

Mixed messages

As Chinese artists disguise their political statements in works of rare power and delicacy, an Australian sculptor turns the tables on kitsch, writes JOHN McDONALD.

There is no better place to write about Chinese art than Beijing, where I'm currently leading a tour on behalf of the Art Gallery Society of NSW. While much of China's imperial art heritage remains in Taiwan, quarantined from the vandalism of the Maoist era, Beijing is the undisputed centre of Chinese contemporary art. The activity in this city is feverish, with a constant stream of openings and art events.

To a much greater extent than Australia, the action is in the studios rather than the galleries. Visit the studio of a leading artist and you won't find a bolt-hole where a painter labours away in isolation. Instead, the visitor might be confronted with something halfway between a factory and salon. Some artists are like foremen directing teams of assistants. There is a constant stream of visitors – dealers, collectors, curators and critics, many of them from Europe or the US.

One of the most desirable visitors nowadays is Judith Neilson, who makes regular trips to China looking for works to add to the White Rabbit collection. She doesn't confine herself to the big studios but goes searching for new talent. The fruits of these excursions are displayed in the gallery in Chippendale, which is fast becoming one of this city's most fashionable drawcards.

The shows at White Rabbit tend to turn over every six months. The current exhibition, *Beyond the Frame*, is a mixture of works that have been seen before and new acquisitions. Among the old favourites is Bingyi's *Six Accounts of a Floating Life* (2008), a loose, expressive painting that has few precedents in Chinese art.

Bingyi, who divides her time between China and the US, has crafted a style that combines Eastern and Western sensibilities. Her work does not fit into any movement but it remains unmistakably Chinese.

Back again is Ai Weiwei's *Oil Spill* (2007) – a series of shiny black porcelain discs that sit flat on the floor, mimicking drops of black gold. In typical fashion, Ai Weiwei takes a substance associated with toxic pollution and transforms it into an aesthetic delicacy. Such ironic turnarounds and dislocations are characteristic of his work, which is

BEYOND THE FRAME

White Rabbit Gallery, until February

PENNY BYRNE:

PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY

Sullivan & Strumpf Fine Art,
until October 15



usually more oblique in its social criticisms than the artist himself.

Incidentally, the word in Beijing is that the authorities are starting to take a more softly-softly approach with troublesome artists: inviting them out for dinner and quietly suggesting they tone down their avant-garde gambits. One thinks of the old adage that there's no such thing as a free lunch but at least it's an advance on summary arrest and detention. When the Party decides that it's easier to kill artists with kindness, they'll have the makings of the arts welfare state we endure in the so-called free world.

Another piece enjoying a second showing at White Rabbit is Lu Zhengyuan's *Mental Patients* (2006), seven life-sized figures in grey, with blank stares and an air of stagnation that denotes lives without hope. Australia has its own problems with such

