

# ELI KLEIN FINE ART

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## **ART/ARCHITECTURE; Brothers in Art as Well as Life**

DECADES from now it will be said that in the late 20th century the world saw an odd and wonderful artistic phenomenon. It will be added in wistful tones that it was a pity it didn't last, but not a surprise. Historians will be speaking of Chinese brother artist teams, two pairs and a trio who lived either in mainland China or in the United States and spent their lifetimes living and working together as if they were one person, putting their collective energies into the creation of (what was then) very contemporary art. Even in China, where the political risk of creating art has demanded the insularity of tight-knit cliques (able to commiserate or jointly shoulder crackdowns or backlashes), brother artists teams are an anomaly. Some doubters in the future may question whether the Gao, Zhou and Luo brothers ever really existed. They did. They do. They flourish, for now.

One of the first pairs to appear was Zhou Shanzuo and Zhou Dahuang, from Guangxi Province in Southern China. Painters and sculptors who emigrated to Chicago in the 80's, the Zhou brothers work simultaneously on giant canvases and life-size sculptures wordlessly enacting what they call "a dream dialogue." The younger, Dahuang, is ambidextrous, and the two are able to paint standing next to each other, as if they were one body using both hands.

The Zhou brothers started collaborating in 1973. Shanzuo was 21 and Dahuang was 16. Since then they have been nearly inseparable: working, traveling and even living together. At one point they were even married to sisters.

When asked why they work together instead of individually Shanzuo explained, in a telephone interview, that it was because they "both had the same childhood dream of art." But Dahuang explained it differently. "I've always believed destruction is the meaning of new creation," he said. "I may go to get a coffee and find that my brother has covered a part of a painting I did. For one artist it would not be so easy to keep things this interesting."

Oscar Friedl, the director of the Oscar Friedl Gallery in Chicago as well as an agent for and longtime friend of the Zhou brothers, elaborated on Dahuang's explanation: "Their art is about being able to take yourself back to the extent that you serve the creative process rather than your own ego. If it's a tolerant team, the exchange, the evaluation between good and bad, is so much quicker. It goes bang, bang, bang. It slides back and forth. The creative process is speeded up, almost doubled. They are just the beginning of the real potential of collaborative art."

Mr. Friedl envisions that the next phase of art history will be populated with collaborative teams. "I think the separation between viewer and artist will get thinner and thinner and eventually disappear," he said. "Reclusive thinking won't work in the future."

Certainly Vitaly Komar of the well-known Russian artist team Komar and Melamid (friends, not brothers) agrees. In "Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art," a book by JoAnn Wypijewski about their work, Mr. Komar declares: "The



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old romantic view of artist is a travesty of monotheism. And now I would say, conscious co-authorship is the only fundamentally new direction in art since the discovery of the abstract."

If co-authorship is a new direction, it will probably be the road less traveled. Teamwork is about the subversion of the ego, as Zhou Dahuang attested, and it is unlikely that the future of art will embrace this sort of selflessness any more than the history of art has to this point, although it is a nice vision.

Speaking with the Luo, Gao and Zhou brothers reveals that there are decidedly unromantic practicalities and very strong family ties rather than ideologies driving them to work together. Luo Weidong, Luo Weiguo and Luo Weibing make up the Luo brothers, a trio from Guangxi. Like the Zhous, they also live and work together, sharing a typical Chinese courtyard home in the suburbs of Beijing. The team uses a traditional lacquer technique to create images of bright red Chinese calendars with all the common symbols of luck and prosperity, like chubby babies, ripe peaches or fat fish. They paint images of famous brands names like Coca-Cola or Fanta, Casio or Motorola into these standard scenes.

"It's a very labor-intensive process," says Yvonne Force, who is the president of her own curatorial consulting firm, referring to the Luo brothers' layered lacquer technique. Ms. Force included the work of the Luo brothers in a 1998 show at the Lehman Maupin Gallery in SoHo. "They are like a studio, all working together," she added. "It's like an artist with assistants."

The work of the Luo brothers has been described by the Chinese art critic Li Xianting as being part of a Beijing-based trend called Gaudy Art. The paintings depict brand-name items within a scene that is the Chinese equivalent of a velvet poster of dogs playing cards, thereby revealing the inherent tackiness of the rampant consumerism that has emerged out of the ashes of Communist China. But there is no nostalgia in their work for the Mao era. On the contrary, consumerism is depicted as the rightful heir to a corrupt and morally bankrupt system.

