



EDUCATION KIT

IN OUR TIME: FOUR DECADES OF ART FROM CHINA AND BEYOND – THE GEOFF RABY COLLECTION



NATIONAL
ART
SCHOOL

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INTRODUCTION

To accompany *'In Our Time: Four Decades of Art from China and Beyond – the Geoff Raby Collection'*, NAS Galleries has developed a set of education resources designed for students in the senior years of high school, most specifically for students studying Visual Arts, through either the NSW Preliminary and HSC or the IB syllabuses. However, these materials may also be useful for secondary and tertiary students from different disciplines visiting the exhibition. They aim to provide interesting entry points through which teachers and students can engage with works in the exhibition, and suggestions for more in-depth case studies.

FIVE key artists and artworks have been selected for the education resource.

Cover image:
Hua Jiming, *20 Maos*, 2008, colour lithograph, edition 47/99, La Trobe University,
Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art. Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019

FIVE KEY ARTISTS

Gonkar Gyatso, Xiao Lu, Ah Xian, Guan Wei and Li Jin reveal the rich diversity of practice found in contemporary art from China. Geoff Raby's collection represents the excitement of the post-Cultural Revolution period in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This was a time when avant-garde art flourished in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chongqing, and artists dared to engage critically with the most pressing issues of their personal, social, cultural and political worlds.

Contextual information, discussion prompts and questions invite students to explore the material and conceptual practice of each artist, and to make connections with their wider study of contemporary art. These materials, which are designed with specific syllabus outcomes in mind, can be utilised during or after a gallery visit, or from observing the works online.

'MAO TO NOW': AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY ART FROM CHINA

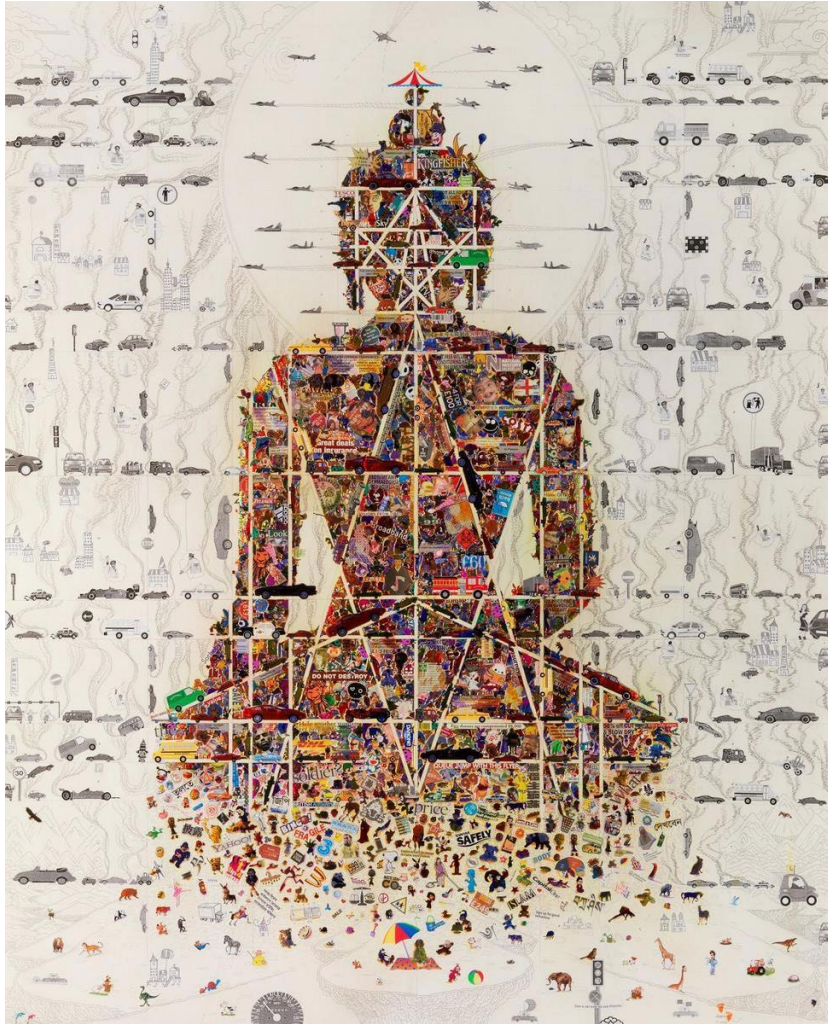
When Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949 they created the People's Republic of China, often referred to as 'New China'. From that time until after Chairman Mao's death in 1976, art was pressed into the service of creating a new nation, encouraging solidarity and revolutionary zeal among the people. The style required was similar to Soviet Socialist Realism – strong, graphic, dramatic paintings that were reproduced as propaganda posters. Older styles of Chinese ink painting were considered feudal and regressive, and artists (called arts workers) were trained to produce realistic works showing farmers, workers and soldiers – considered the revolutionary force – working shoulder to shoulder to create a socialist utopia.

In the 1980s, with policies that opened China to global markets and a new world of ideas that entered China with Western products, artists were free to explore eclectic influences, styles and techniques, and to freely choose their own subjects. A young generation of avant-garde artists married influences from America and Europe with traditions of Chinese art and visual culture to produce something entirely distinctive, and their work entered the global art arena with a bang. The first artist in the education resource grew up in Tibet, studied in Beijing, moved first to India and then to London, and now, like many of his generation, he is an entirely global figure, exhibiting internationally. Meet Gonkar Gyatso!

ARTIST CASE STUDY 1

GONKAR GYATSO

BUDDHA IN OUR TIME



Buddha in our time, 2010, screenprint with mixed media and silver and gold leaf
 La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art. Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019
 © Gonkar Gyatso. Photo: Jia De

LOOK

- Look closely at *Buddha in our time*.
- Identify at least 10 of the stickers and collaged images that make up the figure of Buddha in this work.
- What imagery dominates the background? And why?
- What aspects of 'our time' in the twenty-first century do you think Gyatso is representing in this work?

READ

"WHO IS GONKAR GYATSO?"

Gonkar Gyatso was born in 1961 in the city of Lhasa, Tibet. His father was a soldier in the People's Liberation Army, and Gyatso says that in his early life he felt some confusion about whether his identity was Chinese or Tibetan. He travelled to Beijing to study traditional Chinese ink and brush painting before deciding that he wanted to learn more about Tibetan cultural traditions. He then moved to Dharamshala, India (the home of the exiled Tibetan religious leader, the Dalai Lama), where he studied traditional Tibetan Buddhist *thangka* painting and began to engage with themes of cultural identity and the juxtaposition of tradition and modernity.

In 1984 he returned to Tibet and founded Sweet Tea House, an avant-garde artists' association and gallery in Lhasa. In 1996 he moved to London where he studied at Chelsea College of Arts. His work shifted to focus on themes such as consumerism and the excesses of capitalism. Gyatso has moved between countries often, and as a result has often found himself cast in the role of representing the Tibetan diaspora in cities such as London and New York. He established the London version of Sweet Tea House in 2003 as a space to present contemporary Tibetan art.

In 2004 he began to explore new artistic possibilities in the medium of collage, often using commercially produced stickers, cartoons, corporate logos and other elements drawn from popular culture and the everyday. In 2009 Gyatso was the first Tibetan artist to exhibit at the Venice Biennale. His work is held in numerous public and private collections and exhibited internationally.

Gonkar Gyatso now lives and works in Chengdu, China.

GONKAR GYATSO'S PRACTICE

Tibetan artist Gonkar Gyatso juxtaposes tradition and modernity. He interweaves traditional Tibetan Buddhist symbolism with pop culture references to explore issues of spirituality (or its absence), transcultural identity, globalisation, cultural hybridity, and the overabundance and waste of Western consumerism.

“Gonkar Gyatso’s series of works depicting the Buddha reflect what he calls his ‘hybrid identity’. Gyatso’s work fuses his interest in global popular culture with references to his Tibetan heritage. Here, the Buddha extends his hand in a *mudra* that represents unshakeable faith and resolve. Yet the work is comprised of hundreds of stickers, logos and cut-out words from advertisements: Homer Simpson, Winnie the Pooh and Caspar the Friendly Ghost jostle with glamorous cars and references to global brands from Tylenol to Adidas. Just as Gonkar Gyatso’s life has been one of transcultural fusion and multiple, often mutually contradictory influences, his work similarly reflects this condition of contemporaneity and the hyperlinked, constantly reproducing, frenetic global culture of the present day.”

Source: excerpted from the White Rabbit Collection <https://explore.dangrove.org/objects/205>

WHAT FEATURES OF OUR ‘FRENETIC GLOBAL CULTURE’ DOES ‘BUDDHA IN OUR TIME’ REFLECT?

(‘frenetic’ means fast and energetic in a rather wild and uncontrolled way.)

The Metropolitan Museum in New York describes a similar work by Gyatso this way:

“The Buddha himself is made up of a bright, textually dense mass of imagery that in its entirety defies comprehension, but one is seductively drawn in all the same and rewarded with a rich tapestry of familiar and appealing forms as well as a collage of whimsical texts and captions questioning the political status quo: a swarm of minutiae that demands (and deserves) the viewer’s careful attention but in the process rapidly distracts from the whole. This is the key to Gyatso’s making us experience losing sight of the Buddha amid the irrelevant but glittering fragments of mass-produced consumer media.”

Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/623094#:~:text=The%20Buddha%20himself%20is%20made,questioning%20the%20political%20status%20quo%3A>

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

WHAT IS TIBETAN THANGKA PAINTING?



A thangka painting, school of traditional arts, Thimphu

Source: Stephen Shephard, CC BY-SA 3.0 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>, via Wikimedia Commons

“In Tibet, religious paintings come in several forms, including wall paintings, thangkas (sacred pictures that can be rolled up), and miniatures for ritual purposes or for placement in household shrines.

Some thangka artists traveled all over Tibet, working for monasteries as well as for private patrons. Thangkas were commissioned for many purposes—as aids to meditation, as requests for long life, as tokens of thanksgiving for having recovered from illness, or in order to accumulate merit. Those who commissioned thangkas also supplied the materials, so their financial status determined the quality of the pigments, the amount of gold used for embellishment, and the richness of the brocade on which the painting was mounted. Thangkas could be woven, embroidered, or appliquéd.

Peaceful deities, wrathful deities, and mandalas are among the subjects depicted in thangkas.”

Source: Asian Art Museum <https://education.asianart.org/resources/tibetan-thangka-painting-sacred-pictures/>

LOOK, THINK, AND DISCUSS

Respond to these questions:

- We could identify Gyatso's practice as a form of **appropriation** of Tibetan sacred thangka paintings – what do you think is his intention in altering the original works so dramatically?
- Do you think Gyatso is critiquing or celebrating the contemporary (Western) world?
- Is Gyatso suggesting that the ephemeral products of consumerism and popular culture are obscuring religious faith and spiritual growth? Or, alternatively, is the Buddha simply absorbing all these things and remaining quietly steadfast? What is your opinion, and how can you point to aspects of the artwork to support your view?

WATCH

Watch this video in which Gonkar Gyatso explains his transformation of the Buddha from religious symbol to cultural icon:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbTuuHWfeel>

- What THREE things do you learn about his practice?

WRITE

An Extended Response (Structural Frame) question to try – make some brief notes and then develop your essay with more in-depth reading and research after your visit to the exhibition.

- How does Gonkar Gyatso construct a language of signs and symbols to convey his ideas about modernity vs tradition?

In your answer refer to *Buddha in Our Time* and at least TWO additional works by Gyatso.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

Read this article by Kurt Behrendt, "Tibetan Buddhist Art in the Twenty-First Century".

<https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2014/tibetan-buddhist-art>

The final paragraph states:

Although Gonkar addresses issues relevant to Tibet, his outlook is both culturally and linguistically complex, and truly international. With respect to the image of the Buddha, a central motif of Gonkar's work for the past twenty years, the artist questions its meaning as a symbol of enlightenment in the twenty-first century. "An artist should be free to use the form of the Buddha like a canvas," he says. "Just because it is in the shape of the Buddha does not make it the Buddha." While this kind of statement could be construed as a threat to tradition, it is philosophically grounded in the longstanding idea that the image of the Buddha is nothing more than a mental projection, without inherent reality. As Gonkar puts it, "When is the Buddha not the Buddha?"

- Why do you think Gyatso is described as 'truly international'?

FOR TEACHERS

The work of Gonkar Gyatso lends itself to numerous possible Stage 6 case studies exploring aspects of material and conceptual practice, and analysing how contemporary artists examine issues of culture, history, spirituality and politics. Students could explore contemporary artists' representation of faith traditions, or examine how artists critique over-consumption, globalisation and waste. Below is one possible way to navigate this content:

'CULTURAL SHAPESHIFTERS': A SAMPLE CASE STUDY INVESTIGATION:

NSW Visual Arts Preliminary and HSC Syllabus Focus:

Artist Practice, Structural, Cultural and Postmodern Frames, Conceptual Framework (relationships between the artist and their world)

IBDP Syllabus Focus:

Preparation for Task 1: Comparative study – Students analyse and compare different artworks by different artists. This independent critical and contextual investigation explores artworks, objects and artifacts from differing cultural contexts.

INTRODUCTORY CLASS DISCUSSION

Unpack this quote: "Gyatso plays on but subverts typecast notions of Tibetan culture while reflecting on Buddhism's popularity in the West. In combining references to traditional Tibetan life with references to a global mass-media culture that threatens to supplant and extinguish it, Gyatso creates a volatile, ambivalent mix."

Institute of Modern Art, <https://www.ima.org.au/exhibitions/gonkar-gyatso-three-realms/>

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

- interview for the White Rabbit Collection: <https://vimeo.com/303387659>
- talk from the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial at QAGOMA, Brisbane: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czCJtWJzS_8&list=PL_OpIQD58KpgKU1V2uiJTWFcuQKrD9gC1&index=15
- Francesca Tarocco, 'Vibrant Beings: Making Buddhist Art Today' <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/making-art-of-buddhism-today-1234650156/>

EXTENSION QUESTIONS:

- Following class and small group discussion of several works by Gonkar Gyatso, students undertake independent research into the artist's life and work and explore at least three works from different times in his practice.
- Students make notes comparing *Buddha in Our Time* with TWO of the following works that can be found online:
 - Nam June Paik, *TV Buddha* (1974 – or the 1976 version in the Art Gallery of New South Wales)
 - Karma Phuntsok, *Chairman Mao 2000* (2000)
 - Mariko Mori, *Esoteric Cosmos–Burning Desire*, 1996, colour photograph on glass, 10 x 20 feet
 - Charwei Tsai, *The Womb and the Diamond* (2021)
 - Tim Johnson, *White Tara* (2010)
 - Lu Yang, *Delusional Mandala* (2015)
- Students draft a response to this extended response question:
Explain how artists represent and challenge cultural traditions in contemporary artworks. Refer to specific artists and artworks in your response.

