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Artists Test Limits as China Lets (a Few) Flowers Bloom

By IAN JOHNSON and SKY CANAVES

BEIJING -- When Qiu Zhijie organized a show of fellow young artists in the basement of a suburban Beijing apartment complex a decade ago, police burst in and closed it after just one day. Contemporary art was taboo, and Mr. Qiu was especially provocative, with installations that mocked China's rising consumerism.

Today, Mr. Qiu is as active as ever. His current project looks at the costs of China's 60 years of communism by contrasting the official, heroic history of a giant bridge over the Yangtze River with the span's role as China's top place for suicides.

But there's a key difference: Mr. Qiu is now a member of the Chinese cultural establishment. He has a senior teaching post at the National Academy of Art in Hangzhou. And unlike the old days, exhibitions of his works now fill large halls, staying up for weeks, not hours.

Few art scenes have been as whiplashed by change as China's. As the People's Republic begins a week of celebrations Thursday to mark its 60th anniversary, the country's often-edgy contemporary artists are a proxy for the country's fast-changing political landscape.

First forced to glorify the state, artists across genres were once ostracized. More recently, their work has emerged as one of the few bright lights in China's otherwise staid cultural scene. The National Day celebrations are highlighting China's artistic successes -- its sparkling new concert houses and theaters, cinemas and prolific publishing houses.

Even now, though, few artists actually produce works that reflect the issues of the day or can compete on the international stage. And most are still limited by censorship. Every movie studio, theater, music house, publisher and publication in China is either directly owned by the state or subject to state guidelines.

Contemporary art -- paintings, installations and other works produced in the present day -- is a bright exception. The sector has thrived in part because it almost by definition reaches only an elite few. Yet its success is also due to the persistence of a handful of artists -- and to the party's willingness to let at least some flowers bloom.

That says a lot about the skittishness of the Communist Party at 60. As it strives to build a modern, flourishing country -- including vibrant creative industries -- the party is hamstrung by a desire to limit

the populace's access to free expression.

Even with the nation's art-market bubble slowly deflating, Chinese contemporary artists command high prices at international auctions. Most Chinese cities have art districts, such as Beijing's 798, a former factory complex turned into galleries, cafes and bookstores. A majority of the visitors are Chinese, and contemporary art is a topic of conversation at many parties and dinners.

"Most great artists around the world are socially engaged," says Karen Smith, a Beijing-based historian and author specializing in modern Chinese art. "In China, it's just taken a bit longer to get here."

That's a big change from 30 years ago, when contemporary art was emerging from decades of repression under the tight control policies of Communist China's first leader, Mao Zedong. Mao had issued explicit instructions on how art was to serve the party. Artists were told to copy the Soviet Union's "socialist realism" style or make pale imitations of traditional Chinese landscapes, mostly for export.

The period of stagnation ended when Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, took over. His economic reforms and looser social controls resulted in an outburst of creativity. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the art scene percolated.

But art was largely kept from the view of the masses. A handful of exhibitions took place, but most art was created in living rooms and exhibited for a few hundred aficionados. Many of these were foreigners, especially diplomats and journalists who lived China.

"Chinese art of that time was a mirror for how Westerners saw Chinese society," says Weng Ling, one of China's first art-gallery owners, who now heads the Beijing Center for the Arts.

Many of China's most famous contemporary artists began to produce their best-known works during this period. Zhang Xiaogang began in the 1990s to paint his signature portraits of blank-faced families. Fang Lijun produced ironic paintings of large, bald-headed men yawning. Yue Minjun drew inanelly laughing men. Dubbed "cynical realism," the paintings seemed to capture the artists' boredom with contemporary China's rush toward materialism.

Unlike other creative types, contemporary artists were relatively immune from government pressure. They lived on the margins of society -- many in villages outside Beijing that were occasionally raided by police. But they didn't have to rely on China's government-controlled publishing houses, cinemas or theaters to reach their audience. Few in China knew who they were, but they could create and were beginning to attract international attention. Art exhibitions began to invite them, and foreign galleries gave them solo shows.

The turning point inside China occurred in 2001, when the government began warming to independent artists. The exact reason isn't known; Chinese cultural officials declined to discuss the policy switch. But a general consensus among artists is that China was applying to host the 2008 Olympics and wanted to make a good impression. Contemporary art was popular with foreigners and, even if edgy, was only seen by a handful of Chinese.

In 2001, the government asked Ms. Weng, the gallery owner and curator, to stage an exhibition of contemporary artists. She gathered 80 paintings and sent them on tour of four Chinese cities. It was the first full-blown exhibition of contemporary art in the People's Republic and was a success, with curious visitors packing the museums.

But the show was a commercial flop. Ms. Weng says she had been asked to sell the works in the exhibition, but not one piece sold. "No one was interested," she said.

In 2003, art prices were still in the doldrums even as the movement was picking up pace and visibility. That was the year the 798 art district in Beijing opened, followed by similar zones in most major Chinese cities.

City planners wanted to close the district several times, but artists astutely used visits by high-profile foreign dignitaries and photo spreads in domestic media to show it was popular. Chinese leaders also began to speak of the need for creative industries, and art seemed to fit right in.

Then came the bubble. Mirroring a wave of foreign fascination with China's seemingly unstoppable economy, Chinese art suddenly took off.

Ms. Weng says a Zhang Xiaogang painting in 2004 was still selling for a relatively modest \$45,000. The next year it was valued at \$1 million and by 2008 one of his paintings fetched \$6.1 million at auction. In May 2008, a new record was set for a work by a Chinese contemporary artist, when Zeng Fanzhi's "Mask Series 1996 No. 6" sold for \$9.7 million at Christie's in Hong Kong.

Despite the eye-popping numbers, Ms. Weng says it was one of the most boring times in recent Chinese art history. "The artists just kept producing the same thing over and over again because of the bubble," she says. "Artists' creativity was destroyed because of it."

"When the market grew exponentially it also produced a lot of junk," says Colin Chinnery, a Beijing-based curator and director of the 2009 ShContemporary art fair, which was held in Shanghai from Sept. 10 to Sept. 13.

The bubble began to burst early this year. Major auction houses scaled back their offerings. Last May, for instance, Christie's International PLC sold 195 contemporary Chinese works at its auction in Hong Kong, with an average price of 2.1 million Hong Kong dollars (\$271,000), according to Ingrid Dudek, senior specialist in Asian contemporary art at Christie's in Hong Kong. This year, 64 pieces were sold with an average price of just under HK\$1 million.

Most affected by the drop were the cynical realists, whose work had barely changed over the past decade. One of Mr. Zhang's paintings, similar to his top-priced work, sold this year for roughly \$600,000. The 798 district is now a shell of its former self, with many galleries closed up.

But few in the art community are bemoaning the bubble's passing. Zhu Qi, an art critic and editor-in-chief of Art Map magazine, said artists are reengaging with society. "It had neglected a close tie with the public and the civil society," he says.

New names are gaining prominence. Some are too young to have participated in the bubble. Others were there all along but didn't have the financial draw of their market-oriented colleagues.

One is Mr. Qiu. The 40-year-old began working in the 1990s, but early on criticized artists' pandering to the market. In 1999, he curated a show of even younger artists called "Post-Sense, Sensibility, Alien Bodies & Delusion," which featured roomfuls of disgusting animal and human body parts. The reason, in part, for the provocative choice of materials: The art couldn't be sold to collectors.

It turned out to be a landmark show that brought forth a generation of socially critical artists who flew under the market's radar screen. Among them is Wang Wei, a Beijing artist who with his U.S. partner,

Rania Ho, has turned a storefront in an ordinary alley into a space for art. Some of the shows have featured video installations of shopkeepers. They once rented out the shop to a migrant laborer, who became the exhibit -- a commentary on the invisibility of migrants in society.

"We didn't really pay attention to the bubble," says Mr. Wang. "We were just producing our stuff and the bubble came and went."

Sometimes, the work is so offbeat that it might be hard to know if it's art. Still, people living and working on the street have become informal, de facto curators. During a recent video exhibition, a nearby vegetable seller took a visitor through the show explaining its meaning.

Mr. Qiu's career is also on the rise. But his installations have never been able to command the money of more portable oil paintings -- his works are almost impossible to sell, and he only works on such scale thanks to a Taiwanese patron who underwrites many of his projects.

His current project is a series of works criticizing the price of progress. He chose for his chief symbol the bridge over the Yangtze River in Nanjing. It was the first bridge over China's mightiest river, and for decades was a symbol of the Communists' ability to go it alone.

Mr. Qiu noted that the bridge is also the country's top location for suicides, with more than 2,000 in its 40-year history. This makes it a powerful symbol for the human cost of the country's forced-march modernization.

"I'm trying to show how people can get crushed by a society that values gigantism," Mr. Qiu says.

Curators and gallery owners say works that directly challenge government decisions are taboo, as are works with overt sexuality. At the recent Beijing 798 Biennale, for example, organizers banned a performance about migrant workers that included a prostitute as one of the characters.

But overall, contemporary artists are visible because the bubble had a good side, too. Fan Di'an, head of the National Art Museum of China, said that in a country where money is one of the few measures of success, high prices were something many could newly relate to.

These days, the 798 district might have fewer exhibits on display. But it is still one of Beijing's top tourist destinations, with tourists flocking there for its cafes, bookstores and the remaining galleries.

Mr. Fan, meanwhile, recently mounted an exhibit at the National Art Museum exploring works of the past 60 years. The show included some contemporary artists like Mr. Zhang and was packed, attracting 10,000 visitors a day.

"Art is part of the social discussion," he said. "We've had these ups and downs, but art is a permanent part of society."

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