

# BEYOND STUFF

## Contemporary Art

29 August - 5 October 2014

BEYOND STUFF contains artworks that look like sculptures and paintings of random ordinary objects and events. However, when we look beyond the ordinary “stuff” and into the profound context of the artworks, they are in fact filled with significant commentaries on their country’s society and politics. The works are influenced by recent events that relate to the themes of authoritative power and freedom of speech. They are a reflection of the reality of society. The statement made by the artists through their artworks is what gives this exhibition an edge. Beyond art, this is a stand for what they believe in and an encouragement for others to continue taking the fight in life.

In the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD) China was the most advanced civilization in the world and a gigantic empire, and Europe, by contrast, remained in the midst of the Dark Ages. Nevertheless, in China, the feudal system of governance and the policy of national isolationism imposed during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) meant that China was late to become fully modernized. During the 20th century, what might be called the “giant sleeping lion” of the Chinese state was invaded by various European nations as well as by Japan.

Today, after such successes as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the EXPO Shanghai of 2010, the 21st century Chinese nation – now with the second highest GDP in the world – is taking its place as a global ruler. It is often said this century will belong to Asia – but one could equally say it will belong to China. China owes its modernization to its remarkable pace of economic development. On the other hand, it remains an undemocratic Communist nation with strict controls over free speech and restrictions on artistic expression. Yet the more a nation tries to impose regulations, the more it will give rise to those free spirits, the artists who demand free expression.

The Chinese artists exhibited in our Singapore show “Beyond Stuff” are each, through their respective means of artistic expression, making work that overflows with criticism of contemporary China.

He Yunchang (b. 1967) will go as far as having his own bones removed or wounding his body in front of an audience, in works such as “One Rib” and “One meter democracy”. Through such performance works he appeals to society with a political resistance of blood-stained non-resistance.

By contrast, Li Mingzhu (b. 1973) uses the everyday objects and handicrafts of ancient China revived in a contemporary Chinese context to highlight the disconnect between them, and to explore the contradictions inherent within Chinese society. Xia Xing (b. 1974) creates 60 paintings a year, re-producing

Mizuma Gallery is proud to present BEYOND STUFF, a group show curated by Sueo Mizuma, owner of Mizuma Gallery. This exhibition features ten artworks by Ai Weiwei, He Yunchang, Li Mingzhu, Xia Xing and Zhao Zhao, five leading Chinese contemporary artists.

images from mass media. Each annual series has a different theme, such as the civic lives of children and their right to equality and protection.

Zhao (b. 1982) is somewhat of a leader-figure among young Chinese artists born in the 80s. He was Ai Weiwei’s assistant for seven years, and has been called the successor to both the latter’s courageous actions and his talent, creating paintings bursting with artistic skill. Together with these young artists born in the 70s and 80s, the figure who is their fundamental intellectual support – Ai Weiwei – will also participate.

In 2010, in an undeniably unjust action by the Chinese government, he was arrested and fined the equivalent of two million US dollars for purported tax evasion. In a further act of oppression his passport was confiscated, preventing him from freely travelling abroad. The government is becoming desperate to gag the mouth of this artist. In April 2014, the 15th CCAA (Chinese Contemporary Art Awards) anniversary exhibition was held at the Shanghai Power Station of Art museum. In 2008 Ai Weiwei had won the CCAA’s Lifetime Achievement Award, and this time it was planned to exhibit two of his pieces: “Sunflower seeds” and “Stools”.

However, in the days before the exhibition opened those works were forcibly removed from the show, and Ai Weiwei’s name erased from all CCAA records. It seems like the government wants to remove all trace of Ai Weiwei’s existence from this earth – but his works themselves will not disappear so easily. Even if the art is destroyed, for example, it will remain in people’s memories for eternity.

These previously unsullied artworks “Sunflower” and “Stools” are now, through the intervention and censorship of the government, marked with the particular history of having been “unexhibitable”. As such they have become extremely politicized pieces. Now, they will be shown at Mizuma Gallery Singapore. And

as a passionate advocate of both personal liberty and art, I am delighted to have the opportunity to exhibit these works. They are shown in unaltered state, the same way that they were packed up by the force of the government. We want to invite as many viewers as possible to see the pieces with the power of their own, individual imaginations. That is the truth: no matter what oppressive acts of power are perpetrated, within the human mind there exists a free world.

Sueo Mizuma  
Director,  
Mizuma  
Gallery

## The Question of Culture

1995 saw the inaugural production of Kuo Pao Kun’s Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral, in Mandarin and English, at the Victoria Theatre in Singapore. Written by the doyen of the theatre scene, Descendants was about Zheng He (Cheng Ho), the Muslim-Chinese eunuch who rose to power serving under the Ming Emperor. Central to the play is the consideration of Zheng He’s inner state and thoughts, and Kuo ponders who the Admiral really was: the intrepid voyager, or the rootless wanderer, as he traversed the seas “sailing away to the distant lands, (yet) in the middle of nowhere,” speculating that the Admiral’s “loneliest moments... probably were also his freest.” I have to admit that while I have been asked to write a brief text, I have not met Ai Weiwei in person. Yet, I do feel like I know him, as I am sure many others do, in the sense of being familiar with his artworks, and of the artworks that have come in their wake, in response to what he has created, the evidence of the impact of his vision. Reflecting upon Zheng He’s influence within the region, poet Goenawan Mohamad remarked of the Javanese memory of the Admiral (locally remembered as ‘Sam Poo Kong’), that he was not merely Ming official, but “a local saint, a venerated Muslim, a Chinese idol and an imperial signifier.” Descendants under Kuo’s pen was about the value and necessity of such cultural crossings, and for all that market-nationalisms dictate, art transcends these borders. Within this exhibition are two artworks of Ai Weiwei’s that unfortunately did not have the opportunity to be presented as hoped. Cultural policy is a tricky operation at best, especially

when defined in terms of control; although given the administrative genesis of its scope, and the politics it subsumes, its methods are perhaps not unexpected. Yet one would like to imagine that such policy would come in support of culture – of the conditions, dreams, desires, hopes, and even fears – as experienced in life, and as expressed through art. Few and far between are those who would genuinely speak for another, succinctly mediate a revelation, convincingly inspire an imagination, and powerfully influence a generation. Where culture comes under the control of politics (or economics for that matter), art provides much needed reinvigoration. Not simply as art, but because culture is intrinsically the presentation of vitality. Chinese contemporary art has become recognised globally, and in the interests of cultural exchange, one might say that Ai Weiwei is perhaps one of the more successful cultural exports of China.

However, the thing about culture is that it can be effectively swept aside, buried, even forgotten. The question is, would we be the better for it? Against the fragility of life, and even cultures, art can play a crucial role; and as the saying goes, from little acorns, mighty oaks grow. Within this exhibition are artworks by five critical artists from China, presenting consequential touchstones to the condition of contemporary art there. Signalling the profundity of being able to see beyond their immediate representation, the exhibition presents a view between cultures one might say, where getting past the confines of representation, we might see it for what it really is.

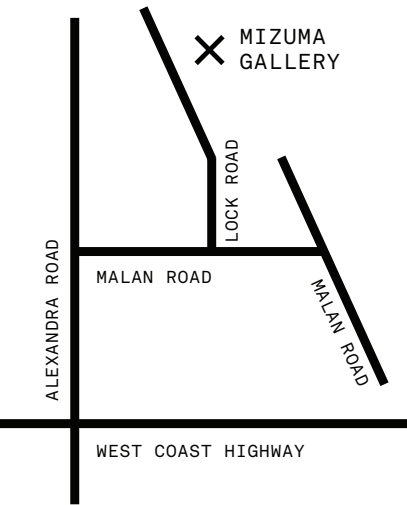
June Yap  
Independent Curator  
(Singapore)

Notes:  
All quotes from Two Plays by Kuo Pao Kun: Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral and The Spirits Play, Wee, C.J. W.-L. and Lee Chee Keng, (eds.), Introduction, and Goenawan Mohamad, ‘An Admiral, a General and a Notion of Home.’

Kuo Pao Kun (1939-2002, Hebei, China/Singapore). Kuo Pao Kun and his wife were detained without trial in March 1976, for allegedly being a member of the Malayan People’s Liberation League (MPLL). He was released in October 1980, but his revoked citizenship was returned to him only in 1992. He was awarded the national Cultural Medallion in 1989, and in 1997, was awarded the French Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

MIZUMA GALLERY

29 AUGUST -  
5 OCTOBER 2014  
TUESDAY - SATURDAY  
FROM 11AM UNTIL 7PM  
& ON SUNDAY FROM  
11AM UNTIL 6PM.



×  
22 LOCK ROAD  
#01-34  
GILLMAN BARRACKS  
SINGAPORE 108939  
  
T. +65 6570 2505  
F. +65 6570 2506  
  
WWW.MIZUMA.SG  
INFO@MIZUMA.SG  
FACEBOOK.COM/MIZUMAGALLERY

# BEYOND STUFF

Ai (WEIWEI)  
He (YUNCHANG)  
Li (MINGZHU)  
Xia (XING)  
Zhao (ZHAO)

29 August - 5 October 2014

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SPECIAL THANKS TO

TASCHEN

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A CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART SHOW  
BY MIZUMA GALLERY

# Ai Weiwei's Essay

"Untitled (Ai Weiwei's Stools and Sunflower Seeds withdrawn from the "15 Years Chinese Contemporary Art Award" exhibition in Shanghai, China)", 2014

On April 26, 2014, the Chinese Contemporary Art Award (CCAA) held a 15th anniversary exhibition at the Shanghai Power Station of Art to commemorate the award participants of the past 15 years. Uli Sigg, the former Swiss ambassador to China and a prominent collector of contemporary art, founded CCAA in 1997 as a platform to promote the Chinese contemporary art scene by attracting foreign interest and discussion of the Chinese cultural landscape. As Uli Sigg's old friend and long time colleague, Ai Weiwei served as a CCAA jury member multiple times and was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008. The historic anniversary exhibition was to include two works, Sunflower Seeds and Stools, by Ai Weiwei, who had been deeply involved with CCAA's work and development. Shortly before the exhibition opened to the public, however, government

officials forced the complete removal of Ai Weiwei's works and name from the venue.

The Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Culture barred the event organizers from showing or mentioning Ai Weiwei. Although the CCAA staff, the Shanghai Power Station of Art museum, and cultural officials attempted to negotiate, the event organizers ultimately had no choice but to obey, and his two works were removed from the exhibition space. His name was also removed from the wall where it was listed as the 2008 Lifetime Achievement Award winner. Although Uli Sigg announced his regret in his opening speech that one artist was not able to be included in the show, these comments were intentionally left untranslated. In the end, Ai Weiwei's presence had almost completely disappeared from the Shanghai Power Station of Art. In response to this action,

his two works, along with a series of photographs taken at the Shanghai exhibition, are now being shown outside the country.

Because they were censored in the Shanghai show, these pieces now have an added history to them - neither was particularly inflammatory or controversial, but both were removed simply because of the Ai Weiwei's name. This goes beyond censoring due to political content and makes showing artwork of any kind a definite risk in the world of contemporary Chinese art. The issues of censorship and political sensitivity are increasingly complicated, and increasingly placed in a global context. As China draws more foreign interest for large-scale art exhibitions, muting globally recognized artists like Ai Weiwei becomes an international focal point for government censorship issues.



"2012 (part of The Seven-Year Itch)", 2012  
Oil on Canvas, 35 x 50 cm each, total of 60 pieces

# Xia Xing

(b. 1974, Shihezi, Xinjiang, China)

has been creating one work per year for the past seven years. Each work consists of 60 oil painting reproductions of chosen images from the media. Each year he focuses on a particular theme, such as children, "the civil way of life", and protection of rights. However, what he specifically paints is completely dictated by the media and current events, therefore the content of his next painting in a series is

always unknown. He imitates the flat, repetitive medium of newsprint, where the process includes editing, selection and reproduction. Despite the unpredictable content in each annual series, he keeps the size and method of the paintings constant in each year. His paintings have neither a beginning or ending, it is simply continuous. By creating his paintings in this manner, he makes his works look ordinary, just like how mass images we see in media seem somehow ordinary despite its significant content.

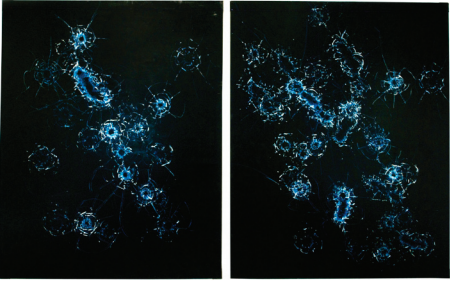
# Zhao Zhao

(b. 1982, Xinjiang, China)

is known to be one of China's most promising young artists and a leader of the younger generation contemporary artists in China. He worked with Ai Weiwei for seven years as his assistant and because of the commonalities between the two artists' experiences, braveness and talent. Zhao Zhao is even said to be the heir of Ai Weiwei's important legacy. He uses paintings, videos, sculptures as well as other artistic mediums to portray the reality of his homeland.

"Constellations", 2013

Oil on Canvas 200 x 160 cm (each)



# He Yunchang

(b. 1967, Liupinghe, Yunnan, China)

is best known as a performance artist who specializes in undergoing physical harm, documenting it through photographs, videos and paintings, and selling them. In his past projects, such as "One Rib" and "One Meter Democracy", he purposely had a surgeon cut parts of his body as a part of his performance and recorded the entire process. His performance art works are typically very gory and cringe-worthy, but overall they have the intention of making a statement on particular current events in society.

"Nirvana-Flesh", 2013

Video  
duration 12' 40''



# Li Mingzhu

(b. 1973, Tianjin, China)

graduated from Tianjin Normal University with an undergraduate degree in Fine Arts in 1993 and from China Academy of Fine Arts Oil Painting Department in 1996. In his artworks, he tends to delve into the issue of disconnect between present day and traditional Chinese ethics and culture. He is known to pay great attention to detail and recreating everyday objects used in China. He has exhibited his artworks in the National Gallery of China in Beijing and around Europe. He currently lives and works in Beijing, China.

"The Horse Trips- A Walk Volume - Beijing", 2013

Horse Hoof, Iron  
31 x 9 x 5.5 cm (each)



# Ai Weiwei

(b. 1957, Beijing, China)

is an internationally renowned contemporary artist. He is not only an artist, but also an activist, architect, curator and filmmaker. He is well known for having a radical stance on the topic of the Chinese government and politics and presenting them through his artworks. Some of his best known works are installations that display a conceptual discussion about contemporary and traditional Chinese thoughts and methods. Ai Weiwei once said, "What you see is not what you see, and what you see is not what it means"; an idea that drives the concept of BEYOND STUFF.



"Study of Perspective (1995-2011)", 2014

Series of 40 B/W and Colour  
C-Prints / Diasec  
Variable Dimensions