

Making it BIG

Summit gallery spotlights massive culture-blending creations by the China-born

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ART

Walk into the new exhibition at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey in Summit and likely the first thing you will notice are the large (more than 10 feet tall) paintings of traditional Chinese landscapes done in the style of Vincent Van Gogh by Zhang Hongtu.

Zhang has more work in a hallway gallery nearby, ceramic figures of the 12 traditional Chinese zodiac figures done in Tang Dynasty three-color glazes, each dressed in a Mao suit. He has also cast McDonald's Happy Meal boxes and fries holders in bronze, covered with traditional Chinese reliefs, and altered a six-pack of Coke bottles to look like they are made out of Ming-era blue-and-white export porcelain.

Zhang is the perfect illustration of the theme of "Travelers Between Cultures," a five-person show of Chinese artists who live, now, in the United States. Zhang, as he tells exhibition curator Zhijian Qian in the catalog introduction, feels that after living half his life in New York City, "Chinese treat (me) as a New Yorker while New Yorkers still regard (me) as Chinese."

True as that may be, the art made by people born on the mainland but now part of the Chinese diaspora has recently become among the hottest commodities on the contemporary international art market. All five of the artists here -- Zhang, Xu Bing, Wenda Gu, Lin Yan, Lin Yilin -- have enjoyed a success that most Chinese-American (that is, of Chinese descent but born here) artists could only fantasize about.

Zhang, Xu, Wenda and the two Lins are global artists whose work juxtaposes distant cultures in a way only a red-eye transcontinental flight can.

But that is, increasingly, how we see world cultures -- in proximity. Even when these artists are particularly involved with definitively Chinese themes, like Xu Bing and Wenda Gu, who make art based on Chinese calligraphy, their approach is often Western in its choice of allusive, unusual materials or earnest, self-help training.

Wenda Gu's wall-sized hangings emblazoned with a traditional Chinese character are made entirely of human hair. (They are designed to be hung together as a tent, with braided strands of hair from many different peoples from around the world hung like a bead-curtain wall, but installation problems forced the gallery to treat them like tapestries.)

Xu Bing has set up a room equipped with long tables at which ink blocks, water, bamboo brushes and little paint-by-numbers calligraphy practice books are laid out with a flat-screen video of an English-accented woman instructor taking you through the process. You can take your practice notebook, with its traditional wood block-printed cover, home with you when you're done.

Lin Yan's work is even more Western in affect. His sculptural reliefs are made by casting hand-made paper on riveted metal doors or they are abstract compositions made of different colored papers and plastics.

Lin Yilin is a photographer who manipulates his pictures -- mostly cityscapes in brand new mainland Chinese towns like Guanzhou -- so that they look almost like each building is shrink-wrapped in plastic, like so many of the products manufactured there for sale over here.

You can even see the appeal of going global in reverse upstairs, where VACNJ is hosting "From Beijing to Brooklyn," work by the current artist-in-residence at the Newark Art Museum, Eric Jiaju Lee.

Lee is showing paintings on silk and canvas that use drips, brushstrokes and smears to achieve a kind of traditional delicacy of line with a modern elements-of-painting overall look. He plans to open a studio in Beijing to "further develop his bi-cultural aesthetic."

If this kind of cross-cultural exhibition interests you, you might want to check out "East TRANSPLANTED West" at the CAS Gallery on the Kean University campus in Union, organized by the same curator and up through Nov. 7. It includes seven Chinese artists who have moved to either Jersey or New York (Hu Bing is in this show, too).