



## A question of scale

Wang GongXin  
*Adelaide Festival 2002*

Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide  
21 February – 28 March

I approach this review with no small amount of hesitation. How to critique the work of a Chinese artist without getting caught in the post-colonial crossfire and often understandable antagonism towards Western critics by many a Chinese artist or writer? Evidence of which can be found in a variety of essays, from Zhu Qi's rhetorically titled essay 'Do Westerners really understand Chinese Avant-garde art' to Pi Li's rigidly defined demarcation between 'interior' and 'exterior' critiques – the 'us and them' approach to cultural understanding.<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly the West likes to generalise and simplify that which it knows little of and I have no doubt that the rush by galleries in Europe and America to exploit the political struggle of young Chinese artists for commercial gain, has led to the championing of many mediocre artists. And certainly, for a nation with over fifteen percent of the world's population, any exhibition of Chinese contemporary art will be de facto token. The question remains, how much of China must one know to comment on the art it produces?

In this context, it is an achievement of this exhibition [part of a larger CACSA program foregrounding Asian art and its influences], that the explicit references in the videos to Wang's cultural heritage present themselves as entry points to the work rather than obstacles to understanding it. Indeed, after eight years working in New York and a travelling schedule that has pinballed him around Europe, South America and Asia, Wang's work is quite clearly located as much within an international context of artists working with video and installation, as it is within the community of artists in Beijing in which he works. The pieces exhibited here were thankfully less prescriptively 'about the struggle for individualism in post-communist China' than some of his work, most notably *My Sun*, shown earlier this year at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. An installation a little too close to Viola-like operatics for my liking – an artist with whom Wang is often compared.

These three videos, *Kara Oke*, *Play Thing* and *The Fly*, are essentially a continuation of Wang's preoccupation with portraiture, both intimate and subtle while also rather monumental, through a series of scale distortions that have become a common element in much of his work. *Kara Oke* is the first piece one encounters, which suitably enough features a droning vocal soundtrack that makes you want to reach for the plug. A close-up of a man's mouth reveals a set of teeth superimposed with the reduced image of a person standing, karaoke style, on each tooth, singing a single note. As his mouth opens and closes and his tongue licks over his teeth, the sound modulates up and down. *Kara Oke* is an ambiguous piece, irritating and humorous, banal and yet curious, stupid and completely mesmerising. All in all disturbingly like a weird cultic experience.

Although featured on both the catalogue and invite card, *Kara Oke* is to my mind upstaged by *Play Thing*, projected on the opposite wall. This time the portrait is not of a face, but of a pair of hands as they play with two traditional Chinese medicine balls, the interminable repetitive circular motion of which echoes the looping convention of video art. Medicine, or Baoding balls have a long history in Chinese medicine, related as they are, to acupuncture pressure points vital to the flow of energy and blood throughout the body. The putative stress-relieving properties of Baoding balls find an interesting visual parallel here in the motion of the one ball chasing the other around the palm of the hand, which, though armed with only a partial knowledge of the cultural significance of these objects, transfixed me as if by a conjurer or hypnotist. All the while, in their shining reflections the curved world in which they circulate is blurrily reflected. I say this armed with only a partial knowledge, which I guess is better than that with which Adam Dutkiewicz of Adelaide's *The Advertiser* approached the work, describing the use of Baoding balls rather patronisingly as "an idiosyncratic cultural practice".<sup>2</sup> There is perhaps good reason why Chinese artists have little respect for Western critics.

Finally the back room of the CACSA was screening *The Fly*, another looping video, where a man, blurred out of focus, is seen harrassed by a fly buzzing around him. As the figure comes closer to the screen his image begins to pixelate, each pixel growing larger and larger until the image reveals itself as made up of thousands of tiny flies. As with the other pieces in this show, Wang's attention is as much focused on the material quality of the digital image as it is on the ostensible story told. Though more obvious in his installation works, this quality of formal experimentation nevertheless comes through here, within the context of these three single channel pieces.

