



▲ Yunfei Ji's Sudden Wind in the Village Wen, 2013. Mineral pigments and ink on rice paper and silk.

Exposing reality in the disguise of Chinese tradition: Contemporary Chinese art show at VAG

by DONG YUE SU

Ai Weiwei's work is here in Vancouver. The world-renowned artist is among 10 prominent Chinese artists whose recent works have been brought together in an exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

The exhibition, *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art*, aims to draw attention away from the activist aspects of the art and more towards the revitalization of tradition in modern artistic practices in China. According to curator Diana Freundl, the exhibit challenges audiences to think more deeply about what Chinese tradition really is.

The social critique

It appears to be a neat and beautiful Chinese landscape scroll painting illuminated by a light-

box, but a look around the back reveals something else. The lines and tones of the painting are actually the shadows of messy plant foliage and some discarded everyday objects. Titled *Background Story* and created by artist Xu Bing, this is the first piece you see in the exhibition.

While most visitors celebrate the beauty of this piece, April Liu, a lecturer and specialist in Chinese art at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design, deciphers its social critique. According to her, the scroll painting is a signifier of how China's glorious cultural history has been idealized and canonized as a means of elite control. By deconstructing the scroll painting, Xu Bing exposes the visual language of power that represents China's cultural authority today. The title *Background Story* points to the fact that what is beautifully packaged on the outside is not so pretty on the inside.

Another artist who borrows the beauty of a scroll painting for a critical voice is Ji Yunfei. Using beautiful ink colour and brush as well as woodblock printing, he has created a narrative of the massive migrations caused by the Three Gorges Dam project in the 1990s and the Great Leap Forward movement in the 1960s. The written text on the painting recounts the displacement of communities, mass upheaval and the destruction of social fabric.

Ai Weiwei's work *Bang* is an installation made up of 886 Chi-

nese antique wooden stools, which are ingeniously stacked up and interconnected into one big rhizomatic structure reaching high up to the ceiling of the exhibition hall. If one stool is removed, the whole structure will collapse.

The stools call up the most common household items that represent grassroots communities, according to Liu. She sees the stacking up of stools as a metaphor of ordinary people be-

ing uprooted, reflecting the narratives seen Yunfei's work – the lower classes losing the connection to their land. The entire edifice is built on uprooted individuals and, although it looks tall and firm, it is chaotic and precarious. A single individual can cause a domino effect and the entire edifice will crumble.

Resistance to be framed by tradition

While the exhibition is about

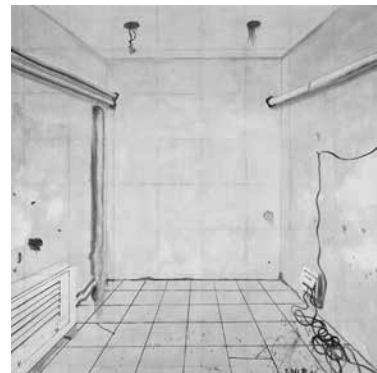
reframing tradition in Chinese contemporary art, there is resistance to the idea of tradition as well.

"Although we see these artworks through their connection with tradition, the artists themselves are not necessary thinking about tradition when making art," explains Carol Yin-hua Lu, an independent curator based in Beijing and the co-curator of the exhibition.

Zhang Enli, who was present at the media preview, chose to discard the elements of tradition in his large paintings of ropes, which were executed through the measurement of his arm length.

"The discussion of tradition and the present does not exist in my work. What matters is the here and now, not the past. I can only be sure about my physical limit at the present moment," he says.

Liu also expresses concern about framing contemporary Chinese art mainly within its past traditions. She would like to see the discussion take a step further to go beyond the dichotomy of non-Western traditions versus modernity and to see contemporary Chinese art on its own terms within the contemporary context. ☞



▲ Zhang Enli's The Destroyed Room 2, 2011. Oil on canvas.



▲ Shan Shui's Cosmos, 2012–present, in progress at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Photo courtesy of the artist and ShanghaiART Gallery

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Vancouver Art Gallery
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ting with the group chanting the verse they called the Maha Mantra, I was not sincere at the beginning. I just wanted to entertain myself and fool around. I grew up in communist China and the Marxist atheism was deeply ingrained in my soul. I felt it hard to be convinced that a God exists, and it was hard to debunk the notion that religion was nothing but a tool for the ruling class to fool the subjugated people of the lower classes. However, as I chanted along, something magical happened. I found myself spellbound by the repetitive and meditative words. That night, I had the best sleep of my life. I woke up the next morning feeling spiritually enlightened.

I became a regular visitor to their meetings and later frequented their temple. Very often I was the only East Asian-looking guy among the sea of South Asian singing and dancing bodies, but that did not

bother me. I enjoyed their vegetarian food; I acquired a spiritual name; I chanted with them as if we could do it together in eternity; I danced with them as if they were the best buddies I grew up with in the timeless universe. I came to realize that cultural differences are just skin deep. The large bulk of us are absolutely the same. Humanities will triumph over political conflicts. I have never been so hopeful in world peace. I have never felt so free than the moment of breaking down the boundary of differences.

Once I opened up myself, I wanted to inhale more spirituality. I joined in different religious groups, including several different branches of Buddhism and Christianity. Engaging in multiple religions gave a positive spin on my atheist past. Not having been born with a God in mind allowed me to freely choose and configure my belief system for the sake of my well-being. ☞

Photo courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery