


by LU HONG
translated by DAI GUIYU

A HISTORY *of*
CHINESE
CONTEMPORARY
ART

1978—1999

 SCPG Publishing Corporation

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Preface

Lu Hong

Ever since the reform and opening-up, tremendous changes have taken place in China's artistic creation. Considering the new social background and its cultural needs, an array of outstanding artists have conducted groundbreaking artistic experimentation, which not only makes Chinese contemporary art gradually become a new tradition, but also makes it widely recognized by the scholars at home and abroad. This book is aimed to review in an objective and lucid way the growing up and development of this new artistic tradition. The time span in this book is from 1978 to 1999. I had intended to extend it to 2009, but taking the advice of one of my friends who engaged in literary history research, I decided to put off publishing the part of the first decade in the new century so as to set apart some time for the digestion of various materials in this new period. Why does this book start from 1978? In my opinion, without the discussion on the criterion of truth and the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in 1978, Chinese contemporary art would be unable to quickly break through the rigid, stereotypical convention. I have noticed that the second volume of *The History of the Chinese Communist Party*^[1] published in January 2011 stipulates the year of 1978 as the beginning of a new era and the years from 1976 to 1978 as an important transitional period. I really appreciate this way of defining.

This book is based on the amplification of my original book *Crossing Boundaries—Chinese Avant-garde Art: 1979-2004*.^[2] In retrospect, the reason why I originally titled the book as “Crossing Boundaries” is because Chinese contemporary art emerging after the reform and opening-up has transcended the definition and classification imparted by traditional artistic theories, and even explored new areas of artistic creation

including the exploration of new materials, new concepts, new media, new forms and even the exploration of the realms from appreciation of beauty to appreciation of ugliness. The use “Avant-garde Art” was based on some relevant western statements.^[3] In this version, the title is changed into *A History of Chinese Contemporary Art: 1978-1999*, which is based on the following considerations: on the one hand, the replacement of “Avant-garde Art” with “Contemporary Art” is to stay consistent with the appellation in academic circles; on the other hand, the omission of “Crossing Boundaries” is to avoid double titling.

However, the so called “contemporary art” in this book is not just a concept of time, nor a synonym of some specific artistic style, nor a reproduction of contemporary western art in China, but refers to the artistic creation and artistic phenomena occurring in those special periods and relating to China’s specific creating background and artistic issues. Its features lie in the fact that it has remained consistently in the subject frontier and revealed a critical attitude towards the previous mainstream or conventional art. According to the theorist Wu Hong, contemporary art has experimented in the following three aspects: art media, content and exhibiting channels. It is undeniable that if world art history is taken as a reference, many “contemporary art works” in China are not qualified to be put on the “pioneer” and “avant-garde” position^[4] and some even bear the hallmark of imitation, which can easily be found when we visit art museums or read picture albums in other countries. As a result, some people commented that Chinese contemporary art is a reproduction and imitation of western contemporary art. However, I insist that the appearance of Chinese contemporary art works is very meaningful in the light of the specific situations in China because when fully displaying their novel artistic values and creation methods, they have brought dramatic changes to the development of China’s art history. Moreover, it cannot be neglected that Chinese contemporary artists did create many works that are different from the western works through appropriation and creative misreading as well as by referring to history and paying attention to reality. It often occurs that when the “contemporary art” of a specific period fulfilled its historical mission, it would be replaced by the ensuing “contemporary art”. Those two points mentioned above will be further illustrated in the book by connecting with specific creation phenomena.

It should be pointed out that referring the new arts emerged after the reform and opening-up as “contemporary art” is not that accurate. From today’s point of view, from 1978 to 1989, China’s newly emerging art forcefully attacked the previous realism, diligently pursued modernity and used the ideas and techniques of western contemporary art for refer-

ence. It was conducive to initiate a situation of diversification, but, to some extent, also gave rise to the problems like “westernization” and “de-Chineseness”. For that reason, I would rather regard it as “pre-contemporary art”, or rather, China’s “modern art”. Generally speaking, it is a continuous exploration of modern art which once appeared and prevailed in 1920s and 1930s but later halted. At this stage, some individual artists began to detach themselves from the national ideology consciously, trying to shake off the identity affiliated to the nation and creating freely and independently, which obviously was of great significance.

