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It's all about the individual for the new generation of mainland artists, writes **Kristina Perez**

Me and mine

Chen Fei's Beijing studio looks like a nursery for horror film producers: it's packed with a mint-condition collection of dolls from Hollywood films such as *Friday the 13th* and *Predator*. Fellow artist Zhao Yiquan is also into toys, particularly Transformers.

The two twentysomethings might be called geeks in the west, but on the mainland they are *niubi*, part of a "Me generation" of hipsters who were raised under the one-child policy yet whose art has been influenced by the internet, comics, video games and globalisation.

Chen and Zhao's art will be featured in an exhibition of works by six *niubi* artists at Schoeni Art Gallery, in Central, later this month. The displays include paintings, sculpture, mixed digital media, 3D animation and mixed-media photography in an exhibition its organisers say makes a stark comparison between their art and that by artists from the 85 New Wave, a movement whose lives were defined by the Cultural Revolution and the opening to the west.

The *niubi* artists and their work have benefited from China's economic rise and interaction with the world, making them more individualistic and distant from the harsh realities faced by the previous generation, the exhibitors say.

The work of the 85 New Wave is about as relevant today as the previous five millennia of Chinese culture, says Zhao, who is from Shenyang in Liaoning province. "If an ancient society used wood for light and a modern person came up with a candle then he would be a great person in their society because he came up with something new," the 26-year-old says. "At that time there was no contemporary art in China. Now art in China is on a par with art in the west."

Chen agrees. He says the Cultural Revolution is of little relevance to him and finds western symbols much more familiar than socialist totems. "Coca-Cola is closer to me than Chairman Mao [Zedong]," the 25-year-old from Shaanxi province says. "I would rather paint Coca-Cola than Chairman Mao." But then

Chen has long absorbed foreign influences. He recalls picking up a traditional Chinese paintbrush to draw his first portrait – of Mickey Mouse – when he was six.

Today, his psychedelic-patterned painting style centres on the immediacy of life – his apartment, dogs and girlfriend – and the raw emotion of western horror and adult movies.

Chen was an art director in films who became frustrated with its production values and quit to express his storytelling and desire for special effects on a different canvas.

"In my pretend world, I am the bad guy who kills everyone without taking responsibility," he says.

Celebrities look charming but they may have made a lot of sacrifices to be a celebrity

Zhang Yexing, explaining his work, *Series No 6* (right)

Fellow exhibitor Zhang Yexing presents his *Curtain Series No 6*, a provocative work that depicts a headless woman spreading her legs in the air before a group of men toting mobile-phone cameras.

The work exaggerates the infamous image of American actress Sharon Stone crossing her legs in the film *Basic Instinct* and exposes the underbelly of the mainland's entertainment industry and the ubiquitous "casting couch", says the 27-year-old Central Academy of Fine Arts graduate, also from Shenyang.

"Celebrities look charming but they may have made a lot of sacrifices to be a celebrity," Zhang says. "And I feel sad about that. But once you decide to be in the game, you need to play the game. That's their life."

Being an only child has also influenced the *niubi* art.

Chen Ke recalls spending a lot of time alone as a child, playing with dolls and animating them with her own stories. "When I think about



Photos courtesy of Schoeni Art Gallery

my childhood I think it was lonely but it's not always the truth," the 30-year-old from Sichuan says. "Memory is also imagination."

Chen Ke is showing a series of photographs that she took while attending the Sichuan Academy of

Fine Arts. Fraught with tension, despair and sexuality, her works explore the relationship between violence and female beauty: her *Fire No 1*, for instance features a woman covered with roses and a gun to her head.

Another Sichuan native, Zhou Jinhua, also 30, uses photography and photo-realist oil painting to document his interpretation of the changes that are occurring in mainland society.

The changes have brought more opportunities for female artists, says fellow artist Feng Wei, sporting a T-shirt inscribed "Shopping Monster". However, the expectations of gender roles have not changed much in the past 20 years, says the 27-year-old, who was raised in Harbin in Heilongjiang province.

"I don't think there's a big difference between the women in my generation and the previous generation," she says, sitting in her classroom at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. "My generation has more economic independence. But the expectation that women will take care of the family hasn't changed much."

