

White Rabbit – Contemporary Chinese Art Collection



Acknowledgements

Education Resource written by John Neylon, writer, curator and art museum education consultant.

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White Rabbit – Contemporary Chinese Art Collection

Education Resource: John Neylon

About this Education Resource

This Education Resource is published to accompany the exhibition

White Rabbit – Contemporary Chinese Art Collection

15 July – 30 September 2011

Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art

This Education Resource is designed to support learning outcomes and teaching programs associated with viewing the *White Rabbit* exhibition by:

- Providing information about the artists
- Providing information about key works
- Exploring Indigenous perspectives within contemporary art
- Challenging students to engage with the works and the exhibition's themes
- Identifying ways in which the exhibition can be used as a curriculum resource
- Providing strategies for exhibition viewing, as well as pre- and post-visit research

It may be used in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition or as a pre-visit or post-visit resource.

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Year level

This Resource is primarily designed to be used by secondary to senior secondary visual art teachers and students. Components can be adapted for use by upper primary and also tertiary students.

1 Background briefing

About this exhibition

White Rabbit – Contemporary Chinese Art Collection

In 2011, the Year of the Rabbit, the Samstag Museum is presenting a major exhibition of selected works from the *White Rabbit Collection*, for Adelaide Festival Centre's 2011 OzAsia Festival.

The *White Rabbit* exhibition provides an exciting introduction to the diversity and power of contemporary art practice in China, showcasing works in very different media – painting, sculpture, animation, new media and installation. Featured works explore China's rapidly changing society, from Mao's oppressive Cultural Revolution to the excesses and exuberance of China's economic boom.

What is White Rabbit?

The White Rabbit Collection is one of the world's largest and most significant collections of contemporary Chinese art. It was founded by Kerr and Judith Neilson and it focuses on works produced after 2000. The origins of the collection go back to the late 1990s, when Judith Neilson engaged Wang Zhiyuan, a Chinese artist then living in Sydney, as her art tutor. He introduced her to the astonishing explosion of creativity taking place in China in the wake of the 'Opening Up' that had begun in 1989. Judith Neilson and her husband then decided to open a gallery that would make the exciting world of contemporary Chinese art available to all Australians.

The White Rabbit Gallery, a converted former knitting factory near Sydney's Central Station, has four floors of exhibition space as well as a theatre, a library and a teahouse. Only a fraction of the collection is on show at any time. The entire contents of the gallery are rehung twice a year.

Further information: www.whiterabbitcollection.org

Participating artists

Bai Yiluo, Bu Hua, Shen Liang, Sun Furong, Wang Zhiyuan, Zhou Xiaohu, Wu Junyong, Cang Xin, Chen Zhuo + Huang Keyi, Dong Yuan, Yan Baishen and Shi Jindian.

2 Exploring the works

Bai Yiluo

b. 1968, Luoyang, Henan Province. Self taught. Lives and works in Beijing.

'All the changes in China could influence me. But most of the time my inspiration comes from my life experience.'

Artist statement, *Guide Look, Selected Works from The White Rabbit Collection*, White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney, 2009, p 16.

Perspectives

Bai Yiluo was born in 1968 in Luoyang, a mining town in central China. He originally worked in a factory but moved to Beijing to be closer to the contemporary art scene. While holding a day job at a photographic studio he taught himself the basics of photography. A series of photographic-based investigations involving the pasting of hundreds of passport identity photographs onto symbols of wealth and power (such as the American dollar) effectively launched his career as a contemporary artist. Today he is recognised not only for his photographic work but also sculptures and installations. A consistent theme in his art is the relationship between institutional power and ordinary people whose work enables the wealthy and powerful classes to enjoy a privileged existence.

'Like a steamroller, Bai Yiluo levels the great and the small, and envisions global connections often overlooked. In his earlier works, usually collage-based, he linked the east and the west, the rich and the humbled, by pasting anonymous Chinese passport ID photos onto symbols of greatness: the American dollar, mummified emperors. While these monochromatic works required painstaking manual labour to produce, his later stuff has greater visual impact.'

www.creativehunt.com/shanghai/articles/profiled-Bai-Yiluo

'Bai Yiluo's works often incorporate photography and traditional sculptural techniques, and media disparate in their ancient and contemporary connotations. Bai draws upon these to develop installations which reflect the human condition as a cyclical struggle, tortuously beautiful and poetically triumphant.'

www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk

See also: www.chinesische-gegenwartskunst.de/pages/presstexte/bai-yiluo-fate-no-4-en.php

Work

Recycling, 2008, mixed media, 320 x 250 x 200 cm

'His installation *Recycling* (2008) takes literally the common saying "I gave my heart away." What if someone really did decide to sell his or her heart, Bai Yiluo asks, "to the first guy who came around collecting rubbish for recycling"? His huge, anatomically exact fibreglass heart is roped onto the back of a garbage man's tricycle cart.'

Artist statement, December 2008, www.artefacts.net

Quoted in *Guide Look: Selected Works from the White Rabbit Collection*, White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney, 2009, p 16.

'The heart on wheels is an image filled with meaning – and with contradictions. It suggests not only the devaluing of love but the heart transplants that sustain life, as well as the illicit trade in human organs for which China has become notorious.'

From *Guide Look: Selected Works from the White Rabbit Collection*, White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney, 2009, p 16.



Bai Yiluo, *Recycling*, 2008, mixed media, 320 x 250 x 200 cm

Framing questions and research

- How do you feel about the idea that everything, even a heart, is just an object which can be bought and sold and eventually discarded?
- In various cultures, the emotions (including love) are regarded as being associated with or located within different organs or areas of the body. What can your research tell you about this?
- Does the comment that the artist's installations 'reflect the human condition as a cyclical struggle, tortuously beautiful and poetically triumphant' alter or expand your response to or interpretation of this work in any way?
- The term 'the human condition' is frequently used to refer to some kind of truth or reality which applies to humanity in general. Do you consider that *Recycle* expresses or is concerned with something like this?
- Can you think of ways in which the ideas within this work could be explored in other ways?
- Do you think the artist would be surprised or disappointed with your personal response to this work?
- Do you agree with the artist that 'the absurdity of such a scenario (*Recycle*) is far less absurd than many of life's realities'?

2 Exploring the works

Bu Hua

b. 1973, Beijing. Institute of Fine Art, Tsinghua University, Beijing (1995). Utrecht School of Arts, Utrecht, Netherlands (1998). Lives and works in Beijing

Artist website/dealer/gallery: www.buhua.com

'Most of the time you are working like a slave... making great efforts to perfect every detail... but having lots of fun.'

Artist statement, quoted in *Guide Look: Selected Works from the White Rabbit Collection*, White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney, 2009, p 20.

Perspectives

'Her allegoric works such as *Savage Growth* are imaginative and existential. They explore the hazy border between reality, free will and meaning of life in a persistent lucid dream-like state against the background of an unstable urbanised landscape.'

www.frontlinecontemporary.com/artists.php?artistID=43

Further reference: www.china.org.cn/english/2004/Nov/113605.htm

'But perhaps the most remarkable feature of her works is the deep feeling they convey. It's not just that Bu Hua's little characters are cute and engaging. They stir our emotions because they are in motion: although they seldom speak, their deftly plotted movement enables them to move us in ways static images can never do.'

Guide Look: Selected Works from the White Rabbit Collection, White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney 2009, p 20.

