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Yue Minjun
Execution
1995
$5,996,932
Sotheby's London
Oct. 12, 2007

Yue Minjun
Contemporary Terracotta Warriors
2001
Private Collection

Installation view of "Yue Minjun and the Symbolic Smile" at the Queens Museum of Art

Yue Minjun's "Kung Fu" series installed at the Queens Museum of Art

GUY SMILEY
by Ben Davis

"Yue Minjun and the Symbolic Smile," Oct. 14, 2007-Jan. 6, 2008, at the Queens Museum of Art, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Queens, N.Y. 11368

Who is the happiest artist in the world? One candidate is certainly Yue Minjun, the Chinese painter whose works feature endless iterations of his own laughing face. Emblematic and easy to recognize, Yue's self-portrait manages to reference the 7th-century Laughing Buddha, the happy Communist worker of the 20th century and postmodernist irony all at once. And perhaps most pointedly, Yue's work exemplifies Deng Xiaoping's famous motto, "to grow rich is glorious" -- his paintings have increased in value by roughly 100 times in the last two years alone.

Thus far in 2007, 13 of Yue's paintings have sold at auction for more than $1 million -- with one, a 1995 painting of a crowd of his clones being executed at Tiananmen Square, selling for close to $6 million at Sotheby's London last month. That beats the records of painting legends like David Hockney, Brice Marden and Ed Ruscha, all artists who have already had major museum surveys devoted to their work.

The Queens Museum of Art in Corona Park is the first U.S. institution to hop on the Yue train -- and the show displays some of the same feverish quality that has accompanied his meteoric rise. It features 30 paintings and two sculpture groups, lent by a handful of private collectors. Most of the works are newer, post-2000. The installation in the QMA's upstairs gallery feels slightly shoehorned into the space, with three large canvasses hung suspended over the atrium on a wall angling away from the balcony, and several of Yue's bronze statues in a narrow stairwell. Still, despite or even because of this atmosphere of haste, the show says a lot about the Yue Minjun phenomenon.

What impresses most is the relentlessness of his central motif: his own laughing self. While most of the paintings at the QMA are recent, the one exception, a small 1996 oil on canvas from his "Beauty" series (courtesy New Jersey collectors John and Carmen Fernandez) focusing on his face against a yellow background, betrays little variation. Compare it to *Hope* from 2005, a self-portrait of the artist standing in front of a corn field against a deep blue sky. The physiognomy has become a little more exaggerated, but the features are pretty much the same: the eyes glued shut in mirth, the ruddy complexion with its obscene gleam, the open mouth with its row of identical white teeth.

The fundamentals of his character do not vary much from work to work, and within each work the figures are often identical clones of one another, in the same costumes. In *Noah's Ark*, six of Yue's self-portraits sit in a small rowboat on a blue sea, squatting together, gripping their knees and screaming with silent laughter. In *Solar System*, three identical Yues are cackling at the bottom of the canvas, each clad only in underwear, giant planets wheeling behind them in outer space.

Group of Yue Minjun's *Contemporary Terracotta Warriors* (2005) installed at the Queens Museum of Art

Yue Minjun
Untitled (from the "Beauty" series)
1996
Collection of John & Carmen Fernandez

Yue Minjun
Hope
2005
Collection of John & Carmen Fernandez

Yue Minjun
Noah's Ark
2005
Private Collection

Asked to participate in the Venice Biennale in 1999, Yue opted to begin fabricating bronze sculptural versions of his signature self-portrait, playing off China's famous Qin Dynasty army of terracotta warriors. A phalanx of these finds its way to the QMA. Notably, while the original sculptures are known for the subtle individuality of each of the warriors, the cackling modern-day versions are relentlessly identical, cast from the same mold.

To comprehend Yue Minjun's style of "cynical realism," as it is called, it helps to have a more dynamic picture of Chinese history than the thumbnail sketch that usually accompanies it (something like, "Yue Minjun's art represents the cynicism of the new Chinese middle class.") He was born in 1962 into Mao's People's Republic of China, a dismal one-party state struggling to escape the problems of underdevelopment via the brutality of forced industrialization -- a reality Yue would have faced directly, as his father worked in the oil fields of northeast China. He himself went to work in the state oil sector, convincing his director to let him study art in 1983, against the background of Deng Xiaoping's moves to "liberalize" the Chinese economy -- that is, to make it more dynamic and therefore more appealing to foreign capital, while maintaining the tight control of the Chinese Communist Party.

In the mid-'80s, the so-called '85 New Art Movement explored this precarious new space, culminating with the now-legendary "China / Avant-Garde" show at Beijing's National Gallery in 1989, the same year Yue finished school (Geng Jianyi's *The Second State*, a giant painting of a laughing face shown in "China / Avant-Garde," directly inspired Yue's signature theme). The show was closed after several performances provoked the authorities, reflecting a visceral -- but also probably over-cocky -- sense on the part of artists that creative freedom was antithetical to the existing state of affairs. In June of the same year, the contradictions of Deng's economic "reforms" came to a head, as thousands of students poured into Tiananmen Square protesting inflation, government corruption and censorship, only to be mowed down by tanks.

Some of Yue's Cynical Realist colleagues, like Zhang Xiaogang, were part of the '85 Movement. You can consequently see the direct impact that the disillusionment with the political and cultural events of '89 provoked in their practice (Zhang swerves from a kind of peasant psychedelia towards the detached style of his "Bloodline" series). Yue, on the other hand, graduated directly into this reality. At the top of society, the Communist Party, rather than pursue democratization following Tiananmen, would opt to crack down politically and accelerate its courtship of international investment, calculating that it could buy off sections of society before social instability consumed them.

