

# BMAC showcases art from China

'Hot Pot' and Liu Bolin's 'Invisible Man' photos offer taste of the rich flavors of contemporary Chinese art

By JON POTTER  
 Reformer Staff

BRATTLEBORO — The impossible task facing Mara Williams was this: How would she squeeze 1.4 billion people into the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center?

Finding the answer started with a meal. The hot pot is a communal dish of broth, meat, vegetables and other ingredients that has been an integral part of Chinese culture for 1,000 years. It's delicious, and it also happens to be a pretty good metaphor.

That's what Adam Silver, of the West Brattleboro-based Asian Cultural Center of Vermont, thought. As Williams wrestled with the overwhelming task of curating an exhibit that somehow represented the vast and diverse world of contemporary Chinese art, Silver served her a dish of metaphor and understanding.

"He said to me 'It doesn't have to be perfect, Mara, because the title is going to be 'Hot Pot,'" explained Williams, recalling their conversation of three or four years ago.

On Saturday, two new exhibits of Chinese contemporary art and photography open at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center. Representing the strong individual voices of 21 Chinese artists working today, the exhibits also serves to shed a little light on China as a whole, all 1.4 billion people ... living, breathing, striving and struggling in a country experiencing tectonic societal change.

**'We're all sort of enmeshed in and dancing around questions of China in the world. This gives us great inroads. That's exactly the kind of service we try to provide.'**

— Danny Lichtenfeld,  
 Brattleboro Museum Director

"The idea of the Hot Pot is a metaphor for the complexity of Chinese art. Why Hot Pot? When you take the different ingredients, they all retain something of their own flavor and texture, and yet, they taste great together," said Silver.

So it is with the artists Williams has selected for these powerful and surprising exhibits. Four of the museum's six galleries will be dedicated to "Hot Pot: A Taste of Contemporary Chinese Art." This exhibit features the work of 20 contemporary Chinese artists, ranging from painting and photography to sculpture and metalwork. Alongside "Hot Pot" is a major exhibit of the work of performance artist and photographer Liu Bolin. The



"This is clearly dealing with the old and new China," said Brattleboro Museum & Art Center Chief Curator Mara Williams of this 2007 acrylic on canvas titled "Paradise" by Zhong Biao.

"Invisible Man" exhibit features 14 large photographs from Liu's "Hiding in the City" and "Hiding in New York" series. The exhibits open Saturday with a reception and champagne brunch for members at 11 a.m., and for the general public at 2 p.m. The exhibits run through June 23.

Museum-goers can appreciate the artists in their own right — but collectively they tell us something, too, about a country that is very much in the news. We wrestle with what's happening there, perhaps applauding that communist control is giving way to the free market and modernization, but bothered by environmental degradation, trade imbalances, human rights issues. The artists wrestle with that stuff, too.

"We're all sort of enmeshed in and dancing around questions of China in the world. This gives us great inroads. That's exactly the kind of service we try to provide," said BMAC Director Danny Lichtenfeld.

Case in point, a pair of works Williams has put next to each other. One is a painting in downbeat dark gray and black hues depicting a crow on a gnarled dead tree looking out over a barren wasteland.

"You wonder ... the crow overlooking the wasteland. What's that about. Is this about loss? Is this about environmental destruction?" said Williams.

Right next to it, is another crow, a sculpture in shiny stainless steel, emblazoned with corporate logos, a glitzy acknowledg-



What does it mean to be an individual in a society of 1.4 billion people. Issues of identity are one thing photographer Liu Bolin explores in his "Hidden Man" photographs, 14 of which are on exhibit at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center.

ment of the new China's. It is titled "Rich Bird on the Stone."

Two individual flavors in the hot pot, telling stories on their own and together.

From all these disparate artistic voices, Williams has distilled some themes which

recur. The first is image and identity. How do individuals and communities define themselves, what do they hold on to and what

See BMAC, Page 11

## BMAC

Continued from Page 9

do they let go in the face of rapid cultural change? What is old China? What is new China? What is China?

Related to identity are issues of environment and politics. These themes are represented in different and often challenging ways in many of the works — artists in China are putting faces to the forgotten migrant workers and on the buildings being demolished to make way for progress. They are looking out over degraded landscapes and hiding in piles of coal to show us the cost. They are also celebrating what's happening there. Han Yuhuan's "Art Flair," a teeming world of cute, modern galleristas is an embrace of contemporary China.

The issues of identity, image, environment and politics are very much bound up in Liu Bolin's photographs, in which he is the subject, but often camouflaged so that he almost completely disappears into the background. And those backgrounds have strong significance — construction sites, places of environmental or historical significance, pop culture marketplaces.

"In China, there's been this question of what's your role in society? Who has the power?" explained BMAC curatorial

intern Elissa Watters, a sophomore at Dartmouth College majoring in English and minoring in art history. "As one of 1.4 billion people, who are you?"

Watters, in addition to being an apt student, is a good testament to the power of these exhibits. Her experience may soon be yours.

"When I first started working with Mara, I didn't know much about (contemporary) Chinese art, but now I've kind of fallen in love with it," Watters said. "It's important to remember that China is one of the oldest civilizations on earth. They have so many engrained artistic traditions. Their culture is still interested in maintaining these traditions. ... The artistic traditions have carried on, and they're just taking it to the next level."

The idea of reinterpreting artistic traditions is another recurring theme of the show. The two crows represent this idea, and there are interesting adaptations of calligraphy, the cultural affinity for gardening and other traditions.

This theme is a component of Cai Silver's "Pink Slip Project," one of the works featured in one of the galleries. Pairing dozens of pink slippers hung on the wall with copies of the pink slip she received from a local school district, the West Brattleboro artist

juxtaposes hospitality with the inhospitable and contemplates issues of cultural difference and the transformative power of making art.

Williams praised Cai and husband Adam Silver whose "enthusiasm, expertise and support" helped transform "Hot Pot" from idea to reality.

The idea for the exhibit first took root some 15 years, when Williams saw an exhibit of contemporary Chinese art while traveling in London. In that exhibit, Williams saw artists chafing at and breaking free of the restrictions placed on them in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. In the intervening years, Chinese art has become especially hot in the art world, fueled by cultural change and by the voices of so many artists in a country whose population is more than four times ours.

"Mara has done an amazing job of capturing the direction their art is taking," said Watters. "It's been an absolutely amazing experience. I owe a lot to Mara."

In keeping with BMAC's efforts to make contemporary art accessible to a diverse audience and all ages, the museum's interactive Ticket Gallery offers visitors a hands-on activity inspired by Liu Bolin's use of camouflage in his artwork. Participants will create creatures in an attempt to hide

them within different habitats represented on the gallery's painted walls.

Accompanying these exhibits — and supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts — the museum will be offering many special programs and events, including "Sounds, Shadows, and Songs," a program with Chinese composer Lei Liang on March 28; a program of traditional Chinese music and dance on April 7; a lecture and demonstration on "King Fu and Popular Culture" with Damon Honeycutt on April 20; a lecture on China and the environment on April 23; a talk on "China Pops! Visual Culture in the 21st Century" on April 25; "Art as Food As Art" with Cai Silver on April 27; a discussion with area students who have

gone on exchange trips to Asia on May 9; a talk on Chinese art since 1976 on May 12; a hands-on program with Cai Silver on making a Chinese word-art book on May 19 and more, including Gallery Walk night film screenings.

The museum's exhibits and gift shop are open Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Thursday, from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Friday from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., and Saturday, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is \$8 for adults, \$6 for seniors and \$4 for students. Members and children under 6 are admitted free. Located in historic Union Station at the intersection of Main Street and Routes 119 and 142, the museum is wheelchair-accessible. For more information call 802-257-0124 or visit [www.brattleboromuseum.org](http://www.brattleboromuseum.org).