

Three persistent individualists

A nomination always demands justification on the part of the nominator, especially when it is supposed to demonstrate what is 'most interesting' to *him* and must reflect *his* taste and interest at a given moment. A nomination can therefore never be objective and permanent. Practised judiciously, however, it can serve the

double-edged goal of promoting selected artists, as well as articulating the agenda underlying their selection. My nomination of Shi Chong, Chen Lingyang and Wang Youshen – an unlikely grouping of artistic style and content – is based on two characteristics they each share: their critical employment of received visual techniques,

and their serious reflection on their self-identities as artists and persons. None of them exemplify common trends in contemporary Chinese art. Instead, each of them has persisted over a prolonged period in developing an individualised visual language to explore his or her interiority.

Shi Chong

Wu Hung

Shi Chong does not call himself an avant-garde artist. Nevertheless, he has found himself increasingly alienated from the academic world of oil painting to which he belongs. Although he still teaches at one of China's top art schools, and although his hyper-realistic pictures continue to amaze people with their technical virtuosity, he has quietly retreated from domestic oil painting exhibitions and now paints for himself. The reason lies partially in the growing distance between his 'anti-social' images and the public: whether depicting a cynical young man holding a skinned bird, or disfigured human body parts stained with blood, these images explicitly or implicitly represent physical torture and psychological trauma, and provoke feelings of manipulation and danger. Equally unsettling to official critics, Shi Chong has created these images to debase the traditional concept of realism and the classical independence of oil painting. The 'reality' he so painstakingly and skilfully depicts is deliberately fictional, constructed during a sustained process of image-making involving sculpture, installation, performance and photography, all masterminded by the artist himself.

A breakthrough in Shi Chong's career occurred five years after he graduated from the Hubei Art Academy, when he began the project 'Fish', 1990–92, to invent a visual system to transform one type of image into another. His 1992 painting *Image of Life* was made for the same purpose. Adapting the traditional technique of ink rubbing, he mounted a piece of rice paper in the shape of a standing figure on a rusty steel board he found in a factory junkyard. The rust eventually penetrated the paper, leaving marks. Shi Chong then transmitted everything he saw in this transformed object onto a canvas.

Differing from pictorial illusionism, which recognises a supposedly objective world, Shi Chong's techniques of image-making are *transformation* and *substitution* – the transformation of one kind of material into another, and the substitution of one kind of sign with another. Following this logic, it is only natural that he would produce his own models for pictorial representation. Starting from *A Waking Man*, 1993, and *Shadow*, 1993, his models changed from natural forms and found objects to sculptures

he made himself. His painting *A Gratified Young Man*, 1995, introduced the next series, which employed human actors as models. Shi Chong was overpowered by the sensation he felt in manipulating the human body and staging dramatic scenes and this sensation motivated him to create several impressive works, including *Today's View*, 1996, *Surgeon*, 1996, and *The Stage*, 1997.¹

Shi Chong's more recent works, *Portrait Made on X Day, X Month, X Year*, 1999, and *A Language of Things*, 2000–2001, bring these experiments to a new level. Both works represent a performance and installation that Shi Chong staged in his studio. A special trough was constructed to hold a female model, who was blindfolded, soaked in a mixture of shampoo, lotion and other cosmetic products, and pressed under a transparent plastic board. The paintings portray sections of the model's naked body subjected to such conditions. The sense of the objectification of the human subject is reinforced by the fragmentation of the body, as well as the attention to minute details.

1 For an analysis of these works, see Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, 1999, pp. 88–93.

Shi Chong was born into a coalminer's family in Huangshi, Hubei province in China. After graduating from the oil painting department of the Hubei Academy of Fine Art (1987) he worked as a stage designer for a year, and then returned to his former school as an assistant professor. He came to national attention when his oil painting *Dried Fish* won a silver medal in the First National Oil Painting Exhibition held in Beijing in 1991. In 1993 his painting *A Walking Man* won a gold medal in the Second National Oil Painting Exhibition. After his painting *A Story of the Red Wall* was criticised in the official journal *Fine Arts*, Shi Chong retreated from officially sponsored exhibitions. His recent works have appeared in the exhibitions 'Transience: Experimental Chinese Art at the End of the Twentieth Century' (1999) and the Shanghai Biennale (2000).