The stylistic Japanese art forms of *anime* (animation) and *manga* (comics) have had a strong influence on Bu Hua's art making. The artist has taken a critical look at the aggression seen on television, film and in real life and has observed that the repetition of violence has desensitised people to suffering. Hostility and belligerence, death and darkness are the common feature of her films and prints. (PR)

Works

Playing a Happy Game No. 1, 2008, giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

Beauty No. 3, 2008, giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

Beijing Babe Loves Freedom No. 1, 2008, giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

The Bodhi Is Not Proven Till There Is Universal Salvation No. 4, 2008, giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

Man-made Fairyland No. 7, 2008, giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

Playing a Happy Game No. 11, 2008, giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

Vowing Not To Attain Buddhahood Until All Are Salvaged From Hell No. 3, 2008, giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

More recently, she has begun making vividly coloured giclée prints of her Flash drawings. Many of her works feature her alter ego, a feisty girl in the white blouse and red scarf of a Young Pioneer (the Chinese Communist version of scouts and girl guides), who encounters all kinds of hell – from the monster-ridden darkness ...to the polluted, crowded chaos of modern development ...and skips through it all unscathed. Whether that is because of her innocent purity or her self-absorption is for the viewer to decide.

www.whiterabbitcollection.org

Framing questions and research

- 'Cute and charming on one level, Bu Hua's works are also preoccupied with chaos and death.' Do you agree with this statement?
- One interpretation of this series suggests that it is about the destruction of Chinese traditions and values by American/Western influences. Can you see anything in these images which might support this interpretation?



Bu Hua, *Beijing Babe Loves Freedom No. 1*, 2008, giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

- Can cartoon-like images be really taken seriously or should they be regarded as just entertainment?
- Do the titles for these images offer clues to their meaning?
- One opinion about Bu Hua's work is that it conveys deep feeling. Do you agree with this and if so in what way does it do this?
- It has been suggested that the central character of the Pioneer Girl is an autobiographical reference to the artist. If so what might this be saying about the artist?
- The idea of a young, innocent person undertaking a perilous journey to achieve some greater good is the basic plot of many traditional and contemporary stories. Identify some examples and consider why this remains a popular theme.

Fact

- One of the stated goals of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was to bring an end to the Four Olds, namely: Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits and Old Ideas. In subtle ways, Bu Hua mourns the demise of traditional Chinese culture and tradition, as represented by those Four Olds. Like many Chinese people, Bu Hua believes that powerful American corporations and China's exposure to the West have finished what Mao started.
- The Young Pioneers is a mass youth organisation for children between the ages of 6 and 14 which began in 1949 – the same year as the birth of the People's Republic of China – and continues to this day. A red scarf, symbolic of the blood of dead Revolutionary heroes is the only uniform requirement. Further research: *Red Scarf Girl*, a memoir written by Ji-li Jiang about her experiences during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.
- Popular slogans during the Cultural Revolution included: 'breaking down the four olds', 'setting up the four news', 'beating down the bad elements', 'beating down imperialism', 'beating down foreign religion', 'beating down Jesus following', 'beating down the counter revolutionists'.

2 Exploring the works

Shen Liang

b. 1976, Yingkou City, Liaoning Province. MFA, China Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing (2003). Lives and works in Beijing.

'I give old things new meanings though my work... It gives me a sense of archaeology.'

Artist statement: www.whiterabbitcollection.org

Perspectives

It is only on closer inspection of the paintings, that a subtle oppositional meaning is revealed. In the persona of a stereotypical, bored and unmotivated student, Shen Liang has used graffiti to ridicule the absurdity of the 'Gao, Da, Quan' model hero, and to bring down Mao's cult of the personality and the lofty ideals of his Cultural Revolution. (PR)

Work

This is a Book, 2007, oil on canvas, 12 units, 80 x 100 cm each

This series of paintings has been inspired by illustrated books published in China between 1971 and 1982. The books' propaganda role was to reinforce socialist values by depicting workers, peasants and soldiers enacting heroic poses and roles exemplifying commitment and self-sacrifice.

'*This Is a Book* powerfully reflects the emerging sense of artistic and personal freedom in contemporary China. Yet it too can be seen as propaganda – for the new individuality and against the old insistence on mass conformity.'

From *Guide Look: Selected Works from the White Rabbit Collection*, White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney, 2009, p 40.

Framing questions and research

- Is it really possible for an artist to graffiti his or her own art works?
- The artist has commented that 'vandalising my paintings relaxes me.' What do you think he means by this?
- Research the Chinese Cultural Revolution from the perspective of art used as propaganda.
- Is art still used as propaganda in today's contemporary world?
- 'It is that humorous sincerity that gives his work its punch.' Can you find anything in Shen Liang's work which supports this statement?
- Shen Liang's formal art training enabled him to treat cheap comic books like grand academic subjects. Do you think this is a good use of his skills?
- It has been suggested that nostalgia is a powerful emotion which cannot be ruled out of an interpretation of Liang's work. Consider this idea when analysing Shen Liang's work.
- Has the artist's strategy of overlaying one set of images with others which contradict them in some way given you an idea for your own work?



Shen Liang, *This is a Book*, 2007, oil on canvas, 12 units, 80 x 100 cm each

Fact

- In 1915, Mao Zedong inscribed a 4000-character denunciation of his teachers and society on the bathroom wall of the Hunan Normal University where he was enrolled as a student teacher.
- *Xiaorensu* is the name of the palm-sized picture books that accompany Shen Liang's paintings.
- These books (popular in China since the 1920s) were designed to appeal to the illiterate masses with stories of heroes – including boys and girls – who were prepared to die if necessary for Mao and the Revolution.
- Vendors would often rip the covers off the books and pin up the pages on a 'washing line' to attract buyers. The books could be purchased for 0.03 yuan or hired per week for as little as 0.01 yuan. Artists during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) were able to supplement their income by drawing *xiaorensu* and could earn as much as 100 yuan (US\$13) per book, which was very good money for the time. The publication *White-Haired Girl* is considered a classic of the genre.
- The visual symbolism underlying *xiaorensu* illustration promoted the ideals of 'life as it really is' and 'life as it ought to be'.
- Mao Zedong once proclaimed, 'To read too many books is harmful'.

2 Exploring the works

Sun Furong

b. 1961, Handan, Hebei Province. Studied art under Zheng Jindong since 2002.
Lives and works in Beijing.

'When I cut clothes into rags, I want to weep. In the process I do cry and feel as if I am cutting myself, until finally, I find myself cutting somebody else and I feel indifferent. Indifference breeds a kind of enjoyment which rapidly turns into a kind of torture.'

Artist statement: *Guide Look, Selected Works from The White Rabbit Collection*, White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney, 2009, p 43.

Perspectives

The title of the installation, *Nibbling-Up Series: Tomb Figures* (2008) has its meaning embedded firmly in the personal experience of the artist herself. The title is a metaphor for Sun Furong's deeply held conviction that 'we are all stripped and eaten away by the callous and cruel people of this world.' The world of Sun Furong is a deeply complex and uncertain place... The artist has never disclosed the precise nature of events which forced her to the end of the psychological spectrum. However, there is nothing at a deeper level than her own words to explain her emotional pain and sado-masochistic impulses. Regardless of how this artwork is interpreted, *Nibbling-Up Series: Tomb Figures* is a mix of the political and confessional. Sun Furong tells a unique and disturbing story as an artist, and as a woman. (PR)

Work

Nibbling-Up Series: Tomb Figures, 2008, cloth, mixed media, 180 x 550 x 250 cm installed

This installation consists of one hundred brand new suits, hung on specially designed steel supports, arranged in eight rows, with each row set two cms apart. The positioning of each unit is staggered as in theatre seating to allow each unit to 'see' or be seen. Prior to being hung each suit was shredded with deliberate scissor cuts to reduce the clothing to rags.

