

High Art, Luo Art

When first confronted with one of the Luo Brothers' trademark compositions—apple-cheeked toddlers floating above a field of saturated red, yellow, and pink rays emanating from the Gate of Heavenly Peace—Union College students with no special knowledge of the artists unerringly homed in on the recognizably American consumer goods cradled in the arms of babes. The familiar icons of the hamburger and Coca-Cola shaped their interpretation of the work as commentary on China's reaction to the West, as “the imposition of capitalist consumerism on Asians,” as “a critique on Western consumption,” with the Chinese “unknowing babies. . . preyed on by money-hungry American corporations.”¹ Perhaps in the wake of September 11th Americans have become far more sensitized to perceptions of the United States abroad, and so the students here have construed these as emblems of global hegemony. But these emblems constitute only one element of the Luo Brothers' carnivalesque fantasies, where distortions of scale, extravagant color, and absurd juxtapositions of iconography clash in both celebration and mourning of an anarchic utopia. Their paintings could not convey more vividly the dizzying dislocation and anomie afflicting Chinese society today.

In the context of the Luo Brothers' first United States solo exhibition, American audiences will be tempted to project a vision of a Sino-American relationship or, at the very least, to expect that contemporary Chinese art should contain political commentary. These expectations arose soon after the Great Leader Mao Zedong's death in 1976, when Premier Deng Xiaoping assessed Mao's judgment as having been seventy percent right but thirty percent wrong. Thus he launched the dismantling of the commune system and the emancipation of Mao's image—and art—from state control. Chinese artists such as Wang Guangyi,² Zhang Hongtu,³ and Li Shan⁴ responded by producing irreverent depictions of Mao, already laid bare as a Pop Art icon by Andy Warhol in his 1972-74 *Mao Tse-Tung* series. These post-Mao *Maos* sold like hotcakes in Hong Kong and abroad. The more successful works in this genre projected onto Mao's visage two or more types of iconicities: Mao as revolutionary hero, as bygone emperor, as Buddhist deity, and (in homage to Warhol) as interlocutor for and representative of all things Chinese to the outside world. The employment of the Pop style expressed a critique of mass production and reproducibility, underscoring the ultimate hollowness of the Mao image. Such satirical and self-conscious confusion of iconoclasm and iconolatry in early Chinese “Political Pop” remains a pervasive theme in the Luo Brothers' oeuvre.

The unexpectedly brutal June 4, 1989 suppression of democracy activists at Tiananmen Square drove many artists to exile abroad. As the memory of June Fourth faded, and international diplomatic and trade relations with China resumed apace, many of these artists returned to China to find that avant-garde and “dissident” art did not appeal to domestic audiences. However, art with overt political content continued to hold considerable cachet outside China, resulting in an onslaught of “imagery of the army or the police, portraits of national leaders, the national flag and other symbolic markers like the Great Wall or the Forbidden City. . . on canvases everywhere.”⁵ Local audiences remained pretty small, composed of regulars from the art academies and the diplomatic compounds. Sometimes the Public Security Bureau would conduct crackdowns on non-government-sanctioned exhibits, especially around symbolic anniversaries

(June 4th or the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1st). These suppressions of artistic freedom had the salutary effect of enhancing the marketability of dissidence, only raising the international profile of any artist lucky enough to have a show closed down. The Luo Brothers themselves have benefited from this corollary effect, their exhibition *Damage from the Flooding/Enriching of China* having been prematurely terminated on May 18, 1996.⁶

Like American Pop Art, Political Pop in China promised instant accessibility and sensory gratification in the manner of commercial art, marked by bold outlines, collage effects, bright colors, and pithy slogans. The inclusion of recognizably Chinese iconography drawn from revolutionary propaganda and other forms of Communist visual culture lent a sharp ironic twist to an increasingly vague political commentary. However, in terms of artistic practice, it offered little intellectual or technical challenge to either the maker or the viewer. In a relatively short span of time, Political Pop came to be seen as repetitive, cannibalizing, and, in the end, self-serving, especially given its success overseas.