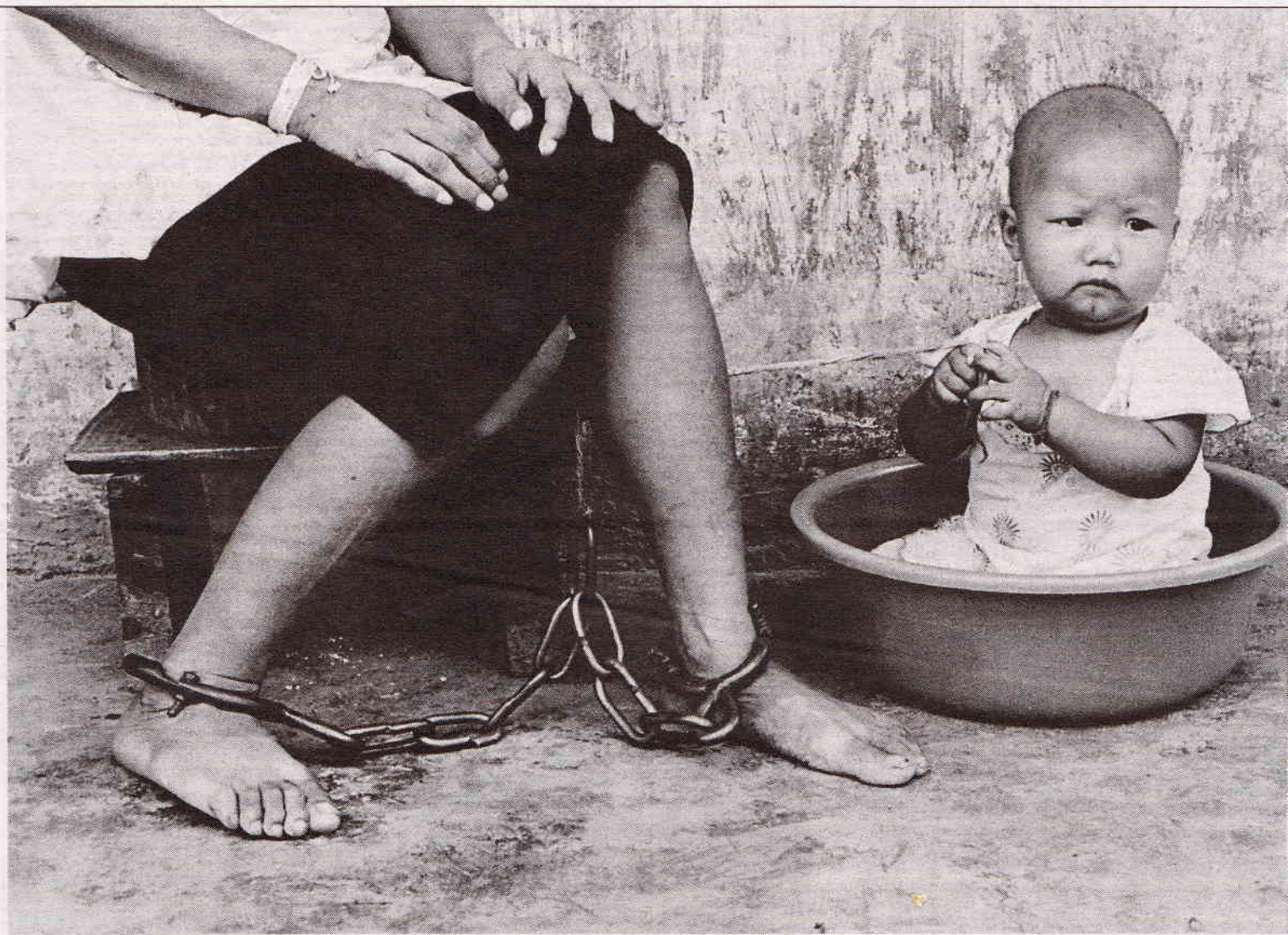
institutions but there can be few places more depressing than Chinese mental hospitals, which have been used as human dumping grounds.

Attention was focused on such institutions by a famous series of photographs by Lu Nan, who travelled all over China documenting the lives of the mentally ill. He followed this with a series devoted to Catholicism in China, then one on the peasants of Tibet. A more recent series, *Prison Camps in Northern Myanmar* (2006), is included in *Beyond the Frame*. It is a typically bleak view of men, women and children imprisoned for drug offences. They live in uncomfortably close quarters, often in chains, acting out a parody of village life.

To appreciate these photos one needs recall the forced positivism of the pre-reform era, when heroic socialist realism was the order of the day. Artists were obliged to show handsome workers, peasants and soldiers achieving great feats for the motherland, beaming as if they were having the time of their lives. The truth is that for most Chinese, even today, life is a struggle, with no real sense of security. Lu Nan shows us those on the bottom of the heap, who have little option but to resign themselves to circumstances.

