

# HOT POT: A TASTE OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

Brattleboro Museum and Art  
Center  
10 Vernon Street  
Brattleboro, Vermont

Through June 23

Walking into the spacious main hall at Brattleboro Museum and Art Center where “Hot Pot” is being shown throughout the spring, I was struck by the perfect match of artwork and venue. The many large works, making even larger statements, are allowed full breathing room.



Liu Bolin, *Hiding in New York No.3 Magazine Rack*, 2011, photograph, 46.5" x 59".

“Hot Pot” refers to a traditional Chinese dish made up of many ingredients, each of which keeps its distinctive qualities. It serves as a perfect metaphor, said curator Mara Williams, for “the art of China today in all its complexity and variety.” Williams has provided thoughtful and instructive comments alongside the artwork, adding depth to a delectable show at BMAC that is both sensual and cerebral.

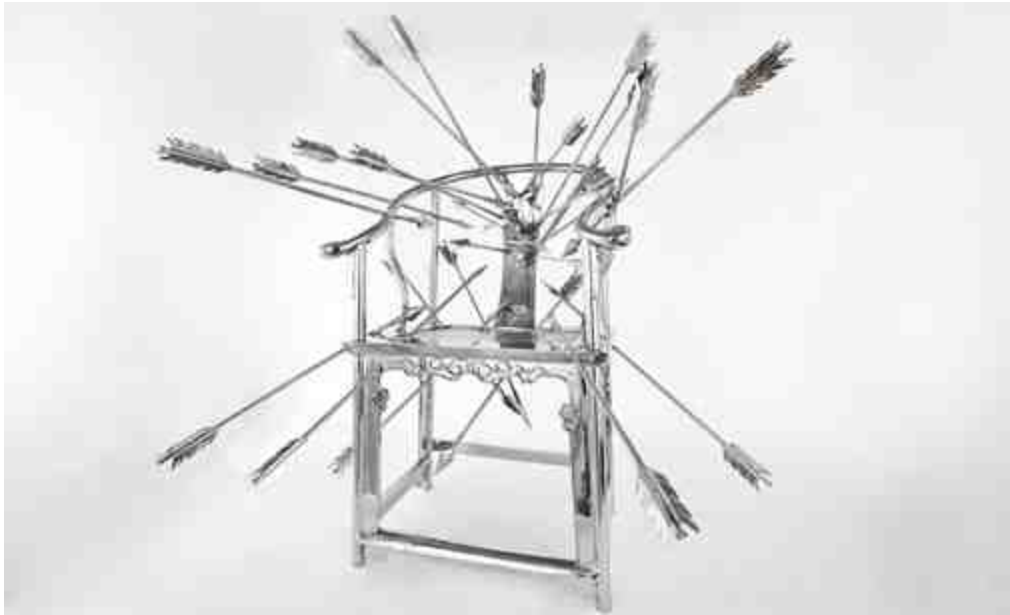
If you are looking for the ideals that have been a part of Chinese art for many centuries — beauty and harmony — you will be hard-pressed to find them here ... at least not as the primary point. Nor will you find the stock, bland art of China’s recent past. “Hot Pot” evinces a true “cultural revolution” by offering artist-centered work liberated from a top-down set of rules.

In fact, several pieces in the show aim their slings and arrows at the Central Committee, if not Chairman Mao himself — in the case of “Chairman’s Chair” by Liao Yibai, literally so, with its sleek stainless steel arrows piercing a stainless steel chair whence ruled the power elite.

Zhong Biao’s large work in acrylic and charcoal on canvas titled “Paradise” meets you head-on as you enter. It depicts several figures in running gear, one wearing headphones; another group of young people in leather jackets amble by with bemused, “cool” expressions, looking directly at the artist (or viewer). In the foreground, a man in Communist Party garb presses hands together in glee, perhaps clapping, looking smug and pleased. We are compelled to ask, “Is this the ‘paradise’ the Party wished for?” Though I found its message somewhat ambiguous (who is more foolish — the clapping Communist leader or the oblivious young people so involved in their individual pursuits?) “Paradise” is compelling. It puts an absurdist spin on the very notion of a political grand plan.

Much of the work in “Hot Pot” reflects on the extreme dislocation felt in China today, both literally — as cities are torn up, torn down and rebuilt while new dams obliterate multiple villages — and psychologically, as traditions are jettisoned.

Zhang Dali’s “Demolition Series,” composed of three pieces that take up all of one wall, confronts this fact of Chinese urban life. “Demolition 1998” is a photograph of a building’s punched-through wall, the missing section in the shape of a human



Liao Yibai, *Chairman's Chair*, 2011, stainless steel, 55.6" x 52.5" x 65.5."

head in profile. The middle piece, "Dialogue 2008" shows the same profile spray-painted on canvas as a simple linear design, with a Basquiat-esque graffiti feel. The third piece, a photograph titled "Demolition 1999," again shows an old plaster wall with the punched-out profile. This time, however, a figure, probably the artist, is perched in its cavity atop a store mannequin's naked torso. On his forehead is written "AK47." Mara Williams' text for the series asks, "What does it mean to

be a member of an ancient culture going through urban renewal on an unprecedented scale?"

Along this same theme, in a small side room where videos and photographs from the show are installed, I was mesmerized by Xi Le's video titled "Water Can." A green sprout struggles to push up, rising slowly out of a watering can. Soon, a dark shape appears behind it, its abrupt lines and angles indicating a built structure.



Liu Bolin, *Hiding In The City No. 71 Bulldozer*, photograph, 46.5" x 59", 2008.



Zhang Dali, *Demolition*, 1999, photograph, 43.5" x 30.75".

It grows until it overtakes the sprout, obliterating it. But our brave sprout has not been defeated — it has retreated into the water can. Finally, it once again pushes up and out while the dark building disappears. Then the whole thing starts over.

Brattleboro's own Xi Cai has a wryly humorous installation called Pink Slip Project, relating to her experience of receiving a "pink slip" from the school district where she worked, notifying her that her job was about to be terminated. A riff on the disorienting experience of being in a new culture, with its code words and symbols one might not be privy to, Pink Slip Project has several panels covered in Chinese style pink slippers, hung with silk pink lingerie. Running along it, like ticker tape, is the text of her notice.

Liu Bolin's "Invisible Man" series graces the large middle room at BMAC. Bolin had himself photographed in front of various landscapes and scenes that are emblematic of the particular culture he inhabits (here, primarily China and New York). An assistant literally paints him into the background, making him recede into it and, to the observer, disappear.

China is an important player — arguably the most important player — on the world stage right now. These young Chinese artists are sensitive to current trends in contemporary art. But this is no copycat show. These artists have absorbed international styles, making them distinctively theirs and relevant to what they have to say.

| Arlene Distler