

TEACHER NOTES

A list of the didactic and label information on each of the artists featured in 'The China Project' slideshow are listed below. These provide background reading for teachers who are planning a school visit to the exhibition.

WILLIAM YANG

Photographer and performer William Yang has consistently recorded his life since the early 1970s, from his family history in far north Queensland to the overlapping artistic and gay scenes in his adopted home of Sydney, to his travels around Australia and to China. His works provide a unique chronicle of Australian cultural life and offer rare insights into the experiences and stories of Australian-Chinese people.

Yang's grandparents emigrated from southern China during the northern Australian gold rush of the 1880s. His parents met in Cairns and moved to Dimbulah on the Atherton Tableland, where Yang and his siblings grew up. Yang's family is now scattered around Australia and across the world, and one of his ongoing projects has been to meet and photograph them, wherever they might be. He has travelled to China five times since 1989, visiting his ancestral village and photographing his experiences. These journeys, while constituting a return to Yang's roots, also, as he says, 'tend to reinforce the fact that I'm Australian'.

For 'The China Project', Yang has produced two new works that respond to the Gallery's architecture and reflect his interest in family and portraiture. The first, presented on the foyer wall, is a large collage of portraits of family members, interspersed with pictures of historical Chinese sites in Australia. This work, through images of one extended family, reflects the diversity of the Chinese community and its integration into Australian society and landscape. The second, displayed in the foyer cabinet, features self-portraits that trace Yang's life from early childhood to the present, with a particular focus upon his exploration of his Chinese heritage. Accompanying these photographs is a collection of personal items that enhance and extend this narrative of the artist's life. While Yang's use of photographs and objects to tell stories is individual and specific, he is always concerned with broader questions of place, history and belonging.

LI ZHENSHENG

From the mid 1960s, for almost 20 years, Li Zhensheng worked as a photographer for the *Heilongjiang Daily* newspaper in the city of Harbin, north-eastern China. During this period, he took over 30 000 photographs documenting the daily events of the

Cultural Revolution (1966–76) — from the massive public rallies, denunciations, humiliations and executions to scenes from everyday life; from a beautiful sunrise to domestic settings. Li's negatives survived the period hidden under the floorboards of his home, and his photographs form a fascinating and rare chronicle of the time.

In Harbin, the effects of the Cultural Revolution were heavily felt, with the destruction of temples and attacks on leading party officials accused of being 'black gang elements'. Li and other documentary photographers were subject to orders from Mao Zedong to focus on the 'positive' aspects of the Cultural Revolution, and his images of song and dance companies performing revolutionary operas, or of peasants gathered together to read Mao's words, reflect Mao's commands to the media. However, Li formed his own 'Red Guard' group, which allowed him access to events denied to other photographers, and enabled him to record the less acceptable face of the Cultural Revolution.

This limited-edition portfolio concludes with a diptych from 1976 showing a massive rally of the People's Liberation Army in Harbin's People's Stadium denouncing the more liberal Deng Xiaoping. It is fitting that this image concludes the portfolio — 1976 was the year of Mao's death, the infamous Gang of Four's prosecution and the end of the Cultural Revolution. By choosing this image, the portfolio hints at the future — not only the ongoing psychological effects of the era, but also Deng Xiaoping's role in China's economic liberalisation and the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square.

LUO BROTHERS

This collaborative work by the Luo Brothers plays on the propagandist imagery of twentieth-century China. Contrasting folk art and symbolism with the international language of consumer capitalism, these highly lacquered 'Untitled' works cheekily strike at the heart of China's contemporary popular culture. The Luo Brothers seek to subvert and comment on this current trend through computer manipulation of a traditional iconography — the New Year Print or *nianhua*.

In pre-communist China, the *nianhua* was the most popular auspicious poster-form of expressing good luck and happiness, long life and wealth. In rural China, such posters would be seen on front gates, courtyard doors and on domestic ritualistic objects. New Year Prints devoted to children were the most popular variety.

FANG LIJUN

Fang Lijun was a child during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, and was regularly criticised because of his class background. He witnessed the 1989 Tiananmen Square incidents as an art student in Beijing, and became involved with the Avant-garde at that time. Fang's painting of the yawning — or screaming — man appearing behind an inexplicably laughing crowd is typical of the cynical realist style, which reflected a concern with 'the absurd, the mundane and the meaningless events of everyday life'. Scattered across the picture surface are brightly coloured roses, chrysanthemums and oleander blossoms that sail out of the sky — these blossoms are rootless, ungrounded in this world but full of symbolism from China's past. Mao Zedong once said 'Let a hundred flowers bloom. Let a hundred schools of thought contend'. Fang is disparaging of China's idealism, which he considers full of political, social and cultural contradictions. His characters are self-portraits conveying parody and humour and reflecting the language of anonymous rebelliousness, where differences in age, status or gender are eliminated. The title, *980810*, provides the completion date of this painting, a vague and inconsequential reference that deliberately suggests a mundane and repetitive world.

XU BING

A book from the sky 1987–91 (also known as *Tian shu* in Chinese) is composed of bound books covering the floor and reams of paper draped overhead, recalling the daily papers in China, which are pasted on boards for all to read. These reams display around 4000 printed characters that were meticulously carved by Xu Bing. Paradoxically, although they look readable, all of the characters were invented by the artist. Capturing the ambition and courage that characterised contemporary Chinese art of the period, this work toys with the venerated position held by the high art of calligraphy, suggesting that the aim of writing, which is to spread knowledge, has been subverted. Interpreted by authorities as an audacious statement, the work critically questions the notion of power and the collapse of political dialogue through the written word. *A book from the sky*, which took Xu Bing some five years to create, also exhibits a reverence for the discipline and reward of mastering text and the fundamental role that the process of writing words and texts can play in the way that we engage with the world. Thus, Xu Bing's epic work has been seen to return to the promise of text. This magnificent installation symbolises aspects of both old and emerging China. While its medium and technique are traditional, *A book from the sky's* scale and daring intellectual energy capture the spirit of contemporary artistic practice.

KATE BEYNON

In this series of drawings, Kate Beynon draws on the two disparate cultures (from Hong Kong and Australia) that constitute her background to explore aspects of pregnancy and motherhood in a highly charged and graphically powerful manner. The drawings display her interest in cartoons, comic books, graffiti art and calligraphic text, as well as ancient legends. As Beynon comments:

The female figure is not directly a self-portrait but based on the image of 'Li Ji', the warrior girl of an old Chinese fable, whose image I developed to embody a strong, female Asian–Australian representation. Her depicted pregnancy was naturally based on my own feelings of anticipation for the birth [of my son] and hope for a healthy baby.

Beynon first began to use the character of Li Ji in 1996, and allowed the reincarnated heroine to move between ancient times and contemporary culture. While the fabled Li Ji battled a deadly python, the contemporary Li Ji confronts issues of identity, racism, politics and class. In these works, the young woman's intense expression challenges conventional romantic depictions of pregnancy as a passive state. The muted presence of the fully formed foetus, placid and contained, contrasts with the outward demeanour of the woman, whose wildly flying hair denotes her inner strength.

SARA TSE

Sara Tse's fragile, visually haunting objects are made from porcelain, a medium which historically indicates stature and wealth in China, Japan, Korea and Europe. Tse carefully dips pieces of everyday clothing in liquid porcelain. The fluid then forms around and penetrates the fibres of the garments, creating a delicate shell or imprint before the object disintegrates during firing.

Tse's work challenges the reverence for objects made from porcelain, contrasting it with the throwaway culture of fashion and trends in her native Hong Kong. Her objects are powerful in their summoning of a ghostly presence; these sculptures closely resemble, and yet are fundamentally transformed from, the items of clothing from which they are made.

NI HAIFENG

Ni Haifeng makes art that manipulates cultural stereotypes and symbols, encouraging contemplative inquiry. Working across

a range of media including video, installation and photography, his recent works explore ideas of geography and trade. The history of Dutch importation and adaptation of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain via the commercial activities of the Dutch East India Company from 1600 informs his major sculptural installation and single-channel video work, *Of the departure and the arrival* 2005.

In this work, Ni collects everyday items in the Netherlands, casts them in porcelain in China's porcelain capital — Jingdezhen — and then paints them with blue Delft motifs originally borrowed from imported Chinese blue-and-white wares. In doing this, Ni engages with the historical and cultural importance not only of porcelain in China, but also of the mass-produced Royal Delft Blue Ware in the Netherlands. Ideas of trade, exchange and economics, mobilised by the objects' movement across geographical boundaries, are further explored in the video work, which documents the journey entailed in making the work. *Of the departure and the arrival* thus interprets the history of porcelain as one that has, since the seventeenth century, been largely motivated by economic imperatives.