In 1990, Yue Minjun moved to the Yuanmingyuan Artists Village outside Beijing, growing his hair long in a sort of anti-authoritarian hippy gesture. Yuanmingyuan was emblematic of the post-Tiananmen balance of forces: a sort of commune, harassed by authorities if it became too provocative, but basically off the grid of official Communist ideology, frequented by foreign investors, at first from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and before long attracting international interest and hype -- as early as 1993, the *New York Times* could trumpet of the Yuanmingyuan artists that "Their Irony, Humor (and Art) Can Save China." By then, Yue was already selling paintings to American investment bankers.

The style Yue developed grew out of portraits of his bohemian friends and their lifestyle. His signature grin -- beyond worldly matters, with a laughter seemingly unconnected to whatever was going on -- was explicitly developed to reflect indifference to politics. His mirthless

Yue Minjun
Solar System
2005
Private Collection

Yue Minjun
Contemporary Terracotta Warriors
2005
Collection of Art Van de Lay, Richard Born and Private Collection

Yue Minjun
Hats Series -- Within, Without the Great Wall
2005
Private Collection

Yue Minjun
Untitled

mirth also reflects the confusion of a society where defending "revolutionary values" means defending the values of a virulently conservative bureaucracy. At the same time, it might be taken to reflect the inauthenticity of being cut off from his own culture, performing mainly for foreigners.

Today, Yue's best-selling works, mostly from the '90s, are riffs on Western art history, his laughing self-image merged with imagery from Bacon, Manet, Velazquez, and so on. They are instantly legible to his Western audience. In general, he varies between foregrounding satirical takes on traditional "Chinese" national symbols -- at the QMA, there's the Great Wall, which pops up in one painting, and a painting from a series where he holds up tiny versions of Chinese monuments, not to mention his Terracotta warriors -- and symbols clearly referencing his international status -- at the QMA, one large painting shows two images of himself performing as a pair of Chinese acrobats in front of a towering Statue of Liberty. This shuffling of Eastern and Western symbols reflects the disorienting ideological cocktail of the times, the commitment to anything-goes globalization that has made a backwards Commie regime the toast of boardrooms internationally.

At the same time that Yue was perfecting his Cynical Realism, other Chinese artists were producing "Political Pop" paintings, juxtaposing floating Chairman Mao heads with logos for Coca-Cola and the like. The two styles are integrally connected: "We live in a world of idols," Yue is quoted as saying in a recent Christie's Hong Kong catalogue. "They are everywhere -- [Socialist Realist hero] Lei Feng, [Socialist Realist heroine] Liu Hulan, Michael Jackson, Monroe, Stalin, Picasso. I've discovered that as idols they share one thing in common, which is that they propagate their own image everywhere. All I did was to borrow what they do, reproducing myself as an idol over and over." This point is made graphically at the QMA by a small watercolor, picturing Yue's smiley profile alongside Tin Tin and Garfield -- icons of European and American mass culture, respectively, with a presumably similar ambition.

Yue's style is thus fused to ideas about cartoons, mascots, logos and the like. It is a brand identity, and a successful one (last year, a Bloomberg article on Chinese art noted that hotel and real estate magnate Richard Born collected Yue -- but mainly identified him as the "smiley guy"). This is admittedly true also of Marden's snakey abstractions, Hockney's swimming pools or Ruscha's floating words -- but Yue's work is far more self-consciously aware of this fact, taking it as a mandate for his art.

One group of small canvasses at the QMA, the so-called "Hat" series, pictures Yue's grinning head with a variety of hats -- a chef's hat, a Special Forces beret, the helmet of a British policeman, Catwoman's mask, and so on. The artist tells us that the series is about his "sense of the absurdity of the ideas that govern the sociopolitical protocol surrounding hats," an art-theoretical notion just as radical and intellectually dangerous as Halloween. What the series nicely illustrates, however, is the way Yue's character is universally adaptable, a sort of logo that can be attached to any setting to add value.

The thing about logos is that they don't lend themselves to nuance. They are about providing an instantly legible stamp. It is not surprising then that Yue's paintings look better in reproduction (his watercolors are chunky and slapdash). Inspect the backgrounds, and one finds that they are somewhat perfunctory. The grass in *Hero Here* is not quite finished. The effect of these loosely rendered leaves is not really "painterly" -- it's more as if the artist has only bothered to make the image come together just enough to create the impression of a finish.

2005
Private Collection

Yue Minjun
Untitled No. 13
2006
Private Collection

Paintings from Yue Minjun's "Hat" series installed at the Queens Museum of Art

Paintings from Yue Minjun's "Hat" series installed at the Queens Museum of Art

Yue Minjun
Untitled No. 24
2006
Private Collection

But this is because he does not need to; the truth of Yue's art is in the whole and not in any of the individual works, in the way that, as he says, his grinning self-portraits "propagate their own image everywhere." Yue Minjun's artistic project is less a painterly one than it is a conceptual one about the market, image and self-marketing -- something his successful mass self-fabrication as a sculpture already suggests. The content of his art cannot be separated from its inherent marketability. He is laughing all the way to the bank.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.

Yue Minjun
Hero Here (detail)
2004
Private Collection