In comparison, Chinese contemporary art from 1990 to 1999 showed more concern for reality and people’s living situation and turned to take the ideas and techniques of western contemporary art as references. In this period, in order to pursue the national and cultural identity, some artists began to exert themselves in solving the problems, such as the national identity of Chinese contemporary art and “re-Chineseness”. Obviously, whether in objectives or ideas and techniques, the artistic creation and phenomena in those two periods are quite different and should not be mixed up together. If examining the relationship between modern art and contemporary art from the perspective of Ilya Kabakov, a Russian installation artist, we could find that the essential difference of the art creations in the two periods lies in their attitude towards artistic languages: the former accentuated the creation of artistic languages while the latter focused on the relationship among artistic languages. Moreover, the former talked about the past or art history, while the later talked about the contemporary time, which is sure to make the creation in those two periods different from each other.¹⁵¹ Therefore, it is reasonable for Mr. Lü Peng to name his two books separately as *A History of Chinese Modern Art: 1979-1989* (co-authored with Yi Dan) and *A History of Chinese Contemporary Art: 1990-1999*.¹⁶¹

Really, from the standpoint of ultra-nationalism, it is easy to believe that the so-called “contemporary art” in China is a relentless separation from the ancestral tradition and a blind imitation of western art; however, if we set it in a specific context and analyze it practically and rigorously, it is not difficult to draw the following conclusions: many young artists in the “pre-contemporary art” stage had the tendency of westernization and even nowadays some artists have the similar problems, but on the whole, most of the artists who engaged in exploring “contemporary art” and drawing lessons from western modern and contemporary art were aimed at breaking the limitation of traditional creation concept and models so as to find new ways of artistic expression. It has been fully proved by practice that most excellent artists, especially those in contemporary period, have not only done

enormous work in critically assimilating and reconstructing western art and in promoting its localization in China, but have also rediscovered modern factors implied in traditional art by means of new concepts, all of which plays a significant role in constructing Chinese contemporary culture. It is on the premise of the above-mentioned ideas that this book will not introduce the art works that were created mainly within the framework of traditional art, including the art works and artistic phenomena that continued or revised the tradition of Chinese classical art and the tradition of socialist realism. If some of them are introduced, it is only for the purpose of supplementing background information.

Another point needs to be stressed is that although I have always hoped to write Chinese contemporary art history in an objective way, the art works and art events occurring in the past thirty years are not only multitudinous and complicated but also fragmentary and incomplete. Therefore, it is beyond my reach to reproduce or reconstruct history across the board. What I can do is to select some related art works, art events and artists to write about on the basis of certain theoretical framework, logical relationship and academic standards. Herodotus, a Greek historian, reputed as “Father of History”, once said, people’s record of history can never obtain the complete “objective authenticity” for it is beyond people’s wisdom. The famous Chinese writer Lao She also said straightforwardly that history is a little girl who can be prettified by everyone. In this sense, this book is at best only an expression of my own understanding of the history of this period.

In addition, since I uphold the academic standards established by the famous American art historian Janson in his compilation of the book—*Important Works in Art History*, I try to abide by those standards in writing this book. The concrete standards proposed by Janson go as follows: “the influence of an art work on the direction of artistic development; its originality among similar works and its representativeness in the trend of artistic culture.”¹⁷¹ In my view, since art history is a continuous question-raising and problem-solving process, any excellent art work that can put forward prospective academic questions and can address relevant ones will not only exert profound influence on the developmental direction of art history, but will also be representative at the same time. As for judging whether the academic problem solved by an artist is of artistic significance or not depends on the comparative study of art history and real cultural context. For example, after the smash of the “Gang of Four”, the most important problem confronting China’s art circle was how to transcend the “ultra-left” creation model and usher in a new artistic era of pluralism and openness. As it turned out, the art world was taking two entirely new directions to solve such a big

problem: one was to emphasize the true presentation, reflection and criticism of history and reality, so as to turn away from the obedient creation mode of singing praises blindly and return to the real “realism”. In this case, there occurred some art works that broke the restricted domain of tradition and exposed and criticized the ugly aspect of life. The other was to emphasize the “independence of formal beauty” and reverse the traditional proposition that “content determines form”. As a result, a new trend of transcending political and literary constraints and pursuing lyricism and noumenon had emerged in artistic creation. The former is represented by a batch of “scar paintings” and “life stream paintings” created by some young artists, while the latter is represented by a batch of works pursuing “formal beauty” created by Wu Guanzhong and other artists. Their emergence has not only brought dramatic change to China’s art history, but also embodied the cultural characteristics of a specific period of time. For the history of art, they are far more meaningful than works that continued the values and styles of the past, and they meet the important criterion that “art history cares about transition, not continuity” (in the words of Arnold Haussel). Therefore, when writing the history of this period, I mainly concentrate on those two directions and select original and pioneering works that have wide academic influence, but with little consideration of other aspects. Frankly speaking, I stick to the same method in my writing of the ensuing periods. If the book was written by another person, the selected art works and events would be undoubtedly different because the focus and standard would vary greatly. No wonder that the famous British art historian Gombrich once sighed that “there are a thousand versions of art history in a thousand historians’ eyes”.^[8] For me, Gombrich’s words also imply that the so-called art history is nothing but certain explanations of the past enforced by art historians. Reflecting from this perspective, we can easily understand why today’s art historians will have different interpretations on the emergence of Chinese contemporary art, sometimes even produce a relatively large controversy. As it turns out, these disputes can only collide with each other, and time will determine the winners and losers.

However, my above-mentioned opinions do not imply that objectivity is not essential in art history writing. I can still remember, three years ago, Professor Peng De wrote in his personal blog that “Restoring history can only be a historian’s personal wish. However, if he doesn’t have the wish at the very beginning, he is certainly not qualified to write history; if he believes that this wish finally comes true through his efforts, then he must be a presumptuous crazy man indulging in history. All works of art history are nothing but the compilation of historic fragments... no matter how big the fragment, it is at best the index of history rather than a complete history.”^[9] Here at least one implication can be interpreted from what

Professor Peng De said. That is, no matter how he himself, as an artistic historian, chooses relevant art works, artistic events and artists according to his understanding of significant academic problems, he must cherish a good will to pursue truth, instead of doing anything against historians' morality by emotions or interests, and even intentionally or unintentionally ignoring artistic works and phenomena of academic influence and significance, or lavishing massive efforts to introduce artistic works and phenomena without any academic influence and significance. I am in full agreement with the opinion of Professor Peng De and I have always stuck to it in my writing. Now I would like to present this book to my fellow scholars and readers for your judgments, and sincerely hope for your instruction and criticism so that I can further carry out related studies in the future.

Of course, I clearly realized, though I have been well prepared for writing this book for more than ten years. That is, when I was learning the method of sorting major works before writing, which was proposed by American art historian Janson^[10], I edited and published in sequence *Illustrated Handbook of Chinese Contemporary Art: 1979-1999* (6 volumes), *Illustrated Handbook of Chinese Contemporary Art in the New Century: 2000-2005*; *Fusion—Illustrated Handbook of Chinese Contemporary Art: 2005-2009*; *Sixty Years of Art in New China: 1949-2009* (two parts); *Collected Edition of Chinese Contemporary Art* (first volume of oil paintings). And I also wrote the book: *Crossing Boundaries—Chinese Avant-garde Art: 1979-2004* by supplying literal explanations to pictures.^[11] Therefore, substantial literal and image data have been accumulated throughout the years. However, today, I still feel it is pretty tough to write a book about Chinese contemporary art. One reason is that our life is so intimate with contemporary art that it's hard to observe it objectively with dispassion and composure; another reason is that during the evolution of Chinese contemporary art, several dramatic changes of cultural background (e.g., changing from anti-traditionalism to anti-west centralism and from the pursuit of modernity to the reflection of modernity, etc.) caused quite a few artists to make significant adjustments in artistic creations. If we analyze the issues only from superficial phenomena, it's very difficult to describe the inconsistent change clearly, not to mention to define it. Out of respecting historical facts, this book will seek to reconstruct situations of problems faced by artists, so as to address their artistic issues and provide solutions in a logical and precise manner based on specific situations. Moreover, with a view to respecting the "effect history", I will try to choose representative artists and works as the objects of my description from important creative phenomena whose academic influence or "objective effect" has been impressive in artistic circle. Just