HU YANG

In January 2004 Hu Yang commenced his encyclopedic project 'Shanghai living', which photographically documents over 500 families from Shanghai, China. Interviewing and photographing foreign residents, Shanghainese, the wealthy, middle-class and impoverished, Hu asked each participant the same three questions: 'What is your current living condition?'; 'What is your most desired thing to do if without any particular concern on time, money and energy?'; and 'What is the biggest torture now in your life?' By turning the camera on the internal lives and home environments of his subjects, Hu also documented the frantic modernisation of Shanghai, one of the most rapidly changing cities in the world. The attendant problems, including unemployment, the commodification of labour and housing shortages, are also apparent in these individuals' stories — from obsessive consumerism and the vast gap between rich and poor to the desire to create an enclosed world in the home, which will shut out the external world. Hovering between objective documentary and incisive social comment, these photographs were taken using a Contax 645N camera and colour negative film with a wide-angle lens, enabling Hu to capture the home environments and to convey a sense of intimacy and depth.

SONG DONG

Song Dong has been a significant figure in the development of Chinese conceptual art since the early 1990s. In his performance work, he often manipulates traditional and domestic rituals — such as calligraphic writing, the stamping of seals and cooking — and even the essential activity of breathing, and converts these into personal and private gestures that form the basis of his meditative practice. These processes are documented through video and photography, and are often investigative in nature. They are also quietly iconoclastic, intending to disrupt categories based on the media, bureaucratic hierarchies and aesthetic expectations, yet this 'political' goal is achieved more often than not through works of art that are uncommonly intimate. *Stamping the water* documents an hour-long performance that took place in the Lhasa River, Tibet, in 1996. Song Dong systematically stamped the 'sacred' water with an archaic wooden seal carved with the character for water. The seal left no trace, its symbolic power instantly dispersed. The authority of the art work resides instead in Song Dong's central gesture, a heroic and futile reiteration recalling those innumerable small acts through which an individual attempts to construct and regulate their relationship with the world.

GUAN WEI

Guan Wei's work is informed by his interests in history, the environment and cross-cultural migrations. Here Guan Wei has appropriated images of Europeans exploring the Pacific Ocean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries — including Captain Cook's landing in Australia — from early books and later historical paintings of European exploration. He reconstructs and grafts images onto the famous Chinese landscape painting *Jiu Ri Shi Cheng Tu Juan* by Wang Yuanqi (1641–1715), a great scholar and artist of the early Qing dynasty. Despite quoting from these historical works, *Echo* 2005 is a contemporary history painting about some of the most complex and troubling issues of the present — migration, conquest, reconciliation and even Australia's status as a place of refuge.

CAI GUO-QIANG

Cai Guo-Qiang uses the element of fire and the phenomenon of explosion as media in his art making, believing fire to be the originating element of the universe, and pivotal in the development of human civilisation. Fire links humankind with

the cosmos and encompasses the duality of creation and destruction. The history and culture of place are important factors in determining the content of a specific project. For the opening of 'The Second Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art', Cai was invited to make an ambitious site-specific gunpowder project for the Queensland Art Gallery that involved a fireworks display located in and around the Brisbane River. The work on display here, *Dragon or Rainbow Serpent: A myth glorified or feared (drawings)* was created by detonating gunpowder charges on paper, leaving a residue of ash and scorch marks that recall the calligraphic forms of traditional Chinese ink drawings. The linear character of these drawings simultaneously suggests the winding path of a river and the curving forms of snakes and dragons.

AH XIAN

Ah Xian was born in Beijing, China, in 1960 and first came to Australia in early 1989 as a visiting scholar at the University of Tasmania's School of Art. He returned to China just weeks before the student demonstrations that led to violent confrontations at Tiananmen Square in June 1989. Deeply affected by these events, Ah Xian sought asylum in Australia. He now lives between Sydney and Beijing.

Ah Xian began porcelain casting in the early 1990s to explore the central and ongoing theme of the human body in his practice. In 1996 and again in 1998 he returned to China, travelling to Jingdezhen — famous for kilns that, for centuries, produced fine porcelain objects and vessels for the Chinese imperial courts — to learn traditional techniques. Working with master potters, he learnt the processes of moulding from life, decorating, glazing and firing. The move to work in cloisonné, lacquer and jade became a natural progression in reinterpreting the great traditions of Chinese crafts.

In creating the 'China China' and 'Human human' series of busts and figures, Ah Xian continues his long philosophical journey. Living in Australia released him from the immediate pressures of Chinese politics and his physical distance from China, coupled with the struggle to survive in and understand his new Australian

home, created an environment that allowed these works to develop. He argues that he could not have produced such work in China. For Ah Xian, these two series are the result of a period of deeply felt life experiences in which he and his family have straddled two cultures.

ZHANG XIAOGANG: SHADOWS IN THE SOUL

Zhang Xiaogang is one of the foremost artists of the Chinese Avant-garde. Best known for his evocative 'Bloodlines: The big family' paintings of the 1990s, his deeply personal practice explores the volatile history of China's recent past.

Chinese people have experienced too much change, which dramatically influences people internally. I say this from my experience, because I have lived through three completely different time periods in China in a short amount of time.
Zhang Xiaogang

Zhang's development as an artist runs parallel to the growth of contemporary Chinese art, from its emergence in the early 1980s to its international renown today. 'Shadows in the Soul' traces the evolution of Zhang's unique style and compelling visual iconography, which poetically convey psychological states. Major series featured in the exhibition are his portrait-based 'Bloodlines: The big family', the dreamlike 'Amnesia and memory', his recent photographic and diaristic series 'Describe', and 'In-Out', which focuses on objects and scenes in which a human presence is implied rather than represented.

'Zhang Xiaogang: Shadows in the Soul' is the artist's first solo exhibition in Australia, features three decades of his practice and begins with two groups of early sketches, shown here for the first time. Highlighting Zhang Xiaogang's creative use of a range of media — from painting, drawing and photography to, more recently, sculptures in bronze — these works are drawn from the artist's personal collection, with key inclusions from the Queensland Art Gallery's Collection and private collections in Sydney, Beijing and New York.

CURRICULUM INFORMATION

Essential Learning – by the end of Year 9

Visual Art

Through their engagement with the ideas and works in 'The China Project', students will:

- research ideas to inform visual responses that consider social, cultural and political issues
- investigate the ways media areas are used in isolation or in combination to make art works
- deconstruct art works in relation to social, cultural, historical, spiritual, political, technological and economic contexts

Media

Students will investigate the ways in which:

- still and moving images, sounds and words are used to construct and reconstruct meaning in media texts
- media techniques and practices are used to deliver and exhibit media texts
- representations in media texts are influenced by different beliefs and ideas

Year 10 Guidelines: The Arts learning area

Media

In investigating the artists featured in 'The China Project', students will:

- consider the way that representations of Chinese people, places, events, ideas and emotions are constructed

Visual Art

Students will:

- analyse, interpret, evaluate and reflect on images and objects by artists in the 'The China Project', using visual language and expression to justify responses
- reflect on their own learning, apply new understandings and make connections to inform future visual art experiences

Senior Syllabus

Visual Art

Students will:

- explore contemporary visual arts practices and emerging technologies used by Chinese artists today
- critically reflect on and challenge meanings, purposes, practices and approaches of contemporary Chinese art works and artists

Film, Television and New Media

While viewing the moving-image works in 'The China Project', students will:

- analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of the narrative conventions of different moving-image media
- evaluate how representations have been formed to confirm or challenge particular Chinese identities and stereotypes
- draw on audiences' prior experiences to actively engage them and/or challenge and reward them

The following curriculum documents have been referred to:

- Assessment and Reporting Framework for The Arts, focusing on learning and assessment around the Essential Learnings and Standards for Visual Art and Media (© The State of Queensland, Queensland Studies Authority, 2007).
- Film, Television and New Media Senior Syllabus (© The State of Queensland, Queensland Studies Authority, 2005 and its licensors).
- Year 10 Guidelines: The Arts learning area. First version released January 2009 (© The State of Queensland, Queensland Studies Authority, 2009).
- Senior Syllabus – Visual Art (© The State of Queensland, Queensland Studies Authority, 2007).

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