Of this work Sun Furong has commented that it was intended to 'magnify the selfish desires of human beings and question the excesses of indulgence.'

Framing questions and research

- The artist has commented that 'In the process of struggling for survival, you've been stripped and eaten away.' Does this insight influence your response to this work in any way?
- Do you think this work could have been altered in any way to get its message across more effectively?
- The steel frames on which the tunics are displayed have been fabricated and shaped in a particular way to cause the garments to hang in a certain way. From your observation what effect has this hanger design created? Can you think of reasons why the artist has done this?
- Within this exhibition there are works by other artists which have involved some obliteration, overlay or cancellation of prior statements or imagery. See if you can find some examples.
- In the context of the above, compare the way in which two works use this strategy in different ways.
- Within this exhibition are other works by artists which incorporate clothing as a key visual or symbolic element. Find some examples and compare how different artists have used clothing to express or explore ideas.
- Consider if this work or strategies used by the artist have given you an idea for your own art work.
- Speaking metaphorically the artist has said that 'The gaping collars remind us that these suits are empty: the souls that dwelt within them are gone.' How useful is this insight in considering your own response to the work?
- Research the 'Entombed Warriors' of ancient China and apply this research to an analysis of Sun Furong's work.



Sun Furong, *Nibbling-Up Series: Tomb Figures*, 2008, cloth, mixed media, 180 x 550 x 250 cm installed

Fact

- *Zhongshan* tunics, known in the West as Mao suits, were introduced into China in the early 20th century. After the Communist Revolution (1949) this attire was universally worn by both men and women.
- The standardised outfit had five buttons (to represent the five branches of China's government) and four pockets (to symbolise the officially endorsed virtues of Social Awareness, Morality, Patriotism and Discipline).
- The artist, Sun Furong, once worked as a seamstress.
- In 1964 in Tokyo (and again in New York in 1965) the artist Yoko Ono sat motionless on stage while members of the audience responded to her invitation to cut the clothes from her body: *Cut Piece* (1964/65). View the film clip at the following link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyynMDMaO8o
- A controversial installation by the British artist Tracey Emin (*My Bed*, 1998) comprised the artist's bed and various personal items including the artist's used underwear.

2 Exploring the works

Wang Zhiyuan

b. 1961 Tianjin, Tianjin Province. China Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing (1984). Sydney College of the Arts, Australia (2000–01). Lives and works in Beijing.

Perspectives

As a student, in the period just after the Cultural Revolution, Wang Zhiyuan recalls being taught that art should depict reality and only subjects depicted with the heroes of the Revolution – workers, peasants and soldiers. Later he came to realise that 'Marxism was not in fact the only theory for interpreting human beings and their world'.

Wang Zhiyuan is a thoroughly – and consciously – Postmodern artist. Equally at home in China and the West ...he has been influenced equally by American artist, kitsch king Jeff Koons, complexity theory, and the Taoist idea of stillness amid change.

(BB p 299)

An accomplished draughtsman, painter and sculptor, Wang Zhiyuan chooses to create works with universal appeal. He rejects the notion of the artist as 'untouchable philosopher' and uses his art to draw ordinary people closer to himself and contemporary issues.

As the artist's style developed he devised series of works which featured everyday items (such as implements and fashion items) portrayed as oversized cut-outs, embossed and engraved with a gloss finish. He initially worked in MDF board and later used metal and fibreglass. In 2000 he produced a wall relief installation (*Underpants (small)*, 2000) consisting of sixteen units which functioned as a visual catalogue of women's underwear of all types from prim, matronly bloomers to scanty lace and G-string models. Another work by the artist, *Unearthed Artefacts* (2007–08) comprised a three metre-high bronze cast which resembled a giantess's briefs unearthed from an archaeological site.

Work

Object of Desire, 2008, fibreglass, lights, sound, 363 x 355 x 70 cm

Excess in desire and bad taste are themes explored in the sonically eccentric *Object of Desire*. The viewer is at once attracted and repulsed by the humanoid boar and his very young nubile companion. The sculpture's expressive sexual character is explored in the interplay of harmony, tension, form, pattern and colour. Words function as a design element, and the Mandarin inscription of 'Diamonds Matter Most' set against a background of throbbing pink pleasure is particularly provocative. (PR)

Framing questions and further research

- 'In our most private and intimate clothes Wang Zhiyuan sees openings for philosophy of the subtlest kind.' What do you think this statement means?
- The artist 'prompts reflections on the relationship between restraint and desire, purity and vulgarity, art and accident'. Review this work from this perspective.
- A description of this work includes the detail that it includes palm fronds and flower-shaped party lights that flash to the soundtrack of love-songs from pre-Revolutionary Shanghai. Can your pre-Revolutionary China research help to explain why the artist has referenced 'old' Shanghai?
- Can artworks which reference the past have anything to say about the present?
- Does the title of this work provide clues to the work's meaning?
- Why do you think the artist has portrayed the man wearing a business suit and having the features of a pig or boar?
- Are we meant to take anything about this work seriously – or is it just a bit of harmless fun?
- Can you imagine anyone being shocked by this work?



Wang Zhiyuan, *Object of Desire*, 2008, fibreglass, lights, sound, 363 x 355 x 70 cm

- Do any other works in this exhibition use humour to get ideas across?
- Research the artist Jeff Koons and the term 'kitsch art'. Review *Object of Desire* in the context of your research.
- Think about, record and later compare with others your first impression of this work and what it might be about or saying?

Fact

'Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend' is the title of a popular song from the 1950s (words by Jule Styne and music by Leo Robin) which featured in the 1953 film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

2 Exploring the works

Zhou Xiaohu

b. 1960, Changzhou, Jiangsu Province. Suzhou Art Institute (1983). Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts (1989). Lives and teaches art in Changzhou.

Perspectives

'Many (of the artist's works) include videos, with dialogue and English subtitles. But even those with no sound track are packed with subtext. For Zhou Xiaohu, art is as much about ideas as it is about motion – in his case, ideas about "The multiple relationships between everyday lives, text, media, and world events".' (BB p 356)

Zhou Xiaohu's hand-made touches sabotage the projection of the digital image, and its plausibility too. They remind us how mass-media 'reality' really is: a life-like play performed by programmed dummies. (BB p 359)

Work

Zhou Xiaohu, *Renown*, 2007, fibreglass, silicone, clothing, professional video camera, microphone, tripod, DVD, 170 x 300 x 175 cm, DVD 4:30 minutes

Framing questions and research

- One interpretation suggests that the artist has intended to 'sabotage' the projection of the digital image. Can you find anything in this work which supports this interpretation?
- How is the concept or idea of 'reality' explored in this work?
- Can you think of reasons why the artist has been motivated to explore or expose the way the news media works?
- Does the inclusion of an image of the artist (he's the person being projected onto the blank dummy) contribute to or confuse the message or meaning of this work?
- Who is the audience for this work?
- Do you think the title *Renown* offers some clue to the artist's intentions?
- Compare your reading of a print or on-line image of *Renown* with the actual installation. To what extent does the reproduction provide reliable information about the original?
- Has this installation given you an idea you can use in your own studio work?

Fact

- As a child Zhou Xiaohu used to write dramas for his friends and act them out with dolls made from clay. Another work by the artist, *Utopian Theatre* (2008), comprised a diorama of historical events, model buildings, hundreds of clay figures, eleven DVD players and TV monitors, screens and animated newsreels.
- In 2008 Zhou Xiaohu approached ten detective agencies in Beijing (unknown to each agency) to spy on and film the activities of each other. The artist presented the results as a documentary-comedy in 2009.



Zhou Xiaohu, *Renown*, 2007, fibreglass, silicone, clothing, professional video camera, microphone, tripod, DVD, 170 x 300 x 175 cm, DVD 4:30 minutes

2 Exploring the works

Wu Junyong

b. 1978, Putian, Fujian Province

'What interests me are mostly those neglected details – a hand, part of a picture, a stage prop, things like that.'

Artist statement

Perspectives

Wu Junyong's dark society runs on power, pornography and anarchic self-indulgence. Yet though his imagery is often savage, he never scolds, and his satire is tinged with sadness. This is human nature, he seems to say; ugly, venal, ludicrous and impossible to change. (BB p 305)

Work

Opera 2, 2007, animation, 3:28 minutes

In one of Wu Junyong's works *Parade* (2006) men dressed in nothing but dunce's caps move across a field of copulating couples. In the *Opera* series (2007) a group of skinny, pot-bellied men dance, beat on drums and applaud themselves. Throughout all such images is a sense that some people will do anything to get into the public spotlight and stay in power.

Framing questions and research

- The artist has said that for politicians the public stage is their route to power – but also to their downfall ('as they strut they put vanity and venality on show'). Analyse *Opera 2* from this perspective.
- The dunce's cap is traditionally used to signify that the person wearing one is a 'dunce' or in disgrace. Where did this tradition come from? Will your research of this topic shed any light on the possible meaning of this work?
- Research the styles and propaganda role of State Opera during the Cultural Revolution in China and apply this research to your reading of this work.
- If Wu Junyong's 'operas' are intended to reveal the kind of self-interest that a one-party political system creates, how successful do you think the artist has been in communicating this idea?
- In terms of the above write a review of this work which focuses on the strategies the artist has used to communicate the central ideas.
- Consider using source material from contemporary politics in Australia or elsewhere to explore related themes of self-serving politicians and political systems.
- Wu Junyong has said, 'All I need is one computer and I can hide in a world I can create for myself.' Do you believe that the artist is completely 'hidden' in this work or does he reveal himself in some way?

Fact

- Eight *yangbanxi* or model operas were produced in the first three years of the Cultural Revolution. They consisted of: six modern operas (*The Red Lantern*, *Shajia Village*, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategies*, *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment*, *Praise of Dragon River*, *On the Dock*) and two ballets (*Red Detachment of Women*, *White-Haired Girl*). After 1969 other model operas were produced but the eight plays (listed above) were the most commonly performed.
- The film *Mao's Last Dancer* (2009) includes scenes in which the young dancer Li Cunxin performs in a revolutionary ballet *The East Is Red*.
- In the Spanish artist Francisco Goya's *Los Caprichos* series (1797 and 1798) characters wearing dunce hats appear as symbols of ignorance and stupidity.
- In the allegorical images of the artist Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450–1516) characters wear extravagant headwear and clothing which signify the wearers' various roles.



Wu Junyong, *Opera 2*, 2007, animation, 3:28 minutes

2 Exploring the works

Cang Xin

b. 1967, Suihua, Heilongjiang Province in Mongolia (Manchuria). Self taught. Lives and works in Beijing.

What ultimately sets us apart from beasts, Cang Xin says, is our ability 'to imagine and create what doesn't actually exist.'

Artist statement and text from *Guide Look, The Tao of Now, Selected Works from The White Rabbit Collection*, White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney, January 2010.

Perspectives

Cang Xin says that his art is influenced by both Tibetan Buddhism and rock and roll. But it is deeply rooted in shamanism, the sorcery tradition of his native Mongolia. As the son of a shaman, Cang Xin believes that in states of trance he can speak to the spirits that pervade the visible world.

Guide Look, The Tao of Now, Selected Works from The White Rabbit Collection, White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney, January 2010.

'Cang Xin is a bona fide shaman; he holds the profound belief that all things have spirit – both animate and inanimate objects – and is a member of an order of enlightened holy men who have the ability to enter various forms at will. As one of China's most celebrated performance artists, Cang approaches his work as a means to promote harmonious communication with nature.'

www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/cang_xin.htm

For him art is more than technique: it is a way of life that sits easily with his self-conception as a modern-day shaman, heir to the nature-magic tradition of his native Mongolia. Cang Xin first seized the public imagination with *Communication* (1996–2006), a ritual-performance series in which he licked, or tasted, everything from cockroaches and cobblestones to banknotes and a portrait of Jean-Paul Sartre. In another series, *Identity Exchange* (2000–06), he swapped clothes with strangers. The title of his exhibition 'Existence in Translation' sums up Cang Xin's grand theme, which pervades works including *Shamanism Series: Variation* (2006) and *Exotic Flowers and Herbs* (2007–08): the shamanic idea that all life forms are linked by the endless transmigration of spirit-essences.

www.whiterabbitcollection.org/artists/cang-xin/

Work

Exotic Flowers and Rare Herbs Series, 2007, seven wood sculptures, 166 to 230 cm high

Framing questions and research

- The artist has commented that the thing which sets us apart from beasts is our ability 'to imagine and relate to what doesn't actually exist'. Can this insight be applied in any way to this work?
- Research the subjects of 'shaman' and 'shamanism' and apply your research to an interpretation of this work.
- If you believe, as Cang Xin does, that 'one creature can transform into another', consider making or imagining a work of art which expresses this idea.
- A web-search for background information on Cang Xin will produce a substantial body of information and images of the artist's work. Using this information, describe how the work *Exotic Flowers and Rare Herbs Series* relates to other work by the artist.
- The German artist Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) is one of a number of modern-era artists who has, at times, claimed shaman status. Research Beuys from this perspective and compare the philosophies and methods of Beuys and Cang Xin. Note: searching for similar artists (under 'shaman artist') will produce other examples which can be drawn into your research.
- Is it possible for creatures (great or small) to make art?

Fact

- Cang Xin was born in Mongolia, a region which has a long tradition (particularly among Mongolia's nomadic herdsman) of shamanism and sorcery.



Cang Xin, *Exotic Flowers and Rare Herbs Series*, 2007, seven wood sculptures, 166 to 230 cm high

- The artist recalls that his mother, a devout Buddhist, told him the 10,000 things in Creation contain a spirit that after death can migrate into another life form or be liberated from reincarnation by prayer. The artist recalls thinking at the time, 'I could be the fish and they could be me.'
- The artist has a long-held fascination with snakes, scorpions, lizards, cockroaches. 'These are older than people... imbued with ancient spirits'. (BB p 58)
- The number 10,000 is used symbolically in oriental philosophy and writing to represent the infinite. The term 'The Ten Thousand Things' is commonly found in Taoist and Buddhist writings to refer to the material diversity of the universe.
- In *Communication* (1996–2006) Cang Xin undertook a programme of work which involved engaging with the world through his tongue and licking a diversity of things (which included China's Great Wall). From this experience he began to think about the relationship between shamanism and performance art. Since 2000, he has been studying shamanism in earnest, travelling to rural villages in Heilongjiang Province to conduct research on shaman culture.
- The artist engaged a team of wood carvers to produce this work.

2 Exploring the works

Chen Zhuo + Huang Keyi

b. 1978 and 1980, Changsha, Hunan Province. Both live and work in Beijing.

'This is an age of craziness. We have no choice but to be insanely excited and scream and shake as we go faster and faster.'

Artists' statements from *Guide Look, The Tao of Now, Selected Works from The White Rabbit Collection*, White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney, January 2010.

Perspectives

Friends since childhood, Chen Zhuo and Huang Keyi find digital photography and Photoshop the perfect marriage of media for their exuberant view of the new China. Taking up to a month over each picture, they integrate real and virtual images, duplicating here and erasing there. In the process, they say, 'some of our works become more real than reality, while others convert reality into fiction.'

On the 15th of January, 2008, Ooi Botos Gallery opened 'Chinese Carnival', an exhibition by Beijing-based artistic duo, Chen Zhuo and Huang Keyi. The series, which comprises nine large C-prints and a six-minute film, is emblematic of the exuberance and optimism of today's generation of Chinese, growing up after the travails and anguish of the Cultural Revolution. Most of the images are painstakingly assembled tableaux of hundreds of doppelgangers interacting against the backdrop of a simulated, synthesised reality, born of the shared imaginings of the artists. Although the general tone of the works is celebratory, even delirious, the duo has deliberately inserted darkly ironic references to a more conflicted Chinese history throughout the series.

Each image is the product of laborious craftsmanship, taking, on average, a month to complete in post-production. This dedication to elaborate, hyper-realistic detail combined with the complex, sometimes, hidden, interleaving of meanings and symbolism are the hallmarks of the duo's art.

www.re-title.com/exhibitions/archive_OoiBotosGallery4957.asp

Work

China Carnival No. 1: Tiananmen, 2007, c-print, 120 x 180 cm

China Carnival No. 2: Wedding, 2007, c-print, 120 x 180 cm

The *China Carnival* series (2007) portrays the country as a frenzied fun park where Chairman Mao gives his blessing to roller-coaster riders, 'romantic love merges happily with shopping, and the sky is too blue to be true'. But there's a grim subtext to these pictures, seen in the identical faces and robotic poses of the crowds and in the red balloons that resemble spatters of blood.

www.whiterabbitcollection.org

'Each time we went to an amusement park, we were amazed by the seemingly frenzied yet orderly scene of gigantic machines incessantly swirling around, swinging people back and forth. It was so close to the aesthetic we wanted to express. For us, 'Chinese Carnival' is simply the most accurate and straightforward name. Moreover, such a joyful mood reflects the attitude of Chinese people perfectly. People not only feel happy and exhilarated about the development and improvement going on in this country, but uplifted by thoughts of material and cultural life in the foreseeable future.'

Artists' statement: www.re-title.com/exhibitions/archive_OoiBotosGallery4957.asp

Chen Zhuo has indicated that his studies in architecture have contributed to his enjoyment of seeing 'hundreds of people connected together in a gigantic machine of complex structure, the bustling and pulsating music inside the game room, and the thrilling, stimulating visual and sound effects of Hollywood movies.'

Artist statement: www.re-title.com/exhibitions/archive_OoiBotosGallery4957.asp



Chen Zhuo + Huang Keyi, *China Carnival No. 1: Tiananmen*, 2007, c-print, 120 x 180 cm

Framing questions and research

- The artists have stated that they 'added in many references to traditional culture, as well as seemingly senseless visual elements to reinforce the impression of richness and substantiality.'
- The artists have said, 'some of our works become more real than reality, while others convert reality into fiction.' Does this comment apply in any way to the two works in the exhibition?
- If as the artists state, 'this is the age of craziness', can you identify anything in these two works which provide some clues about the artists' feelings about this trend?
- Having studied these works closely do you believe that they express or contain 'a grim subtext'?
- Research the topic of mass weddings in contemporary China. What do you think (*China Carnival No. 2: Wedding*) is saying about this phenomenon?
- How would you describe the mood of these images? Can you identify the strategies the artists have used to create this mood?
- Choose a small detail from one of these images and give others clues which will require them to search for and find it.

Fact

- The 'Chinese Carnival' referred to in the title does not refer to a carnival held in China, but a carnival with Chinese characters.
- In developing ideas for images Chen Zhuo and Huang Keyi search the Internet and other sources such as travel magazines to choose settings for their fictionalised mass events. This information is then reviewed and edited. Decisions are then made about the relationship between models and settings. The models ('performers') are then photographed in a studio setting and the final images are resolved in a post-production process in the digital photographic studio.
- The collective wedding fictionalised in *China Carnival No. 2: Wedding*, references the trend (in China and elsewhere) of collective or mass wedding ceremonies involving several or sometimes hundreds of couples.

2 Exploring the works

Dong Yuan

b. 1984, Huatong, Liaoning Province. Lives and works in China.

'I wanted to paint all the places I stayed in so I could remember them well.'

Artist statement: www.whiterabbitcollection.org

Perspectives

The two one-room apartments look like regular student digs, though by Chinese standards they are relatively large and well furnished. There is a bed, shelves filled with books, vases of limp flowers, a jug and thermos, a computer and a teddy-bear, and, on the walls, pasted-up study notes and a still-life painting. But with the exception of a folding chair and some paint tubes, every item in both these apartments is itself a still-life painting. Both works were done to memorialise the places the artist passed through in 2008. Her fellow students might have done this with a cell phone or digital camera, but 'I like the traditional way of painting,' she says. The pictures are astoundingly detailed, down to a door knob and a row of power plugs, and their placement in the three dimensions of four-walled rooms prompts double-takes. Giving many of her subjects uniform beige backgrounds and placing the canvases edge-on to the viewer further stresses the tensions between painted and real. And it simultaneously echoes and departs from the approach of traditional scroll painters, who did not use single-point perspective.

www.whiterabbitcollection.org

In an era of the cheap digital camera Dong Yuan's way of doing seems so stubbornly old-fashioned. (BB p 106)

Work

Home of Paintings, 2008, acrylic on canvas, wood, 200 x 400 x 200 installed

Sketch of Family Belongings, 2008, acrylic on canvas, wood, 360 x 360 x 260 cm installed

Home of Paintings (2008) consists of 59 separate canvases. *Sketch of Family Belongings* (2008) is composed of 186 canvases. Both depict in various ways, actual places the artist lived in during 2008.

Framing questions and research

- Dong Yuan's two installations are examples of *trompe l'oeil* painting. Research this art term and analyse these works from this perspective.
- To what degree do you consider you can trust these images as evidence of actual places and objects?
- Consider making a pictorial work of art which is derived from spaces you live or work in and things that you own.
- Dong Yuan's strategy has much in common with keeping a diary. Consider using this as your primary strategy for the production of one of your own works.
- These works cast the viewer in the role of a voyeur, looking into domestic spaces, normally hidden from view to strangers. With this in mind, what do these spaces and their contents reveal about the artist?
- Look closely at a detail in one canvas and see if you can 'unpack' the illustrative methods the artist has used to create an illusion. Later, try these methods in your own work.
- 'Dong's paintings show details – even beauties – that usually pass unnoticed. The painstaking effort that went into these imitations confers on their humble originals a value which no digital camera ever could.' (BB p 109). Do you agree?
- The artist has stated that 'I wanted to get people to look at domestic objects in another way.' (BB p 106). Do you think she has succeeded?

Fact

In a more recent series of work (*Daily Screens*) the artist has turned her attention outward, painting the views from every floor of a seven-storey apartment building.



Dong Yuan, *Sketch of Family Belongings*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, wood, 360 x 360 x 260 cm installed

2 Exploring the works

Yan Baishen

b. 1977, Lanzhou City, Gansu Province. Lives and works in China.

'I make art so that I can tolerate my own existence.'

Artist statement: www.whiterabbitcollection.org

Yan Baishen's father worked in a top-secret military factory on the Loess Plateau, in north western China. Sequestered from the rest of the nation, his family was untouched by the changes that swept through it in the 1980s and '90s. It wasn't until they moved to the city that he encountered modernity. *Ketchup* is part of a trilogy of animations based on the artist's childhood memories.

