GUAN WEI

A CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ARTIST
Although there is some parity between the surface area of China and that of our own continent, the billion plus population spread across China leaves an impression of vastness; vastness in human terms. Very little of that gargantuan country is not utilised, is not tended for the purposes of sustaining the population. That degree of caring often produces vistas of great elegance: a landscape designed and shaped by functional concerns and worked and re-worked down the millennia, a handmade landscape.

In 1988 (my last visit), Beijing, stripped of its historic city wall, was in the midst of a high-rise building boom. An old city trudging into modernity with sewerage schemes, the motor car contesting the streets with a few million push-bikes, urban resettlement and rising levels of pollution. The Avenue of Heavenly Peace, a great, broad concourse, had the makings of a man versus machine battlefield, even before the tanks of June 1989.

INTRODUCTION
BY GEOFF PARK
With American Express sponsoring the bilingual signage in the Forbidden City, with Coca-Cola across-the-counter and Polaroid instant-photo stalls, the devils from the depths of the sea were already well established, and windows showing glimpses of the West were open each day via millions of television sets. Tradition was losing the contest. The wooden water pail had been replaced by the brightly coloured, plastic bucket.

In visual art, practice beneath the shadow of so great an art heritage-post-prescriptions delivering up the forms of the present-had become an anachronism, especially so for artists who, out of the corners of their eyes, could see a looming modernity. Television sets, washing machines and refrigerators (our generic term for them is 'white goods') were replacing the shaped and manicured tree, the volcanic monolith, goldfish and the bamboo sprig as objects of contemplation and even possession. Painting had shifted from an exposé of nature's truths to an illustration of style and tradition.

Enter the individual, the one amongst millions. This heroic concept of a unique vision, of a stand-alone artist-creator, a figure deified during the modern age and partially discredited in the post modern...
And yet in the West, individuality remains a strong perception of self and carries with it a burden of responsibility. There are instances of visitors to China becoming enamoured with the notion of communalism and the prospect of shedding that burden of individual responsibility and losing some of the freedom for independent action. But I don't know what the Chinese themselves think. Is there a reverse side? Was it the spectre of freedom for independent action which danced so beguilingly at Tiananmen Square two years ago? Is it perhaps that Western ideology sneaks in through Chinese television sets in the form of second-hand, Chinese dubbed, 1950's American soaps? Is materialism, as it is known in advanced industrialized countries, a reasonable and sustainable expectation in China, or for that matter, in a world becoming more heavily populated each minute of each day?

These are questions posed by a long nose, someone perceiving the world from the viewpoint of Western norms and here is the difficulty - will someone of that ilk recognise a Chinese avant-garde art if he stumbles upon it?

Deep within those dense regions, be it in Shanghai, Hangzhou or Beijing, what are the chances for the conception of an
avant-garde? How would such a vision be fostered? How would the drive and optimism be maintained and how will the artist reach out from a suburban address in Beijing and locate his or her work in the flow of twentieth-century modern art? Capitalising!

This exhibition presents to you Guan Wei, Beijing-based, contemporary artist. The reality of that announcement is, in itself, just so amazing:

A man in a billion.

Right up to his fourth glass of claret, Guan Wei is a quiet and gentle person who would rather smile than frown and who laughs inside and through his paintings. To the viewer, these paintings provoke the laughter which culminates in a "Yes"; the acknowledgement of a deeper insight.

His paintings are not quite like anything we have seen before. East or West. They come from a predominantly monochrome world and point to little items in the human condition, but, just as little things can be the harbinger of momentous matters, so the "ping" produced by the mischievous pointing forefinger of Guan Wei, may be announcing the coming of a resounding "pung", with reverberations that shake convention in true avant-garde fashion.
HUNG BAIL

Acrylic on canvas 1990
10 x 34 inches
around with "concepts." All is suffering; all is empty. In a way this is not that different from the monks of yore, though you don't see anyone today coming up with pastoral poems or landscape paintings as in the past.

Idleness, "nesting," is a kind of attitude, a lifestyle. When you get tired of it then you just have to try even harder to hang out. When you look up it's easy to get a stiff neck, when you stare straight ahead it's easy to flake out, and when you look down it's easy to get dizzy. Aches, flakes, and faints plus Jerry built "new concepts" are what contemporary Chinese art contributes to the world. The proof is in my poetry:

Aches -- enervation to the nth

The desire to ascend. The desire to descend,
The desire to exit, and the desire to enter
Thinking ahead, looking back,
checking things out left and right,
looking up at the sky,
looking down at the ground;
gazing outwards, exploring inwards
Can the bones and tendons really take it--
who cares?

Flakes -- thick as a brick

Look, store, but still things aren't clear
Play. Playing without getting here or there
Taste. Tasting but you don't know what it is
Just pick your nose, all is the void.

Faints -- dull as they come

No idea that birds fly in the sky
Not a clue that men run crazily
over the earth
Why does the sun rise in the East?
Why does anyone need to attain Tao?

New concepts...

Tradition plus a little physics
The Buddha is just a universal machine
Men is no more than DNA
Transversing the world in his dreams.

It is not easy to come to grips with these
four basic elements, and there are new
things being added all the time. I can even
feel one coming over me at this instant:
boredom.

But in the end it all comes back to the ways
of wu. That's what turtles do, just pull in
their heads and waddle. Slow, plodding and
oh-so-patient. Hard on the outside, but soft
as all get-out deep down. They can't protect
themselves but they can still handle
everything. They can even take on a hare in
a race when the time comes. They're cool,
take it all in their stride, and they live ▼
around with "concepts". All is suffering; all is empty. In a way this is not that different from the monks of yore, though you don't see anyone today coming up with pastoral poems or landscape paintings as in the past.

Idleness, "nesting", is a kind of attitude, a lifestyle. When you get tired of it then you just have to try even harder to hang out. When you look up it's easy to get a stiff neck; when you store straight ahead it's easy to flake out, and when you look down it's easy to get dizzy. Aches, flakes, and joints plus jerky built "new concepts" are what contemporary Chinese art contributes to the world. The proof is in my poetry:

**Aches** - enervation to the nth

The desire to ascend, the desire to descend,
The desire to exit, and the desire to enter
Thinking ahead, looking back
checking things out left and right;
looking up at the sky.
looking down at the ground;
go ing outwards, exploring inwards
Can the bones and tendons really take it—
who cares?

**Flakes** - thick as a brick

Look, store, but still things aren't clear
Play. Playing without getting here or there :>
Taste. Tasting but you don’t know what it is.
Just pick your nose. All is the void.

Faints -- dull as they come.

No idea that birds fly in the sky.
Not a clue that men run crazily
over the earth.
Why does the sun rise in the East?
Why does anyone need to attain Tao?

New concepts...

Tradition plus a little physics.
The Buddha is just a universal machine.
Man is no more than DNA.
Transversing the world in his dreams.

It is not easy to come to grips with these
four basic elements, and there are new
things being added all the time. I can even
feel one coming over me at this instant
boredom.

But in the end it all comes back to the ways
of us. That’s what turtles do: just pull in
their heads and walk out. Slow, plodding and
oh-so-patient. Hard on the outside, but soft
as all get-out deep down. They can’t protect
themselves but they can still handle
everything. They can even take on a hare in
a race when the time comes. They’re cool,
take it all in their stride, and they live...
oh-so-long. No wonder the ancients called
them "dragons with humps". Let me say it
in verse:

The Big Way. The Little Way.
The Usual Way.
A thousand attitudes, a hundred poses,
the mainstream style.

Change as you will, you still can't suss it.
Only the tortoise can wo its way through.

This is the spirit, the philosophy, the
phenomenon, the ism, "the be-all and end-
all of "nesting".

Just think of turtles and happy "nesting".

Guan Wei, 24 February, 1991

(wo-fully translated
by Linda Jinwen and Garemie Borme)
The Chinese title of this essay is "Wo" de
yishu literally "the art of wo". Wo has a
range of meanings from nest, as in bird's
nest, to idleness and incompetence.

Please allow me to express my appreciation
to Professor Geoff Parr of the University of
Tasmania and to the Visual Arts and Crafts
Board of the Australia Council; this exhibition
has only been possible through their support.
Guan Wei was born in Beijing in 1957. He graduated from the Department of Fine Arts of Beijing Teachers College and is now an art teacher in a middle school.

He began his art career in 1978 and since then has painted several series of works including Small Yards, Self-portraits, Figures with Acupoints, Bean-like Eyes and Red Soles, Dybama of Two Fingers, Diary, Paper, and representative works: Zhi Hu Zhe Yue, Pay Attention to Hygiene, Stamp A Circle and Play Rope.

Since 1989 Guan Wei has been at the University of Tasmania as a visiting artist.

BIOGRAPHY
1986 Four Artists Art Works, Peking University
1986 Autumn Salon Exhibition, Paris
1987 Guan Wei and Ah Xian Paintings, Peking University
1988 Alumnus Paintings, Beijing Teachers College, Beijing
1989 Individual Paintings, French Embassy, Beijing
1990 Contemporary Chinese Young Artists’ Works, Twin Cranes Gallery, Seattle, USA
1990 International Youth Art Show, Paris
1990 Lun Exhibition, 6 artists, Beijing
1991 Guan Wei, Artist from the Republic of China, Photospace Gallery, School of Art Canberra

Guan Wei’s works are published in magazines and are represented in numerous private collections internationally.
1. Play Card 18 x 34
2. Sing 24 x 50
3. Hat 18 x 34
4. Radish 18 x 34
5. Facial Makeup 18 x 34
6. Beef soup 18 x 34
7. Sliding ball 18 x 34
8. Dominoes 18 x 34
9. Hide-and-seek 24 x 50
10. Self-portrait 18 x 34
11. Spray 18 x 34
12. Straw 18 x 34
13. The five element chart 24 x 50
14. Go back 24 x 50
15. Footprints 24 x 50
16. Sun-Moon-Star 24 x 50
17. Gum 18 x 34
18. Four seasons 24 x 34
19. Practise Taoism 24 x 50
20. Xuan Bird 24 x 50
21. Past-Present-Future 24 x 50
22. Running wind 24 x 50
23. Handstand 24 x 50

LIST OF WORKS
(All acrylic, measurements in inches)
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Clasp and pillar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>The beginning of autumn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Run mediv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Day and night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Tone and space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Get out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>What is this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Freedom in oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Yes or no, False or true, Ying or Yang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Zhao, Tian, Zhang, Li and Wang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Ring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Nipple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Two yellow balls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Red fingerprints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Hung ball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Dancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Call</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Play Chess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Drop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Yellow disk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Round fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>A reel of thread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Held bôb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>The</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>For</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Oh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Gosh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Aho-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Guan Wei's artist-in-residency at the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania, was made possible through generous assistance from the Australia Council, the Federal Government's Arts funding body.

The residency was arranged through Dr Nicholas Jose, who was at the time Cultural Counsellor at the Australian Embassy, Beijing.

The Art Exhibitions Committee, University for Tasmania acknowledges the generous assistance of the Ministry of Education and the Arts through the Tasmanian Arts Advisory Board.

Exhibition catalogue published by the University of Tasmania, July 1991 to accompany the exhibition Guan Wei: A Contemporary Chinese Artist, Plimsoll Gallery, Centre for the Arts, Hunter Street, Hobart, 12 July - 2 August, 1991.

Statement by the artist (assistance with translation, Linda Jaivin and Geremie Borme).

Introduction: Professor Geoff Parr

Publication design and artwork: Susan Andrews / D'Art Room

Printing: Monotone

Typesetting: Susan Andrews

Photography: John Farrow

Copyright, 1991
The Artist, the Writers and the University of Tasmania

ISBN: 0 85901 481 9

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS