

Xiong Lijun

Born into a Chinese generation that grew up amidst an economic revolution, Xiong Lijun belongs to an age steeped in consumerism. In her lifetime, China has experienced dramatic increases in personal wealth (the years between 1978 and 1998 saw a phenomenal, 20-fold, increase in Gross Domestic Product). Along with this change came the introduction of televisions, computers, the internet, fashion magazines, commercial advertising and the one child per family policy; exposure to the outside world, combined with the expendable income of the single child family, resulted in the evolution of a booming youth culture heavily influenced by the Western model. Since the 70s, mass markets targeting young people have materialised within the fields of affordable fashion, Western and local music, movies and video games, and with the development of increased access to foreign media being particularly influential. Today, open romantic relationships are seen as acceptable and, increasingly, so is premarital sex. However, the latter is perhaps still seen as a taboo subject. In general, the lives of young people in contemporary China would be unrecognisable to their counterparts 30 years ago.

This is the context in which Xiong Lijun creates her work, with everything in her intensely vibrant paintings boldly expressing the 21st century voice of China's urban youth. The young artist's neon, cartoon-like oil and acrylic works are a visual bombardment within which figures dance, sing or strike a pose; every element of these dynamic compositions are painted in fluorescent shades of pink, yellow, green and blue, colours which unashamedly demand our attention. She presents us with the relatively new, mass imagery of her existence—an imagery which has replaced the tightly politically controlled visual language of her parents' generation. Therefore implicit in her iconography of a new age is a kind of celebration, a sense of the relative freedom permitted today's Chinese youth.

Xiong's is not a style which saw easy development, however. Like all art students of her generation, she received a strictly traditional artistic education. This training engendered the exquisite painting techniques that we see in her work today, but it also severely confined her personal creativity and caused an inevitable period of confusion after the artist's graduation in 1997. Initially, Xiong, like many of her peers, experimented with impressionism for a short period, a style which was, at the time, experiencing a belated Chinese resurgence. She soon recognised that these banal reiterations of past styles bore no relation to her personal life, nor to the world in which she lived. She therefore began to turn to the imagery of her everyday existence, finding inspiration in fashion magazines, MTV, cartoons and commercial advertising. Upon realising the rich field of material available to her in contemporary mass culture, Xiong began to develop her own form of Chinese pop art; a unique style that serves as a reflection of the new and brazenly commercialist age that is modern China.

Of significant impact upon the artist's style has been the phenomenon of the cartoon, which plays a major role in current Chinese culture. It is an art form that was long suppressed under Maoist rule but that gained massive popularity throughout the 90s as access to Japanese and American cartoons became available through the channels of newly available international media. Through the forms of comic books, anime and computer games, millions of young people fell in love with a host of

characters and even went so far as to impersonate them in COSplay, the Japanese craze that began in the late 80s. Xiong's enthusiasm for cartoons exposes itself not only through her choice of colours, but in the exaggerated forms, stylised hair and, particularly, in the glassy, oversized eyes of her characters. All of her works feature these aspects, but, simultaneously, we see reflections, detailing and shadowing which demonstrate the acute realism of traditional fine arts. Into these realist details the artist integrates the cartoon so smoothly that the overall effect is mesmerizing, and we notice that, unlike pop artists who elevated the cartoon to the status of fine art, Xiong assimilates it into realist fine art so that it actually becomes a hybrid art form.

The vivid forms and enthusiasm inherent in Xiong Lijun's works make it easy, upon initial viewing, to recognise them as representative of China's inspired urban youth. Upon further consideration however, it becomes apparent that there is something more complex lurking beneath the neon; something which the artist, in being an absolute product of her age, may not have consciously implied. We realise that Xiong Lijun's images are not, in fact, the reality of China's modern youth, but what scores of people desperately crave and dedicatedly work towards: attaining the beauty, material possessions and lifestyle that signify a certain persona and status in society. In Xiong's paintings we are drowned in ideals of image and material gain as she presents us with what is essentially a fantasy; a vision which, at present, remains an unattainable reality for the majority of the population. Contributing to this is the cartoon aspect of her work, as the art form itself makes no pretence at imitating reality; its very duty is to serve as a form of escapism where all that is unfeasible in reality can be represented. Xiong admits that she paints the physical attributes, and one can assume, the material possessions that she desires in life and in doing so she highlights the extent to which her generation has been conditioned by extensive advertising drives and media pressure. She demonstrates a materialist attitude which is of course not limited to China, but one which has, relatively recently, been seized with furious enthusiasm in the artist's native land.

Xiong Lijun continually picks up fragments of inspiration from sources as diverse as supermarkets, designer stores or MTV shows, incorporating the objects and images that she finds into her material utopia. What we see in her works is, in part, a celebration of the present and symbolic of positive hope for the future, but it is also the reflection of a new generation of commercialist pressure that China's youth feel themselves under today; a very different pressure to the political devotion required of yesteryear, but one which also possesses overwhelming authority.

Interview conducted by Jade Franklin with Xiong Li Jun in her Chongqing studio, September 16, 2006.