Purveyors of this Chinese export product could not jeopardize their increasingly bourgeois lifestyles by evincing concrete dissent. At the same time, sincere dissidents found the Communist Party's nationalist agenda bolstered every time a Chinese artist was chosen to participate in prestigious international exhibitions. In this "velvet prison,"⁷ collaboration with the authorities was inevitable, and exile seemed a ludicrous form of self-abnegation, given the relative openness of Chinese society. Some artists rejected the vacuous wit of Political Pop to retreat into Cynical Realism, paintings of human figures, often self-portraits, frozen in enigmatic poses of pain, horror, or just plain ennui.⁸ Others, the Luo Brothers among them, opted to propel Political Pop beyond subtle irony to blatant vulgarity, where a cacophony of signs rendered all signs laughable.

This alternate trajectory was dubbed "Gaudy Art," translated from the Chinese phrase *yansu* — *yan* meaning "garish or brightly colored" and *su* meaning "common, base, or vulgar."⁹ Whereas its Pop Art antecedents played with combinations of high art and low, i.e., popular media, Gaudy Art altogether dispensed with high art and its pretensions of tradition, connoisseurship, and taste. Critic Liao Wen has called Gaudy Art the "Romance of the New" and the "New Ugliness":

There are two reasons why the Ugliness of kitsch can be termed an esthetic interest. First, the interest is a result of the pursuit of the New. . . . It is very cliched and appeals to the masses. To a large extent, it stirs up dreams of a "good"; kitsch is ugly, but merry. Secondly, I am not sure how many people can still detect the ugliness. . . . People have forgotten the desire to admire beauty and lost the ability to enjoy it. . . . The ugliness is irresistible, it describes an unavoidable reality. It is all powerful.¹⁰

Magnificent kitsch appears everywhere in contemporary China: multi-storied concrete "mansions" built over the rubble of seventeenth-century dwellings; flanking every doorway, stone lions and gilt dragons, the bigger the better; and yards of Christmas lights strung in front of businesses all year round. The architects of China's phenomenal drive towards economic modernization somehow left out a coherent "modern" Chinese art in the planning process.

In fact, the party line regarding the arts has changed little since Mao's 1942 Yan'an Forum Talks on Art and Literature. Art had to mobilize the masses, to reflect the struggle of the masses, and to adopt techniques and styles familiar to the masses. Poetry, calligraphy, and painting, the triumvirate of traditional elite arts, were either repudiated or transmuted into a vernacular for the masses. In other words, low art—Soviet-style socialist realism, primitivist peasant paintings, and colorful woodblock-printed calendars—became official art. In their *Welcome the World Famous Brand* series, the Luo Brothers have gleefully fetishized all these forms of the low, throwing in for good measure the logos of global corporate culture as the official art of a rapidly modernizing China.

The Luo Brothers have also chosen a medium, lacquer, associated with the applied and decorative arts (as opposed to painting, sculpture, or printmaking grouped under "fine arts"). The impenetrable gloss of lacquer perfects the relentlessly cheerful and euphorically consumerist subject matter. In addition, the prevailing "red, shiny, and bright" palette, once a national style designed to energize the masses, becomes the fitting focal point for China's new "get-rich-quick" values.¹¹ Like other Gaudy Art practitioners, the Luo Brothers wield technical mastery over a material that accords with the fundamentally cheap, tacky, machine-made quality required of kitsch.¹² It is this very obsessive attention to detail and craftsmanship, at odds with the banality of the objects depicted, that distance Gaudy Art from the snap wit of early Political Pop.

