

Acknowledgements

The Living Specimen

Guan Wei
A Chinese-Australian artist



Dear David
Thank you for your help
& time,
Melanie.

Melanie Eastburn

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Introduction

This thesis focuses on the work and experiences of Guan Wei. Guan Wei is a Chinese born artist now living and working in Australia. He is one of a number of mainland Chinese who came to live in Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹ While there are certain commonalities between the experiences of these artists, I have concentrated on Guan Wei not merely as a case study for recent emigre Chinese artists in Australia, but because of his prominent place in Australian contemporary art.²

Since arriving in Australia for the first time eight years ago, Guan Wei has made his way to the forefront of contemporary art in Australia. He is represented by Australia's foremost commercial contemporary gallery, Sherman Galleries, and he has strong links to Australian art institutions including the Tasmanian School of Art, the Canberra School of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Guan Wei is represented in major Australian public collections as well as in private collections and his work has been included in many important exhibitions in Australia. He has also had several solo exhibitions. Internationally, Guan Wei's work has been exhibited in Beijing, Paris, Seattle, Oxford, Hong Kong, Singapore and Tokyo.

The issues addressed in this thesis include the tensions between tradition and innovation in Chinese art, the close relationship between art and politics, cultural relationships between China and Australia over recent decades as well as issues of personal and national identity.

I have meshed my study of Guan Wei's work and experiences in China and Australia with a summary relevant cultural and political events in Chinese art in the twentieth century and against relations between the two countries. This background is important not only for providing a context for Guan Wei's work but because the history of art - literati, modern and

¹These artists include Ah Xian, Xiao Xian, Guo Jian, Shen Jiawei, Tang Song, Xiao Lu, Lin Chunyan, Ren Hua, Shen Shaomin and Wang Zhiyuan, many of whom I have met in the process of researching this thesis.

²Guan Wei is at least as prominent as expatriate Chinese artists Gu Wenda or Xu Bing in the United States or Cai Guoqiang in Japan.

postmodern - in China this century is markedly different from that of the West. Much Chinese art from this particularly turbulent and difficult period is intimately linked, both directly and indirectly, to politics.

The thesis provides a narrative of Guan Wei's life and career, including his shifts back and forth between China and Australia, alongside analysis of his art and style, which necessarily takes into account Chinese traditions and the recent history from which it arises. I outline the development of his distinctive style, ways in which it has changed and developed over time, and its relationship to his geographical shift. Naturally this discussion is not exhaustive but intended to set the parameters against which to assess the work of Australia's best-known Asian emigre artist.

Despite Guan Wei's prominence and the currency of this topic, relevant published information is surprisingly scattered and fragmentary. It appears mostly in journal articles, some of which are scholarly but many of which take the form of anecdotal reviews. Therefore a considerable amount of the information presented in this thesis is the result of original research gathered in the form of interviews with the artist and other relevant people.

The first chapter places Guan Wei's art education and experiments with European modernism in the early 1980s in the context of twentieth-century art in China. It includes discussion of the tensions between traditional literati and imported Western art styles in the first half of the century and of the impact on art practice of the Maoist period, particularly the so-called Cultural Revolution.

Chapter two explores the development of avant-garde art in China following the death of Mao and the implementation of the Open door policy in 1978. It includes discussion of the place of foreigners in recognising and promoting Chinese avant-garde art as well as the particular significance of cultural exchanges between China and Australia. There is specific reference to the Australian Fine Arts Delegation to China in 1988 which resulted in Guan Wei, having developed his distinctive style, being invited to visit the Tasmanian School of Art as an artist-in-residence.

Chapter three examines some of the important events of 1989. It was in this year that Guan Wei first visited Australia, the seminal *China/Avant-garde* exhibition was held in Beijing, the Tian'anmen Square massacre took place and Guan Wei made the decision to leave China and live in Australia on a semi-permanent basis.

Chapter four focuses the development of Guan Wei's career since his arrival in Australia in 1990. It includes discussion of the changes that have occurred in his work, both in style and content, during that period, the exhibitions in which he participated and how he has arrived at the forefront of contemporary art in Australia so quickly.

Chapter five deals with the complex issues of Guan Wei's identity as a Chinese-born artist working in Australia and poses questions about his place in Australian as well as Chinese art.

Chapter 1

Red, Bright and Shining

Guan Wei spent the first years of the 1980s experimenting with Western modernist painting styles. Carrying out his investigation in a carefully chronological manner, he began with Impressionism, and worked his way through Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and everything in between, until he reached the postmodern. At this time Guan Wei, who had already decided to become an artist but had not yet developed his own style, often emulated the styles of the artists whose work he was studying. His output during these years was prolific:

I think in China we went through a hundred years of Western art in ten years. Artists had to have strong stomachs at this time because of all the things they needed to digest.¹

The years following the implementation of Deng Xiaoping's Open Door policy in 1978 have been described as 'gluttony'.² It was at this time, as I will demonstrate, that after ten years of virtual isolation during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), China once again opened up to the West. Suddenly, perhaps as an unwelcome side effect of the policy, the aim of which was to import foreign knowledge and technology in order to improve China's economic status, Western culture began to flow into China.³

It became possible for outside influences, in the form of previously unavailable materials such as books and journals, as well as foreign visitors, to penetrate and influence Chinese culture.⁴ Guan Wei was

¹ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

² Annear 1995a, p. 54

³ Hsü 1995, p. 872

⁴ van Dijk 1993, pp. 18-19

working as a boiler attendant in Beijing when the effects of the Open Door policy began to be felt. The job allowed plenty of time for reading so Guan Wei devoured as many books on Western philosophy, science and art as he could.⁵ He was also an avid reader of novels. Guan Wei's wide reading included classic works by Freud, Nietzsche, Hegel, Sartre and Kafka.⁶ Having grown up knowing only Marxist philosophy, he found reading Freud particularly eye-opening. Guan Wei describes himself and his generation at the time as 'hungry and thirsty and anxious for new knowledge'. He feels that this was a very important time in his personal development because of the impact the exposure to new ideas had on his perceptions of the world.⁷

Guan Wei recalls going in 1979 to see one of the first exhibitions of modern European art to be shown in China for decades. The exhibition, which featured reproduction Impressionist works rather than originals, was, according to Guan Wei, a huge success. He remembers long queues of people waiting hours to see it. Guan Wei described finding Impressionism 'very fresh' after a lifetime of looking at propaganda pictures and traditional Chinese art. The Impressionist show heralded a number of similar exhibitions based on other major Western art movements including Cubism, Fauvism, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism.⁸ Although for Guan Wei and his generation, who had grown up in Mao Zedong's China, these experiences were

⁵ In summer Guan Wei worked as a builder's labourer, a job which left much less time for reading.

⁶ The voracity and careful thought with which Guan Wei approached these new sources seems to foreshadow the meticulous effort he puts into researching each series of his work. A trip to his Newtown studio finds the artist working amongst piles of books. In preparation for painting the 1997 series *Freestyle frogs* and *Rollercoaster*, for example, both of which include depictions of various insects, including cockroaches, lady beetles and bees, Guan Wei studied the anatomical make-up of these creatures in scientific detail.

⁷ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

⁸ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997; Laing 1993, p. 211

new and stimulating, the 1980s was not the first time that China had experienced modern Western art and thought.⁹

Following the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the opening up of China to the West in 1911, there was a similar influx of Western art, literature and ideas into China. At that time there was a rejection by radical intellectuals of traditional literati brush and ink painting and calligraphy (*guohua*) (see Plate 1) in favour of Western-style academic realist oil painting. These intellectuals, many of whom had studied in the West, advocated overcoming China's perceived cultural weaknesses by rejecting tradition and replacing it with the apparent strengths of the West. Their aim was to create a Chinese art and culture relevant to the development of the new republic and completely disassociated with the failings of the past.¹⁰ Literati painting, with its 'escapist ideals and ... yearning for tranquillity'¹¹ was considered an elitist and esoteric activity useless for revolutionary purposes. The Chinese folk and popular arts too were rejected on the basis of their vulgarity and naivety.¹²

Western-style realism and literati painting were not the only art movements competing for attention in early twentieth-century China. There were various Western-style modernisms and also a strain of progressive literati painting. The new literati painters believed that the style could be modernised and its language updated such that it would regain its relevance in the contemporary world while retaining its quintessential Chinese character.¹³ Many Chinese art students studied overseas, firstly in Japan and later in France and elsewhere in Europe, returning to China with knowledge of the latest artistic trends and

⁹ Clark 1982, p. 386; Wan Qingli 1992, p. 26

¹⁰ Hsü 1995, p. 494

¹¹ Li Xianting 1993b, p. 5

¹² Dixon 1996, p. 2

styles as well as books, journals and photographs documenting them. Back in China, a number of these students founded art schools in the major cities along the lines of the European academies. The first of these, a private college in Shanghai, was established in 1912. During the years between 1917 and 1923, collectively known as the May Fourth period, a number of similar institutions, including the Beijing Academy, were set up in Beijing.¹⁴

It is not, however, the role of this thesis to explain in detail the histories of modern and literati art in China. Suffice it to say that realism, because it could be used to communicate the social and political messages of those controlling it 'defeated' its competitors to become China's dominant art style.¹⁵

Later, when Mao Zedong was searching for an appropriate art form with which to promote his new China, he too initially advocated the use of Western-style realism.¹⁶ Mao's passion for artistic reform was demonstrated as early as 1942 when he delivered two lectures as part of the Communist Party *Yan'an Talks on Art and Literature*. In the talks he outlined his ideas about art, stressing that all art should be politically motivated and simultaneously serve, educate and entertain the masses.¹⁷

By the time the communist People's Republic of China was established in 1949, however, Mao had almost entirely rejected Western realism and all other forms of Western modernism in favour of art based on

¹³ Li Xianting 1993b, p. 6

¹⁴ Lang Shaojin 1993, p. 50; The May Fourth Movement acquired its name from a major student protest held in Beijing on 4 May 1919 when more than 5000 students protested against the failings of the Quomindang (Nationalist Party) government.

¹⁵ Roberts 1992, p. [1]

¹⁶ Li Xianting 1993b, p. 5

¹⁷ McDougall 1980; Li Xianting 1993b, p. 5; Laing 1988, pp. 3-4

the Soviet Socialist Realist model.¹⁸ Determined, like the radical intellectuals in the earlier decades of the century, to create a distinctly Chinese and culturally relevant art, Mao championed the combining of Soviet-style Socialist Realism with aspects of Chinese folk art, particularly the brightly-coloured traditional New Year prints and paintings (*nianhua*) (Plate 2).¹⁹ These festive decorations signalled joy and celebration, exactly the impression the Communist party wanted to portray.²⁰ The decision to incorporate folk art into the art of the communist state stems from Mao's anti-bourgeois belief in learning from the people as well as his understanding of the value of using adaptations of well-known visual forms in order to communicate with a largely illiterate population.²¹ The result of this stylistic amalgamation was Maoist Revolutionary Realism.²²

By the onset of the Cultural Revolution in the mid 1960s, Chinese-Soviet relations had cooled and all traces of Soviet 'greyness' had been removed from Maoist Revolutionary Realism. The new brighter, more colourful and overtly optimistic style became the only form of art acceptable to the state (Plate 3). Characterised by the axioms, 'Sublime, Outstanding, Perfect' and 'Red, Bright and Shining',²³ Maoist Revolutionary Realist prints and paintings invariably depict the glorious present and promise an even more radiant future.²⁴

The aim of the Cultural Revolution was to reform the thinking and attitudes of artists, writers and intellectuals whom Mao accused of ignoring the policies of the Communist party and of behaving in too

¹⁸Li Xianting, 1993b, p. 5; Sullivan 1996, p. 131

¹⁹ These prints and paintings on paper are used in celebrating all significant events, not just the coming of the New Year.

²⁰ Li Xianting 1993a, p. 45

²¹ Dixon 1996, p. 5

²² Li Xianting 1993b, p. 6

²³ Li Xianting 1993b, p. 6

liberal and bourgeois a manner. In order to curb their activities, Mao ordered the closure of all universities and introduced harsh penalties for anyone suspected of having 'counterrevolutionary' tendencies. Many of China's art schools were also closed down and those that remained open were used not to train the elite, as they had been since they opened earlier in the century, but to train peasants, workers and soldiers in Maoist Revolutionary Realist art.²⁵

Despite growing up during the Maoist period, Guan Wei enjoyed a very classical bourgeois childhood. His father, an actor in the Beijing Opera, was interested in traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy and practised these arts himself. Guan Wei watched his father work with interest and at the age of five or six, began to copy his calligraphy and brush and ink painting. He also devoted time to adding colour to black and white comic books. Guan Wei recalls that he was a shy and quiet child who enjoyed the solitary nature of these activities. He liked the idea that he could create works for himself alone, pictures that did not look like anyone else's and of which there was no expectation of external communication. Guan Wei also studied operatic acting but abandoned it, deciding to concentrate on his art instead when his voice broke.²⁶

Guan Wei attended both primary and high school in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution but, according to his personal assessment, very little of substance was taught there. Concerned about the lack of educational opportunities and the implications it might have on his son's future, Guan Wei's father encouraged his interest in art so that at least he would be trained in something. Guan Wei's father had a friend who was a teacher at the Central Academy of Fine Art and the

²⁴ Dixon 1996, p. 10

²⁵ Roberts 1992, p. [1]

²⁶ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

two men entered an informal arrangement for the child to be tutored in calligraphy, drawing and Western-style academic painting. For the next five or six years Guan Wei made weekly visits to the houses of a number of teachers to have his work examined, criticised and encouraged. These visits continued throughout primary school and into his high school years.²⁷

By the time Guan Wei reached high school his skills were becoming quite developed and he was chosen as one of the small group of students given the task of creating the *dazibo* - propaganda posters and banners that were put up all around the school. The same students were in charge of writing and illustrating lines from Mao's thoughts and poetry on the blackboards throughout the school. He considered these activities extremely dull but remarked that at least they provided him with an opportunity to practise his calligraphic, drawing and painting skills and to work in a variety of media including pencil, pastels, charcoal, ink and water colour.²⁸

In 1976, having completed high school, Guan Wei, like most of his class and generation, was required to spend some time in the countryside. He spent three years there working as a builder's labourer, using his spare time to further develop his artistic skills. It was at this time that he began his first experiments in oil painting. Returning to Beijing in 1979, just as the effects of the Open Door policy began to be felt, Guan Wei resumed his visits to his old teacher from the Central Academy.²⁹

In 1980, however, there was a turning point in Guan Wei's approach to his work. After having seen an intense and depressing film, Guan

²⁷ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997

²⁸ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997, Burns 1992, p. 3

²⁹ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997, Burns 1992

Wei, who was used to concentrating on his artistic technique, was moved to express some of the emotions the film had inspired in him in his painting and to explore the human condition, a feature which runs through the entire body of his established work:

I went home and spent two or three hours painting a picture, just a small one, but when I had finished I looked at it and thought it was just perfect. When I took it to show my teacher in the Central Academy he looked at it and said, 'What is this? It's all wrong'. He said, 'Guan Wei, you are running before you can walk. You haven't got the technical skill to do your own work yet'. I was very disappointed and angry about this and I decided not to go back there and to just keep working on my own.³⁰

In the following years, Guan Wei continued to work alone and concentrate his energies on a systematic study of recently reintroduced Western modernist styles. While he rarely copied extant paintings directly, the pictures he painted during this period clearly display the process of his investigation into European modernism. Plate 4, painted in 1980 is a classic example of a modernist reclining nude.³¹ Plate 5, from 1983, illustrates Guan Wei's untitled take on Cubism, while Plate 6 could only have been inspired by De Chirico, a painter for whom Guan Wei still has great admiration.³² These early works give no indication of the individual style that Guan Wei himself would begin to develop over the next few years. Competently crafted they are merely studies, practice for his own work. It was only in 1984, having spent six years looking at and copying various examples of modern Western art movements, that Guan Wei's inimitable quirky style started to come through in his work. Very flat, very grey and very cold,

³⁰ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

³¹ Nudes are rarely depicted in Chinese art of any period. However 1980 was a particularly liberal period for experimental painting in China, so it is not surprising to see Guan Wei exploring the genre at this time. Three years later, in the midst of the Chinese government's Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign (1983-84), nudes again became politically unacceptable and many artists who were known to have painted them were regarded with suspicion. Ah Xian was among the artists singled out for such surveillance. Jose 1995b, p. 137; Laing 1993, p. 218

Guan Wei's early original work was almost diametrically opposed to Mao's 'red, bright and shining'.

