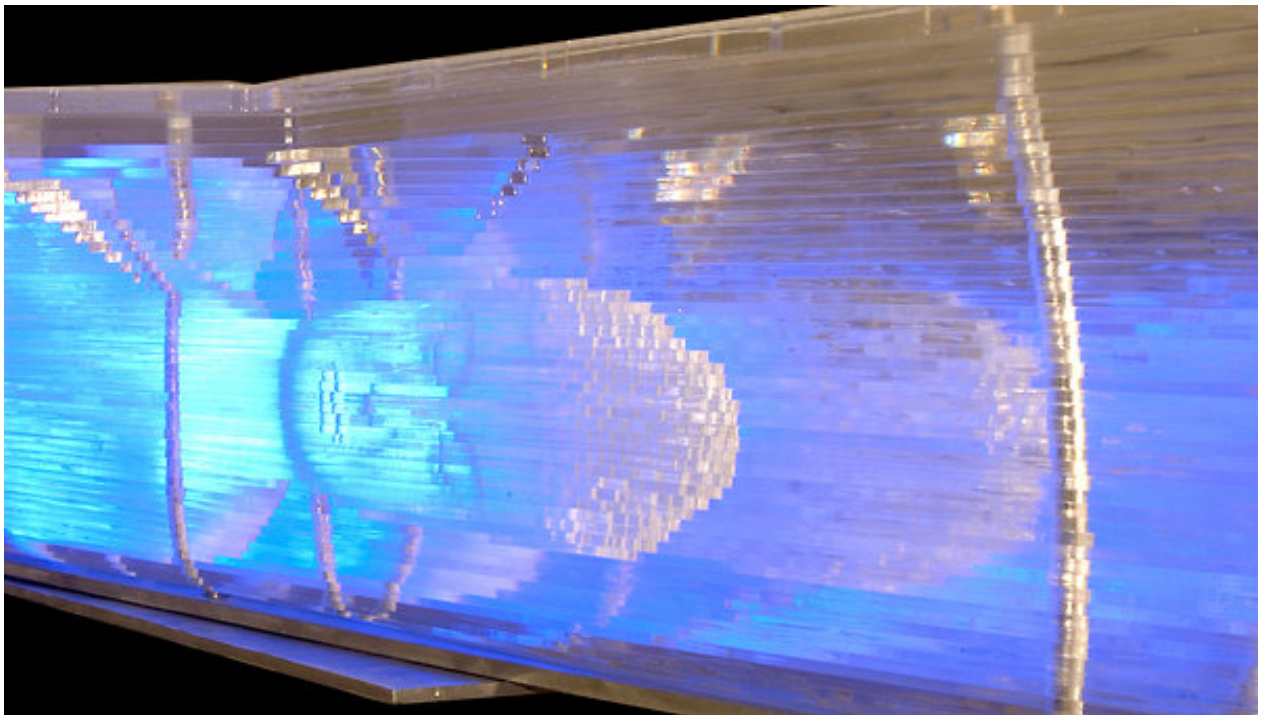


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# Chinese Sculptors' Exploration of Ancient Traditions Sparks Artistic Rebirth

By KEVIN HOLDEN PLATT



Li Hui's "Buddhist Altar" features the binary themes of war and peace.

BEIJING — A generation after Chairman Mao Zedong set out to destroy China's millennia-old artistic and religious traditions — in part by razing temples, closing art schools and sending artists and Buddhist priests to re-education camps — a new wave of sculptors here has begun tapping surviving remnants of classical Chinese civilization to create experimental artworks.

The process of exploring ancient beliefs and art, they say, is aimed not only at resurrecting pieces of China's past but also at helping spark a widening cultural renaissance.

Tang Yuhan, born in 1985, nearly a decade after Mao's passing marked the close of the Cultural Revolution, said that she and other young artists have started sifting through the centuries to transmute some aspects of classical culture into "art for the new generation."

In an upcoming exhibition of her works at Gallery Yang in eastern Beijing, Ms. Tang will transform the space through precisely placed works like "Flowing Water," where sunlit raindrops seem to defy gravity to fall on the ceiling, and "Heaven and Earth," an otherworldly solar system where blue

planets and orange asteroids orbit an invisible sun. Her goal is to create a space that is in perfect balance according to the 2,500-year-old principles of the I Ching, or the Book of Changes, which provides guidance on how to navigate a cosmic web of links between heaven, earth and humanity.

“We can use the I Ching and the related concepts of feng shui not only to divine the future but also to change our individual destiny, and that is my aim with these works,” said Ms. Tang, a recent graduate of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

From ancient times, she said, this philosophy has been tied to the arts. In centuries past, feng shui masters aimed to channel good fortune through a palace by placing talismanic sculptures of mythical creatures in the most propitious places.

“I admire the mystery of this ancient culture but want to play with its rules,” she said. In the future, Ms. Tang added, she would like to experiment with creating a massive feng shui work that she hopes could be powerful enough to stop two countries at war.

War and peace are binary themes in an acrylic and neon work by another sculptor, Li Hui, whose “Buddhist Altar” features a glowing blue Buddha encased in a transparent aircraft carrier. The work “represents the conflicting idea of going to war in the name of religion, or a clash of cultures,” he said.

Since graduating from the Central Academy, China’s leading art school, nearly a decade ago, Mr. Li, who was born in 1977, has turned out sculptures and installations that revolve around Buddhist concepts, including one that incorporates an array of orange-red lasers in a piece titled “Reincarnation.”

“The movement of the laser light is like the soul passing through the sky,” he mused. “Art has always been connected with religion, from the ancient sculptures of the Greeks to Chinese Buddhist icons.”

Yet Mr. Li said his presentation of ancient Buddhist precepts in works that incorporate lasers and fog machines has attracted a far wider audience abroad than inside China. In the last two years, for example, his works have been shown in solo exhibitions at the Mannheimer Kunstverein in Germany and at the Light Art Museum in the Netherlands.

In China, he said, “government-run museums do not recognize these works as art” because they translate classical concepts of Chinese civilization using new media. These state-run museums still dominate the People’s Republic, and most are still walled off from contemporary artists, he added.

The Beijing-based curator Bérénice Angremy said Chinese government policies on contemporary art were in a constant state of flux, but added that the authorities still sporadically resorted to banning or closing down exhibitions on experimental art that they found objectionable.

Professor Sui Jianguo, who is a sculptor and until recently headed the sculpture department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, said that state control over Chinese culture dates from more than 2,200 years ago.

The first emperor of a unified China, Qin Shi Huang, cemented his rule over Chinese civilization from 221-210 B.C. by banning and burning books and by burying hundreds of dissident scholars alive, according to records compiled by an imperial court scribe a century later.

During the terror-filled twilight of Mao’s reign, as his Red Guards raided Tibetan temples and the homes of “bourgeois” collectors of art who had somehow survived previous purges, the Great

Helmsman bragged that he had far surpassed the first emperor in terms of burying scholars and burning books.

At that time, some sculptors managed to hold onto their freedom by cloning Mao in stone, with countless copies of the Great Leader's statue deployed to stand sentinel over China's citizenry and culture. These Mao icons were virtually the only sculptures produced during the Cultural Revolution, Mr. Sui noted.

Mao's death triggered a series of youth-led calls for greater political and cultural freedom; these protests culminated at Tiananmen Square in 1989, when young sculptors erected a luminous "Goddess of Democracy" to face off against Mao's portrait above the Tiananmen Gate. This statue was crushed by tanks deployed to clear the square of protesters on June 4, 1989.

Mr. Sui, who graduated from the Central Academy in 1989, said: "June fourth was a tragedy that triggered a period of disillusionment across the arts."

These days at the academy, Mr. Sui said, sculpture novices study classical Greek sculptures, Michelangelo, Rodin and a spattering of contemporary conceptual works, along with 2,000 years of Chinese Buddhist icons. In his own sculptures, Mr. Sui has highlighted the West's influence on China's cultural metamorphosis. To memorialize China's jerky transition from the Age of Mao to the Age of the Internet, he has recreated a series of classical Western sculptures and adorned them in Mao jackets.

A version of one of Michelangelo's works, after being reborn in Mr. Sui's sculpture studio, retains the name "Dying Slave" while outfitted in the Mao gear.

In the run-up to Beijing's hosting the Olympic Games in 2008, Mr. Sui similarly transformed the classical Greek "Discobolus"; the work is set to join an exhibition at the British Museum from June 1 to Sept. 9 on a series of discus throwers sculpted through the ages to mark London's staging of the 2012 Olympics.

Meanwhile, Mr. Sui said that despite the new exploration of ancient Chinese culture and an explosion of exchanges with the West, he still could not predict when a full-fledged renaissance would begin transforming modern China, though he is certain it is on the horizon. A wide rebirth of the arts, he added, will not succeed until artists gain the power to shape the collective creative space and their individual destinies.

For Li Hui, there cannot be real change until state-run museums dismantle their walls of resistance to displaying the works of contemporary Chinese artists.

Fellow artists who transmute ancient images and ideas into experimental artworks include the Tibetan Gonkar Gyatso, who produces installations and prints of multicolored Buddhas surrounded by tiny airplanes and clouds. And Huang Rui, co-founder of the capital's 798 Art District, is exhibiting through March 31 an array of 64-sided, black-and-white polyhedrons, covered with the I Ching's 64 hexagrams, at The Opposite House gallery in the trendy Sanlitun district of Beijing. The installation is set to travel to the Lille art festival in October, said Ms. Angremy, who will curate the exhibit. She noted that inside China, Mr. Huang's works are blocked from entering many government-run museums.

Robert Bernell, the founder of the Hong Kong-based Timezone 8, which has been at the forefront of publishing books on the evolution of contemporary Chinese art, said a new generation of Chinese artists reaching back into classical Chinese civilization for inspiration reflected the expanding range of freedoms that mark the post-Mao era.

While Mr. Bernell agrees with the common assessment among Chinese artists that Mao's rule gave rise to a dark age of Chinese art, he offers an alternative view on the timing of a cultural rebirth here. It could be argued, he said, that "June fourth ignited the Chinese renaissance in the sense that it destroyed any remaining faith in the system."