Zhang Yexing's *Curtain Series No 6* (above); Zhao Yiquan's interest in toys can be seen in *Interesting No 5* (left); Chen Ke's *Fire No 1* (right)

So she channels the conflicts between the adult and adolescent worlds into her clay-animation shorts called *Rabbit Street*, which examines Beijing hutong life through the eyes of its rabbit protagonists, who run a television repair shop.

Feng left her hometown at 16 to attend boarding school in Beijing. She jokes that her parents still see her as a teenager a decade later.

"Even now, I can't get home too late in Beijing – they call me from Harbin," she says. "I've been here for 10 years. My parents are still keeping a close eye on me because I am an only child, like most of my generation. They want me to get married but I'm not ready yet. It's a pretty common feeling among my girlfriends."

Critics might say the "Me generation" artists are self-centred, but the *niubi* say teenagers born in the 1990s are more so.

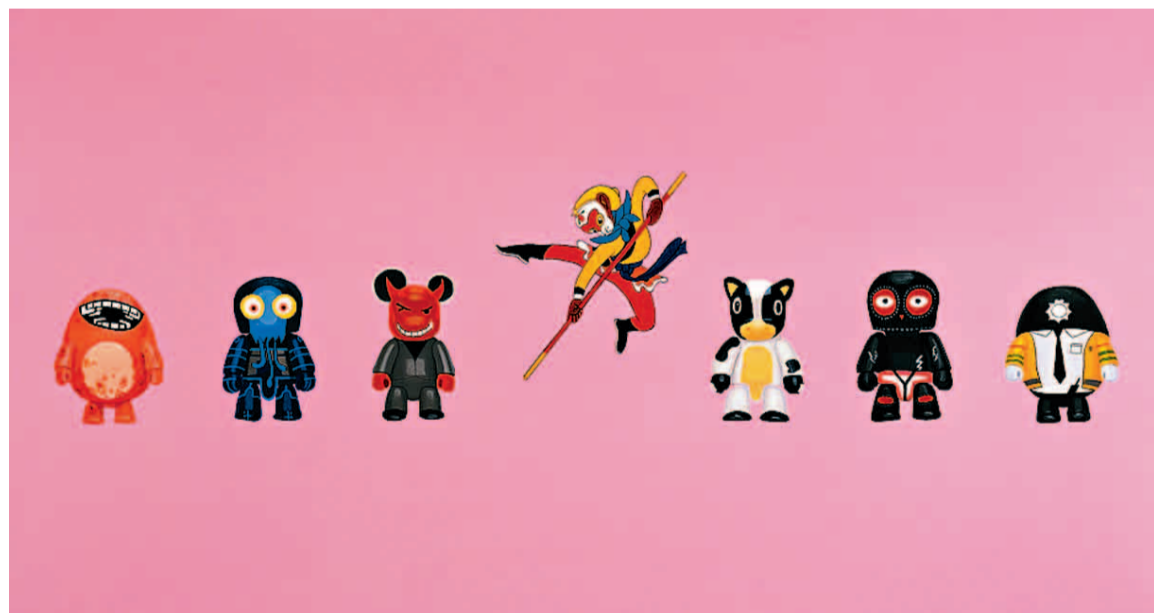


Chen Fei says his sister born in 1989 is different from his contemporaries. "My sister is very young, very immature," he says. "She doesn't have to think about reality. The youngsters don't have pressure."

But Zhao Yiquan says this emerging individuality is not a

bad thing. "I find it is pretty good because the last generation had no 'me' at all," he says.

Niubi Newbie Kids – Me Generation Chinese Artists Mixed Media Exhibition, Sept 19-Oct 13, Schoeni Art Gallery, 21-31 Old Bailey St, Central. Inquiries: 2869 8802



Glimpses of Bhutan's sacred world

Audrey McAvo

Assistant curator John Johnston scaled steep cliffs to reach a bronze sculpture of a Buddha at a small Himalayan monastery 3,962 metres above sea level. And where there was no trail, he and two companions grabbed trees to pull themselves up the mountain.

After seven hours of trekking they reached the 60cm-tall gilt bronze figure of Buddha Vajrasattva, which is said to bridge the divide between enlightened knowledge and worldly action, and carries a bell in one hand and a thunderbolt in the other. The bell symbolises compassion and wisdom. The thunderbolt, called a *dorje*, symbolises the wisdom and power of Buddhist teachings.

The 15th-century or 16th-century figure is now one of the key pieces in The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan, a rare display of centuries-old sculptures and

paintings that have never before left the remote, mountainous kingdom.

Even in Bhutan, the public rarely gets to see the rich collection of work, now due to travel to New York, San Francisco and Europe over the next two years.

Almost all the art is normally kept in active temples, monasteries and *dzong* – fortress-like buildings home to both monasteries and government offices. About one-quarter of the items were gathered from far-flung monasteries and temples reachable only by hiking several hours from the nearest road.

Bhutan, a country of about 700,000 people sandwiched between China and India, is one of the most remote places in the world. Most people are Buddhist, and the government carefully aims to balance economic growth with spiritual well-being.

Some of the paintings had to be refurbished before the show

because they were covered with tiny black spots where bugs had eaten through the animal-skin glue. In some cases, rats ate chunks out of the scrolls' silk borders.

American museums have hosted Bhutanese art before. The Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, organised a Bhutanese textile show in the mid-1990s, but the exhibit didn't feature religious works. Others have shown sacred Tibetan paintings and sculptures similar in style to Bhutanese work. But these objects were from museums, and were no longer actively used in worship.

In contrast, monks and lay worshippers in Bhutan bow down and chant prayers before the works borrowed for this exhibition. Believers say performing rituals in the presence of the paintings and sculptures helps remove obstacles to enlightenment.

Underscoring the art's sacred

status, three to five Buddhist monks are accompanying the exhibit around the world, praying twice a day for the protection of the paintings and sculptures.

One monk, Sherab Dorji, says he's never seen such a collection of work back home; he walked through the display every day when it was held at the Honolulu Academy of Arts earlier this year. "I explain to all the visitors, 'If you have faith in God, then you surely will be blessed by this art,'" Dorji says.

Bhutanese officials took about eight months to mull over the academy's exhibit proposal. But academy director Stephen Little says they agreed after seeing that the museum didn't intend to profit from the venture. Johnston then spent about 2½ years learning Bhutanese customs and language and travelling to isolated monasteries and temples asking to borrow art. A representative from the

government's Department of Culture and a monk from Bhutan's official monastic body accompanied him on these treks, vouching for the project. Even so, Johnston had to win the trust of the monks.

"We never pushed people. If we sensed resistance, or if people really did not want to participate, we didn't try to apply any kind of pressure," he says. "You have to be so sensitive to the role these objects and images play in the lives of these villages, and in the lives of these practitioners."

Getting to some of the works was physically trying, especially since



A gilded cast copper sculpture of the Buddha Maitreya, part of a show of Bhutanese art touring the US. Photo: AP

Johnston suffers from motion sickness on Bhutan's windy roads and fears heights. "There would be this scary little crumbly trail on a cliff," Johnston says. "And on the other side would be a temple with who knows what kind of art inside."

Some of the paintings – or *thangkas* – in the exhibit show scenes

from the lives of Buddhism's founder, Sakyamuni.

In two colourful scrolls called the *Jataka Tales* from the 18th-19th centuries, Buddha is shown as a flying horse rescuing people who had fallen into the land of cannibal demons after their boat capsized. In

another scene, he's a human prince who offers himself as food to a famished tiger that is too weak to feed her two cubs.

Some of the art shows deities striking poses from centuries-old sacred dances that are still performed regularly across Bhutan. High-definition video of the dances plays on screens mounted on walls next to the paintings and sculptures.

The show was a hit in Hawaii, with average monthly attendance at the Honolulu Academy doubling since it opened in late February. It will now head to the Rubin Museum of Art in New York from September 19 to January 5, then the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco in February-May 2009. A tour around Europe is also being planned, with a possible stop in Singapore on the art's return to Bhutan.

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