ARTIST CASE STUDY 2

XIAO LU



Xiao Lu, *Open Fire* 2004
 photographic print on aluminium
 La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art. Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019
 © Xiao Lu. Photo: Jia De

LOOK

- Look closely at *Open Fire* 2004.
- What is the visual and emotive effect of the photograph being divided into halves, with the right-hand side as the photographic negative?
- Why do you think Xiao Lu chose to print the image in black and white?
- How would the impact of the photograph be changed if it was in colour rather than black and white?
- Do you think the title is intended to be ironic?

READ

“WHO IS XIAO LU?”

Xiao Lu (b.1962, Hangzhou, China) currently lives and works between Sydney and Beijing. She is a graduate of the Subsidiary School of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing and Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (China Academy of Art), Hangzhou. Best known for raising a gun and shooting at her work in the National Art Museum of China in 1989, thus precipitating the closing down of the show by the government, and her brief arrest, Xiao is considered one of China's most influential and provocative artists. Though Xiao operates across a range of media, her work is grounded in performance art. Xiao sees performance art as a way of releasing internal conflict and negative emotions such as anger and hatred. As such, her artworks are often very personal explorations of concerns regarding gender power dynamics, communication, and the precariousness of life in the face of both social and natural forces.

Xiao Lu's work has been included in important international exhibitions, including Tate, London; Guggenheim Museum, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and 4A Center of Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney. Her work has been collected by public and private institutions, including the Tate, London; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Taikang Insurance Group Art Collection, Beijing; and White Rabbit Collection, Sydney.

Source: Vermilion Art <https://vermilionart.com.au/artist/xiao-lu/>

XIAO LU'S PRACTICE

Since graduating from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou, in 1988, Xiao Lu's work has focused on performance art. In February of 1989 she shocked fellow artists and audiences when she fired two shots from a handgun into her installation at an important exhibition of contemporary art in Beijing's National Art Museum. Later that same year, after the tragic events at Tiananmen Square, Xiao Lu came to live in Australia, before returning to China in 1997. In 2021 she returned to live in Sydney once again.

Xiao Lu's significant body of performance art (called *xingwei yishu*, or 'behaviour art' in Chinese), has often used the material properties of ink, water, ice and other liquids such as alcohol, tea, Chinese medicine or seawater in connection with her body. Significant examples include *One* (2015), a ceremonial event in which she pours black ink and water over her head; *Ren (Human)* (2016) which features black ink contained in a Perspex vessel held up by the artist to form the Chinese character 'ren' meaning 'human'; *Suspension* (2017) in which frozen blocks of ink and ice are suspended over the artist's head as she utters non-verbal sounds; and *Tides* (2019) performed in Australia. The artist's website explains this performance: 'On a beach in Sydney, facing the incoming tide, Xiao Lu plants 30 bamboo poles, one by one, into the sand at first light. The performance landscape created by Xiao Lu's action and the waves refers to the past and the future, resistance and letting go, the individual and history.' Xiao Lu maintains that her performance process is intuitive, emotive and often spontaneous, taking the form of rituals or ceremonies.

Text: Luise Guest

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT



Xiao Lu, *Dialogue*, chromogenic print, printed 2006, 81 x 119.7 cm. ©2024 Xiao Lu. Documentation of performance shot by Wen Pulin.

WHY DID XIAO LU FIRE A GUN IN THE NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF CHINA IN 1989?

In 1989 artists in China were experimenting freely with new ways of making art. The death of leader Mao Zedong in 1976 and China's gradual opening to global markets from the 1980s allowed artists to explore influences from contemporary art in the West, including installation, new media and performance art. In February 1989, a significant exhibition was held at the National Art Museum in Beijing, showing the work of artists from all over China. The curators had agreed to the demands of the authorities to ban the possibly unpredictable results of performance art; however, a number of artists ignored this prohibition. One of them was a young graduate from the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, Xiao Lu. Her work is explained in this extract from a longer article:

"[Xiao Lu] was catapulted to instant notoriety when she suddenly fired two shots from a handgun at her own installation at the opening of the important 1989 "China/Avant-garde" exhibition at the National Art Museum in Beijing. Xiao's dramatic action resulted in the (at first temporary, then permanent) closure of the exhibition and the subsequent brief detention

of the artist. Xiao Lu's installation comprised two public telephone boxes, one containing the image of a man and the other a woman. Between them, in front of a mirror, a red dial telephone sits on a white plinth, its receiver hanging off the hook. The work is titled, ironically, *Dialogue*. Xiao intended it to represent the impossibility of communication between young men and women like herself who had grown up in a revolutionary world in which romance, love and sexual expression were taboo and gender distinctions were erased. Women were expected to do the work of men, "holding up half the sky" – and, despite Mao Zedong's policies of gender equality, to manage the household as well. The work was deeply personal, reflecting on Xiao's experience of abuse by an older man. She felt voiceless in the face of this violation of trust. *Dialogue* represented a masculine/feminine binary characterised by suspicion and mutual incomprehension."

Luise Guest, from 'Becoming one: Xiao Lu's dialogues of ink and water' source: NGV Magazine issue 37.

Despite Xiao Lu's insistence that the work and the shooting were a response to her personal trauma rather than a broader political statement, the work has often been described as 'the first gunshots of Tiananmen'*. Ironically, given Xiao Lu's motives in creating the installation and then firing a gun at it, many critics attributed her actions jointly to Xiao Lu and a male fellow artist. It was not until much later that Xiao felt able to reclaim her own agency in the creation of the work and the shooting performance. The work shown in *In Our Time*, created in 2004 as a re-enactment of the shooting, is part of that reclamation of sole authorship.

**For more on the incident at Tiananmen Square in June 1989 see this BBC coverage: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48445934>*

LOOK, THINK, AND DISCUSS

Respond to these questions:

- How do you think Xiao Lu's dramatic action in firing a pistol into her sculptural installation in 1989 changed the meaning and impact of her 3D work?
- Can the work and the shooting action be interpreted as a feminist statement?

WATCH

Watch this video, in which Xiao Lu speaks to White Rabbit Gallery about her work, 'Dialogue' and the shooting incident in 1989: <https://vimeo.com/233239072>

- What THREE things do you learn about Xiao Lu's practice?

WRITE

- An Extended Response (Subjective Frame) question to try – make some brief notes and then develop your essay with more in-depth reading and research after your visit to the exhibition.
- 'The making of art is an intuitive act rather than a planned process.'
- Evaluate this statement with reference to ONE or MORE artists and their artworks.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

This article by Alex Colville in *The China Project* explains the context and the fallout of Xiao Lu's 1989 action very clearly:

<https://thechinaproject.com/2021/03/16/an-artist-and-her-gun-in-1989-xiao-lus-accidental-revolt/>

FOR TEACHERS

The work of Xiao Lu lends itself to numerous possible Stage 6 Case studies exploring aspects of material and conceptual practice, and analysing how contemporary artists examine issues of gender, sexual politics, power relationships, and feminism.

Below is one possible way to navigate this content:

'INK AND BULLETS': A SAMPLE CASE STUDY INVESTIGATION:

NSW Visual Arts Preliminary and HSC Syllabus Focus:

Artist Practice, Subjective, Structural and Cultural Frames, Conceptual Framework (relationships between the artist and their world)

IBDP Syllabus Focus:

Preparation for Task 1: Comparative study – Students analyse and compare different artworks by different artists. This independent critical and contextual investigation explores artworks, objects and artifacts from differing cultural contexts.

INTRODUCTORY CLASS DISCUSSION

Unpack this quote:

"I created the work out of personal feelings, but this work became interpreted with political meanings...I don't reject this. I've come to understand that with this work, making it for myself is one thing, but how it is interpreted is also a big part of it."

(Xiao Lu, in an article by Philip Wen, '25 years on, artist remembers 'first gunshots of Tiananmen' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 May 2014)

1. In a class or small group discussion, compare and contrast Xiao Lu's *Open Fire* (2004) with the work by Rose Wong, *Cut Into* (2016). Consider how both works might be interpreted through a feminist lens.



Rose Wong, *Cut into* 2016
fibreglass, wood, resin
La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection
of Chinese Art. Donated by Dr Geoff Raby
AO through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program, 2019
© Rose Wong. Photo: Jia De

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

- Tate Modern explanation of Xiao Lu's 'Dialogue' installation and the incident at China/Avant-garde: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/xiao-dialogue-t15540>
- MOMA interview with the artist <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/290/3759>
- 4A Center for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney <https://4a.com.au/creatives/xiao-lu>
- An interview with Monica Merlin for Tate Research <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/research-centres/tate-research-centre-asia/women-artists-contemporary-china/xiao-lu>

EXTENSION QUESTIONS:

- Following class and/or small group discussion of several works by Xiao Lu, students undertake independent research into the artist's life and work and analyse at least three works from different times in her practice, using the Subjective, Structural and Cultural Frames.
- Students compare Xiao Lu's *Dialogue* installation and performance with works by Marina Abramovic, Shirin Neshat, Tracey Emin and Louise Bourgeois.

OR

Students trace the development of performance art in the late twentieth century and consider significant practitioners such as Joseph Beuys, Zhang Huan, Marina Abramovic and Yoko Ono in comparison with Xiao Lu. Students select TWO examples of performance to analyse, making connections with the work of Xiao Lu through the agencies of the Conceptual Framework A useful reference from The Art Story: <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/performance-art/>

- Students draft a response to this extended response question:
Evaluate the role of risk-taking and experimentation in artists' practice. In your answer, refer to specific artists and artworks you have studied.

ARTIST CASE STUDY 3

AH XIAN



Ah Xian, *Concrete forest: chrysanthemum*, 2008–09
 Concrete with oil and wax, artist's proof
 La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art. Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019
 © Ah Xian. Photo: Jia De

LOOK

- Look closely at *Concrete forest: chrysanthemum*.
- What words best describe the textured surface of the figure?
- How do you imagine the texture has been created? What might Ah Xian have done?
- What is the effect of the closed eyes? (There are practical reasons for this, of course, when a cast is made from a live model. But are the closed eyes also a visual code or symbol?)
- In China, the chrysanthemum flower symbolises late summer and early autumn, and the ninth lunar month. It also signifies longevity (long life) in China. Why do you think Ah Xian chose this plant as a motif?
- Why do you think Ah Xian chose concrete rather than clay, porcelain or bronze for this portrait bust? What possible meanings are associated with this material?

READ

“WHO IS AH XIAN?”

Born in 1960 in Beijing, China, Ah Xian lives and works in Sydney and also has a studio in China's famous porcelain city, Jingdezhen.

His early practice in China was as a painter, and he now works in both 2D and 3D forms. Ah Xian was associated with the 'Stars' group of avant-garde artists in Beijing, studying informally with one of the few female artists in the group, figurative painter Li Shuang. In his sculptural practice he works with a diverse range of materials including concrete, resin-fibreglass, *cloisonné* enamel, jade and ox-bone inlay, bronze, porcelain and latex. He has focused on representing the human form, often alluding to Chinese history and visual culture.

From around 2007, Ah Xian moved away from porcelain and began to experiment with the material properties of cast concrete, resulting in sculptures that have a much rougher, raw appearance, like the example in this exhibition. The resulting suite of thirty-six portrait busts, *Concrete forest*, won the 2009 Clemenger Contemporary Art Award. Their surfaces are embossed with the leaves of plant species such as maple, lotus, chrysanthemum, and weeping willow.

Ah Xian's work has been exhibited internationally in solo and group exhibitions and is held in numerous private and public collections.

READ THIS EXCERPT:

"Ah Xian is at once an absolutely contemporary artist, yet also grounded in Chinese traditional art forms; highly cosmopolitan and global in his outlook, yet profoundly influenced by his own and China's histories. Before arriving in Australia, firstly in 1989 as a visiting scholar at the Tasmanian School of Art (with Guan Wei) and settling in Sydney in 1990, Ah Xian was a member of Beijing's avant-garde artistic circles. He became a self-taught painter during a period poetically described by writer Linda Jaivin as 'that time when everything seemed hopeful'.

Since the 1990s and his transition from painting to sculpture, the artist (who was born Liu Ji Xian but took the name 'Ah Xian' in the early 1980s) has been internationally known for figurative sculptures cast from human bodies. The first series, *China China*, consisted of forty hand-painted porcelain body casts. The best-known of these are a set of busts, cast by Ah Xian from the bodies of family and friends before being made and fired in the kilns at Jingdezhen* and hand-painted by local artisans. Often painted with the cobalt blue glaze for which Jingdezhen (the 'city of blue and white') is so famous, the figures appear melancholy, their closed eyes suggesting they are lost in a private reverie. There is a faint echo of the death masks that once memorialised people in a pre-photographic age. Decorative patterns across their heads and torsos partially cover their mouths, suggesting that they cannot, or will not, speak. Asked about possible interpretations of their closed eyes – apart from the obvious one that it is required by the casting process – Ah Xian was reticent; he prefers audiences to make up their own minds."

**Jingdezhen is the centre of China's historical (and contemporary) porcelain production, famous for its blue and white glazed porcelain.*

Text by Luise Guest

Source: *An Art Teacher in China* <https://anartteacherinchina.blogspot.com/2022/04/three-realms-of-ah-xian.html?m=1>

AH XIAN'S PRACTICE

"From his early painterly nudes to the exquisite busts and full-body sculptures in porcelain, cloisonné, lacquer and bronze for which he has become well known, Ah Xian has focused his attentions on depicting the human form. Produced between 1998 and 2004, his iconic *China, China* series consists of luminous busts of unnamed models, each with a unique poise and countenance, overpainted with fine landscapes and other motifs derived from a range of sources, from the venerated to the vernacular.

These works were created as the artist acquired porcelain techniques over the course of three trips to the celebrated kilns of Jingdezhen in the Chinese hinterland province of Jiangxi, and experiments in the ceramics workshop of Sydney College of the Arts, where he spent a year as artist-in-residence. His casts were created by wrapping plaster-soaked bandages around the heads and shoulders of his models, who were initially friends and family members. Earlier works in the series were produced with a slip-cast method, where liquid porcelain is poured into a mould, which evolved through Ah Xian's studies in Jingdezhen into press-moulding with porcelain clay. The busts were polished to achieve their characteristic lustre, and the artist would set to work applying his flowing designs, typically in the cobalt blue of classic Jingdezhen ware, before firing them.

Text by Reuben Keehan

Source: MCA Australia <https://www.mca.com.au/collection/artists/ah-xian/>

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

WHY THE FORM OF THE PORTRAIT BUST?

"The form of the bust itself results from both practical and artistic considerations. Early experiments had shown Ah Xian that porcelain was too fragile for full body casts; he would find the cloisonné technique of finely enamelled copper more appropriate to that task. But the bust had made a striking appearance in an earlier conceptual experiment, which had resulted in the work *Disappearance of Mona Lisa* (1996). This set of photocopies of Leonardo da Vinci's enigmatic painting derives from an installation in which three fax machines copied three portraits – the *Mona Lisa*, the Buddha and a photograph of the artist himself – over and over. With each successive reproduction the image broke down, ultimately to the point of illegibility. The selection of images, situating the artist between Asian and European archetypes, evoked a process of cultural negotiation, both at a personal level and on the plane of artistic practice, as Ah Xian worked to reconcile Chinese and western influences on his practice as a recent migrant to Australia. The bust is in this sense an emblematically transcontinental form, present as much in European portraiture as it was in socialist realism, the official artistic style of the China of the artist's youth."

Text by Reuben Keehan

Source: MCA Australia (hyperlink here) <https://www.mca.com.au/collection/artists/ah-xian/>

"For me, one of the most interesting aspects of the China China series, and of later busts made from other sculptural materials including concrete, resin-fibreglass, cinnabar, cloisonné, jade, bronze, and latex, is the very intentional cultural hybridity of Ah Xian's visual language. The portrait bust is a Western form, deriving from classical Greece and Rome, while the motifs that proliferate across these figures are purely Chinese, referencing traditions of shan shui landscape painting, bird and flower painting, and porcelain painting. Ah Xian points out in conversation, though, that notions of east and west are not so easily defined by simple binaries: we must not forget the carved figurative sculptural forms of Buddha, and of various deities and Immortals, found in temples across China. Ah Xian's first series of busts represented a ten-year period in which he oscillated between Australia and China, seeking a way to bring aspects of his Chinese background into his work as a contemporary conceptual artist. The series has been described by QAGOMA curator Reuben Keehan as 'an equilibrium finally struck between Chinese and European modes of making.'"

Text by Luise Guest

Source: An Art Teacher in China (hyperlink here) <https://anartteacherinchina.blogspot.com/2022/04/three-realms-of-ah-xian.html?m=1>

LOOK, THINK, AND DISCUSS



Ah Xian, *Stop* from the series 'Sense of security', 1985, oil on canvas
La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art. Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019
© Ah Xian. Photo: Jia De

Stop is an early work by Ah Xian. The painting, which includes references to road markings and a stop sign, obscures the distinction between the urban environment and the domestic interior. With harsh light streaming in from the windows and doorway, Ah Xian emphasises the geometry of the space.

At the same time, the furniture is slightly distorted, taking on a figurative presence within the scene. In its blurring of the boundary between public and private, this painting speaks to concerns about surveillance and privacy.

Source: Bendigo Art Gallery

RESPOND TO THESE QUESTIONS:

- What is the impact of the distorted perspective and flattened, tilted pictorial space in *Stop*?
- What features of the work convey a sense of disquiet or discomfort?
- The stop sign and road markings are a visual code in this work – what do you think they signify?

WATCH

Watch this video in which Ah Xian discusses his conceptual and material practice: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TP2Jm5Af0Y>

- What THREE things do you learn about Ah Xian's practice?

(Note that he explains the technique used for the concrete busts at around the 7-minute mark.)

WRITE

An Extended Response (Cultural Frame) question to try – make some brief notes and then develop your essay with more in-depth reading and research after your visit to the exhibition.

- Referring to Ah Xian and ONE additional artist, explain how artists reflect and document their cultural context.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

Read this extract from an article about Ah Xian:

Concrete forest (2009) is a series where [Ah] Xian's work takes a turn in terms of materiality, working with the much rougher, heavier less traditional material of concrete. In these works, Xian places leaves inside the mould before pouring in the concrete. As seen in Figure 7 (Xian 2008-09), the result is a contrast between the delicate imprints left from the leaves against the harsh surface of the concrete. Whilst Xian, does not usually intend for his works to be political, one such series can be considered a slight exception, commenting on the destruction of nature through urbanisation. Xian (2017, 7:15-8:02) states 'concrete is the material we use for building up our cities...a kind of symbolic way to say we ruined nature, the green becomes grey'. Again, in these works the material is important to the reading, as concrete is one of the most common and unsustainable materials found in our urban landscapes. The busts therefore act as a statement on the urban sprawl, through the material, by contrasting the fragility of the leaves against the permanence of the concrete.

Overall, the most important factor of Ah Xian's work is the material, which is carefully considered and chosen for its significance to Chinese culture and history in its own way. Xian's peaceful depictions of the human figure utilise traditional Chinese materials, such as porcelain, cloisonné, carved lacquer, ox bone inlay and bronze, combined with patterns, designs, and found objects, in a contemporary way. Working with traditional craftsman [sic] in China, Xian brings new life into industries which are still focused on making traditional objects rather than artistic pieces. Blending both the traditions of Chinese culture and with the motifs of the western portrait bust, Xian's sculptures draw on themes of identity, culture, the environment, and beauty of the human form.

Text by Hannah Hall. See the entire article at <https://reshapingworlds.com.au/Hannah-Hall-1>

FOR TEACHERS

The work of Ah Xian lends itself to numerous possible Stage 6 Case studies exploring aspects of material and conceptual practice, and analysing how contemporary artists examine issues of cultural hybridity, the reinvention of tradition and aspects of identity. Students could explore contemporary artists' representation of issues of materiality and meaning, distinctions between art and craft, migration and diaspora, and connections between tradition and contemporaneity.

Below is one possible way to navigate this content:

'MATERIALITY AND MEANING': A SAMPLE CASE STUDY INVESTIGATION:

NSW Visual Arts Preliminary and HSC Syllabus Focus:

Artist Practice, Structural and Cultural Frames, Conceptual Framework (relationships between the artist and their world)

IBDP Syllabus Focus:

Preparation for Task 1: Comparative study – Students analyse and compare different artworks by different artists. This independent critical and contextual investigation explores artworks, objects and artifacts from differing cultural contexts.

INTRODUCTORY CLASS DISCUSSION

Unpack this quote: "Ah Xian's practice maintains an ongoing and unrestricted exploration of the human form as a cultural, historical and reflective entity."

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

- An early series of paintings in the collection of the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) <https://blog.qagoma.qld.gov.au/ah-xian-heavy-wounds/>
- The full figure cast in the collection of QAGOMA <https://blog.qagoma.qld.gov.au/ah-xian-the-body-is-a-central-and-ongoing-theme/>
- Roni Feinstein, 'Ah Xian, A Journey to China', *Art in America*, 2002 <https://www.ronifeinstein.com/book/ah-xian-a-journey-to-china/>
- Michael Young, Ah Xian, *Artist Profile*, 2016 <https://artistprofile.com.au/ah-xian/>
- A useful Case Study <https://ahxiancasestudy.weebly.com/>

EXTENSION QUESTIONS:

- Following class and small group discussion of several works by Ah Xian, students undertake independent research into the artist's life and work and explore at least three works from different times in his practice, using the Structural and Cultural Frames.
- Students compare *Concrete forest: Chrysanthemum* with Pablo Picasso, *Head of a Woman* (1909), Brancusi, *Sleeping Muse* (1910) and Marc Quinn, *Self* (1991–Present) a bust made from ten pints of the artist's frozen blood. List similarities and differences of style, imagery and atmosphere. Consider how each artist represents aspects of culture and history.

AND/OR

Investigate the Roman tradition of the portrait bust and its revival during the Renaissance. Select 2–3 examples to compare and contrast with *Concrete forest: chrysanthemum*.

- Students draft a response to this extended response question:
Analyse the significant role played by materials and technologies in the evolution of an artist's practice. Refer to specific works in your response.

ARTIST CASE STUDY 4

GUAN WEI



Guan Wei, *Water view no. 14 and 15*, 2011, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art. Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019

© Guan Wei. Photo: Jia De
Courtesy the artist, ARC ONE Gallery, Martin Browne Contemporary.

LOOK

Look closely at *Water View No. 14* and *Water View No. 15*.

- Identify images in each painting that locate this 'water view' in Australia, and others that refer to Guan Wei's Chinese cultural background. How does the artist visually connect the two?
- What elements in the two paintings convey an atmosphere of hedonism* or happiness? Are there suggestions of foreboding or danger? What makes you think so?
- What aspects of Australian culture and lifestyle are highlighted in these works?

**hedonism: the pursuit of pleasure; sensual self-indulgence.*

READ

"WHO IS GUAN WEI?"

Guan Wei was born in 1957, in Beijing, China. In 1989, three years after graduating from the Department of Fine Arts at Beijing Capital University, he came to Australia to take up an artist-in-residence at the Tasmanian School of Art. He was invited to undertake two further residencies: one at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (1992), the other at the Canberra School of Art, Australian National University (1993). Since then he obtained many grants, including Australia Council's grant for Greene St New York studio in 2003, Cite International des Arts Paris in 2007 & Fellowship in 2008-2009. In 2008, he set up a studio in Beijing. Now he lives and works in both Beijing and Sydney.

Source: ARC One Gallery <https://arcone.com.au/guan-wei-artist-profile>

Guan Wei has developed an international reputation as a contemporary artist whose work crosses cultural and political boundaries, specifically between Australia and Asia. His practice is underpinned by his Chinese history and his experience of Australian culture since migrating in 1989. Guan's paintings, sculptures and ceramics are also underpinned by his deep knowledge of both Chinese and Western art history and his awareness of historical and contemporary social and political issues. Guan Wei explores complex issues with humour and a deep sense of compassion, with key themes including migration, identity, colonialism and empire, cultural differences, and First Nations' histories.

GUAN WEI'S PRACTICE

"Over his more than 40-year art practice Guan Wei has developed a distinctive style that combines Australian and Chinese influences. Working across painting, sculpture and installation, he uses a symbolic visual language to map the outlines of an imaginary world, merging eras and empires, and Eastern and Western philosophies. Within this invented realm, contemporary issues, such as climate change, medical research and the global refugee crisis, are placed on the same pictorial plane as ancient cartographic symbols, astrological cyphers and mythical creatures. The artist invites us to construct narratives from these incongruent elements and, in doing so, discover new connections and meanings."

Source: MCA Australia (hyperlink here) <https://www.mca.com.au/exhibitions/guan-wei-mca-collection/>

"The beauty of the natural environment in Australia, especially the blue ocean and the colourful plants and animals, was a source of great joy for Guan Wei and became an essential part of the motifs in his work. Guan Wei's concern for the environment is apparent. There is longing for the beauty and

the exotic of the pristine natural world. The freedom he found in Australia to express himself as an artist, with various social and political viewpoints, is also embedded in his practice. Aspects of the real world, for example, world events and political commentary, are incorporated into narratives that can also include imaginary elements. He has a playful sense of humour and loves to tell stories that explore his belief in the interconnectedness of people and the environment. His strong graphic sensibility facilitates storytelling. His practice makes use of Chinese visual elements, creating works that interweave imagery from his Chinese heritage with his life experience in Australia. The work is instantly recognisable for its distinctive style and highly personal visual vocabulary; swirling waves and floating Chinese clouds, large expanses of colour (mostly blue) and strange beasts and fleshy pink, Buddha-like figures inhabit a timeless world where creating artworks is a continuous journey, reflecting self and knowledge acquisition. The artist challenges our cultural bearings as his works offer a different perspective on history and Australian politics, especially with issues related to immigration, the War on Terror and the colonial occupation of Australia. He has a rare gift to highlight problems. His playfulness (and sometimes neutrality) can diffuse tensions and bring a more positive view to global situations so his audience may engage fully and not turn away."

Source: 'Guan Wei: A Case Study' produced by Carol Carter for Museum of Art and Culture Lake Macquarie (MACAM) available as a PDF from <https://mac.lakemac.com.au/Learn>

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Guan Wei came of age during the chaos and trauma of China's Cultural Revolution.* After the turbulent events of the late 1980s, and the crushing of the student movement at Tiananmen Square** in June 1989 there was an exodus of contemporary Chinese artists who left China for cities such as New York and Paris. Others – including Ah Xian, Wang Zhiyuan, Shen Shaomin, Guo Jian, Shen Jiawei and Xiao Lu – came to Australia. They are sometimes described as the 'post-1989 generation'. Some were fleeing political oppression, while others had taken advantage of newly available opportunities for travel overseas and foreign residencies. Guan Wei first came to Australia in 1989 on a foreign exchange to Hobart, Tasmania, in early 1989. He returned to China, but then came back to Australia in 1990, where he continued to develop the unique painterly idiom that he had been creating in Beijing.

*Cultural Revolution: in 1966 Chinese leader Mao Zedong, fearing that his power was waning, called on young people to restore the purity of socialism by 'smashing the four olds' (old habits, old ideas, old customs and old culture). What ensued was a 10-year period of unimaginable chaos and violence that ended with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976.

**For more on the incident at Tiananmen Square in June 1989 see this BBC coverage: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48445934>

LOOK, THINK, AND DISCUSS



Guan Wei, *Day after tomorrow no. 5*, 2007
synthetic polymer paint on canvas

La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art. Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019

© Guan Wei. Photo: Jia De, courtesy the artist, ARC ONE Gallery and Martin Browne Contemporary.

"While Guan Wei's iconography has recognisable antecedents in European maps and Chinese landscapes, he presents them in the context of his own personal visual idiom. His distinctive style unites the disparate elements that blend so harmoniously that we do not immediately perceive anomalies. The map-like background, his basic foundation, provides a conducive platform for his iconographic amalgamation. The perspective shifts and disproportionate elements are at home in this format. Guan Wei deftly accomplishes dimension without depth by subtly modeling the figures and formations such that he subverts the cartographic flatness. Furthermore, he delicately varies the tonality of the blue in the sea from dark at the bottom to a slightly lighter hue at the top, giving the vague suggestion of recession and perspective."

Text by Tally Beck, 'Navigating Guan Wei', Redgate Gallery https://www.redgategallery.com/Artists/Guan_Wei-painting/Guan_Wei-essay/index.html

RESPOND TO THESE QUESTIONS:

- Why do you think Guan Wei has chosen to present *Day after tomorrow no.5* in a format that recalls Chinese scrolls?
- How would it change the meaning of the work if it was instead presented as a single painting in the more usual Western rectangular format?
- How does Guan Wei juxtapose flatness with suggestions of depth and perspective in this work?
- What is the impact of the featureless people, who have mouths but no eyes or noses? Can you 'decode' the symbolism?
- Guan Wei describes himself as a storyteller – what story or stories does this painting convey to the audience?
- What do you think is the significance of the title?

WATCH

Watch this video in which Guan Wei discusses his conceptual and material practice

<https://www.mca.com.au/exhibitions/guan-wei-mca-collection/>

- What THREE things do you learn about Guan Wei's practice?

WRITE

An Extended Response (Structural Frame) question to try – make some brief notes and then develop your essay with more in-depth reading and research after your visit to the exhibition.

- How does Guan Wei use imagery, signs and symbols to convey his ideas about his transcultural identity?
- In your answer refer to *Day after tomorrow* and at least TWO additional works by Guan Wei.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

Read this extract from an article about Guan Wei:

"From his early years in Beijing's post-Cultural Revolution contemporary art scene, to his arrival in Hobart in 1989 and emergence as the most prominent of the so-called 'post-Tiananmen' generation of Chinese artists in Australia, Guan Wei developed an art practice that merges two worlds. His visual language as painter, ceramicist and sculptor juxtaposes Chinese traditional motifs with Australian colonial imagery, and with continuing references to the indigenous history that intrigued him from his earliest days in Tasmania. The result is a surreal parallel universe, a place of imagined, alternative histories. Guan Wei once said that he likes to work in 'the space between imagination and reality': he is a storyteller, a myth-maker – an artist with a strong sense of social justice and moral conviction. His blend of real and imaginary histories creates a world in which his characteristically faceless, pale figures interact with silhouettes of animals and people that resemble papercuts. His paintings are populated by Indigenous Australian, European and Chinese characters who wander in exotic landscapes or sail across painted oceans. Described poetically by Alex Burchmore as 'adrift in dense spaces of iconographic collision', Guan Wei's eclectic imagery suggests stories of empire, invasion, exploration, and migration – and often evokes a contemporary political paranoia over 'sovereign borders'. Together with his distinctive iconography of Chinese clouds, swirling waves, map coordinates, navigational charts, and astrological diagrams they create a floating world of ambiguous transnational narratives."

Text by Luise Guest.

See the whole article at <https://vermillionart.com.au/beyond-the-ordinary/>

- In what way do you think Guan Wei is 'a storyteller, a mythmaker'?

FOR TEACHERS

The work of Guan Wei lends itself to numerous possible Stage 6 case studies exploring aspects of material and conceptual practice, and analysing how contemporary artists examine issues of culture, history, cultural hybridity, diaspora, migration, colonialism and empire, and politics. Students could explore contemporary artists' representation of issues of migration and colonial history, transcultural or diasporic identities, or representations of Australia. Below is one possible way to navigate this content:

'JUGGLING TWO WORLDS': A SAMPLE CASE STUDY INVESTIGATION:

NSW Visual Arts Preliminary and HSC Syllabus Focus:

Artist Practice, Structural and Cultural Frames, Conceptual Framework (relationships between the artist and their world)

IBDP Syllabus Focus:

Preparation for Task 1: Comparative study – Students analyse and compare different artworks by different artists. This independent critical and contextual investigation explores artworks, objects and artifacts from differing cultural contexts.

INTRODUCTORY CLASS DISCUSSION

Unpack this quote:

"On the first viewing, Guan Wei's work can be mildly disconcerting. His crisp imagery leads the observer to anticipate a direct message, a cohesive narrative, a decipherable, if highly symbolic, coded language. The uneasiness sets in when the simple explanation does not come. His mélange of familiar signs resists concatenation* despite his intricately balanced composition. It is then that the viewer may empathize with Guan Wei's cartoon-like human figures, adrift and isolated in a tumultuous sea or panicked and huddled in unfamiliar territory."

**'concatenation' refers to the action of linking things together in a series*

Text by Tally Beck, 'Navigating Guan Wei', Redgate Gallery https://www.redgategallery.com/Artists/Guan_Wei-painting/Guan_Wei-essay/index.html

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

- Guan Wei, 'Plastic Surgery', Art Gallery of New South Wales <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/prizes/archibald/2016/29727/>

- Guan Wei, 'Silent Open Fire', Correspondences <https://www.correspondences.work/silent-dialogue-guan-wei>
- Caitlan Coman-Sargent, *Navigating Liminal Space: An Interview with Guan Wei*, Vermilion Art <https://vermilionart.com.au/navigating-liminal-space-guan-wei/>
- Australia and Me, Guan Wei, 2010 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pNqlqdf7Wg>
- Guan Wei: A Case Study' produced by Carol Carter for Museum of Art and Culture Lake Macquarie available as a PDF from <https://mac.lakemac.com.au/Learn>
- Luise Guest, *Floating Worlds: A Conversation with Guan Wei*, The Art Life <http://theartlife.com.au/2013/floating-worlds-a-conversation-with-guan-wei/>

EXTENSION QUESTIONS:

- Following class and small group discussion of several works by Guan Wei, students undertake independent research into the artist's life and work and explore at least three works from different times in his practice, using the Structural and Cultural Frames.
- Students compare *Day after tomorrow* with a painting by Zhang Xiaogang such as *Big family no. 4* in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. List similarities and differences of style, imagery and atmosphere. Consider how each artist represents aspects of culture and history.

AND/OR

Students compare *Water view no. 14 and 15* with TWO works relating to Australian beach culture such as Charles Meere, *Australian beach pattern* (1940) or Brett Whiteley, *Balmoral* (1975–1978). For more examples see this article: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2015/dec/31/sun-surf-and-skin-australian-depictions-of-the-beach-in-pictures>

- Students draft a response to this extended response question:

Analyse how artists communicate meaning through the use of signs, symbols and visual codes. Refer to specific artists and artworks in your response.

ARTIST CASE STUDY 5

LI JIN



Li Jin, *Erroneous*, 2000 i
ink and colour on xuan paper
La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art.
Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019
© Li Jin. Photo: Jia De

LOOK

- Look closely at *Erroneous* (2000).
- Describe the woman in the painting – what kind of quiet moment are we witnessing?
- What aspects of the work allude to Chinese art traditions?
- What aspects of the work reveal it is a response to the contemporary world?
- What mood or atmosphere does the work evoke? How has the artist achieved that effect?
- What is the impact of Li Jin's use of empty space surrounding the figure, and the minimal detail of her environment?
- How can you interpret the title? Who, or what, is 'erroneous' (mistaken or wrong) in the view of the artist?

READ

"WHO IS LI JIN?"

Li Jin (b.1958, Tianjin, China) is a contemporary ink painter best known for his often-humorous depictions of everyday life. His work is underpinned by the tradition of Chinese literati ink painting* but his work is very contemporary – he celebrates the sensual pleasures of food and drink, as well as frank images of sexual relationships.

Li Jin has been a leading figure in contemporary Chinese ink art since the 1980s, following his graduation from the Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts. He was presented with the Annual Ink Artist Award at the 2013 Award of Art China and was the only ink artist selected by the authoritative publication L'OFFICIEL Art in 2019. In 2015, his major survey show 'The Sensory Life of the Mass: 30 Year of Li Jin' was exhibited at the Long Museum in Shanghai. His works are in the collections of major institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, National Art Museum of China, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Seattle Art Museum, and Hong Kong Museum of Art, and his work has recently been collected by the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

*'literati ink painting' refers to the works of scholar-painters in imperial China – erudite connoisseurs and amateurs who painted as a way of self-cultivation and escape from their work in the emperor's court. They used the brush and ink to convey their inner thoughts in calligraphy and painting rather than aiming for realistic representation.

LI JIN'S PRACTICE

Li Jin is best known for his lush and colourful depictions of sensory pleasures in contemporary China. In his banquet scenes and anecdotal vignettes, voluptuous men and women are surrounded with food in various states of undress and sexual intimacy, but appear awkwardly out of place or spiritually vacant. Often portraits of the artist himself, the figures suggest both playful self-amusement and reflective distance. Indeed, even at their most extravagant, Li Jin's pleasure scenes are tinged with the melancholy of solitude and the unreality of a dream or a memory.

In truth, Li Jin's art has always had a spiritual undertone, perhaps even a spiritual purpose. In 1984, inspired by the examples of van Gogh and Gauguin, he went to Tibet in search for an authentic life and primal connection to nature. There, particularly after witnessing a sky burial, he began to reflect on the limits of corporeal existence. Drawn to the religiosity and the sense of time and history in Tibetan culture, he would sojourn twice again in the region, but would gradually come to recognise its essential alienness from himself.

Upon leaving Tibet in 1993, he set out to embrace the shifting realities of contemporary China under liberalisation.* Influenced by his encounter with the New Literati painter Zhu Xinjian in Nanjing, and inspired by his new life in a Beijing *hutong**, he developed an aesthetics of *xianhuo*, or 'aliveness'. His paintings came to represent food, sex, and other aspects of quotidian life with honesty and enthusiasm, and in a manner strongly evoking first-hand experience. As he gained in reputation and exposure, his paintings also changed, becoming increasingly boisterous and incorporating experiences of his travels abroad.

Li Jin has now turned his focus towards painting in monochrome, translating his well-honed sensitivity towards color washes into a masterful control of tonality – what is traditionally called the 'five colours of ink'. He paints in a looser, more gestural and expressive *daxieyi* style*, exploiting the accidental effects of the medium. As if again retreating from the mundane world as he did decades ago in Tibet, Li Jin now seeks to return to a state of freedom and unencumbered creativity.

**'liberalization' refers to China's 'Reform and Opening Up' policies after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the end of the Cultural Revolution. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, in the late 1980s and 1990s China was gradually opened to global markets and people had greater freedoms.*

**a 'hutong' refers to the historical layout of Beijing, with traditional walled courtyard residences connected by narrow alleyways and lanes.*

**daxieyi style refers to spontaneous, unrestrained brush and ink painting.*

Source: <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/artists/63-li-jin/>

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

WHY IS INK SO IMPORTANT IN CHINESE VISUAL CULTURE?

"It has been almost impossible until recently for Westerners to grasp the significance of calligraphy for the Chinese. It has been the foundation stone of their society since the dawn of civilisation." (Michael Goedhuis)

In China, ink is not merely a viscous liquid made from soot or carbon mixed with a binder – it is loaded with meanings both historical and contemporary, philosophical and political. It is imbued with notions of nationalism, Chinese exceptionalism, love of tradition – even with religious feeling. Ink was the primary medium for artistic – and literary – expression in China for more than two millennia. Ink painting has survived and thrived throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, despite China's tumultuous history and the introduction, at various historical moments, of art styles and techniques from the West.

Although ink was used for both calligraphy and painting, calligraphy was always considered the more important art form; the forms of Chinese characters were not only beautiful but were also replete with the symbolic power of the elite scholarly class, the literati, who, themselves, embodied the power vested in the Emperor. Painting, poetry and calligraphy were known as the '*san jue*', or 'Three Perfections' in which painting was considered to be silent poetry, and poetry to be painting with sound.

In the 1980s and early 1990s many artists in Mainland China began to revive and renew aspects of traditional Chinese philosophy, culture and cultural and artistic practices. Some saw a revival of ink painting as an embodiment of a lost spirituality, a return to the philosophical roots of Buddhist and Daoist philosophy. Contemporary artists began to work with ink in the form of conceptual, performative and installation works, while artists such as Li Jin, and others associated with the New Literati movement, employed ink's material and symbolic properties to respond to contemporary life and the modern world.

Text by Luise Guest

For more on ink and how it has been recontextualised and re-energised by contemporary artists see the information about an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum, New York – 'Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China'. <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/ink-art>

WHO WERE THE LITERATI?

The term 'Literati' refers to the class of powerful scholar bureaucrats in Imperial China who operated as the scholarly and governmental élite. They were connoisseurs of calligraphy, painting and poetry and were often painters themselves, particularly after they retired from the political intrigues of the imperial court and could spend time contemplating nature in their beautiful gardens, or in the mountains.

WHAT IS 'NEW LITERATI' PAINTING?

Emerging in the 1980s, the 'New Literati' movement refers to artists whose work expands the boundaries of traditional Chinese ink painting in terms of the subjects they paint (for example, erotic or everyday quotidian scenes as in the work of Li Jin) and also the materials and techniques they use.

WATCH

Watch this video, which shows Li Jin at work in his studio:

<https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/video/10/>

- What THREE things do you learn about Li Jin's practice?

LOOK, THINK, AND DISCUSS

Respond to these questions:

- Look at the three works by Li Jin in the exhibition. What descriptive words or phrases could an art critic use to explain his painterly style?
- With these three works in mind, how could you describe Li Jin's material and conceptual practice?

WRITE

An Extended Response (Artistic Practice) question to try – make some brief notes and then develop your essay with more in-depth reading and research after your visit to the exhibition.

- How do artists use the qualities of their materials artists to communicate their ideas?

Refer to ONE or MORE artists and their artworks in your response.

FOR TEACHERS

The work of Li Jin lends itself to numerous possible Stage 6 Case studies exploring aspects of material and conceptual practice, and analysing how contemporary artists examine issues of love, desire, aspects of daily life and human relationships.

Below is one possible way to navigate this content:

'EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN': A SAMPLE CASE STUDY INVESTIGATION:

NSW Visual Arts Preliminary and HSC Syllabus Focus:

Artist Practice, Subjective, Structural and Cultural Frames, Conceptual Framework (relationships between the artist and their world)

IBDP Syllabus Focus:

Preparation for Task 1: Comparative study – Students analyse and compare different artworks by different artists. This independent critical and contextual investigation explores artworks, objects and artifacts from differing cultural contexts.

INTRODUCTORY CLASS DISCUSSION

Unpack this quote:

[Li Jin] “developed an aesthetics of *xianhuo*, or ‘aliveness’. His paintings came to represent food, sex, and other aspects of quotidian life with honesty and enthusiasm, and in a manner strongly evoking first-hand experience.” (Ink Studio)

- In a class or small group discussion, compare and contrast Li Jin’s *Erroneous* with *The Bar at the Folies Bergère* by Édouard Manet. Consider how each work might be interpreted through a feminist lens.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

For background context:

- ‘I is for Ink’ a brief and accessible history of ink painting in China <https://pluralartmag.com/2020/08/22/i-is-for-ink/>
- Maxwell Hearn, ‘Ink Painting’ https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chin/hd_chin.htm
- ‘Chinese Landscape Painting’ <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-asia/imperial-china/song-dynasty/a/chinese-landscape-painting>

FOR MORE ON LI JIN:

- <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/artists/63-li-jin/>
- <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/exhibitions/44-new-york-every-one-everywhere-every-li-jin-and-the-art-of-the-portrait/>
- <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/spotlight-chinese-artist-li-jin-ink-paintings-blend-irreverence-and-tradition-2047392>
- <https://www.cafa.com.cn/en/figures/artists/details/8110549>
- A video in which art critic John McDonald discusses the work of Li Jin: <https://vermillionart.com.au/artist/li-jin/>

EXTENSION QUESTIONS:

- Following class and/or small group discussion of several works by Li Jin, students undertake independent research into the artist’s life and work and analyse at least three works, focusing on artist/world relationships in the Conceptual Framework.
- Students compare Li Jin’s *Erroneous* with works by TWO artists who similarly work with ink in a contemporary manner e.g., Bingyi, Tao Aimin, Lin Yan, Gu Wenda, Liang Quan, Yang Yongliang or Qiu Anxiong. How are the material and conceptual properties of ink applied to contemporary themes in the work of the selected artists?

OR

Students compare Li Jin’s *Erroneous* with works by artists who explore quotidian themes of everyday life, and the sensual pleasures of eating and drinking. Examples could range from *Banquet Still Life* by Abraham van Beyeren (1620-40) or *Still Life with Cherries, Strawberries and Gooseberries* by Louise Moillon (1630) to Paul Cezanne’s various still life paintings of apples and pears, Wayne Thiebaud’s cakes and pies and Andy Warhol’s soup cans. Other works to examine and analyse could include banqueting scenes such as Chinese Song Dynasty scrolls (see the Metropolitan Museum for examples), Pieter Breugel, *Peasant Wedding* (1538), Peter Paul Rubens’ *The Feast of Herod* (1635-38) and Pierre-August Renoir, *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1880-81).

- Students draft a response to this extended response question:

‘Art has the capacity to transform the everyday’.

Evaluate this statement with reference to TWO or MORE artists and their artworks.

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