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# Oh baby, look at us now

Three artistic siblings show how much they've grown up, writes **Kristina Perez**

**Y**u Chen's Beijing studio is dominated by a pair of enormous, hot-pink, pudgy-cheeked toddlers. Although the 45-year-old is no longer dressing her trademark Red Babies in green army garb, the likeness to Chairman Mao Zedong is still visible in their cherubic if demanding faces. But those faces also bear an uncanny resemblance to the artist and her two brothers.

Yu Chen, Chen Yu, 39, and Chen Li, 33, are showing jointly for the first time on the mainland in The Chen Family, which runs at the Beijing Today Art Museum Gallery until April 29. Despite their similar physical traits, their characters, and their art, could not be more different.

Nicole Schoeni, director of the Schoeni Gallery which represents the artists and is co-organising the exhibition, says the show highlights the distinctive styles that set the Chens apart from their contemporaries while reflecting their contrasting personalities.

Growing up in 1960s and 70s China, the artistic inclinations of the Chen children were nurtured by their mother, an art teacher, and father, who worked for an art organisation. All three siblings later graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

Yu Chen's art explores the impact of the Cultural Revolution during her formative years through the limitless possibility of infants adorned with symbols from the era and sometimes candy.

"The future of babies is uncertain," she says. "If you look at an adult you are certain of their personality but if you look at a baby you don't know who they will be when they grow up."

"Possibility is very important for me because earlier in my life there were too many rules, saying you must do this, you must do that, so I felt constricted."

About the ornamental motifs in her work Yu Chen says: "The military uniform and the five stars on the cap represent my childhood, the memories of those years. The Cultural Revolution was only 10 years but the influence was huge so it is difficult to totally get out of it. The ice cream cone is just for fun, sort of a joke, not so serious."

It was with the *Red Babies* series, which began in 2000, that Yu Chen realised her artistic voice, but she says: "Styles are not important for me, what is the most important is how to express myself. Style is just the way for me to express myself."

"Whether it is a baby or not a baby is not important to me. But when I paint the babies I feel release. I feel this is something right to express, this is something right for me right now. How to release myself is the most important part."

Although she is an established artist in the male-dominated and increasingly high-priced realm of Chinese contemporary art, Yu Chen is reluctant to identify herself as a

**The men in the painting are pretending to have their eyes closed because in China sex is immoral**

Chen Yu (below left with siblings Yu Chen and Chen Li)



pioneer. "When you create something, you are an artist. When you are a female artist, people will ask you, 'Why did you create these works, like baby girls? Are you trying to express something about gender? Or, what's the attitude you're trying to paint about baby girls?'"

She says with the "competition" between male and female artists, people try to identify female artists by their gender, to identify who is who: "But I don't want to explain."

Her brother Chen Yu's paintings are often composed of multiple repetitive figures – and one that does not belong.

Schoeni says identity is a central theme in his work because "Chen Yu

was born the year Mao officially declared the Cultural Revolution was at an end in 1969. Because individuality was shunned, he belongs to the generation of artists, as does his older sister, so they are in a search and inquisitive about the issue of one's identity. He wants the viewer to question, why on a superficial level [the heads or figures] are all the same, yet one of them has his eyes open and is awake or aware of his surroundings."

Chen Yu says he feels he is just one among the crowd in public places. "I always ask the question, are they the same as me, are we the same? When I was growing up I was dissatisfied with society. I felt uncomfortable with society. I didn't get the traditional cultural influence because during the Cultural Revolution everything was changed and I wasn't satisfied with it."

Looking at his work, he says: "I am the different person."

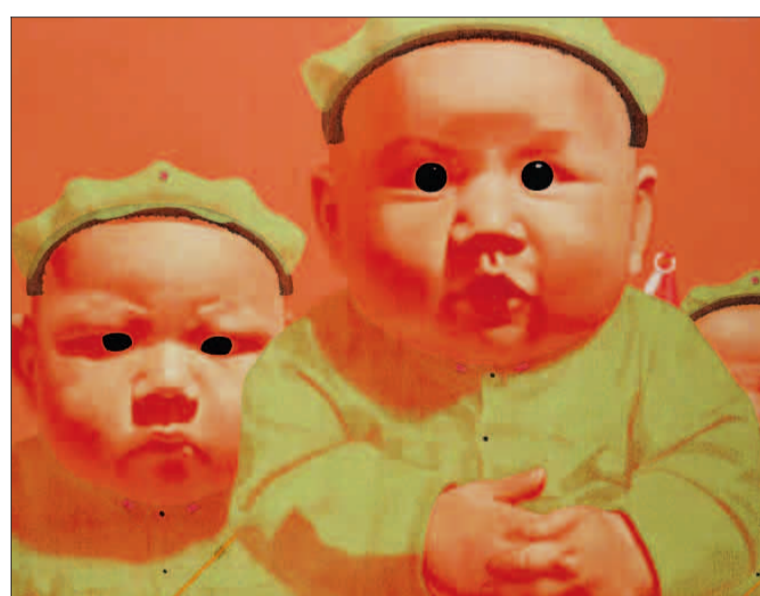
Chen Yu's work also addresses gender relations in modern China; in many of his paintings there is a naked woman among men who are sexually attracted to her, such as in *Untitled 2006 No 3*.

Chen Yu says he is exploring "the sense of how a man feels when he sees a woman. When I painted this I thought I was the person outside the situation imagining how this group of men felt seeing this woman. But I am also in the painting. I wasn't the man with his eyes open, but I hope to be him."

"The other men who have their eyes closed are only pretending to have their eyes closed. They are pretending to have their eyes closed because in China sex is immoral. They are pretending they don't see it but they want to see it."

The "baby" of the family, Chen Li, whose work borrows from Buddhist and Christian symbolism as well as referencing western masters such as Rubens (*Innocent Phoenix*, 2005), is back in their home province of Guizhou. "Chen Li's work is totally different from ours," says his brother. "It is not related at all. He doesn't care about this world. He is a very complicated person."

Chen Yu remembers when Chen Li was a child he read western history books so he incorporates it in his works. "I think the Cultural Revolution still influences Chen Li



because he likes history but I think it is just something interesting, distant for him," the middle child says.

"The feeling is different for him because he didn't experience it directly. For the people who experienced the Cultural Revolution the memories are painful but for Chen Li, who didn't experience it, he can see it as something romantic, even funny."

"His works, the older ones

especially, show signs of paranoia, insecurity and again identity issues," Schoeni says. "I personally feel his mind and therefore his art is much more complex than the rest of his generation."

**The Chen Family, Apr 13-29, Beijing Today Art Museum Gallery in association with Schoeni Art Gallery (Hong Kong), Pingod, Building 4, Baizwan Rd, Chaoyang District**



*Untitled 2006 No 3 (top)* by Chen Yu; *Innocent Phoenix (above)* by Chen Li; one of the *Red Babies* (above left) series by Yu Chen

## Happy Mundi for global Artes

### Adrian Searle

Almost nothing happens in Romanian artist Mircea Cantor's film *Deeparture*. A wolf and a deer circle and watch one another warily in an antiseptic, white gallery space. The wolf pads about, yawns and has a lie down. The deer, understandably looking a little anxious, might as well be wearing a placard saying "LUNCH", but the wolf doesn't seem hungry. Maybe he had a cameraman earlier.

The film, shot in 16mm, is cool, crisp and elegant: it is not difficult to imagine it as an advert for a new tint of white paint or an air freshener.

Cantor currently has a show at Modern Art Oxford and is one of the nine finalists in the biannual Artes Mundi prize exhibition, at the National Museum of Wales in

Cardiff. Now in its third edition and with a prize of £40,000 (HK\$615,000) Artes Mundi is Britain's biggest international art prize. (The two previous winners are the US-based Chinese artist Xu Bing, also one of this year's judges, and Finnish filmmaker Eija-Liisa Ahtila.) It aims to "celebrate artists who in their work discuss the human condition and add to our understanding of humanity", writes the prize's co-founder Tessa Jackson.

This could mean almost anything. What does Cantor's film, or his sculpted, crystal-glass cornucopia, sat on a cardboard box, add to our understanding of the human condition? But this is to quibble. What is good about the prize is its breadth and genuine internationalism. So on with the other works.

Lida Abdul's films, small and enigmatic stories shot in her native Afghanistan, tease us with inexplicable narratives: boys line up to sell salvaged bricks on a foggy hilltop; a group of men chop down a tree once used to hang their group's compatriots; another group tug at ropes attached to a ruined building – whether to pull it down or prevent it taking flight, one is unsure.

Malian artist Abdoulaye Konate, who was in last year's Documenta in Germany, produced large-scale hanging textile panels that depict symbolic figures – hunters, death, conflict, nations, the sky. His work aims at social comment. The trouble is that the most compelling work here is his 1995 *Tribute to the Hunters of Mande*, a complex image; the graphic silhouettes of his later figures are a bit obvious.

In Vasco Araujo's film *About Being Different*, originally commissioned for the Baltic in Gateshead, the Portuguese artist interviewed a number of local clerics after having them watch a production of Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, on its themes of difference, conformity and persecution. They come out with well-meant, brow-furrowed, solemn platitudes. The camera cuts away to Gateshead's streets, homing in on front doors, satellite dishes, drainpipes and windows. Conformity! Different curtains! Secrets! This is laughable.

In a further work, *L'Inceste*, Araujo has filled a number of glass cases with mises-en-scene of porcelain figures and portions of text, embroidered on to fabric, by the Marquis de Sade, in French.



Rosangela Renno's 2003 video *Daily Mirror needs editing*. Photo: Jeff Morgan

Rosangela Renno's double-screen, two-hour 2003 video *Daily Mirror* is too long, especially when the only seating is small stools. You have to dip in and out, as the Brazilian artist acts out the roles of bride, thief, gangster's moll, pampered lover, jailbird, detective, mother, judge. The stories are derived from snippets she has read in the newspaper. The whole thing is

a tour de force, though in desperate need of an editor.

Dalziel + Scullion's 2007 video installation *Source* is beautifully shot. Their tide pools and weathered rocks, colonies of mussels, the strange geometries of the basalt formations on the Isle of Mull are a balm – until the camera begins following a boy as he wanders the landscape. He lies on the rocks and

climbs trees. There are glimpses of eagles and a stag in rut. Water drips from moss, a snail slides over kelp, a centipede crawls over the boy's face. The camera seeks out holes in rocks, caves and fissures. The whole thing is almost pornographic. The boy doesn't really add anything to the film, except to provide a certain sense of scale.

The Artes Mundi show tries to live up to its theme and to engage its artists in conversations with one another. The trouble is, those pesky, solipsistic ego worlds keep getting in the way.

Guardian News & Media

**Artes Mundi is at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, until Jun 8 (artesmundi.org). The winner will be announced on Apr 24.**