

## WHITE RABBIT

Elizabeth Keenan

In 1999, after almost ten years living in Australia, the artist Wang Zhiyuan paid a visit to Beijing. There he heard something that stopped him in his tracks: dance-hall songs from pre-revolutionary Shanghai. When he was growing up, these 'capitalistic' tunes had been banned. Now they were everywhere -- along with Debussy and jazz, rock and hip-hop. Art too was exulting in its liberation. Painters who had once been jailed for making 'bourgeois' art were now richly paid for it. When Wang Zhiyuan left China in 1989, there were no commercial art galleries in the country. Now there were thousands, and whole districts of Beijing were being turned into artists' enclaves. So exciting were the changes that Wang Zhiyuan started thinking he'd move back there.

Meanwhile, in Sydney, Judith Neilson was also being bowled over by Chinese contemporary art. Now that her two daughters were teenagers, the former graphic designer and photographer wanted to resume her art studies and was looking for a tutor. At the Ray Hughes Gallery, she spotted a series of flat shapes, cut from sheet metal, that portrayed whimsical fusions of animals, birds and plants: a bird-angel, a winged cloud-man, a pig sprouting fruit. Whoever made these, Neilson decided, was the artist she wanted to learn from. His name, she discovered, was Wang Zhiyuan.

After returning to Sydney, Wang soon became a regular visitor to the Neilsons' home, tutoring Judith Neilson in drawing and painting--and enthusing about the wonderful art he'd seen in China. After several months of this treatment, Neilson and one of her daughters went to Beijing to see what all the fuss was about. They came back with a single painting, but when she raved to her husband, Kerr, about all the other works she'd seen, he said, 'Why didn't you buy more?' 'I said, 'We have no room in the house,' she recalls. 'But later I started thinking, 'it would be wonderful if we could have a space, to show what contemporary Chinese art really is'. So I said, 'Why don't we open a gallery?'

In August 2009, the White Rabbit Collection opened to the public. 'The name just came to me,' Neilson says. 'It was a little flash.' Admission to the three-storey former knitting factory, in the inner-Sydney suburb of Chippendale, is free. 'I did this for a quite personal reason,' Neilson explains. 'I just want

RED MEMORY - SMILE BY CHEN WENLING, CHINA, 2007, BRONZE AND VEHICLE DUCCO, 290 X 120 X 200CM



to share the art because I can.' And to share it with as many people as possible: 'I wanted a place where people who'd never set foot in a gallery could come and not feel intimidated, or that they weren't smart enough, or their opinion was wrong.'

When their ideological shackles were first loosed, in the mid-1980s, the first instinct of many Chinese artists was to look backwards. Countless works appeared mocking Mao and the revolution, collectivism and communist propaganda. By 2000, older artists had got the past out of their system, and new artists were emerging who had no past to worry about. They were exploring any subject that grabbed them, using

every genre from abstract expressionism and traditional ink painting to embroidery, flash video and conceptual art, incorporating themes and influences drawn from Western magazines, pop music, Zen, Taoism, Chinese folk art, the internet, consumerism, feminism, Marshall McLuhan and Marcel Duchamp. Their output was prolific, energetic and superbly executed. Chinese art education may have been ideologically rigid, but it was also technically rigorous. Now that artists could say anything they pleased, they had the skills to do so with flair.

The 400 works in the White Rabbit Collection (90 of which appear in the opening exhibition of August 09 ) reflect the fireworks that



result when creative freedom meets technical mastery. They range from Chen Wenling's naked, grinning boy, six metres tall and covered in red car duco, to Jin Nu's delicate little-girls' dresses, floating like a pastel cloud. Dai Hua's *I Love Beijing's Tiananmen*, a witty cavalcade of Chinese history and legend, was made entirely in a computer. A few steps away are the spare geometries of Gu Fan's *Find Light in the Rain*, hand-stitched in black wool on white cloth. There are Jiang Jian's heart-tugging full-length portraits of Chinese orphans, and an installation by Xiao Lu—featuring sperm freezer and glass jars—that mourns her inability to have a child. There are Liu Haizhou's gigantic, fluorescent portraits of dead chickens, and the tiny abstracts of his wife Du Jie, each spun from a single, intricately folded line. There is exuberant colour: Zhu Jinshi's paint is applied so thickly (with a spade and a wok spatula that form

part of one work) that it took months to dry. And there is no-colour: Lu Zhengyuan sculpted his seven *Mental Patients* in grey, he says, because that is what you get 'when you dilute every colour enough, and when you mix all the colours together'.