Work

Ketchup, 2009, digital animation, 4:30 minutes



Yan Baishen, *Ketchup*, 2009, digital animation, 4:30 minutes

2 Exploring the works

Shi Jindian

b. 1953, Yuxi City, Yunan Province

'The wire was like a pen for me. I used it to outline shapes like sketching.'

Artist statement (BB p 265)

Work

Blue CJ750, 2008, coloured stainless steel wire, 260 x 170 x 102 cm

This work took a year and a half to make. The artist crocheted a tight sheath around each component and then extracted them through cleverly designed openings.

'I'm terribly fond of the 750... It is part of the collective memory and yearning of our generation.'

Artist statement (BB p 265)

Framing questions and research

- The artist has stated that he has intended (in this work) 'to take away the object's materiality and physicality – to take away its reality, in other words'. What do you understand this statement to mean? Why do you think an artist wants to do this?
- One interpretation of this work is that it creates room for the imagination. Think about your personal response to this work. Does it have this kind of effect on you?
- This kind of representation has been described as a 'kind of virtual reality'. Can you think of reasons why someone might see this object in this way?
- Consider making a work of art which uses some of the production strategies used to make this work.
- Research the referencing and use of everyday items associated with Pop Art of the 1960s.
- The Australian artist Margaret Dodd has extensively referenced the iconic FJ Holden. Research this artist from this perspective to get a wider sense of how different artists explore the idea of a car (or motor bike) as an iconic object and focus of nostalgic sentiment.
- Consider making a work of art which pays tribute in some way to a machine or an everyday object.

Fact

- The motor bike depicted in *Blue CJ750* is based on a Soviet copy of a pre WWII BMW design, identified as CJ750 which has been in continuous production since the 1950s and was commonly used by the Chinese army. In more recent years this bike has achieved cult status within China among motor bike enthusiasts. The CJ refers to Chang Jiang (Yangtze or Long River).



Shi Jindian, *Blue CJ750*, 2008, coloured stainless steel wire, 260 x 170 x 102 cm

3 Exploring the exhibition: Themes

Exploring the exhibition extends beyond looking at individual artist's work to identifying and considering relationships between various works in the exhibition. An effective way to do this is to see *White Rabbit* as an exhibition consisting of groups of works that have things in common or, intentionally or otherwise, have things to say to each other. This kind of dialogue is conventionally described as themes.

Theme 1: Symbolism and ritual

The use of symbols to communicate ideas or challenge values is evident in a number of *White Rabbit* works.

Consider

- The prominence of the heart in Bai Yiluo's installation *Recycle*.
- The use of a lingerie item in *Object of Desire* to symbolise decadence.
- Sun Furong's shredded 'Mao suits' as symbols of abused and wasted lives.
- Shen Liang's quotation of the Pioneer Girl motif to satirise failed social aspirations.

Theme 2: Humour and satire

Humour is prevalent throughout the *White Rabbit* exhibition. It takes various forms according to the intention of the artists to amuse, mock, satirise, subvert or offend. In most cases it is a weapon which often succeeds where brute force and blunt comments fail. Research into the individual circumstances of the artists as well as broader social and political contexts will assist in understanding just why and how some artists have given humour a central role to play.

Consider

- Bu Hua's comic-book depiction of her imperturbable Pioneer Girl hero facing adversity.
- Shen Liang's mocking self-vandalism of his own paintings.
- Sun Furong's 'over-reactive' slasher response to the idea of brute conformity.
- Wang Zhiyuan's translation of a lingerie item into a red-light advertising sign.
- Bu Hua's 'comic book' juxtapositioning of symbols of 'old' China and 'new' Western influences to portray the challenges facing Chinese culture today.

Theme 3: Everyday life

For some artists, everyday objects, places and events provide the inspiration for a diversity of depictions and explorations which express wonder at the extraordinary nature of ordinary things.

Consider

- Dong Yuan's intense cataloguing of her life and personal effects creates an 'extraordinary year' out of something others would see as 'normal' and eventually 'forgettable.'
- Shi Jindian's elevation of a motor bike to mytho/cult status.
- Bai Yiluo's worker's bicycle as a symbol of the grinding reality of daily labour for faceless workers and artists alike.
- Wang Zhiyuan's creation of an oversized pair of women's briefs to exploit associations such objects have with sexuality and desire.

Theme 4: Self portraiture

In this exhibition there is no self portrait as such. However a number of artists have demonstrated considerable creativity in revealing aspects of their inner lives and personalities.

Consider

- Sun Furong identifying with the process of slashing and shredding as if being personally attacked.
- Bai Yiluo regarding his recycled heart and bicycle as representing 'the relationship between an ordinary artist and the everyday experience he accumulates.'
- Bu Hua's 'Pioneer Girl' as a visual realisation of the artist's own sense of life as a journey.

Theme 5: Belief

A number of *White Rabbit* works have been made within a context of a world view or belief in some system, overarching value or sense of greater purpose.

Consider

- Cang Xin's hybrid creatures which explore the idea that, at a notional or spiritual level, everything is capable of being something else.
- Wang Zhiyuan's suggestion that the decadence associated with a pre-Revolutionary era and with 'old' Shanghai in particular, haunts the future of a new, materially prosperous China.
- Bu Hua's fictions while humorous on one level, hint at darker forces at work, threatening to bring down the best in what Revolutionary China aspired to.
- Bai Yiluo's outsized heart expressing anger at the commodification of values and a sense of loss or grievance that the ideas and work of artists can be ignored or simply recycled.

Theme 6: Materiality

The term 'materiality' refers to the role that the materials used to compose the work, plays in delivering some sense of meaning or significance. The modern era foregrounded this aspect of art making, to the point where the choice of materials and their tactile and symbolic properties became part of the 'package', in terms of setting up and delivering meanings or simply making emphatic statements. The increasing use of 'found objects' and materials (such as industrial or mass consumer domestic materials and ware), accelerated this process. Today artists draw on a rich contemporary tradition in which the use of such materials or items such as fat, rubber, furniture, industrial fasteners, clothing, off cuts, toys, clay, timber, fur or water is often read as being significant and perhaps central to the work's intent.

Consider

- The shredded qualities of Sun Furong's slashed suits implying frayed emotions.
- The glossy, plastic surface qualities of Wang Zhiyuan's shop sign-like work implying sleaziness and commercialism.
- The intense *trompe l'oeil* definition of Dong Yuan's depictions of domestic objects implying affection and perhaps curiosity.
- The CAD-like visual qualities of Shi Jindian's wire tracteries creating a sense of machine-like (but hand-made) precision.

3 Exploring the exhibition: Themes

Theme 7: Reality

The idea of reality having many 'realities' can be traced from Cubism (with its multi-viewpoint depictions of objects) and Surrealism (which held that dreams and the subconscious mind represented a more central reality than that of the world of appearances). By the later 20th century 'reality' took centre stage as Postmodernist ideas questioned the systems and basis on which society functions (such as beliefs, political and commercial systems, values, national and individual identity). Taking a position that it is not possible to separate art from the wider 'visual environment', many artists based their practice on a critique or exploration of the way mass media has created a 'hyperreality' based on an endless circulation of signs. Central to some artists' practice is a probing into the nature of seeing and understanding the world.

Consider

- Bai Yiluo's almost believable proposition that a 'real' heart can be put out for recycling.
- The sense created in Sun Furong's suits that these items actually belonged to real people.
- The uncanny sense of 'out of body' reality associated with Shi Jindian's motor cycle.
- Zhou Xiaohu's 'real life' TV studio.
- Cang Xin's belief in the interrelationship of all things expressed in a very tangible way through his hybrid sculptural forms.
- The comforting reality of the past and present as being seen as separate: collapsing in Shen Liang's overlays of past assumptions and present questions.
- The reality of an historical past (decadent Shanghai) returning to haunt a progressive future in Wang Zhiyuan's *Object of Desire*.

4 For teachers

Planning a successful group visit to *White Rabbit*

If planning to bring a school group to this exhibition – book now.

To book: Telephone 08 8302 0870 or samstagmuseum@unisa.edu.au

All bookings will be confirmed by email with the supervising teacher.

Year level

The Resource is designed to be used by secondary to senior secondary visual art teachers and students.

Pre-exhibition

Background briefing

- Inform the students about the origins and content of the exhibition.
- Refer to the 'Curatorial Frameworks' section in this Resource.
- Download the *White Rabbit* Education Resource and catalogue from the Samstag Museum of Art website: www.unisa.edu/samstagmuseum
- Visit The White Rabbit Contemporary Art Collection website: www.whiterabbitcollection.org
- Visit selected White Rabbit Collection artists' websites.

In the exhibition

On arrival your group will be met and welcomed by a staff member of the Samstag Museum of Art.

If planning to organise a class group as independent viewing, smaller groups are recommended.

Organise and task these groups now. This will be the best time to distribute prepared activity sheets or the 'Get Started' research activities included in this Education Resource.

Before groups disperse, remind students of the usual gallery viewing protocols (such as being aware of others using the space) and stress the nature of viewing this kind of exhibition which will require students to spend quality, reflective time with works, immersing themselves within viewing experiences of up to 15 minutes or more.

This session will involve students being involved in some group and individual analysis and response. Scribing is optional but will be useful for on-site reporting and post-visit research.

A suggestion is that students in this session try two things: engage with the work of an individual artist and with one of the exhibition's themes.

For this to happen it would be useful if the students had access to the *White Rabbit* Education Resource prior to visiting the exhibition. This could allow students to make thematic selections before arrival.

Post visit

Post-exhibition options primarily consist of sharing and analysing the information gathered during the exhibition visit. This information might be:

- Information gathered on-site
- Individual opinions (shared)
- Different task or theme groups reporting findings

5 Get started

In-exhibition engagement activities

The following tasks are designed to support/initiate structured viewing and engagement for students in the exhibition. They can be undertaken in any order and are suitable for individual and small group work. Implicit in some tasks is the idea that students or groups will report findings and discuss works with others.

Scribing is not necessary to undertake these activities but some of these tasks could involve scribing to support on-going post-visit work.

Think about

- When you find yourself wanting to look at some works in particular do you think it is because the image or subject is interesting, or is it because of the artist's technique or way of interpreting the subject?
- Is there a particular work in this exhibition that contains or is saying things that you agree with or disagree with strongly? Talk to someone else in your group about your response.
- Is there a particular work in this exhibition which raises more questions than any other work?
- What kinds of questions does this work raise? Compare and discuss your findings with others.

First and last impressions

- What did you think about when you first came into the exhibition and looked around?
- Was there any work in particular you wanted to return to and look at again?
- Any reasons for this?
- Is there a work in this exhibition that you think you will find hard to forget? Why?
- Is there one work here which has challenged you in any way? Look at it again before you leave and consider why this is so.
- Before leaving check out the exhibition one more time to see if there's an idea or technique in a work that you could try when you get back to school.

Easy?

- Which work was the easiest and which work was the hardest to make – and why?

Analysis and response (individual work/s)

- Choose any work that attracts your attention and apply any or all of the following questions:
- Are the visual qualities of this work appealing in any way?
- Would this idea have been better expressed in a different way?
- Can you see any kind of connection between this kind of art and others you know about?
- What do you think this work is about or might be saying?
- Has this given you an idea for something you could make as part of your art studies?
- Select one work that appeals in some way and tell someone else your reasons for your selection.

Analysis and response (the exhibition)

- Write a review of the exhibition which explores the links or relationships between the works.
- Choose one of the themes suggested in this Education Resource and review the exhibition from this perspective.
- Are there other themes (not identified in this Resource) which could apply to this selection of work?
- Compare two or more works which appear to be exploring similar ideas in different ways.
- Explore cultural perspectives: is there a particular work (or number of works) in this exhibition which has provided new information or altered your understanding of how individual Chinese artists perceive the world, its past and its future? Discuss your selection and opinions with others.
- Consider reviewing this exhibition in terms of the following statement: 'Though obvious Chineseness is becoming less important for both makers and buyers of contemporary Chinese art, few artists want to abandon it altogether. Instead they seek to harmonise pop-global sensibility with their ancestral culture.' (BB p 10)

6 Further research

Critical frameworks

The catalogue for *White Rabbit* contains an introductory essay by Australian art writer and critic John McDonald. In this essay McDonald traces different phases of development associated with emerging and contemporary Chinese art across the period of the mid 1980s to the present day.

The full text of this essay can be accessed at www.unisa.edu.au/samstagmuseum/exhibitions/2011/whiterabbit.asp

These phases are summarised as:

- In the first phase which emerged in the mid 1980s (coinciding with a development known as the '85 New Wave') official insistence of Social Realism was relaxed and artists began to borrow from a broad menu of art from the West, and from Modernism to performance art.
- The second phase covers a period broadly from the early 1990s to the turn of the century, a period which includes the July 1989 Tiananmen Square upheavals. Much of the art of this period confirmed Western audiences' stereotypical grasp of Chinese history and current affairs by offering seemingly endless variations on Mao Zedong's face (with Andy Warhol inflections) and making constant references to the Cultural Revolution.
- The third phase (linked to the liberalisations associated with China's entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001) is characterised by a spirit of individualism. A new generation of artists growing up in China in the 1980s and '90s had no memories of Mao or the Cultural Revolution. The world and values of this generation has been defined by social and economic progress and above all, consumerism. Adding to this mix is the return of a number of artists who left China in the wake of Tiananmen Square.

McDonald's essay identifies a number of key themes or issues which offer frameworks for looking at and responding to works in the *White Rabbit* exhibition.

Individuality

'For two thousand years individuality had been an almost unknown concept in China, but in the new millennium it quickly became an ideal, and then the norm. The new Chinese artists display a quality of introspection that was quite unknown in the past. They respond rapidly to the ongoing changes in society, with various degrees of celebration or criticism. They are rediscovering a cultural heritage, of Buddhism, Taoism and other beliefs that were previously almost as taboo as capitalism.'

In terms of this statement consider the extreme diversity of styles, strategies and concepts evident in this relatively small selection of works. The key indicator of individuality in this selection is a sense of different 'voices' communicating ideas and feelings.

- From a personal point of view which 'voice' speaks the loudest or most persistently to you?

Paradox

The artists of the new generation are acutely aware they are living in a state that is one of the great political paradoxes of all time: a communist country with a thriving stock market.

- Within this exhibition are there any works which convey a sense of layering or subtexts, with traditional/official/historical world views being questioned or subverted by artistic interventions?

Contradiction and tension

'If the new China is characterized by expediency rather than ideology, it does not mean that the contradictions and tensions of this society go unnoticed. It is obvious to everyone that 'Communism' has become a threadbare ideal to which politicians pay a specious lip service. Power is the real goal, with all the secondary benefits of wealth and privilege it brings.'

In terms of this statement consider how, in a number of works, the theme of power and social manipulation and control is central to the intent of the work.

In this context consider McDonald's statement that, 'Artists have become accustomed to playing with the limits of political and cultural acceptability... The need to avoid overtly confrontational statements has led to amazing feats of ingenuity and originality.'

- Do any works in this exhibition incorporate this 'balancing act' between commenting on or referring to issues without making direct political statements?

