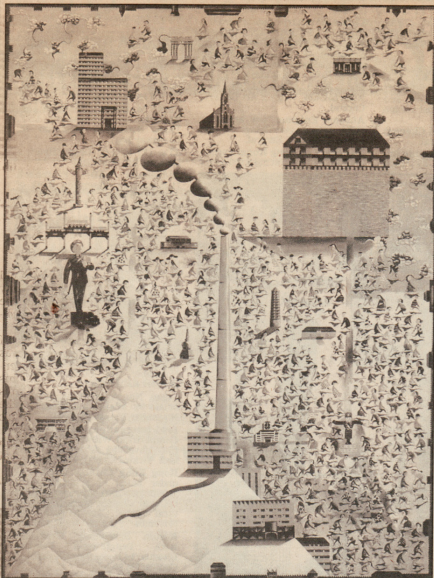


Zhang paints one China, two worlds



OLD MEETS NEW: Colliding values in Zhang's 1993 4.20.

By Desiree Au

"MY real existence is quite dull and mundane. That is why I want my other life, life of the arts, to be beautiful and carry my hope of a brighter and more brilliant future."

These are the words of Zhang Gong, a Beijing artist whose enthusiasm, spirit and hopes translate into bright, electrifying colours on his canvases.

Besides betraying the frustrations of seeking individuality in a homogenous society, Zhang's first one-man show, *Ideals and Idols*, demonstrates his fascination with a China shaped by both new norms and lingering traditions.

The 20 works on show at Shoehi Gallery in Central are powerful representations of the dilemma he is experiencing as the mainland's sleeping market awakens.

Born to an ordinary household in a strict, conventional society, Zhang hums to a different tune.

He never followed the traditional path of artistic training; he was rejected by the Central Academy of Fine Arts five times before being accepted into a Master's program.

But Zhang possesses a tremendous amount of perseverance and while making various attempts to gain admittance to the academy, he experimented with different ideas in search of his own style.

Though he began with basic training in realism and Chinese traditional landscape, he finally found his own language in experimental and abstract art.

Zhang's art is strong in colours and symbolism but at the same time has a lighthearted sense of humour and is very courageous.

On his large canvases, figures and objects are depicted with much precision and detail, almost like a diary recording China's attitude towards a changing and modernising society.

In one of his intricate works, *Family Scene*, every centimetre of the canvas represents his ambiguous feelings towards a more materialistic mainland.

The scene takes place in his living room, where there is a sense of being cramped. There are various objects of modernisation and decadence, such as a colour TV and stereo speakers. As well, there are objects of tradition, such as the communist flag and a picture of Tiananmen Square.

"We're getting an influx of luxurious goods in our society," Zhang said. "But do they really represent the things that will make a family more comfortable?"

The objects in his painting are proportionately small because Zhang hopes for a home full of warmth and love. Although the scene depicts a certain dependency on material goods, it also betrays doubts that they are the basis of his comfort. He feels that his spiritual life is poor and cannot be compensated by a good material life.

One of Zhang's most provocative pieces is *1993.4.20*. In a rainbow of colours, the work depicts an everyday street scene in Beijing.

More than 200 tiny individuals riding bicycles are depicted in excruciating detail but when grouped together, somehow they lack a sense of individuality. "I could be any one of those tiny people," Zhang said. "This is our existence."

He painted a wall around the border of the work, symbolising

China as a trap that encloses everyone.

The picture juxtaposes contradictory images. A modern high-rise stands majestically at the top corner while several traditional structures emerge among the crowd.

Interestingly, a giant figure of a communist hero stands out from the rest. "This is Comrade Lei Fong," he said speaking of his childhood idol.

Lei was a model comrade whose diary had to be studied by all schoolchildren.

"Lei was a perfect soldier who gave his life completely to the party," said Zhang. "This is what was expected of us, to reserve our soul for the People's Republic of China."

Looking back, Zhang feels that Lei's heroism was just another idea fed to the Chinese people, much as Western and industrial perspectives are presented today.

People depicted have indifferent expressions, as if they are too busy to evaluate their changing ideals. Contradiction and disorder seem not only to be themes of Zhang's work but of his life. He isn't isolated enough from China's rigid social structure to cross the boundaries into avant garde, yet his multiple denotations stray from realism.

His spirit is witnessing the struggle between tradition and modernity, the intellect and material world, and values of the East and West.

This may just be a passing phase for Zhang, as it is a phase to many other Chinese, but his art will always be a crucial, simultaneous response to an era of changing *Ideals and Idols*. *Ideals and Idols* is on show at the Shoehi Art Gallery, 11 On Hing Terrace, Central, until 3 December.

Exhibit draws criticism over travelling art

By Raf Casert

AFTER 500 years, it's a tri-

layers of pigment on a volatile surface. "Panels can shrink, expand, bleed, and even fall apart."



SIGNS OF FORTUNE

YOU are under the sign of Scorpio.

You born on this date have a good head for business and instinctively know how to look after No. 1. You're ambitious, and are likely to reach a high place in your field. At times, you are skeptical and hard to convince. However you can be a good champion of a cause. You are at your best when you do your own thing. Those born on this date include: Alain Delon, actor; June Havoc, actress; and Mary Hart, TV host.

ARIES

(Mar 21-Apr 19)

Business developments put you on the road to future gains. Capitalise on opportunity. Good news comes about money. Rise above a small problem after dark.

TAURUS

(April 20-May 20)

It's a happy time for romance and interests of the heart. Cooperative efforts will succeed. Pay attention to details on the job. Guard against errors.

GEMINI

(May 21-June 20)

A romantic introduction could come through a co-worker. Your personality is an asset in business. Financial backing comes now. Take care not to be flippant tonight.

CANCER

(June 21-July 22)

Happy events occur in the life of a child. Couples enjoy going out somewhere special together. The accent is on romance and recreational interests.