All the works were bought because Neilson loved them. Wang Zhiyuan, now living in Beijing, scouts for pieces he thinks will appeal to her; sometimes she buys them, sometimes not. Three-monthly visits to China have honed her eye. 'The more you see,' she says, 'the faster you can identify what is good.' Since the works are not bought for resale, Neilson is free to define 'good' independently of market fads. 'I buy work because I have a reaction to it,' she explains. 'It might be the colour or the shape or the subject, but I notice it -- it stays with me.' Names are not important: 'I want to show established artists and promote

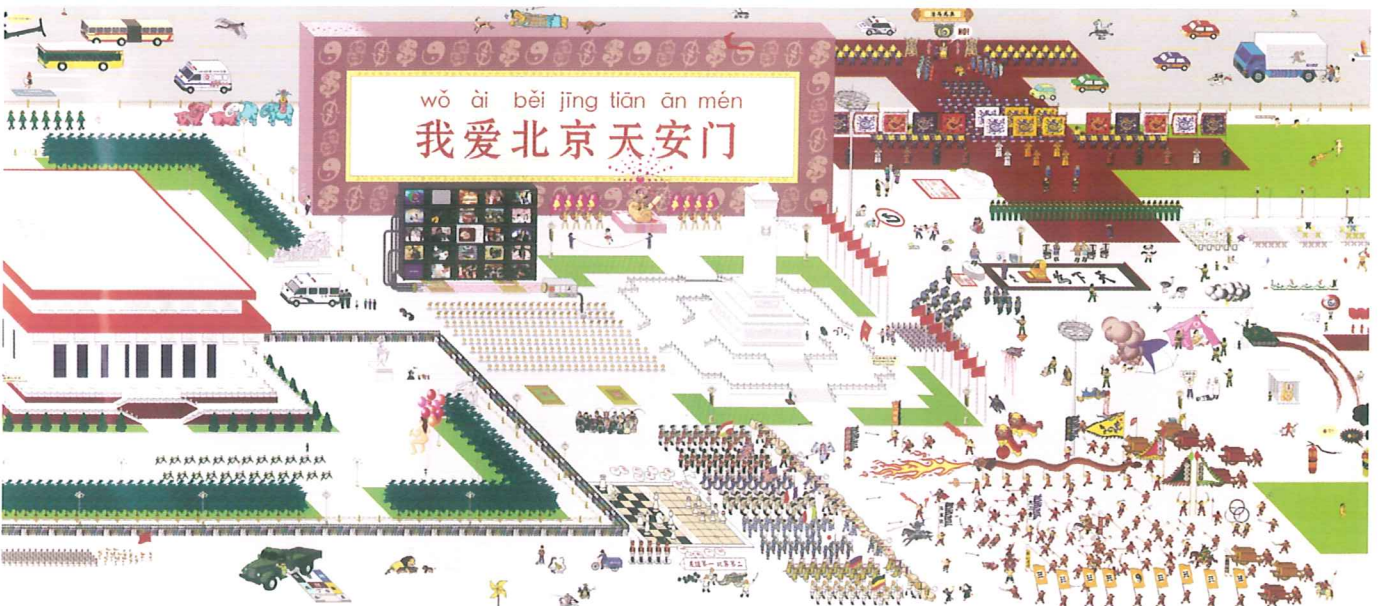
undiscovered ones.' White Rabbit has works by celebrities such as Ai Weiwei and Lin Tianmiao, and by emerging artists like Jin Nu and Dong Yuan, both aged 25. 'This is not a star show,' Neilson says. 'It is a document of Chinese contemporary art since 2000.'

Just inside the gallery's glass doors hangs Wang Zhiyuan's *Object of Desire*, a bas-relief on a giant pair of brightly coloured women's panties. On a red-curtained bed lie a fat businessman and a young woman flaunting a ring that flashes with electric light. Above the couple glows a green neon sign: 'Diamonds matter most'. The work mocks the libertinism that is the shadow side of liberty. But it also has a soundtrack: those long-banned Shanghai dance-hall songs, which seem to add '...And freedom is a diamond'.

Elizabeth Keenan is Press and Publications Director for the White Rabbit Collection, Sydney. All quotations from Judith Neilson from personal interviews, August 2009

**WORKS REFERRED TO**

- Chen Wenling (b. 1969), *Red Memory—Smile* (2007)
- Jin Nu (b. 1984), *Exuviate II—Where Have All the Children Gone?* (2005)
- Dai Hua (b. 1976), *I Love Beijing's Tiananmen* (2006)
- Gu Fan (b. 1980), *Find Light in the Rain* (2007)
- Jiang Jian (b. 1953), *The Orphan Files* (2004)
- Xiao Lu (b. 1962), *Sperm* (2006)
- Liu Haizhou (b. 1971), *Gorgeousness Override No. 11 and No. 21* (2007)
- Du Jie (b. 1968), *Green*, 2007.01.18 (2007)
- Zhu Jinshi (b. 1954), *Diary: 25.12.2006* (2006)
- Lu Zhengyuan (b. 1982), *Mental Patients* (2006); quotation from personal interview, August 2009
- Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Oil Spill* (2007)
- Lin Tianmiao (b. 1961), *Focus Series No. 1 and No. 2* (1989)
- Dong Yuan (b. 1984), *Sketch of Family Belongings* (2008)



I LOVE BEIJING'S TIANANMEN BY DAI HUA, 2006, GICLEE PRINT, 110 X 635CM