The Luo brothers were all born during the Cultural Revolution, a period stretching from 1966 until Mao's death in 1976, during which China was in chaos. Chairman Mao, seeking to consolidate power, instigated purge upon purge of his political rivals. He also called on the country's youth to show their patriotism by weeding out the politically suspect and destroying all remnants of the old feudal society. Schools closed and families were torn apart as mothers and fathers were sent to the countryside or distant factories for re-education, often for years. The Luo brothers' names reflect the extreme political fervor of the times: Weidong means Defending the East, Weiguo means Defending the Country and Weibing means Guard.

In a catalog for the 24th Sao Paulo Bienal, in which the Luo brothers participated, the curator Segundo Apinan Poshyananda claims that the father of the Luo brothers witnessed an act of politically motivated cannibalism in 1967 when the flesh of party dissidents was eaten by other members of the community in the Luo's home province.



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Cannibalism in Guangxi during this period has been widely documented, lending if not credence, at least the possibility that this grisly anecdote is true.

In a telephone interview, Weidong, the oldest Luo brother, didn't want to talk about the cannibalism stories or that period of China's history. "Things are better now," he said. "I'd rather not talk about that. Things have changed so much, improved so much in China."

Ms. Force added: "I think their work reflects that as a family growing up together they experienced much of the same things. They had to face a lot of obstacles."

Mr. Friedl says something similar about the Zhou brothers who were in their teens at the height of the Cultural Revolution: "They were separated at a very early age and the whole family was scattered over the country. Theirs must have been a very close family and to see all that being destroyed must have been a very traumatic experience. I think their partnership is a kind of survival instinct, if they stick together they will be able to recreate that bond."

With none of the teams is the desire to preserve a family bond more evident than with the multimedia artists the Gao brothers. Gao Qiang and Gao Zhen from Shandong Province began collaborating in 1985, a year earlier than the Luos, and their work has some graphic similarities to what the Luo brothers produce.

The Gaos do performance, painting and photography and recently began a global e-mail exhibition. Never having been abroad themselves, they have gained a worldwide cyber audience for their playfully subversive works.

Their e-mailed pieces feature Mao's face on a Kewpie doll or Chinese coins floating in the sky like U.F.O.'s. Superimposed on the images are questions directed toward Chinese citizens: Why are we all so similar today? What are we waiting for? What can we get? What can we believe in today?"

One of the Gao brothers' recent shows at the Xing Xue Exhibition Hall in Shanghai featured a piece that was a touching and defiant tribute to their mother, who passed away last year. They credit her with inspiring them to be artists. In the piece, a series of photographs of their mother throughout her life covers a wall and underneath is an altered version of the slogan "Heaven and earth are great but greater still is the kindness of the party." In the Gao brothers' piece the caption reads: "Heaven and earth are great but greater still is the kindness of our mother."

The brothers' bitterness toward the party is easily understood.

"Our father was persecuted to death during the Cultural Revolution, and this has left an indelible scar in our hearts," they wrote in response to an e-mail asking them about their work. "The Cultural Revolution brings up terrifying and painful memories for us. These memories have directly influenced our judgments of things as well as our method of creating art and our manner of living."

There are many sayings in the Chinese language meant to teach the wisdom of lying low: "The tallest tree catches the wind"; "The bird who peeks his head out gets shot"; "Man fears fame like a pig fears heft." The community usually sees the solitary individual in Chinese society as reckless, stupid. On this rare point Chairman Mao's beliefs merged



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seamlessly with traditional Confucian ethics. Both the revolutionary and the philosopher preached that individuals were nothing more than spokes on a wheel or screws in a great Marxist-Leninist machine.

After Mao's death, Chinese artists were allowed greater freedom to absorb and imitate the trends and techniques of contemporary Western art. They quickly plowed through modernism, Impressionism, Dada, Pop and postmodernism. In the late 70's the Beijing-based band of artists called the Stars Group declared: "Picasso is our banner. Kollwitz is our model." A mere 10 years later Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol were the heroes of the Chinese art scene -- only to be unceremoniously dropped for Joseph Beuys in the 90's. Part and parcel of each of the newly adopted Western models of art was the assumption that art is created by solitary geniuses from the stuff of their own experience, and no one else's.

THE degree of independence and narcissism required by this presumption was a hard thing to pull off in China. Art in China took off after Mao's death, seeking inspiration and new ideas wherever it could, but its growth has been a tug of war with the environment. Chinese society, certainly the Communist government, continues to this day to be less than tolerant of freedom of expression or artistic experimentation. Since 1949 art in China has been entirely inseparable from politics. Considering that "The bird who peeks his head out gets shot," it seemed wise to stick together, with heads down, when it came to art.

As a result, even the most experimental of Chinese artists tended to draw tightly together like so many stray beads of mercury. Compared to their counterparts in the West to whom imitation was the sincerest form of mediocrity, Chinese artists found strength and safety in numbers, and in incubating cliques of similar-minded creative types. Brother artist teams are the most insular example of safety in numbers.

While artist teams and co-authorship may be a phenomenon described by some as the future of contemporary art, in China at least it is more likely is a tendency born out of necessity. The Gao, Luo and Zhou brothers are very much a product of their times.

Artists coming up in China now have already whole-heartedly adopted the belief that the best art is solo art. Also, they now have the material comfort and social stability to be able to go it alone.

The three brother artists teams are likely part of an endangered species. For the reason alone that China has a one-child policy, it seems unlikely that there will be many new Chinese brother artist teams emerging (unless they are twins). More likely Chinese brother artist teams will go the way of the Yangtse River White Dolphin, very much on their way to extinction.

**ALEXA OLESEN**



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## **Imitation Warmth and Cold Pleasures**

Luo Wei Dong is the eldest of three siblings who work collaboratively as the Luo Brothers. They produce carnivalesque lacquer paintings and ink wash scrolls that reflect the disorientating reality of contemporary Chinese society.

A Coca Cola sun radiates its imitation yellow-red warmth from behind a faded Forbidden Palace; Chairman Mao swims in blue waters towards Coca Cola buoy; a row of white puppy dogs poke rubescent tongues at oversized Coca Cola cans, on which a baby, afflicted with uncertain pink white blisters, climbs and cries.

Born in 1963, Luo Wei Dong is the eldest of three brothers in his family who have become artists. Although he and his brothers Luo Wei Guo and Luo Wei Bing all trained in different academies (respectively, Guangxi Academy of Art, Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art and Central Academy of Art and Design in Beijing) they began collaborating together in 1986 when they all moved to Beijing to live.

As the names Luo Wei Dong, Wei Guo and Wei Bing – ‘defenders’ respectively of the ‘East’, the ‘country’ and the ‘body’ – might suggest, the Luo brothers were born around the time of the Cultural Revolution in China, when political fervour still fuelled the hearts and minds of many people. Decades later and with its opening to the west, China now finds itself helter skeltering into a rapid economic development and modernisation. The effect is disorientating. Ideological idolatry is replaced by a worship of consumer goods. On the anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China on 1st October, the streets now boast more Coca Cola advertisements than red national flags.

It is this new reality that forms the basis of the exuberant, fantastical, dazzling world captured in the Luo Brothers’ works, such as the series, ‘The Famous Brands of the World are Welcomed’ (2002). Densely packed with an unruly mix of symbols, iconic images leap across time as the Luos amass together within a single space the visual vocabularies of the traditional, the revolutionary and the consumer. Impossible juxtapositions are made possible as notions of scale and perspective are gleefully dismissed. A blank red sun shines out again from behind a Forbidden Palace now wreathed in artificial blooms and hovering above a row of Coca Cola locomotives; cutesy cherubs giggle and pose on perfect bouncy golden hamburgers; two hold up a gilded mirror which endlessly reflects the same sun, the same picture, the same synthetic yellow red warmth.

Do these carnivalesque scenes proclaim the triumph of a global consumer culture? Are modernisation and commodification inescapably linked? In works such as these the Luos may prompt serious thought upon social change and development yet the horror of the spiritual emptiness of contemporary consumerism is rendered all the time with an engagingly boisterous energy. Global brands usurp the power over the collective imagination once held by slogans of political propaganda. Materialism supersedes ideals.



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It might seem ironic then that to capture the glittering present, the Luo Brothers return to the past, employing two very traditional Chinese media across their repertoire: lacquer paint and ink-on-paper. The deeply saturated hues of lacquer paint, usually associated with decorative arts as opposed to fine art, creates an impenetrable gloss that completes the sheen of the material world depicted. The ink washes meanwhile are rendered in a hanging scroll format that at once recalls and parodies the tradition of classical Chinese painting.

Authorial red seal impressions, a longstanding convention of literati works, appear here and there but are unconventionally placed, sometimes even at the centre of the picture plane.

With their obsessive attention to detail and craftsmanship, at odds with the banality of the objects they depict, the Luo Brothers powerfully convey the dizzying disorientation, the joy and the emptiness that characterises postmodern experience in societies across the world today.

The Luo Brothers have had solo shows in Paris, Sydney and Hong Kong and have participated in many significant international group shows at venues in the UK, Australia, Brazil, USA, France, Switzerland and China. In 2002, they were invited by the Red Mansion Foundation to participate in the exhibition 'Dream 02', supported by Visiting Arts, which brought together the works of 24 artists from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

**DIANA YEH**