6 Further research

Art in context

Modern to Contemporary China: key events and developments

- 1949 Mao Zedong proclaims the People's Republic of China.
- 1958 Great Leap Forward – five year economic plan. Farming collectivised and labour-intensive industry introduced.
- 1966–76 Cultural Revolution. Mao's political and ideological campaign. Revival of revolutionary spirit. Massive social, political and economic upheaval. Era of Mao's 'Little Red Book'.
- 1976 Mao dies.
- 1977 Beijing Spring.
- 1977 Deng Xiaoping emerges as leader. Economic reforms.
- 1979 One-child policy established.
- 1986–90 Chinese open-door policy. Development of a market economy and the private sector.
- 2001 China joins World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Social/political scene pre 1976

State organised workforce. People told what they can and can't do.

Art scene pre 1976

Dominant ideology – 'art serves the state'.

'There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, or art that is detached from or independent of politics.' Mao Zedong (1942)

Dominant style – Social Realism. Western art and Modern art in particular considered to be dangerous or decadent.

Few opportunities for artists to see European/Western art or to travel.

Art education and training controlled by conservative, official academies.

Social/political scene late 1980s to 2011

1980s – 1990s era of transition from state controlled to market controlled economy.

Translation of political revolution into a capitalist one – from politics to economics.

'To get rich is glorious.' Deng Xiaoping

1979 establishment of the one-child policy.

Focus in society now less on family more on self (*ziwo* – 'I myself').

Significant shift of populations from country to cities.

Lifestyle changes reflect inner-city apartment living and recreation (such as mall shopping and web-surfing). Life increasingly defined by consumerism.

Art scene 1976 to present day

1978–2000 seen as an artistic 'opening-up' period. The Communist Party began to relax its grip on cultural and political expression.

'The old concept about art and government being at odds has changed. Now... the artists and government are running with development.'

Xu Bing, International Relations Director, the Central Academy of Fine Arts.

Artists begin to explore new styles of expression including Political Pop, Cynical Realism and Kitsch Art.

A key note of emerging art expression across the period 1980s – 1990s was parody. Much of this was directed at Maoism. This took the form of mocking aspects of Mao-worship (particularly iconic representations of the leader), Mao's 'Little Red Book' and Mao's fashion sense. By 2000 this spirit of parody (and of 'settling scores' with a repressive political system) had begun to lose its focus and interest.

Into the 2000s much contemporary Chinese art has resembled what Arthur Danto has described as 'post-historical art'. This means that over the last decade artists have explored and copied styles of art associated with Western European art styles and philosophies from the later 19th century to the present day – without regard in many instances to the conceptual or theoretical basis of the source.

In this process the central idea of the avant-garde or avant-gardism has been exposed. One argument declares that after the early 20th century revolutions in European art (which were allied to social and political revolutions taking place across Europe) there have been no further 'authentic' avant-garde movements, just an art market increasingly driven by a recycling of styles. From this perspective art-historical narratives are basically concerned with 'product differentiation'.

Perhaps Chinese contemporary art is providing a 'mirror of truth' for the Western European art community to gaze into and see things as they truly are.

Artists left and worked outside of China following the July 1989 Tiananmen Square upheavals.

After 2000 many returned but maintained studios and gallery/dealer links elsewhere in the world.

Freedom to travel and work elsewhere, and global and social communication technologies, makes it possible for Chinese artists to be connected with the world and to operate at home and abroad.

Broad social and political changes in China reflected in the preoccupations of new generations of artists. There is far less emphasis on political and social issues.

Work is no longer judged by 'political correctness'.

In the context of urbanised city living and the flow-on effect of the one-child policy it is understandable that '...so much contemporary art is about individual experiences, idiosyncratic obsessions, memories and dreams.' (BB p 10)

Those artists born after 1980 are a 'computer generation'. This helps explain the preference for digital drawing, multimedia, animation, performance and music.

The preference for painting-based practice (in some contemporary artists' work) is evidence of the influence of the academies of art. The pedagogies associated with these academies placed great emphasis on technical skill and flair which are prominent characteristics of contemporary Chinese art.

Other factors which have influenced the development of contemporary Chinese art have been access to relatively cheap but skilled labour (within China) which has allowed artists to create teams of artisans or assistants capable of undertaking large and complex projects and a readiness to organise as artist groups or teams, thereby pooling resources.

Some statistics

600 million Chinese people now live in cities.

China has over 160 cities with populations of over 1 million.

China now has 400 million internet users.

Resources

- The White Rabbit Gallery, www.whiterabbitcollection.org
- All of the *White Rabbit* artists have extensive www profiles varying from extended biographies and professional profiles, media articles and interviews and academic essays. Many of the artists have dedicated artist or gallery websites which provide valuable background briefing. These sites are referenced in the artists' profiles (Section 2 'Exploring the works').
- The *White Rabbit* catalogue (with complete curatorial essay) can be accessed online: www.unisa.edu.au/samstagsmuseum/exhibitions/2011/whiterabbit.asp

7 List of works

Bai Yilou

born 1968, Luoyang, Henan Province
lives and works in Beijing

Recycling, 2008
mixed media, 320 x 250 x 200 cm

Bu Hua

born 1973, Beijing

Playing a Happy Game No. 1, 2008
giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

Beauty No. 3, 2008
giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

Beijing Babe Loves Freedom No. 1, 2008
giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

*The Bodhi Is Not Proven Till There Is
Universal Salvation No. 4*, 2008
giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

Man-made Fairyland No. 7, 2008
giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

Playing a Happy Game No. 11, 2008
giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

*Vowing Not to Attain Buddhahood
Until All Are Salvaged From Hell No. 3*, 2008
giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

Cang Xin

born 1967, Suihua, Heilongjiang Province
lives and works in Beijing

Exotic Flowers and Rare Herbs Series, 2007
seven wood sculptures, 166 to 230 cm high

Chen Zhuo + Huang Keyi

Chen Zhuo born 1978, Huang Keyi born 1980,
both Changsha, Hunan Province
both live and work in Beijing

China Carnival No. 1: Tiananmen, 2007
c-print, 120 x 180 cm

China Carnival No. 2: Wedding, 2007
c-print, 120 x 180 cm

Dong Yuan

born 1984, Huatong, Liaoning Province

Home of Paintings, 2008
59 acrylic on canvas, wood
200 x 400 x 200 cm installed

Sketch of Family Belongings, 2008
186 acrylic on canvas, wood
360 x 360 x 260 cm installed

Shen Liang

born 1976, Yingkou City, Liaoning Province

This Is a Book, 2007
12 oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm each

Shi Jindian

born 1953, Yuxi City, Yunnan Province

Blue CJ750, 2008
coloured stainless steel wire, 260 x 170 x 102 cm

Sun Furong

born 1961, Handan, Hebei Province
lives and works in Beijing

Nibbling-Up Series: Tomb Figures, 2008
cloth, mixed media, 180 x 550 x 250 cm installed

Wang Zhiyuan

born 1961, Tianjin, Tianjin Province
lives and works in Beijing

Object of Desire, 2008
fibreglass, lights, sound, 363 x 355 x 70 cm

Wu Junyong

born 1978, Putian, Fujian Province

Opera 2, 2007
animation, 3:28 minutes

Yan Baishen

born 1977, Lanzhou City, Gansu Province

Ketchup, 2009
digital animation, 4:30 minutes

Zhou Xiaohu

born 1960, Changzhou, Jiangsu Province

Renown, 2007
fibreglass, silicone, clothing, professional
video camera, microphone, tripod, DVD
170 x 300 x 175 cm, DVD 4:30 minutes

All works courtesy White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney