

1 December 2016

The New York Times

'Chinese Artists Redraw Boundaries in 'Tales of Our Time''

Link: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/01/arts/design/chinese-artists-redraw-boundaries-in-tales-of-our-time.html>

The New York Times

Chinese Artists Redraw Boundaries in 'Tales of Our Time'

By JASON FARAGO DEC. 1, 2016



Zhou Tao's two-channel video "Land of the Throat," from 2016, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Zhou Tao, The Robert H.N. Family Foundation Collection; David Heald, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Museums of modern and contemporary art like to talk a big game about globalism, and their big-tent discourse challenges the old assumption that artists can be naturally grouped together by geography. Yet the fact remains: Western artists get the solo shows, while audiences usually discover art from beyond the United States and Europe through exhibitions with a geographic focus — which lump together diverse and sometimes unrelated artists under a national or regional banner.

The reason is in small part a matter of habit and in large part financial. While curators and artists may be skeptical of geographic frames, donors love them.

At the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, three recent exhibitions showcased new acquisitions from South and Southeast Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, which were [harshly criticized in some quarters](#) for eliding differences and segregating non-Western art. (The acquisitions program was paid for by the Swiss bank UBS, which told The New York Times in 2012, “we are refocusing our strategy to reach emerging markets, and this project seemed like a perfect fit.”)



Sun Xun's "Mythological Time" (2016), a two-channel color HD animated video, with sound, and ink, graphite and acrylic on mulberry bark paper.

Sun Xun, The Robert H.N. Family Foundation Collection; David Heald, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Now a new show, ["Tales of Our Time,"](#) presents contemporary art from China. Though it, too, makes some doubtful implications about geography as destiny, it is better than its regional predecessors. The works here, by seven artists and collectives from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, were all commissioned by the Guggenheim, with a better than average hit rate. Unlike the three regional shopping sprees, desperate to ascribe unity where little was to be found, this is a more open-ended exhibition that, in its diversity, implicitly rebukes its own reason for being.

The artists in “Tales of Our Time” — all born between 1970 and 1980, many familiar from the biennial circuit, several new to me — were chosen by [Xiaoyu Weng](#), an associate curator at the museum, and Hou Hanru, director of the [Maxxi](#) museum in Rome who also is a consultant curator to the Guggenheim. (Mr. Hou is also advising the museum on a much bigger, and more promising, exhibition of Chinese art in a global context, “Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World,” which is to open next October.)

The lingua franca of “Tales of Our Time” is video, but there’s one giant sculpture: a crazed industrial robot equipped with a squeegee, installed in a room-size see-through chamber. Programmed by the Beijing artists [Sun Yuan and Peng Yu](#), a husband-and-wife duo with a reputation as Chinese enfants terribles, the robot mops up liquid, with the viscosity of molasses and the color of blood, according to a set of rules: When a sensor detects that the liquid has flowed past a certain boundary, the robotic arm swoops down and cleans it up off the floor, and splashes the white gallery walls with the red fluid, like in a slasher film. It’s a legible, if forced, metaphor for the societal hazards of algorithms and automation. It’s also a rather expensive piece of Snapchat bait.

Subtler and better is the art by [Chia-En Jao](#), from Taiwan, who interrogates that island’s history, and the ways nationalism can obscure it, with sly humor and an easy hand. In “[Taxi](#),” a rewarding [video](#) completed this year, Mr. Jao sits in the back of several cabs en route to Taipei landmarks, like the presidential palace or a memorial to Chiang Kai-shek, and the drivers animatedly kibitz about geopolitics and their own pasts. Abstract discussions about the meaning of nationhood sometimes slip into current events. (“I see the British pound fell today,” Mr. Jao says. “That’s Brexit,” the driver responds. “The U.K. was never very involved in the E.U. anyway.”) Journeys to military sites dredge up memories both painful and playful, prompting one driver to sing an old army ditty: “Take back, take back, take back the mainland!” The taxi drivers’ narratives offer a more plural and personal map of Taiwan, as does a nearby work by Mr. Jao: a flag whose coat of arms incorporates Chinese, Japanese and indigenous Taiwanese fabrics.

Two artists, [Sun Xun](#) and [Zhou Tao](#), use video to explore China's industrialization and environmental degradation. Mr. Sun's "[Mythological Time](#)" is a surreal, at times overweening animation set in his northern hometown, Fuxin, which was once home to the largest open-pit coal mine in Asia. Scenes of tanks, miners, fossils and mountains give way to compelling dream sequences, one of which features fishermen hauling a colossal carp beached like a whale. Disconnected vistas scroll across the long screen, recalling the axonometric compositions of Chinese landscapes, though the gruff, energetic paintings that line the walls of the darkened gallery recall the vigorous work of William Kentridge even more than the literati style of classical Chinese art.

Mr. Zhou's disquieting two-channel [video "Land of the Throat,"](#) by contrast, is shot in the south of China: specifically, the Pearl River Delta, the first region of the country oriented to hypercapitalist production in the era of Deng Xiaoping. "Land of the Throat" roams abandoned or sullied sites around Guangzhou and Shenzhen, avoiding character and plot in favor of wordless, melancholy shots that cohere into a lurid dreamscape. A barefoot man trudges across acres of mud; a turtle bobs up out of brackish water. A parched brown landscape is bisected with red-and-white caution tape, and hills have been eroded so badly they appear like wrinkled skin. Mr. Zhou's Pearl River Delta is a sci-fi dystopia with no need of special effects, an update of Jean-Luc Godard's "Alphaville" for a century of ecological crisis.

If "Tales of Our Time" and its bank-backed predecessors serve as initial maneuvers to broaden the museum's collection, then I'm prepared to see these shows' geographic straitjackets as necessary evils. And the Guggenheim is indeed planning to present a more global cross-section of modern and contemporary art — in Abu Dhabi, where its controversial planned satellite museum, 12 times the size of Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral museum in Manhattan, will place art from after 1960 in a worldwide framework.

As for New York, “Tales of Our Time” and the museum’s coming China megaexhibition offer a welcome opportunity to reckon with art we still see too infrequently. I hope, though, that we start to see more solo shows by the likes of Mr. Zhou, as well as thematic exhibitions that let us appreciate him as more than just a national ambassador.

“Tales of Our Time” runs through March 10 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue; guggenheim.org.

A version of this review appears in print on December 2, 2016, on page C28 of the New York edition with the headline: For Artists, More Than Two Chinas. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe