

## review

## 12 VISUAL ARTS

## Paint the town red

White Rabbit Contemporary  
Chinese Art CollectionBalfour St, Chippendale, Sydney  
Open Thursday to Sunday, 10am to 6pm

**C**ONTROVERSIAL, challenging and confronting are among the most bloodless clichés of contemporary art. But confronting is for once the right word for the vast and in every way excessive works that greet visitors to White Rabbit, Kerr and Judith Neilson's new private museum of contemporary Chinese art in the inner-city Sydney suburb of Chippendale.

The first thing you see on the right as you come in is a colossal multicoloured wall piece in fibreglass and plastic, with flashing lights and speakers playing cheap bar music. This mixed-media extravaganza is in the shape of a pair of women's panties; in the centre are two enormous figures, an obese businessman with the head of a boar and ogling bloodshot eyes, and sitting on his knees a lap-dancer. Above and across the figures, in neon tubes, is the motto: "Diamonds matter most." The work's title is *Object of Desire* and the artist's name, Wang Zhiyuan, is printed on it like a brand label.

The whole thing is unspeakably vulgar and yet undeniably fascinating. It sounds like schlock, but there is, in the Chinese context, a ring of truth that makes it worthy of attention. It is the expression of a society that has passed in the past few decades from the ideological insanity of Mao's Cultural Revolution to the excesses of the economic revolution. Upstairs is an installation that reproduces the squalor in which millions of workers subsist: a tiny, filthy box containing a cramped sleeping alcove, a bench with a gas burner for cooking, a tiny television and a hole in the ground for a latrine.

Next to this first work in the foyer is an extraordinary pair of sculptures by Chen



A Sydney gallery's collection of Chinese art reveals a culture in transit, writes **Christopher Allen**

Wenling: a gigantic but extremely thin naked male figure, bald and hairless like a science-fiction alien, leaning down to smile at an oversized piglet which rises up on its hind legs like a dog begging. Both figures are in bright red; once a symbol of communism, now part of the China brand. Behind that is a work by the same artist, so vast that the building's interior has had to be designed around it: it is well over two storeys high.

This piece is a sculptural installation, although all genre categories are strained by what we see before us: a full-scale small car, transformed as though in a children's animation, the windows turned into eyes and the open bonnet a mouth. From this mouth issues an 11m tongue, and from its tip dangle a monstrous sow, a businessman and a woman. The car and the tongue are in the trademark red, the sow and the two other figures in gold. The general idea here is not

unlike that of the first piece. The pig is a symbol of wealth in China. The male figure is trying to hang on to it, and the woman is hanging on to him. The work's title is *Valiant Struggle*, borrowing and giving new meaning to one of those slogans of the revolutionary kitsch that was official culture under Mao. The struggle for a socialist utopia has given way to a scramble for individual enrichment.

It sounds as if this should be a political statement, but it is too cynical for that. The grotesque is pursued for its own sake and the artists seem quite content to be part of the world they parody.

The proof lies in the expensive media and the meticulous industrial finish of these works. They are made of bronze, painted in automotive duco to achieve their high-gloss finish. These are in every way super-deluxe art products for the top end of the market. If they are not as obviously futile as the deluxe

Hard core: He Jia's *Apple in Love*, 2006

collectables of Damien Hirst, it is because of the sheer energy of the environment in which they originate; but ultimately this kind of art is just as opportunistic as everything else in today's China.

There are many interesting works on the three floors above. Perhaps the most cogent are on the first floor. Here we encounter almost at once a very large digital print full of tiny figures: Dai Hua's *I love Beijing's Tiananmen*. The work is based on the visual idiom of computer games and shows us this symbolic heart of the Chinese state overrun with soldiers, animals, sex and violence.

Shen Liang's *This is a Book*, a series of 12 images, ridicules the endless Mao-era pictures of workers and soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder building the revolution. Images from the covers of children's books are reproduced as oil paintings, then defaced with graffiti: male or female genitals, or words in Chinese or Latin script. Thus an earnest soldier, leading the way forward to a glorious future, is now made to hail a taxi.

Opposite this is a sculptural group, in what appears to be porcelain, but is in fact painted bronze: Li Zhanyang's *Traffic Accident* shows a man knocked down in the street, surrounded by the driver and passers-by, some weeping, some staring, one taking the opportunity to pick a pocket and another slipping around the corner to urinate.

Through a curtain is a pair of animated sculptures in stainless steel by Xu Zhongmin, *Egg Shape Nos 1 and 2*. Each is in the form of a sphere that is opened in the centre to reveal a ring of figures, babies in one case and skeletons in the other. The visitor's approach causes the spheres to spin, and strobe lights makes skeletons and babies seem to walk.

Nearby is a set of acrylic and pencil drawings with a large installation by Yuan Shun. Made in 2006, the year of China's first mission to the moon, the installation looks as