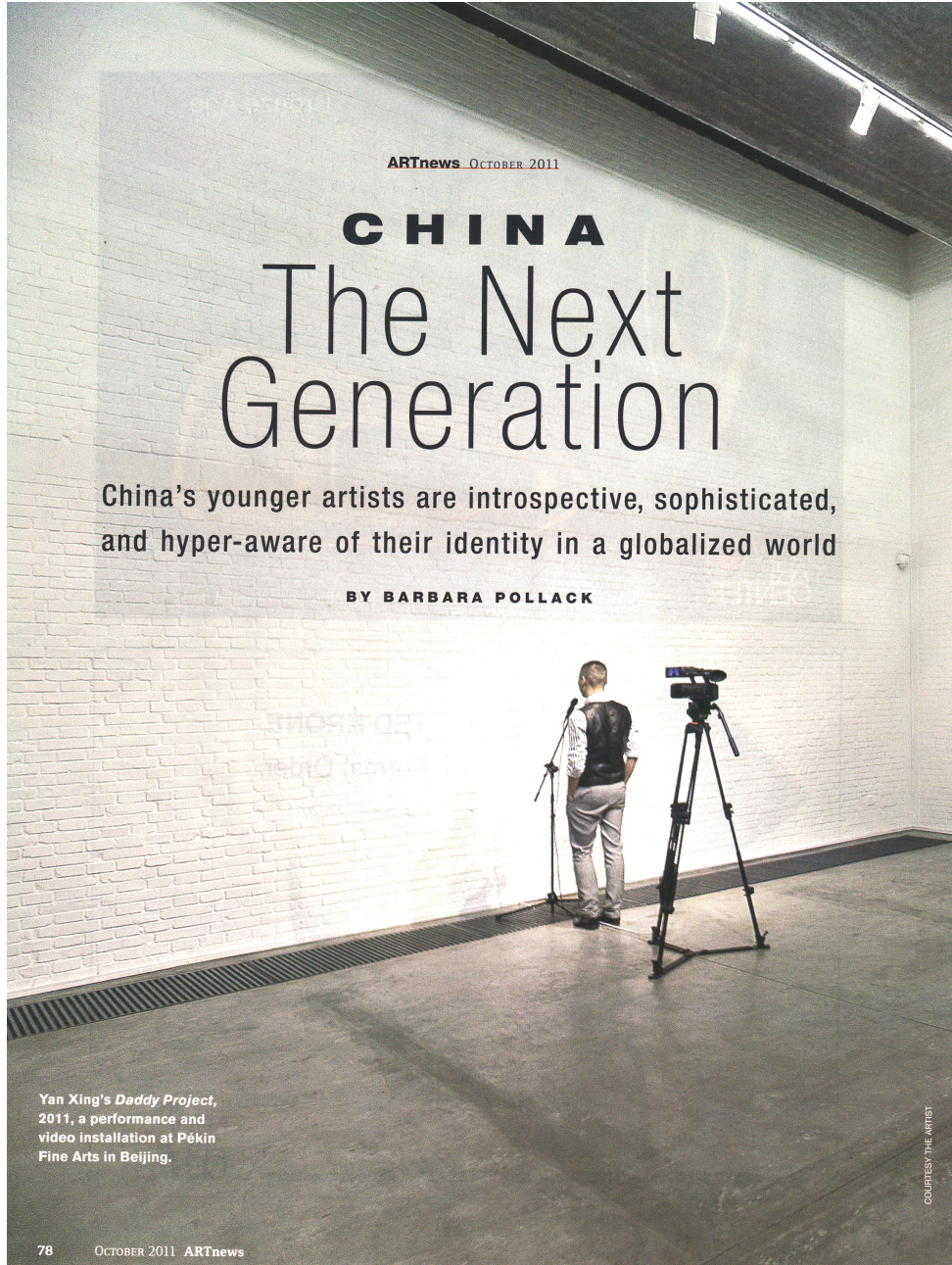


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CHINA The Next Generation

China's younger artists are introspective, sophisticated,
and hyper-aware of their identity in a globalized world

BY BARBARA POLLACK

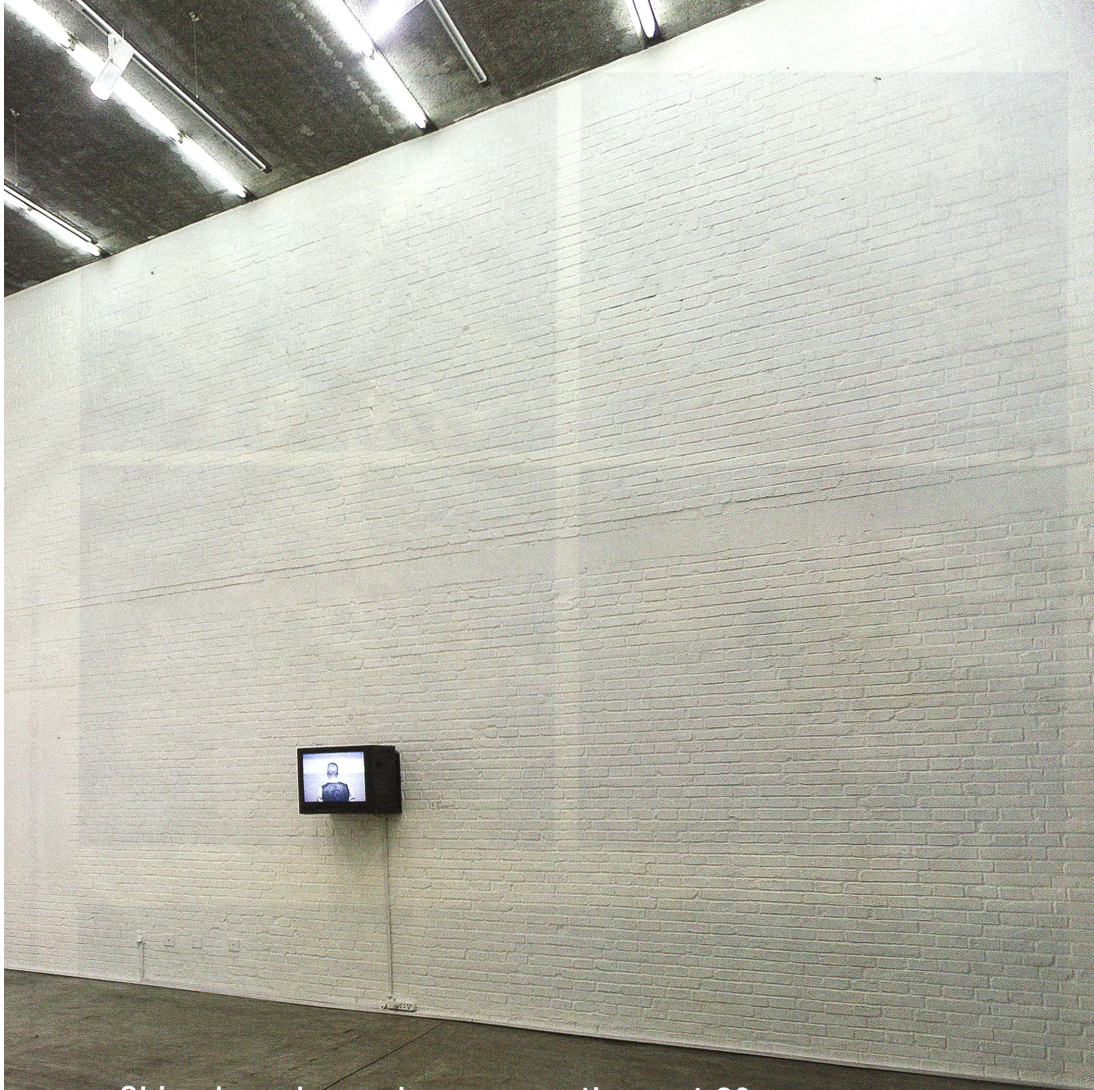
Yan Xing's *Daddy Project*,
2011, a performance and
video installation at Pékin
Fine Arts in Beijing.

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730 FIFTH AVENUE
NEW YORK NY 10019
TEL 646 336 7183
FAX 646 336 7185
WWW.GERINGLOPEZ.COM



China has changed more over the past 20 years than most countries did in the entire 20th century. The generation of artists that emerged in the mid-1990s grew up in a mostly rural nation, under Mao, and experiencing the decade-long Cultural Revolution that started in 1966. Their art, often filled with propaganda or portraits based on photographs of the period, reflected not only conditions at the time but also a Chinese identity formed when the country was isolated from the rest of the world.

