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Review: Guan Wei at Hanart T Z Gallery

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Guan Wei at Hanart T Z Gallery

Over the past seven years, since Chinese artist Guan Wei settled in Australia, he has quietly edged his way to the forefront of contemporary Australian art. With some of the most appealing and incisive narrative works around, Guan has taken the essential elements of caricature and some of the concerns of both Chinese and Western society and fused them to create a series of humorous and often bizarre tales.

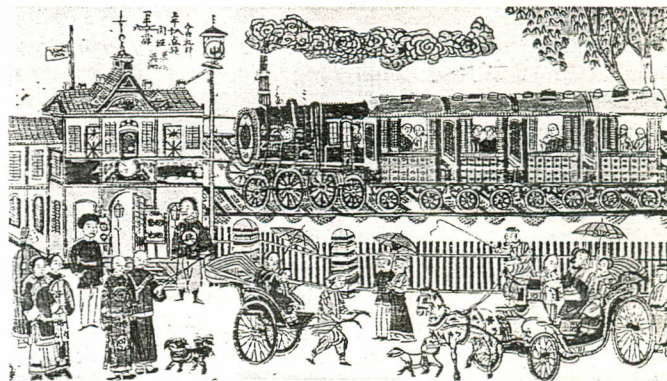
Crossing cultural borders without losing or discarding the essence of one's original cultural influences requires a painter to tread a difficult visual path. If the artist is not careful in transition, then their work could very easily become inconsequential in character and content. This has not happened to Guan, whose art points to a keen mind and one who is an active observer of the scene around him. His recent exhibition of 20 paintings entitled *Magic Garden* reinforces these qualities.

Created on plain, light brown paper office files, Guan's mixed-media *Magic Garden* is

just that, a formal, highly geometric place enchanted by design and symbol. Each piece is rather like an episode in a picaresque novel, though there is no rogue present. Each episode is an exercise in precision, an attempt to utilize the format which he has adopted to his painterly and philosophical needs without falling prey to the creative commonplace.

The magic here is really the sense of mystery that Guan has been able to create within the scope of such a small space. At no time does the viewer feel that his gardens are squashed, tiny spaces. He has through an astute use of line, color, and space managed at the same time to give us both a sense of spaciousness and the feeling for privacy.

A garden can either be open or closed, an arena for public or private events, a statement of personal need or general desire. What is "magical" here is Guan's ability to suggest that his gardens contain an astonishing range of the physical and the ethereal. Here, there is a person hiding, playing, reclining and there, a landscape above which clouds scud. Here, there is the calligraphy of an ancient culture and there, sym-



Artist unknown, **Shanghai Train Station**, Qing dynasty, Suzhou, Jiangsu province, 28 x 50 cm.

bolic suggestions of a much more recent one.

Chinese garden and Australian landscape, each containing the other's thoughts and passions, each meeting as we haven't witnessed them before, and each piece building on the other to create a much wider narrative that, through individual pieces and as a whole, creates yet another new narrative. Creating multiple meanings and tensions that build constantly in the mind of the viewer to create more tales is surely Guan's great achievement here. At same time, Guan seems to be suggesting that as we journey through his *Magic Garden*, in whatever order, the viewer will come to the end and recognize the real beginning of their journey for the first time.

Ian Findlay

Chinese Folk Art at Hong Kong University Museum and Art Gallery

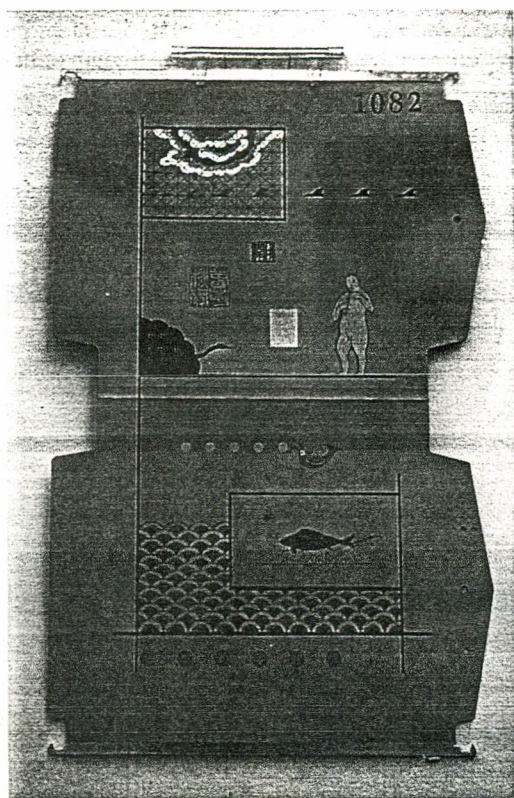
Entering the Year of the Rat, Hong Kong has been besieged recently by both attractive and crude depiction of rats and mice in a variety of media. When contrasting this array with a colored woodblock print of the Republic of China era (1911-1949) from Chunantan, Hunan province—*The Mouse Marrying off his Daughter*—we are reminded that the long history of New Year prints was included in other functions beyond the wish for a good harvest in the coming year. Here, in a satire on the

habit of using a daughter to climb in society, the mouse bride, in a jaunty sedan chair procession, finds a cat obstructing the way.

Although most Lunar New Year prints feature auspicious scenes, after 1840 contemporary events were also depicted, often as a popular reaction to crumbling Imperial rule and foreign intrusion—as seen in the 1900 work, *Robbing the Pawn Shops in Beijing*.

This exhibition included but a small selection of the collection of mainland China scholar, Professor Wang Shucun, who has collected pre-1949 folk art since his youth, and protected it through the political upheavals post 1949. Now he is happier, knowing that his research and writings are acknowledged not only internationally but within China itself.

One section of the show displayed richly embroidered opera banners and smaller items such as 'nine articles of the courtly style'—pouches for tobacco, snuff, betelnuts, perfume, money, fan, spectacles, pocket watch, and visiting cards. But it was the woodblock print which indicated how traditional Chinese life contended with modernization, such as the railway, cars, and habits of dress, rather than Western aggression. Here, they are shown absorbed and romanticized. In *School Teachers in Tianjin* flowery Western hats attractively contribute to an unconventional style of dress. Peasants in the countryside might have envied Chinese high-life as depicted in *Cars and Motor Boats in Shanghai*.



Guan Wei, **Magic Garden No. 14**, 1995, mixed media on paper, 58 x 36 cm.