

Community history, Chinese

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Artists and intellectuals

Ah Xian and Liu Xiao Xian (b. 1960 and 1963)

Brother artists Ah Xian and Liu Xiao Xian came from China in 1990 to live in Australia. They grew up during the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. Both were invited to exhibit at the first Sydney Spring International Festival. Both have worked diligently in Australia to make sense of their exile from their homeland, their continuing relationship with its culture and the massive social change occurring there. Both have built successful international careers.

(From summary of Diana Giese's interview with Ah Xian and Liu Xiao Xian, ORAL TRC 4906, 2002, *Chinese Australian Oral History Partnership*, National Library of Australia:)

It was hard for them to resettle in Australia. According to Xiao Xian, 'nothing much happened' at first. While waiting for their status to be finalised they could neither work nor receive benefits, so they went door to door around factories and workshops in Alexandria, asking for a job. They began at a fabric printing factory in Enmore, printing T-shirts, but then discovered that one of the lines involved swastikas. A Jewish friend lobbied to have the factory closed.

Ah Xian began work with a house painter to whom he had been introduced by a Chinese friend: 'hard labour, long hours, six days a week, for a couple of hundred dollars'. In Sydney, there was a network of Chinese employers 'like a chain'. Xiao Xian worked in a little café as a kitchen hand, and stopped making art because he didn't have enough money for equipment. Becoming depressed, he started to go to RSL clubs to play snooker, 'to try and relax from the labour...numb myself'. Their worst time was when their applications to stay in Australia were rejected by the Department of Immigration, Xiao Xian being interviewed by 'a young lady, I guess she knows nothing about China...I think she thought I was lying to her.'

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In 1994, in his work he was starting to place dolls in alien environments: graveyards or among huge brick chimneys... 'trying to express the feeling of me as a migrant, feeling like a newborn baby in a strange world'...He studied English at TAFE, having made a false claim about his residency status to get in, and worked 12-hour shifts as a cab driver five or six days a week. The brothers both paid for solicitors to re-present their cases, and found those handling them 'more sympathetic to artists'.

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Every second Saturday they went round the Paddington art galleries that seemed 'interesting', then targeted the Sherman, Roslyn Oxley, Coventry and Australian galleries. Xiao Xian showed photographic collages and Ah Xian his Chinese works. They were told to keep in contact. Then Sherman organised a group exhibition for them and their friend Guan Wei, followed by a larger show. 'You're getting up there now,' their Australian friends told them. 'The future should be easier for you now'—'but Guan Wei was the one they liked'. Professor Mabel Lee [see interview, ORAL TRC 3152, 1994, *Post-War Chinese Australians* project, National Library of Australia] organised an exhibition for them at Sydney University. 'She's very friendly and helped a lot.'

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Ah Xian started to make plaster-of-Paris casts from life, of disembodied hands and feet, a comment on the Tiananmen events of 1989. He found this new material 'temporary and cheap'. 'Subconsciously' he was turning to the rich and ancient ceramic tradition of China. He wanted to use porcelain as a medium, but did not know how. He remembered that during their childhood they used to go to the Forbidden City and the Summer Palace to see, behind glass, 'beautiful and exquisite craft pieces...highly refined'...From 1993, he started to read about this tradition and got an Australia Council grant to visit Jingdezhen, where porcelain has been worked for over 1000 years. 'In almost every family there are a number of

people involved in this field...and we have a friend who is a professor at the Ceramics Institute.’

He began working with white porcelain and each time had to find a life model. These included Xiao Xian, who remembers that ‘when Ah Xian started, he was not experienced, so we were victims. We had to wait within a full body cast with only two holes to breathe, for hours, while it set.’

Once Ah Xian tried to cast his own body, lying quietly in their flat while the others were out. The plaster set hard ‘and the hairy parts became stuck’. He became ‘a prisoner of art’...

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In late 2000 Ah Xian went to China to visit different workshops, including those producing cloisonné, lacquer work, inlay and bronze, and he spent 2001 working in workshops and factories...now he uses in his pieces a combination of the ‘photo-realistic sculpture’ common to the Western tradition, plus the Chinese tradition of decorative craftsmanship. ‘The juxtaposition is what is special and disturbing.’ In 2003 he was planning to return to China to make full-body casts decorated in carved lacquer-ware, following a tradition that is several thousand years old. He was also planning using ‘stronger and more confrontational’ bronze decorations. ‘Within the Chinese tradition there is a vast and uncultivated field which still excites me.’

Since studying for his Master’s at the Sydney College of the Arts, Xiao Xian has begun to compare similarities and differences between East and West, including religious images. A 1990 triptych of Mao, Buddha and himself used tiny images to make up the larger ones, as in newspaper photographs. He learned how to realise his ideas using computers. In his work *Reincarnation*, Mao is made up of ‘images of himself, representing ordinary people. Mao’s power comes from everybody, their collective power. Mao used to be an ordinary person before he became powerful.’

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Ah Xian is against the globalisation of art, where everybody is 'doing something messy or massive or temporary...I don't want to spend a lot of time working on one piece. Rather I want to work carefully, and produce highly-refined work.'

Both brothers think global art is 'too emotional' or 'too political', even though Ah Xian says that his own work was once 'very political in a direct way...now less and less'.

Xiao Xian strives for 'very fine workmanship, craftsmanship' rather than something 'roughly presented' which will later become 'rubbish'. Both want to revive the 'dying' Chinese cultural traditions which collapsed as the market-driven economy arose in the wake of the Cultural Revolution.

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