SHI CHONG, *A Language of Things*, 2000–2001, oil on canvas, 60 x 64 cm.

Chen Lingyang

Wu Hung



far left: CHEN LINGYANG, *Twelve Flower Months*, 1999–2000, colour photograph; left: CHEN LINGYANG, *Twelve Flower Months*, 1999–2000, colour photograph.

Unlike Shi Chong, who maintains his academic identity but subverts academic art from within, Chen Lingyang, arguably the most daring female artist in China today, abandoned her academic credentials even before she graduated from Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Art in 1999. At the beginning of that year she participated in a now well-known 'basement' exhibition in Beijing – 'Post-Sense Sensibility: Distorted Bodies and Delusion', curated by Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie – which included several notorious works using human corpses and body parts.¹ Her work in the show, *Honey*, was an enlarged wooden coffin, over 4 metres long and painted entirely in black and suspended in the downward passageway leading to the exhibition proper. Natural light from the rear of the coffin outlined the object's dark silhouette. The solemn impression created by this installation, however, was compromised by sticky, golden-coloured honey which dripped slowly from the front end of the coffin to the ground; the movement was silent and hypnotic. While the exhibition was organised to combat 'cool' conceptual art by encouraging representations of 'physical and mental mutations', *Honey* derived its dynamism and complexity from imbuing a conceptual representation with an acute sense of physical decay.

I saw Chen's work a second time in 'The Generation of Factory No. 2', an exhibition held at Beijing's Yunfeng Gallery in 2000. Her piece, *Scroll*, was an overly long and narrow composition – over 6 metres in length, but only 22 centimetres tall – mounted as an exquisite traditional hand-scroll painting. However, its material and image were anything but traditional, consisting of a roll of toilet paper Chen used to record her menstrual cycle in October 1999. Although some critics quickly dismissed it as an offensive adaptation of western 'feminist art', this work ingeniously revitalised a traditional artform for a contemporary, individual expression. A hand-scroll is by nature private, physical and temporal; to view it one must touch it and unroll it, and only one viewer can handle it at a time. More than any work in contemporary Chinese art, *Scroll* captures and utilises these qualities of a traditional hand-scroll. The subject of *Scroll* is Chen's bodily transformation, which substantiates the medium's inherent temporality

with individualised referents. Chen's series of photographs, 'Twelve Flower Months', also represents menstrual cycles, but extends the duration to a whole year, from November 1999 to December 2000. Reproduced in book format, the work resembles a traditional painting 'album', which often consists of twelve leaves.

Chen's more recent project, *Years*, 2001, will eventually consist of twelve nude images of the artist, in which her face is transformed into one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac. Since Chen plans to take the twelve photographs in consecutive years to represent the transformation of her own body, the whole series will not be complete until 2012; what we have now is the first image for 2001, *Year of the Snake*.

All three of these projects reveal Chen's desire to unify the production of a visual representation over a sustained period; the temporality of the representation as implied in both its content and sequential viewing; and the artist's physical or biographical transformation as the subject of representation. As the duration of Chen's art production and/or representation extends from a month to a year and then to twelve years, her work, although still strictly private, begins to acquire a measure of monumentality.

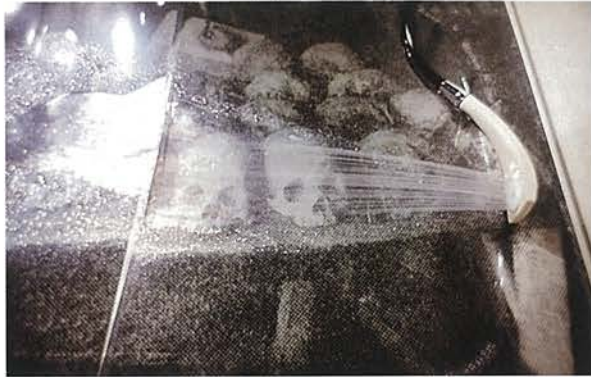
1 For a record of the exhibition see Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, 2001, pp. 164–71.

Chen Lingyang was born in 1975 in Zhenjing, China, and studied at the National Academy of Fine Arts High School in Hangzhou and the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing. Since graduating from the oil painting department of the Central Academy in 1999 she has been living in Beijing as a freelance artist. Her installations and photographs have appeared in several important Chinese exhibitions of 'alternative art', including 'Post-Sense Sensibility' (1999) and 'Fuck Off' (2000), as well as exhibitions in Japan, Paris and Helsinki. Her most recent works were featured in two exhibitions in Beijing: 'Visibility' (2001) and 'Run Jump Crawl Walk' (2002).

Wang Youshen

left: WANG YOUSHEN, *Washing: The Mass Grave at Datong in 1941, 1995* (detail), newspapers, photographs, basins, water, dimensions variable; right: WANG YOUSHEN, newspaper, Great Wall of China.

Wu Hung



A graduate of the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing, Wang Youshen belongs to an earlier generation of 'avant-garde' Chinese artists whose rise in the 1980s was intimately related to the broad political, economic and intellectual movements that opened China to the outside world. After the 4 June massacre in Tiananmen Square in 1989, many of these artists turned against the heroism and social commitment that had characterised the 1985 new wave movement.¹ But Wang continued to produce artworks as a means of public criticism throughout the 1990s, focusing mainly on problems such as the fragility of social memory and historical representation, and the newspaper's invasion of public and private space. Like Chen Lingyang, but in very different ways, Wang's art is deeply intertwined with the issue of self-identity. Since 1988 he has been an art editor for the popular newspaper *Beijing Youth Daily*. He takes this job seriously, but his insider's position also allows him to create original artworks as critiques of the newspaper.

In interviews and writings Wang often emphasises the 'power' of the newspaper. To a large extent this form of mass media constructs reality for its vast readership, and the threatening omnipresence of the newspaper has been a constant theme of Wang's installations and performances since the early 1990s. For the landmark exhibition 'New Generation', held at the Museum of Chinese History in 1991, for example, Wang made a life-sized mannequin, which stood next to a large window absorbed in the act of reading a newspaper. All the surfaces of the figure and its surroundings were covered with an edition of the *Beijing Youth Daily*, the official sponsor of the exhibition. Going a step further, Wang staged a performance in 1993 in which he appeared as an anonymous newspaper reader who had merged with a universe of newspapers. Later, turning his attention from humans to monuments, Wang covered a portion of the Great Wall – China's most famous political and cultural symbol – with newspapers. These and related projects explore the nature of the newspaper as a means of both communication and manipulation – an information technology that turns against individuals.

The vulnerability of printed images – and hence the impermanence of the history

and memory that they represent and preserve – is another central theme of Wang's work. He has made many installations composed of eroded and scratched archival photographs, and has presented his own photos in a simulated darkroom in exhibitions. For me, however, Wang's *Washing: The Mass Grave at Datong in 1941, 1995*, remains the most poignant example in this genre. In this installation, newspaper pages on the wall report the discovery of the 'pit': the remains of hundreds of thousands of Chinese people who were buried alive by Japanese soldiers during the Second World War. Below the wall, photographic images of the unearthed human remains were placed under circulating water in two large basins. As Wang explains: 'The water washes the image away, just as time has washed people's memories clear of this atrocity that occurred fifty years ago.'²

1 Li Xianting, 'Major trends in the development of contemporary Chinese art', in *China's New Art Post-1989*, Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong, 1993.

2 'Everyday sightings: Melissa Chiu interviews the Chinese artist Wang Youshen', *ART AsiaPacific*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1996, p. 54.

Born in 1964 in Beijing, Wang Youshen graduated from the folk art department of the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing in 1988. That year he became an art editor at the *Beijing Youth Daily*, a position he still holds today. The first exhibition he participated in was the seminal 'China/Avant Garde' show held at Beijing's National Art Gallery in 1989. Since then he has shown his installations in many group exhibitions around the world. His first solo exhibition, 'Developing: Darkroom', was held in 1998 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, followed by a second solo exhibition, 'Y2K', in Hong Kong's Artist Commune Gallery in 2000. His most recent works, a series of sculptures and installations under the collective title 'Tang Dynasty Costumes', appeared in the exhibition 'The Beijing Youth Daily – Media and Art' in Beijing in 2002.