In 1982 Guan Wei decided that he wanted to study art in a formal environment. However, perhaps because of his distinctive style, he had to sit the art academy entrance examination a number of times before he was accepted.³³ Of course his initial lack of success may also have been due to the high demand for positions in such courses. The first of the art schools that had been closed during the Cultural Revolution reopened in 1977 and the response to these 'new' art schools was extraordinary. Sixteen thousand prospective students applied for the first sixty-eight positions available at the Hangzhou Academy and four thousand applied for the forty places at the Canton Academy.³⁴

Eventually one institution - the Beijing Teacher's College - accepted him. There he was trained not as an artist but as an art teacher. Guan Wei did not find the college particularly stimulating but observed that at least it was better than building houses or attending boilers, and it did provide further opportunities to improve his skills. On completion of his four-year course, Guan Wei took a position as an art teacher in his old high school. The job required only a few hours teaching a week, allowing Guan Wei plenty of time to work on his own art.

At that time I painted a lot of my own pictures, pictures about how I felt and about my friends, family and colleagues. Also at that time China was changing and many foreign people began to be interested in buying and looking at art in China. I was in a good position, I could earn money from my job and from selling my pictures to foreigners at the same time. I also had a lot of opportunities to

³² Burns 1992, p. 4

³³ Jose 1992c, p. [2]

³⁴ Sullivan 1996, p. 217

communicate with foreign people and foreign artists. It was a very interesting time.³⁵

³⁵ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

Chapter 2

Treasure Hunt

Guan Wei first visited Australia in 1989 as an artist-in-residence at the Tasmanian School of Art in Hobart. He and three other Chinese artists, Ah Xian, Xiao Xian and Lin Chunyan, were invited to take up short residencies in Tasmania following their meeting with members of the Australian Fine Arts Delegation in Beijing in 1988. The Fine Arts Delegation comprised David Williams, Director of the Canberra School of Art; Betty Churcher, then Director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia; and Geoff Parr from the Tasmanian School of Art.³⁶

Sponsored by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the delegation was in China from 24 September to 6 October to explore aspects of contemporary art in China and to investigate the potential for new arts exchanges between China and Australia. The delegation visited numerous art schools, museums and places of cultural significance in Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Hangzhou. Meetings with curators, artists, academics, government officials and others associated with the fine arts in China were also on the agenda.³⁷ The visit was part of a series of cultural exchanges between China and Australia initiated by the Whitlam Labor Government following its formal recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1972.³⁸

Emphasis on the importance of cultural exchanges between Australia and Asia in general, and between Australia and China in particular, has intensified in recent years, primarily as a result of increased economic interest in Asia on the part of successive Australian

³⁶Williams 1988, pp. 1, 29

³⁷Williams 1988, p. 1

³⁸Paroissien 1993, p. 3; Sheridan 1995, p. 7

governments. Despite its essentially economic foundations, this 'push into Asia' has been accompanied by cultural interactions with fascinating implications for both Australia and China.³⁹

The 1988 Australian Fine Arts Delegation visit to China was facilitated by Dr Nicholas Jose, then Cultural Councillor at the Australian Embassy in Beijing. The years in which Jose, a novelist, and the actor and theatre director Carrillo Gantner before him, held this position have been described by the writer and sinologist, Linda Jaivin, as 'probably our most exciting period of official cultural exchange with China'.⁴⁰ The propensity of these diplomats to befriend dissident artists, writers and musicians, although often frowned upon by other officials, has had some very interesting ramifications for Australia.⁴¹ Perhaps this is because, as Jaivin puts it, 'it is at the margins, in the difficult places, that the most interesting things are happening in both our cultures, and that these are also the areas where there is likely to be the greatest possibility of communication and impact.'⁴²

In his essay, 'My search for a shaman', Jose recounts his initial meeting with, and impressions of, Guan Wei, who by this time was an established figure in the Beijing avant-garde art scene:

In 1988 I met Guan Wei ... whose then predominantly grey canvasses of figures marked with acupoints instantly appealed to me for their cool, sharp, playfulness - a rare quality in the academy art of the time, whether in traditional Chinese manner or in the solemn adaptation of social realism or other newer imports. Guan Wei had stacks of paintings in his studio that had been seen only by a few friends. Standing to one side of the system, Guan Wei showed a

³⁹ Ang and Stratton 1995, p. 28

⁴⁰ Jaivin 1995, p. 152

⁴¹ Jaivin 1995, p. 152

⁴² Jaivin 1995, p. 153

startling inventiveness, a capacity for play which gave a rare quality of humour to his work.⁴³

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a renaissance in art and literature in China. The two movements followed much the same course and often intertwined. Both had official and avant-garde or experimental components, flowered concurrently and suffered as a result of the same political events. While China's underground literature scene will not be discussed in this thesis, it is important to be aware that the developments in contemporary Chinese art at this time did not occur in isolation.⁴⁴

The first major avant-garde artists of the post-Mao period were the Stars.⁴⁵ Making their appearance in 1979, they were a group of dissident artists who, more through their philosophy and defiant actions than their art itself, had a significant impact on the evolution of contemporary art in China. Their slogan, 'Käthe Kollwitz is our banner, Picasso our pioneer', expressed their interest in humanism and desire for artistic and social freedom.⁴⁶ They attempted to cast off 'the representationalist realist burden by imbuing real objects with symbolic meaning'.⁴⁷ Intimately involved in the pro-democracy movement of the time, the Stars' first exhibition was part of a pro-democracy demonstration.⁴⁸

In late 1979, having applied for, and been denied, permission to exhibit their work in public, the Stars staged an 'unofficial' exhibition in the park outside China's most prestigious gallery, the China Art Gallery, in

⁴³ Jose 1995b, p. 135

⁴⁴ Yeh 1996, pp. 51-52

⁴⁵ The Stars group included Ma Desheng, Huang Rui, Ah Cheng, Wang Keping, Ai Weiwei and Bo Yun. Hui Ching-shuen 1989.

⁴⁶ Li Xianting 1993b, p. 7; Barmé 1989, p. 76

⁴⁷ Li Xianting 1993b, p. 7

Beijing. The exhibition included prints, oil paintings and 'absurd' wooden sculptures inspired by recent contact with Western art.⁴⁹ It opened on 1 October to coincide with, and make a point of not celebrating, the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The exhibition was closed down by police the following day but the Stars were later given an opportunity to hold an 'official' exhibition of their work inside the China Art Gallery. The authorities offered them this second exhibition in order to demonstrate that their actions were pointless and that nobody was interested in their work.⁵⁰ The exhibition proved to be very popular, as a result, no third Stars exhibition was allowed to be held in China.⁵¹

Contemporary art in China had its 'official' beginning some years later in 1985 when the critic Li Xiaoshan declared that traditional painting was dead.⁵² Around this time the 'second generation' of artists to have been through the reopened art schools, as well as a number of self-trained artists, began to make an impact on China's alternative art scene. Well aware of Western art through the journals, books and other links made available to them in the early 1980s, these artists, incorporated the new knowledge into their work and actively opposed the Maoist line that art must serve politics.⁵³

Known collectively as the '1985 New Wave', the movement comprised a variety of strands of artistic thought and practice which can be broadly divided into the categories of rational painting, 'vital' expressionism and conceptual art. Rational painting includes work by artists inspired

⁴⁸ Li Xianting 1993b, p. 7; Barmé 1989, p. 76

⁴⁹ Roberts 1992, p. [1]

⁵⁰ Ah Cheng 1989, pp. 17-18; Sullivan 1996, p. 224. The second Stars exhibition ran from 23 November until 2 December 1979.

⁵¹ Sullivan 1989, p. 6; Ah Cheng 1989, p. 18

⁵² Jose 1992b, p. 53

⁵³ Cohen 1992, p. 105

by such Western art movements as Surrealism and Dadaism who portrayed a sense of loneliness, psychological distress and spirituality in their work. Another movement, 'vital' expressionism represents a combination of abstract expressionism and Chinese 'primitive' art, described by the writer Lauk'ung Chan as being, 'intended to show the state and the intrinsic essence of being'.⁵⁴ The third category, conceptual art, often has the appearance of Western modernist works by artists such as Beuys and Duchamp, but is grounded in a distinctly Eastern philosophical base. It is characterised by a renewed interest in Daoist and Zen thought.⁵⁵ Also at this time a New Literati painting movement was established, seeking to balance the seriousness of so much New Wave art by returning to the 'spirit of idle play' of traditional Chinese painting.⁵⁶

The emphasis on the emotions and experiences of the individual in the 1985 New Wave represents a significant shift away from wider Chinese culture's subjugation of the individual to the group, an ethos which was clearly expressed in such Chinese art forms as Maoist Revolutionary Realism.⁵⁷

Public exhibitions of avant-garde art were strongly discouraged in China in the 1980s and opportunities to hold them were extremely limited. Guan Wei, for example, applied for permits to exhibit publicly on a number of occasions but all his applications were rejected. Consequently, avant-garde artists tended to hold salon-style exhibitions of their work either in their own homes or in those of sympathetic foreign diplomats or journalists.⁵⁸ These 'foreigners' were the artists'

⁵⁴ Lauk'ung Chan 1992, p. 111

⁵⁵ Lauk'ung Chan 1992, p. 111; Li Xianting 1993b, p. 9

⁵⁶ Li Xianting 1993a, pp. 47-8

⁵⁷ Li Xianting 1993b, p. 8

⁵⁸ Jose 1992b, p. 55

clients. As Guan Wei points out, very few Chinese were interested in buying Chinese contemporary art, but foreigners were fascinated by it.⁵⁹

In a brief discussion on the phenomenon, Australian sinologist Geremie Barmé has suggested that one of the reasons for the attraction of foreigners to the Chinese avant-garde lay in the appeal of having 'surreptitious exchanges with "dissidents"' and having 'direct contact with Chinese acting outside the limits of government control', while remaining safe yourself.⁶⁰ The shows in homes, for instance, attracted little official interference as they were as much private parties as they were exhibitions.⁶¹

Barmé refers to the location of avant-garde artists as the exotic 'other' by Westerners as an 'oriental incarnation of the "pet primitive" psychology Tom Wolfe described so tellingly in *The Painted Word*'.⁶² While this may be the case, the artists themselves were well aware of the situation and used it to their advantage, including adopting their own 'pet foreigners'. In a recent conversation, Guan Wei explained that the backing of foreign journalists, curators and critics was essential to having the work of alternative artists in China known, shown and sold, both in China and internationally. He also jokingly remarked that, 'if you find a good foreigner you try to keep them for yourself and avoid introducing them to your other friends who are artists, in case they like their work better than yours'.⁶³

While in Beijing in 1988, at least two members of the Australian Fine Arts Delegation, Geoff Parr and David Williams, attended an

⁵⁹ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February and 7 May 1997

⁶⁰ Barmé 1989, p. 80

⁶¹ Jose 1992b, p. 56

⁶² Barmé 1989, p. 80

⁶³ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

exhibition of avant-garde art at Nicholas Jose's home.⁶⁴ The exhibition, which included paintings by Guan Wei, Ah Xian and Lin Chunyan as well as photographs by Xiao Xian, was put up a week early in order that the Delegation could see it.⁶⁵ Both Parr and Williams were impressed by what they saw. Although at the time they had only been in China for four days, in retrospect Parr recalls that the work of this small group of artists showed the most promise of any of the work he saw during the visit. Parr was particularly struck by Guan Wei's paintings which he considered the most mature of the group. He describes most of the other art seen by the Delegation during their time in China as naive and undeveloped.⁶⁶

The paintings Guan Wei exhibited were from his 1987 *Figures with acupuncture points* series. The works in this series are primarily grey, accented with small amounts of red. The restricted palette of black, white and red was adapted from the black ink, white paper and red seal of traditional Chinese ink painting.⁶⁷ As indicated by the series title, each work depicts a figure, or figures, marked with acupuncture points. These acupoints, some genuine, some invented by the artist, are painted in red and accompanied by a pair of Chinese characters.⁶⁸

Rope games (Plate 7) from this series, shows a highly stylised, faceless grey figure with long fine fingers playing cat's cradle. The figure, with a red acupuncture point painted on the right side of its head, is positioned against a very flat darker grey background. The character's agile hands are its most expressive feature and it is only through them

⁶⁴ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997; Parr, pers. comm., 2 May 1997; Williams, pers. comm., 16 May 1997. According to Parr, he and Williams attended the exhibition but Betty Churcher did not.

⁶⁵ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997; Jose 1995b, p. 136; Parr, pers. comm., 2 May 1997

⁶⁶ Parr, pers. comm., 2 May 1997

⁶⁷ Jose 1991, p. 17

⁶⁸ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

that any indication of the figure's emotional state is revealed. Guan Wei's interest in the story-telling potential of hand gestures reappears throughout the body of his work and has links to the way hands are used to relate narratives in Chinese opera, a skill Guan Wei learned as a child.⁶⁹

Although *Rope games* is quite an early work, it displays a number of the characteristics which recur in Guan Wei's later painting and which are peculiar to his work. These include, the flatness of the paint, the large unadorned spaces, the shapeless figure, the intricate expressive hands, Chinese ideograms and the use of red acupuncture points.

Figures with acupuncture points is one of Guan Wei's earliest works painted in series. The artist started painting in series because, in contrast to the traditions of narrative history painting, he does not believe that an entire story can be told in one painting. Guan Wei also comments that a viewer will only look at a single piece for a short time and that perhaps the more components there are to a work, the more time the viewer is likely spend in front of it. The long vertical format of the *Rope games* canvas is another of the distinctive features of Guan Wei's work. Initially inspired by opportunism - Guan Wei needed frames for his paintings and the old long, narrow window frames in the school where he worked were being replaced, so he took them - the format is now an instantly recognisable part of his style.⁷⁰

Guan Wei's work of this period is very individual and does not quite fit into any of the categories into which the 1985 New Wave is often divided. It does, however, include elements from the categories. For example, it includes reference to Eastern philosophical and cultural traditions, it expresses feelings of loneliness, as well as demonstrating

⁶⁹ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997

⁷⁰ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

interest in and concern for the experiences of the individual. The quirkiness of *Rope games* indicates some interest in the 'spirit of idle play'⁷¹, yet it is, at this stage, disturbing, introspective play.

Guan Wei recalls Parr asking him a lot of questions about his paintings at the exhibition in Jose's apartment. Relayed through an interpreter, the two spent several hours discussing what constituted modernism and postmodernism in China, after Guan Wei referred to his work as postmodern.⁷² Parr was surprised at how well informed Guan Wei was about postmodernism, and about the amount of information that must have been available on the subject in China for Guan Wei to be so well read. He was impressed also by Guan Wei's extensive knowledge of Western art history, despite his having seen very few original works.⁷³ That Guan Wei was well informed about art and keeping up with recent international philosophical debates was in fact hardly unexpected given the intensity of his auto-didactic approach to information.

Approximately two months after the Fine Arts Delegation returned to Australia, the artists whose work had been on show at Jose's apartment received invitations from Parr to visit the Tasmanian School of Art as artists-in-residence. In January 1989, with the laborious process of organising passports and visas completed, Guan Wei, Ah Xian and Lin Chunyan left China for the first time to come to Australia.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Li Xianting 1993a, pp. 47-8

⁷² Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997

⁷³ Parr, pers. comm., 2 May 1997

⁷⁴ Xiao Xian was unable to accept the offer.

Chapter 3

No U-Turn

Following the massacre in Tian'anmen Square on 4 June 1989, there was an overwhelming sense of devastation, despondency and uncertainty in China. Hopes had been shattered. In an attempt to counter the malaise amongst his artist friends, Guan Wei organised a group of 'unofficial' artists, including Ah Xian, Xiao Xian, Wang Youshen and Lin Chunyan, to meet once a month in each other's homes to discuss art and encourage each other's artistic development.

The group established regular art competitions. Each month the members were assigned two themes to work on, and the following month they returned with their works on one of the subjects. Examples of the themes include 'Diary', 'Wind', 'Book', 'Paper' and 'Photograph'. The completed works were laid out around a room and discussed by the comrades. In a parody of democracy, the winners of the competition were selected by secret ballot and awarded token monetary prizes. Friends of the artists, including foreigners such as Nicholas Jose, were invited to attend the meetings and vote for the best pictures. Among the positive effects of these competitions, held in a supportive atmosphere, was the friendly rivalry sparked between the artists, inspiring them to put more effort into their work.⁷⁵

The artists in the group tried not to draw attention to themselves since, in the months following the tragic end to the pro-democracy protests, the government was particularly suspicious of groups of people gathering together. Guan Wei in particular, was anxious to be inconspicuous as by this stage he had applied to return to Australia and

⁷⁵ Jose 1992c, p. [2]; Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February and 7 May 1997. *Survivors*, an exhibition of work by this group was held in Tasmania in 1992.

did not want to have any difficulty in gaining the necessary documents and approval.

At the time all 'unofficial' culture including that associated with art and literature was again pushed to the periphery and greater governmental control was exercised over cultural activities. The progressive art journals, *Fine Arts in China* and *The Trend of Art Thought* were closed down and editors and writers from other journals who had been involved with the avant-garde lost their positions. Between 1989 and 1991 the surviving official art journals *Fine Art* and *Jiangsu Pictorial*, mentioned avant-garde art and in particular the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition only in order to denounce and denigrate them.⁷⁶ The few opportunities for artists to show their work publicly disappeared and recent work could only be seen in art schools or in the homes or studios of the artists.⁷⁷

The *China/Avant-garde* exhibition had opened at the China Art Gallery in Beijing on 5 February 1989. Organised by a group of art critics and academics - including Li Xianting and Gao Minglu, the editors of the journals *Fine Arts in China* and *Fine Arts* respectively - it was the first major officially sanctioned exhibition of 'unofficial' art to be held in China.⁷⁸ The show's organisers aimed to illustrate the changes that had taken place in Chinese art since 1978 and to demonstrate the strength and importance of the avant-garde movement. The exhibition and the events that accompanied it, however, also raised questions about the future of avant-garde art in China. *China/Avant-garde* was held under the banner of the No U-Turn sign as a symbol of

⁷⁶van Dijk 1993, p. 41

⁷⁷Cohen 1992, p. 106; van Dijk 1993, p. 41

⁷⁸Roberts 1992, p. [1]; Barmé and Jaivin 1992, p. 280; Chang Tsong-zung 1993, p. i.; van Dijk 1993, p. 33

the organisers' conviction that Chinese art must continue to move forward.⁷⁹

Conceived in 1987, at the height of the government's Anti-Bourgeois Liberalism campaign, the initial idea for the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition was rejected by the Chinese Artists Association.⁸⁰ When the proposal was revived in the calmer political climate of mid 1988, more than a hundred artists came together to discuss the exhibition and show slides of their work, from which a preliminary selection for inclusion in the show was made.⁸¹ Three of Guan Wei's paintings were selected for exhibition.⁸²

However, once the opportunity to visit Australia promised to become a reality, Guan Wei withdrew his pictures from the show, deciding to exhibit them here instead. Guan Wei was also afraid that his works might get lost or damaged in China if he was not there to ensure their safety. By the time Guan Wei withdrew from the show, the *China/Avant-garde* catalogue was already in the process of being printed: thus, although not exhibited, Guan Wei's paintings, including works from the *Figures with acupuncture points* series, are reproduced in the exhibition catalogue.⁸³

China/Avant-garde was a comprehensive retrospective survey of Chinese avant-garde art since 1978, with particular emphasis on the 'New Wave' which had reached its high point in 1985. As works by almost all of the individual artists and groups who had come to prominence in the preceding decade were exhibited, the show

⁷⁹Roberts 1992, pp. [1-2]; Xu Hong 1993, p. 123.; Lauk'ung Chan 1992, p. 111-2

⁸⁰The Artists Association was a government organisation established in 1949 in order to supervise and regulate artistic activity. Sullivan 1996, pp. 129, 226

⁸¹Sullivan 1996, p. 274

⁸²Guan Wei, pers. comm., 12 May 1997

⁸³Guan Wei, pers. comm., 12 May 1997

consequently featured numerous art styles created from often conflicting philosophical perspectives.⁸⁴ Many of the works exhibited in *China/Avant-garde* were well-known examples of post-Stars modernism, but controversial 'postmodern' works by younger artists produced as recently as 1989 were also included.⁸⁵ The variety of work shown was such that the exhibition was divided into the following categories: installation art, action art, pop art, art with a religious or spiritual resonance, absurdist art, conceptual and expressionist art, and ink painting or anti 'New Wave' art.⁸⁶

Among the postmodern works exhibited were Huang Yongping's *A Comprehensive History of Chinese Art and A Concise History of Modern Painting* and an installation/performance piece by Wu Shanzhuan. In the space assigned for his work, Wu Shanzhuan set up a stall and started selling prawns. Although very popular, his exhibit was closed down after about half an hour, the artist taken away for questioning and his sale sign torn up. Upon his return Wu Shanzhuan erected a sign in the place of his prawn stall which read 'Closed temporarily for stocktaking'.⁸⁷ *A Comprehensive History of Chinese Art and A Concise History of Modern Painting* was a comment on the written word and the subjectivity of interpretations of history. It consisted of two books, *A Comprehensive History of Chinese Art* and *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, which had been swirled around together in a washing machine for two minutes.⁸⁸

An important event in itself, the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition took on even greater significance when, within hours of the show opening, the artist Xiao Lu fired a gun at the installation she and her partner

⁸⁴Li Xianting 1993b, p. 9

⁸⁵Barmé and Jaivin, 1992, p. 279

⁸⁶Roberts 1992, p. [2], Xu Hong 1993, p. 127

⁸⁷The editors of *Fine Arts in China*, quoted in Barmé and Jaivin 1992, p. 279

Tang Song had produced.⁸⁹ The installation, entitled *Dialogue* (1989) (Plate 8), consisted of a pair of telephone booths, side by side, separated by a mirror. A telephone with its receiver dangling stood on a plinth before the mirror. A woman was using a telephone in one booth and a man was talking in the other. They were obviously not communicating with each other. Xiao Lu later explained that the work, as it was, 'lacked destructive energy'⁹⁰ and was incomplete. In response, she fired two shots at the mirror between the booths, shattering it.⁹¹ Both Xiao Lu and Tong Song were subsequently arrested and the entire *China/Avant-garde* exhibition was temporarily closed.⁹²

The exhibition was permitted to open again on the proviso that there would be no more performances.⁹³ However, it was closed on at least two more occasions during the two weeks it was on display. The second time, after the *Dialogue* shooting incident, was the result of another performance piece which took the form of a bomb threat.⁹⁴

Tang Song and Xiao Lu were detained by police for questioning for three days but were released without being charged, possibly because they were both children of high-ranking officials.⁹⁵ Their release marked the completion of their installation, further reorienting its focus by highlighting the sensitive problem of corruption within the

⁸⁸Sullivan 1996, p. 275

⁸⁹Xiao Lu and Tong Song both now live in Sydney.

⁹⁰Xiao Lu quoted in Sullivan, 1996, p. 275

⁹¹Sullivan 1996, p. 275; Xu Hong 1993, p. 127

⁹²van Dijk 1993, p. 32

⁹³Sullivan 1996, p. 275

⁹⁴van Dijk 1993, p. 32

⁹⁵some sources, such as Sullivan 1996, p. 275 have the artists detained for two days. I have followed the majority of sources which specify three; Xu Hong 1993, p. 127; Li Xianting 1993b, p. 9

Chinese legal system.⁹⁶ Xiao Lu's actions had extensive repercussions. According to the influential Chinese art critic, Li Xianting:

The gunshots ... were the mechanism by which the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition, and the '80s avant-garde art movements that it represented, were led to the execution block. The artists involved were thrown out of the national art museum and forced underground once again. In a way the fate of the exhibition was a precursor to the fate of the student movement at Tian'anmen, marking the conclusion of an era's ideals.⁹⁷

On 15 April 1989 former Communist Party Secretary Hu Yaobang, who had shown some leniency and sensitivity towards artists, writers and intellectuals, died. Subsequently a group of people, primarily students, artists, writers and teachers, gathered in Tian'anmen Square to mourn his death.⁹⁸ At the same time they demanded democracy, freedom and an end to official corruption, nepotism, and favouritism.⁹⁹ Many of the demonstrators were students from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. They resurrected and marched under the No U-Turn sign that had symbolised the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition. Consequently the No U-Turn symbol became a banner for the pro-democracy movement as a whole¹⁰⁰

Some of the art students painted a huge portrait of Hu Yaobang and placed it against the Monument to the People's Heroes in Tian'anmen Square, declaring him a hero of the people.¹⁰¹ Support for the demonstrators grew rapidly and, over the next six weeks, numerous similar demonstrations took place not only in Beijing but throughout

⁹⁶Li Xianting quoted in Barmé and Jaivin 1992, p. 281.; Li Xianting 1993b, p. 10

⁹⁷Li Xianting 1993b, p. 10

⁹⁸Schell 1990, p. 11; van Dijk, p. 33; Sullivan 1996, pp. 226, 276

⁹⁹ Schell 1990, p. 12

¹⁰⁰ Barmé and Jaivin 1992, p. 279

¹⁰¹Cao Xinyuan (a sculptor) quoted in J. K. Fairbank, O. Schell, J. Spence et al. 1990 p. 116

China. The excitement surrounding the events intensified and there were significant increases in the numbers of protesters involved.¹⁰²

By May 4, the anniversary of the important 1919 May Fourth Movement, the number of protesters in Tian'anmen Square had swelled to approximately 250 000 people. The crowds of peaceful protesters frustrated by the lack of political reform grew daily. A visit to China by Mikhail Gorbachov was planned for May 14 and a group of students, assuming that the government would want to give in to their demands and clear the square before his arrival, began a hunger strike to speed up the process. It made no impact on the government and martial law was declared on May 20. The feeling of freedom ebbed.¹⁰³

A major demonstration in Tian'anmen Square was planned for May 30. During the previous week, students in Shanghai had incorporated a copy of the Statue of Liberty into one of their demonstrations. The Beijing students wanted a similar emblem, but hoped for something both more original as well as more Chinese than the Statue of Liberty. With financial support from the Federation of Beijing University Students, art students from the Central Academy created a ten-metre tall styrofoam 'Goddess of Democracy', holding a torch in her hands, especially for the occasion (Plate 9). Adapted from an existing work by a Central Academy student, the giant figure alluded both to the Statue of Liberty and to Kuan Yin, the Chinese Goddess of Compassion.¹⁰⁴ One student declared that, 'The Goddess of Democracy has to hold her torch with two hands because democracy is so hard to support in China.'¹⁰⁵

¹⁰²Sullivan 1996, pp. 226, 276; Schell 1990, p. 11; van Dijk, p. 33

¹⁰³Schell 1990, p. 12

¹⁰⁴ Sullivan 1996, p. 276-77; Blofeld 1977, p. 149

¹⁰⁵quoted in Cohen 1992, p. 105

On the eve of the May 30 demonstration, the Goddess was taken to the square in pieces and assembled there using plaster and wire. Banned from driving into the square, the students surrounded the pieces of the sculpture and wheeled it into the square on flat trolleys. They then erected the Goddess of Democracy in a position of prominence, face to face with Mao. Five nights later, tanks rolled in to Tian'anmen Square, demonstrators were killed and the Goddess of Democracy was crushed.¹⁰⁶

In the months following the tragic end to the pro-democracy demonstrations, Guan Wei created a series of works to capture the ebullience and optimism that characterised the weeks leading up to it. Entitled *Two finger exercise* (also called *Dhyana of two fingers*) (1989-90), each work in the series depicts figures making victory signs. During the period of the pro-democracy demonstrations the two-finger victory sign was used as a sign of solidarity between its supporters. According to Guan Wei, it was extremely common to see strangers making the sign at each other in passing. Truck loads of students made it as they travelled to Tian'anmen Square, people greeted each other with it in the streets and even little children made victory signs. Guan Wei was struck by the potency of this simple gesture and began exploring it in his work.¹⁰⁷

The alternative title for this series, *Dhyana of two fingers*, is a reference to the Buddhist *mudra* (symbolic position of the hand) *Dhyana*. Each *mudra* is a physical expression of a particular energy. *Mudras* release the energies relevant to the position in which the hands are held. *Dhyana* is the *mudra* of meditation and absolute balance. It is a *mudra*

¹⁰⁶Cao Xinyuan (a sculptor) quoted in J. K. Fairbank, O. Schell, J. Spence et al. 1990 p. 116

¹⁰⁷Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

which releases powerful protective energies.¹⁰⁸ Each of the forty-eight gouaches in the *Two finger exercise* series has a short poem, written by Guan Wei, inscribed on the back of it.

Many of the images are humorous, others are poignant, but there is an underlying optimism throughout the series. *Two finger exercise no. 15* (Plate 10), is a light-hearted work which depicts a male figure making the victory sign with both his hands and with his crossed legs as well.

It is accompanied by the words:

Happy-go-lucky, free as a bird
fingers in the air, its better than ever.
Cross your legs in a v-sign to match!¹⁰⁹

Two finger exercise no. 35 (Plate 11), shows a lone figure sitting at a window, making a v-sign above his head and looking through one eye at a nearby insect. The accompanying poem, in which Guan Wei explores the irrational expectations of special protective properties attributed to the victory sign, reads:

I open the window to let in some breeze
And in a small insect flies
But when I give it two fingers
In a V-formation it suddenly flees.¹¹⁰

The No U-Turn sign is an appropriate symbol for 1989 as the year marks a series of significant events in China's cultural and political life from which there can be no turning back. In terms of the art world, the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition and the massacre in Tian'anmen Square on 4 June are the two most conspicuous catalysts for change. Official disapproval of avant-garde art intensified after June 4. Art journals were closed down and the limited opportunities for public exhibition diminished further. Facing such a repressive climate, many

¹⁰⁸Jansen 1990, pp. 4, 6

¹⁰⁹Translated by Claire Roberts and Nicholas Jose, text courtesy of Guan Wei.

¹¹⁰Translated by Claire Roberts and Nicholas Jose, text courtesy of Guan Wei.

important artists left China to live elsewhere.¹¹¹ 1989 was also a No U-Turn year for Guan Wei as it was then that he decided immigrate to Australia.

Immediately following the Tian'anmen Square massacre, Parr was concerned for Guan Wei's safety and wrote offering to assist him to return to Australia. Parr and Jose, with funding from the Australia Council, had secured funding for another term as artist-in-residence at the Tasmanian School of Art for Guan Wei.¹¹² Although Australia had downgraded its political and economic relations with China after the Tian'anmen Square massacre, such things as cultural exchanges were not dramatically affected because the Australian Government's aim was to make it clear that it disapproved of the Chinese Government's action, not disadvantage the Chinese people.¹¹³ Therefore it was still possible for arrangements such as Jose and Parr had made for Guan Wei to go ahead.

Unsure of whether he should leave China or not, Guan Wei sought his fortune in the I-Ching. He discovered that for the best chance for luck and prosperity he should live as far south as possible. While certainly not the only reason for Guan Wei deciding to return to Tasmania, it tipped the balance.¹¹⁴

Guan Wei's second term as an artist-in-residence at the Tasmanian School of Art began in August 1990.¹¹⁵

111 Cohen 1992, p. 107

112 Parr, pers. comm., 2 May 1997; Guan Wei and Parr 1991, p. [17]

113 Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1996, p. 137

114 Guan Wei and Parr 1991, p. [17]

115 Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

Chapter 4

Wunderkind

Since coming to live in Australia in 1990 Guan Wei has 'edged his way to the forefront of contemporary Australian art'.¹¹⁶ According to David Williams, Director of the Canberra School of Art, 'Guan Wei is now regarded as one of the finest independent artists to have adopted Australia and he has developed an impressive national and international exhibition record'.¹¹⁷

Guan Wei has been an artist-in-residence at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, the Tasmanian School of Art in Hobart and the Canberra School of Art. He is represented by Australian's leading contemporary commercial art gallery, Sherman Galleries. His works are included in most major Australian public collections including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the Queensland Art Gallery, the Australian National University and the University of New South Wales, as well as in many private collections.¹¹⁸

Guan Wei's works have been exhibited internationally in Paris, Seattle, Beijing, Oxford, Hong Kong, Singapore and Tokyo and have been included in a number of significant exhibitions within Australia. Among these exhibitions are: *Mao Goes Pop* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1993; *Localities of Desire* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1994 and *Australian Perspecta 1995* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Guan Wei has also participated in a

¹¹⁶Findlay 1996, p. 75

¹¹⁷Williams 1994, introduction

¹¹⁸See the artist's biography for further details

numerous lower profile group shows and had several solo exhibitions both in Australia and overseas.

A prolific artist, Guan Wei paints approximately thirty works a year. In the seven years Guan Wei has been living in Australia he has painted several major series of work including *Living specimen*, *Test tube baby*, *The Great War of the Eggplant* and *Treasure hunt*.

Within a year of arriving in Australia for the second time, Guan Wei had created three series of work, *Pillar*, *Little toys* and *Paper*. In 1991, these works were exhibited in solo exhibitions at the Waverley City Gallery in Melbourne, the Canberra School of Art and at the Plimsoll and Hobart Despard Street galleries in Hobart. The exhibitions were a direct result of links made between Guan Wei, Geoff Parr and David Williams following their meeting at Nicholas Jose's apartment in Beijing in 1988. Organised by Parr, Williams and Jose, who had returned to Australia from China in 1990, the exhibitions provided exposure for Guan Wei's work, helping to establish his national profile.¹¹⁹ Guan Wei's work was also included in two group exhibitions in 1991 - *Twelve Contemporary Chinese Artists* organised by the University of Sydney; and *Echoes of China - From behind the bamboo curtain - Three contemporary Chinese artists* at Irving Galleries in Sydney.

Each of the forty-three paintings in the *Little toys* series includes a simplified figure and one or two objects. The titles of each work within the series is derived from the objects the painting depicts, for example *Hat*, *Fan* and *Vase* (Plates 12 & 13).¹²⁰ The *Little toys* appear to be direct descendants of the 1987 work *Rope games* (Plate 7). More refined and

¹¹⁹ Guan Wei and Parr 1991, Parr, pers. comm., 2 May 1997, Williams, pers. comm., 16 May 1997

playful, the *Little toys* feature the same stylised character who inhabits *Rope games*, although this time the figure has eyes. The two series also share the same acupuncture point elements. Some of the *Little toys* feature blue acupoints which have simple English words, like 'Oh', 'Why' and 'Gosh' painted beside them in place of Chinese characters (see Plate 12); others retain the red acupoints and Chinese ideograms of *Rope games*. However, while the Chinese characters Guan Wei used in China were genuine, in Australia they are either invented or nonsensical. As few Australians could read what he had written, Guan Wei felt it would be entertaining to create his own characters.¹²¹ The practice of combining real and invented ideograms has been a popular trend in recent Chinese art. The best-known exponent of this technique of 'miswriting' characters in order to create abstract symbols divorced from their original meanings is Xu Bing, a Chinese artist now living in America.¹²²

Although still predominantly grey, Guan Wei's *Little toys* include a wider variety of colours in brighter hues than his earlier work. They are also painted in acrylic rather than oil paint. Guan Wei began using acrylics during his first trip to Australia in 1989 and continues to work with them. While acrylics were available in China, according to Guan Wei, they were very poor quality. The speed with which acrylics dry appeals to the artist because he does not have to wait days before he can add details such as acupoints and characters to his work. He also likes, and uses to his advantage, the flatness of its finish.¹²³

Towards the end of 1991 Guan Wei began work on the *Living specimen*. The series, which consists of twenty-three panels, marks a

¹²⁰ *Vase* from the *Little toys* series was used on the front cover of the July 1992 issue of the respected international Asian arts journal *Orientations*.

¹²¹ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

¹²² Li Xianting 1993b, p. 9

¹²³ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 12 May 1997

turning point in his work. It was with this series that Guan Wei moved away from the acupoints, Chinese characters and greyness that characterised his earlier work and began to redefine his distinctive style. As Guan Wei explained:

When I first came to Australia I thought I should keep some clear ways of showing that I am a Chinese artist so I used a lot of Chinese cultural references in my work but at the same time I was worried that Western audiences wouldn't understand my work. When I had a show in Tasmania I was very surprised because many Australians could understand what I was saying with my work. I remember Geoff Parr talking about my pictures and his ideas were quite similar to mine, to what I had been thinking about this. I realised that maybe there is an international language within the works. After this I still used some Chinese things but I expressed myself in other ways too. Also I had been using those marks for a few years and I was feeling maybe a bit bored.¹²⁴

While the *Living specimen* series includes fewer Chinese cultural allusions than Guan Wei's earlier paintings, it is brimming with references to icons of Western art, including Masaccio's *Expulsion*, Magritte's pipe, Botticelli's *Venus* and Duchamp's urinal (Plate 14). In this series Guan Wei has applied, exploited and taken pleasure in his extensive knowledge of Western art as part of his search for a new individual visual language. In the *Living specimen* Guan Wei tried to find a way of crossing cultural boundaries, to explore the universal essence of human experiences and concerns and to locate what he calls 'human culture':

I try and use Western culture but this is on the surface, on the inside of me I think they are quite Eastern ideas and styles because I lived in Beijing for more than thirty years and the cultural things are maybe inside my blood. I can't change it anymore. I put some Western marks in the pictures but the way they are organised in the paintings is very Eastern, very Chinese.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997

¹²⁵ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997

The *Living specimen* is presented in what has become one of Guan Wei's signatures - a sequence of long, narrow, vertical panels. Each canvas is horizontally divided into three unequal parts. The upper and lower sections are a very dark blue and the central one is a lighter blue painted to give the appearance of a running stream. This central section is at different heights in every second one of the twenty-three canvases so that when they are all hung together an impression of rising and falling water levels is created. Whether the similarity is intentional or not, this interaction between the panels, combined with the proportions of the panels themselves, is characteristic of traditional Chinese literati painting (see Plate 1).

In the middle of every panel a different object has been placed inside a beaker-like container. When asked about the significance of the beaker, Guan Wei explained that, at the time, he was very interested in glass as a material that was not only transparent but also cold and impenetrable unless it was broken, at which point it became sharp and dangerous. In producing this series, Guan Wei was determined to paint something which was representative of his life at the time. He was then in the midst of his second residency at the Tasmanian School of Art. Away from his friends and family in China, including his wife Lui Pin who had not yet immigrated to Australia, and with limited English, Guan Wei felt very alone:

I had some cultural problems because I was living in the Western society but on the inside of my body was Eastern culture. I could look at Western people and talk to them and we could see each other clearly but we couldn't understand each other's meanings exactly. I felt that there was glass between us. I felt very isolated, like I was inside a glass filled with water.¹²⁶

However, in the *Living specimen*, which has no single narrative but is rather a sequence of separate and essentially unrelated comments

¹²⁶ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

interlaced with panels created for pure amusement, Guan Wei used the glass beakers not only to communicate his sense of isolation but to 'make some jokes for the masters'.¹²⁷ One panel, entitled *Fishing for Miro*, depicts a painting by Miro inside the glass container. Guan Wei explained that, although he enjoys Miro's work, he thinks it is time to put old art movements away and move on.¹²⁸ In another panel, *Pipe*, the beaker holds Magritte's pipe. It is accompanied by one of Guan Wei's personal jokes, a sign which reads, 'This is not art - Geoff Parr'. A third panel, *Holy water*, shows the cupid from Botticelli's *Primavera*, with the markings of a Buddhist monk on his head, urinating into a beaker containing Duchamp's urinal. Having filtered through the urinal, the liquid drips from it as holy water - a successful mix of East and West - into a piously held ceramic bowl. As Jose commented:

Guan Wei coolly takes on the ironies of cultural crossover. His Living specimens, 1991, combine icons of modern Western art, pickled in beakers, with images from Chinese folk culture, or Chinese parodies of classical Western art, suggesting humorous incongruities of symbiosis.¹²⁹

Reading Guan Wei's work can be very difficult. He believes that a work of art should appeal not only to the eye, but also to the mind, that it should be multivalent and challenging like a puzzle.¹³⁰ There is no easily decipherable code or system in Guan Wei's painting; it is constantly changing and full of deliberately ambiguous clues and allusions. This is particularly true of the *Living specimen* series. In later series where one idea is presented from a variety of perspectives, such as *Test tube baby* interpretation is less complex but hazardous nonetheless.

¹²⁷ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997

¹²⁸ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997

¹²⁹ Jose 1993b, p. 16

¹³⁰ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

Guan Wei's appropriation of both Eastern and Western imagery leads to the creation of works that can clearly be classified and interpreted as postmodern. That Guan Wei understands and consciously applies concepts of postmodernism is undeniable, although he no longer classifies himself as a postmodern artist. Guan Wei's creations are especially interesting in the light of the doubts certain writers, in particular Ellen Johnston Laing, have expressed about whether there can be any such thing as Chinese postmodernism. This argument is based on the notion of the Western linear development of art and the assumption that because China did not fully experience modernism, therefore Chinese artists cannot produce postmodern art.¹³¹ Although Guan Wei was living in Australia at the time he painted the *Living specimen*, such assumptions must apply to him equally because he only recently came to Australia from China.

One might question why all art must be seen to follow the same linear path in order to reach a common point and why it cannot come from different pasts, different histories. If Chinese understanding of modern art is different to that of the West, this does not necessarily mean that China cannot participate in such movements and debates. The notion that modern and postmodern art are the exclusive preserve of the West is certainly debatable in the light of artists such as Guan Wei. Should one assume that just because an artist was away from the centres of the dominant contemporary theory that he must be isolated from such influences, unable to participate in an informed way in debates surrounding such ideas? It is not my intention to explore this debate in any detail, only to expose its existence and to make it clear that I question its validity in relation to Guan Wei's experience.

Guan Wei's meticulous working methods and the concentrated research he puts into planning each series are especially evident in the

¹³¹ See Laing 1993

Living specimen series. Having come up with the basic idea for a sequence and begun researching it, Guan Wei then draws plans for the series in pencil in a notebook: once mapped out these drawings are translated into full-colour miniature versions of the final series along a single long sheet of paper. Guan Wei then makes any necessary alterations to the studies and uses the final drawings as the basis from which to paint the full scale panels. Each element is carefully researched. In the case of the *Living specimen* every painting Guan Wei has appropriated will have been studied in great detail in order to present the recognisable essence of it to the viewer. Jose has suggested that, in his approach to research, form, media, composition and colour, may be Guan Wei 'heir to the painting traditions of his native Chinese culture, where freedom is achieved within restraint.'¹³²

Guan Wei's association with Sherman Galleries (then called Irving Galleries) began in March 1991.¹³³ While in Sydney on holidays from Tasmania to visit his friends, brothers Ah Xian and Xiao Xian, Guan Wei decided they should look for a gallery to represent them. Having heard that Irving Galleries was interested in Asian art, Guan Wei and Xiao Xian approached the gallery's director, Dr Gene Sherman, leaving photographs of their work with her to look over. A short time later, Sherman visited Ah Xian's home, where Guan Wei was staying, to look at the work of all three artists. Obviously impressed, Sherman arranged for them to show their work at the gallery later the same year. The exhibition - *Echoes of China - From behind the bamboo curtain - Three contemporary Chinese artists* - was held in September. The works exhibited by Guan Wei were from the *Little Toys, Fool and Paper* series.¹³⁴

¹³² Jose 1995a, p. 48

¹³³ Renamed Sherman Galleries in October 1992.

¹³⁴ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997; Roberts, pers. comm. 8 May 1997

Over the next months, a number of Guan Wei's paintings were sold through Irving Galleries, and in 1992 a larger exhibition of works by young artists from mainland China, working in Australia, was shown there. The exhibition, *Orientations: The Emperor's new clothes*, included work by the printmakers Ren Hua and Shen Shaomin, installations by Tang Song and Xiao Lu, seal carvings by Jia Yong, works on paper by Ah Xian, and Guan Wei's series the *Living specimen*. Four panels from the *Living specimen* were exhibited again the following year in the blockbuster exhibition *Mao Goes Pop* at the Museum of Contemporary Art.¹³⁵

Particularly pleased with audience response to Guan Wei's work, Irving Galleries offered to represent him. The proposal was advantageous to both parties: it has allowed Guan Wei to continue to support himself as a professional artist and for Gene Sherman, who was well aware of Guan Wei's potential for wider success, it has resulted in having one of Australia's most interesting new artists in her stable.

In 1992, Guan Wei spent a year at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. He was the first to hold the position of artist-in-residence at the MCA, the museum had only opened in November the previous year.¹³⁶ For a new contemporary art museum attempting to set itself apart from existing Australian art institutions through a program of exhibitions of new work created away from the established centres of Europe and America, Guan Wei was an obvious choice for the position. Not only was he an avant-garde artist from 'fashionable' China, but he had already proven himself to be productive and reliable. He was rapidly developing a name in contemporary art circles and was to be represented in their next major exhibition, *Mao Goes Pop*. An

¹³⁵ Roberts, pers. comm., 8 May 1997; Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

¹³⁶ Apostolou, pers. comm., 20 May 1997

added bonus no doubt was that the artist is personally charming and accessible.

His time as artist-in-residence in Sydney was extremely productive for Guan Wei. He painted two series of works, *Test tube baby* and *Wunderkind*. Comprising twenty and ten panels respectively. Both series investigate the potential impact of science and technology on humans. Guan Wei was inspired to paint *Test tube baby* after reading two articles, one about an infertile American couple wanting to have a child using in-vitro fertilisation; and another about the legal and moral questions that arose regarding the future of a frozen embryo after its biological parents had both been killed in an accident. Faced with such difficult moral and ethical questions about to whom the embryo belongs and whether it is already a real life, Guan Wei decided to explore a number of the issues surrounding scientific and medical tampering in human lives - his test-tube babies are both literal and allegorical expressions of this debate. Guan Wei also considers some of the implications that such innovations may have for the future in the *Wunderkind* series on the test-tube babies as they grow up.¹³⁷

Guan Wei's test-tube babies are derived from the images of babies in the brightly-coloured Chinese New Year prints and paintings (*nianhua*) (see Plate 15). Like New Year babies, all the test-tube babies are male, since baby boys are associated with luck in Chinese folklore. *Test tube baby no. 2* (Plate 16) shows a chubby, pink-cheeked, test-tube infant sitting astride a giant carp. The fish is a Chinese sign of fertility and salvation from suffering.¹³⁸ (The baby is wearing a *tou-tou*, a traditional apron-style garment, ornamented with a picture of a lotus flower.¹³⁹ Another lotus - an open blossom which, in Buddhist

¹³⁷Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997

¹³⁸Jansen 1990, p. 32

¹³⁹Tseng Yu-Ho Ecke 1977, p. 47

iconography, symbolises purity - rests on his head.¹⁴⁰ In creating the *Test tube baby* series, Guan Wei has incorporated Chinese traditional and religious symbols into his own personal code. The infant's other attributes are a test-tube in his right hand and a little ball, a sign of immortality, between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand.¹⁴¹ The test-tube represents potential danger, associated for the artist with its application in scientific experimentation and with the propensity of glass to break.¹⁴²

The formal properties of each panel in the *Test tube baby* series are identical. Characteristically long and narrow, the panels are divided into four horizontal sections, each painted a different shade of green or grey. Superimposed onto the centre of the two lower sections of the works are liquid-filled beakers. Each beaker contains a different fruit or vegetable. As Guan Wei explains, 'In the past, people made many experiments trying to graft apples and pears together to produce new fruit. Now they start to experiment with people. So the fruit is a historic relic, already put in a glass case in a museum.'¹⁴³ Gas is being emitted from the bottle gourd in the beaker in *Test tube baby no. 2*. The gourd is an enigmatic symbol which often features in Chinese fairy tales and legends. Such vessels, also associated with immortality, are receptacles for both good and evil spirits, and for magical elixirs.¹⁴⁴ Following this line of thought, the social effects of the test-tube baby emanating from the gourd, may be destructive, auspicious or even entirely neutral - for the artist it is too early to tell.

The use of whimsical, overtly oriental, motifs constitutes a break from Guan Wei's earlier series. Here, alongside the flat stylised figures, are

¹⁴⁰ Jansen 1990, p. 25

¹⁴¹ Williams 1976, p. 142

¹⁴² Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

¹⁴³ Guan Wei quoted in Gibson 1993, p. 3

well-rounded babies. Designed to entertain as well as to investigate a complex issue, the *Test tube baby* series is seductively 'Chinese', exotic but not alienating. Perhaps this is, at least in part, due to the fact it is about a universal rather than a culturally or politically specific issue. The use of these motifs, along with the format of the panels on which they are painted, despite Guan Wei's pragmatic explanation of it, give a distinct impression of exotic 'Chineseness' and represent a clever exploitation of the artist's heritage.

Guan Wei's generation of super-children, the *Wunderkind*, are themselves fascinated with scientific experimentation. *Wunderkind no. 8* is shown transforming red cherries into green by dipping the fruit into a beaker of blue-green liquid, while *Wunderkind no. 2* looks through his magnifying glass at scientific slides of sperm and ova, perhaps planning the next generation of test-tube babies (Plates 17 & 18). Interestingly, although originally a rural peasant tradition, many contemporary New Year prints and paintings depict school children in science classes.¹⁴⁵ The artist contemplates what a generation of scientifically engineered people will create and what scientific, moral and legal changes will result from their existence. Similar questions about medical innovations are explored in two of Guan Wei's later series, *Treasure hunt* and the *Efficacy of medicine*, both painted in 1995.¹⁴⁶

In late 1993, Guan Wei had his first solo exhibition at Sherman Galleries. The show comprised one hundred paintings including the *Test Tube Baby* and *Wunderkind* series. By this stage Guan Wei's work had been exhibited in *Mao Goes Pop* and he was beginning to be

¹⁴⁴ Williams 1976, p. 171.

¹⁴⁵ Sullivan, 1996, pp. 149-50

¹⁴⁶ According to both Guan Wei and Kerrie Ann Roberts, the manager of Sherman Galleries, works from these three series have proved popular with doctors. Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997.; Roberts, pers. comm., 8 May 1997

recognised in the Australian art world. The Sherman show attracted television, radio and newspaper coverage, measurably increasing Guan Wei's public profile within Australian art circles.¹⁴⁷ In addition to this, following the exhibition, three panels from the *Test tube baby* series were translated by Guan Wei and master printer, Fred Genis, into limited edition lithographs titled *Big baby*, *First kiss* and *King and Queen*. The prints were made as part of a Sherman Galleries initiative to produce a series of lithographs by 'Australia's most important artists'.¹⁴⁸

Mao Goes Pop: China Post-1989, opened in Sydney on 2 June 1993, the first major exhibition of new Chinese art to be seen outside of greater China.¹⁴⁹ The exhibition's curators use of the term 'new art' is significant and its meaning specific. They make a distinction between 'new art' and the broader category of contemporary art in China. New art is defined through its craving for radical change while the art the curators classified as contemporary 'lacks the central, driving impulse to remake or restate the culture, to burst the boundaries and take on the world'.¹⁵⁰ The exhibition was also a huge success, attracting considerable media attention and record crowds. In fact, more people went to see *Mao Goes Pop* than any other exhibition the MCA has held to date.¹⁵¹ The exhibition included works which were categorised as Cynical Realist, Political Pop, Endgame and abstract art by the vanguard of new Chinese art, including Wang Guangyi, Liu Wei, Yu Youhan,

¹⁴⁷ Roberts, pers. comm., 8 May 1997

¹⁴⁸ Sherman Galleries 1994, [p. 1]; Among the other artists involved in the project are, John Olsen, Colin Lanceley and Imants Tillers.

¹⁴⁹ Paroissien 1993, p. 3. Greater China includes mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan; The exhibition was also shown in Melbourne in September 1993 where it was divided between four commercial galleries: William Mora Galleries, City Gallery, Flinders Lane Gallery and Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi.

¹⁵⁰ Jose 1993c, p. 4

¹⁵¹ Jaivin 1995, p. 150

Zhang Xiaogang and Feng Mengbo.¹⁵² Much of the work in the exhibition was overtly political. Commenting on the exhibition and the change in his own work since coming to live in Australia, Guan Wei said:

artists still living in China are very concerned with political problems because the political fact is unavoidable. But in Australia, it is very different. My heart has become very peaceful here. In China, it was not.¹⁵³

Mao Goes Pop was the product of an international curatorial team and years of planning. Its chief curator, Li Xianting, who played a major role in organising the notorious *China/Avant-garde* exhibition in Beijing in 1989, was assisted by Johnson Chang Tsong-zung and Oscar Ho Hing-Kay from Hong Kong, and the Australians Nicholas Jose and Janet Parfenovics. The initial idea for the exhibition emerged in 1989 from *China/Avant-garde*, when that show's organisers wanted the works shown to be seen outside China. With support from Johnson Chang Tsong-zung from Hanart T Z Galleries Hong Kong and Taipei, and Nicholas Jose, then still Australia's Cultural Councillor in Beijing, investigation into the possibility of such a show began. Jose felt that the project was important and that 'the show would be an eye-opener for Australians'.¹⁵⁴

The criticism directed towards Li Xianting and the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition during the cultural crackdown that followed the tragic end to the pro-democracy demonstrations in Tian'anmen Square in 1989 made organising the exhibition both more complex and more pressing. Jose brought hundreds of Li Xianting's slides to Australia and showed them to staff at the MCA who were very interested in the proposed exhibition. In 1990 Bernice Murphy and Janet Parfenovics from the MCA visited China where they discussed the project with relevant

¹⁵²Jose 1993c, pp. 31-32

¹⁵³Guan Wei quoted in Gibson 1993, p. 3

artists, critics and scholars. By the end of the trip, preparations for what became *Mao Goes Pop* were underway. When it became clear that new trends had emerged in Chinese art since *China/Avant-garde*, the organisers decided to shift the focus for the exhibition away from the original concept, towards art produced since 1989. The final exhibition included new works by eighteen of the artists who had participated in *China/Avant-garde*, including Xu Bing, Tang Song and Xiao Lu.¹⁵⁵

The *Mao Goes Pop* exhibition that was seen in Australia was an adaptation of *China's new art, post-1989*, an exhibition put together by the same team and shown at the Hong Kong Arts Festival in early 1993. Although the MCA exhibition featured fewer works than its Hong Kong counterpart, it benefited from the inclusion of additional works by Australian-based Chinese. For example, more recent works by Ah Xian and Tang Song/Xiao Lu, who by this stage were living in Sydney, were exhibited in the Australian show than in Hong Kong, and Guan Wei's work, not included in the original show, was exhibited in the MCA version. Why Guan Wei's work was not included in the Hong Kong show is unclear. However, more recent works by Ah Xian were exhibited because he was living in Australia and they were available; and installation artists Tang Song and Xiao Lu could not present any of their newer creations in Hong Kong because their visas did not allow them to leave Australia to install their work.¹⁵⁶

That the first major exhibition of Chinese avant-garde art to be seen outside of China was held in Australia is significant. It is concrete evidence of Australia's direct links with the Australian government's conscious effort to encourage and maintain cultural ties with China in the wake of, or even especially in the wake of the Tian'anmen Square

¹⁵⁴Jose 1993a, p. 32

¹⁵⁵Jose 1993a, pp. 32-33

¹⁵⁶ Jose 1993a, pp. 32-33

tragedy. However, such a significant exhibition was only possible because so many of the world's experts on contemporary China are Australian: the event came about in large part through personal communication. It stemmed from considerable Australian interest in contemporary Asia, and from Australian foreign policy and cultural bias towards the region, especially towards China.¹⁵⁷

Mao Goes Pop had been preceded in 1992 by *New Art from China: Post-Mao product*, a much smaller travelling exhibition of contemporary Chinese art. Curated by Claire Roberts for the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the exhibition toured to the Queensland Art Gallery, City of Ballarat Fine Art Gallery and the Canberra School of Art Gallery.¹⁵⁸ Also significant in 1993 was the first *Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* held at the Queensland Art Gallery. Around the same time *Art AsiaPacific*, an Australia-based journal dedicated to contemporary Asian art was established. Asian Art was big news and the focus and perceptions of the Australian contemporary art scenes were changing.

To have an exhibition of recent avant-garde art from China such *Mao Goes Pop* was not, however, a purely Australian innovation nor an isolated event. The developments in art in China that had inspired the exhibition were dramatic and revolutionary, and, particularly in the wake of the Tian'anmen Square incident had attracted world wide attention. Similar exhibition were held in England and Germany later in 1993. Paintings by Guan Wei, as well as work by seven other artists featured in *Mao Goes Pop*, were shown at the Museum of Modern Art

¹⁵⁷ Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1996, p. 137; FitzGerald 1997, pp. 25-30

¹⁵⁸ Roberts 1992

in Oxford as part of the exhibition *New Art from China*. Guan Wei's paintings were attracting international interest.¹⁵⁹

Having completed his residency at the MCA, Guan Wei took up another position as an artist-in-residence, this time at the Canberra School of Art. In the months Guan Wei spent in Canberra over the summer of 1993-94, he painted two series, *The Great War of the Eggplant* and *Sausage*. These works were exhibited at the Australian National University Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra in June and July 1994.¹⁶⁰ *The Great War of the Eggplant* (Plate 19) has since been shown in a number of other exhibitions, the most prominent of which was *Australian Perspecta 1995* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1995. The *Sausage* series was exhibited in *Localities of desire* at the MCA in 1994.

The inspiration for *The Great War of the Eggplant* came from Jose outlining Guan Wei the story line of a novel he was writing. The book, *The rose crossing*, is a romantic tale about the meeting and crossing of English and Chinese cultures in the seventeenth century. Guan Wei's whimsical variation on Jose's theme is a bizarre story of cultural transference focussed on eggplants, both in the place of humans as the main characters in the drama, and as the objects of trade and cultural hybridisation.¹⁶¹

Guan Wei had originally planned to present the story as an installation piece with his invented 'Great War of the Eggplant' explained through a variety of maps, wordy wall texts and objects in cases in the style of an old-fashioned history museum. Finding it too difficult to organise, he chose to simplify and paint the tale instead. Ten of the twenty panels

¹⁵⁹ Jose 1993a, pp. 32-33

¹⁶⁰ Williams 1994, introduction

¹⁶¹ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

relate a narrative about eggplants travelling out into the world from India in two directions - the first through Tibet, China and Japan to Korea, and the second through the Middle East to end up finally in Italy. The lower section of each panel in this journey depicts an eggplant dish from the corresponding country. These dishes are based on real recipes from around the world collected by Guan Wei as part of his research for the series. The other ten panels are stories about how the eggplants spent their time, about their couplings and their offspring.¹⁶² In the essay Jose wrote to accompany this series in the *Australian Perspecta 1995* catalogue, he describes the sequence and the complexity that lies behind its deceptively simple and amusing appearance:

Absorbed with processes of cultural transference, Guan Wei performs a balancing act between an idiosyncratic private vision and the mythology he has fabricated from layers of cultural dislocation. His ordered enigmas simulate narratives that are open-ended in the ways they can be read, providing trick meanings only. They are coded, but the cultural keys are elusive, and their whimsical immediacy, with blithely populist references to cartoons, cookbooks, movies and advertising, proves deceptive alongside darker references to more destructive processes of history and politics.¹⁶³

In fact Jose's comments about the layering of ambiguous meaning, and humour juxtaposed with serious consideration of broad social issues in *The Great War of the Eggplant* could apply to almost any of Guan Wei's works. Virtually all of the artist's work, in all media, deals in some way with issues the artist considers of importance to humanity, whether they be on a personal level like the problems of identity and communication developed in the *Living specimen* or the environmental concerns that dominate his more recent works, the

¹⁶² Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

¹⁶³ Jose 1995a, p. 48

mixed media *Mapocalyps*, 1996 and the 1997 painting sequence *Freestyle frogs*.¹⁶⁴

Unlike much of Guan Wei's other work, the *Sausage* series was not meticulously planned over a long period of time. Rather it came about by chance. In preparation for painting *The Great War of the Eggplant* Guan Wei requested that thirty 87 x 46 cm canvases be constructed for his use. Completing the series after filling only twenty of the canvasses, Guan Wei felt obliged to use the remaining ten. In contemplating what to paint he found that images of sausages kept appearing in his mind. Just as the glass beaker in the *Living specimen* series had symbolised Guan Wei's feelings of isolation when he was first in Australia, the sausage symbolised how he felt over the summer of 1993-1994.¹⁶⁵

At the time he was learning English, learning more about Australia and sojourning in a strange city. He recalls that he felt like a sausage with everything being squeezed into it and with no time to consider any of his experiences or question the information he was receiving. So, on a whim, he decided to paint sausages. Guan Wei found that he wanted to explore some of things people associate with sausages, from the erotic to the mundane.¹⁶⁶ The formal elements of *Sausage* (Plate 20) are reminiscent of the *Little toys* series (Plate 13). Each panel shows a stylised, hairless, generic man in typical Guan Wei style, sitting behind a table. A different set of objects, including a sausage, appears on the table in every panel. There are no real clues as to why these objects, a cushion, a wind-up lady beetle, a beer bottle and a glass of beer, have been selected. The images are very entertaining but even

¹⁶⁴ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997

¹⁶⁵ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

¹⁶⁶ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

the artist himself is unsure as to the meanings of the images he created.

He said of them:

I'm interested to know why I painted what I did. I liked working that way, not knowing why, but I still think there should be something behind it, some meaning, but with the sausages even I'm not very clear on it. Maybe it will come later. Maybe in ten years something will come to me and I'll think, 'Oh, that's what it's about.'¹⁶⁷

The residency in Canberra complete, Guan Wei returned to Sydney to live. At that time, assisted by Gene Sherman and Nicholas Jose, he applied for permanent resident status in Australia under the category of 'Special skills' as an 'International distinguished artist'. Six weeks later the application was approved. Remembering the arduous and lengthy task of applying to leave China, Guan Wei was shocked by the speed of the process. The following year he successfully applied for an grant from the Australia Council for a studio and set up the studio in Newtown where he continues to work.¹⁶⁸

In 1995, having settled in Sydney, Guan Wei completed two interrelated series of work - *Treasure hunt* and *Efficacy of medicine*. Every panel in each series includes an illustration of a capsule. The *Treasure hunt* is a mock epic about the search for the capsule, representative of the goals people feel driven to achieve in their lives (Plate 21). The capsules are protected by little creatures, most based on Australian native animals. The *Efficacy of medicine* leads on from the *Treasure hunt* in much the same way as the *Wunderkind* succeed the *Test tube baby* series. The *Efficacy of medicine* series explores what happens after a goal is reached, after the capsule has been obtained,

¹⁶⁷ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

¹⁶⁸ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997; Roberts, pers. comm., 8 May 1997

what the effects of ingesting it might be. The artist questions the results of achieving the goal, of obtaining the treasure.¹⁶⁹

Although completed in 1995, the *Treasure hunt*, *Efficacy of medicine* and a contemporary series, the *Last supper*, are Guan Wei's most recently exhibited paintings.¹⁷⁰ Since that time he has concentrated on producing mixed media works on open cardboard suspension files. Not yet exhibited in Australia, works from these series, called *Detective*, *Magic garden* and *Mapocalyps*, have been shown in Hong Kong and Beijing (see Plate 22).¹⁷¹ The suspension file format, which Guan Wei enjoys because of the intricacy of the work and the associations it has with secret documents, has become another signature format for the artist.¹⁷²

In early 1997 Guan Wei was again concentrating on larger paintings. The series on which the artist is currently working, *The story of the four winds*, a series of paintings on the ubiquitous vertical panels tells a story, again of cultural transference, this time of germs and bacteria between East and West. Each of the end panels of the series features a figure blowing dangerous chemicals towards each other. While the

¹⁶⁹ These explanations of the stories behind the *Treasure hunt* and *Efficacy of medicine* series were told to me by Guan Wei during a visit to his studio on May 7 1997. The interpretation I was given is not the same as that expressed by Bernice Murphy in her catalogue essay for the exhibition of these works at Sherman Galleries in September 1995. Murphy describes the series as being about 'cultural differences expressed through human attitudes to physical and spiritual well being'. While not unrelated, the two stories are definitely different. This highlights one of the problems of primary research through interview in which people's changing perceptions and interpretations of works and events affect the information obtained. Therefore, while the explanations of works I provide are derived from information shared with me by the artist, they are not necessarily in agreement with those expressed elsewhere.

¹⁷⁰ The three series were shown in a solo exhibition at Sherman Galleries in September 1995 and the *Treasure hunt* is currently being displayed as part of the travelling exhibition *Above and Beyond: Austral/Asian interactions*. A number of panels from the *Efficacy of medicine* are now on show in Singapore in the exhibition *In & out* which will travel to Australia in 1998.

¹⁷¹ Findlay 1996, p. 75; Smith 1996, pp. 80-81

¹⁷² Guan Wei, pers. comm., 12 May 1997

current works, *Rollercoaster*, *Freestyle frogs* and *The story of the four winds* conform to the same vertical format as is associated with Guan Wei's style, they are less visually amusing and more concerned with environmental issues than much of his other recent work.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 21 February 1997 and 7 May 1997

Chapter 5

The Living Specimen

Since 1994, Guan Wei's work has been displayed in the context of a number of group exhibitions each of which has focused on a different variation on the concept of identity. Having arrived in Australia in 1990 as a Chinese avant-garde artist, over the course of the last seven years his status appears to have shifted from that of an expatriate Chinese artist towards that of an exotic Australian artist. This rather intangible change in perception is manifested in the ways he has been portrayed and in the exhibitions and publications his work has been presented in over the last few years.

As early as 1992, when writing about the *Living specimen*, Nicholas Jose commented:

Guan Wei is not complaining, but rather fantasising about connections, including with himself and where he might fit, as he ceases to be a Chinese artist and becomes an object for Australian commitments to multiculturalism and Asian awareness.¹⁷⁴

Exhibitions concerned with identity in which Guan Wei's work has been shown include *Localities of Desire* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1994; *Australian Perspecta 1995* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales; *Above and Beyond: Austral/Asian interactions*, a 1996-97 travelling exhibition organised by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) in Melbourne and the Institute of Modern Art (IMA) in Brisbane; and *Drift*, a travelling exhibition originating from the Penrith Regional Gallery. Guan Wei will also be represented in *In & out: Contemporary Chinese art of mainland and diaspora*, an exhibition from Singapore which centres on issues of identity,

¹⁷⁴ Jose 1992a, p. 9

specifically in relation to Chinese artists living inside and outside of mainland China.¹⁷⁵

In 1994 the *Sausage* series and a number of works from *Two finger exercise* were included in *Localities of desire: Contemporary art in an international world*. It was an exhibition of 'recent or little known work by artists of many cultural backgrounds.'¹⁷⁶ Intended as a 'renewed, cross-cultural statement of an evolving (exploratory) approach to ideas of internationalism in contemporary art and cultural life',¹⁷⁷ it was a very consciously constructed, theory-based, and essentially flawed exhibition. The curatorial vision for the show was in its conception which was not readily communicated through the works or the method of their display: in fact the catalogue essays, overloaded with intellectual assumptions and unnecessarily complex language, include almost no discussion about the art works themselves.

In this exhibition which was, at least ostensibly, about exploring issues of identity outside of mainstream culture, Guan Wei was selected in the context of his being a Chinese artist working in a foreign environment. It seems, in many ways, to have been Guan Wei's cultural heritage and recent history that were exhibited rather than his art works. The curatorial decision to display Guan Wei's *Sausage* series in an exhibition such as *Localities of desire* is also problematic for while the series is a recent work, it is one of the artist's less resolved series.¹⁷⁸ Certainly *Sausage* appears to have no direct relevance to the theme of the exhibition, unlike many of his other works, such as *Sausage's* exact contemporary *The Great War of the Eggplant* which

¹⁷⁵ This exhibition will tour Australian in 1998.

¹⁷⁶ Paroissien 1994, p. 10

¹⁷⁷ Murphy 1994, p11

¹⁷⁸ *Two finger exercise* was five years old at the time.

focuses overtly on issues of cross-cultural fertilisation and communication.

Whether a conscious curatorial choice or not, *Sausage*, as a work which remains in a state of flux in terms of its meaning, even to the artist, is an interesting work to exhibit in a show about the constant realignment and questioning of cross-cultural identities. While *The Great War of the Eggplant* is accompanied by a palimpsest of complicated tales about, among other things, the transference of culture, *Sausage*, although physically complete, is - as the artist implies - still in the process of being constructed.¹⁷⁹

Addressing a similar theme was the Art Gallery of New South Wales's 1995 biennial exhibition of Australian contemporary art, *Australian Perspecta 1995*. The inclusion of Guan Wei's *The Great War of the Eggplant* in *Australian Perspecta 1995* was important, as it represents one of the earliest classifications of the artist as Australian rather than Chinese. Whether his inclusion in the exhibition was made possible by his having formally become an Australian resident in 1994 is unclear.¹⁸⁰ More likely, it is evidence of desire on the part of the exhibition's curator Judy Annear to locate Guan Wei as a multicultural Australian.

The exhibition, subtitled 'Partial cultures', was based on ideas of post-colonial Australian society and of contemporary art being at its most exciting when in-between, hybrid and diverse. The curator thus presented these concepts not as 'lack, loss or displacement' but as positive attributes. As Annear wrote in the catalogue essay for the exhibition, 'The artists in *Perspecta* are a selection of those who choose

¹⁷⁹ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 7 May 1997

to make constructive use of difference and marginality in tandem with an inquiry into the history and techniques of art practice.¹⁸¹ Guan Wei was an ideal product to illustrate the in-between, the artist in flux, the hyphenated person.

Above and Beyond: Austral/Asian interactions, which opened in 1996 and is travelling to all Australian capital cities in 1997, focuses on the strong element of Asian culture in Australia, not just in recent years but since the nineteenth century. It includes not only the work of Asian-Australian artists but that of non-Asian Australians who have been influenced, however superficially, by 'Asian' culture. Guan Wei is represented in this exhibition by four panels from the *Treasure hunt* series.¹⁸²

It is evident that Guan Wei's identity has been variously constructed, most often as marginal, peripheral or exotic 'other', in such exhibitions to suit curatorial vision. In fact among the obvious reasons for his current prominence is the role of curators who need an artist such as Guan Wei to support the fashionable politically correct current interests in identity. This role is enhanced at this time of government funding for multicultural awareness and an interest in Australia's place in the Asia Pacific region.

John Clark, an historian from the University of Sydney uses a series of definitions to categorise a variety of Chinese artists living outside of China.¹⁸³ These include artists who left China by choice with the intention of returning and are not impeded in doing so; artists who left

¹⁸⁰ Although Guan Wei was formally an Australian resident by the time the exhibition was shown, it is unlikely that this technical change in his status had any particular impact on the way he was perceived in the art world.

¹⁸¹ Annear 1995, p. 7

¹⁸² Snelling and Williamson 1996, pp. 3-5, 48

China for educational or professional reasons, sometimes with little choice, who feel nostalgic about and want to return to China and who retain distinctly Chinese elements in their work; and artists who are well adjusted to their 'other than Chinese' culture and whose work shows evidence of participating in a cross-cultural dialogue with it. The last category is further divided into artists whose Chinese origin is incidental to their work and those who make conscious use of it.¹⁸⁴

Guan Wei falls most easily into Clark's third category - that of artists who are very much aware of their cultural 'otherness' and who use it to their advantage in communicating with the 'other than Chinese', in this case, Australian culture in which they now live.¹⁸⁵ Aware of the curatorial interest generated by his bi-cultural heritage and the expression of it in his work, Guan Wei has certainly been receptive to curatorial demand for his work and his multicultural identity.

When asked by curator Melissa Chiu to participate in the exhibition *Drift* which delves into the question of identity in multicultural Australia, Guan Wei produced a work especially for the exhibition. The work - a concertina-style artist's book which includes collages composed of pictures of Guan Wei and his friends superimposed onto each other so that no one is recognisable as themselves - is clearly investigating the proposed theme of the exhibition. This is in a way in contradiction of the catalogue introduction to the exhibition where the curators explicitly state that, 'What is distinctive about this group of artists is that these issues [of identity] are not patently visible in their work.'¹⁸⁶ In Guan Wei's case, however, the issues of identity certainly

¹⁸³ Clark's definitions are adaptations of those devised by a University of Sydney student Rae Agahari.

¹⁸⁴ Clark 1997, pp. 12-27; there is also a very specific fourth category which is not relevant to this study.

¹⁸⁵ Clark 1997, pp. 20

¹⁸⁶ Chiu and Genocchio 1997, p. 1

are. While *Drift* is a case of exhibiting a theme or phenomena in which the artist was not expected to be particularly culturally focused or 'Chinese', it is this very 'Chineseness' that is frequently exploited by curators and art historians.

In his recent book *Australian Printmaking in the 1990s: Artist Printmakers: 1990-1995* Sasha Grishin included Guan Wei's 1997 book on the strength of the three *Test tube baby* prints.¹⁸⁷ Sherman Galleries' encouragement of the production of the prints and Guan Wei's inclusion in Grishin's recent book are not only indicative of the artist's important place in contemporary Australian art. Such prominence also suggests that he has moved into the mainstream of Australian art as the most conspicuous and attractive representative of the newly important Asian-Australian artists.¹⁸⁸

While as an avant-garde artist in China Guan Wei was in something of a marginal or peripheral position, in Australia, due to his increasing success in the mainstream of contemporary art, such theories no longer apply. Despite this, Guan Wei is often romantically presented as an exile when, given that he can and has returned to China, he clearly is not.¹⁸⁹ In fact, he recently visited China to assist curator Claire Roberts in the selection of Chinese works for the prestigious *Second Asia-Pacific Triennial* held in Brisbane late in 1996, thus taking on the role of curator to which he had previously only been subject. He has also returned to China as an exhibiting artist.

A selection of Guan Wei's prints and suspension file constructions were exhibited at the Red Gate Gallery in Beijing towards the end of

¹⁸⁷ Grishin 1997, pp. 312-3

¹⁸⁸ Sherman Galleries 1994, [p. 1]

¹⁸⁹ Barrowclough 1996, p. 50

1996.¹⁹⁰ Located in an expensive international hotel, Guan Wei found that the audience he was showing to at the gallery, primarily comprised of foreigners, was very much the same audience he had exhibited to in Beijing in the past.¹⁹¹ Both Guan Wei and his wife Lui Pin went to Beijing for the opening of the exhibition. On their return to Australia, not having enjoyed the visit as much as they had hoped, the two took out Australian citizenship.¹⁹²

Another residency at the Canberra School of Art is planned for Guan Wei in 1998 in conjunction with the *In & Out: Contemporary Chinese art of mainland and diaspora* exhibition organised by Jade Binghui Huangfu from the Lasalle SIA College of the Arts in Singapore.¹⁹³ *In & out* includes work by ten artists, five living in mainland China and five in Australia. Its aim is not just to exhibit contemporary Chinese art, as many recent exhibitions have done, but to examine the experience of being a contemporary Chinese artist both in China and in Australia.¹⁹⁴

This is a complex issue on which Guan Wei continually reflects, and which will undoubtedly be visible in his art for the foreseeable future:

Nowadays many Australians and Chinese ask me, 'Who are you?, an Australian artist? a Chinese artist?' I think this is an interesting thing. Sometimes I feel it is quite good because I have two cultures. Spending more than thirty years in China means I have long history of Chinese culture behind me and after nearly seven years living in Australia I now know more about Western society as well. I think this may be a good thing for me as an artist because I have a choice and can make comparisons between the two cultures as well as keeping a balance between them. But sometimes I think maybe not, I feel like I've lost myself. I don't know

¹⁹⁰ Smith 1996, pp. 80-81

¹⁹¹ Guan Wei, pers. comm., 12 May 1997

¹⁹² Williams, pers. comm., 16 May 1997

¹⁹³ Williams pers. comm., 1 May 1997

¹⁹⁴ Binghui Huangfu 1996

where my place is. I don't belong to China and I don't belong to Australia. Sometimes Australians think, 'Oh Guan Wei, he's a Chinese artist', but my friends from China think of me as an Australian artist because I live here.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵Guan Wei 1997, pers. comm., 7 May

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Unless otherwise stated all works by Guan Wei are illustrated with photographs from the artist's collection. Details of artist, title, date, size and media have been provided where available. Dimensions are given height x width.

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1882 175 x 47.3 cm
ink and colour on paper
Brown & Ju-hsi Chou 1992, pp. 174-5
- Plate 2** **anonymous Suzhou artist**
New Year picture (nianhua)
c. 1950s
hand-coloured woodblock print
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- Plate 3** **Renmin meishu chubanshe**
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- Plate 5** **Guan Wei**
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1982 120 x 100 cm
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- Plate 15** **Qilin Song Zi**
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1993 87 x 46 cm
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Mapocalyps nos 4 & 12
1997 58 x 36 cm
mixed media



Plate 1

Ren Xun

Magpies and plum blossoms

1882 175 x 47.3 cm

ink and colour on paper

Brown & Ju-hsi Chou 1992, pp. 174-5.



Plate 2 anonymous Suzhou artist *New Year picture (nianhua)*
c.1950s hand-coloured woodblock print. Sullivan 1996, plate 34

Plate 3 Renmin meishu chubanshe *Tempering red hearts in stormy waves* early 1970s
Landsberger 1995, p. 181



Plate 4 Guan Wei
Untitled
1980 120 x 65 cm
oil on canvas

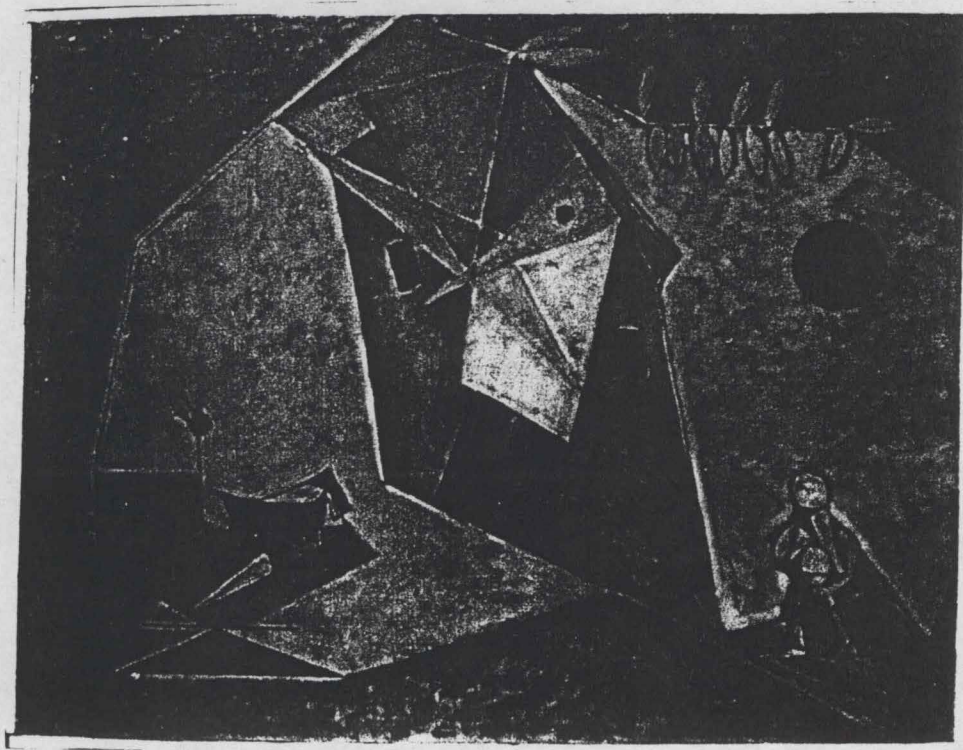


Plate 5 Guan Wei
Untitled
1983 110 x 70 cm
oil on canvas



Plate 6

Guan Wei
Untitled

1982

120 x 100 cm

oil on canvas

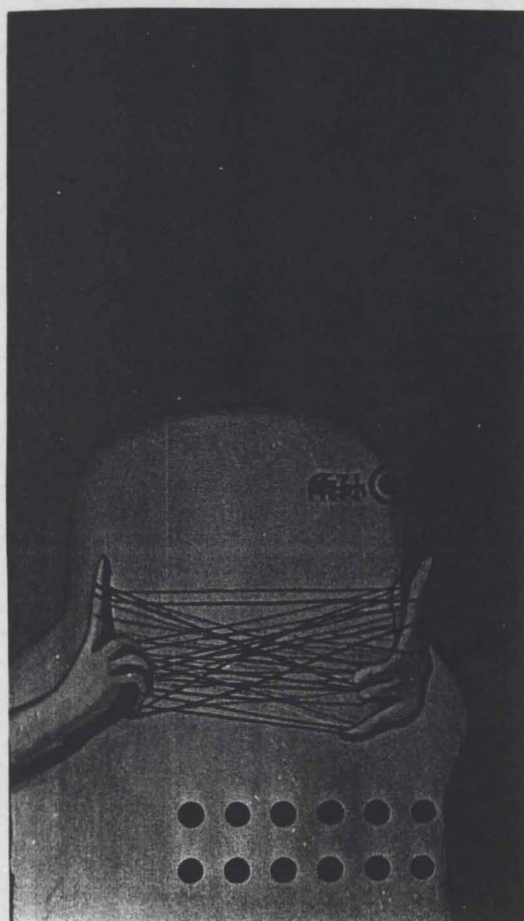


Plate 7

Guan Wei
Rope games
1987

95 x 62 cm

oil on canvas



Plate 8 **Tang Song & Xiao Lu**
Dialogue Installation
1989
Sullivan 1996, p. 276

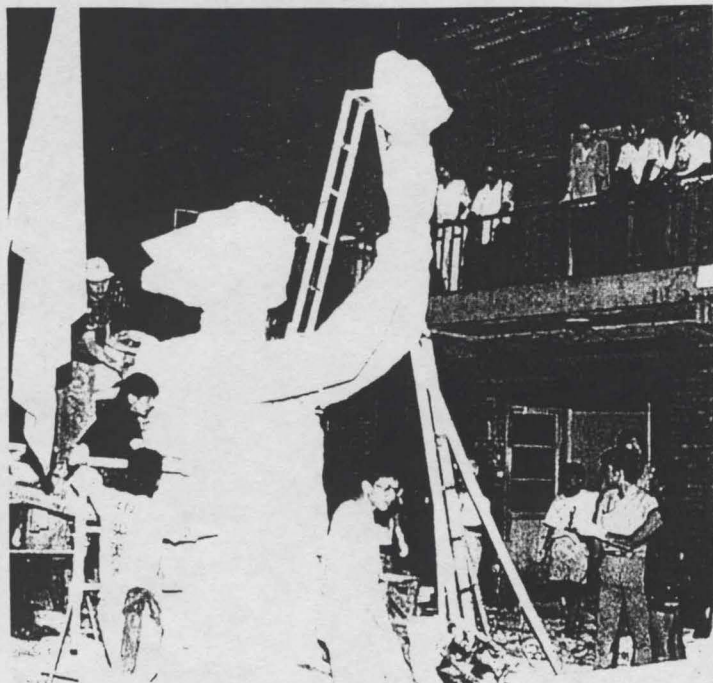


Plate 9 **Central Academy sculpture students making the Goddess of
Democracy** May 29/30 1989
Sullivan 1996, p. 277

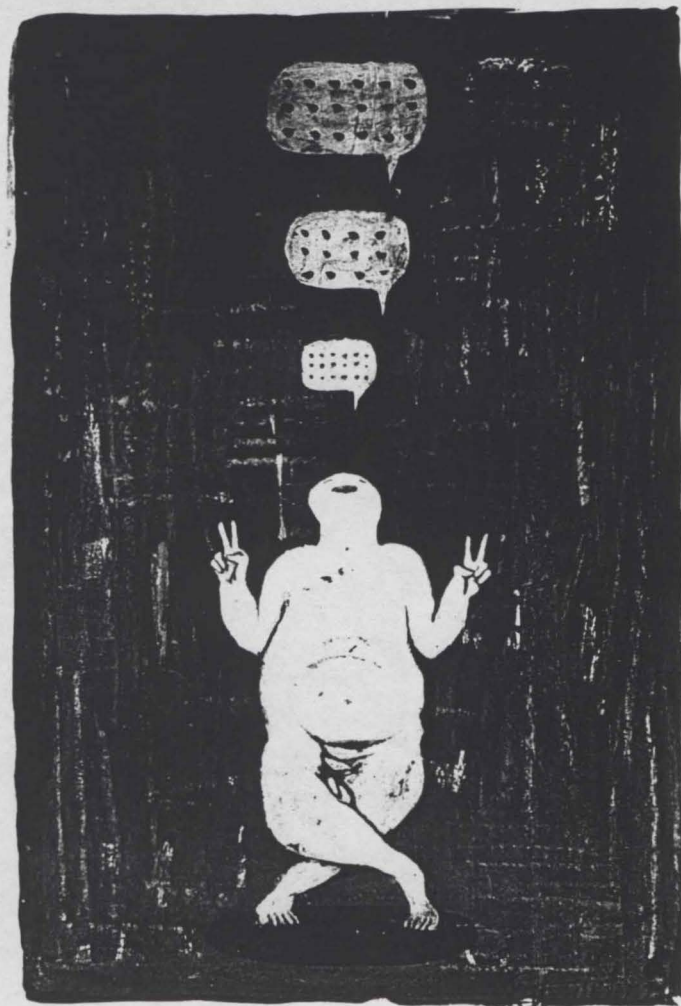


Plate 10

Guan Wei
34.5 x 25.5 cm

Two finger exercise no. 15
gouache on cardboard

1989

Plate 11

Guan Wei
34.5 x 25.5 cm

Two finger exercise no. 35
gouache on cardboard

1989

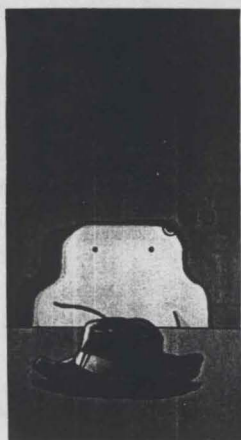
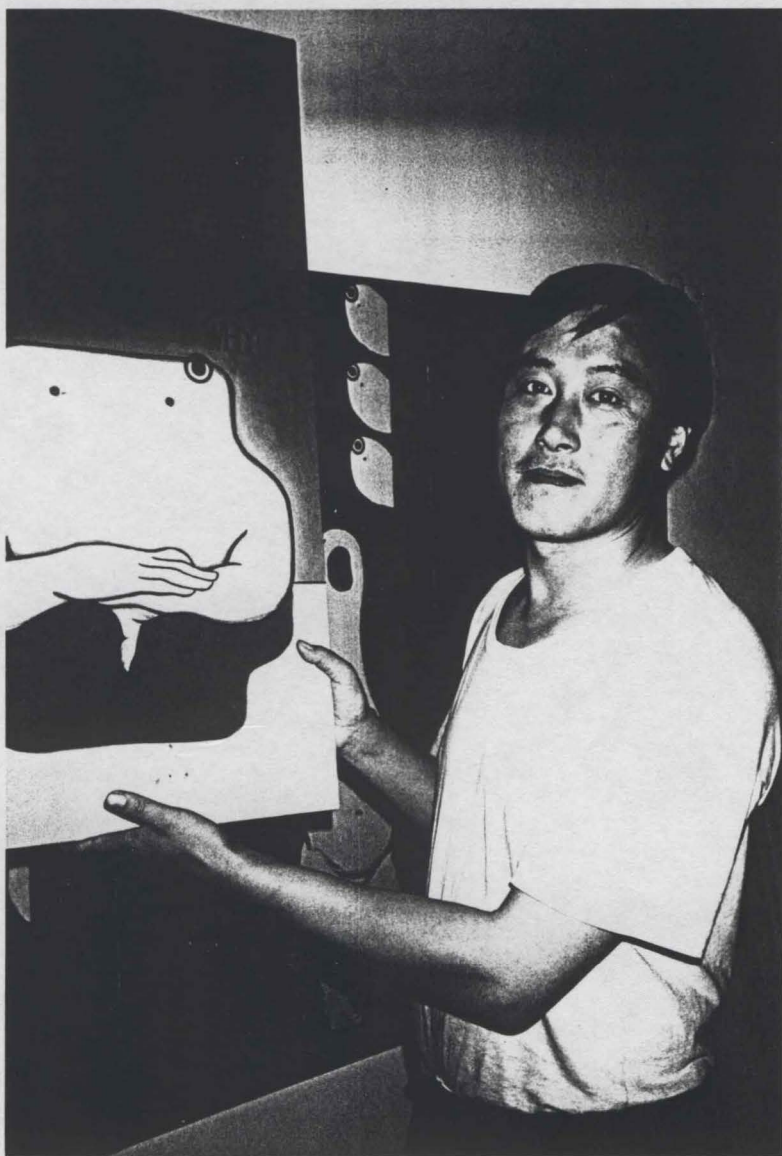


Plate 12

Guan Wei holding *Why* from the *Little toys* series. The canvases in the background are from *Pillar*. Photograph by David Williams, 1991.

Plate 13

Guan Wei
Hat, Fan and Vase from *Little toys*
1990 87 x 46 cm
acrylic on canvas

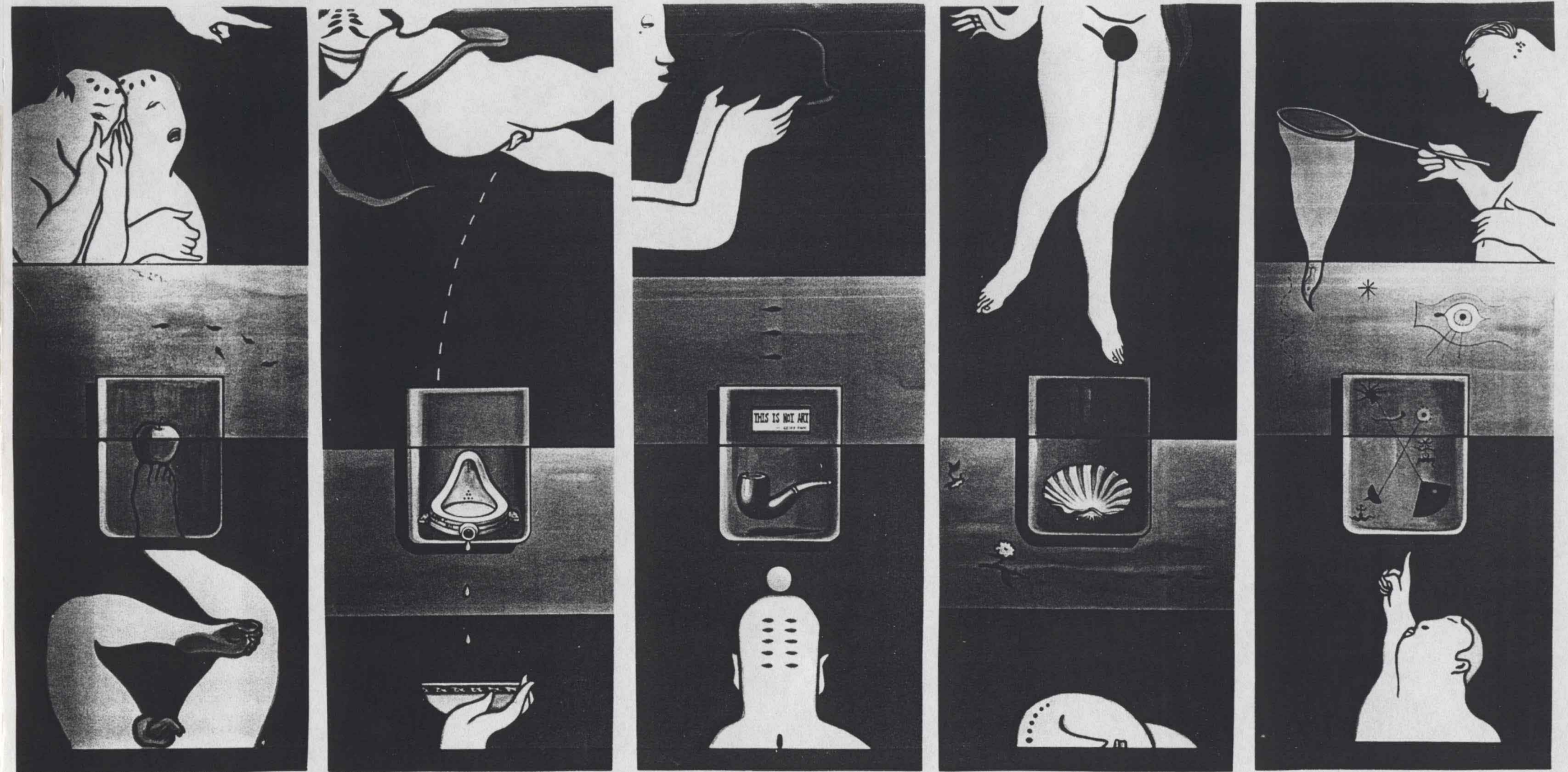


Plate 14

Guan Wei

*Apple on the foot, Holy water, Pipe, Venus vanishing and
Fishing for Miro from the Living Specimen*

1991-92 127 x 48.5 cm

acrylic on canvas



Plate 15

Qilin Song Zi
The arrival of the boys
51.2 x 29.8 cm
Dittrich 1984, p. 71.



Plate 16

Guan Wei

Test tube baby no. 2

1992

127 x 48.5 cm

acrylic on canvas



Plate 17

Guan Wei
Wunderkind no. 8
1993 87 x 46 cm
acrylic on canvas

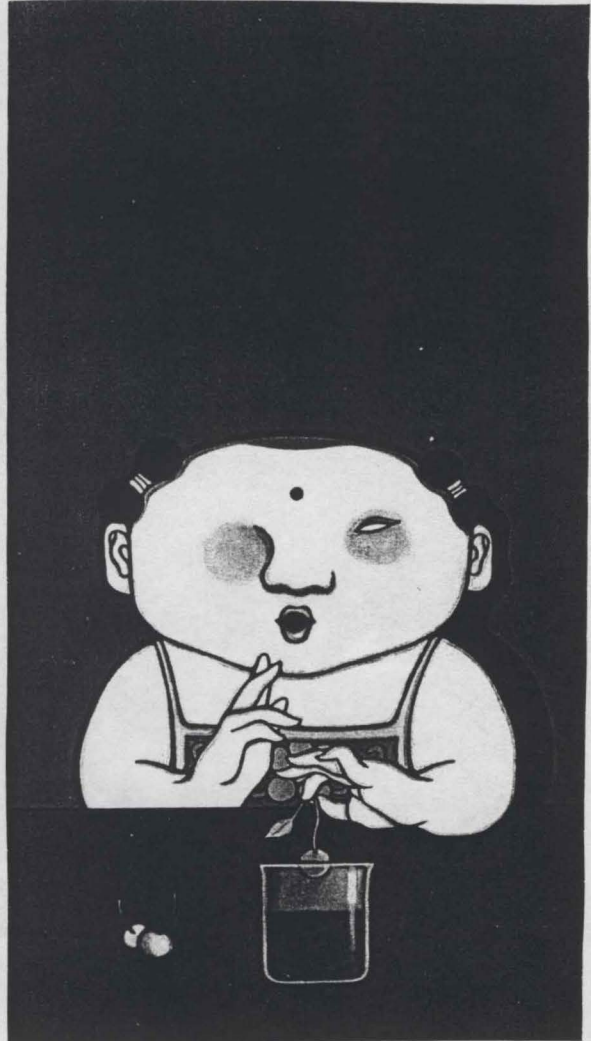


Plate 18

Guan Wei
Wunderkind no. 2
1993 87 x 46 cm
acrylic on canvas

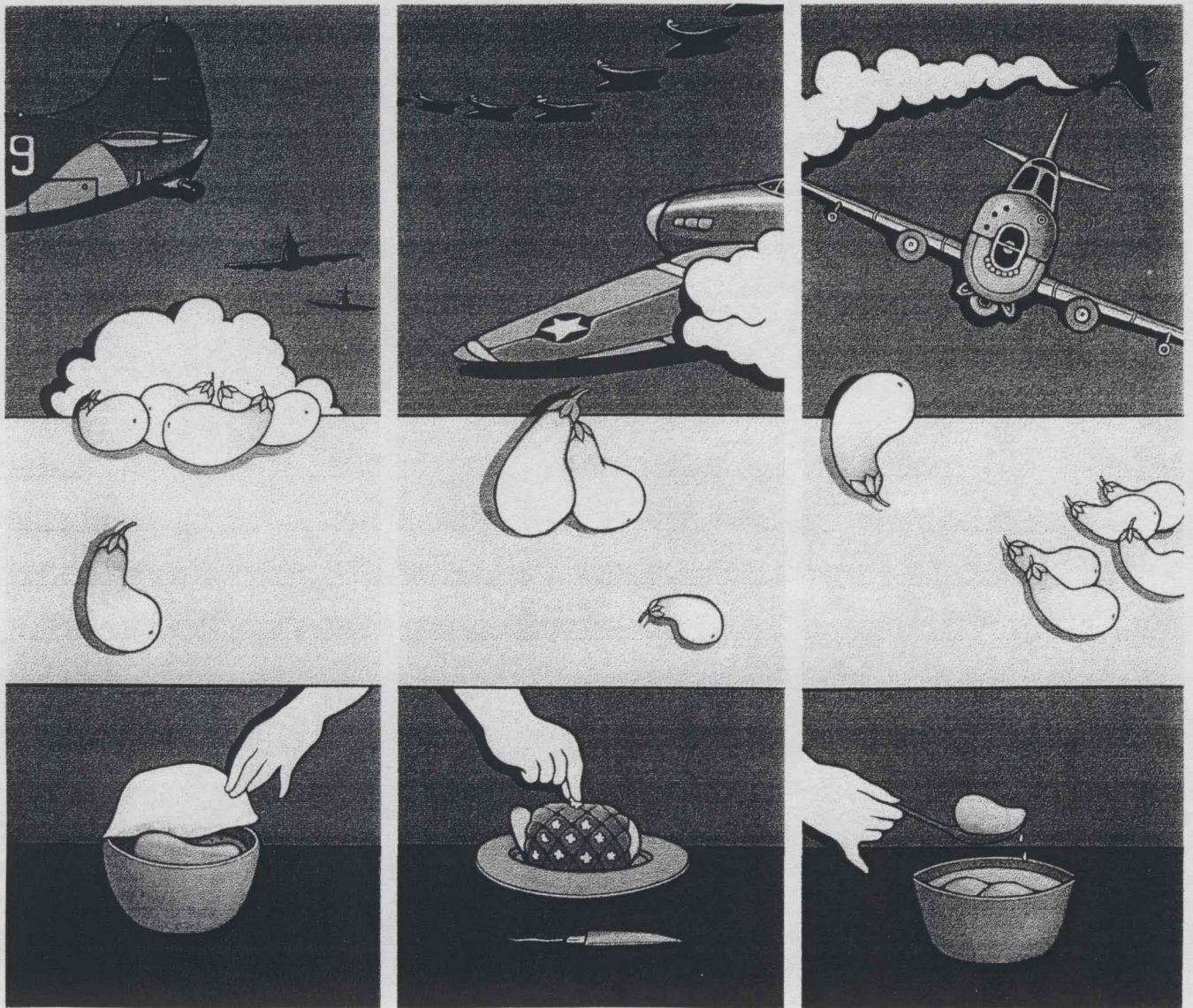


Plate 19

Guan Wei

The Great War of the Eggplant nos 6, 7 & 8

1993-94 87 x 46 cm

acrylic on canvas

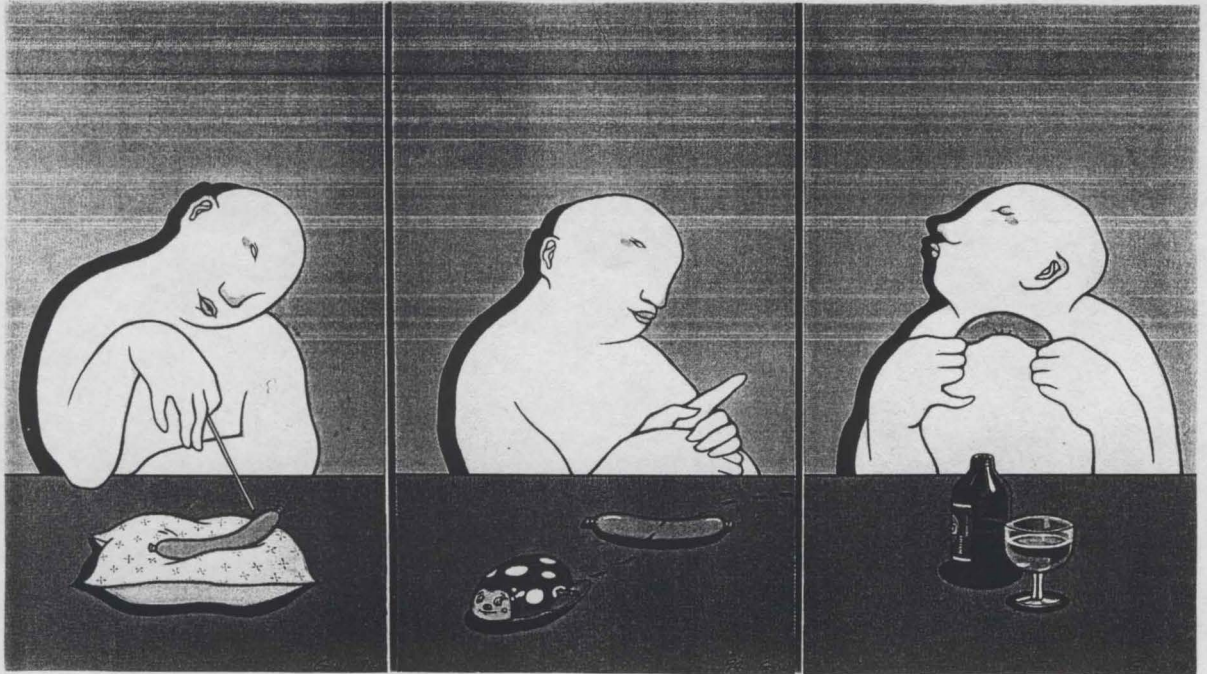


Plate 20

Guan Wei

Sausage nos. 8, 9 & 10

1994 87 x 46 cm

acrylic on canvas



Plate 21

Guan Wei

Treasure Hunt nos 3, 11 & 19

1995 87 x 46 cm

acrylic on canvas

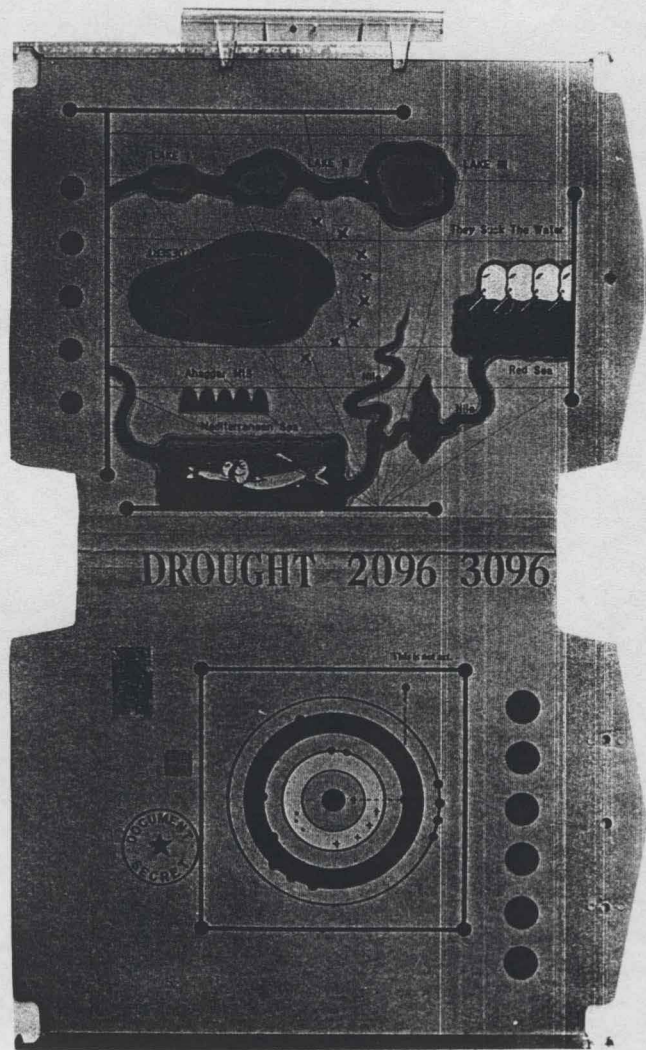
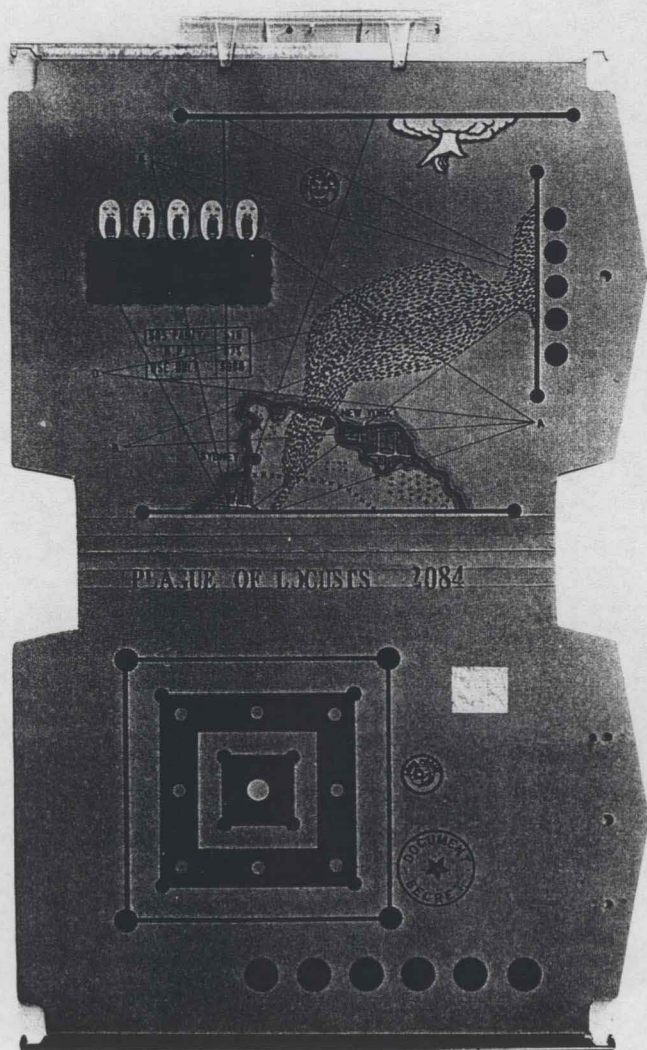


Plate 22

Guan Wei

Mapocalyps nos 4 & 12

1997 58 x 36 cm

mixed media

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Personal communication

Guan Wei

artist

13 July 1996

21 February 1997

7 May 1997

12 May 1997

Ah Xian

artist

13 July 1996

Maria Apostolou

Assistant curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

20 May 1997

Deborah Clark

Curator of Australian Paintings, National Gallery of Australia

23 April 1997

John Clark

Lecturer in Asian History, University of Sydney

1, 8 & 20 May 1997

Geoff Parr

Professor of Art at the Tasmanian School of Art, Hobart

2 May 1997

Jade Binghui Huangfu

Curator & lecturer, Lasalle SIA College of the Arts, Singapore

ex. Assistant Curator, Asian Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales

12 & 13 July 1996

Kerrie Ann Roberts

Manager, Sherman Galleries

8 May 1997

David Williams

Director, Canberra School of Art School, Canberra

16 May 1997

Xiao Xian

artist

13 July 1996

Guan Wei

biography

1957 born Beijing, People's Republic of China

1986 Graduated from the department of Fine Arts at Beijing Capital University and became a high school art teacher

1989 Artist-in-residence, Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania, Hobart

1990-92 Artist-in-residence, Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania, Hobart

1992-93 Artist-in-residence, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

1993-94 Artist-in-residence, Canberra School of Art, Australian National University, Canberra

Art Prize 1994 Gold Coast City Conrad Jupiters Art Prize

1994-95 Grant, Australia Council

1996 Curatorial team member, the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

1997 Visiting scholar, School of Asian Studies, University of Sydney

Selected solo exhibitions

1997 Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

Sherman Galleries Goodhope, Sydney

1996 Hanart T Z Gallery, Hong Kong

Umbrella Studio, Townsville

Red Gate Gallery, Beijing

1995 Sherman Galleries Goodhope, Sydney

1994 Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University

1993 Sherman Galleries, Sydney

1992 Dick Bett Gallery, Hobart

Plimsoll Gallery, Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania, Hobart

1991 Canberra School of Art, Australian National University, Canberra

Plimsoll Gallery, Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania, Hobart

Despard Gallery, Hobart

Waverley City Gallery, Melbourne

1989 French Embassy, Beijing

Selected group exhibitions

- 1997** *Asian Art at the ANU*, University Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra
Anon ... Sherman Galleries Goodhope, Sydney
Drift, Penrith Regional Gallery, Sydney
In & Out: Contemporary Chinese art of mainland and diaspora, Lasalle SIA College of the Arts Gallery, Singapore. Exhibition touring to Australia.
- 1996** *Above and Beyond*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne & Institute of Modern Art (IMA), Brisbane. Touring capital cities nationally.
Five Australian Artists Show, Bede Gallery, Jarrow, England
Flagging the Republic, Sherman Galleries Goodhope, Sydney, travelling exhibition.
Adelaide 96 Festival, Adelaide
- 1995** *Australia Perspecta*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
The Collectable Eggbeater, Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania, Hobart
Work on paper, Sherman Galleries Hargrave, Sydney
3 x 3 Sites, Sydney, Christchurch, Auckland, Berlin, Canberra, Beijing (travelling exhibition)
- 1994** *New Art from China*, Noosa Regional Gallery, Queensland
94 Open, Sydney
Gold Coast City Conrad Jupiters Art Prize, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland
Localities of Desire, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
Fourth Australian Contemporary Art Fair, Melbourne
- 1993** *Six Contemporary Chinese Artists*, Griffith University Art Gallery, Brisbane
Mao Goes Pop, China post 1989, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
Silent Energy, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, England
New Art from China, post-1989, Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong
Second Asian Art Fair, Hong Kong

- 1992-3** *Chinese New Wave*, Chameleon Contemporary Art Space,
Hobart
- 1992** *Orientations - The Emperor's New Clothes*, Irving Galleries
(renamed Sherman Galleries), Sydney
New Chinese Art, University of Western Sydney, Nepean, Sydney
Third Australian Contemporary Art Fair, Melbourne
- 1991** *Twelve Contemporary Chinese Artists*, University of Sydney and
touring
*Echoes of China - From Behind the Bamboo Curtain - Three
Contemporary Chinese Artists*, Irving Galleries, Sydney
- 1990-1** Plimsoll Gallery, Tasmanian School of Art, University of
Tasmania, Hobart
- 1990** *Contemporary Chinese Young Artists' works*, Twin Cranes
Gallery, Seattle, USA
International Youth Art Show, Paris
- 1989** *Individual Paintings*, Beijing Teacher's Institute, Beijing
- 1988** *Alumni Painting Exhibition*, Beijing Teacher's Institute, Beijing
- 1987** *Guan Wei and Ah Xian Paintings*, Beijing University, Beijing
- 1986** *Exhibition of Four Artists*, Beijing
Autumn Salon, Paris

Works in series

all sizes are given height x width

1978/83	<i>Small yards</i> oil on canvas	series of 20 works various sizes
1987	<i>Figures with acupuncture points</i> oil on canvas	series of 70 works 75 x 56 cm; 95 x 62cm
1989	<i>Two-finger exercise</i> gouache on cardboard	series of 50 works 34.5 x 25.5 cm
1989	<i>Fool</i> acrylic and oil pastels on paper	series of 18 works 28 x 20.3 cm
1989	<i>Diary</i> mixed media	series of 10 works 30 x 23 cm
1990	<i>Paper</i> mixed media	series of 36 works 30 x 23 cm

1990	<i>Little toys</i> acrylic on canvas	series of 43 works 87 x 46 cm
1990	<i>Pillar</i> acrylic on canvas	series of 26 works 127 x 61 cm
1991/92	<i>The Living Specimen</i> acrylic on canvas	series of 23 works 127 x 48.5 cm
1992/3	<i>Test Tube Baby</i> acrylic on canvas	series of 20 works 127 x 48.5 cm
1993	<i>Wunderkind</i> acrylic on canvas	series of 10 works 87 x 46 cm
1993/94	<i>The Great War of the Eggplant</i> acrylic on canvas	series of 20 works 87 x 46 cm
1994	<i>Sausage</i> acrylic on canvas	series of 10 works 87 x 46 cm
1995	<i>Treasure Hunt</i> acrylic on canvas	series of 20 works 87 x 46 cm
1995	<i>The Last Supper</i> acrylic on canvas	series of 23 works 87 x 46 cm
1995	<i>Efficacy of Medicine</i> acrylic on canvas	series of 10 works 87 x 46 cm
1995	<i>Detective</i> mixed media	series of 25 works 58 x 36 cm
1995	<i>Magic Garden</i> mixed media	series of 20 works 58 x 36 cm
1996	<i>Mapocalyps</i> mixed media	series of 20 works 58 x 36 cm
1997	<i>Rollercoaster</i> acrylic on canvas	series of 4 works 550 x 127 cm
1997	<i>Freestyle frogs</i> acrylic on canvas	series of 10 works 230 x 127 cm
1997	<i>The story of the four winds</i> acrylic on canvas	series of 10 works 500 x 87 cm

Prints

Printer: Fred Genis, Sherman•Genis Graphics, Sydney

1993	<i>First Kiss</i>	edition 20
	lithograph	80 x 41 cm
	<i>King and Queen</i>	edition 20
	lithograph	80 x 41 cm
	<i>Big Baby</i>	edition 20
	lithograph	80 x 41 cm
1995	<i>Last Supper</i>	edition 20
	lithograph	41 x 80 cm
	<i>Return to Paradise</i>	edition 20
	lithograph	41 x 80 cm
	<i>Last Judgement</i>	edition 20
	lithograph	41 x 80 cm

Collections

Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
Australian National University, Canberra
Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
University of New South Wales, Sydney
University of Tasmania, Hobart
Artbank
Private collections