The latest generation, artists born after 1976 and the death of Mao, emerged under a market economy and an open-door policy, accompanied by Western influences. McDonald's, KFC, cell phones, and DVDs are all taken for granted by these artists, now in their 20s and 30s. Many of them, the products of China's one-child policy, have attended the country's competitive art schools and traveled to Europe and the United States as part of their education. They could look to the generation before them and see that success in the international art market was clearly within reach, and many are already making a name for themselves in China and beyond.

Barbara Pollack is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

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TOP, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CHAMBERS FINE ART, NEW YORK, BEIJING; BOTTOM, COURTESY ALEXANDER OCHS GALLERIES, BERLIN, BEIJING, AND WHITE SPACE BEIJING

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"We can see in the work of the younger generation of Chinese artists a uniqueness and creative potential that could be much, much more interesting than the work of the already world-famous artists, in terms of the art market and the work itself," comments Xu Bing, the MacArthur Award-winning artist who recently returned from the United States to China to become vice chairman of Beijing's prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts. "We can see real

curator Leo Xu, formerly associate director at James Cohan Gallery Shanghai, the exhibition examined how Chinese artists, most of whom have never been to the United States, see the nation based on what they have culled from movies, television, the Internet, and art-history books. Last spring, there was a large group exhibition, titled "+Follow," staged at the Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai, that revealed the sheer diversity of styles among the artists.

OPPOSITE Song Kun's *Leftover Pieces 3*, 2003-4 (top), combines anime and traditional painting techniques. A C-print, *Mood Is Never Better than Memory—June*, 2010, by the often provocative artist Chi Peng (bottom). **RIGHT** Chen Ke combines playfulness and melancholy in works like *The Snail's Home*, 2006.



Testifying to this breadth is Chen Ke, who, at 33, is already established compared with many of her peers. After graduating with an M.F.A. from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 2005, she moved to Beijing, where she has been showing regularly at Star Gallery. She speaks sensitively about her melancholic paintings—fantasies often featuring a sad little girl that are expressions of the loneliness of

seeds of contemporary art—a real sense of future," he adds, "because China is so experimental, the most experimental place in the world."

From the perspective of James Elaine, a curator who left his position at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles to move to Beijing two years ago, "the artists born in the 1980s and '90s are becoming much more introspective and sophisticated." Elaine curated the exhibition "In a Perfect World," at the Meulensteen Gallery in New York last February, featuring works by 12 Chinese artists under 35. Few of the pieces in the show were obviously related to China—no images of Mao or the Forbidden City—but close inspection revealed many undercurrents of Chinese culture and social concerns.

Among the works here were Yan Xing's video monologue *Daddy Project* (2011), a work about growing up a single child in a single-parent family, and a painting by Song Kun, *Woman in Pinetree* (2010), which combines an anime character with traditional scroll-painting techniques. "A lot of these artists are shedding their Chinese skin very rapidly," Elaine says. "They really want to be international so badly, but they are still Chinese. They are still producing work that can only be made in China."

"In a Perfect World" is not the only recent show focusing on these younger artists. "Catch the Moon in the Water: Emerging Chinese Artists" opened this summer at James Cohan Gallery in New York. Organized by independent

growing up an only child. Her painting *The Snail's Home* (2006) sold for more than \$200,000 at Christie's Hong Kong in November 2010.

"Sometimes I have these mixed-up feelings or I'm frustrated and I don't want to take it out on my friends or parents or neighbors, so I found I can create these figures and ventilate my anger," says Chen Ke. It is a surprisingly personal confession yet typical of a generation that is not as concerned with social issues as with individual psychology. Chen Ke has a large studio close to her apartment and there is a waiting list for her work. Still, she remarks, "I never assumed I would be successful, and success has brought me trouble. Success came early for me." She adds, "but now many people expect me to be better and better, so there is pressure. It's not just pressure from the outside, but from my own inner self as well."

Another young art star, Chi Peng, 30, feels similarly apprehensive and pessimistic, despite his remarkable early success. "Being born a human being is bad. Being an artist is even worse," he says, sitting in his spacious modern studio in the center of the 798 Gallery District, the heart of Beijing's art scene. Sporting a Tin Tin buzz cut and a quirky smile, Chi Peng would seem to have many reasons to celebrate. Openly gay, he started selling his large-scale digital photographs—including pictures with multiple images of himself running naked through the streets of Beijing or copulating with his double in public places—even before he graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 2005.

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He was selected by Chinese curator Feng Boyi for an exhibition at Chambers Fine Art in New York in 2004, and he recently had a solo exhibition at the Groninger Museum in the Netherlands. When asked if he feels lucky, he compares himself to China and says, "China has the attention of the world, so you think it is lucky. But China is really naked in front of the world, so it actually is unlucky."

The doubts expressed by Chi Peng and Chen Ke are typical of this younger generation. While they have the support of their families, as only children, they are also subject to intense pressure from their parents to succeed. And, unlike the previous generation, these artists witnessed the market downturn in 2008, which took its toll on art sales.

"When the economic crash came, a lot of the young artists were left by the side of the road," says Meg Maggio, owner of Peking Fine Arts, a gallery in the Caochangdi district of Beijing. "Unfortunately, people fled to safe havens of known, established artists." Maggio saw a new seriousness set in as the market receded for these young artists. "I think when the market is booming, artists get swept up with the spectacle, and they enjoy the sort of schmoozing that goes with the boom. When the market crashes, things get very quiet, and what do you do? If you are smart," Maggio emphasizes, "you go back to the studio and focus the bulk of your attention on your practice." According to Maggio, works by most of her young artists sell for relatively modest prices, below \$20,000, and that includes photographs by one of her stars, Liu Di. The 25-year-old recent art-school graduate won the Lacoste Elysée Prize at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2010. Liu Di's digital photographs of huge animals taking over Chinese cityscapes sell for \$6,000.

Several dealers in Beijing and Shanghai report that while interest in this younger generation is growing, it nevertheless lags behind demand for well-known Chinese artists, such as Zhang Xiaogang, Cai Guo-Qiang, and Yue Minjun. "The market for our artists is very stable," says Waling Boers of Boers-Li Gallery in Beijing. "Still most of the collectors' concentration is going to a repetitive vocabulary, and understanding the younger artists who are not copying what the older generation has done is not an easy thing." Boers works with several artists who are beginning to experience an upsurge in their market, including Qiu Xiaofei, who

makes mural-size expressionistic oil paintings based on photographs and memories of his childhood (prices are between \$50,000 and \$100,000); Chen Yujun, whose collages reflect the culture of his hometown in Fujian Province (prices range from \$30,000 to \$60,000); and Lu Yang, a young woman who conveys science-fiction fantasies in videos and digital prints (selling for \$4,000 to \$20,000).

One trend among the younger artists that has been



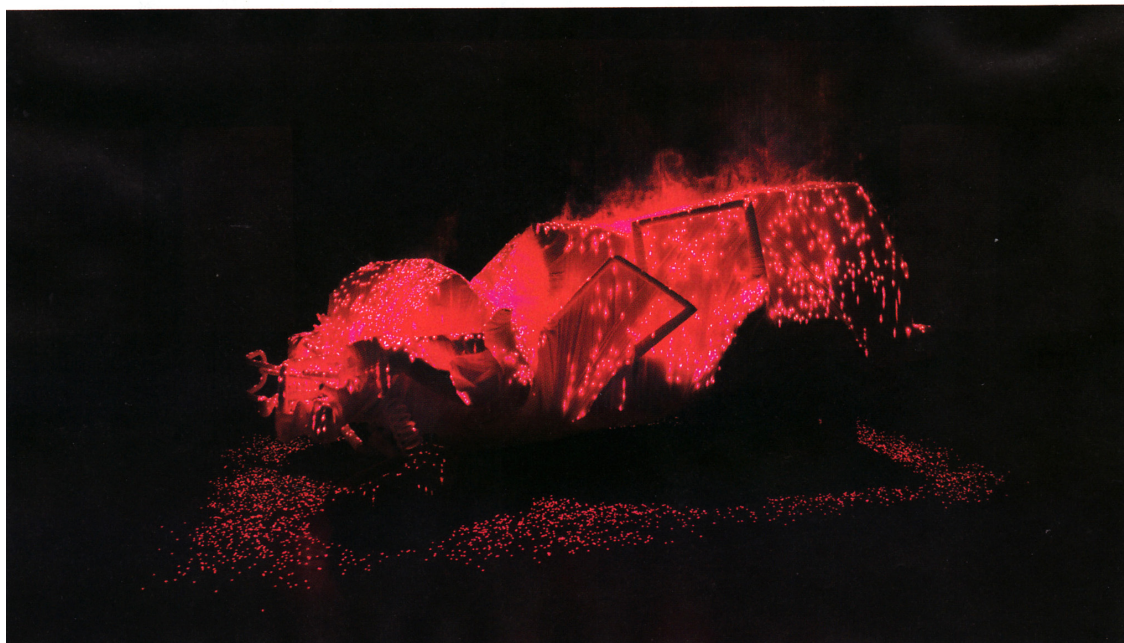
LEFT Lu Yang blends social criticism, new media, manga, and design in her print *Biological Strikeback!!!*, 2010. **OPPOSITE** *Animal Regulation No. 2*, 2010, one of Liu Di's digital photos of animals taking over Chinese cityscapes (top). Li Hui's installation *Untitled (Transition)*, 2010, includes a car wreck, laser lights, fog machines, and audio of Mongolian songs (bottom).

attracting auction-house attention is work influenced by Japanese anime and cartoons. For example, Chen Ke says that Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami were key influences on her development. MOCA Shanghai curator Victoria Lu has coined the phrase "animamix" to describe the style and has held the Animamix Biennial at the Shanghai museum since 2007. She has curated an ancillary exhibition to the current Venice Biennale on this topic. Animamix artist Li Jikai's painting *Corkhorse Fly and Writing* (2005) sold for \$70,000 and Li Hui's stainless-steel sculpture with LED lights *Ark No.2* (2005) sold for over \$300,000 at Christie's Hong Kong in May 2008. "We are cautious about who we take on because they are young," says Ingrid Dudek, a specialist in contemporary Asian art at Christie's. "Nonetheless, there are people within that generation who have shown an enormous amount of promise and are getting a lot of international attention."

Liang Yuanwei, 34, is one such artist who is gaining international recognition, even before developing an auction record. Her canvases look like gleaming swatches of silk fabric decorated with delicate floral patterns. She says her main influences are Mark Rothko and Luc Tuymans, though her paintings look most like the rolls of fabric in the windows of Shanghai tailor shops. She is one of five artists, and the only female, with work in the China Pavilion of the Venice Biennale. Her works sell for up to \$70,000 and have been shown at Boers-Li, Beijing Commune, and Pace Beijing.

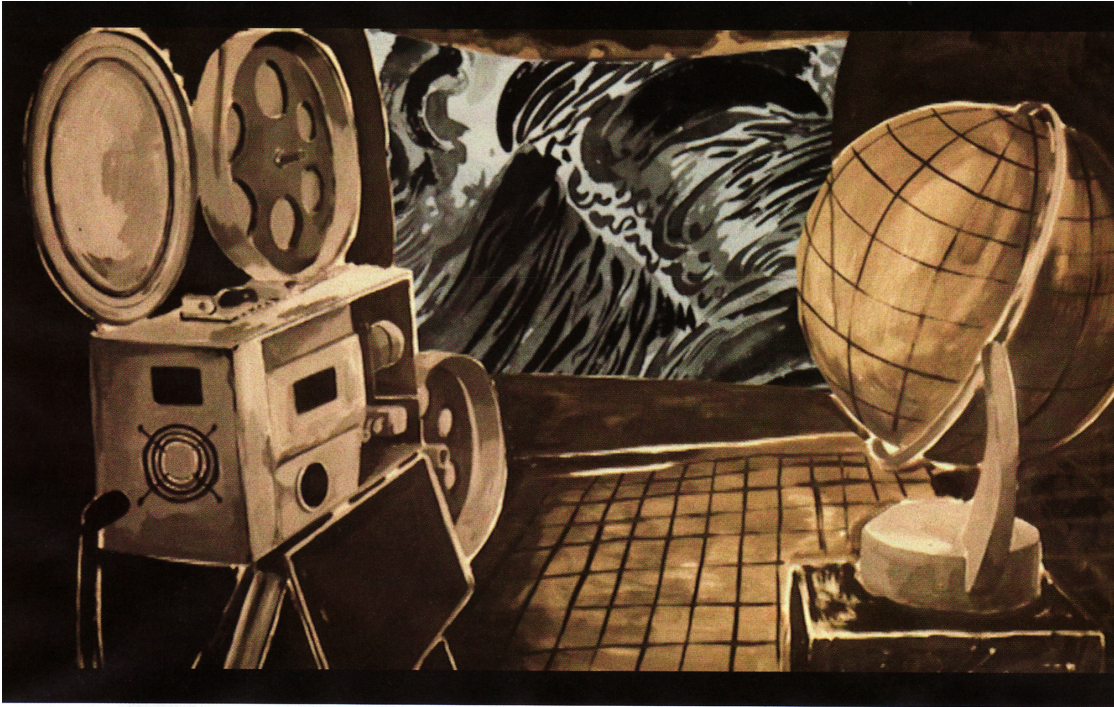
Sun Xun, 31, another rising star, claims that his ideas about

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art are influenced mostly by German philosopher Martin Heidegger, although his stunning hand-drawn animations are packed with oblique references to traditional Chinese culture as well. In his longest piece, *21 Grams* (2010), which took him four years to produce, he shows a magician performing on an empty stage as men in top hats gather in an ominous town square. In another of his works, *Clown's Revolution* (2011), political leaders shout at one another, looking as if they had

OPPOSITE Sun Xun's hand-drawn animation from his video *Clown's Revolution*, 2011 (top). In Jin Shan's installation piece *It Came from the Sky*, 2011, a silicone policeman is raised to the ceiling (bottom). **RIGHT** Liang Yuanwei's installation *I Plead: Rain*, 2011, in the China Pavilion of the Venice Biennale.



stepped off the front page of a newspaper. The characters don't look particularly Asian, but they are drawn with traditional ink and brushstrokes.

'For this younger generation, Chinese identity is not the most important thing, because the artists exist in a globalized world," says Leng Lin, president of Pace Beijing. "Before them, Zhang Xiaogang, Yue Minjun, and that generation emerged in a society that thought it belonged to a special culture, not part of the world." As if to prove Leng Lin's point, artist Jin Shan, 34, insists that he doesn't want to be considered a "contemporary Chinese artist." He says, "Actually, I want out of that identity. I don't want to use this kind of old colonialist idea." Jin Shan makes large-scale installations with mechanized parts, including a machine that shot Ping-Pong balls at collectors standing in a booth at ARCO in Madrid in 2008 and a mannequin of a man peeing into a canal at the Venice Biennale in 2007. He recently made an installation for the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas in which a seven-foot-tall silicone policeman is mechanically raised to the ceiling, and then dropped to the floor.

"I would say my connection to a Chinese identity is mainly emotional," says Li Qing, 30, a painter who lives in Hangzhou. His installation *Drift*, featuring videos that capture the poetry

of feathers floating through the air inside a down-coat factory, was presented at the Centro de Arte Tomás y Valiente in Fuenlabrada, near Madrid, in 2010. Inside the gallery, a fan blew out the insides of 100 actual coats. "I don't want to show China as a stereotype," the artist says. "I don't like such iconographic things."

When looking back on the older generation of contemporary artists who put China on the international art map, Li Qing is quite philosophical. "We are facing different questions. The questions pertinent to their works, for us, are pretty old," he says. "They experienced the Cultural Revolution and the expression after such suppression. But for our generation, our reaction would be more concrete, more prosperous, more various, and more heterogeneous. The reality we are facing is not a post-revolution situation. We are more connected to a materialistic world. We have different actions, more subtle."

Many critics of these younger artists—if not of the entire younger generation in China—fault them for being narcissistic and apolitical. But probing beneath the surface sometimes uncovers deep concerns about politics that

are difficult for these young people to articulate. Chi Peng is close friends with Ai Weiwei, the renowned dissident artist who was jailed and released earlier this year. At first, Chi Peng hesitates to comment on the situation, offering only, "I am an artist, not a politician." But when pushed, he replies defensively, "If you were Chinese, living in this country, what would you say?" Liang Yuanwei admits that when she first heard of Ai Weiwei's arrest she couldn't work for two weeks. "For now, it is enough for me that I am free to do my work. But I worry, if I go in a different direction and make work about politics, it would not be so good for me," she said.

"A lot of people think the younger artists are superficial; I can't agree with that," says Leo Xu, pointing to artists like Guo Hongwei and the artist collective Double Fly Art Center, whom he included in the James Cohan exhibition. "I think the younger generation is promising and hugely diverse in their art making and in philosophy. In the past," he adds, "in Chinese contemporary art, you don't see people who will speak out on sexuality. You don't see works inspired by fashion or design. You don't see anything that can be hilarious, a Chinese version of Dash Snow or Terence Koh. It's happening now with artworks that embrace what happens in the world. I think it is an exciting moment." ■