

Review

by Louise Martin-Chew



VIBRANT ... Fang Lijun's oil on canvas.

The China Project

**Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane
Until June 28
Incorporating Three Decades: The
Contemporary Chinese
Collection/William Yang: Life
Lines/Zhang Xiaogang: Shadows
in the Soul**

AUSTRALIA'S engagement with China has been front page news lately, with the friendships of government ministers and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's private meeting with a Chinese high official acknowledging China's influence as the superpower in our region. Cultural policy reflects those interests and relationships and impacts on our cultural choices. However, Chinese contemporary art has also captured the world stage in recent years, with its vibrant insights reflecting massive social and economic change the likes of which most countries do not experience. Contemporary art from this period captures what Geremie Barme describes in the catalogue for *The China Project* as the "covert artistic vitality" of China.

The Queensland Art Gallery has actively collected from the art brought to Australia from China for the Asia-Pacific Triennial since 1993, in addition to commissioning works from particular artists.

The resulting collection of Chinese contemporary art over three decades is without precedent in Australia, contrasting and complementing the Art Gallery of New South Wales's historical Chinese collection.

This exhibition provides significant food for thought about the history, relationships and events which have

taken place in a country with extraordinary energy and resources. It also demonstrates the dominance of tradition in Chinese painting. The works both reject this tradition yet acknowledge its role.

Some of the social realist works from the late 1980s and 1990s appear, like much highly political art, as a historical anachronism, while effectively evoking the time. Wang Wenhai's *Mao Zedong and Mao Zedong (2003)*, commemorates the achievements and atrocities of this deified Chinese leader. While Mao has been superseded in China, this larger than life sculpture resonates with the ongoing "resilient authoritarianism" coined by Sinologist Andrew Nathan. Many of the other works, which had such large presence in the Asia-Pacific Triennials in which they appeared, remain strong and dignified. The hang gives solemnity and presence to Xu Bing's *A book from the sky (1987-91)*, and the performance art and video is compelling viewing. The commissioned wall, *China Red* by Wang Qingsong, is a parable of the overwhelming commercialisation of modern China.

Zhang Xiaogang's solo exhibition gives depth to his well-known family portraits and William Yang's work signifies the contribution made by Chinese-Australians to our history. The next chapter, with a significant contemporary edge, will be work by a new generation to be shown at QCA Gallery's *Sichuan Hot! New painting from Chongqing City, China* from July 17 this year. The paintings to be included suggest that the aesthetic juggernaut we have experienced from China in recent decades has not waned.