Beyond Contemporary “Chinese” Art:
Interpreting Post-'80 Art and Artists from Sichuan, China

Hongbei Li, Class of 2014

When the 2008 Olympics puts China under the spotlight, the fever for contemporary Chinese art also reaches its all time high. With works by Chinese contemporary artists selling for millions of dollars at auction houses worldwide and the number of Asian collectors growing exponentially, the scholarship on the topic has also been steadily accumulating. Although the history of contemporary Chinese art is short—a scant three and a half decades—the iconic works of artists who were born in 1950s and 1960s have often been read through a politicized lens within a nationalistic framework due to the politically charged experiences of that generation. For many exhibits over the past ten years devoted to contemporary Chinese art, this interpretation has dominated the scholarship, shows, and writings alongside these exhibitions.

Although situating contemporary Chinese art in its unique historical context is certainly informative, it nevertheless produces limitations, and especially as new generations of Chinese artists have surfaced. While it is true that some of the most iconic images in contemporary Chinese art respond to the significant episodes in modern Chinese history, this kind of sociological framework might no longer be adequate enough for fully understanding works being made in China nowadays. Considering the global environment, the critical assessments of art produced in China should be characterized by plurality and openness. Through three case studies that I have gathered from my own field research, I propose a new way of engaging the works of young Chinese artists that has a different socio-political relationship with the society the artists live in.

My research benefitted significantly from the Peter J. Grua and Mary G. O’Connell grant because the research grant enabled me to travel to Sichuan, China—my primary research site—to do as many studio visits as I can in order to select three case studies that can represent a relatively wide range of artistic practices that suits the purpose of the project. The grant also supplied me with materials and publications such as exhibition catalogues that are not yet in stock in the library due to the contemporary quality of the research.

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