

Art & Identity

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Eastern artists have traditionally concentrated on painting and calligraphy, using brush pens and black inks on rice paper and silk, to draw lines that not only formed precise contours, but permitted the artist to express his or her own concepts and feelings. Similarly, pottery has been produced over centuries with the finest lines. However, since the mid-eighties, the people of China have realised new freedoms that have unlocked new international awareness. Global and social changes towards a more consumerist society have resulted in new forms of expression among emerging Chinese artists, reflecting strong links to their cultural identity through symbolic representation. It is this creative process that effectively connects the artist's personal experiences with the cultural context of China's changing national identity. A country of strong traditions and long term isolation, it is now moving towards a new global outlook, increasing international relations and promoting capitalist ideals.

Three Chinese artists who identify as bridging cultural tradition through personal experiences are Ai Weiwei, Cai Guo-Qiang and Ah Xian. I will look at the cultural mark each one makes, in the light of the concepts, techniques and materials they employ to inform the viewer of their cultural identity and the merging of traditional ideals with new freedoms. Seen as part of the 5th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT5), which was displayed in conjunction with the Queensland Art Gallery Collection, the works of these three artists illustrate the effects of Chinese political policy in which 'modernised industry, agriculture, defence and technology encouraged the influence of market forces ... private trading was allowed and profit motive was acknowledged' (Cowie, 1993, p.319). These artists have been able to 'combine new modes of expression with traditional Chinese painting techniques ... opening a vast new world of artistic expression' (Chinavoc, 2002).

In Ai Weiwei's artwork entitled *Boomerang* (2006), a site-specific installation composed of glass lustres, plated steel, electrical cables and incandescent lamps, the artist uses the idea of an extravagant, traditionally crafted chandelier as a desirable acquisition for the households of China's new middle class. Ai Weiwei uses the traditional techniques that have produced the finest ornaments, such as those from the Ming and Qing Dynasties, to create *Boomerang* as 'a satirical comment on China's *nouveau riche* [as a result of] economic reforms which began in 1978' (Queensland Art Gallery, 2006, p.38). Hanging some twenty centimetres over the watermill in the Queensland Art Gallery, the work comprises 270,000 pieces of crystal, suspended in carefully installed tiers to be 8.6 metres in length and some 7 metres high (Queensland Art Gallery, 2006, p.38). Clearly, changes towards a more consumerist society in China are signified in this work.

Critics describe Ai Weiwei as 'a neo-dadaist, because he critically addressed traditions and conventions' (APT5, 2006, p.1). This is evident in his artwork titled *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), (purchased by the Gallery of Modern Art, 2006), where the artist makes a video of himself shattering the Han urn (Pearman, 2007). In the same way, Ai Weiwei painted the red Coca Cola symbol on the surface of a Han Dynasty urn which is over 2000 years old (Artfacts, 2007, p.1). The actions symbolise the artist's desire to subvert and desecrate a cultural tradition by identifying and breaking his link with the Chinese cultural past. Apparently, Ai Weiwei's own home has been carefully designed so as to negate any cultural significance. In his own words, 'The best way of decoration is making reasonable use of space without endowing it with any cultural significance. As for me I've been careful to avoid various dominating design styles' (Crienglish, 2004, p.1). Ai Weiwei reveals that although 'China's economic reforms have transformed the country's cities and lifestyles of many residents', he believes that 'certain areas, certain taboos can't be touched' (BBC News, 2005). Thus, changes towards a more consumerist society have resulted in the breaking of certain traditions and conventions. In this way, artists effectively connect personal experiences with the context of traditional Chinese culture.

Like the symbolic breaking of the Han Dynasty urn, Chinese installation artist Cai Guo-Qiang uses the medium of gunpowder in fireworks to find new appreciations for traditional Chinese cultural traditions, as is evident in his *Dragon or Rainbow Serpent*. The significance of this artwork is the use of ancient symbols and traditional Chinese concepts (Heartney, 1998, p.93), namely fire and the serpent. *Dragon or Rainbow Serpent* is the result of gunpowder creating fire and smoke, an original element of the universe, which creates a dragon-like impression as a scorch mark on paper, a mark which is reminiscent of historical ink drawings (Cai & You, 1988, p.251). Again the traditional is linked to the new in Cai's contemporary artwork, *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows*, where arrows symbolise the way in which Chinese people have been captivated by modern Western ideology. The old excavated boat is representative of a China past (Heartney, 2002, p.95). By explanation, 'global capital flow and cultural homogenisation have been "targeting" the nation ... as the enemy's arrows pierce through that obsolete, worn out ship' (Lin, 2004, pp.284–285). Cai Guo-Qiang acknowledges his traditional past, but embraces a new global outlook.

This embrace of globalisation alongside tradition is also the case with artist Ah Xian. He explores the casting of real people, but employs traditional designs and techniques from China's painting factories—underglazing in blue and overglazing in copper red, elaborated to fit the busts and symbolic of the old and the new forms of art. Ah Xian has embraced 'many international art forms such as "conceptual art", "installation", "performance", "happenings", "video art", "multi-media" and so on' (APT3, 1999). During the time of the Cultural Revolution, much of this cultural change in art was due to economic changes. Although Ah Xian's work provides for 'differences by balancing the old and the new', he comments, 'As I am weary of and question globalisation and the inundation of "international art", I therefore devote myself to ancient art and culture of China' (Ah, 1999). As a result, Ah Xian has produced a series of busts that maintain strong links to Chinese cultural identity. He believes that the old artforms should be re-invigorated as an intimate part of China's artistic and cultural heritage (APT3, 1999). These links to traditional modes of expression reflect the artist's cultural identity.

Together, the works of these three artists demonstrate how concepts, techniques and materials are used to depart from Chinese cultural tradition and inform the viewer of contemporary cultural identity. The creative process successfully connects the artist's own journeys with the cultural context of China's changing national image.

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