Fashion & Mild), a glazed ceramic work by Suo Tan

exhibition's curator. Maya Kovskaya, writes that Chinese contemporary art took root in the late 1970s. Then, "experimentation, emulation of Western styles and rejection of many native traditions characterized the '80s. Pivotal events include Robert Raischenberg's 1985 exhibition at the China Art Gallery. (And) 1995 brought the first group of Chinese artists to the Venice Biennale. By the late 1990s, disgust with consumerism led to a spree of art that defied commodification altogether."

The images on view now are an Please see ASIA, Page ES



FIGURINE: Tang Lady, a fiberglass work painted with enamel auto paint by Yu Fan,



THE WRITING'S ON THE WALL: Book of Women, a 2005 installation by Tan Aimin, constructed with wooden washtwards, jule cord and hemp cloth

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# ASIA: Modernizing

#### **CONTINUED FROM PAGE E3**

aftermath of international awareness, a rush to modernize and the conflicts that are inevitable when time and culture are compressed. Sometime it's humorous, as Hei Yue's *Buttocks* ... a series of photographs from a performance when the artist faced a group of hard-hatted construction workers or impeccably aligned and uniformed policemen — wearing pants with their seats removed.

Sometimes it's nostalgic, as in Weng Peijun's deeply colored picture of a young girl in Western school uniform who sits on an old wall in a verdant spot and gazes over a crammed parking lot toward an equally crammed skyline of modern skyscrapers.

And sometimes, it's pointed social critique, as in Solution Scheme.

In this series of performance stills, artists Xu Yon and Yu Na show a nude young, Westernized woman posing in stark settings where fully suited executives variously ignore or pursue her.

Through Aug. 31. Deborah Colton Gallery, 2500 Summer; 713-864-2364.

#### **McClain Gallery**

China Under Construction is one of numerous exhibitions of Asian art in the city's galleries that supplement or complement the massive Red Hot: Asian Art Today From the Chaney Family Collection show at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

At McClain Gallery, you see repeats of many pieces in the museum.

And you realize that many of them are essentially tchochkes - pricey, high-end and beautifully crafted - but tchochkes nonetheless. Like Sui Jianguo's Waste Beauty. The darling resin and painted panda on a pedestal, a toothbrush-holder/fern planter lookalike, is here repeated three times, while his massive red T. rex at the entrance to the museum has evidently sired plenty of babies -1,000 of them to be precise one of which found a corner in this gallery.

Through Aug. 18. McClain Gallery, 2242 Richmond; 713-520-9988.

#### **New Gallery**

Multiples appear to be the norm in this new China – but there are some fresh pieces to consider at New Gallery.

Two ceramic busts of Mao Zedong by Suo Tan call for double takes. The chairman's features nearly disappear in the delicacy of the landscape painted in the traditional form and blue glaze of Ming Dynasty ceramics. Yu Fan's Tang Lady is cast in fiberglass and painted, about 7 feet tall, regal and serene. At the museum, Yu has a similarly stylized figure but of radically different subject -Liu Hulan the young heroine/ martyr of the Communist revolution who was beheaded whom he represents prone with her throat cut.

Among the photographs by Liu Bolin is the striking picture of a young man in dark clothes standing erect in front and behind veils of China's red flag, its stars sweeping delicately across his face and shoulder.

The Luo Brothers, they of cherubs and Western goodies, are represented here, too. The toddler with the carp seen at the museum in bright oranges and reds is all gold in this version. It's not better nor worse, just different, more like a trophy than an advertising sign.

Through Sept. 1. New Gallery, 2627 Colquitt; 713-520-7053.

#### **Barbara Davis Gallery**

Finally, Barbara Davis Gallery gives the central space to Weihong, a native of Beijing and Houston resident, for her performance of 255+0. It's a realtime tea ceremony set in black and white and open to audience participation. Running along the walls is a friezelike installation of photographs from past performances, the first of which was held in Houston in 2001. Among those sipping green tea then are art folk such as curator Walter Hopps and sculptor Joe Mancuso. It's a way to calm down after all the pop and fireworks. Call the gallery for a date with the artist.

Through Aug. 11. Barbara Davis Gallery, 4411 Montrose; 713-520-9200.

### ART IT PICKS

Tsui Kuang-Yu The Shortcut to the Systematic Life: Invisible City 崔廣宇:システマティックな生活への近道一見えない都市



現在、オランダのライクスアカデミーに長期 滞在中の台湾作家による2年ぶりの個展。崔は 一貫して、自らが出演するパフォーマンスの記録 performances as works on video. Over the past five years he has released a series of pieces under the title Superficial Life that at first glance appear to be just an endless parade of silly antics - such as a quiz in which the artist is asked to guess the identity of objects thrown at the back of his head, and casual collisions with the likes of city walls and grazing cattle - but which actually train an incisive gaze on the societal systems underlying our day to day existence. This exhibition will provide an overview of the series, including work produced for the Liverpool Biennial 2006, and Tsui's latest output from The Netherlands. Apparently the latter takes its cue from the fact that 26 percent of the country lies below sea level.



ART IT PICKS

を、ビデオ作品として発表してきた。ここ5年は 「表皮生活圏」と題したシリーズを展開している。 後頭部に向かって投げられるものが何かを当て るクイズや、街中の壁や草を食べる牛などに無 為にぶつかって行く行為など、一見、ばかばかし いことの繰り返しを延々とビデオに収めたこの シリーズは、私たちの日常生活に潜む社会シス テムへ鋭い視線を向けたものだ。

当展は、リヴァプール・バイエニアル2006のた めに制作された作品、およびオランダで制作さ れた最新作など、本シリーズを総覧する展覧会 になる予定。後者は、オランダの国土の26%が 海抜以下の低地であることにヒントを得た作品 だという。 (岩切みお)

The first solo show in two years by this Taiwanese artist currently on a residency at the Dutch Rijksakademie. Throughout his career Tsui has presented recordings of his -lwakirî Mio

8.4 - 26	
誠品畫廊	
Eslite Gallery	[see p.160]

China Under Construction: Contemporary Art from the People's Republic 正在建設中:中国当代芸術展

中国現代美術がオークションでもてはやされ、 大陸の政治的でセクシーな一面が周知された。だ とすれば本展は、そのイメージを覆し、薄汚れた 暗部を露にする。悪名高い作家30人が提示する のは、中国の輸出向けの顔ではない。流行でイカ したものより社会の実情を伝える別の一面。瓦 臻、黄色の安全帽、露骨な真実だ。

企画者のマヤ・コヴスカヤは、伝統、近代化、



Yu Na & Xu Yong Solution Scheme (D4) 2007

アイデンティティ、ジェンダーに注目。解体され る現実の風景が心理的領域に溶け込み、イメージ 改革の過程にある国家がアイデンティティという 新たな挑戦に直面する場を創造する。韓冰、 曹斐、何雲昌らは、不可能などないこの変わり ゆく風景を描きだす。かつては自らの肉体を売 り物にしていた俞郷は、人類最古の職業を作品 に転じる。徐勇との共同デビュー作で「客」と一

> 緒に裸でボーズし、何としてでも自分の新 世界を手に入れると言わんばかりにカメラ を直視するのだ。 (リー・アンブロジー)

> If auction house-inspired excitement surrounding contemporary art from China has delivered a sexy, politically charged view of the Mainland, then *China Under Construction* will flip it to reveal a dusty, gritty underbelly with more than 30 notorious artists presenting a world not necessarily for export, but one where rubble, yellow hard hats and the nakedness of truth deliver more social commentary than trendy cool.

The exhibition curated by Maya Kóvskaya addresses tradition, modernity, identity, and gender. The deconstruction of the physical landscape melts into the psychological realm and ultimately creates the platform upon which a nation in the process of revamping its image will rise to new challenges of identity. Artists such as Han Bing, Cao Fei and He Yunchang characterize this changing landscape where anything is possible, as evidenced also in the photographic series by Xu Yong and Yu Na - who once profited on her flesh and in this her first artistic venture turns her timeless profession on its head, posing nude with her "johns" and staring directly in the camera as if to say she'll have her piece of the new world, at any cost. -Lee Ambrozy

> Through 8.31 デボラ・コルトン・ギャラリー Deborah Colton Gallery www.deborahcoltongallery.com

> > Summer / Fall 2007 017





like everything is being rebuilt by frail figures hauling buckets of bricks with a yoke. Meanwhile, little kids sit in the rubble. With over a billion people, labor is apparently far cheaper than heavy equipment. How many basket-carrying people does it take to equal a dump truck? Han gives you a glimpse of how brutal, widespread and backbreaking change is in China.

Han is also a performance artist, recording his work with video and photographs. He gave a performance at the opening of "China Under Construction," centering on a pile of bricks, some yellow hard hats and red rope lighting (overly artfully) arranged in the gallery with a flagpole stuck in the center. The flag mixed red and blue stripes with the yellow stars and red of the Chinese flag. During the performance, Age of Big Construction was projected on the wall behind the brick pile. Han emerged in a pair of flesh-toned tights and proceeded to lie upon the brick pile as if he were trying to make himself comfortable. Over the next 20 to 30 minutes, he readjusted himself and then embraced the flagpole in a rather intimate manner. It was one of those performances that went on longer than necessary, though the idea of the rubble and physical discomfort worked okay. But the messages seemed a little mixed; Han was a very pretty, impossibly slender young man with long dark hair, sporting plucked eyebrows and what appeared to be eye shadow. The problem is, the artist's appearance made me look for some genderissue angle to the whole thing, yet I couldn't see what that had to do with everything else.

Han's past performances, is more successful. The photo shows Han supine over the arm of a heavy equipment bucket. Han is surrounded by a pile of insulation that looks fluffy and fairy-tale like, and the scene is surrounded by a canopy. The image is sort of like that of an urban sleeping beauty, except with a gay. It's a pretty campy photo and works better than the overly dramatic video from the same performance, in which a sweaty Han embraces the arm of the bucket-truck. In her essay, Kövskaya talks about Han "erotically engaging the earthmover claw" and using "feminine generativity to

## Workers Deborah Colton Gallery presents China sans pop

#### BY KELLY KLAASMEYER

here is a whole lotta Asian art out there right now, filling practically every gallery in the city. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's "RED HOT - Asian Art Today from the Chaney Family Collection" has created an Asian art storm, Chinese art - Chinese pop in particular - is dominating the galleries; many are showing the same artists and works similar to those included in the Chaney exhibition. Even if you love the work, so much of the same stuff makes a couple of the galleries feel like off-site gift shops. The exhibition at Deborah Colton takes a different tack. Curated by Beijing-based curator Maya Kovskaya, "China Under Construction" is intended to explore literal and figurative ideas of "construction."

At first glance, Wu Gaozhong's large photographs seem to be of little cakes or pastries – they're fluffy, and some of them

are tiered. Then you realize the fluffy stuff is mold coating small ceramic objects. A pagoda, a bridge and an archway are all covered with layers of decay. Multicolored mold blooms over the objects' surfaces, partially obscuring the brightly colored ceramics and creating a lurid display. The pagoda sports a delicate veil of spider webs. The photographs themselves still look kind of lovely - until you imagine the smell. Wu coated the objects with decomposing matter to create that patina of rot. In these images, the symbols of China's past quietly molder away.

While there is a lot of talk about the massive change, construction and development that China is currently undergoing, it's hard to get a real sense of it. At the entrance to the gallery is Han Bing's Age of Big Construction (2006); its documentary footage of construction and destruction focuses on bleak and decaying landscapes rather than shiny new Beijing skyscrapers. In the video, it looks like every old building is being torn down, and not by a wrecking ball but by a group of guys with sledgehammers. It seems

Red Flags Flying on the Skyline Cranes: Urban Amber (2006), a still photo from one of



Wanii Mari's fiberglass reliefs mimic a newspaper layout.

"China Under Construction: Contemporary Art from the People's Republic" Through August 31, Deborah Colton Gallery, 2500 Summer St., Third Floor, 713-864-5151. overcome masculine destructivity." I suppose an artist could make that work, but I think Han needs more irony if he's going to pull it off.

China's booming development comes at a price, and migrant

workers pay a high one. Wanli Mari deals directly with their plight by creating work based on newspaper reports of abuse. Called the Migrant Workers' Daily, after the People's Daily, the main government paper, Wanli's fiberglass reliefs mimic a newspaper layout, with an image and a Chinese caption below. The images have a quirky folk-artmeets-socialist-realism look to them. (She also has a Web site featuring the images and English text at www.migrant-d.com.)

One of Wanli's reliefs shows the tiny leg of a man stepping over a building's window sill. Others show a cluster of heads at the top of a skyscraper about to jump, burned and beaten migrants and a man lying prone in a bed. A photocopied handout tells the stories behind each scene: workers threatening suicide because of unpaid wages, workers being physically abused because they want to be paid,

workers being imprisoned. The translation of the text for the guy in the bed reads, "It was said that all the workers got their food from a street vendor at lunchtime. We suspected that the snakes were infected." The stories are from the official media - the Chinese government is allegedly trying to improve the rights of workers. One can only imagine what other horrors lie behind the spare language of the reports, and the horrors not reported.

Gallery owner Deborah Colton has lived in Asia for years, and her decision to have Kóvskaya curate was a good one. By my figuring, only four out of the 25 artists are also in the MFAH show. Kóvskaya has put together some pretty interesting, if sometimes uneven, work. The slams in her essay against the foreigner favorites - Chinese "political pop" and "cynical realism" - are pretty amusing. You can tell this is someone who has been on the ground in Beijing and is pretty cynical about a lot of highly touted Chinese contemporary art. Whether you agree with her or not, this is a good chance to see some work you probably won't see elsewhere.

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Brett Mitchell, conductor Jennifer Hope Willis, vocalist Ryan Silverman, vocalist

labor is apparently far cheaper than heavy equipment. How many basket-carrying people does it take to equal a dump truck? Han gives

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City Glow Self-styled Pop Art star Chiho Aoshima emerged out of the "factory" art group founded in Tokyo in the late '90s by Takashi Murakami. Her computer-generated images reference manga comics and anime cartoons, with wide-eyed characters and line drawings. Like Murakami, Aoshima believes in the contributions pop genres have made to the art world at large. Tucked away underground in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Chiho Aoshima's installation City Glow (2005) sits behind a cafe and next to the escalators. Don't feel bad for her, though: James Terrell's The Light Inside tunnel and Damien Hirst's installation End Game are good company in the basement. The cyclical piece is told through a five-screen animated video of telescoping layers that comments on deteriorating climate conditions. Plants, animals and anthropomorphic skyscrapers grow, bloom and die throughout the course of the seven-minute piece, perhaps predicting the death of civilization as the balanced world of the opening scenes mutates into a nightmare apocalypse set in a blood-red graveyard. Highly recommended for Nipponophiles or anyone bored with painting and sculpture. Through October 21. 1001 Bissonnet, 713-639-7300. - SC

"The David Whitney Bequest" "The David Whitney Bequest," currently on view at the Menil Collection, is a strange little exhibition of works from Whitney's collection, which were bequeathed to the Menil. The show is curious for its double-sided mission. On one hand, it's a wonderful sampling of works by contemporary art legends like Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol - and, in a sense, the world and scene they represented. On the other, it's a window into the mind of a collector: Whitney's championing of, and influence on, modern artists. Whitney reserved perhaps the bulk of his interest for Jasper Johns. This exhibit contains 17 works on paper by Johns, spanning the artist's entire career, with works made as recently as 2004. There's also Cy Twombly's Untitled (1959), a pencil on paper squigglefest that, at first, looks like it belongs on a proud parent's refrigerator door. Time spent in reflection is always rewarded with Twombly, though, and the work responds by revealing an intricate, well-composed pattern. Don't miss three of Robert Rauschenberg's early transfer paintings, contemporaneous of Warhol's early silk screens. Ghostly impressions of baseball players, horses and other Texasinspired imagery haunt the hazy, greenish realms of these works. Not surprisingly, on the opposite wall from the Rauschenbergs is Warhol's 1980 portrait David Whitney. An intense blackand-white snapshot of Whitney with his fingers clasped under his chin, it brilliantly anchors the exhibit. Three tones of gray fan elegantly across the painting, the middle one perfectly zoning Whitney's eyes, which seem to say, "Gaze upon my influence and impeccable taste." Through





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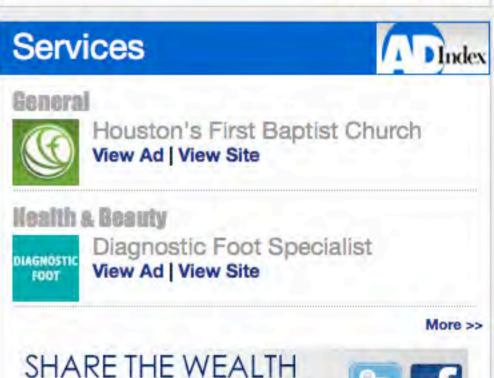


Asia Society First Look Festival



6th Annual Anime Matsuri Convention

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October 28. 1515 Sul Ross, 713-525-9400. - TS

"Perspectives 157: Xaviera Simmons" Xaviera Simmons's installation at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston will make you lament the passing of the LP. Simmons has covered the walls of the downstairs gallery with vintage album covers from her collection of recordings by black artists. Dinky CDs and image-free digital mp3 records lack the impact of those album cover visuals and their provocative, creative images that sometimes became as iconic as the music itself. The densely packed albums of the installation are a nostalgia trip as well as a visual record of the massive role black artists have played in music and popular culture. There are album covers from jazz greats such as John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy as well as funk artists such as Bootsy Collins and rap icons such as Tupac. There are albums from people you never even knew sang - Jasmine Guy's "Don't Want Money," anyone? Then there are people you forgot about, such as Grace Jones, and people that you wanted to forget about, such as, say, El DeBarge. Through September 16. 5216 Montrose, 713-284-8250. - KK



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### Entertainment



The exhibition at Deborah Colton Gallery is titled China Under Construction - which is precisely what's going on in that huge nation. Physically, it's constructing a new environment to meet the demands of increasing urbanization - especially in Beijing as it prepares for the 2008 Olympics — with the corollary paving, damming and slicing up of the natural world.

And culture is also being reconstructed as artists respond to the massive changes, interpreting and redefining what China is and is becoming, especially for

### an artist on a global stage.

The exhibit consists of photographs and a few video works addressing these vast changes. While the work may miss in terms of visual power at times, it often makes up for it in the metaphoric and allegorical descriptions of this new world.

Bridging the divide between tradition and contemporary concerns is an arresting work, the only three-dimensional piece in the show. Tao Aimin collected wooden washboards used by Chinese women for generations. Tao strung dozens of them together with rope, like a bridge over a gorge. These slatted planks reflect life stories, portions of which Tao recorded in black ink. The edges are rough, splintered and torn; the middles have been rubbed smooth and patinaed by countless working hands to speak of harsh labor and of love. The climb of three flights of stairs to the gallery is worthwhile just to consider this humble and gripping object loaded with visual and human interest.

But there are other works here to study and perhaps be moved by.

Zhan Wang constructs visionary landscapes from common utensils. He fashions mountains from crumpled foil, skyscrapers with piles of pots and pans, smaller edifices from salt-and-pepper shakers; round boxes, kettles, sieves and strainers fill in the urban-scape. He photographs the apocalyptic scenes in gold to bronze tones, shrouded in misty air. One, Urban Landscape, Beijing, is as persuasive as a <u>Rene Magritte</u> painting.

Beijing-based critic and the exhibition's curator, Maya Kóvskaya, writes that Chinese contemporary art took root in the late 1970s. Then, "experimentation, emulation of Western styles and rejection of many native traditions characterized the '8 os. Pivotal events include Robert Rauschenberg's 1985 exhibition at the China Art Gallery. (And) 1995 brought the first group of Chinese artists to the Venice Biennale. By the late 1990s, disgust with consumerism led to a spree of art that defied commodification altogether."

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The images on view now are an aftermath of international awareness, a rush to modernize and the conflicts that are inevitable when time and culture are compressed. Sometime it's humorous, as Hei Yue's Buttocks ... a series of photographs from a performance when the artist faced a group of hard-hatted construction workers or impeccably aligned and uniformed policemen - wearing pants with their seats removed.

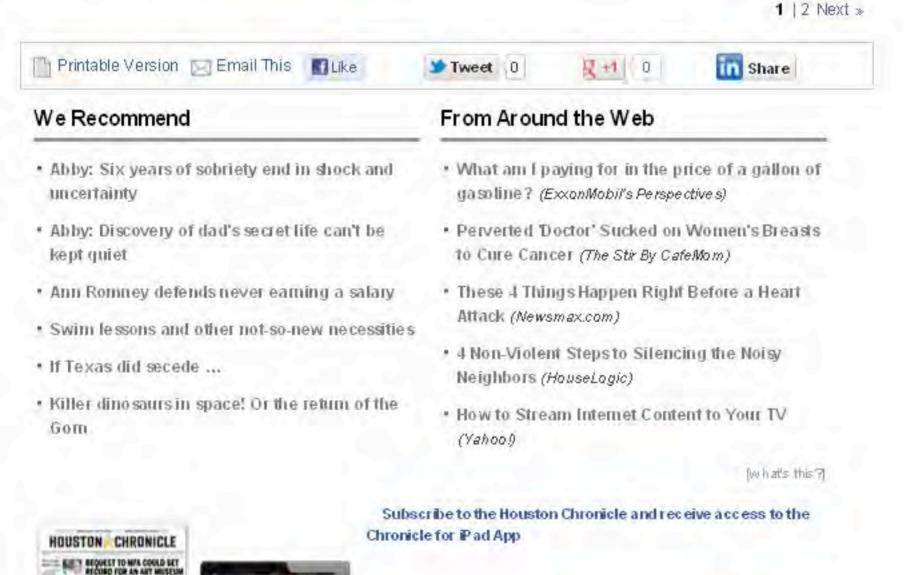
Sometimes it's nostalgic, as in Weng Peijun's deeply colored picture of a young girl in Western school uniform who sits on an old wall in a verdant spot and gazes over a crammed parking lot toward an equally crammed skyline of modern skyscrapers.

And sometimes, it's pointed social critique, as in Solution Scheme. In this series of performance stills, artists Xu Yon and Yu Na show a nude young, Westernized woman posing in stark settings where fully suited executives variously ignore or pursue her.

Through Aug. 31. Deborah Colton Gallery, 2500 Summer; 713-864-2364.

### McClain Gallery

China Under Construction is one of numerous exhibitions of Asian art in the city's galleries that supplement or complement the massive Red Hot: Asian Art Today From the Chaney Family Collection show at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.



Fast-healing Michael enjoys A&amp:M's rapid-fire offense



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Taylor Switt Wins AGM entenaner on the Year

### Entertainment



With a soft voice but animated hand gestures, Yang Jin Long speaks through an interpreter at <u>Deborah Colton</u> <u>Gallery</u>, surrounded by the paintings of his first solo exhibit in this country.

Executed in a brilliant palette, the complex compositions by this Chinese artist blend the delicacy of traditional Asian scrolls and calligraphy with brash Pop Art directness.

*Crossroads*, created after his first visit to the United States in 2001, reflects his approach and seems to

foreshadow his future here. In November, the artist was granted a visa as an "alien of extraordinary ability," which allowed him, wife <u>Jianping Jing</u> and 17-year old daughter <u>Cheng-Cheng Yang</u> permanent residency in this country.

*Crossroads*' imagery includes an American flag in the upper-right corner that hides a portion of a green street sign for Houston's Woodway Drive on the opposite corner. A clown's head lies with its left cheek down near the lower-right corner. The carnivalesque composition is pinned in the center by an ovoid gray object that resembles a grenade.

"No," Yang says, "not a grenade. It's a fish caught in a net. I don't like weapons."

And yet *The Holy Mountain*, a 2003 painting about Tibet, has among its components a cylindrical object that looks like the nose of a missile; also, a figure wearing goggles and dressed in ashy reds and black, looks very much like a walking burn victim. Tibet has long been fighting Chinese occupation and domination.

Yang denies his work is political.

"Politics is too much to get involved with," he says, "so I stay away from it in my life." His wife smiles. "We have a lot of family in China," she says softly.

But his work - and occasional phrases - contradict him.

Born in 1960, he grew up during the convulsions of the Cultural Revolution, when intellectuals and artists were "re-educated" to serve as laborers in the fields and factories. What effect did it have on him, on his parents?

Yang shakes his head with discomfort. "I don't want to talk about it." Pressed, he says his father worked at a chemical plant. Reluctantly he adds, "I don't know much. I was too young. My mother didn't tell me anything until I was much older, like 17."

Yang's future as an artist was evident from the time he was in second grade in his native city of Zhenjiang. His mother, who taught Mandarin, encouraged him. His teachers called on him to create class projects and lead his schoolmates in art activities.

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"In school, when I was hungry and had no food, I'd just draw and look at art," he says. "I love to go to museums. I love to look at art."

But when you leave middle school in China, Yang explains, "you have two choices — the fields or the army. I joined the army. I sat in an office and drew, for myself and for others who asked. Part of my job was to arrange entertainment. So I watched a lot of movies, too, all kinds of movies, Chinese and foreign movies, many times."

He studied traditional Chinese painting in Zhenjiang in the early 1970s and was still in the military when he began to study Western painting. After completing his service in 1988, he returned to Zhenjiang. Seven years later he became dean of <u>Zhenjiang College</u>'s art department.

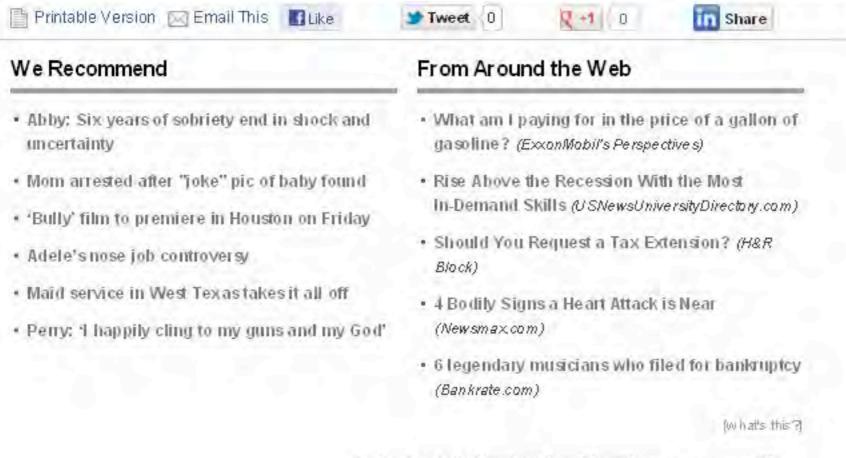
"I've seen a lot, done a lot, "Yang says. "I like to draw from the imagination. My paintings are from my experience in all those areas — school, soldier, factory worker, teacher. It takes a lot of life experience to successfully produce something.

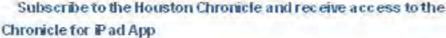
"Being an artist is difficult. You feel sorrow, pity, you paint from your heart. It takes time to make something that others have seen and that they can relate to."

Yang had his first solo show in 1996 in Nanjing; a second solo exhibit three years later at Bangkok, Thailand's <u>Silpakorn University</u> introduced him to gallery owner Deborah Colton.

"I couldn't believe how good he was. He was the first to address the situation in China." she said. "I became his patron."

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