

**China's third generation art and artists - Zhang Zhaohui**  
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Dramatic changes have taken place in the 25 years since China's reform and opening. Since 1978 it has transmogrified from the isolated, indigent and unenlightened country of the cold war years to a world economic powerhouse.



Accelerated integration into the international community has turned Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and China's other major cities into cradles for a new urbanized culture, of which consumption is a major aspect.

Today's young Chinese people enjoy a level of education their parents could not even imagine. Labeled by the media and society as the "Cartoon," "New Breed," "Ultra New Human" and even "Post Human" generation, they express themselves in a manner so uninhibited as to be in direct contrast to that of their introverted and stoic elders.

The broad scope of consumables available to them is manifest in their avant garde choices of clothes, hairstyles, cosmetics and jewelry, and a superior material environment and wider mental range gives them a natural affinity with European, American and Japanese popular culture.

China's societal progress and economic development are reflected in its contemporary art. Representatives of the three generations of avant-garde artists that have emerged since 1978 have all achieved world acknowledgement.

First was the New Wave Art Movement of the 1980s whose most famous exponents are Huang Yongping, Xu Bing, Cai Guoqiang and Gu Wenda. All born in the 1950s, these artists experienced the surreal agony of the "cultural revolution" as young adults and left for the West in the 1980s and 1990s in search of a kinder working environment.

All four have established reputations on the international art stage, but their works are completely divorced from China's organic changes.

The second generation was born in the mid 1960s. Their Political Pop and Cynical Realism schools of art are influenced by childhood memories of the "cultural revolution" and adult experience of the Tian'anmen Square Incident of 1989 and the political stagnancy that followed.

These artists, in whose number are Yu Hong, Liu Xiaodong, Fang Lijun, Zhang Xiaogang, Zhao Bandi, Zhang Huan and Wang Jin, came to the forefront in the 1990s.

The third generation of the so-called Gaudy Art school that emerged at the end of the 1990s were born at the beginning of the 1970s.

Their works employ videos, digital cameras, and performance to create an interdisciplinary artistry totally apt for expressing the puzzlement, confusion and sense of loss felt by many as a result of China's urbanization.

Its main representatives are new media artists Song Dong, Yin Xiuzhen, Zheng Guogu, Qiu Zhijie, Zhou Tiehai, Liu Wei, and Feng Mengbo. A group of loosely connected younger Guangzhou artists styling themselves the Cartoonist Generation presented arts exhibitions and street performances but failed to produce any influential artists.

Their obvious mimicry of the Japanese manga cartoon style precludes the creation of any fresh visual expression and ignores completely China's urban reality.

At the turn of the millennium, the generation born around the 1980s began to appear in art circles. Outstanding among them is Chongqing-based Xiong Lijun.

Her works express fresh visual images and a clearly individual artistic language, most obvious in her acute attunement with and masterful depiction of modern metropolitan youth culture.

In September 2003, Xiong Lijun's works appeared in the Bare Androgyny Exhibition, a satellite of the landmark first Beijing Biennale which marked her debut in the Beijing art scene.

Her large oil painting *I enjoy I am* caused a stir among local viewers as well as critics and curators from all over the world. Her gigantic triptych was on display in the central section of the exhibition hall, its keynote saffron yellow presenting a sharp contrast to the blue tones of a painting by Chengdu-based female artist, Huang Yin, entitled *Salute to Louis Vuitton*.

This visual contradistinction imbued the exhibition hall with an exciting dynamism that drew the eye to Xiong Lijun's work from every angle.

Having grown into a young adult since China's reform and opening, Xiong Lijun's work is an expression of her personalized perception of the contemporary Chinese social environment. Her distinctive style, engendered by the social reality of contemporary China, sets her apart from the generation that precedes her.

Her *Bohemia Style Series*, *Playing Water Series*, and *Spring Series*, with their brilliantly saturated and exuberant pigments of saffron yellow, green and red, integrate the generosity and grandeur of oils with the brilliance and luster of acrylics.

This combination brings lucidity animated with a vapor-like undulating rhythm. Figures in Xiong's paintings are generally young people, aged 16-20, who embody infinite enthusiasm, energy and imagination, as well as boldness and independence of character.

These attributes are conveyed through their studiously unconventional self-images that project a natural affinity with international trends.

Pop culture cartoons are employed to convey a swing between realism and show, and the subjects' emotions – joy, excitement and exhilaration – are perceivable by means of exaggeration and metamorphosis.

There is throughout a strong sense of movement; figures dance, walk, run and fly; their desire to communicate and be visible is foremost. Xiong Lijun's works bear no trace of the cynicism and angst so dominant in the works of many young artists.

She is obviously centered on the positivism of her own generation and its wholehearted enthusiasm for urban life and its consuming pleasures. Her work conveys a sense of personal and social liberation within a new metropolitan culture. In short, Xiong Lijun presents and celebrates new Chinese youth culture in bloom amid overall and continuing urbanization.

Xiong Lijun's pictorial world may thus be interpreted as a visual simulacrum of the mentality of today's youth as expressed by one of its number.

Her images reflect its vibrant temperament: spontaneous, free spirited, enthusiastic, and open – all representative characteristics of the one-child generation, fostered by a plenteous font of consumerism.

In the past 25 years, Chinese artists have followed and studied the art of Europe, America and Asia's developed countries. There has been scant contemporary Chinese art with its own distinctive language and aesthetic value that does not defer to the expectations of the established art circuit.

In this respect Xiong Lijun's works are groundbreaking; they signal a new confidence in Chinese contemporary art and an advance towards a freer, more open art creation space.

The work of Xiong Lijun is testament to China's cultural transformation; her paintings constitute definitively Chinese contemporary art.