as Gadamer said, the principle of “effect history” has already stipulated the academic issues deserving our attention and research in advance, which is much more meaningful than selecting artists and art works according to inane aesthetics and philosophy. I believe it’s likely for us to deal well with artists and art works of real significance in art history as long as we carefully study the artistic issues implied in “effect history” on the basis of clues provided by art history and contemporary culture. However, it’s a pity that the ability to respect the principle of “effect history” is one thing while the way to master it is quite another. I hope the readers can understand that it’s hard not to miss some points in light of my limited perspective, academic level and collected data. As this book is not a complete edition of Chinese contemporary art, the readers have to check relevant information if wishing to have a fuller and deeper understanding of the artistic creation of an artist in a certain period ^[12].

It’s also of great importance to know that Although Chinese contemporary art started from reversing the “art of the cultural revolution” and the realistic creation mode, the revolutionary cultural tradition since Yan’an, especially the socialist cultural tradition before the reform and opening up, has been exerting a profound influence on the emerging Chinese art and many artists. This is undoubtedly the basic condition for us to understand Chinese current culture, society, politics and even contemporary art. If this can be grasped effectively, not only can the connection between history and reality be strengthened, but also inherent development logic of Chinese contemporary art can be uncovered, and then the features of the emerging Chinese art can be highlighted and distinguished from Western contemporary art. That is what I overlooked when I wrote *Crossing Boundaries—Chinese Avant-garde Art: 1979-2004*. Therefore, I pay a lot of attention to that in writing this book.

Some explanations need to be made here:

First, placing an artist in a specific time period is considered in terms of the outstanding performance of the artist’s artistic activities and works. But in the specific writing he will not be restricted by a specific time period, that is, sometimes he will be combined with the situation of different periods before and after the comprehensive analysis.

Second, the book unfolds around two clues: text part and picture part. They are designed to complement each other and all pictures are equipped with captions, which help facilitate readers to read. In other words, those who have no time to read the part of pure texts can read the part of pictures with captions first, even can start from any page, and later return to the part of pure text if having time. Undoubtedly, it is a kind of post-modern way of reading and it might be more suitable for us in the era of fast tempo. It must be stressed that a few

captions have already existed in the text part and a few are enriched with more information, but most captions don't exist in the text part because they are written specially in relation to the pictures.

Third, in order to enable readers to have a full picture of relevant works, this book introduces some artists' resumes in connection with their works.^[13] If the works of the same artist are introduced in the following chapters, his resume will not be repeated. On few pages, the artists' resumes are moved to next page due to lack of enough space. Besides, this book mainly focuses on introducing the emerging art, so the resumes of few artists outside this art category are not presented here.

Fourth, it is regrettable that some pictures in the book are poor in quality as they were reproduced from long-ago periodicals.

Fifth, due to the fact that some remapped pictures of works in publications and some pictures provided by artists fail to indicate the creation time and materials of works, the text introduction of works cannot be standardized.

Sixth, the works in each section are basically arranged according to the year of creation, but the works in several sections are arranged according to categories.

Seventh, in several chapters of this book, some articles and books written by me and Mr. Sun Zhenhua are invoked. I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. Sun Zhenhua. Finally, I'd like to express my heartfelt thanks to all artists and critics who kindly provided information and pictures. Without their generous support, it's beyond imagination to complete the writing and publish the book. Originally there were more artists and art works listed in the illustration part of the book, but due to the limitation of space, their works did not appear in the book finally. For these artists I sincerely apologize. I also wish to take this opportunity to extend my warm thanks to the leadership and the editor Xu Ke of Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House for giving me this precious publishing opportunity, to Shenzhen Publicity and Cultural Development Fund, to Mr. Wan Jie and Artron Art Group, to Ms. Xu Litian for their substantial support; to my teacher Professor Tang Yiming for his writing the preface of this book; to Mr. Li Bangyao, Mr. Feng Feng, Mr. Wang Xiaoding, Ms Liu Yuan, my wife Yang Kening and my son Ru Yang who have done a lot for the publication of the book; to all the friends who have given me generous help.

The first draft written in Shenzhen Art Museum on February 26, 2010

The final draft finished at home in Shenzhen Bao'an district on April 8, 2013

Notes

- [1] Published by History of the Communist Party of China Publishing House.
- [2] *China Avant-garde Art: 1979-2004-Crossing Boundaries* was published by Hebei Fine Arts Press in 2006 and appeared in the ranking list of Beijing joint publishing company LTD in September of the same year. It was again published with the title *China Avant-garde Art 1978-2008* published by China's Taiwan Artists Press in August, 2011, with the content slightly added and deleted.
- [3] As shown by the available information, the notion of "avant-garde-art" can be traced back to French utopian socialist Henry Saint-Simon who insisted, in his late theory, that the avant-garde art should become the leadership of a good society. After his death, his followers made great and promising efforts to influence radical practitioners in the field of fine arts, literature, music etc. and further developed his theory and spread the notion of "avant-garde art" outside France, making it influential worldwide. Generally speaking, in the arena of world art, "Avant-garde Art" is often used to refer particularly to relatively advanced, off-beat, marginalized and radically explorative works and phenomena, and it always stood as powerful backlash against previous mainstream art. (Donald Egbert, "Avant-garde Art in Art and Politics", in *History of Art and History of Ideas*, Nanjing Normal University Press in 2003.)
- [4] Chinese words "Xian Feng" and "Qian Wei" are both translated from "Avant-Garde".
- [5] *Visual Arts in 20th Century*, China Renmin University Press, April 2007, p. 3.
- [6] Lü Peng & Yi Dan, *A History of China Modern Art: 1979-1989*, Hunan Fine Arts Press, 1992; Lü Peng, *A History of China Contemporary Art: 1990-1999*, Hunan Fine Arts Press, 2000.
- [7] *Art Education: A Critical Necessity*, Sichuan People's Publishing House, October 1998, p. 89.
- [8] Cao Yiqiang, *Art and History*, China Academy of Art Publishing House, 2001.
- [9] "Artintern", in Peng De's blog, September 7, 2009.
- [10] The famous art historian Janson has always listed out an accessible content of artistic templates before writing art history. For that reason, he selected thousands of art works and collected them into the book *The Important Works in Art History*. His work fully proved: art works with significant artistic values are indispensable and important materials for writing art history, and the sorting of them is beneficial for art historians to explore important art issues and writing framework. I have also managed to do the same work. (See *Art Education: The Necessity of Criticism*, p. 89, Sichuan People's Publishing House, October 1998)
- [11] Lu Hong (ed.), *Illustrated Handbook of Chinese Contemporary Art: 1979-1999* (6 volumes), Hubei Education Press, 2001; Lu Hong (ed.), *Illustrated Handbook of Chinese Contemporary Art in the New*

Century : 2000-2005, Hunan Fine Arts Press, 2006; Lu Hong (ed.), *Fusion-Illustrated Handbook of Chinese Contemporary Art: 2005-2009*, Hebei Education Press, 2009; Lu Hong (ed.), *Sixty Years of Art in New China 1949-2009 (two parts)*, Hebei Fine Arts Press, 2009; Lu Hong (ed.), *Complete Works of Chinese Contemporary Art (First Volume of Oil Paintings)*, Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy Press, 2010; Lu Hong, *Crossing Boundaries—China Avant-garde Art: 1979-2004*, Hubei Fine Arts Press, 2006.

- [12] With regard to the specific standard in selecting art works, I normally follow the following points: first, whether art works can raise the most sensitive and essential issues in contemporary culture; second, whether the issues posed in art work are extracted from Chinese history and social context rather than simply transferred and imitated from western works; third, whether art works employ the sinicized visual experience, such as the use of Chinese symbols and images in expression to highlight national identity; fourth, whether art works are expressed in a wise way; fifth, whether there is creativity in the language of art works. However, the standard for measuring the above questions should be considered in specific cultural contexts and according to specific works through the method of comparison and analysis.
- [13] As the resumes or birth dates of a few artists cannot be found, we have no choice but to leave them blank. In addition, we can only present the given and accessible information about the artists' work addresses and professional titles, some of which may have been changed but unknown by us.