In contrast to the powerful realism of this work, the exhibition also includes abstract paintings by artists such as Liu Wei, Qu Fengguo, Chen Yufan, Xie Molin and Tsong Pu. Although abstraction has been part of the furniture in Western art at least since the 1950s, it has never had much traction in China. In Korea recently, I spoke with the director of Wellside Gallery, Joong-Ku Eum, who opened a branch in Shanghai with the hope of discovering a new wave of Chinese abstract artists, but eventually decided there were only about six in the entire country. One of that group is Liang Quan, who has a large work in the White Rabbit collection.

On the third floor of White Rabbit, which is usually viewed as the place of honour, is a sculpture by Peng Hungchih called *Farfur the Martyr* (2009) – a crucified figure made from steel, with the head of Mickey Mouse. Water pours from multiple wounds into a basin shaped like a Star of David. This image



Uncomfortably close quarters . . . Lu Nan's *Prison Camps in Northern Myanmar, No. 26* (2006) presents a bleak view of people imprisoned for drug offences; (left) a detail from Penny Byrne's *In Happier Times (Gaddafi's Gal Guards Guarding Gaddafi)* (2011).

is allegedly based on a television program produced by Hamas as anti-Israel propaganda. Peng is interested in such "distortions of meaning and intent", which he sees as "the truest face of our times". The precise meaning of the work is not clear but it probably has the potential to offend everyone.

This work has something in common with arguably the major piece in this exhibition, *Calm* (2009), by the artist collective, MadeIn. Both works supposedly relate to events in the Middle East, a region that may be viewed with relative objectivity from China, as the endless conflict between Israel and its Muslim neighbours presents few foreign policy dilemmas for Beijing. And yet, if only by force of habit, one tends to read every contemporary Chinese work as an oblique commentary on local politics.

In this scenario, Peng Hungchih's stainless steel mouse may be seen as a comment on the distortions of meaning inherent in all propaganda. MadeIn's *Calm* – a mound of rubble suggesting a demolished building that seems to be gently breathing – may well be a reflection of the violent means used by terrorists and counter-terrorists in the Middle East but it is also reminiscent of scenes from the earthquake in Sichuan.

Ai Weiwei overstepped the mark by criticising government responses to the

earthquake, which is a taboo subject. This "collective", apparently consisting of one artist, Xu Zhen, is conscious of the need to avoid such associations. But when a work of art is sent out into the world, its meaning cannot be controlled. As every Chinese artist knows, audiences will draw their own interpretations. There's plenty to think about in this eerie, strangely touching installation that makes one suddenly conscious of the fragility of life.

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While much of the political content in contemporary Chinese art is encoded and disguised, artists in more democratic countries frequently create banalities when they exercise their freedom to make overt political statements. One way out of this dilemma is to practice a form of art that disarms us with humour but leaves room for more serious reflection.

This is roughly the method of Penny Byrne

in her exhibition, *Plausible Deniability*, at Sullivan + Strumpf Fine Art. In the course of this year, SSFA has begun to attract healthy audiences to its new venue in Zetland – not traditionally known as a thriving hub of the art trade – with quirky, unusual exhibitions by new-generation artists. Byrne is a good example of the SSFA style, as she fashions political polemics from the treasures usually found on suburban mantelpieces.

Her method is to take antique china ornaments sourced from junk-shops and eBay, and by artful additions and rearrangements, turn them into pithy, satirical comments on modern materialism, militarism and xenophobia. This may sound like the epitome of political correctness but the effect is quite the opposite: these works are irreverent and very funny. I defy anyone not to smile at the image of the Venus de Milo as a hoodie, or two small ceramic reliefs of figures in 18th-century costumes holding packets of cigarettes.

Leaking like a SIEV is Byrne's third go at the "boat people" saga – a hilarious ensemble of china dollies, squeezed onto a model boat. It throws the exaggerations of this issue into vivid relief. Rather than worry about being overrun by refugees, we should be more concerned about the joyous way Australians submit to the invasive forces of kitsch.