By transporting their repertoire to paper, the Luo Brothers might be construed as having abandoned the hard-edged precision and escalation of irony provided by lacquer. Although the motifs are familiar—Cultural Revolution propaganda, Coca-Cola cans, and pigs and babies signifying wealth and prosperity—the overall effect diverges sharply from the lacquer-coated collages. These compositions of aqueous paint on paper resemble, and thus parody, the hanging scroll format associated with elite art production. Red-inked seal impressions, a convention of this Chinese literati painting, are sprinkled throughout, often placed unconventionally in the center of the picture plane. Icons have been magnified exponentially and arrayed more prominently and symmetrically on the longer central vertical axis.

The more absorbent paper demands a controlled application of ink, in much the same way an experienced brush-and-ink painter would judiciously stroke the surface to form a bamboo leaf or a flower petal in the "boneless" style. Here, however, this delicate technique, applied repetitively, bludgeons the viewer with overtones of distortion and decay. The softer, more impressionistic treatment imparts a romantic gauziness to the icons, while deliberate splotching and evenly wavering outlines project a languid energy. Coupled with the persistently intense coloration, this new presentation conjures up a disorienting but still achingly gorgeous acid trip, or, alternately, the ironic premeditated repackaging of psychedelia in the promotion of consumer products.

As for those searching earnestly for commentary on contemporary Chinese culture in these works, it would be as easy as hunting for the soul of America in a velvet Elvis painting. With these new pieces, the Luo Brothers continue to turn the concept of "fine art" on its head. Although mounted elegantly in silk brocade and protected by Plexiglas in an art gallery, each rough-edged and sometimes ripped sheet of paper resembles nothing so much as an old poster left tacked to a wall, mottled and stained. This is not a precious handscroll to be rolled up and

treasured. On the contrary, the principles of kitsch demand its constant display, if only to mock our own tastelessness.

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¹ A selection of comments by Union College students enrolled in AAH 12 (Introduction to Art History, Part II) can be viewed at "Serious Pop: Social Commentary in Asian Popular Culture" <<http://www.union.edu/PUBLIC/EAS/CKJ/seriouspop.html>>.

² *Mao Zedong No. 1* (1998). Asia Society, "Inside Out: New Chinese Art" <http://www.asiasociety.org/arts/insideout/work_3_maos.html> (19 March 2003) and Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

³ Zhang Hongtu provides a pictorial survey of his Mao works in "Museum of My Art Only," 2001 <<http://www.momao.com>> (19 March 2003).

⁴ See *Rouge No. 57: Young Mao* (1994) and *Mao and the Artist No. 2* (1994) in Leng Lin, "Nine Chinese Artists," *Chinese Type Contemporary Art* 1:5, September 1998 <<http://www.chinese-art.com/volume1issue5/feature.htm>> (19 March 2003).

⁵ Yi Ying, "Chinese Experimental Painting in the 1990s," Karen Smith, trans., in Wu Hung, ed., *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-2000)* (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 30.

⁶ Also translated as *Damage of Ostentation. Luo Brothers* (Vancouver: Annie Wong Foundation, 2002), 87.

⁷ Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 1-19.

⁸ Cynical Realists Fang Lijun, Yang Shaobin, and Yue Minjun all exhibited at the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999. See Monica Dematté, "Chinese art...It's dAPERTutto!" *Chinese-art.com Contemporary* 2:4, 1999 <<http://www.chinese-art.com/Contemporary/volume2issue4/Post89/post89.htm>> (22 March 2003).

⁹ Li Xianting, "Some More Thoughts on the Raison d'Être of Gaudy Art," in Liao Wen and Li Xianting, eds., *Kua shiji caihong—yansu yishu (Ouh La La Kitsch!)* (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 1999), 19.

¹⁰ Liao Wen, "Living in Kitsch—The Critical Sarcasm of Gaudy Art," in Liao and Li, 8-9.

¹¹ Li Xianting, "Parodying 'Peasant-Style Get-Rich-Quick Taste—A Second Commentary on Gaudy Art Discourse,'" in Liao and Li, 89.

¹² Cf. Xu Yihui and porcelain, Liu Zheng and textiles, Lu Hao and Plexiglas. Liao and Li, 20-22, 38-41, 42-45.