



ART REVIEW: Dynamic Contrasts Fuel “28 Chinese” at Rubell Family Collection

March 11, 2014

by Elisa Turner

Dynamic contrasts fuel the visual power and presence of “28 Chinese” at Rubell Family Collection in Miami. In many of the 85 works by 28 artists, from painting to video to photography to sculpture, there’s a visceral sense of voices alternatively speaking out and staying silent—or at least hewing absurdly close to the status quo. Surely this implicit tension is appropriate for a detailed look at contemporary art in China, a country known as much for its rapidly exploding economy as it is for its repressive government.

Walking through this exhibition requires patience and curiosity, especially for experiencing the numerous video works. There’s much to see and contemplate, particularly since many of the artists have not had wide exposure in the United States.

Most of the ground floor is thoughtfully paced so that artworks exert a maximum impact on viewers. Upstairs, interconnecting galleries may seem almost labyrinthine, given the size of this 45,000-square-foot museum. The curated presentation in galleries on both floors is generally focused and appears carefully edited, so the overall show does not seem crowded and jammed. Nevertheless, it’s somewhat easy to get lost in the variety and abundance of art, so a quick visit is not recommended.

Comprehensive Research

“28 Chinese” evolved after six prodigious research trips the Rubells made to China between 2001 and 2012. It includes, as one would expect, work by art star Ai Weiwei, internationally celebrated not only for his art but also for his utterly fearless challenges to the Chinese government.

His *Ton of Tea* (2005), a minimalist cube of compressed Chinese tea leaves, resembles an unyielding block of metal but is actually much more delicate. It offers a pointed critique regarding what is valued in Western 20th century art by coyly meshing Chinese materials with Western traditions.



“Ton of Tea” by Ai Weiwei, 2005. Pu’er tea leaves from Yunnan Province with wooden base, 39 3/8 x 39 3/8 x 39 3/8 inches. Rubell Family Collection, Miami.

Many of the artists in the exhibition have had far less exposure in the West. To complete their research, the Rubells made 100 studio visits in various cities.

Regarding these studio visits, as Mera Rubell explains in an interview in the catalog, “every artist knew we were coming to meet them; it was an interaction. *Hopefully*, in every interaction we had, it was not just about us evaluating them. It was a real conversation about them and us ... It was a real conversation about art; it was a conversation about China.”

We hear “constantly about its global economic ambitions and its pivotal role in the 21st Century,” Jason Rubell says of China in the same interview, “so it’s fascinating to delve into a young art scene and see how that art reflects a country’s ambitions, issues and desires. It’s also intriguing to see how Chinese art relates to Western contemporary art.”

Strategies for Artistic Expression

Their close research into the country’s young art scene reveals strategies for artistic expression within a society in which freedom of speech is typically nothing more than a distant fantasy. Irony is often paramount.

Consider, for example, the performances of Hu Xiangqian, whose antic body language suggests a stand-up comic in New York performing on the street or in a park. Meanwhile, what he says, translated in English subtitles in his three-channel video *Xiangqian Art Museum I,II,III* (2010), recounts horrific encounters with military power. The work’s title, a fictitious art museum named for the artist himself, brings another level of caustic irony to the conversation this work is clearly meant to provoke.

Another vivid theme plays out in the imagery driving numerous artworks: scenes of human bodies, often naked, in odd, risky situations. Imagery highlighting the body’s fleshy vulnerability, as well as its sensuality, often implies dangerous or deadly consequences within the show’s subtle and not-so-subtle references to brute force. Some artists create disturbing animal imagery as apparent metaphors for human rights abuses.

Tackling Repression

A harrowing example of such art is the archival inkjet print *Unnamed Room No. 2* (2006) by Chen Wei. It shows a man slumped on a small desk, a bottle of ink overturned and spilled on his face, arm, and down his leg. The dark ink bears a suspicious resemblance to blood. The man appears to be bloodied, bruised and dying if not actually dead. The staged photograph could be a meticulously documented crime scene, also acknowledging Western practice of staged photographs by contemporary artists, such as Cindy Sherman and Gregory Crewdson.



“Unnamed Room No. 2” by Chen Wei, 2006. Archival inkjet

print, Ed. 3/8, 59 x 43 1/4 inches. Rubell Family Collection, Miami.

Still, the lethal intensity of this work and its response to life under totalitarianism cannot be denied. Clearly, the man's attempts to express his thoughts by writing them down have been halted in a brutal way. Chen Wei's *Sand and Nobody No. 1* (2007), an archival inkjet print, again shows a man whose facial features are hidden in another mysterious, dehumanizing position in a claustrophobic room crammed with books and magazines. Both works evoke narratives of forced silence, of words obscured.

The disconcerting presence of He Xiangyu's *The Death of Marat* (2011) spurs another eerie allusion to Western art traditions. Reminiscent of hyperrealistic sculpture by Duane Hanson and John De Andrea, *The Death of Marat* also alludes to the iconic 1783 painting *The Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David, which depicts the murder of an outspoken opponent of French aristocracy.

He Xiangyu depicts a deathly rigid Ai Weiwei lying on his stomach on the floor, his distinctive face only partly visible. While it might seem unreasonable to draw parallels between today's China and the Reign of Terror in late 18th Century France, one can only hope that this sculpture does not become horribly prescient.



"The Death of Marat" by He Xiangyu, 2011. Fiberglass, silicone, fabric, human hair and leather, Ed. 1/3, 13 x 80 1/2 x 33 1/2 inches. Rubell Family Collection, Miami.

Lushly colored yet unnerving and chilling, the nearly 15-minute video *Blithe Tragedy* (2011) by Huang Ran shows a captor leading his captive by a rope through a picturesque forest until darkness engulfs them both. With a Pinocchio-like nose, the captor, whose face is smeared with white paint, looks grim and ghoulish in black robes and marches stolidly while carrying a black flag. A gold and leather muzzle covers the mouth of the captive; he also wears scanty, bizarre garb suggesting S&M gear.

In the video are scenes of bodies shoveled into a closet, presumably after being tortured and executed. This video seems emblematic of a dysfunctional, moribund society partially cloaked in the rarefied, deceptive gloss of a Western fairy tale.



“Blithe Tragedy” by Huang Ran, 2011. Single-channel video (color, sound), Ed. 1/5, duration: 14 min. 56 sec., Rubell Family Collection, Miami.

Geometric Abstraction

Artworks by Shang Yixin, Wang Guangle, Zhu Jinshi and others employ geometric abstraction to reflect, in more coded ways, conditions of making art in cosmopolitan China, where digital advances are ubiquitous. Xie Molin created a triaxial device to carve out drawings, previously programmed on a computer, on painted canvas. Perfectly etched patterns of white, tiny, waving lines in *Gradation No. 3* (2012) are disorienting to examine for more than a few seconds.



“Gradation No. 3” by Xie Molin, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 68 7/8 x 171 5/8 inches. Rubell Family Collection, Miami.

Vibrant abstract paintings by Liu Wei evoke both a crowded skyline and computer circuit boards, with dense overlays of precisely constructed grids of loud, saturated color. His paintings, such as *Liberation No. 1* (2013), lead the eye among pulsating, pixilated shapes and shadows, places of ongoing change.

Barbara Pollack profiled Liu Wei in her February 2014 ARTnews article, [China's Trickster Mixer-Upper](#). According to her piece, political critique doesn't appear to be a primary focus. “Liu Wei and his friends,” she writes, “appreciated the irony that, as a generation trained on realist painting, they were now making works that questioned what is real and what is not, reflecting the rapidly changing conditions in China as it evolved into a capitalist market economy.”

In the catalog for “28 Chinese,” Lui Wei writes, “In painting, sculpture, and installation, I give shape to the world around us, offering an acute visual commentary on underlying ideologies. My works have no specific meaning—this is left for the audience to decide.”



“Liberation No.1” by Liu Wei, 2013. Oil on canvas, 118 x 212 1/2 inches. Rubell Family Collection, Miami.

“28 Chinese” offers a bold foray into the brave new world of Chinese contemporary art, providing viewers a considered look at the range of work now being produced in China. The ambitious scope

of this exhibit is indeed admirable. Surely a visit to this show is yet another way to gain insight into the vast and various all-too-often opaque nation whose economic presence on the international stage continues to expand.

BASIC FACTS: “28 Chinese” is exhibited through August 1, 2014, at Rubell Family Collection, 95 NW 29th Street, Miami FL 33127. For details, visit www.rfc.museum

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