



THE FIRST WAVE

Modern and Contemporary Chinese Paintings
in the USC Pacific Asia Museum Collection

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More than two decades ago, when the burgeoning contemporary art community in China was still little known to the outside world, USC Pacific Asia Museum organized two exhibitions to introduce this new art to the United States—*Beyond the Open Door: Contemporary Paintings from the People's Republic of China* in 1987, and *I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne and Other Works: Selections from the Chinese "New Wave" and "Avant-garde" Art of the Eighties* in 1991. Today, Chinese artists are essential participants and contributors to the international art scene, and it is timely to revisit these two important historical exhibitions.

Beyond the Open Door featured more than thirty young artists from three cities—Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hangzhou, all of which have been centers of artistic and cultural production since ancient times. The artists' works already showed a desire to break away from the Socialist Realism taught in art academies, via a remarkable variety of styles and approaches, from traditional ink painting, to Scar Movement and Soil Art, Cubism, Expressionism, and even Photo-Realism. Also noticeable is a strong presence of women, both as subjects and creators, partly due to the Communist Party's mission to bring equality to women.

The late 1980's was marked by a great increase in intellectual freedom and optimism that was manifested in the student-led pro-democratic movement and Tiananmen Protest in 1989. The inspiration to mount *I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne and Other Works* dates from the same year. When it opened in Pasadena two years later, one could already discern a different attitude and approach, from both the exhibition organizers and the participating artists. The curatorial team, consisting of both American and Chinese scholars, was equipped with an increasingly broad network and better understanding of the Chinese art community. They were fully aware of the impact of the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition held at the China Art Gallery in Beijing in 1989, with its advocacy of free expression and a progressive future symbolized by its logo of a crossed-out U-turn sign. Many of the artists who participated in *China/Avant-Garde* exhibited at USC Pacific Asia Museum in



COVER: GENG Jianyi
Salon de Beauté (detail)
China, 1985
Oil on canvas
USC Pacific Asia Museum Collection
Gift of Waldemar A. Nielsen
1987.52.4

ABOVE: LIU Guohi
A Smoke After Work
China, 1985
Ink and color on paper
USC Pacific Asia Museum Collection
Gift of Waldemar A. Nielsen
1987.52.6

RIGHT: LI Chao
I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne
China, 1988
Gouache on paper
USC Pacific Asia Museum Collection
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Ralph S. Riffenburgh in
Honor of Roger, Stephen and Bruce Riffenburgh
2005.12.2



1991. Working in the second half of the 1980's, they were more critical of Western art and its influence, and actively engaged in the debate of how to adapt it to their own creation instead of blindly embracing it. Li Chao's painting *I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne*, which was adopted as the exhibition title, distills this new dilemma—the ambiguous figure at the bottom right corner, perhaps the artist, pushes himself away from Cézanne's card player and out of the canvas. The artists involved in the experimental art movements of the late 1980's participated in a similar experiment, searching for an individual style and expression while working within the context of China's long history and the recent influx of Western ideas.



USC Pacific Asia Museum acquired some of the works included in the 1987 and 1991 exhibitions for its collection, and after more than twenty years they are presented together again for the first time. Instead of emphasizing the different periods the two exhibitions presented—the first and second halves of the 1980’s—the current exhibition connects them to position the decade as a critical moment in the development of art in China. It was a time when contemporary Chinese art was still an alien concept to the West, before China was exposed to the international art market, and when the artists were united by their shared eagerness in searching for an artistic language of individual expression. The different media, styles, approaches and interpretations demonstrated by these works not only reflect the period’s atmosphere, but also look forward to the multifaceted art now being created in China.

All the artists included in the two exhibitions, such as CHEN Haiyan, GENG Jianyi, XU Bing, YU Hong, and ZHANG Peili, today enjoy international acclaim. *The First Wave* features works from the museum’s collection by some of these artists—a gathering that mirrors China’s own history of opening the door to the outside world.

—Christina Yu Yu, Ph.D.
Director, USC Pacific Asia Museum

ABOVE LEFT: SONG Gang
Living Diary #5
China, 1989
Ink on paper
USC Pacific Asia Museum
Collection
Gift of the Artist

ABOVE RIGHT: HAN Liqin
Blue Rocks
China, 1989
Ink and color on paper
USC Pacific Asia Museum
Collection
Gift of Waldemar A. Nielsen
1987.52.11

RIGHT: DAI Hengyang
Thunderous Dawn
1982
Oil on canvas
USC Pacific Asia Museum
Collection
Gift of Waldemar A. Nielsen
1988.64.5

