

INSTITUTE OF VISUAL ARTS OPENS RUINS,  
MARCH 10  
Exhibition Explores New Video and Photography from  
China

The Institute of Visual Arts (Inova) at the UWM Peck School of the Arts opens its third exhibition of the spring cycle, RUINS, on Friday, March 10, 2006 from 6:00-9:00 pm in Gallery One, 3253 North Downer Avenue. Guest curator Zhang Zhaohui begins a gallery talk at 6:30 pm. The opening is sponsored by the Organization of Chinese Americans-Wisconsin. Mr. Zhang and artists Ma Yongfeng and Liu Jin will be in residence at the Peck School of the Arts from March 6 through March 12. The show remains open through May 14. Gallery hours are noon-5:00 pm, Wednesday-Sunday.

RUINS, an exhibition of new video and photography from China curated by Zhang Zhaohui, directly addresses the tension between a rapidly developing and urbanizing society and its traditional history and culture. This exhibition brings together the work of fourteen artists from Mainland China and Macau: Chen Qingqing, Chen Qiulin, the Gao Brothers, Huang Yan, Li Luming, Li Wei, Liu Jin, Liu Wei, Ma Yongfeng, Ng Fong Chao, Sheng Qi, Xing Danwen, Zhang Dali, and Zhang Wei. Created with readily accessible new media, their photographic and video works document and comment upon bewildering changes, each telling a truth about contemporary China.

After nearly three decades of development, the Chinese contemporary art scene has reached a new stage. Recent Chinese art is winning international recognition and the number of gifted, self-assured and globally conscious emerging artists has grown to a steady stream. These younger artists have grown up in the midst of remarkable social transitions and a remaking of the urban environment; they are also making work in a country that is, because of its rapid and extensive economic development, at the center of the global gaze. China's attitude towards its past—historical, spiritual, and material—is also under construction, and the tension between past and present suffuses the work of the artists whose work is included in Ruins.

Many works in the exhibition reflect the artists' deep

concern with the uncertainty of a fast-changing society, their anxiety about deteriorating environmental conditions, their implicit criticism of the corrupt political system, and their aspirations for a freer and brighter world. Their work mirrors a world defined by physical, cultural and spiritual destruction; in it we see not only demolished buildings but the ruins of traditional culture, patriotism, and revolutionary ideals. Like many of China's younger artists, the artists in this exhibition are picking through the debris of their country's recent and distant past and considering the possibility of building a new cultural identity on these ruins.

### **About the Artists**

#### **Chen Qingqing**

Chen Qingqing (born Beijing, 1953) is one of the few Chinese artists to have developed a methodology for creating installations combining natural and industrial materials. Over the past ten years, she has created a large body of work by assembling a wide variety of gadgets into enchanting surrealist spectacles. In these landscapes, she anticipates the consequences of the deterioration of the natural environment and expresses her fear for the world's future in light of its actual helplessness. Chen's landscapes draw on recognizable emblems of contemporary life and popular culture--scenes from Jurassic Park and Hackers, the miniature replicas of identical tourist landscapes embedded in everyone's mind—suggesting that modern civilization and its spiritual landscape are no more than a mishmash of familiar cultural fragments.

#### **Chen Qiulin**

Over the last five years Chengdu-based Chen Qiulin has created several performance pieces in outdoor settings surrounded by demolished towns and cities that explore the impact of urban development on individuals. Her newest video work documents the displacement of people whose houses were demolished and will be submerged upon the completion of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, the largest reservoir and hydropower station project in the world. From Chen's perspective, the government's utilitarian pursuit of modernization is a disaster for individuals and their environment. In *One Day*, a performance from 2002, the artist, dressed as a bride, applies makeup in front of a dressing table perched atop a ruin. The chimneys of a power station emit smoke in the

background. A young man wearing a suit throws cake at her, and though he covers her body and face, he fails to disturb her. For Chen, who correlates social change with individual psychological response, the inner hurt created by a sweet life encapsulates the experience of the One-Child generation. These lonely survivors are fragile, weak, and vulnerable to the ruinous social environment masked by a shallow, foppish society.

#### The Gao Brothers

The Gao Brothers (born Jinan, 1956 and 1962) began making work in the mid-1980s and are among the first generation of China's avant-garde artists to create works together. They examine the perplexed spiritual state of the generations that grew up with a Communist education but came to embrace pro-democracy sentiments. Their contribution to this exhibition, the Never Finished Construction Site, is a digitally manipulated photograph. A group of young people stands silent and aloof in the vast, deserted concrete framework of an unfinished building—a sight familiar in many Chinese cities. The image exposes the alienation engendered by never-ending demolition and reconstruction. Confronted by this profound confusion, and reluctant to accept the current system, China's young people are awaiting a better society.

#### Huang Yan

Huang Yan (born Jilin Province, 1966) is an internationally renowned artist whose works have been widely exhibited. In the past five years he has developed a body of work based on traditional Chinese landscape painting and tattoo. His landmark work, Body Landscape, reproduces these landscapes on the human body. The transposition of Chinese cultural icons on the living masculine body simultaneously suggests a rebirth of an ancient culture and the superficiality of cultural identity. Huang's contribution to this exhibition, a new work entitled Copy, shows a naked, Rubenesque Chinese woman in a studio. She is posed in front of a large-scale reproduction of a 19th-century European landscape painting and surrounded by the debris of Western architectural ornaments; a large-scale reproduction of a classical Chinese landscape painting is the backdrop. Huang evokes present and past in the tattooed flesh of the model, whose skin is covered with a traditional Chinese painting; he simultaneously contrasts East, as represented by the woman, and West, symbolized

by the Western backdrop. Ultimately, the work condemns China's loss of direction as epitomized by its misuse or abuse of Western icons in modernization projects.

#### Li Luming

One of the older artists participating in this exhibition, Li Luming (born Hunan, 1956) juxtaposes the images of a young female revolutionary and a contemporary woman of the same age. The generational rift between those born in the 1950s and those who came of age in the new millennium has been intensified by China's vast social transitions. Li's work conveys a sense of historical nihilism and the absurdity of reality. It uses the metaphor of a mother-daughter relationship to explore the ambiguous logic between yesterday and today: as the space between the two widens, China's imagination becomes a collage made up of segments of its complicated history and present-day reality.

#### Li Wei

Li Wei's works have drawn wide attention on the world art stage, and have been featured on the covers of many international art magazines including *Flash Art*, *Work*, and *Contemporary*. As one of the many migrant workers who sought a better life in an urban area, Li Wei was subjected to unfair treatment by a government that cannot guarantee people's freedom and equality. Consequently, his performance-based work and computer-manipulated pictures are concerned with individual courage and the wisdom of expressing one's voice in a hectic and dynamic society in transition. *Baby Leaves the Earth* considers the possibility of sustaining life in the ruins of a traditional courtyard and the implications of nurturing new life in rootless ground. Li Wei was born in Hubei in 1970.

#### Liu Jin

Liu Jin's work is a metaphor for the potential crisis of economic development. In the *Moldy Landscape* series, broken toys and utensils covered in mold are arranged as a multicolored traditional Chinese landscape painting, charming but ultimately poisonous. The *Angel Wounded* series documents a performance in which the artist disguised himself as an angel with a pair of bloody wings on his back. The wounded angel appears in an urban setting, amidst the ruins of aged and demolished houses and the newly finished high rises that dominate Chinese

cityscapes. For Liu Jin, the angel is wounded and the dream is over. Liu Jin was born in Jiangsu Province in 1971.

#### Liu Wei

As Beijing prepared to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China in 1999, the better part of a year was devoted to renovating and reconstructing the landmark buildings alongside the city's Chang-an Avenue, the "First Avenue of China" (Zhonghu Diyi Jie). Artist Liu Wei (born 1965) was alienated by the giant wrapped edifices—buildings that had witnessed the social and political fluctuations of the past half-century, from the Cultural Revolution to the June 4th Massacre. For Liu Wei's generation, the wrapping of the buildings constituted a form of mourning for historical events, despite the fact that the government was using the renovation project to gloss over a political scar. In his video work, *In the Depth of One Hundred Flowers*, Liu Wei expresses his deep concern about the two extremes of China's ongoing urbanization program by overlapping images of central Beijing's polished skyscrapers with dirty trash piles on the city's outskirts.

#### Ma Yongfeng

Ma Yongfeng (born Shanxi, 1971) is a video artist whose work *Swirling* has been exhibited internationally. His new video work, *Beijing Zoological Garden*, documents domestic animals and their man-made nests and shelters. The zoo is comprised of artificial mini-ecosystems designed to ensure the survival of animal species; each unit is drawn from an imagining of the natural environment as well as traditional Chinese bird-and-flower scroll paintings. As China's fiercely rapid development destroys the natural environment, and animals are increasingly confined to the screen and the page, this garden becomes a nostalgic living picture.

#### Ng Fong Chao

Ng Fong Chao was educated in Mainland China and has been working in Macau for the past ten years. His subtly nostalgic work explores personal and cultural metamorphosis, and particularly the interaction between rapid and overwhelming westernization and inborn cultural identity. In a photograph documenting a performance, *Turns a Blind Eye (II)*, Ng fuses mirror images—one color,

one black and white--of himself in a wedding dress, Macao's traditional architecture in the background.

### Sheng Qi

Sheng Qi (born Hefei, 1965) is one of China's most influential performance artists. He was a key member of the 1985 New Wave Art Movement inspired by rationalism and liberalism. In 1989, driven by despair and agony after the June 4th Tiananmen Square incident, Sheng cut off a finger from his left hand and buried it in a flowerpot in Beijing. After more than ten years of self-exile, Sheng returned to Beijing and began to photograph his mutilated hand. *Memories* is the signature image of Sheng's excavation of the past, both personal and historical. In the picture, Sheng's left hand holds a picture of his friend. It is one of the artist's most ambitious performances in its extraordinarily disturbing power of representation, its extension of meanings, and its search for a historical past.

### Xing Danwen

Xing Danwen was born in Xi'an and studied at New York's School of Visual Art before returning to Beijing in 2002. Her works have been featured in many international exhibitions, including the Whitney Biennale 2002. In the *disCONNEXION* series she photographs piles of discarded computer chips and obsolete hardware in the deserted outskirts of Guangdong province, one of the most developed areas in China. Electronic waste is shipped illegally from countries such as Japan and the United States and dumped along Guangdong's coast, where more than 100,000 people make their living by recycling these piles of e-trash, operating in poor conditions and with simple tools. Over the years, the land has been destroyed and people have been severely injured by the poisonous material. Xing's work explores the interaction between global and local economies and questions the rhetoric of Chinese development by documenting the cost of environmental pollution.

### Zhang Dali

Zhang Dali (born Harbin, 1963), a Beijing-based graffiti artist who resided in Italy for five years in the early 1990s, makes his own mark on the streets of an increasingly incoherent and unrecognizable city. Over the last ten years, he has airbrushed a man's profile on Beijing's traditional courtyard houses as they underwent demolition. He then

photographs these ruins using the surrounding new buildings as a backdrop. The Demolition series documents a one-man war against the government's overwhelming desire to overlay China's past with a veneer of modernization by constructing a modern-looking city. These works expose decision-makers whose readiness to ignore cultural traditions may be innocent, but whose neglect of the interests of local residents is intentional. By making ephemeral work on the man-made ruins of aged courtyard houses, Zhang Dali links the past with the future and the individual with society.

### Zhang Wei

Changsha-based artist Zhang Wei has produced a series of computer-manipulated works that insert contemporary Western commercial icons into scenes from classical Chinese paintings: Marilyn Monroe in a Taihushi stone garden, semi-naked cover girls in front of a traditional bird-and-flower setting. This pictorial integration of East and West recasts the conventional binary concept in light of China's new cultural experiences.

### **About the Curator**

Zhang Zhaohui grew up in Beijing and received his B.A. from Nankai University Tianjing (1988), an M.A. in modern art history from the China Art Academy (1995), and an M.A. in Curatorial Studies from Bard College New York (1998). He is the recipient of fellowships from the Asian Cultural Council and the Luce Foundation and a visiting scholarship from Asialink. From 1988 to 1992 he served on the curatorial staff of the National Museum of Art, Beijing. From 1999 to 2000 he was the director of the Curatorial Section at He Xiangning Art Museum, Shenzhen. In 2002 he became the founding director of Beijing X-ray Art Center. He is currently a PhD candidate at The Central Academy of Art Beijing and a research fellow of the Hong Kong-based Asia Art Archive. Curated exhibitions include Where Heaven and Earth Meet: Xu Bing and Cai GuoQiang (1998, New York), Departure from China (1999, Beijing), Food as Art (2000, Beijing), Gravity of the Garden (2000, Shenzhen), Zero Degrees Project (2001, Beijing), Mask vs Face (Beijing 2002), New Urbanism (Guangzhou 2002 and Sydney 2004), Manufactured Happiness (Beijing 2003), and Bare Androgyny (2003, Beijing).

