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Sheng Qi, *Me*, 2000. Chromogenic print.
Collection International Center of
Photography.



Qiu Zhijie, *Tattoo 1*, 1997. Collection Smart
Museum of Art, Chicago

Exhibition Provides Window to a Culture in Transition

SBMA Represents Exclusive California Venue of *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* July 1 – September 17, 2006

February 27, 2006 – Representing the only California venue, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (SBMA) is host to the groundbreaking exhibition *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China*, the first comprehensive look at the innovative photo and video art produced since the mid-1990s from China. A portion of the exhibition will be presented simultaneously at the Contemporary Arts Forum from July 1 through September 17, 2006.

Featuring 130 works by 60 Chinese artists, many of whom are exhibiting for the first time in the United States, the exhibition reflects the enthusiastic adoption of media-based art by younger Chinese artists. Their works, often ambitious in scale and experimental in nature, reflect a range of highly individual responses to the unprecedented changes now taking place in China's economy, society and culture. In addition to introducing a remarkable body of work to American audiences, the exhibition will also provide insights into the dynamics of Chinese culture at the start of the 21st century.

The significance of the subject matter is only matched by the considerable scope of the exhibition which includes not only photographs, but also video and installation pieces that amplify the exhibition's four main themes of History and Memory, People and Place, Performing the Self, and Reimagining the Body. The space required to house such an exhibition presents the opportunity for SBMA to share a portion of this exhibition with Contemporary Arts Forum.

Background

China has undergone a series of profound transformations in the decades since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. Starting in the late 1970s, a new generation of Chinese leaders initiated a series of reforms aimed at experimenting with a market economy with a centralized political system, and with a managed "open door" approach to the foreign investment and external cultural influences. By the mid-1990s, the consequences of these changes became fully evident.

Many of the changes in Chinese experimental art are related to these national developments. Starting in the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, a large number of experimental artists relocated from the provinces to major urban centers such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, reinventing themselves as independent artists working for international exhibitions and a global art market. Using a wide variety of media, from painting and sculpture to video and photography, China's experimental artists have explored the dynamics of an emerging "modernity with Chinese characteristics" in a country where the forces of tradition still retain enormous power. By examining these artistic efforts, *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* contributes to a new understanding of the different ways that Chinese artists have come to perceive themselves and their communities on a personal, regional, national and even global scale.

Photography and video art have become increasingly important means of artistic expression in China. While photography was largely reduced to a propaganda tool during the first thirty years of the People's Republic, it has gradually developed into an important vehicle of individual expression. Unofficial photography exhibitions began to be mounted in 1979-80, immediately attracting a huge audience.

In the 1980s, the major schools and masters of Western photography were introduced and gained popularity in China. The Western master's techniques, as well as their social and artistic aspirations, influenced a generation of young Chinese photographers, who began to produce photographs reflecting the reality of life in contemporary China. At the same time, the artistic exploration of video as an expressive medium began in earnest.

In the mid 1990s, Chinese photography entered a new phase becoming closely linked to an ongoing avant-garde art movement. Since then, a brand of image-making often referred to by Chinese artists and critics as "experimental photography" (shiyan sheying) has grown into a broad trend. Its sustained development has been characterized by non-stop invention, abundant production, multifaceted experimentation and cross-fertilization with other art forms. Photography now plays a key role in contemporary Chinese art, permeating various kinds of art practice. In many ways, the medium's versatility and instantaneous nature have become synonymous with the rapidity of change in China.

Exhibition sections

The exhibition is organized into four thematic sections:

History and Memory

The works in this section explore the contemporary legacy of China's past. Some artists, for example, update motifs drawn from the rich heritage of Chinese art. Still others examine the consequences of such recent historical moments as the Cultural Revolution, a period of traumatic upheaval that many of the artists experienced in their childhood.

Reimagining the Body

In this section, many works document performances that use the human body to fashion sometimes disturbing metaphors for the violent changes that have swept through every corner of Chinese life in recent decades.

People and Place

In the past two decades, China's urban life has been completely transformed. A massive building program has created sprawling skyscraper cities, and at the same time tens of thousands of city dwellers have been displaced from the inner city to the outskirts. These conditions have brought about a growing alienation between the city and its residents – they no longer belong to each other. The works in this section both reflect and respond to the new textures of China's metropolitan culture.

Performing the Self

Arising from a culture that has traditionally been marked by the subordination of the individual to the collective, these works all reflect the emergence of hybrid new conceptions of selfhood and personal identity in contemporary China.

SBMA will receive this exhibition after its having traveled from New York, Chicago, Seattle, London and Berlin. The exhibition is co-organized by the International Center of Photography, New York, and the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, in collaboration with the Asia Society New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

This exhibition in Santa Barbara has been made possible through the generous support of Stephanie and Fred Shuman, with additional support from the Charles and Mildred Bloom Fund, Jill and John C. Bishop, Jr. and Bruce G. Wilcox. This exhibition is presented in collaboration with the Contemporary Arts Forum.

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