As a taster of what is to come from CACSA's Asian focused program for 2002, the show had a light touch, neither exoticising the mysterious depths of an unknown culture à la Joseph Conrad nor prescribing an off the shelf political context from which to view the work. It rather let the work speak for itself.

### Notes

- 1 Zhu Qi, 'Do Westerners really understand Chinese avant garde art?', *Chinese-art.com*, Vol. 2 No. 3: 13–17;
- 2 Pi Li, 'My life, my decision: the political nature of Chinese contemporary art', *Chinese-art.com*, Vol. 2 No. 5: 15–18
- 3 Adam Dutkiewicz, 'Confronting Sounds', *The Advertiser*, 18 March, 2002

Andrew Mackenzie



## Slippery when wet

Denise Kum

Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide  
1 March – 6 April

Plastics have always had a bad rap. Associated with a proliferation of consumer goods of endemic proportions during the fifties through to the seventies, the successful development of new plastics became synonymous with mass production. Synthesized from organic chemicals, plastic's multifarious properties were utilised in creating a diverse range of products that were valued for their cheap and cheerful availability and by 1982, plastic production surpassed that of steel worldwide.<sup>1</sup>

Despite being seen as a useful material, plastic was sneered at because it also came to represent artifacts of tasteless and inferior quality. It lacked the sensuality of timber and fabrics and didn't possess the coolness of metal or glass. Disposability and the increased use of packaging have eventually defined it as the material most indicative of capitalism's rampant consumption and wastefulness. The environmentally aware 1990s confirmed that plastic is bad and all things 'petrochemical' are not very earth-friendly either.

Unctuous substances, polymers or petrochemical derivatives have become an interesting choice of material for New Zealand born/London based artist Denise Kum. Through her research and aided by British Petroleum in Auckland, Kum discovered an affinity with substances and unguents usually manufactured for a variety of domestic and industrial applications.<sup>2</sup> In particular she began to use petrolatum and acetates in works that were often lumpy, sticky and virulent in appearance and with names like *chewy*, *slumpy*, *lube* and *thermo* seemed to personalise the experience of mutant texture and materiality.

Kum's recent installation at the Experimental Art Foundation was uncompromising in its saturation of colour and product. On entering the gallery an almost allergy-inducing odour of industrial hand cleanser permeated everything and a boardwalk of packing crates invited the viewer to walk through what appeared to be a dystopic garden display. Twisted stalagmites of extruded plastic were fantastical in the Tolkien sense, rising out of pools of viscous, acid-hued petrolatum and nasty pink hand-cleanser. Disorderly spills of granulated plastics and other hardened blobs completed the scene along with a resting-place of benches and blue Astro turf.

The extruded plastics and pellets are thermoplastics, which enables them to be softened by heat and reformed as part of a never-ending consumptive cycle. This quality marks the material's superiority in the good plastic/bad plastic competition. Cosmetics, cleaning products, even foods are devised from a similar chemical base and we consider them benign or intolerable depending on the context. It was this duplicity, this crossover, that Kum's installation spoke about. In the exhibition catalogue in conversation with Chris Chapman, Kum says that there is, "an acknowledgment of the breakdown between concepts of the artificial and so called real or natural. And not in a completely abject way either – I mean why can't these things coexist without us having to elevate one state over another?"<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps something this work didn't question was acceptable levels of 'risk' that are an integral part of the culture of manufacturing, either in-built within the products themselves [e.g. pharmaceuticals] or in the disposal of waste. The temptation to fill the gallery space right to the edges and to keep everything orderly may have subjugated the latent and dangerous aspects of the materials' eventual dispersal. Unlike the experience of walking through zoological or botanical displays you were never under the illusion that this world was alive or in any way fertile. This was a carefully devised set that lay stagnant in its own slippery and coagulated juices, rendered useless and contaminated; it required nothing but your compliance.

### Notes

- 1 A. Di Noto, *Art Plastic*, Cross River Press, USA, 1984
- 2 Giovanni Intra, 'Very slippery' in *Elain*, Denise Kum, New Zealand, 1996
- 3 Denise Kum, *Denise Kum*, exhibition catalogue, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 2002



Katrina Simmons