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Think You Know China? 'Tales of Our Time' Will Make You Think Again



Pop Art portraits of Mao Zedong and installations of Qing dynasty furniture have long represented the Chinese art world in New York and other cultural centers in the United States.

But the Guggenheim Museum intends to broaden the artistic experience with its "Tales of Our Time," opening on Friday, Nov. 4. Featuring eight newly commissioned projects by artists from Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as from China, this exhibition will present fresh approaches to contemporary art from the region, highlighting alternative narratives that depart sharply from news accounts and official histories.

"Our exhibition is not trying to tell people what is right or wrong, but maybe one way we can think about it is, how can we diversify people's thinking about Chinese art?" said Xiaoyu Weng, an associate curator. Ms. Weng and Hou Hanru, consulting curator, organized the exhibition under the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Chinese Art Initiative, a \$10 million grant devoted to researching and commissioning works for the permanent collection.

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From the catastrophic mudslide in Shenzhen to the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Diaoyu Islands (which the Japanese call the Senkaku) in the East China Sea, the exhibition touches on topics pulled straight from the headlines, but interpreted by artists who are storytellers more than they are documentarians. Employing media from ink painting to animatronics, they conceive of China more as a concept than as an identity, eschewing easy associations and symbols. This is fitting for a show that takes inspiration from the 1936 modernist classic "Old Tales Retold," by Lu Xun, who appropriated folklore to critique the social conditions of his time. Likewise, the artists in "Tales of Our Time" examine conditions in contemporary China through approaches that often blur the distinction between fact and fiction.

"Art has its own particular narrative, which is not just about illustrating a given fact," Mr. Hou said. "It is about imagination and a kind of independence."

Mr. Hou, artistic director at Maxxi, the National Museum of the 21st-Century Arts, in Rome, joined Ms. Weng on studio visits in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Nanjing and Hangzhou, starting in October 2015. In the end, they chose five individual artists, Zhou Tao, Chia-En Jao, Kan Xuan, Sun Xun and Tsang Kin-Wah; the team Sun Yuan & Peng Yu; and the three-member Yangjiang Group, most of whom will be making their American debuts.

Xiaoyu Weng, one of the curators of "Tales of Our Time," and the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation associate curator of Chinese art at the Guggenheim Museum. Credit David Heald/Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

Sun Xun, a 36-year-old Beijing artist who has already shown in New York at the Sean Kelly Gallery, prepared several mural-size scrolls onto which his hand-drawn animations will be projected, offering a surrealistic look at his hometown, Fuxin, a coal-mining capital in northeast China that has fallen into decline. The Yangjiang Group — Zheng Guogu, 46; Chen Zaiyan, 45; and Sun Qinglin, 44 — is creating an interactive tea garden for the circular gallery overlooking Central Park, with a blood pressure station for visitors to measure the calming effect the installation has on their senses.

For the Taipei artist Mr. Jao, 40, the exhibition was a chance to complete a video, "Taxi," that he has been contemplating for several years. For this work, he surreptitiously recorded conversations with taxi drivers en route to politically charged sites around the city. From a group of 60, he chose to concentrate on five who specifically spoke of the history of their destinations from personal experience. "Through this project, I get to view not brainwashing, but how things imprint on our memory," Mr. Jao said in a telephone interview.

Ms. Kan, 44, another artist from Beijing and one of two women in the exhibition, also completed a long-term project, based on extensive travels throughout China to 110 ruins of ancient cities. Her multimedia installation "Ku Lue Er" plays videos on 11 screens compiled from the thousands of images she shot on her mobile phone during her journey. Mr. Hou and Ms. Weng recall their visit to her studio as one of their favorites; in contrast to the luscious images they were seeing, Ms. Kan's cramped apartment, which served as her studio, was in a rundown building, unlike the vast spaces that many successful Chinese artists inhabit. They reviewed work and listened for more than five hours as her ideas poured forth.

"Often, we see artists today working in a situation that is much more glamorous, but this was one of the most memorable meetings," Mr. Hou said.

The artists who tested the limits of the Guggenheim as an institution are the team of Sun Yuan, 42, and Ms. Peng, 44 (the other female artist), who in the past have made installations using human body fat, live animals and corpses. At the Guggenheim, they will present a shovel-wielding machine scooping up a bloodlike liquid as it seeps across the floor. "When we first heard, we thought it was pretty cool, we thought it was pretty awesome, but we did not know how it was going to get realized," Ms. Weng said, noting that the museum had concerns about safety and potential damage.

For this generation of artists, Chinese identity is a completely different experience from what it was for the previous generation, which suffered through the isolation and repression of the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976.

Many of these artists studied abroad, and most work internationally. Mr. Jao earned a master of fine arts from Goldsmiths in London, for example, and Ms. Kan divides her time between Beijing and Amsterdam. "These artists concentrate on individual identities, rather than Chinese identity, but all build on quite Chinese topics," Mr. Hou said. "It's really about what happens at this moment in Chinese society that provokes debates, which on the one hand is a globally important question, and on the other, really a very individual interpretation."

In such an exhibition, China is no longer an exotic territory or a national identity, but a cultural construct framed as much by current social conditions as by 5,000 years of history. "On the one hand, I don't want people to get intimidated if they don't know anything about Chinese art, but, also, I don't want people to think they are experts and come looking to match their preconceived knowledge," Ms. Weng said. "I want people to think about geopolitics, I want people to think about contested landscapes, I want people to enter the exhibitions and think about concepts and ideas, not a set of identities."

Correction: October 30, 2016

Because of an editing error, an article last Sunday about projects commissioned by younger artists from Hong Kong, Taiwan and China at the Guggenheim Museum misstated the location of the Diaoyu Islands. They are in the East China Sea, not the South China Sea.