

# Beyond the Real

An exhibition of contemporary Chinese art

*The intricate, fantastical world of Liang ChangSheng appears to collide with the realistic metaphors of Jiang Huan, while the dreamy sculptures of Zhang Hua glide alongside the floating beings of Lu Peng's creations.*

This May, Mulan Gallery will be presenting the first major showcase of its representative collection of Chinese art at the Arts House. The exhibition brings together the works of four artists whose styles and compositions vary considerably from what has been hitherto seen as Chinese contemporary art in Singapore. These works of art do not easily fall under the identified genres of 'Political Pop' or 'New Realism'. The syncretic images, instead, have recourse to childhood imaginations, traditional, mythic tales and the compositions and narrative tools of indigenous forms of visual arts, like scroll paintings and papercuts.

Among the three artists who work the two-dimensional painting medium, the compositions and subjects differ remarkably. While Lu Peng's and Liang ChangSheng's works create dense imagery with impressive attention to detail, Jiang Huan's paintings are like storyboards, structured with a strong narrative element. The latter re-creates impressions of past grandeur, of Chinese Opera and often paints contemporary subjects as well. He does this consistently with a female subject in the foreground. Lu Peng, on the other hand, creates more dream-like compositions, with exuberant colours and whimsical bodies. His paintings also blend the past and the present in a fusion that is more exaggerated and dramatic than realistic. The structure and style of his works are admittedly influenced by Tibetan scroll paintings. Meanwhile, Liang ChangSheng creates imagery that combines mythic symbols, Buddhist icons, tales and themes of



Artwork by Liang ChangSheng

traditional Chinese folk arts. His early work, in fact, was confined to papercuts, and his paintings appear drawn out, scaled-up versions of these.

It is also interesting to note how the styles of these three painters have been influenced by their distinct and individual experiences and pursuits. For instance, Jiang Huan's practice of interior design for the past decade could well explain the ornate, elaborately composed objects and settings in his paintings, as well as the precise quality of his draughtsmanship. Lu Peng's paintings, which are more studied and less intuitive, could very well stem from his academic interests in painting. Liang ChangSheng, on the other hand, has devoted significant time learning folk papercuts and line drawings, and it is hard to miss the importance of these to his artistic practice.

Varied as they are in compositions and subject matters, the works of the three artists are also striking for their use of colours. Jiang Huan's colours are saturated with occasional luxuriant touches of red, gold and more or less realistic hues. And they add dimension to the stories he tells. Lu Peng, too, uses saturated colours and strong contrast to create a distinctive



Remote water. Jiang Huan. 2008. Oil on canvas. 206 x 150 cm.



Through the Wall Series. Lu Peng.

world of his own. Liang ChangSheng uses a much more nuanced palette with a range of colours, from the bright reds to the more sober greys and browns. Witnessing the works of these artists together is not unlike stepping inside a kaleidoscope of colours, forms and patters.

Also part of the exhibition is the unique sculptures of Zhang Hua. Childhood games and dreams are the common themes of his works. The figures are almost always characterised by elongated limbs and necks, with an open-mouthed facial expression. Movement is suggested with the flowing lines of lithe bodies. The still figures, such as the slender girl seated on a plank of 'Longing', too, are engrossing in their introspective moods. In fact, in all of these artworks there is a certain gaiety and, perhaps, innocence, too. Imagination takes flight and it is easy to drift into these simple worlds. When juxtaposed next to the theatrical world of Lu Peng, the absurd hotch-potch reality of Liang ChangSheng and the staged narratives of Jiang Huan, Zhang Hua's sculptures appear lighter, like impressions of dreams that are about to disappear when we open our eyes.

All four artists have received their art training from China. Zhang Hua received his at the Central Academy of Fine Arts and has been exhibiting his works for almost a decade now. His works have received many awards and accolades, most recently the Silver Prize at the Beijing Olympic Landscape Sculpture Competition, and are also seen at public spaces in China and South Korea. Jiang Huan trained at the Capital Normal University and his works are highly sort after in auctions. Lu Peng recently completed his PhD in painting, and now teaches at the Beijing College of Education. Both his and Liang ChangSheng's works have been exhibited in various parts of the world, in America and Europe, to critical acclaim.

Together, the works of these artists can be contemplated in relation to one another to reveal interesting cross-currents, overlapping narratives and distinct artistic styles. Speaking of the choice of artists for the exhibition, the director of Mulan Gallery, Patricia Liang, remarks that these four artists are particularly interesting to her and also original in many respects. In addition, all of them are mid-career artists who have been widely shown in China and other parts of the world but not so much in the Southeast Asian region. Patricia herself has been collecting art for close to two decades and she established the gallery in early-2008. This exhibition is indeed a culmination of sorts of the groundwork that has been laid through the years.

This varied selection of contemporary art promises to be, both, refreshing and unique.

*Written by Usha M.Nathan*

The exhibition titled Illusory Worlds will be shown at the Arts House from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> of May and later at the Mulan Gallery from 20 May to 30 June 2009.



*Longing.* Zhang Hua.

# Little Rascals



Rodolfo "Titi" Cerdia's "Basa Sa Ulan" (In The Rain) 21 x 29 in. watercolor on paper



Rodolfo "Titi" Cerdia's "All We Need is Love" 48 x 60 in. acrylic on canvas

Childhood is a time of great adventure and spirited exploits; of carefree fun and memorable friendships, of innocence and pure joy. This group show celebrates childhood with a look at the cheeky, wonderful escapades that we all remember fondly from our own early years, and creates hope for similar joy to await future generations.

22 May - 5 June, 2009