Contents

Part I

Backwash of the “Ultra-left” Artistic Creation Mode 1978-1984

Chapter One A Brief and Important Review

1. The “Cultural Revolution Art” as an Important Context 2
2. A Sudden Change in Artistic Climate and the Brisk Rise of Mass Cartoon Campaign 4
3. The Turn of Creation in the New Political Context 6

Chapter Two Changes Brought about by Ideological Emantion Movement

1. The Art Circle in a Crucial Transitional Period 10
2. Folk Art Organization and New Ways of Exhibition 12
3. “12 People’s Art Exhibition” in Shanghai 14
4. The Stars Art Exhibition 16
5. Wang Keping 19
6. Beijing Oil Painting Society 21

Chapter Three Return to True Realism

1. Relevant Background 23
2. “Scar Art” 25
3. “Local Realism” or “Life Stream” Art 30
4. Luo Zhongli 34
5. Chen Danqing 37
6. He Duoling 40

Chapter Four New Patterns towards Diversification

1. Discussion around “Formal Beauty” 44
2. Wu Guanzhong 47
3. The Airport Murals and Yuan Yunsheng 50
4. Artistic Creation as Common Practice 54
5. Zhou Shaohua 56

Part II

Quest for Artistic Modernization 1985-1989

Chapter One Relevant Background

1. The Transient “Spiritual Pollution Clearance” Movement 62
2. From “The 6th National Art Exhibition” to “Huangshan Conference” 64
3. “International Youth Art Exhibition” as a Turning Point 66
4. A New Look of Mass Medium and the Emergence of New Academic Community 72

Chapter Two The Unstoppable “85 New Wave”

1. The Thriving Young Artists Group 78
2. Philosophical Trend 82
3. The Northern Artists Group 87
4. “New Figurative Painting” and “The Southwestern Art Research Group” 91
5. Mao Xuhui 93
6. “Large-Scale Modern Art Exhibition” in Jiangsu and “Red · Brigade” 96
7. “85 New Space Art Exhibition” and “Chishe Society” 100
8. Zhang Peili 103
9. “Youth Art Festival” in Hubei and “Tribe — Tribe” 107
10. Fu Zhongwang 111
11. Introduction to Other Youth Groups and Youth Art Exhibitions 114

Chapter Three Astonishing Alternative Art

1. Prevalence of Rebel Aesthetics 117
2. Huang Yongping and “Xiamen Dada” 120
3. Wu Shanzhuan and *Red Humour* 124
4. Xu Bing and *Analysis of the World View* 127
5. Introduction to Other Youth Group and Youth Art Exhibitions 130

Chapter Four Embarrassed Modern Ink Painting

1. The Difficulty of Transitional Ink Painting 136

2. Invitation Exhibition of Chinese Painting in Hubei	137
3. The Shock Caused by Li Xiaoshan	141
4. Issues of the “New Literati Painting”	146
5. The Great Breakthrough of Gu Wenda	150
6. The Budding of Expressive Ink Painting	154
7. The Springing Up of Abstract Ink Painting	158
8. Reference to Folk Art	161

Chapter Five New Creation Phenomenon and Problems Caused by the New Wave Art

1. Dialogue between the “Purified Language” and the “Great Soul”	165
2. The Rise of Classical Style	169
3. The Emergence of Chinese Abstract Art	173
4. The Exhibition of “New Academism” in Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts and Relevant Opinions	177

Chapter Six “China Modern Art Exhibition”

1. “Zhuhai Conference” and Proposal of an Initiative	182
2. Difficult Preparations for the Exhibition	184
3. The Harbinger of Creative Turn	186
4. The Twists and Turns of “China Modern Art Exhibition”	188
5. The Convening of Related Conferences	191
6. Two Gunshots that Shocked the World	194

Part III

Sociological Turn of Chinese Contemporary Art 1990-1999

Chapter One Great Transformation of Cultural Context

1. Receding to Low Ebb	198
2. “Post 89 Art”	201
3. The Advent of International Opportunities and Related Discussions	205
4. “Art — Market” and the Guangzhou Biennale	208
5. Free Artists and the Artists’ Village of Old Summer Palace	214
6. New Exhibitions and Publication Methods	218
7. Art Media in the 90s	220

Chapter Two Establishing a New Direction of Painting

1. Pop Painting	225
2. Wang Guangyi	230
3. Zhang Xiaogang	234
4. The New Generation Painting	236
5. Liu Xiaodong	242
6. The Cynical Realistic Painting	245
7. Fang Lijun	248
8. Yue Minjun	252
9. New Expressive Painting	256
10. Shang Yang	258
11. Zhou Chunya	261
12. Zeng Fanzhi	264
13. Super Realistic Painting	267
14. Gaudy Painting	272
15. Abstract Painting	275

Chapter Three A New Trend of Sculpture Creation

1. Relevant Background	279
2. Two Influential Sculpture Exhibitions	281
3. The Diversification in Sculpture Creation	285
4. Sui Jianguo	291
5. Zhan Wang	294

Chapter Four Increasingly Popular “Alternative Art”

1. Installation Art Toward Maturity	298
2. The Controversial Performance Art	302
3. The East Village and the Tendency of Body Performance	306
4. The Birth of Video Art	310
5. Several Influential Work Teams	314
6. Wang Jianwei	320
7. Liang Shaoji	324
8. Song Dong	326

Chapter Five Chinese Way of Female Art

1. Relevant Background 329
2. Important Exhibitions and Publications of Female Art 331
3. Introduction to Female Artists' Works 334
4. Yin Xiuzhen 341
5. Lin Tianmiao 344
6. Jiang Jie 346

Chapter Six Reshuffled Modern Ink

1. New Challenges to Modern Ink Painting 349
2. Discussions on Modern Ink Painting 352
3. Series of “The Trend of Modern Chinese Ink Painting in the Late 20th Century” and the Abstract Ink Paintings 359
4. Exhibition of “Tension Experiment” and Expressive Ink Paintings 363
5. Exhibition of “Entering the City” and Concern with Reality 366
6. Diversified Artistic Pursuit 369

Chapter Seven Reflection on Chinese Contemporary Art

1. The Trap of Imitation 372
2. The Opacity of Over Interpretation 373
3. The Elitist Misunderstanding 375
4. The Importance of Wisdom 380
5. Re-Sinicization of Chinese Contemporary Art 381

Chapter Five

Chinese Way of Female Art

1. Relevant Background

omitted

omitted

The female artist Zhang Xin's installation *Climate No. 5* were the busts of the ancient

Greek poet Sappho and the American singer Madonna sculptured with ice. When the ice sculpture melted, two pairs of red panties were revealed, each with a brief introduction of two female celebrities. The work suggested that as female celebrities, both Sappho and Madonna would disappear someday, but the problems faced by women in different eras and regions are eternal.

omitted

Editor Xu Ke Xia Qingqi
Designer Lu Yang Liu Yalan Li Ting
Reviewer Li Xingfu



Lu Hong
Professor, Sichuan Fine Arts Institute
Executive Director of United Art Museum



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The History of Chinese Contemporary Art 1978-1999 serves as an open window through which contemporary art lovers can see the history and development of Chinese contemporary art in the recent twenty years. The book is authored by a Chinese well-known scholar Lu Hong. The author provides an accessible, focused, and much-needed narrative of the development of Chinese art across all media from 1978 to 1999, a time span characterized by radically social, political, and economic changes in China. The chapters in the book follow a chronological order Backwash of the “Ultra-left” Artistic Creation Mode (1978-1984), Quest for Artistic Modernization (1985-1989), and Sociological Turn of Chinese Contemporary Art (1990-1999). Each chapter focuses on important issues and art movements in China, as well as includes a brief introduction of the historical events and a detailed review of the significant artists and their body of works. The book is a richly illustrated and easily navigated for both Chinese and international readers.

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